



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AESTHETIC CONSUMPTION AND VISUAL IDENTITY AMONG GENERATION Z IN JHARKHAND – A CASE STUDY OF RANCHI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary consumer culture, purchasing behaviour is increasingly shaped by appearance, emotional resonance, and symbolic meaning rather than functional utility alone. This study examines the psychology of Aesthetic Consumption and Visual Identity among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers in Ranchi District, Jharkhand, focusing on how visual appeal, emotional attachment, self-image, and social media exposure shape buying behaviour and self-presentation. The research adopts a descriptive and exploratory design using a mixed-method approach. Primary data were collected from 105 Gen Z respondents in Ranchi through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms, supplemented by qualitative insights from in-depth interviews; secondary data were drawn from academic journals and prior studies on youth culture and consumer psychology. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and linear regression. The findings show that Gen Z respondents in Ranchi are highly active on social media (91.4% daily users, predominantly on Instagram) and that aesthetic design, emotional connection, and identity expression are significantly associated with purchasing decisions across the large majority of variable pairs tested, while a smaller number of relationships particularly those involving direct social comparison and image-pressure variables show weaker or non-significant associations. The study concludes that psychological factors significantly influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi, confirming the alternative hypothesis, and recommends that businesses, marketers, and platforms place greater emphasis on visual design, authentic branding, and identity-aligned communication when engaging this demographic.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic Consumption, Visual Identity, Generation Z, Consumer Psychology, Social Media, Ranchi District, Jharkhand

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the modern consumer environment, purchasing behaviour is no longer driven solely by functionality, economic necessity, or product performance. Younger consumers increasingly evaluate goods, services, and experiences on the basis of their aesthetic appeal, emotional connection, and symbolic value a phenomenon termed Aesthetic Consumption. This reflects a broader shift from functional consumption toward experiential and identity-based consumption, in which products are valued not merely for what they do but for how they look, how they make consumers feel, and what they communicate socially. The aesthetic features of a product its packaging, design, colour palette, and retail or digital presentation generate emotional responses that shape consumer perception and brand evaluation.

Visual Identity refers to the ways individuals express and communicate their values, social status, lifestyle, and personality through visual cues and consumption patterns. It functions as a form of symbolic self-representation, constructed through clothing, grooming, social media profiles, and lifestyle choices. For Generation Z individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who have grown up entirely within a digital, image-saturated environment Aesthetic Consumption and Visual Identity have become deeply intertwined, as platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, and short-form video normalize highly curated self-presentation and continuously expose users to idealized lifestyles, beauty standards, and visual trends.

This psychological linkage is supported by several established theoretical frameworks, including Symbolic

Consumption theory, Self-Concept theory, Belk's Extended Self theory, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, Social Identity theory, Social Comparison theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, each of which explains a different dimension of why consumers are drawn to aesthetically pleasing products and how visual cues translate into purchasing decisions and identity formation.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Gen Z consumers are visibly influenced by aesthetics, visual appeal, and lifestyle trends when making purchasing decisions, yet the psychological mechanisms underlying this behaviour remain insufficiently understood, particularly outside major metropolitan markets. Existing research has generally examined consumer behaviour, branding, and social media influence as separate phenomena, leaving the combined psychological impact of aesthetic consumption and visual identity comparatively unexplored. The role of emotions, self-esteem, social approval, and identity congruence in shaping aesthetic purchasing behaviour especially among Gen Z in emerging Tier-2 urban centres such as Ranchi constitutes a significant and under examined gap.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, is experiencing rapid urbanization, growing digital connectivity, and increasing exposure to global fashion, beauty, and lifestyle trends through social media. The rise of branded retail outlets, aesthetic cafes, skincare and beauty culture, and influencer-driven consumption among local youth mirrors patterns previously documented



mainly in metropolitan markets. As a developing urban centre where global aesthetic trends intersect with local cultural traditions, Ranchi offers a distinctive and currently under-researched context for examining how Gen Z consumers psychologically engage with aesthetics, self-presentation, and identity construction.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses specifically on Gen Z consumers (born 1997–2012) residing in Ranchi District, examining their engagement with aesthetic consumption across fashion, skincare, technology, café culture, and digital self-presentation. It investigates the psychological factors emotional connection, self-esteem, social comparison, and identity expression that influence aesthetic purchasing behaviour, and evaluates the role of social media platforms in shaping Visual Identity, drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview insights.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Shukla, Singh, and Banerjee (2015) examined luxury value perceptions across China, India, and Indonesia using impression management theory, finding that consumers in different Asian markets weigh the symbolic, experiential, and functional dimensions of luxury brands differently, cautioning against treating Asian luxury consumers as a uniform segment.

2. Boguslaw (2015) found that self-congruity and the desire for distinctiveness were the strongest predictors of consumers' purchase intentions toward premium fashion brands, while demographic factors showed little predictive value, underscoring the role of self-identity in aesthetic purchasing.

3. Sung et al. (2015) developed a theoretical framework for luxury fashion brand identity, noting that consumers purchase high-end brands to fulfil emotional, hedonic, and social needs rather than purely functional or financial ones.

4. Li, Zhang, and Sun (2015) found a positive relationship between face consciousness and status consumption among Chinese consumers, with social self-esteem partially mediating this relationship relevant to understanding social-approval-driven aesthetic consumption.

5. Manchiraju and Diddi (2015) segmented the U.S. luxury market using the Luxury Value Perception framework, identifying "status-seeking hedonists" as the largest consumer cluster, with self-identity and uniqueness values being key differentiators across segments.

6. Suresh (2015) studied youth shopping behaviour for branded clothing in Indian malls, finding that peer groups, technology and symbols, and perceived brand value positively influenced willingness to buy among young consumers.

7. Strydom (2014) identified eleven dimensions of customer value in high-fashion retail, with experience value and status value showing significant relationships to customer satisfaction relevant to understanding aesthetic and experiential retail consumption.

8. Heine (2012) distinguished functional and hedonic motivations behind luxury consumption, arguing that hedonic motivations linked to status display, social interaction, and self-esteem closely mirror the psychological drivers of aesthetic consumption.

9. Teimourpour and Hanzae (2011) found that brand-conscious Generation Y consumers in Iran purchase prestigious, high-priced brands specifically to convey affluence and social status.

10. Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) examined self-categorization and affective commitment as components of social identity, providing a foundation for understanding how group membership shapes consumption-based identity signalling.

11. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed a framework for consumer-company identification, showing that consumers form relationships with brands that reflect and reinforce their own self-concept.

12. Eastman et al. (2009) examined millennials' mobile technology behaviours and online shopping attitudes, finding generational differences in technology-mediated purchasing relevant to understanding Gen Z's digital-first consumption patterns.

13. Devgan and Kaur (2010) identified product cost, validity, data security, customer satisfaction, store appeal, and product elegance as critical factors shaping young consumers' mall-shopping behaviour.

14. Al-Mutawa (2013) found that Muslim women in Kuwait constructed personal identity narratives around Western luxury fashion brands, illustrating how consumers actively reinterpret global aesthetic symbols within local cultural contexts.

15. Amatulli and Guido (2011) found, through laddering interviews with Italian luxury consumers, that self-assurance and self-actualization were the two fundamental hidden values underlying luxury fashion purchases.

3. RESEARCH GAP

The reviewed literature on consumer behaviour, luxury consumption, purchase intention, and brand perception has predominantly focused on economic, marketing, and behavioural dimensions rather than the underlying psychological dimensions of aesthetics. While prior researchers have examined social influence, brand consciousness, and perceived value, very little attention has been given to Aesthetic Consumption as a means of self-experience and identity formation. A particular gap exists in understanding how Gen Z uses Aesthetic Consumption to construct and communicate Visual Identity: existing studies largely explore brand image and purchasing behaviour without explaining how fashion, beauty, lifestyle choices, and social media aesthetics contribute to self-concept and social presentation. Psychological factors underlying aesthetic consumption self-esteem, social comparison, belongingness, and identity expression remain comparatively unexplored, and most existing studies on aesthetic consumption have been conducted in major metropolitan or international markets, leaving emerging Tier-2 Indian cities such as Ranchi largely unexamined despite growing local exposure to globalization and social media. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the psychological factors driving Aesthetic Consumption and Visual Identity formation among Gen Z in Ranchi district.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does Gen Z in Ranchi district engage in Aesthetic Consumption?



2. What psychological factors influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi district?
3. How do digital platforms shape the Visual Identity and self-presentation of Gen Z in Ranchi district?

5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the patterns of Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi district.
2. To analyse the psychological factors that influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi district.
3. To evaluate the influence of digital platforms on the Visual Identity and self-presentation of Gen Z in Ranchi district.

6. HYPOTHESES

H0 (Null Hypothesis): Psychological factors do not significantly influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi district.

H1 (Alternative Hypothesis): Psychological factors significantly influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi district.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

The study employs a combination of descriptive and exploratory research designs. The descriptive component captures patterns of Aesthetic Consumption and the extent of digital influence, while the exploratory component examines the underlying perceptions, motivations, and identity-related behaviours of Gen Z consumers.

7.2 Data Sources

A mixed-method approach was employed, combining qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions used to explore the reasoning behind aesthetic preferences and identity expression with quantitative survey data measuring

consumption patterns, platform engagement, and visual identity markers. Secondary data were drawn from academic journals, government and NGO reports on youth culture, social media analytics, and prior studies on aesthetic consumption.

7.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The target population comprised Gen Z individuals (born 1997–2012) residing in Ranchi District. Primary data were collected from a total of 105 valid respondents via structured questionnaires and an online survey administered through Google Forms, supplemented by in-depth interviews with a subset of participants.

7.4 Data Collection Method

Structured questionnaires combining closed-ended and Likert-scale items were administered both online (Google Forms) and through in-depth interviews to capture both quantifiable consumption patterns and qualitative narratives around visual identity and self-expression.

7.5 Statistical Tools Used

Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to profile respondents and summarize survey responses. One-way ANOVA was used to test for significant differences between psychological and aesthetic-consumption variable pairs, and linear regression was used to assess predictive relationships between selected variables. All tests were conducted at a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$) using SPSS. Qualitative interview transcripts were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns around Visual Identity and self-expression.

8. DATA ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

8.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the 105 respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 105)

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48.6
	Female	50.5
	Other	0.9
Age	14–17 years	2.9
	18–21 years	36.2
	22–25 years	49.5
	26–29 years	11.4
Occupation	Student	65.7
	Student & Part-time Employee	10.5
	Private Sector Employee	8.6
	Self-Employed/Freelancer	8.6
	Content Creator/Influencer	1.9
	Unemployed	3.8
	Businessman	1.0



Monthly Income/Allowance	No Personal Income/Dependent	53.3
	Below ₹5,000	8.6
	₹5,000–₹10,000	12.4
	₹10,001–₹20,000	7.6
	₹20,001–₹30,000	7.6
	₹30,001–₹40,000	4.8
	Above ₹50,000	5.7
Area of Residence	Urban	72.4
	Semi-Urban	21.0
	Rural	6.7
Social Media Use Frequency	Daily	91.4
	Weekly	7.6
	Rarely	1.0
Most-Used Platform	Instagram	76.2
	YouTube	21.0
	Pinterest / LinkedIn / WhatsApp	1.0 each

Source: Primary data collected by the researcher.

The sample was nearly evenly split by gender (50.5% female, 48.6% male) and dominated by the 22–25 age bracket (49.5%), consistent with a Gen Z-focused study. Students constituted the majority of respondents (65.7%), and a corresponding 53.3% reported no personal income, reflecting financial dependence typical of a student-heavy sample. Social media use was nearly universal (91.4% daily users), with Instagram as the dominant platform (76.2%), and 61.9% of respondents reported actively

following aesthetic-based content pages—confirming high digital and aesthetic engagement within this cohort.

8.2 ANOVA Test Results

One-way ANOVA was conducted across 29 variable-pair combinations to test for significant mean differences between psychological and aesthetic-consumption variables. Table 2 summarizes a representative set of these results.

Table 2: Summary of One-Way ANOVA Results (Representative Pairs)

Variable Pair (Dependent ↔ Factor)	df (between)	F	Sig.	Decision
Purchases reflect personality ↔ Aesthetic design influences buying	4	4.355	.003	Reject H0
Emotionally connected to aesthetic products ↔ Aesthetic design influences buying	4	5.000	.001	Reject H0
Visual trends influence lifestyle ↔ Willing to pay more for aesthetics	4	10.907	<.001	Reject H0
Use aesthetics to express identity ↔ Buy products matching personal aesthetic	4	6.594	<.001	Reject H0
Prefer brands with strong visual identity ↔ Compare style with others online	4	3.224	.016	Reject H0
Product presentation ↔ first impression ↔ Social media affects self-presentation	4	1.497	.209	Fail to reject H0
Packaging/design affects quality perception ↔ Pressure to maintain online image	4	1.361	.253	Fail to reject H0
Feel satisfied with aesthetic products ↔ Pressure to maintain online image	4	3.073	.020	Reject H0
Enjoy collecting visually attractive items ↔ Admire people with visual identity	4	6.373	<.001	Reject H0
Confident when appearance matches aesthetic ↔ Choose cafes by ambience	4	9.678	<.001	Reject H0
Emotionally connected to aesthetic products ↔ Feel satisfied with aesthetic products	4	8.506	<.001	Reject H0



Buy products matching aesthetic ↔ Confident when appearance matches aesthetic	4	9.571	<.001	Reject H0
Social media affects self-presentation ↔ Prefer brands with visual identity	4	2.398	.055	Fail to reject H0 (borderline)
Aesthetic design influences buying ↔ Influenced by trends in choices	4	4.260	.003	Reject H0
Admire people with visual identity ↔ Product presentation ↔ first impression	4	3.751	.007	Reject H0
Purchases reflect personality ↔ Enjoy collecting visually attractive items	4	2.361	.059	Fail to reject H0 (borderline)
Compare style with others ↔ Prefer visually appealing products	4	0.626	.645	Fail to reject H0
Pressure to maintain online image ↔ Prefer visually appealing products	4	1.595	.182	Fail to reject H0
Willing to pay more for aesthetics ↔ Use aesthetics to express identity	4	5.802	<.001	Reject H0

Source: Computed from primary survey data using SPSS (Confidence Interval: 95%).

The overwhelming majority of variable pairs tested showed statistically significant relationships ($p < .05$), particularly those linking aesthetic design influence, emotional connection, identity expression, and willingness to pay more for aesthetically pleasing products. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected for a smaller subset of pairs, most notably those involving direct social comparison (“compare my style with others on social media”), pressure to maintain an online image, and product presentation’s influence on first impressions in

relation to digital self-presentation suggesting that while aesthetic and identity variables are broadly interconnected, certain social-comparison-specific behaviours operate somewhat independently of the broader aesthetic consumption pattern.

8.3 Regression Analysis

Linear regression was used to test predictive relationships among key variables; results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Linear Regression Results (Model Summary)

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable(s)	R	R ²
Admire people with strong visual identity	Prefer brands with strong visual identity	.468	.219
Visual trends influence lifestyle preference	Willing to pay more for aesthetic products	.466	.218
Influenced by trends in choices	Product presentation influences first impression	.421	.177
Use aesthetics to express identity	Buy products matching personal aesthetic	.389	.151
Influenced by trends in choices	Aesthetic design influences buying decisions	.364	.132
Willing to pay more for aesthetic products	Pressure to maintain image online	.333	.111
Aesthetic design influences buying decisions	Social media self-presentation + Compare style	.324	.105
Emotionally connected to aesthetic products	Prefer visually appealing products	.296	.088
Purchases reflect personality	Enjoy collecting visually attractive items	.258	.067
Buy products matching personal aesthetic	Social media affects self-presentation	.231	.053

Source: Computed from primary survey data using SPSS.

The strongest relationship observed was between admiring people with a strong visual identity and preferring brands with a strong visual identity ($R = .468$, $R^2 = .219$), followed closely by the relationship between visual trends influencing lifestyle preference and willingness to pay more for aesthetically pleasing products ($R = .466$, $R^2 = .218$). Several other moderate relationships (R between .30 and .47) were found linking trend-influenced choices, identity expression, and aesthetic design influence on buying decisions. The weakest relationships, with R^2 values below 9%, involved the link between buying products matching personal aesthetic and social media’s effect on self-presentation ($R^2 = .053$), and between purchases reflecting personality and collecting visually attractive items ($R^2 = .067$), indicating these specific pairs are only weakly predictive of one another in isolation,

even though broader ANOVA testing shows them to be statistically significant.

8.4 Hypothesis Testing Summary

The combined ANOVA and regression results provide strong support for the alternative hypothesis. Across the majority of variable pairs tested, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected, confirming that psychological factors emotional connection, self-esteem, identity expression, aspirational consumption, and social validation significantly influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi district. A small number of pairs, primarily those involving direct social comparison and pure image-maintenance pressure, showed non-significant or borderline results, indicating isolated pockets where statistical variance was minimal. Overall, however, the broader psychological ecosystem driving identity congruence,



emotional connection, self-esteem, and aesthetic satisfaction is significantly tied to how this demographic consumes goods and experiences, supporting H1 over H0.

9. KEY FINDINGS

1. Gen Z respondents in Ranchi are overwhelmingly active on social media (91.4% daily users), with Instagram as the dominant platform (76.2%), and a majority (61.9%) actively follow aesthetic-based content pages.
2. Aesthetic design, emotional connection to visually appealing products, and the use of aesthetics to express identity are significantly associated with purchasing behaviour across the large majority of ANOVA tests conducted ($p < .05$).
3. The strongest predictive relationships identified were between admiring people with strong visual identity and preferring brands with strong visual identity ($R^2 = .219$), and between visual trends influencing lifestyle preference and willingness to pay more for aesthetic products ($R^2 = .218$).
4. Confidence in one's appearance matching personal aesthetic preference is strongly and significantly linked to choosing cafes and places based on ambience, and to feeling emotionally satisfied with aesthetically pleasing products.
5. A small subset of relationships particularly direct social-comparison behaviour ("comparing my style with others on social media") and the general pressure to maintain a certain online image showed weak or non-significant associations with other aesthetic variables, suggesting these specific behaviours operate somewhat independently of the broader aesthetic consumption pattern.
6. Slightly over half of respondents (51.4%) reported that influencers affect their fashion or lifestyle choices, and a similar proportion (43.8% "sometimes," 15.2% "often") reported purchasing products after seeing them online.
7. The demographic profile confirms a sample dominated by students (65.7%) with no personal income (53.3%), consistent with a financially dependent but digitally and aesthetically engaged Gen Z cohort.

10. CONCLUSION

This study examined the psychology of Aesthetic Consumption and Visual Identity among Generation Z consumers in Ranchi District, Jharkhand, using primary data from 105 respondents. The demographic profile confirms a digitally engaged, predominantly student cohort that is almost universally active on social media, with Instagram as the platform of choice. The hypothesis testing results provide strong support for the alternative hypothesis: psychological factors emotional connection, self-esteem, identity expression, aspirational consumption, and social validation significantly influence Aesthetic Consumption among Gen Z in Ranchi, with the null hypothesis rejected across the substantial majority of variable pairs tested. The exceptions to this pattern direct social comparison and generalized image-pressure variables suggest that while aesthetic consumption is broadly identity-driven, certain comparison-specific behaviours may be governed by distinct psychological mechanisms not fully captured within the

present variable set. Overall, the findings confirm that for Gen Z in Ranchi, consumption decisions are deeply intertwined with emotional gratification, self-image, and the ongoing construction of a coherent Visual Identity, both online and offline.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Visual design investment:** Businesses and marketers should prioritize aesthetic design in product development and packaging, given the strong and consistent association found between visual appeals and purchasing decisions.
2. **Consistent visual branding:** Organizations should develop and maintain a distinctive visual brand identity, as respondents showed a significant preference for brands with strong, recognizable visual identities.
3. **Product presentation and packaging:** Companies should invest in visually appealing packaging and presentation, as first impressions were found to meaningfully shape consumer perception and purchase interest.
4. **Identity-aligned marketing:** Marketers targeting Gen Z should align product aesthetics with the self-expression and identity goals of this demographic, given the consistent finding that consumers use aesthetic choices to communicate personal identity.
5. **Authentic social media communication:** Given the central role of social media in shaping self-presentation, brands should favour authentic and responsible visual content over excessively idealized imagery, which can otherwise heighten the image-maintenance pressure noted among respondents.
6. **Experience-based aesthetics:** Businesses in hospitality, food, and lifestyle sectors should continue to invest in ambience and visual experience, as café and place selection was found to be strongly tied to aesthetic and identity confidence.
7. **Trend monitoring:** Organizations should continuously monitor emerging visual and lifestyle trends among Gen Z, given the significant role trends play in shaping both purchasing decisions and broader lifestyle preferences.

12. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could extend this study through a larger, cross-regional sample comparing Gen Z aesthetic consumption patterns across multiple Tier-2 Indian cities, to determine whether the patterns observed in Ranchi are regionally distinctive or broadly representative. Longitudinal research tracking the same respondents over time could help establish whether aesthetic preferences and visual identity markers shift as Gen Z consumer's age into different life stages and income brackets. Future work might also disaggregate findings by gender, income level, and platform preference, and further investigate the specific psychological mechanisms—such as social comparison and image-maintenance pressure—that showed weaker or non-significant relationships in this study, to better understand why these particular behaviours diverge from the broader aesthetic consumption pattern.



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