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Between the Feed and the Fitting Room: Brand Influence, Teenage Interpretation, and the Construction of Fashion Identity

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ABSTRACT

Fashion brands address teenagers continuously, through campaigns, ambassador partnerships, sustainability claims, and rebrands, each of which encodes an identity and invites young people to adopt it. Teenagers interpret these messages rather than absorbing them. This study examines the space between what brands project and what teenagers interpret, and argues that fashion identity is constructed within it. Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model bridges two literatures that rarely meet, one addressing how producers construct and project brand meaning (Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015) and one addressing how consumers draw upon it in building a self (Belk, 1988), and renders the distance between intended and received meaning empirically researchable. Five semi-structured interviews, comprising an audience strand of four young consumers and a stakeholder strand with a brand founder, were anchored in a shared stimulus set and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Participants audited sustainability claims structurally, assessing whether a claim was compatible with a brand's business model rather than verifying it factually, and did so whether or not they had marketing training. They decoded the strategic manoeuvre behind a campaign rather than the message within it, yet visited stores and purchased regardless, suggesting that interpretive resistance and behavioural compliance can be separated. Bodily accommodation operated as a threshold condition preceding symbolic interpretation, with sizing regimes reported to exclude at both ends of the range. This suggests that the gap between projection and interpretation begins before meaning, with the material conditions that make reading possible. Identity was assembled by extraction rather than adoption. The study extends Hall's model into fashion branding, proposing that in embodied categories the body forms part of the infrastructure of decoding, and qualifies the assumption that persuasion knowledge protects against persuasion.

INTRODUCTION

Foundations & Motivations

Every fashion brand is, in effect, sending teenagers a message. A campaign, a chosen ambassador, a sustainability pledge, a sudden rebrand: each attempts to communicate a particular identity and invite young people to make it their own. Yet teenagers do not receive these messages as blank screens. They interpret them, filter them through their own values and social worlds, and decide (often unconsciously)

which to accept, which to quietly rework into something else, and which to reject outright. The meaning a brand intends and the meaning a teenager takes away are produced separately, and they do not always meet.

This study examines the space between those two acts: ***what brands project, and what teenagers interpret. Its organizing insight is that teenage fashion identity is constructed precisely in that gap.*** A young person does not simply absorb the self a brand offers; they build a self out of the readings they make, the meanings they trust, and the messages they refuse. Understanding identity, therefore, means understanding interpretation, and understanding interpretation means holding both sides of the exchange (sender and receiver) in view at once.

Two ideas anchor the study. ***The first is Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding*** (Hall, 1980), which supplies the engine: the proposition that a message is encoded with intended meaning by its sender and then decoded, sometimes faithfully and sometimes against the grain, by its receiver. This is what makes the gap a researchable object rather than a vague metaphor. ***The second is Russell Belk's account of symbolic consumption and the extended self*** (Belk, 1988), which supplies the stakes: the proposition that what we consume becomes part of who we are. Together, they frame the study's central drama. For a teenager, decoding a brand is never a neutral act of comprehension, because identity itself is what is at risk in the reading.

A sustainability claim is simply one kind of message a brand encodes, and the distance between that claim and how teenagers read it is a matter of decoding. A rebrand or a new ambassador changes the message, but it's read through the same lens. This keeps the vivid, contemporary material that makes the study compelling, while resisting the temptation to chase several theoretical conversations at once. The study maps the gap between what fashion brands say and what teenagers hear, and shows how identity is assembled inside it.

Background of Study

Clothing has always done more than cover the body. It signals belonging and difference, announces affiliation, and offers a vocabulary through which others can read a person before they have spoken (Entwistle, 2000; Simmel, 1957). For adolescents, this work is particularly consequential, since the teenage years are precisely when identity is most actively under negotiation and when the judgement of peers carries its greatest weight (Erikson, 1968; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). A long tradition in consumer research holds that possessions become constitutive of the self rather than merely accessories to it (Belk, 1988, 2013), that goods carry culturally structured meanings which consumers transfer to their own lives (McCracken, 1986), and that people gravitate toward brands whose image corresponds to their self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Among young consumers specifically, brand choices are bound up with reference groups and the negotiation of belonging (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, Mangleburg et al., 2004; Osmanova et al., 2023). Fashion is among the clearest arenas in which this occurs, since clothing is at once intimately personal and immediately public.

What has changed is not the fact of identity work through dress but the conditions under which it is now conducted. Contemporary fashion brands operate as cultural agents rather than merely commercial ones,

projecting lifestyles, values, and aspirational identities through campaigns, ambassador partnerships, influencer collaborations, and sustainability messaging (Vladimirova et al., 2024; Audrezet et al., 2020; Park & Chun, 2025). These messages reach young people continuously and intimately, through algorithmically curated feeds on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, in an environment where the boundary between advertising, entertainment, and peer conversation has become difficult to locate (A. M. Hall, 2025). A teenager may encounter dozens of carefully constructed brand identities in a single scroll, each engineered to feel personal rather than promotional.

The registers in which brands now communicate have also become more contested. Sustainability claims invite scrutiny in a market where fast fashion remains dominant and where the distance between stated environmental values and actual consumption is well documented (Joy et al., 2012; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Rebrands and repositioning exercises are undertaken at speed to reach younger audiences, risking the alienation of the consumers a brand already has. Ambassador and influencer partnerships borrow credibility from individuals whose own authenticity is itself under constant public assessment. Each of these is a message encoded with an intended meaning, and each therefore presents an occasion on which the intended and the received meaning may fail to coincide.

One body of work examines how firms construct and project brand meaning, manage image over time, and cultivate perceptions of authenticity (Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015). A second examines how consumers perceive brands, form attachments, and use them in constructing identity (Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). The first is strong on intent but generally stops at transmission, inferring reception rather than observing it; the second attends closely to the consumer but tends to treat brand meaning as something received rather than contested. What remains comparatively less explored is the interpretive space between the two, and it is in this space that Hall's (1980) model becomes valuable, since it holds that decodings do not follow automatically from encodings and that the resulting gap is a proper object of study rather than a failure to be corrected. Although developed for broadcast media, the model has seen little application to fashion branding, and less still to teenage audiences, whose decoding is inseparable from the identity work described above.

Research Questions

This study is guided by one overarching question:

> *How is fashion identity among U.S. teenagers (ages 13–19) constructed between brands' projected identities and teenagers' interpretations of them?*

Three sub-questions engage the two sides of the exchange and the gap between them. Each corresponds to one of the study's exploratory areas and, in turn, to a strand of the analysis. The first sub-question addresses the encoding side and is answered through the analysis of brand materials and the stakeholder interview. The second addresses the decoding side and is answered through the audience interviews. The third is comparative and can only be answered by setting the two against one another, which is the analytic move on which the study's contribution rests.

1. *Brand projection (the message encoded).* What identities, values, and aesthetics do fashion brands project toward teenage audiences through their campaigns, ambassadors,

sustainability claims, and rebrands, and what meanings are they evidently seeking to communicate?

2. *Teenage interpretation (the message decoded).* How do teenagers decode these projected meanings, and which do they accept, rework, or reject as they assemble their own fashion identities?
3. *The space between (the gap and its consequences).* Where do brand-intended meanings and teenage readings align, where do they diverge, what explains the divergence, and how does the resulting interpretation enter the teenager's sense of self?

Justification and Significance

Since the production and the reception of brand meaning have been studied largely apart, the distance between them has been inferred rather than measured. A study that analyses a brand's own communications as a record of intent and then asks teenagers to interpret those very same materials occupies the less explored middle ground. It asks whether a specific intended meaning survives the journey to a specific reader, and what becomes of identity when it does not. Applying Hall's (1980) framework to fashion branding, and to a teenage audience in particular, extends a model developed for broadcast texts into a setting where the text is also an object to be worn and where the audience is engaged in active identity formation. As the findings will show, that difference alters where the gap begins.

Comparative designs of this kind are rare in student and early career research, and rarer still with a shared stimulus set anchoring both sides. Thus, presenting the same materials to brand-side and audience participants, the study converts a general contrast between producers and consumers into a specific, evidenced comparison and produces an alignment map that can be interrogated message by message. The method is transferable to other communicative settings in which intent and reception may be presumed to diverge.

Fashion brands invest substantially in communicating with young consumers, and yet the evidence they collect about how those communications are received is largely behavioural, consisting of engagement signals that register some responses and are blind to others. Understanding which signals young people read as credible, which brand changes are experienced as renewal rather than betrayal, and where carefully constructed claims are quietly disbelieved offers brands a clearer account of a generation of future core consumers. It also offers something to educators and to those concerned with consumer literacy, since the study describes how young people actually assess commercial claims rather than how they are assumed to.

Adolescence is a period in which the construction of a public self is both urgent and consequential, and it now occurs amid a volume of commercial messaging without historical precedent. Treating teenagers as active interpreters rather than as passive recipients reframes a process often dismissed as mere consumerism. It takes seriously the possibility that young people bring judgement, scepticism, and considerable interpretive skill to a relationship in which they are frequently assumed to bring none, and it

asks what identity is built from when the materials on offer are supplied by parties with a commercial interest in the outcome.

Overview

The remainder of this manuscript proceeds as follows. The literature review situates the study within three conversations: theoretical work on symbolic consumption and the extended self, which establishes why brand meaning matters to identity; empirical work on brand meaning, authenticity, and young consumers, which establishes what has been found on each side of the exchange; and Hall's encoding and decoding model, which supplies the bridge between them. The review closes by specifying the gap the present study addresses.

The methodology section sets out the qualitative, interpretivist design and its comparative two-strand structure, together with the sampling strategy, data collection instruments, procedure, and the reflexive thematic analysis through which the transcripts were interpreted. It also records the ethical arrangements governing work with minors and the researcher's position in relation to the population studied.

The results section presents the themes generated by the analysis, organized into three aggregate dimensions concerning how young consumers audit what brands tell them, how they assemble a self from what they accept, and how the brand side detects reception. The section closes with the alignment matrix, which sets encoded intent against decoded reading for each message type and characterises the divergence in each case.

The discussion interprets these findings against the literature reviewed earlier and states the study's contributions, leading with the two that extend rather than merely apply the frameworks employed. The final section addresses the academic and practical implications of the work, states its limitations candidly, proposes directions for future research, and concludes by returning to the question with which the study began.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Fashion, the Social Self, and the Dressed Body

The proposition that dress performs social work is among the oldest in the sociology of consumption. Simmel (1957) described fashion as the product of two opposing impulses held in tension: the desire to imitate and belong and the desire to distinguish oneself, and argued that a fashion dies precisely when it is universally adopted because it can no longer satisfy the second impulse. Goffman (1959) situated dress within the wider apparatus of self-presentation, treating appearance as part of the front through which a person projects a definition of themselves that others may accept or challenge. Bourdieu (1984) added the dimension of structure, showing that taste is neither innate nor idiosyncratic but socially patterned, and that judgements of style function as markers of position that classify the classifier as much as the classified.

These accounts share an assumption worth making explicit, since it bears directly on this study: dress communicates. It is a medium through which claims about the self are advanced and read. Entwistle (2000) sharpened this insight by insisting that dress is a situated bodily practice rather than a purely symbolic system, and that fashion theory has too often treated garments as texts to be interpreted while neglecting the body that must wear them. The garment, on this account, is simultaneously a sign and a material object with which a particular body must negotiate.

Symbolic Consumption and the Extended Self

Consumer research has developed the communicative properties of goods into a substantial theoretical apparatus. Belk (1988) advanced the foundational claim that possessions are not merely used but incorporated, becoming constitutive of the self rather than external to it, such that what we own forms part of who we are and their loss is experienced as a diminishment of the person. McCracken (1986) supplied the mechanism by which this occurs, describing how culturally constituted meanings are transferred first into goods through advertising and the fashion system and thereafter into individuals' lives through rituals of possession and use. Sirgy (1982) contributed the principle of self-congruity, holding that consumers are drawn to brands whose image corresponds to their own self-image, and away from those that do not.

Subsequent work has emphasised the active, constructive nature of this process. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argued that brands function as symbolic resources for constructing identity, and that young consumers in particular draw on them to narrate who they are, both to themselves and to others. Escalas and Bettman (2003, 2005) demonstrated experimentally that reference groups shape brand meaning, that consumers form connections to brands whose associations help construct a desired self, and that they actively avoid brands associated with groups from which they wish to distinguish themselves. Fournier (1998) reframed the relationship between consumer and brand as one with duration, reciprocity, and the possibility of betrayal, opening the analytic space in which brand change may be experienced as a violation rather than merely a variation. Arnould and Thompson (2005) subsequently consolidated this body of work under the heading of consumer culture theory, characterising it as the study of the dynamic relations between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.

Two features of this literature bear on the present study. First, it establishes identity as the stake in brand consumption, which is why a teenager’s reading of a brand is never a neutral act of comprehension. Second, for all its emphasis on consumer agency, it tends to treat brand meaning as a resource available for appropriation rather than as a claim advanced by an interested party and open to contestation. Meaning arrives, and the consumer does something with it; how it was constructed, and whether the consumer accepts the construction, receives less attention.

Encoding, Decoding, and the Active Audience

The tradition that addresses this question directly originates outside consumer research. Hall (1980) proposed that a message is encoded by its producer with a preferred meaning and subsequently decoded by its audience, and that the two operations are relatively autonomous. An audience member may adopt a dominant reading and accept the preferred meaning, a negotiated reading that accepts the broad frame while resisting elements, or an oppositional reading that comprehends the preferred meaning and rejects it

in favour of an alternative frame. Hall's decisive move was to argue that decodings do not follow automatically from encodings, which converts the distance between the two from a communication failure into a proper object of analysis. Less often noticed is that Hall located both moments within material as well as discursive conditions. His model places technical infrastructure alongside frameworks of knowledge and relations of production on each side of the communicative circuit (Hall, 1980). This element becomes important below.

Morley (1980) supplied the first substantial empirical test, showing through group interviews that readings of the same broadcast varied systematically with the social position of the viewer, and Fiske (1987) extended the argument to popular culture more broadly, contending that texts are polysemic and that audiences routinely produce meanings their producers neither intended nor anticipated. The model has since been applied across a wide range of media, but its migration into commercial branding has been limited, and its application to fashion, where the text is also a garment, and the audience is also a customer, remains thin.

Persuasion Knowledge and the Limits of Literacy

A parallel tradition within consumer psychology examines what audiences know about persuasion itself. Friestad and Wright (1994) proposed the persuasion knowledge model, arguing that people develop, over time, a working theory of how marketers attempt to influence them and deploy this knowledge to cope with persuasion attempts. Once an attempt is recognised as such, the model holds, the target's response changes: attention shifts from the message to the tactic, and the persuasive force of the appeal is typically attenuated.

Developmental work has examined when this capacity emerges, with Rozendaal et al. (2011) finding that children's understanding of advertisers' tactics grows considerably through late childhood and adolescence. The implicit expectation running through much of this literature, and through the media literacy scholarship that draws upon it, is broadly protective: to recognise a persuasive attempt is, at least in part, to be defended against it. Whether that expectation holds among a generation raised inside continuous commercial messaging is an empirical question, and one this study is positioned to address.

Empirical Review

Teenagers, Brands, and the Negotiation of Belonging

Empirical work confirms that adolescence intensifies the identity work described above. Piacentini and Mailer (2004) found that teenagers used clothing choices to communicate a great deal about themselves and that their selections were governed by an acute awareness of how peers would read those choices. Auty and Elliott (1998) showed that fashion involvement and self-monitoring shaped the meanings young consumers attached to brands, with more self-monitoring individuals paying closer attention to the social signals a garment transmitted.

Equally instructive is the work on rejection. Banister and Hogg (2004) demonstrated that young consumers construct identity as much by avoidance as by acquisition, using negative symbolic consumption to distance themselves from images of the self they do not wish to project. Mangleburg et al.

(2004) established that shopping with friends increased teenagers' susceptibility to peer influence, underlining that these judgements are made socially rather than in isolation. Most directly relevant to the present study, Ritson and Elliott (1999) conducted an ethnography of adolescent advertising audiences and found that advertisements functioned as social currency among young people, discussed, parodied, and repurposed within peer groups in ways entirely independent of the responses advertisers sought.

Recent work situates these dynamics in the contemporary media environment. Park and Chun (2025), interviewing twenty-six young consumers aged fourteen to twenty-four, found that exposure to luxury imagery posted by influencers, peers, and unspecified others on social media stimulated consumption, and that posting after purchase produced social approval that reinforced the cycle. Their study is notable for its qualitative design and its focus on how young people are socialised into consumption through platforms rather than through advertising alone.

The Construction of Brand Meaning and Authenticity

A separate literature examines the same exchange from the producer's side. Holt (2002) argued that branding operates dialectically, with brands continually appropriating the cultural materials through which consumers express autonomy, and consumers in turn developing new resistances, an account that anticipates a persistent gap between what brands attempt and what audiences grant. Beverland (2005) examined how firms craft authenticity, finding that authentic status is constructed through careful narrative management rather than being a simple property of the product. Morhart et al. (2015) subsequently decomposed brand authenticity into continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism, and demonstrated its effects on consumer identification and trust.

Work on rebranding addresses the risks of change. Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) found that corporate rebranding may destroy, transfer, or create brand equity, and that outcomes depend substantially on whether existing consumers perceive continuity with what the brand previously was. The literature accordingly recognises that change is hazardous, but examines it predominantly through equity and identity from the firm's perspective rather than through the accounts of consumers who experience it.

What unites this body of work is its analytic vantage point. It is strong on how meaning is constructed and projected, and it infers reception from outcomes such as attitude, equity, or purchase. It rarely observes reception directly, and it almost never places the producer's intent and the consumer's reading of the same material side by side.

Influencers, Ambassadors, and Borrowed Credibility

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that young female Instagram users regarded non-traditional online celebrities as more credible than traditional ones, and that this credibility influenced purchase decisions. De Veirman et al. (2017) demonstrated that follower counts function as a heuristic for popularity, but that very high counts can reduce perceived uniqueness, complicating any simple reach-based account of influence.

Authenticity again emerges as the pivotal construct. Audrezet et al. (2020) found that influencers manage a persistent tension between commercial imperatives and the authenticity on which their appeal depends, and that audiences are attentive to signs of that tension. Boerman (2020) showed that disclosure of

sponsorship activates recognition of advertising intent, with consequences for how content is subsequently received. Collectively, this work establishes that young audiences appraise the source as well as the message, and that they are alert to the commercial architecture behind apparently personal communication.

Sustainability Claims and the Attitude-Behaviour Gap

Sustainability constitutes the most contested register in contemporary fashion communication, and the literature documents a persistent discrepancy between what consumers profess and what they purchase. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) established the attitude-behaviour gap as a general feature of pro-environmental conduct, identifying a range of internal and external barriers between value and action. Within fashion specifically, Joy et al. (2012) found that consumers who expressed genuine concern for sustainability nonetheless continued to purchase fast fashion, and McNeill and Moore (2015) described the resulting tension as a conundrum in which the desire for novelty and affordability routinely overrides stated ethical commitment. Niinimäki (2010) approached the same territory from the direction of identity, finding that eco-clothing consumption is bound up with self-image and ideology rather than environmental calculation alone.

On the producer's side, Delmas and Burbano (2011) analysed the drivers of greenwashing, and Parguel et al. (2011) examined how independent sustainability ratings might deter it, both proceeding from the premise that unverifiable environmental claims are common enough to constitute a market problem. Vladimirova et al. (2024), reviewing ninety-two studies on social media and sustainable fashion consumption, found that the great majority examined how brands might influence consumers, with markedly fewer addressing how consumers themselves interpret or contest sustainability discourse.

The Present Study

Collectively, the literature reviewed above supplies a rich account of each side of an exchange whose middle remains comparatively unexamined. Four gaps follow, and the present study is designed to address them. First, intent and reception have been studied apart. Research on brand meaning establishes with considerable sophistication how firms construct and project identity (Beverland, 2005; Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015), while research on symbolic consumption establishes with equal sophistication how consumers use brands in constructing a self (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). What has rarely been attempted is the direct juxtaposition of the two, in which the same material is analysed as a record of what a brand intended and then presented to consumers to establish what they actually took from it. Without that juxtaposition, the distance between projection and interpretation can be inferred but not observed. The present study addresses this by employing a comparative two-strand design anchored in a shared stimulus set, so that encoded intent and decoded reading are established from the same materials and can be set against one another message by message.

Second, Hall's framework has been applied little to fashion branding, and even less to teenagers. The encoding and decoding model was developed for broadcast texts and has been most extensively tested in

that setting (Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1980). Its transfer to commercial branding has been limited, and its application to adolescent audiences, whose decoding is inseparable from active identity formation, is thinner still. This is a substantive omission rather than a merely technical one, since fashion is an unusually rich site for the model: brands encode meaning deliberately and at scale, and young audiences decode it under intense social and developmental pressure. The present study extends the model into this setting, and connects it to Belk's (1988) account of the extended self, on the proposition that for a teenager the meanings accepted from a brand become part of the self and those rejected mark its boundaries.

Third, persuasion knowledge is widely assumed to be protective, and that assumption has seldom been examined among consumers raised inside continuous commercial messaging. The persuasion knowledge model anticipates that recognising a persuasive attempt attenuates its force (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and media literacy scholarship has generally proceeded on similar grounds. Yet the developmental work establishing that young people acquire this knowledge (Rozendaal et al., 2011) does not establish what follows behaviourally once it is acquired and thoroughly habituated. ***The study therefore offers three contributions***. Empirically, it provides a direct, evidence-based account of where brand-intended and teenage-received meanings converge and diverge across several message categories, including sustainability claims, ambassador campaigns, immersive brand worlds, and brand change. Methodologically, it uses a comparative design in which a shared stimulus set anchors both producer-side and audience-side data, turning a general contrast between the two into a specific comparison that can be interrogated case by case and transferred to other communicative settings. Conceptually, it extends Hall's (1980) model into fashion branding and into a population for whom decoding is simultaneously an act of self-construction, and in doing so tests two assumptions the existing literature has largely inherited rather than examined: that interpretive resistance attenuates commercial effect, and that the interpretation of a garment begins with what it means.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist design. The choice follows from the research question, which concerns meaning rather than incidence: it asks not how often teenagers encounter brand messages, but what they make of them, and how those interpretations enter the construction of a self. Questions of this kind require access to participants' own accounts, in their own vocabulary, and are poorly served by instruments that fix the categories of response in advance (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The design is further distinguished by its comparative, two-strand structure. Existing scholarship has tended to examine either the production of brand meaning or its reception, rarely setting the two in direct contact (Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015). Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model supplies the conceptual warrant for doing so, holding that a message is encoded with an intended meaning by its producer and then decoded by its audience through a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional position, and that decodings do not follow automatically from encodings. If the distance between the two is to be

examined empirically rather than inferred, both sides must be present in the data. The study therefore comprises an audience strand of interviews with young consumers and a stakeholder strand with a brand-side participant, analysed separately and subsequently mapped against one another.

A single set of brand materials anchors both strands. Participants in each strand responded to the same publicly circulated campaign, which permits their interpretations to be compared with one another and against the intent evident in the material itself. This shared stimulus is what converts a general contrast between producers and consumers into a specific, evidenced comparison.

Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected purposively, a non-probability strategy appropriate where cases are chosen for their capacity to illuminate the phenomenon rather than to represent a population (Miles et al., 2014). Two sampling frames were used.

For the audience strand, the criteria were that participants be young consumers of fashion who engage with brand communication through social media, with variation sought in gender, style sensibility, and level of fashion involvement. For the stakeholder strand, the criterion was direct experience of constructing and projecting brand meaning, whether through design, founding, or marketing.

Six interviews were conducted. Five inform the substantive analysis: four in the audience strand and one in the stakeholder strand. The sixth, with an academic specialising in fashion brands, was used to refine the interview guide; it is reported separately below and is excluded from the study's substantive claims, though it is drawn upon at four points where it corroborates or productively contradicts the audience data, and is identified as such on each occasion. Recruitment is ongoing, and the sample reported here represents the first phase of data collection, not its completion. Participants are identified by pseudonym throughout, in accordance with the undertakings given at consent.

Table 1 *Participant Position & Pseudonym*

Pseudonym	***Strand***	***Position***	***Status in analysis***
Marcus	Stakeholder	Academic specialising in fashion brands and marketing	*Instrument refinement; corroborating and deviant material only*
Priya	Audience	Young consumer with marketing training	*Substantive*
Wren	Audience	Young consumer studying fashion marketing	*Substantive*

Clara	Audience	Teenage consumer, in full-time education	*Substantive*
Rayan	Stakeholder	Founder and designer, independent fashion label	*Substantive*
Nicole	Audience	Teenage consumer, in full-time education	*Substantive*

All names are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews lasting between thirty and forty-five minutes, conducted in person or by video call. The semi-structured format was chosen deliberately over a fixed schedule. Rather than administering an identical sequence of questions, the researcher worked from a bank of open questions organised around three exploratory areas, tailoring wording and order to each participant and following lines of thought as they emerged. This conversational latitude allowed participants to address each area in terms they found meaningful, a precondition of inductive analysis.

The three exploratory areas correspond to the study's sub-questions. The first concerns the message as encoded: which brands participants notice, what they take those brands to be communicating, and to whom. The second concerns the message as decoded and its relation to identity: how participants describe their own style, which brand meanings they accept, rework, or reject, and how they make those judgements. The third concerns the space between: participants respond to specific campaign materials, articulating what they believe the brand intends and how far they accept it. The stakeholder guide mirrors these areas from the encoding side, asking how brand identity is constructed, how the young audience is imagined, and where messages have landed or misfired. Full guides are provided in Appendices A and B.

Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit permission and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked against the recordings, with particular attention to brand and proper names, which automated transcription rendered unreliably.

The Interview Process

Prospective participants received a written invitation describing the study's purpose, what participation involved, the recording and anonymisation arrangements, and the voluntary nature of participation. The

invitation offered participants the option of receiving the topic areas and questions in advance, an offer extended uniformly so as not to advantage or disadvantage any participant. No incentive or payment was offered.

For participants who were minors, we obtained written parental or guardian permission and written assent before scheduling. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher read a standardised opening script restating voluntariness, the right to decline any question or to withdraw at any point, including after the interview, the purpose of recording, and the anonymisation of all data. Verbal consent, including consent to record, was then confirmed on the recording before any question was asked. A closing script reiterated withdrawal rights and provided contact details for subsequent questions.

After substantive discussion with the research mentor, three exploratory areas emerged. This prompted two revisions to the guide: the stimulus-response task was moved later in the sequence, having initially interrupted the flow of the identity discussion, and probes were added to the questions concerning brand change.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022), which proceeds through familiarisation, coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing against the full data set, defining, and writing up. Three features of its application here warrant statement.

First, themes were developed as *central organising concepts* rather than as summaries of the domains about which participants were asked. A theme reporting what was said under the heading of sustainability would constitute a topic summary; a theme proposing that claims are audited against a brand's business model rather than verified factually constitutes an analytic claim and can be shown to be right or wrong against the data. Each theme reported below is stated in the latter form.

Second, coding proceeded inductively before applying any theoretical framework. Had Hall's (1980) three reading positions been used as an a priori coding frame, the analysis would have located dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings by construction. The framework was therefore introduced at the theme-development stage, where it functions as an interpretive lens on patterns already established in the data. This hybrid sequencing is reported explicitly so that readers may judge the independence of the codes from the theory.

Third, the two strands were coded separately and on their own terms before being brought into contact. Pooling them would have dissolved the distinction the study examines. The comparison was then constructed as an alignment matrix, similar to a structured data display (Miles et al., 2014), with rows corresponding to message types and columns recording the intent evident on the brand side, the readings produced on the audience side, and the character of any divergence. Analytic memos were written after each transcript and again at each candidate theme, recording emerging interpretations, surprises, and possible disconfirmations; these memos constitute the study's audit trail and informed the discussion.

Two conventions common in qualitative reporting are deliberately not observed. Participant counts per theme are not given: with a small purposive sample such counts are uninformative, and in an interpretive design they import a frequency logic under which a widely shared reading would be taken to matter more

than a singular one. Two of the observations reported below derive from single accounts and are retained on interpretive grounds. Thematic saturation is likewise not claimed. The concept originates in a different methodological tradition and sits uneasily with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021); honestly, the analysis reached sufficient interpretive depth to develop the themes presented, and data collection continues.

Quality was pursued through mentor debriefing, in which a supervising researcher interrogated codes and candidate themes; through the deliberate search for disconfirming and boundary cases, which are reported rather than smoothed away; and through the reflexive practice described below. Inter-rater reliability was not calculated, since in an interpretive design agreement between coders evidences shared training rather than accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Tracy, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could decline any question, and that they could withdraw at any time, including after the interview, in which case the data would be deleted. We used recordings solely for transcription and stored them on a password-protected device. Names and identifying details were removed or replaced with pseudonyms at transcription, and no information identifying a participant, directly or through linked identifiers, appears in this report.

Two further matters required specific attention. Anonymity is more fragile for the stakeholder participant, whose role, organisation, and campaigns are identifiable in combination; his account has accordingly been reported at a level of description that removes organisational identifiers, and his permission was obtained to use material concerning his own commercial judgements. Second, the researcher belongs to the population under study. The implications of that position for data generation and interpretation are addressed in the reflexivity statement below rather than treated as a bias to be eliminated.

Reflexivity

The researcher is a member of the population whose interpretive practices the study examines. This proximity conferred evident advantages: participants moved quickly into candid accounts of taste, body, and social pressure, and shared reference points allowed questions to be posed in the vocabulary participants themselves use. It also carried risks, two of which we monitored throughout.

The first is assumed agreement, in which a shared cultural reference substitutes for an explanation a reader would require; we identified passages of this kind during familiarisation and, where quoted, glossed them. The second is the possibility that participants offer a peer the answers they expect a peer to want. Against this, the analysis deliberately searched for evidence of participants being persuaded rather than resisting, a discipline that produced what is arguably the study's most consequential finding, reported under Theme 2. In several early passages, the interviewer articulated an interpretation before the participant reached it; quotations have accordingly been drawn from participant-initiated material wherever possible, and this tendency is recorded as a limitation.

RESULTS

Analysis generated six themes, organised into three aggregate dimensions. The first, the audit, concerns how young consumers assess the credibility of what brands tell them. The second, the assembly, concerns what they do with brand meaning to construct and maintain the self. The third, the blind spot, turns to the producer's side and concerns the instruments through which reception is detected. Table 2 traces the analytic path from participants' own terms to these dimensions. This section reports what participants said and did; it reserves interpretation for the Discussion that follows.

Table 2 *Thematic Summary: Themes, Sub-Themes, and What Each Establishes*

Dimension	Theme	Constituent sub-themes	What the theme shows in these data
The audit	1. Claims are audited structurally, not verified factually (audience)	Testing the claim against the business model Category and scale as disqualifiers	Participants inferred credibility from what a brand's commercial logic could plausibly support rather than from disclosure. The object of judgement

		Structural absence accepted as proof Coherence valued above stated virtue	was the claimant, not the claim.
	2. Teenagers decode the manoeuvre, not the message, and act regardless (audience)	Naming the tactic Imagining the production process Appraising execution separately from message Compliance following rejection	Among these participants, recognition of persuasive intent was fluent but did not prevent store visits or purchase. Reading position and commercial outcome proved separable.
The assembly	3. Symbolic interpretation is gated by bodily accommodation (audience; absent from stakeholder account)	Unavailability and refused verification Sizing regimes that exclude in both directions Comfort as a precondition of confidence Representation and accommodation as one matter	In these accounts, a garment had to accommodate the body before it could signify. Brands failing this threshold were not engaged at the symbolic level at all.
	4. Identity is assembled by extraction rather than adoption (both strands)	Buying one category from a favoured brand Refusing identification with any label Admiring a brand's world without entering it A style authored across contexts	The extended self extended selectively and in fragments, under the consumer's curatorial authority rather than the brand's narrative logic.
	5. Change becomes betrayal when it disrupts the brand's function (both strands)	Category abandonment Revival experienced as costume Material and functional drift Repositioning welcomed as enlarged accommodation	Loyalty attached to the office a brand held within the assembled self. Functional continuity mattered more than visual or narrative continuity.

The blind spot	6. Reception is measured with instruments that cannot detect it (stakeholder, set against audience)	Engagement analytics as the instrument of reception Respect without purchase; purchase without belief The imagined gullible decoder	The producer's side detected only responses that generated engagement, which excluded the readings that most shaped attachment. This helps to explain why the gap persists.

Note. Strand attribution in parentheses records the data source from which each theme was developed, not the number of participants contributing to it. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, frequency counts per theme are not reported.

Audit: Assessing What Brands Say

Theme 1: Claims Are Audited Structurally, Not Verified Factually

No participant described consulting a certification, a supply-chain disclosure, or a published report. Instead, they described a rapid plausibility test: they assessed a claim against what was already known about a brand's scale, category, and commercial logic.

This logic ran through the audience accounts, often in compressed form. Wren treated a sustainable line housed within a conventional business as a net harm rather than a partial good, since those garments are produced in addition to rather than instead of the others: "Having a line that is sustainable is doing no impact when you're still making the same amount of polyester clothes." Nicole extended the reasoning from the firm to the sector, inferring from the economics of materials that the claim was implausible across the industry: "I'm pretty sure everybody still uses polyester, and that's always gonna be a thing, because it makes the clothes cheaper."

The same test was articulated, almost as a procedure, in the interview conducted to refine the instrument, which asked first what a brand claimed to stand for and then whether its operating model could sustain the claim: "What's your core business model? I'm looking at you in fast fashion … Please give me a break. You're not going to be sustainable."

Priya supplied the data set's clearest instance of a claim being believed, and the grounds were structural rather than declarative: "Elf is a U.S. company that claims that they are cruelty free, and they substantiate that because they don't have a market in China." An absence was accepted as evidence in a way no advertisement was. Clara arrived at the same position retrospectively, describing a brand's standing collapsing once structural information reached her and the material then confirmed it.

Theme 2: Teenagers Decode the Manoeuvre, Not the Message, and Act Regardless

Asked what a campaign was trying to say, participants characteristically answered at the level of strategy, treating the campaign as an artifact produced by a marketing department rather than as a communication bearing a meaning. Wren's account of an online video is the sharpest instance: "They're in a boardroom being like, how do we be more authentic? And that's obviously the exact opposite of being authentic." Priya classified a controversial campaign within a recognized genre of deliberate provocation before appraising a competitor's execution against the same objective. Clara, furthest from any marketing training, performed the same operation in plainer language: "It seemed like less about the actual product they were trying to advertise, but more about grabbing attention."

What followed constitutes the finding. Having decoded the campaign as a bid for attention, Clara acted upon it:

> I definitely did go in with my friends after seeing that ad, because we were like, oh my God, the Sydney Sweeney ad, American Eagle, let's look. (Clara)

Priya described the same decoupling in the register of self-knowledge, naming the mechanism operating upon her while it operated: "The more exposed you are to something, the more you will want it." She subsequently purchased the product concerned. Interpretive resistance and behavioural compliance therefore coexisted within the same account.

Assembly: Building a Self From Brand Meaning

Theme 3: Symbolic Interpretation Is Gated by Bodily Accommodation

The most consistent material in the audience data was also the least anticipated by the interview guide. Before a brand's meaning could be accepted, reworked, or refused, the garment had to accommodate the participant's body. Wren directed her frustration precisely at the substitution of purchase for verification: "So many times I go into stores, they're like, we're not that size, but you can order for you online. Well, the whole point is I want to try it on." She also stated the general principle:

> You're only gonna feel cute in it if you're the ideal size, or else your skirt's gonna be rolling up the whole night. (Wren)

Clara described a brand's claim of a single universal size dissolving upon contact with an actual body ("I'll try on like three different pairs of sweatpants and they'll fit me completely differently"), and Priya identified the removal of fitting rooms as the moment a brand lost her. Nicole reported the condition operating in the opposite direction, describing a repositioning toward inclusive sizing as the reason a brand became available to her, while noting that the resulting regime produced its own exclusions: "Skinny people, you're never gonna find a perfectly fit pair of jeans, because they want to help plus size so bad … they're not fully inclusive."

The asymmetry between the strands is marked. Across the audience transcripts, the vocabulary of fit, size, and body recurs continually; in the stakeholder transcript it is effectively absent as the brand has one size, displaced by a vocabulary of philosophy, narrative, and immersion.

Theme 4: Identity Is Assembled by Extraction Rather Than Adoption

Asked how far the brands they wear reflect who they are, participants independently rejected the premise. Clara's formulation arrived immediately after she had named a single retailer as her favourite: "I don't think someone would look at me and think, oh, she wears a lot of Urban Outfitters." She buys one category there. Wren attributed the mismatch to her refusal of the coordinated set: "When brands try to sell a look, it's with their other products." Nicole declined brand identification as a category rather than declining any brand: "I feel more comfortable wearing clothing that has no labels, and that usually just screams good quality, and that's all that matters to me." Priya, the most brand-identified participant, nonetheless reserved final authority for herself.

The producer's side, by contrast, described constructing worlds for consumers to inhabit. Rayan stated the ambition without qualification: "They want to actually just join our world and understand our brand."

Theme 5: Change Becomes Betrayal When It Disrupts the Brand's Function

Not every change felt like betrayal. Priya left a retailer that moved from occasion wear to athleisure, even though she is an active person who the new range could plausibly serve. Clara refused a brand's attempt to return to an earlier identity ("It feels like I'm buying clothes that are trying to fit that style, rather than buying clothes that are from that time period") and instead buys the originals on resale platforms. Nicole, conversely, described the repositioning as renewal, welcoming it because it expanded the range of bodies the brand's garments could serve. Rayan anticipated the mechanism while naming a narrower trigger: "If a brand has always been highly affordable for everyone and then starts raising their prices, they're gonna feel betrayed."

Blind Spot: How the Producer's Side Detects Reception

Theme 6: Reception Is Measured With Instruments That Cannot Detect It

Asked how he had learned that a campaign had misfired, Rayan answered in metrics: "The likes were low, the reposts were low for that one. All this analytics and stuff, those did not perform as well." The audience, however, described responses that generate no such signal. Wren reported gaining real respect for brands whose artistry she admires while saying she would never buy from them. Clara visited a store because of a campaign she found objectionable and purchased nothing. Priya bought a product while narrating the mechanism that had sold it to her. None of these responses appears in an engagement metric, and two would be actively misread by one.

The audience data also inverted the stakeholder's explicit model of the young decoder:

> "Younger people obviously are a little bit more gullible than older people. They're quick to jump to conclusions." (Rayan, stakeholder)

Alignment Matrix

Table 3 sets each message type against the intent evident on the brand side and the readings produced on the audience side. Reading positions follow Hall (1980); the final column characterises the divergence rather than merely recording its presence.

Table 3 *Alignment Matrix: Encoded Intent Against Decoded Reading*

Message type	**Encoded intent**	**Decoded reading**	**Character of divergence**	**What it extends**
Sustainability and ethics claims	The vocabulary treated as devalued and avoided; practice described instead (natural fibres, minimal waste)	Near-uniformly oppositional; audited against business model, scale, and category; belief granted only on structural proof	*Aligned in scepticism, divergent in remedy: both distrust the vocabulary, only the audience distrusts the claimant*	Hall: the object of decoding is the encoder, not the text. Authenticity: credibility inferred from conduct (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015)
Celebrity and ambassador campaigns	Borrowed credibility and reach; collaborators valued for genuine resonance with the brand	Oppositional as to meaning, compliant as to conduct; read as attention acquisition, yet store visits and purchases follow	*Widest divergence: reading position and behaviour separate, so a campaign may succeed commercially while failing semantically*	Hall and persuasion knowledge: reading position is separable from behaviour (Friestad & Wright, 1994)
Immersive brand worlds	Immersion sought: an audience that joins the brand's world rather than scrolling past a product	Negotiated; the world admired as craft but not adopted as identity, with components extracted instead	*Partial alignment: the aesthetic pleasure lands, the identity claim does not*	Belk: the self extends by extraction, not adoption (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986)

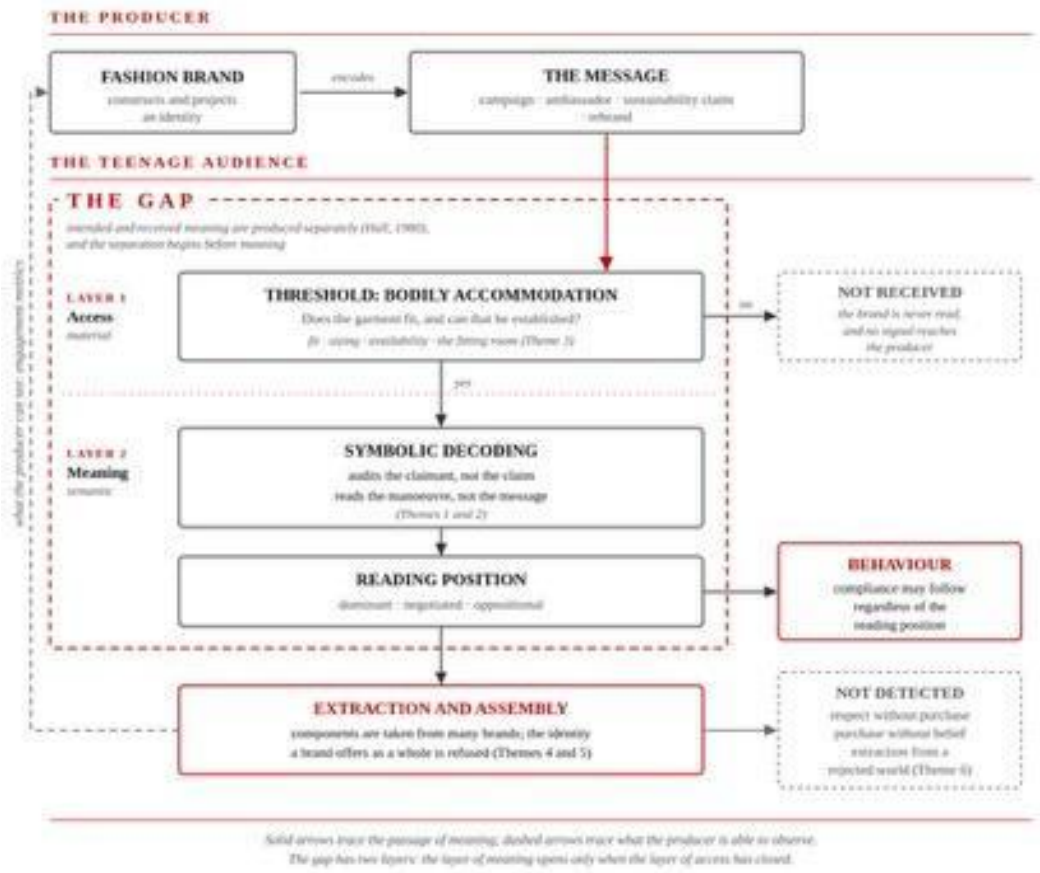
Brand change and revival	Change understood as risky; price and access identified as the betrayal trigger	Betrayal triggered instead by category abandonment, inauthentic revival, and material drift; originals sought over reissues	*Correct mechanism, misidentified trigger: the brand side perceives the risk it can measure*	Loyalty attaches to a brand's function in the assembled self (Fournier, 1998; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006)
Fit and bodily accommodation	Effectively absent from the brand-side account, displaced by philosophy and narrative	The dominant register of the audience data; operates as a threshold condition prior to symbolic reading	*Not divergence but absence: the two sides are not in disagreement; one is not in the conversation*	Hall: a material layer of the gap, prior to the reading positions; the body as decoding infrastructure
The imagined young decoder	Gullible, quick to conclusions, susceptible to online consensus	Structurally reasoned scepticism, strategic literacy, and explicit awareness of one's own susceptibility	*Direct contradiction: the capacity that governs reception is the capacity underestimated*	Mechanism: why the gap persists; reception is measured by instruments that cannot detect it (Theme 6)

Note. Encoded intent is drawn from the stakeholder interview and from the campaign materials used as shared stimuli. Decoded readings are drawn from the audience strand.

Three patterns are apparent. Divergence is widest where a message makes a claim about the brand's character (its ethics, its ambassadors, its identity) and narrowest where it concerns craft. Alignment and divergence coexist within a single message type, as with brand change, where the producer's side holds a broadly correct model of consumer attachment while misidentifying what breaks it. The largest discrepancy is not disagreement but absence: the register that dominates audience decoding has no counterpart in the producer-side account. Read against theory, the patterns point in three directions, indicated in the final column and developed in the Discussion. Divergence over the brand's character refines Hall's account of what is decoded, and qualifies the assumption that persuasion knowledge protects. Partial alignment, around immersive worlds and brand change, qualifies Belk's extended self, since what is accepted is a component or a function rather than an identity. And absence marks the material layer of the gap, which precedes decoding altogether.

DISCUSSION

These findings speak to three largely parallel literatures: producer-side accounts of how brand meaning is constructed and projected, consumer research on the use of brands in self-construction, and audience studies of mediated decoding. The discussion addresses each substantive finding in turn, positioning it within the relevant scholarship and identifying the study's contribution. Two contributions extend, rather than simply apply, the guiding frameworks: the separability of reading position from behaviour, and a material precondition upon reading. They are considered first and in the greatest detail (Figure 1). A final synthesis brings the argument together by explaining why the gap between projection and interpretation persists.



Note. The model summarises the study's findings. A brand encodes an identity into a message. Between that message and the audience's reading lies a gap with two layers. The first is material: the garment must accommodate the body, failing which the message is not received and the brand is never read at the symbolic level at all (Theme 3). The second is semantic: symbolic decoding proceeds by auditing the claimant rather than verifying the claim (Theme 1) and by reading the strategic manoeuvre rather than

the message (Theme 2). The resulting reading position does not determine behaviour, since compliance was observed to follow oppositional readings (Theme 2). Identity is assembled by extracting components rather than adopting the identity a brand offers (Themes 4 and 5). The dashed return path represents what the producer can observe. Neither a failure at the first layer nor the outcomes of extraction registers within it (Theme 6).

Persuasion Knowledge Without Persuasion Resistance

The most consequential finding of this study is that oppositional reading did not produce oppositional behaviour. Participants named the tactic, imagined the boardroom, appraised the marketing team's competence, and then entered the store or made the purchase. This pattern presses directly upon two bodies of theory that predict otherwise.

The persuasion knowledge model holds that people develop a working theory of how marketers attempt to influence them, and that once a persuasion attempt is recognized as such, the target's response changes: attention shifts from the message to the tactic, and the persuasive force of the appeal is attenuated (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Developmental research has established that this capacity grows substantially through adolescence (Rozendaal et al., 2011), and media literacy scholarship has generally assumed it is protective. The present data confirm the first half of the model and complicate the second. Recognition occurred exactly as predicted, and with striking fluency. What did not follow was attenuation. Priya named the mechanism at work on her ("The more exposed you are to something, the more you will want it") and completed the purchase. Clara, who described a campaign as an exercise in "grabbing attention" rather than a claim about a product, went to the shop because of it. Coping, in Friestad and Wright's sense, appears here to have been cognitive rather than behavioural.

The finding also refines Hall's (1980) framework in a way the model itself invites but does not develop. Hall proposed that audiences decode from a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional position, and the model's critical purchase has largely rested on showing that audiences are not captured by producers' preferred meanings (Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1980). Yet the model concerns the reception of meaning, and is silent on what reception does. These participants supply an instance in which an oppositional reading and a compliant behaviour occupy the same account. Clara's rejection of a campaign's preferred meaning was, on her own description, the very thing that took her into the shop. A message decoded as a provocation is still a message that has succeeded in circulating.

A second refinement concerns the object of decoding. Hall's model addresses how an audience receives the meaning encoded within a text. These participants decoded the text's strategic intent, treating campaigns as artefacts of a commercial process rather than communications bearing content. Wren's account of executives "in a boardroom" asking how to appear authentic is not a reading of the advertisement at all; it is a reading of the meeting that produced it. This is arguably the most contemporary aspect of the findings. It accords with what is known about the media environment in which these consumers have been socialised, one in which marketing is encountered continuously and at close range, and in which the vocabulary of marketing has itself become publicly available (Park & Chun, 2025; Vladimirova et al., 2024). Ritson and Elliott (1999) found that adolescents treated advertisements as

social currency to discuss, parody, and repurpose within peer groups, largely independent of the responses advertisers sought. The present findings extend that observation: the object circulating among these participants was not the advertisement but the strategy behind it.

The implication is not that literacy is worthless but that it operates upon a different variable than has been assumed. In these accounts, recognition changed what a campaign meant to the participant without reliably changing what she did about it. Interventions premised upon recognition as protection may therefore overstate what recognition achieves, and future work on advertising literacy might usefully separate interpretive outcomes from behavioural ones rather than treating the second as following from the first.

The Body as a Precondition for Meaning: Where the Gap Begins

The study's second contribution, and arguably its most distinctive, emerges from its most persistent and least expected finding: fit, sizing, comfort, and physical availability functioned as prerequisites for interpretation, and brands that failed to meet them were not engaged symbolically at all.

This exposes a limitation, less in Hall's (1980) model than in the way it has usually been applied. The model was developed for broadcast texts, and its fashion application has generally preserved that textual conception, treating the garment as a bearer of meaning to be read. Consumer research on symbolic consumption has followed a similar path, theorising possessions as carriers of culturally constituted meaning (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). Yet a garment is not only a text. It is an object that must be worn, and Entwistle (2000) argued precisely that fashion scholarship has privileged the symbolic properties of dress over its situated, bodily character. The present findings supply empirical support for that criticism from an unexpected direction, since the participants themselves insisted upon it. Wren's formulation subordinates a brand's entire aspirational apparatus to the garment's behaviour on the body: one will only feel a certain way in a garment if it fits, or else the skirt rolls up all night.

This suggests a stage before the three reading positions, in which the question is not what the message means but whether the object can be inhabited. Only once that condition is satisfied does the symbolic negotiation Hall describes become available. The proposal is modest, but it has consequences for how the interpretive process is modelled in embodied product categories, and it is not confined to clothing: Wren extended the same logic to cosmetics whose shade range excluded her.

The finding therefore revises the study's original conception of the gap. The study began from a semantic conception, in which the gap is the distance between a meaning encoded by the brand and a meaning decoded by the teenager. The present data indicate that another precedes this distance. Before a message can be read, the object that carries it must be able to meet the body it addresses. The gap between projection and interpretation is therefore better understood as having two layers. The first is material, and concerns whether a garment can be worn by this body at all. The second is semantic, and concerns what the brand means and how that meaning is read. The second opens only when the first has closed. In this sense the gap begins earlier than the study assumed, with the material conditions that make interpretation possible.

This refinement can be made from within Hall's model rather than against it. Hall (1980) placed technical infrastructure alongside frameworks of knowledge and relations of production on both the encoding and the decoding side of the communicative circuit. In broadcasting, the decoding infrastructure was the receiving apparatus: a household without a television set could not decode a programme at all, whether dominantly or oppositionally. In embodied product categories, the findings suggest, part of that infrastructure is the body itself. A garment that cannot be worn has not been read oppositionally; it has not been received. Treating the body as part of the infrastructure of decoding preserves Hall's three reading positions while specifying a condition on which their availability depends.

Nicole's account prevents the finding from collapsing into a familiar observation about the exclusion of larger bodies. Describing a repositioning toward inclusive sizing as the reason a brand became available to her, she also noted that the new regime generated its own exclusions at the other end of the range. Across the two layers, her account shows the material layer shifting rather than disappearing: closed for her, and reopened for others at the far end of the range. Her account suggests that the condition is not that brands neglect particular bodies but that a sizing regime accommodates some bodies and excludes others, and that whichever bodies fall outside it are barred from symbolic engagement irrespective of what the brand communicates. This connects the finding to Banister and Hogg (2004), who showed that young consumers construct identity as much through avoidance as through acquisition, using negative symbolic consumption to distance themselves from selves they do not wish to project. The present data indicate that some of that avoidance is not chosen at all. A brand that cannot fit a body is rejected before any symbolic judgement is made.

The finding also reframes what appear to be operational retail decisions as communicative acts. One participant identified the removal of fitting rooms as the point at which a brand lost her, and another objected to being directed online when she wished only to try a garment on. In both cases the reasoning concerned verification rather than convenience. A brand that closes its fitting rooms has withdrawn the apparatus through which bodily accommodation is established, and has thereby, in these accounts, communicated something more decisive than any campaign. In the terms proposed above, it is a decision taken at the material layer of the gap, and no message at the semantic layer can repair it. A gendered dimension should be acknowledged rather than assumed. This material derives overwhelmingly from the young women in the sample, and whether the bodily gate operates equivalently across genders cannot be established here.

Credibility as Coherence

The third finding concerns how participants judged credibility. Rather than verifying sustainability claims directly, they tested whether those claims were structurally plausible given the brand's commercial logic. This was not broad cynicism but a specific epistemic strategy, with implications for two bodies of literature.

Research on brand authenticity has established that authentic standing is constructed rather than possessed, produced through the careful management of narrative, continuity, and credibility (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015). That work largely focuses on what firms do to be perceived as authentic. The present findings describe the corresponding operation on the receiving side, and it turns out to be

structural rather than narrative. What persuaded Priya was not a story a brand told about itself but an inference drawn from where the brand does not operate ("they don't have a market in China"). What disqualified brands for Wren and Nicole was not the content of their claims but their incompatibility with the economics of their category. Authenticity, so far as these participants are concerned, is not communicated. It is inferred from conduct that cannot easily be staged.

This bears directly upon the greenwashing literature. Delmas and Burbano (2011) analysed the drivers of misleading environmental communication, and Parguel et al. (2011) examined how independent sustainability ratings might deter it, both proceeding from the premise that consumers cannot readily distinguish substantiated claims from unsubstantiated ones. These participants appear to have developed a heuristic precisely because verification was unavailable to them. None consulted a certification, and it is unclear that any would have known how. What they possessed instead was a rule of thumb about what kinds of organization can plausibly make what kinds of claims. The heuristic is structurally sound but evidentially thin, resting on category knowledge, hearsay, and the felt quality of fabric rather than any disclosure.

Read alongside the attitude-behaviour gap literature, this reframes a familiar problem. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) established the distance between stated environmental values and actual conduct as a general phenomenon, and studies in fashion specifically have documented consumers professing concern while continuing to purchase fast fashion (Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015). That distance has generally been theorised as a deficit in the consumer, whether of knowledge, motivation, or resolve. These participants were not inconsistent in that manner. They disbelieved the claims, gave coherent reasons for disbelieving them, and purchased anyway on grounds they could articulate. Marcus made the underlying value explicit in observing that he would think better of a brand that openly disclaimed environmental concern, since it would at least not be lying. What is being audited is not a brand's environmental performance but its truthfulness about itself, and the standard applied is arguably more exacting than the one implied by the claims.

Nicole's account is instructive on a further point. Reasoning from the cost of materials rather than from any brand's conduct, she concluded that the claim was implausible across the sector. Her audit operated at the market level rather than the firm level, and she reached it without marketing training. Vladimirova et al. (2024), reviewing ninety-two studies of social media and sustainable fashion consumption, found that the vast majority examined how brands might influence consumers, while comparatively few addressed how consumers interpret or contest sustainability discourse.

Extracting, Not Adopting: Rethinking the Extended Self

Belk's (1988) proposition that possessions become constitutive of the self is among the most durable in consumer research, and subsequent work has documented young consumers using brands as symbolic resources through which identity is narrated and social belonging negotiated (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). The present findings support the general proposition while qualifying its operation in a specific and consequential way.

Participants did not adopt the identities brands offered. They extracted components from many brands and assembled them under their own curatorial authority, and they explicitly refused identification with any single label. Clara buys one category from her favourite retailer and expects no observer to identify her by it. Wren attributes the mismatch to her refusal of the coordinated set, noting that brands sell a look through their other products. Nicole declines brand identification altogether, preferring garments without visible labels. The extended self, on this evidence, extends selectively, in fragments, and under the consumer's direction rather than the brand's narrative logic.

The qualification matters because the producer's side is, by its own account, in the business of constructing whole worlds. Rayan described wanting consumers to join the brand's world and understand it, an ambition consistent with the strategic literature on brand meaning (Holt, 2002). The mismatch is not that consumers reject brand meaning. Rather, they disaggregate it, purchasing the jeans without the world. Wren's case is instructive here, since she was enthusiastic about brands committing fully to a constructed world while declining to be defined by one. What is refused, then, is not the world but its claim upon identity.

What extraction changes in Belk's account can be stated precisely. For Belk (1988), possessions are incorporated into the self together with the meanings they carry. McCracken's (1986) model of meaning transfer specifies the route: meaning moves from the culturally constituted world into goods through advertising and the fashion system, and from goods into the consumer through rituals of possession. The participants in this study interrupted that route at its final stage. They took possession of the goods while declining much of the meaning that advertising had loaded onto it, purchasing the jeans without the world. In these accounts, transfer was partial, filtered at the point of possession by the consumer rather than completed by the brand. The self that results extends not through any single brand but through an assemblage of the consumer authors. This might be called curatorial extension: the self extends through what is selected and combined, and the authority to select remains with the consumer. The sample is small, but the qualification relocates agency within one of consumer research's most durable propositions.

This aligns with Holt's (2002) dialectical account, in which brands appropriate the cultural materials through which consumers express autonomy while consumers, in turn, develop new resistances. Extraction may be understood as one such resistance, and a particularly effective one, since it permits consumption without identification. It is consistent, too, with Thompson and Haytko's (1997) account of consumers appropriating countervailing fashion discourses and combining them into identity positions of their own. It also accords with Simmel's (1957) observation that fashion is animated by the twin impulses of imitation and differentiation: extraction allows a consumer to participate in a brand's aesthetic while withholding the affiliation that would collapse the difference. Nicole's account of arriving at a style that answered to neither of the two national conventions she had lived among is perhaps the clearest illustration of the authorial stance that extraction expresses: a style composed in relation to the available conventions rather than drawn wholesale from any one of them.

A boundary case sharpens the claim rather than weakening it. Marcus described wholesale identification with a brand he has followed for years, reporting that he feels like a citizen of it. Even here, agency is located with the consumer: he emphasised that he chose the brand for its consistency and that it has

honoured that choice. Adoption, where it occurs in these data, is narrated as a decision rather than an absorption, which is consistent with Fournier's (1998) reframing of brand relationships as reciprocal and conditional rather than unilateral. Even wholesale adoption, on this account, is a curatorial act: a single selection, made and then renewed, rather than an identity received.

Brand's Role: Change, Betrayal, and Renewal

If identity is assembled by extraction, then the unit of loyalty is not the brand but the function the brand performs within the assembled self. This proposition explains the pattern observed in participants' responses to brand change, which was neither uniformly conservative nor uniformly permissive.

Priya's defection isolates the mechanism. A retailer moved from occasion wear to athleisure, and she left, despite being a plausible customer for the new range. The defection concerned role rather than taste: the brand had held a particular office in her wardrobe, and that office had been abolished. Clara's response to an attempted revival is a subtler variant: she refused the brand for the attempt itself, and she now purchases its original garments on resale platforms, preferring the authentic artifact to the official reissue. Nicole supplies the positive case that completes the mechanism, welcoming a repositioning precisely because it enlarged the range of bodies the brand could serve, thereby creating an office where none had existed. In the terms of the two-layer gap, her renewal began at the material layer: only once the brand could accommodate her body did it acquire a function in her wardrobe at all.

Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) found that corporate rebranding may destroy, transfer, or create brand equity, with outcomes depending substantially upon perceived continuity. The present data suggest that the continuity at issue is functional rather than visual or narrative: what must persist is not the brand's appearance but its usefulness within an identity the consumer has already assembled. This also connects the theme to Fournier (1998), for whom brand relationships admit of betrayal precisely because they carry expectations. The expectation these participants held was not that a brand would remain the same but that it would remain useful for what they had recruited it to do.

The comparison across strands is instructive. Rayan identified price and access as the trigger of felt betrayal, the change most visible from within a business and most readily measured. The audience reported three further triggers (category abandonment, inauthentic revival, and material drift), none of which would necessarily register internally as a strategic decision. Marcus registered the most minute version, having changed retailers over an alteration in the feel of a single garment category. The producer's side, in other words, held a broadly correct model of consumer attachment while misidentifying what breaks it.

Tracking Reception Through the Wrong Instrument

Demonstrating that intended and received meanings diverge is of limited interest unless one can explain why the divergence endures, given that brands are strongly motivated to close it and have access to more audience data than at any previous point. The final contribution of this study concerns mechanism rather than description.

Reception, on the producer's side of this data, is detected through engagement analytics. Rayan learned that a campaign had misfired because "the likes were really low, the reposts were low." Such instruments register responses that produce engagement, and thereby exclude the three responses most prominent in the audience accounts: respect without purchase, purchase without belief, and the extraction of a single category from a rejected world. Each of these is a substantive reception outcome. None generates a measurable signal, and two would be actively misread by one, since a store visit prompted by disapproval and a store visit prompted by desire are indistinguishable in aggregate. The same blind spot applies with greater force to the material layer of the gap. A garment that does not fit generates no engagement at all: no like, no repost, nothing an analytics dashboard would record. Returns data may register a garment that failed after purchase, but not the shopper who could not find her size, or a fitting room, and bought nothing. The earliest point at which a brand loses a young consumer is therefore the point least visible to the instruments through which it observes reception. This may help to explain why the register of the body was effectively absent from the producer-side account.

This explains the stakeholder's characterisation of young consumers as gullible and quick to conclusions, a description contradicted by every audience transcript in the study. It is, however, precisely the picture one would form of an audience knowable only through aggregate engagement, in which volatility is visible and reasoning is not. The observation carries a reflexive dimension worth recording: Rayan is himself a young person describing his contemporaries, which raises the possibility that the misperception is occupational rather than generational, acquired upon entry to the industry rather than held beforehand. A single stakeholder account cannot settle the point.

The finding qualifies the influencer marketing literature in a useful way. Studies in this area have established that young audiences appraise sources as well as messages and are attentive to the commercial architecture behind apparently personal communication (Audrezet et al., 2020; Boerman, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). That literature relies substantially upon measured attitudes and stated intentions. The present study suggests that much of the interpretive work these participants performed would be invisible to the instruments through which the industry observes them, which may explain why practice continues to be organized around assumptions the research has already unsettled.

Synthesis, Academic and Practical Implications

The findings suggest that the distance between what fashion brands project and what teenagers interpret is not principally a failure of message design, and that it is unlikely to be closed by better encoding. Three features keep it open, and the first precedes meaning altogether.

The first lies before interpretation. In these accounts, a brand whose garments could not accommodate the body was not read at all, and the producer-side account contained no vocabulary for this layer of the gap. A brand may refine its message indefinitely without reaching a consumer it has already lost at the threshold.

On the audience side, these participants read strategy rather than content. They interpreted the manoeuvre behind a campaign, audited claims against the claimant's commercial logic, and assembled identity by

extracting elements from brand worlds they declined to inhabit. Each of these practices kept them at a systematic distance from the preferred meaning, and none would be displaced by more skilful communication, because that skill is itself what they were reading. On the producer's side, reception is tracked through engagement metrics, which cannot detect the readings that most shape attachment.

Identity is built in the space this creates, and the manner of its building is the study's central observation. Among these participants, identity was assembled rather than received, drawn selectively from brand worlds and subject throughout to the prior condition that the garment had to fit.

For scholarship, the study offers an empirical demonstration that encoding and decoding can be examined in direct contact rather than inferred from one side and supplies a method (shared stimuli across both strands, mapped through an alignment matrix) that is readily transferable to other communicative settings. It proposes two refinements to Hall's (1980) framework: the separability of reading position from behavioural outcome, and a material precondition upon symbolic reading, which locates the beginning of the gap before interpretation and treats the body as part of the infrastructure of decoding. It also proposes one qualification to Belk's (1988) extended self: that extension operates by extraction rather than adoption. Meaning transfer from brand to self is partial and filtered at the point of possession (McCracken, 1986), so that the self extends through an assemblage of the consumer authors rather than through any single brand.

For practitioners, the findings carry a direct implication. Young consumers in this study did not disbelieve sustainability claims because they distrust sustainability; they disbelieved them because the claims were incoherent with the business models advancing them. A brand seeking credibility with this audience gains more from correspondence between what it says and what it visibly does than from refining what it says. The measurement implication is equally direct: engagement analytics cannot detect the responses that most shape long-term attachment, and firms relying upon them exclusively are systematically blind to respect without purchase and to purchase without belief.

For educators and those concerned with consumer literacy, the findings counsel against a straightforward protective account. These participants were highly literate about persuasive technique and acted on the campaigns regardless. Interventions premised on recognition as protection may therefore overstate what recognition achieves.

LIMITATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

What the Study Shows and What It Opens

The sample reported here represents the first phase of an ongoing study, and its claims fall into three kinds, each warranting different degrees of confidence. The first concerns what these participants did. They audited sustainability claims against business models rather than verifying them; they decoded campaigns as strategy and acted upon them regardless; they treated fit and comfort as conditions of

engaging with a brand at all; and they assembled identity from components rather than adopting it whole. These observations are grounded in the transcripts and are reported as such.

The second concern is theory. On the strength of those observations, the study proposes that reading position and behavioural outcome are separable, that symbolic decoding in embodied categories depends upon a prior material condition, and that the extended self extends by extraction rather than adoption. These are propositions offered for examination, not generalisations established by a sample of this size.

The third concern is what should now be tested. Whether structural auditing is a general competence or a property of the trained; whether the bodily threshold operates equivalently for boys and young men, across a wider socio-economic range, and in other product categories; and whether the measurement blind spot holds for larger firms with dedicated research functions: these are questions the study raises rather than settles. Each is taken up in the recommendations below.

Limitations

First, the sample is small and purposive, and the study aims at interpretive depth rather than statistical generalisability; the findings describe these participants and these brands.

Second, the sample is weighted toward participants with marketing or fashion-industry training, which may inflate the strategic literacy reported under Theme 2. The confound is real but partial: two of the four audience participants have no such training, and the structural auditing described under Theme 1 appears in their accounts as readily as in those of the trained participants. Interpretive sophistication and prior training are therefore not straightforwardly coextensive in these data, though the sample is too small to separate them with confidence, and doing so remains the first priority for further recruitment.

Third, the brand-side strand rests upon a single stakeholder account, which is sufficient to establish the contrast reported but not to characterise the brand side generally; Theme 6 would carry considerably more weight with additional stakeholder interviews.

Fourth, encoded intent for the shared stimuli was reconstructed from public materials rather than from internal decision-making, so intent is inferred from what brands communicate rather than from what they deliberated.

Fifth, the data are self-reported and subject to social desirability effects, potentially heightened by the researcher's proximity in age to participants.

Sixth, as noted in the reflexivity statement, the interviewer sometimes articulated interpretations before participants reached them; quotations were selected to mitigate this, but co-construction remains real. Finally, the bodily material that grounds Theme 3 derives overwhelmingly from the young women in the sample, and its generality across genders cannot be established here.

Recommendations & Future Pathways

First, recruitment should be extended to young consumers without marketing training, which would permit interpretive literacy to be examined as a variable rather than inherited as a confound, and would test whether the strategic decoding reported here is general or a property of the trained. Second, additional

stakeholder interviews would test the measurement blind spot against a range of brand-side practices, including those of larger firms with more sophisticated research functions.

Third, the separability of reading position from behaviour invites longitudinal or diary-based designs that can trace an interpretation through to a purchase, since the present cross-sectional interviews capture but cannot observe the passage between them. Fourth, the bodily precondition proposed here warrants dedicated investigation across genders, body types, and product categories, and would benefit from methods that observe the retail encounter directly rather than reconstructing it in recall. Such work might also ask whether the retail practices that govern the material layer (size ranges, online-only sizing, and the provision of fitting rooms) register at all in the data through which firms observe reception.

CONCLUSION

This study asked how teenage fashion identity is constructed in the space between what brands project and what teenagers interpret. It found that a more capable interpreter than the producer's side imagined occupied that space. It also found that the space begins earlier than the study assumed. Before a brand could be read, its garments had to accommodate the body, so that the gap between projection and interpretation opened first at a material threshold and only then at the level of meaning. These participants did not receive selves from brands. They audited what brands told them, took what was useful, refused what was not, and assembled the remainder under their own authority, subject throughout to the prior and unglamorous condition that the garment had to fit.

Four operations characterise that work. Credibility was established structurally rather than evidentially, by testing whether a claim fit the commercial logic of the brand advancing it. Campaigns were decoded at the level of strategy rather than content, and yet recognition of a persuasive attempt did not reliably prevent compliance with it. Bodily accommodation preceded symbolic interpretation, so that a brand unable to fit a body was never read at all. And identity was assembled by extraction, component by component, drawn from brands whose worlds these participants declined to inhabit. In Belk's terms, the self extended through what these participants selected and combined, not through what any brand offered whole.

Two of these findings warrant particular emphasis, because each points beyond the present sample. Structural auditing appeared in the accounts of participants with marketing training and of those without it. This raises the possibility that it is a general interpretive competence among young consumers rather than an artefact of specialist knowledge, a possibility the next phase of recruitment is designed to test. The bodily threshold, similarly, was described not as a matter of brands neglecting bodies but of sizing regimes accommodating some and excluding others at both ends of the range. If that account holds more widely, exclusion from symbolic engagement would be a structural feature of how garments are made rather than an oversight to be corrected in a single direction.

These findings suggest that the gap between projection and interpretation is not principally a failure of message design, and that it is unlikely to close through more skilful encoding. In this data it was held open by an audience that read strategy rather than content, and by a producer's side that observed

reception through instruments registering only what generates engagement. The producer is not indifferent to the audience. The producer is looking carefully through the wrong lens.

The fitting room, closed by one retailer and missed by participants who wished only to try a garment on, is an apt emblem of the whole. Brands increasingly address young consumers in the register of meaning, while the audience they address is first engaged in establishing whether the thing will accommodate a body.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview Guide (Audience Strand)

Interviews were semi-structured. The questions below constitute the bank from which each interview drew; not every question was asked of every participant, and wording was adapted to the flow of conversation.

Area 1: The message encoded

1. Which fashion brands do you notice most at the moment, whether or not you buy them? What makes them hard to miss?
2. Think of one brand you have strong feelings about. If that brand were a person, how would you describe their personality, values, and the kind of life they seem to be selling?
3. When a brand runs a campaign or posts on social media, what do you think they are really trying to get you to feel or believe?
4. Who do you think a brand like this is talking to? Does it feel like it is speaking to someone like you?
5. Have you noticed brands making claims about being sustainable, ethical, or environmentally friendly? What do you think they are trying to say about themselves?
6. Have you noticed a brand change, perhaps a new look, a new face, or a different feel? What did you think they were trying to do?

Area 2: The message decoded

1. How would you describe your own style? Is there a name you would give it, or does it not fit neatly into a label?
2. Is there a piece you own, or a post you have saved, that feels really you? What does it say about you?
3. Are there brands that genuinely fit who you are, and others you would never wear even if they were free? What is the difference?
4. When a brand presents a certain kind of person or lifestyle, do you find yourself believing it, questioning it, or seeing through it?
5. Has a brand ever tried to associate itself with something and failed to convince you? What gave it away?
6. How much do your friends, or people you follow online, shape what you think of a brand?

Area 3: The space between

1. (Stimulus shown) What do you think this brand is trying to say here? How does it land with you: do you buy it, half-buy it, or not at all?

2. Can you think of a time a brand completely won you over? What made it work?
3. And the opposite: a time a brand tried something that fell flat, or put you off? What went wrong?
4. (Sustainability claim shown) Do you take a claim like this at face value or with a pinch of salt? What would make you believe it more, or less?
5. When a brand you liked changed, did it feel like an exciting update or like they had lost what made them them?
6. Do you think brands really understand people your age, or do they often get it wrong? Where do they miss the mark?
7. How much do you think the brands you wear reflect who you really are, versus who they want you to be?

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Stakeholder Strand)

The stakeholder guide mirrors the audience guide area by area, so that responses from the two strands may be compared directly.

Area 1: How brands craft what they project

1. Tell me about the brand you know best from the inside. If that brand were a person, how would you want the world to describe them?
2. When you develop a campaign, what are you trying to get the audience to feel or believe? Walk me through how a message goes from an idea to something the public sees.
3. Who is the imagined customer when messages are crafted, and how does a young audience figure in that picture?
4. What role do ambassadors, influencers, and collaborations play in saying what the brand cannot say directly about itself?
5. When a brand communicates about sustainability or ethics, what is it trying to say about itself? How are those claims decided and worded?
6. Have you been involved in a rebrand or a significant shift in a brand's look, positioning, or price? What was the change meant to achieve, and what to preserve?

Area 2: The reader imagined

1. How do you form a picture of how young people will read a campaign? What research, data, instinct, or feedback goes into it?
2. In your experience, how do young consumers use brands in building who they are? Do you design with that in mind?
3. How savvy do you find young audiences? Do they take brand messages at face value, question them, or see through them?

4. What makes a brand feel authentic to a young audience, and what gives the game away when a brand is trying too hard?
5. How much power do brands actually have over what a young person thinks of them, compared with friends, influencers, and conversation you do not control?
6. Is there anything about how young people respond to fashion marketing that surprises you, or that the industry keeps getting wrong?

Area 3: Where messages land and where they miss

1. Tell me about a campaign that landed exactly as intended, especially with younger consumers. What made it travel intact?
2. And the opposite: a message read in a way you never intended, or that fell flat. What did the audience take from it, and why did the gap open?
3. How did you find out it had misfired?
4. (Stimulus shown) Looking at this as an industry insider: what is this brand trying to say, and how do you expect a young audience to read it?
5. When a brand changes, how do audiences tend to respond? When is change received as renewal, and when as betrayal?
6. What does lasting loyalty from a young consumer look like from the brand side, and what missteps leave an enduring negative impression?
7. How wide is the gap between the identity brands offer young people and the identity young people actually build?

Appendix C: Illustrative Coding Process

The table below illustrates the movement from interview extract to first-order code and then to the analytic note that informed theme development. It is offered as a transparency device rather than as a complete codebook.

Table C1 *Extracts, Codes, and Analytic Notes*

Interview extract	First-order codes	Analytic note
"What's your core business model? I'm looking at you in fast fashion … you're not going to be sustainable." (Marcus)	Testing claim against business model Category as disqualifier	Credibility inferred structurally; no verification attempted. Object of judgement is the claimant, not the claim
"They substantiate that because they don't have a market in China." (Priya)	Absence from a market as proof Structural evidence accepted	The one instance of belief granted; grounds are structural, confirming the audit heuristic from the positive case
"They're in a boardroom being like, how do we be more authentic? And that's obviously the exact opposite of being authentic." (Wren)	Imagining the production process Naming the tactic	Object of decoding shifts from message to manoeuvre; campaign read as artifact of a department
"I definitely did go in with my friends after seeing that ad." (Clara)	Visiting the store because of controversy Compliance following rejection	Decisive for Theme 2: oppositional reading does not produce oppositional behaviour
"We're not that size, but you can order for yourself online. Well, the whole point is I want to try it on." (Wren)	Unavailability in store Verification refused	Bodily accommodation precedes symbolic reading; retail logistics as communicative act

"I don't think someone would look at me and think, oh, she wears a lot of Urban Outfitters." (Clara)	Refusing brand identification Buying one category only	Extraction rather than adoption; qualifies Belk on the operation of the extended self

Appendix D: Ethical Documentation

The following materials were prepared and approved prior to data collection, and are available on request:

1. Research plan, addressing methodology, participant recruitment, confidentiality and privacy, informed consent procedures, and a risk and benefit analysis.
2. Institutional review documentation, including the completed approval form and reviewer signatures.
3. Combined informed consent, minor assent, and parental permission form, covering purpose, procedures, time required, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation.
4. Participant invitation templates for the audience and stakeholder strands, each stating the recording and anonymisation arrangements and offering the interview topics in advance.
5. Opening and closing interview scripts, by which voluntariness, withdrawal rights, recording, and anonymisation were restated and verbal consent confirmed on the recording.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms at transcription. Identifying details, including school, place names, and named third parties, were removed or altered. Recordings were stored on a password-protected device and will be deleted upon completion of the project; anonymised transcripts will be retained securely.