Master Thesis

Dress to Impress:

How Social Identity Shapes Moldovans' Consumption Behaviour at Home and in the Netherlands

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Acknowledgements

With this paper, I proudly end my journey as a student at the University of Twente. I have spent four valuable years in this institution, managing in the meantime to experience all stages of grief after moving away from home, until finally falling unconditionally in love with the city of Enschede and the whole of the Netherlands. I will forever carry the University of Twente in my heart, being thankful for all the growth I had the chance to experience while here. I especially want to thank my partner, Lourenço, for being by my side for the past five and a half years and supporting me unconditionally, and to both our families, for showing us the greatest love there is on Earth!

The topic of the current paper stems from my personal interest in how people are influenced by their environments, often unconsciously, and what repercussions are there for their behaviours. After moving to the Netherlands, I recognised the significantly more relaxed attitudes towards clothing choices and public appearances compared to Moldova, giving me a greater sense of freedom and making me less fearful that I will be judged. Hence, I was curious to investigate whether this was an individual experience or a collective one. I was particularly interested in exploring how perceptions of dressing to impress differ between those who moved away, like me, and those who stayed in Moldova.

With my thesis, I aim to raise awareness of the challenges some of us face, as well as encourage a more empathetic attitude and authentic expression of one's individuality through clothing. Ultimately, I hope that my study encourages people to acknowledge the value of conscious consumption and, potentially, break cultural patterns that facilitate consumerism.

Andreea-Ceslava Glavan

Abstract

Objectives: Clothing plays a key role in how people express their identity and cultural belonging, yet Eastern European countries are often overlooked in such discussions. This study fills this gap by exploring how Moldovans use clothes to express identity, navigate materialistic and consumeristic values, manage impressions, and respond to social influences, comparing experiences of Moldovans in Moldova and those in the Netherlands.

Methods: Data were collected from 30 individual interviews, with 13 participants from Moldova and 17 from the Netherlands. Thematic analysis was used to explore how cultural norms, social expectations, and the desire to express one's identity shape clothing choices, highlighting similarities and differences between the two groups.

Results: Participants in both groups use clothes and accessories to express characteristics like intelligence, seriousness, and uniqueness. Moldovans in the Netherlands value Moldovan folk costumes more, and those in Moldova tie clothing more to social status. Materialism is driven by emotional needs and ease of buying across both groups, but is less evident among participants in the Netherlands. Gender norms, social media, and social judgement shape both groups' clothing choices, with diaspora participants being more aware of these pressures. For both groups, cultural drivers behind dressing up include tidiness and post-Soviet influences, while psychological ones involve seeking validation and fear of criticism.

Conclusion: This study shows that clothing is an effective strategy for expressing identity, navigating social belonging, and responding to cultural norms. It emphasises how migration can deepen self-reflection and shape personal values, and contributes to the discussion on post-Soviet identity, with conclusions applicable not only to Moldova, but also to other post-Soviet or collectivist nations dealing with similar identity and consumption characteristics.

Keywords: *social identity, consumer behaviour, social influences, dressing to impress*

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Introduction

The notion of "dressing to impress" shows that clothing is more than just apparel. It reflects the broader understanding that clothing also works as a strategic tool for identity construction, impression formation and management, and more. Even as far as 70 years ago, researchers asserted that consumers are defined by the products they own (Tucker, 1957) and tend to prefer products that match their self-image (Belk, 1988; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959; Sirgy, 1982). This introduced the idea that products are not just functional but also represent the self. Building on this, Al-Issa and Dens (2021) argue that personal values shape how individuals use possessions to express and communicate their identity, offering both significance and pleasure through consumption. These values often connect to appearance, allowing people to express themselves and showcase their personal style.

However, what we wear extends beyond apparel. According to Höpflinger (2014), clothing is "a complex communication system that embraces the whole human appearances" (p. 177) and includes all items of attire, ornaments, and body decorations like makeup, accessories, haircuts, tattoos, and jewellery as part of clothing (Horn & Gurel, 1981). As clothing may reflect not only who the person is, but also who they want to be (Safdar et al., 2019), consumer choices are not influenced only by personal desire, but also by social factors. For instance, Vigneron and Johnson (1999) identified values like conspicuousness (signalling status), uniqueness (standing out with exclusivity), and social conformity (fitting in with groups) as key social drivers of consumption. These values seem to be motivated by external pressures such as peers, parents, and even social media influencing how one dresses (Cialdini, 1989; Safdar et al., 2019). Similarly, Negrin (1999) emphasised that clothing allows one to incorporate both personal and traditional elements in their style, to express their individual and cultural identity.

Although existing literature (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bluvstein Netter & Raghubir, 2021; Loureiro et al., 2017; Naumann et al., 2009) discusses influences on clothing choices, little is known about how cultural, psychological, and social identity factors shape people's dressing to impress habits. This study draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT), and literature on consumer behaviour, impression management, and social influences, to address this research gap and explore how clothing reflects Moldovans' social identity both in Moldova and after migration to the Netherlands. It also investigates their drivers behind dressing to impress, and whether these drivers shift or persist after migration. To achieve this, a qualitative study was conducted in the form of 30 individual interviews with Moldovans living at home or in the Netherlands. The primary research question guiding this study is: In which ways does social identity shape Moldovans' dressing behaviour in Moldova and the Netherlands, in relation to material, social, psychological and cultural influences?

Moldova makes a compelling case for examining the behaviour of dressing to impress as a cultural phenomenon. In 2020, over 1.1 million Moldovans lived abroad (United Nations, 2020), compared to an estimated 2.5 million living in Moldova in 2024 (Biroul Național de Statistică, 2024), resulting in a diaspora of roughly one-third of the total country's population. The term "diaspora" is frequently used to describe Moldovans who live abroad and, according to Cambridge University Press & Assessment (n.d.), it means "a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries, or the act of spreading in this way". Driven by economic hardship (Cheianu-Andrei, 2023) and societal pressures that drive them to prioritise visible assets like expensive clothing (Popov et al., 2020), the large Moldovan diaspora is drawn to active clothing consumption and consumerism – behaviours deeply rooted in historical inequalities and aspirations for upwards mobility (Popov et al., 2020).

As little is known about how social and cultural pressures shape Moldovans' attitudes toward dressing to impress, the current study contributes academically to addressing what is described as a major distinction between Eastern and Western cultures (Choi et al., 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Suh et al., 1998). In this context, the presence of over 3,000 Moldovan voters in the Netherlands for the Moldovan presidential elections (Comisia Electorală Centrală, 2024) appears to be enough diversity to draw relevant conclusions concerning Moldovans' migration and potential acculturation to the Dutch environment, possibly reflected in their consumption behaviours. By examining how Moldovans negotiate identity, social status, and cultural legacy through appearance, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Moldovan society. It also highlights how migration shapes deeply rooted consumer values, making them valuable for cross-cultural studies, diaspora research, and post-Soviet countries identity analysis. These insights can also assist policymakers in promoting sustainable clothing consumption by addressing consumerism and materialism, and encouraging more mindful, value-driven consumer habits within Moldovan society and its diaspora.

Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

SIT explains how people's sense of self is shaped by the groups they belong to, coupled with the emotional attachment to that membership, and how group membership defines who we are and who we are not (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT differentiates ingroups (us) from outgroups (them), claiming that ingroup members are more prone to having more favourable views of the ingroup over the outgroup, which often leads to prejudice, intergroup competition, or conflict. The theory proposes that people strive to feel good about themselves in order to sustain or boost their self-esteem, which can be acquired, among other things, through identifying with a superior group. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT is

based on three main aspects: social categorisation, social comparison, and social identification, showing how group membership influences identity and behaviour.

Social categorisation

Social categorisation theory, which is deeply rooted in SIT (Kim, 2021), is about how people divide themselves and others into groups. Instead of seeing everyone as unique individuals, people group others based on shared traits or identities (La Macchia & Louis, 2016), such as beliefs, values, social norms, personal attributes (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1979), and apparel. This process helps individuals understand where they fit in the social world, as they always belong to one group or see themselves as outsiders (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). As such, those whom one psychologically identifies with are perceived as ingroup members, and those who one does not psychologically identify with are seen as outgroup members. Usually, ingroup members are preferred at the disadvantage of outgroup members (Brewer, 1999; Marques & Paez, 1994).

An important factor that might cause one to display unfavourable reactions against those who seem outside one's social identity is clothing (Kim, 2021). Results of a study on aesthetic labour by Pounders et al. (2014) showed that when service providers dressed too similarly, customers were less likely to engage with the business and reported negative feelings. The authors argued that due to social categorisation, when service providers' clothes differed significantly from those of clients, it reinforced an "outgroup" attitude, resulting in negative reactions towards both the staff and the organisation (Pounders et al., 2014).

Social identification

Social identification focuses on how people use their group memberships to define who they are. As members of the same group, people imitate some behaviour traits from their mates, including clothing (Pearson et al., 2001). Hence, as clothing has long been utilised to show one's social rank, membership, religion, and ethnic heritage, contributing to identity

constructions, to this day, social groups put effort into expressing their social identity through clothing (Kim, 2021; McNeill, 2018).

In fact, dressing for a specific role or membership is very common today, too. According to Worley (2021), when a person becomes a doctor or lawyer, they adopt a code of conduct particular to their profession, either to gain peer respect or to boost self-esteem. This process shapes how they see themselves and others, as belonging to a group provides meaning, self-esteem, and a sense of certainty.

Social comparison

Once people group and identify themselves with one or multiple groups, they begin social comparison, which involves comparing their group to other groups. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), people naturally want their group to seem better than others because it boosts their self-esteem, creating a positive identity. These comparisons allow individuals to feel proud of their group and see it as superior to others (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). In general, when people are exposed to information about others, social comparison might take place (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009), fostering a self-evaluation of people's capabilities in comparison with those around them (Johnson & Lammers, 2012; Le, 2020).

One theory to explain this phenomenon is social comparison theory, which implies that people will compare their abilities and opinions with others who are similar to them (Latif et al., 2020). Social comparison theory posits that comparing oneself to others is part of the process of creating one's identity and beliefs (Sharif et al., 2021) and might lead to eliciting inspiration (Meier & Schäfer, 2018). Nevertheless, comparing with others may have a detrimental impact, if people feel inferior as a result of social comparison, particularly on social media. Research shows that people comparing themselves with others who they consider better than themselves might experience depression (Li, 2018) and mental health problems (Jang et al., 2016). Also worth mentioning is that, according to Cleveland and

Chang (2009), social comparison is believed to be more prominent under collectivism, and, according to Popov et al. (2020), who evaluated Moldovan culture using the theoretical model of Hofstede (2011), Moldova is a collectivistic society.

The social identity perspective of clothing

SIT explains how people form their concept of self by combining personal characteristics, such as interests, personalities, and abilities, with social characteristics derived from group membership and intergroup relations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Reid, 2006). While often overlooked in clothing studies, SIT can offer valuable insights into how appearance, particularly attire, can contribute to shaping one's identity (Crane, 2000). As noted by Reed (2002), clothing is an important aspect of the material self and a great boost for confidence and wellbeing (Raunio, 1995) – potentially as a result of social comparison – contributing to greater self-esteem and social success by attracting the attention of others.

Importantly, the process of identity is influenced by one's social environment, and involves a continuous self-reflection, where personal style becomes both an expression of the self and a response to societal expectations. As such, as part of the acculturation process to a new country (Penaloza, 1994), migrants might buy more clothing items to signal high status or match local societal expectations (Cleveland et al., 2022; Safdar et al., 2019). Research shows that, while values and beliefs evoke one's personal identity, visible traits like gender and ethnicity often play a key role in how people see themselves and how others perceive them (Cheek & Briggs, 1982; Deaux et al., 1995; Huddy, 2001). As such, although clothing is more adaptable than these fixed visible traits, they still seem to be used to obtain social approval and establish a sense of self (Hunt & Miller, 1997; Kimle & Damhorst, 1997).

Additionally, personal and social components of identity seem to be deeply connected and constantly influence one another (Deaux et al., 1995; Hitlin, 2003; Reid & Deaux, 1996), implying that changes in one area can affect the other (Kim, 2021). Thus, from a social

identity perspective, clothing is often used strategically to express individuality and conform to group standards. The current study applies this lens to explore clothing in relation to social identification, more specifically, how people use apparel to express their identity and to impress others. Hence, the first sub-question results:

Sub-question 1: How do Moldovans in the Netherlands and in Moldova use clothing to express their social identity?

Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour has been extensively researched and defined in various ways. Durmaz and Jablonski (2012) define consumer behaviour as the study of how individuals choose, utilise, and dispose of items to fulfil their desires and needs, while Diop (2004) describes it as a learnt attitude influenced by each consumer's unique sociocultural context, emphasising the fact that these distinctions prevent customers from being universally categorised. Moreover, Voramontri and Klieb (2019) outline several key models of consumer behaviour: economic model (cost-effective value); psychological model, in line with Maslow's hierarchy (buying to meet pressing needs); Pavlovian learning model (behaviour shaped by experience and repetition); and sociological model (influence of social norms).

Consumerism

Consumerism is one's desire to acquire goods, or "the active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences" (Bocock, 1993, p. 50). Although it emerged as a means to create a more just market for both consumer and businesses (Kucuk, 2016; Mann & Thornton, 1978), consumerism has since evolved into a critical societal problem, given that it promotes constant buying of goods. According to Moisander and Pesonen (2002), consumerism is a way of life or an inner desire to be a specific type of person. Niinimäki (2010) supports this view, claiming that beyond the need to simply purchase new items, people often have deeper reasons, like being associated with a

social status. This may involve building their identity on wearing rich symbols or brands or simply having the desire to have a certain lifestyle, that reflects how they present themselves to others, their daily routines, and their social activities. In general, consumerism creates the environment in which materialism thrives. However, while consumption is critical for one's life, as people need to eat, drink, and have their basic needs assured to survive, the current level of consumption is unsustainable and needs to change (Assadourian, 2010).

Materialism

Materialism fuels both consumerism and conspicuous consumption, emphasising the importance of material belongings and the pursuit of happiness through them (Richins, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009). For materialistic individuals, possessions reflect their happiness and social status, boost life satisfaction, and shape their personal identity. In line with this, Sobol et al. (2018) found that materialism is positively associated with global consumer culture. Similarly, Cleveland et al. (2015) claim that it is facilitated by global media that promote materialistic values, like "extravagance, pleasure, fulfillment, exclusivity" (p. 14) and more.

Furthermore, ownership of conspicuous status goods, including domestic appliances, is defined not just by the possessor but also by their expectations of how such objects will be perceived by their relevant communities (Sharma, 2011). For many materialistic people, the opinion of their social group is important, making them more susceptible to detrimental social comparisons. According to Sharif et al. (2021), social comparison theory suggests that people measure their social position by comparing their belongings to those of people they regard as important. This often results in increased materialism in an attempt to not only mimic but also outperform others.

Conspicuous consumption

Conspicuous consumption is a behavioural expression of materialism within a consumerist society, manifesting as people show off. It is the idea that people consume, at

least partially, to demonstrate to other people their power (Veblen, 1967), and this definition is valid in our era too (Carolan, 2005). In general, a product is considered conspicuous if it is used in public to impress or to make the owner stand out in their social group (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Additionally, conspicuous consumption is very closely related to the fashion business (Loureiro et al., 2017). And so, as one's identity is continuously evolving and advertisements are tailored for specific audiences (Kennedy & Krogman, 2008), conspicuous consumption is facilitated.

To better understand the drivers of consumer behaviour in the luxury goods context, Al-Issa and Dens (2021) propose a framework of personal and social luxury values that helps understand practices like conspicuous consumption, in which luxury items are used to show social status. Personal values include the extended self-value (a), which involves using purchases to express identity; the hedonic value (b), focused on pleasure from consumption (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), and the materialistic value (c), which emphasises the importance of possessions (Wiedmann et al., 2009). Social values, as outlined by Vigneron and Johnson (1999), include conspicuousness, uniqueness, and social conformity.

As such, people who like to show off often take pride in displaying material goods, including trendy clothing (Sedikides et al., 2011). And those who enjoy being noticed, value possessions, follow fashion trends, and care about their appearance tend to showcase their personality and social status through clothing (Loureiro et al., 2017). As this study explores the relationship between clothing consumption, self-construction, and self-esteem of Moldovans at home and in the Netherlands, as well as their attitudes towards consumerism and materialism, the following sub-question emerges:

Sub-question 2: How do Moldovans interpret and experience materialistic and consumerist values in relation to their clothing choices?

Social Influences on Clothing Choices

The concept of social influence is closely linked to social values (Loureiro et al., 2017). Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) defined value as a belief in an ideal outcome that guides how people choose to behave, regardless of the situation. Moreover, it is believed that values and norms influence how people think and act, making it simpler for individuals and communities to connect and cooperate (Maltseva, 2018). While values are based on perceiving something as good and are internalised as "felt evaluations" (D'Andrade, 2006, p. 37), providing criteria on which a behaviour is judged as good or bad, norms set rules for what a behaviour should be like (Maltseva, 2018).

Norms are built on shared values (D'Andrade, 2008) and are reinforced by our human nature of collectivity. According to Paluck et al. (2010), a social norm is the assumption that particular behaviours and dispositions are considered standard or desirable in one's community. Maltseva (2018) states that in the socialisation process, people are able to understand what is normal and socially desirable and what is not, forming conclusions about future behaviours based on these insights. And usually, without any external pressure, people learn what they need to do and what they should avoid doing at all costs, if they want to be accepted by other members of their group or by society at large (Searle, 1995).

Additionally, in a culture, regardless of how unusual a norm might seem, it requires compliance within the cultural community where this norm holds superiority (Maltseva, 2018). As such, a widely accepted norm can be thought of as the group's standard behaviour, and the reasons for it frequently reflect the psychological characteristics of those who belong to the group. Interestingly, failing to match cultural norms has been scientifically proven to have harmful effects on both mental and physical health in various American and Brazilian populations (Dressler, 2005; 2006). In this context, the concept of normative influence provides a useful lens.

Normative influence implies a conformance with the demands of other people or groups, such as family and close friends (Bearden et al., 1989; Lord et al., 2001). In the context of fashion, this could imply choosing clothes and fashion accessories that do not necessarily reflect one's identity and style but are approved by their social circle. Drawing on SIT and the concept of social categorisation, Spears (2021) claims that when people categorise themselves into groups, they do not regard the group as a separate entity, but rather as part of their personal identity. In this case, social influence becomes intertwined with self-influence. That is because, in moments of uncertainty, people tend to assume that members of their in-group share similar perspectives on social reality, making them a trustworthy source of guidance (Spears, 2021). Additionally, social media also plays a role in influencing one's clothing choices (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019), as social norms do not require a face-to-face interaction and can occur via digital channels too (Nolan & Wallen, 2021).

Thus, norms and values play an important role in the consumption process. People might choose fashionable clothes to showcase their social status, and to either impress others (Lawry et al., 2010), place themselves into a group, or separate themselves from others (Li et al., 2012; Loureiro & de Araújo, 2014). As such, social values seem to be shaped by community and group influence (Wiedmann et al., 2009), with fashionable items often being related to social recognition and prestige (Loureiro et al., 2017). Given that fashion products that are accepted by family members, friends, and other groups of belonging increase the desire to own them (Loureiro et al., 2017), the subsequent sub-question results:

Sub-question 3: What social influences shape the clothing and fashion choices of Moldovans at home and in the Netherlands?

Psychological and cultural drivers behind dressing to impress

People's clothing choices reflect deep societal, personal, psychological, and cultural factors that shape how they gather information and assess things before making a purchase.

Psychological drivers

Impression management, also named "image control" (Schlenker, 1980, p. v), implies that, unconsciously or not (Leary, 1995), people's perceptions of themselves and how others treat them are frequently influenced by how they attempt to project a particular image of themselves. The impression formation perspective indicates that, instead of investing major mental efforts into generating correct perceptions of others, people rely on basic cues or heuristics to create impressions (Asch, 1946; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986; Miller, 1970).

Additionally, research shows that visible cues like apparel reflect the wearer's character or mood, influencing how others see them (Lurie, 1981). As such, one of the drivers behind dressing to impress is impression management motivation, which is an indication of how important it is to one's intentions to generate a positive impression (Bluvstein Netter & Raghubir, 2021), highlighting the disparity between the actual and the intended appearance. Besides visible cues like physical appearance, other factors like non-verbal behaviours and stereotypes sustain impression formation (Chartrand et al., 2006; Naumann et al., 2009).

Another helpful framework to understand the drivers behind dressing to impress is the social cognition framework. Social cognition is a type of psychological process that implies the use of intellectual or cerebral processes to analyse, perceive, criticise, and draw conclusions about others (Lennon et al., 2017). As such, with the help of these processes, people translate the social information (e.g., clothing choices of others) into personal conclusions and future behaviours towards them. An aspect of social cognition responsible for perceptions based on people's visible clues, particularly their clothing, is social perception. It encompasses categorisation, impression formation and management, stereotyping, and preconceptions (Lennon et al., 2017). According to social cognition and perception, clothing is a tool for self-expression, grooming, and identity communication.

Although research has not proven yet that people categorise others by attire appeal (Lennon, 1990), one study found that participants classify people by determining who was more properly dressed and hence more suitable to "make a good media representative" (Stangor et al., 1992; p. 214). In line with these studies, Lennon et al. (2017) claimed that in the US, people have the general perception that one's clothes should be clean and free from dirt, giving the example of earlier research that showed how in mid-Western US, people perceived those in untidy clothes as coming from poor-families (Form & Stone, 1957).

Additionally, a driver for using clothes to impress is one's desire to protect their self-esteem and recognise the value of the self (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). In their study, Banister and Hogg (2004) found that the majority of participants maintained their self-esteem by wearing attire that was unlikely to be interpreted negatively. They chastised themselves, "played it safe" (p. 860), and avoided standing out from the crowd or fighting for status. Conversely, several individuals expressed a desire to express their authenticity, identity, and confidence through dress without fear of being accused.

In line with the self-esteem driver, Kim et al. (2023) combine the sociometer theory with the enclothed cognition theory to explore how clothing choices impact employees' self-esteem and behaviour at work. The sociometer principle is based on people's reactions, but it does not require interpersonal encounters, as people are able to predict their potential relation value in the absence of others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). As such, those holding positions that require a certain dressing style, might be inclined to respect it even when there is no one to criticise or compliment the way they respect the potential dress-code.

Building on the idea that people are concerned about how others perceive them (Cooley, 1967) and care about receiving social approval (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), research shows that the more situations one encounters in which their worth is determined by what others think of them, the more likely their self-esteem will fluctuate in response to

external feedback (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Leary et al., 2003). As such, using clothing that aligns with one's role or status corresponds to the perspective of enclothed cognition, coined by Adam and Galinsky (2012). Enclothed cognition refers to some mental processes of the wearer, in which a symbolic meaning carried by the clothes influences the wearer's next behaviours, positing that clothing has an influence on the social identity, feelings, perceptions, cognitions, and behaviours of the wearer (Kim, 2021).

The importance of external feedback is highly related to social influence. Recent research has brought a neuroscientific basis of conformity and social influence, demonstrating that people are more likely to conform when their nucleus accumbens (a reward centre in the brain) responds positively to the group agreeing with them (Nook & Zaki, 2015). Additionally, experimental research using transcranial magnetic stimulation showed that disrupting brain areas like the posterior medial frontal cortex reduced conformity in individuals (Klucharev et al. 2011). Similarly, other areas of the brain, like the right lateral prefrontal cortex, regulate the level of conformity when sensing a threat of punishment for norm violations (Ruff et al. 2013). Together, these findings suggest that conformity is a deeply ingrained neurological process, in which the brain actively balances social rewards and potential sanctions to guide a behaviour aligned to social norms.

Cultural drivers

One tenet of the concept of culture is that it is a manifestation of one's ability to gather, keep, access, and communicate information of collective value. This information transcends one's memory capacity and needs for personal use (Maltseva, 2018; Popov et al., 2020). According to Assadourian (2010), people's level of consumption is almost fully driven by cultural norms. Additionally, current consumer behaviour trends reveal the increasing importance of cultural meaning and identity in shaping consumption patterns. Cultural Consumption Theory (CCT) highlights how cultural forces like myths, narratives, and

ideologies shape consumer preferences and behaviour (Joy & Li, 2012). Consequently, consumers are increasingly drawn to products that reflect their personal identities, cultural values, and social status, as these items help define and communicate who they are. This shift emphasises that consumer choices are not solely driven by functional needs but also by the symbolic meanings attached to products within cultural contexts.

Research suggests that social behaviour and adherence to social norms are more prevalent in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic ones (Chen, 2021; Pepitone, 1976). In collectivistic contexts, people are strongly influenced by family, friends, and authority figures when making personal decisions (Loureiro et al., 2017), including those related to clothing. Hence, people coming from such cultures tend to exhibit greater self-criticism, reticence, and tolerance for cognitive dissonance. As a collectivistic society with a high power-distance index (Pirlog & Alexa, 2024), Moldova offers an appropriate context to study such behaviours, where people tend to report back to an authority figure and seek their approval before a final decision is reached. Given these psychosocial and cultural dynamics, the last sub-question emerges:

Sub-question 4: What psychological and cultural drivers motivate Moldovans to dress up in Moldova and in the Netherlands, and how do these drivers relate to self-perception?

An overview of the study's main concepts is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of main concepts of the study

Concept	Definition	Relevance to study
Social Identity	An "individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Tajfel, 1972 , p. 292).	Essential for understanding how individuals use clothing to signal group membership, internalised roles, and self-concept in social contexts.
Consumer behaviour	The study of how individuals choose, utilise, and dispose of items to fulfil their desires and needs (Durmaz & Jablonski, 2012).	Relevant for analysing how psychological, emotional, and cultural factors drive clothing choices, including attitudes toward materialism and consumption habits.
Social influence on fashion choices	Social influence is closely linked to social values (Loureiro et al., 2017). Values are based on experiencing something as positive and are internalised as "felt evaluations" (D'Andrade, 2006, p. 37), providing criteria on which a behaviour is judged as good or bad, while norms set rules for what a behaviour should be like (Maltseva, 2018).	Helps explain how external pressures like societal norms, media, and peer expectations shape people' fashion behaviours and preferences.
Psychological and cultural drivers behind dressing to impress	Internal needs for approval shaped by social perception (Lennon et al., 2017) and external norms rooted in shared cultural values that guide appearance and consumption (Assadourian, 2010; Maltseva, 2018).	Offer insights into the internal (emotional, cognitive) and external (cultural, historical) forces that motivate individuals to manage impressions through clothing.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how social identity shapes Moldovans' consumption behaviour at home and in the Netherlands. There is a limited body of research exploring this topic, and researchers advocate for additional studies on Eastern European countries, with some claiming that scholars from non-Western nations are underrepresented in academic studies (Nyúl et al., 2021; Stenning, 2005). Consequently, this gap highlights the value of a qualitative approach, which enables an in-depth examination of individuals' feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Mohajan, 2018) related to dressing to impress in Moldova.

Sample and Recruitment

The study included a purposive sample of 30 Moldovan participants (15 women and 15 men), aged 19 to 57, with an average age of 27, living in the Netherlands (17 participants) and in Moldova (13 participants). Table 2 provides a summary of participants' demographics. Important to mention is that the order in which participants are listed does not reflect the chronological order of the interviews. Although the original goal was to compare Moldovans living in Moldova with those living abroad generally, it just so happened that Moldovans in the Netherlands were more receptive, and those who lived in other countries did not volunteer to participate but instead directed the researcher to other residents of Moldova or the Netherlands.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, using community groups on WhatsApp and Telegram, cultural organisations, and personal networks. In some cases, participants were personally approached after being recommended by others. Moreover, attention was paid to an equal gender division, to ensure gender-balanced insights and avoid biases in understanding attitudes and behaviours. Following a

Table 2

General Overview of Participants

Participant	Gender		Age	Occupation
Moldovans living in the Netherlands (*n = 17*)				
P1		M	22	Chemical engineering student
P2	F		22	Political science student
P3		M	22	Chemical engineering student
P4		M	19	Mechanical engineering student
P5	F		22	IT student
P6	F		46	Lawyer
P7		M	22	Political science student
P8		M	20	Architecture student
P9		M	26	Legal advisor
P10		M	31	Data analyst
P11		M	22	Software engineer
P12		M	20	IT student
P13	F		25	Research assistant
P14	F		21	Safety and security management student
P15		M	26	Cultural leadership student
P16	F		20	Sociology student
P17		M	20	IT student
Moldovans living in Moldova (*n = 13*)				
P18	F		49	Head of kindergarten
P19	F		23	Medical student
P20	F		47	Editorial manager
P21	F		57	Teacher
P22		M	22	Unemployed
P23	F		22	Arts student
P24		M	35	Fashion designer
P25	F		24	Bartender
P26	F		22	Project manager
P27		M	23	Architecture student
P28	F		45	Occupational therapist
P29		M	27	Communications & events specialist
P30	F		22	Legal analyst
Total interviews	**15**	**15**		

greater initial response rate from female participants, the researcher resent the recruitment message in the same community groups, but with a particular invitation for male participants. This tactic resulted in a final sample of 15 women and 15 men.

Importantly, ethical approval was obtained from the Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS) Ethics Committee of the University of Twente [request number 250273] (see Appendix B). Additionally, each participant received information about the study's purpose in the invitation, allowing them to make an informed decision about their participation. The study concluded once no new insights emerged, ensuring the findings offered a solid and extensive understanding of Moldovans' social identity and clothing consumption behaviour.

Data collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 28 primary questions for participants in Moldova and 30 for those in the Netherlands, and sub-questions for both groups. Prior to each interview, participants signed an informed consent form, in which they agreed with the study's objectives, their rights, and the way their data will be further protected (see Appendix C). The interviews were conducted individually, mostly online via Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or WhatsApp, based on participants' availability. They were held in English or Romanian (the national language in Moldova), depending on participants' preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed using online tools, and those translated were carefully reviewed by the native-speaking researcher to ensure accuracy. On average, an interview lasted for 43 minutes. The total duration of all 30 interviews was 21 hours, 50 minutes and 44 seconds.

Interview outline

The interviews explored participants' social identification through clothing, consumption behaviours, social influences on clothing choices and their personal or observed drivers behind dressing to impress in Moldova. Semi-structured interviews were especially

advantageous, giving the researcher more freedom to follow a natural conversation flow (Balushi et al., 2018). The questions were grouped into three themes: general questions, social identity, and consumption behaviour. While general questions remained the same, some of the questions in the other two themes were tailored to each group's unique experiences. Appendix D provides an overview of the interview guide for both groups.

The order of the interview questions was designed to ensure a continuous flow between social identity, consumer behaviour, and participants' experiences with and views of dressing to impress in Moldovan culture. To guarantee a culturally sensitive interviewing approach, interviews started with demographic questions and reflections on participants' personality and their local fashion culture. Hence, as participants were aware of the purpose of the study, they were offered the opportunity to talk about their personality in relation to fashion, laying the foundation for the experiences they shared later in the interview.

The next section explored participants' clothing consumption patterns, shopping frequency, and influences such as social media or their favourite artists. Interviewees rated themselves on materialism and dressing to impress, using a 1 to 10 scale introduced during early interviews to allow for more specific answers. The questions in this section also addressed the influence of Moldovan societal norms and pressures on appearance-related behaviours and in both Moldova and the Netherlands. Grouping these questions together helped explore participants' consumption choices within broader social and cultural contexts, aligning with findings from previous research about the interplay between identity and clothing choices (Lawry et al., 2010; Loureiro et al., 2017).

In the following section, participants discussed how they express, maintain, and negotiate their social identity through clothing. Additionally, interviewees in the Netherlands reflected on social belonging, cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction, which are key in acculturation theory (Penaloza, 1994; Schwartz & Unger, 2017). Several follow-up

questions were selectively used to ensure data richness and encourage deeper reflections, particularly on topics like identity conflict or adjusting style and behaviours. Lastly, a final section addressed responsibility and potential solutions for reducing clothing consumption. However, while extremely critical for our planet but falling outside the primary focus of this research, the findings for this last section were not further used.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process underwent thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. While conducting the interviews, the researcher was already taking notes to capture any recurring answers mentioned by other participants, some opinions that strongly contradicted what the majority said, or simply answers that were unique and stood out. This is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) description of writing as an essential aspect of analysis that should not only occur at the end of the process.

After conducting all 30 interviews, the ones conducted in Romanian were translated to English using a combination of automated translation tools and manual translation by the researcher to facilitate the comparability of answers in the same language. All transcripts were anonymised, and participants were labelled with neutral codes (e.g., P1, P2...), making it impossible to identify them. Additionally, both audio files and transcripts were safely stored to ensure confidentiality and protection of participants' information. The transcripts were then compared to the original audio, to confirm they corresponded to the recording (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, the researcher reviewed and re-read the material, to better familiarise with it and sketch some potential codes.

Next, the researcher generated a list of initial codes based on what the data was about and what seemed interesting. The coding process was carried out using ATLAS.ti. Thematic analysis is suited for software-assisted coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling a more structured outline of identified patterns and themes. As such, coding began with reading

through the transcripts and assigning a specific code from the initial list to selections of text. If the selections stood out but did not correspond to any existing codes, new codes were added to the initial list, resulting in over 120 codes. The reason for it was that, at first, the researcher coded the content of almost the entire data set. However, throughout the process, she decided it was best to maintain a narrower focus and to concentrate on a specific, smaller part of the data set, which only covered the codes that helped answer the sub-questions.

Having obtained an extensive list of codes, the researcher grouped similar codes into potential themes. While the social identity and consumer behaviour themes were anticipated, considering their central role in the study's main framework, others – such as cultural differences between Moldova and the Netherlands, as described by participants who reside in the latter – were excluded from the final analysis, as they were not about how Moldovans express their social identity through clothing. Themes were refined until improvements no longer added meaningful differences to the list of codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), then clearly named and divided into distinct sub-themes. An overview of the final thematic structure is provided in Table 3.

To discover patterns and contrasts between how cultural environments influence the way Moldovans express their social identity through clothes in Moldova and the Netherlands, the final themes and sub-themes served as basis for comparison between the two groups. To enhance reliability, a second coder analysed approximately 15% of the collected data using the researcher's codebook. The results of the two coders were then compared, resulting in a Cohen's Kappa of .62 – and indication of a substantial consensus between the two coders (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Table 3
Overview of themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Definition	Example
Social identity	*Social identification through appearance*	Signalling affiliation or non-affiliation with specific social or cultural groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), based on shared styles or dress norms.	"In the Netherlands […] I don't really identify with Moldovan people. […] They dress in a very clean and nice way, but it's not the identity that […] I have […]. I also don't feel like I identify with Dutch people because of the difference in colours […] and the style."
	Social comparison	Engaging in comparisons between one's own social group (ingroup) and others (outgroups) to evaluate a status of superiority or inferiority (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).	"I think I'm usually better dressed than the people who surround me. Again, partly because I'm in a STEM environment and those people, they don't care as much about the way that they look."
	Social categorisation	Grouping themselves and others based on shared traits or identities (La Macchia & Louis, 2016), including clothing style.	"I don't think there's a category […] for what I wear. It's just like university, like academic outfits and also more Gen Z. […] I don't know […] how […] you can like have the limits of […] what is the Gen Z style […] it can be like so many things nowadays."
	Self-expression through clothes	Using clothes and style to show one's personality, culture, and how one wants to be seen (Hunt & Miller, 1997; Kimle & Damhorst, 1997).	"[I]f you walk into a room and see a person wearing different colours or shapes […] that's usually my style. […] an artist identity […] combined with clothes that look like someone who's been in the desert for a few months […] I think it's those three combined."
Consumer behaviour	*Consumerism*	Constant buying of goods, often for being associated with a social status (Bocock, 1993; Niinimäki, 2010).	"I honestly buy, I admit, more often than I should. Once a month, I definitely buy something. I like it."
	Materialism	The value of material belongings and how they might help one achieve	"I like spending money on myself […] I really do have some clothes […] if I see something beautiful and I like it, I just

		happiness (Richins, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009).	crave it and I want it. Even if I don't know how much I'll wear it."
	Conspicuous consumption	Buying things to show off status or impress others, often using visible products to stand out in a social group (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Veblen, 1967).	"I think it just comes from the family […] everyone wants to go to the relatives […] showing all the aunties and all the neighbours that: oh you know [name] is the most successful, he has like the last BMW."
Social influences on clothing choices	*Societal norms and values*	Shared beliefs and rules that guide how people behave and judge what is right or wrong, helping communities live and work together (Maltseva, 2018; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987).	"I used to love wearing short skirts. […] But around the time I turned 42, something shifted. […] I stopped because I felt that, at that age, it was more dignified, more appropriate. […] I moved on to longer skirts and dresses that still made me feel beautiful, but in a different way."
	External purchase influences	Human and situational factors that shape how people choose what to wear or buy.	"A lot comes from the media, from bloggers, influencers on Instagram and TikTok promoting clothes, brands, boutiques. They have a big impact."
Psychological and cultural drivers behind dressing to impress	*Cultural drivers*	Shared norms, values, and practices within one culture that guide what is considered acceptable, desirable, or necessary in terms of apparel (Maltseva, 2018; Popov et al., 2020).	"[O]ur culture that imposed or encouraged a certain style, at celebrations, at weddings, Moldovans used to dress very pompously […] And then there were the ladies who made handmade things, they crocheted, embroidered […] I think that's where our motifs and prints come from. Maybe that's where the tendency to impress through clothing comes from."
	Psychological drivers	Internal motivations (e.g., impression management or the desire to influence how others perceive one) that lead one to use clothing as a tool to project a desired image (Bluvstein Netter & Raghubir, 2021; Miller, 1970).	"[N]o one wants to be the same and like, just trying to be better than the others […]. It comes down from this background and lack of education […]. Everyone is just in a rush to be like better than the other."

Results

Social identity

Participants across both groups viewed clothing as a key tool to express their present and aspirational personality. They claimed using details like accessories, colours, textures, and style choices like avoiding visible brands, to reflect personal traits like intelligence, seriousness, and uniqueness. A shared pattern of the two groups was the strategic adaptation of clothing styles to fit a social group or context. However, notable differences emerged: participants in Moldova were more focused on maintaining seriousness and status through appearance in line with societal expectations, while those in the Netherlands engaged in more reflective and individualised expressions of identity, showing an increased interest in traditional Moldovan clothing.

Identity in details

To understand how Moldovans express their social identity through clothing, it is important to first synthesise their understanding of social identity. Participants generally associated clothing with visible elements, like apparel colour or textures, accessories, and stylistic themes, as well as the overall projected persona or individual traits conveyed in an outfit.

Both Moldovans residing in Moldova and those in the Netherlands described clothing style as an extension of one's personality. One participant, for instance, highlighted the importance of colours, patterns, and inner state that can influence her choice of an outfit: "*Some days I go for something minimal and balanced, other days I'm all over the place: layers, colours, patterns. It just depends on how I feel inside. My wardrobe is a kind of visual diary of all those moods.*" (Participant 25, Moldova). Another participant explicitly enumerated some strict factors that he bases his clothing choices on: "*I rather have my own pattern according to which I choose my clothes: no brand inscriptions, no texts or weird*

patterns, just pale colours, as simple as possible" (Participant 27, Moldova). Thus, participants mostly express their social identity using not only brands and flashy elements, but also through adjusting subtle details in their outfits to reflect their personality.

Furthermore, some participants from both groups referred to accessories as tools for expressing individuality. However, participants from Moldova mainly mentioned buying or owning accessories, and those in the Netherlands more often referred to the way Dutch people use accessories to express their individuality, rather than describing themselves doing so. This observation reflects a cultural characteristic of Moldova, which seems to have been internalised by interviewees and practiced even by those who no longer live in Moldova. As such, for Moldovan society, which is more austere, freedom of expression in terms of private life or consumption behaviour is not an essential concern (Popov et al., 2020). This might be a sign that participants from Moldova correspond to the culture they live in, and that those in the Netherlands have not been influenced (yet) by their host culture.

Dressing for a role or occasion

Another dimension of social identity expressed through clothing is related to dressing for a job and corresponding to occasions and groups, which involves the intersection of apparel, professional role, and social expectations. While several participants described using clothes to signal an image of intelligence or seriousness, one interviewee from Moldova emphasised the importance of clothing when closing a business deal: "*You can be judged, and you can lose a transaction, just because they didn't like how you were dressed*" (Participant 29, Moldova).

Similarly, an interviewee beginning a career in law expressed her desire to be perceived as more serious: "*If you have to go to court, for example, you can't afford to go dressed in T-shirts with funny messages*" (Participant 30, Moldova). This suggests a pattern of participants from Moldova adjusting their style to suit an occasion or group they engage with.

This adaptive behaviour aligns with Safdar et al.'s (2019) claim that clothing reflects not only who someone is, but also who they aspire to become. It is also consistent with the concept of social conformity (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999), which posits that consumption choices are shaped by people's desire to fit in. As such, the findings align with the SIT premise that group membership plays a key role in shaping people's behaviours and self-perceptions, and this seems particularly prevalent among participants living in Moldova.

Additionally, participants from both groups mentioned adjusting their appearance to meet expectations associated with their job. One participant from Moldova who holds a leadership position described her need to appear polished and elegant due to social judgements associated with clothes:

> *I need shoes that say "director". [...] if I, being a director, were to go out in [...] just a simple pair of pants and a basic blouse [...] People wouldn't see that right, they'd look down on me, like: That's a director?* (Participant 18, Moldova).

This observation relates to the concept of enclothed cognition, which suggests that the symbolic meaning carried by the clothes influences the wearer's cognitive processes and next behaviours (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). It also resonates with sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which implies that those holding positions that require a certain dressing style might be inclined to respect it even when there is no one to criticise or compliment their attire. For instance, wearing clothes associated with a high-role status, such as a director, might prompt the wearer to embody the director identity. Additionally, this phenomenon highlights the immense importance Moldovans give to others' meanings about them – an aspect rooted in SIT – and also raises concerns about the extent to which external validation impacts self-perception.

National identity

The last prevalent dimension of social identity emerging from the data was national identity, which appeared predominantly among participants residing in the Netherlands. Several of them described consciously adjusting their clothing style when travelling between the Netherlands and Moldova in order to avoid social scrutiny or criticism upon returning home:

> *I went [...] with a group of Dutch doctors to Moldova. And I dressed up nicely at the airport and they said [...] "Wow, you look so different". [...] In Moldova, when they saw me, they'd say, "You're a different person than you are in the Netherlands"* (Participant 6, Netherlands).

In fact, most interviewees in the Netherlands (*n=14*) declared that their style more closely resembles the style of other internationals in the Netherlands, rather than that of other Moldovans. Some explicitly mentioned adapting their clothing style when in Moldova: "*I must say that when I'm back home in Moldova my clothing style do changes a bit. [...] I feel like I dress more locally […] to, you know, be part of the society*" (Participant 13, Netherlands). Both participants' statements are consistent with the need for identity conforming and group uniformity explained by SIT (Hogg, 2016).

Another layer of national identity emerged as Moldovans residing in the Netherlands declared a greater interest in owning or wearing traditional Moldovan clothes than those in Moldova. Many attributed the development of love for traditional clothes to the experience of living abroad, which invited them to reflect more consciously on their culture and national identity: "*But the idea of expressing […] national identity [...] developed during my time in the Netherlands. [...] when you're taken out of your context and placed in a new one, you start to notice differences and specific characteristics*" (Participant 16, Netherlands). As such, participants' rediscovery of traditional clothing as a form of identity expression suggests that cultural distance may boost the desire to preserve national heritage. This finding aligns with

recent research showing an increasing interest in traditional clothing among the Romanian diaspora (Cuciureanu, 2022). Given the shared language, history, and cultural traditions between Romania and Moldova (Sofransky, 2002), it is reasonable to view Romania's experience as relevant for understanding national identity within the Moldovan diaspora.

Materialism

The findings for consumer behaviour revealed a general divide between consumerists and non-consumerists, and both groups demonstrated tendencies to overestimate or underestimate their consumerism level. Materialism emerged as both a consequence and a reinforcing condition of consumerism, thriving in environments where consumer culture is prominent, and sustaining that culture. A few participants openly shared their materialistic attitudes, explaining how clothing and consumerism influenced their self-image and lifestyle.

Materialism was explained by one participant as one of the consequences of scarcity of clothes in Soviet times: "*We lived in the Soviet space, when […] you couldn't really afford it. In the store there were only two, three kinds of material, and two dresses, and you chose: either this or that*" (Participant 20, Moldova). As such, Soviet remnants seemed to facilitate a symbolic consumption practice. Important to mention is that, although participants attributed many behaviours to Soviet times repercussions, it is important to not overprescribe these problems to a single cause, as clothing choices may be solely based on individual preferences, rather than historical conditions alone.

The next dimension of consumerism concerned a good deal of the total participants, who initially rejected the label of materialism, yet their later reflections revealed behaviours and values aligned with materialistic tendencies. One interviewee from Moldova conceded impulsively shopping for clothes, often as an emotional regulation mechanism: "*I do buy them, but I don't always wear them. Sometimes I'll buy clothes and just store them in the closet. [...] I'm more likely to shop when I'm not feeling so great, when I want to treat myself*

or lift my mood with a small gift" (Participant 28, Moldova). Such behaviour aligns with cultural tendencies identified by Popov et al. (2020), who argue that Moldovans' habit to gather many useless objects – including clothing – around the house for "when we might need it" (p. 41) stems from the collective memory of lack of products and poverty during Soviet times, and post-Soviet survival strategies. This tendency is similar to the tradition of preserving food during summer to get through winter (Popov et al., 2020) and may reflect social trauma dating back to the famine organised by the Soviet Union in 1946-1947 in Moldova.

Another example of implicit materialism was revealed mostly among residents of the Netherlands. Although interviewees claimed they did not identify as materialistic, the convenience-driven shopping behaviours they reported suggested otherwise:

> *[I]t's also very easy to buy something here. You know you can buy it from a website and then you have it the next day at home, which also creates a big risk in terms of responsibility in buying […] and you can just return it right after if it doesn't fit you.* (Participant 13, Netherlands).

This contradiction aligns with Assadourian's (2010) call for decreasing consumption as it is unsustainable, and can be explained by Joergens (2006), who argues that consumers might be limited in making conscious decisions by fast fashion's low prices and accessibility. In such environments, materialistic tendencies are interpreted as contextual decisions, making it difficult for people to critically assess the ethical implications of their habits. Additionally, this claim aligns with Sobol et al.'s (2018) remark that materialism is associated with the global culture of consumption.

The final prevalent dimension concerned the absence of materialism and was reflected in non-consumerism. A minority of participants, mostly from the Netherlands, demonstrated a consistent, conscious detachment from material possessions, maintaining minimal

consumption and self-expression through simplicity and shopping only when needed. However, their accounts were inherently subjective. For instance, the idea of buying clothes when one *feels* their wardrobe is boring is open to interpretation, as it may reflect a more frequent consumption, depending on each participant's internal barometer of boredom.

Hence, materialism appeared not just as a result of consumerism, but as a mindset that further entrenches it. While few participants explicitly identified as materialistic and openly talked about their consumption, several interviewees from the Netherlands claimed not to be materialistic, only to later contradict themselves and describe being influenced by the accessibility of stores and the ease to purchase apparel online. Only a small group, mostly from the Netherlands, consistently distanced themselves from consumerist pressures, embracing minimalist, need-based consumption for long-term use.

Social influences on fashion choices

Overall, Moldovans' clothing decisions appeared to be strongly influenced by societal scrutiny, gender norms, and social media both in Moldova and the Netherlands, with both groups generally seeking group belonging. Interestingly, interviewees living in the Netherlands showed greater awareness of societal pressures, often mentioning the impact of their relocation to the Netherlands on reflecting deeper on their identity. Regardless of gender, participants from both groups seem to be aware of a Moldovan cultural requirement for women to dress more feminine and for men to avoid attire that is not manly enough – a demand which those in the Netherlands somehow escaped once they left Moldova.

Gender norms and pressures

A pattern that emerged across interviews was the pressure to conform to normative behaviours and societal expectations within Moldovan society. While some participants outlined the importance for dressing strictly for one's age, suggesting that dressing outside one's age category might seem ridiculous, the most prevalent narrative concerned gender

norms. Female participants shared their personal experiences of being judged for not corresponding to the rigid feminine ideals in Moldova, describing the contradictory standards of female modesty and presentation:

> *[S]kirts [...] not too long, because then you're a prude. But not too short either, because then you're "asking for it". [...] it's very much the "traditional woman" thing [...]* ***someone who just [...] sits quietly and is pleasant to look at*** (Participant 16, Netherlands).

Such reflections match Pirlog & Alexa's (2024) argument that Moldova is a high power-distance country, where group consensus takes precedence over individual freedom. Hence, women are expected to be decorative, passive, and visually pleasing, and men are expected to take over the authoritative role to make decisions and have control. This is also consistent with SIT's concept of social categorisation, which implies that people want to feel accepted and included in groups, and, to facilitate that, social pressures often become internalised (Spears, 2021).

As Moldova is a collectivistic culture (Popov et al., 2020), people there tend to adhere more to social norms (Chen, 2021). One male participant shared the pressure he endured in Moldova for dressing in ways that deviated from traditional masculine expectations. He emphasised how moving to the Netherlands allowed him to feel free to express himself, without fearing social disapproval: *"[A]s a guy, it's not good to stand out because then you're not abiding by some culturally accepted ideas of masculinity [...] when I came here, I could breathe more easily*" (Participant 15, Netherlands). Besides confirming the high power-distance nature of Moldovan society, his claim also supports Popov et al.'s (2020) assertion that Moldova is an austere culture, where freedom of expression is constrained and deeply shaped by fear of social judgement for both men and women.

An interesting observation was that participants from Moldova appeared less affected by pressure compared to those living in the Netherlands. This may stem from the experience of relocation, which often prompts deeper self-reflection and potential identity renegotiation, as illustrated in participants' narratives. Haslberger et al. (2014) argue that during the process of expatriate adjustment, people's wellbeing, emotional stability, and satisfaction with their self and the environment are key concepts. In navigating this transition, they may experience various introspections, discovering previously unexamined personal and cultural tensions.

Social media influence

The last prevalent social influence outlined by both groups confirmed the great impact of social media on consumerism of clothes. One participant mentioned how, because of social media, she learned that the maple colour was trendy last fall, and so she was interested in buying an item of that colour: "*And you seem to want something - a coat, an accessory [...] You might not have thought about a colour or a pattern, but if you see it often, you start to like it*" (Participant 30, Moldova). This aligns with Johnson et al.'s (2014) observation that people are keen to a product overly advertised on social media because they don't want to miss out, again pointing to SIT and the need for group belonging.

Psychological and cultural drivers behind dressing to impress

Overall, Moldovans' desire to dress to impress seems to stem from cultural drivers like tidiness and post-Soviet remnant, and psychological drivers such as the need for validation and fear of judgement. The pressure to be like everyone else seems especially intense in Moldovan culture, which is very strict with assigning which people and behaviours are normal or not, because of the conservative mindset (Popov et al., 2020). As such, it seems that culture creates the *normal* and *not normal* groups, which then influence people's way of dressing, by making them more susceptible to choose to dress like a *normal* person.

Cultural drivers

The interviews revealed a complex intersection of cultural and psychological drivers to dress to impress, where cultural norms influence individual beliefs and behaviours, which in turn reinforce or reshape culture over time. One commonly mentioned cultural driver was the importance of looking presentable and tidy, especially in public – a staple behaviour carried to the Netherlands by some participants: "*You need to have everything ironed. Everything is smelling well and clean. [...] I cannot imagine going out outside of my house without ironing my clothes*" (Participant 13, Netherlands). This reflects the tendency to conform to social standards – typical of collectivistic cultures (Chen, 2021; Pepitone, 1976).

Another cultural driver that shapes their psychology are the restrictive post-Soviet remnants that were transmitted through generations: "*[I]n Soviet Union it felt like you have to be conforming with the society […] that we, all of us, are homogeneous. Don't you dare wear something to […] be distinguished in a group. Otherwise, you'll attract unnecessary attention*" (Participant 10, Netherlands). Besides the need for social homogeneity, participants also viewed Soviet kids' consumption of branded items as a compensation for their past: "*a visible logo, as a form of validation of a past self that couldn't afford it. It's childish but deeply emotional behaviour […] a source of self-validation or a sign that they have* ***made it***" (Participant 30, Moldova).

These findings suggest that materialistic behaviours among Moldovans might stem from their past deprivation. This aligns with the view of consumption as a symbolic practice for compensation, as theorised in the Pavlovian learning model of consumer behaviour (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019), which posits that people consume according to their most pressing needs. Having grown up in Soviet times in a context marked by scarcity of clothes, today's adults may perceive clothing as a critical and unmet need. In this context, older participants, particularly those from Moldova, most often confessed they are materialistic.

Psychological drivers

The psychological drivers identified are the need for validation and fear of judgement, and both seemed to be consequences of the social environment. Several participants described an internalised fear of judgement and social rejection if not dressing according to societal expectations, mentioning that Moldovan society operates within rigid definitions of what is acceptable, and that deviation can result in criticism and fear of exclusion: "*[I]n Moldova, we have the* ***normal*** *and we have the* ***not normal*** *[...] everyone thinks about 'oh, what my neighbour is going to say about me, what my friend is going to say about me?'*" (Participant 14, Netherlands). This supports Banister and Hogg's (2004) claim that people manage their self-esteem by wearing clothes unlikely to elicit negative reactions, while also aligning with the impression management framework, which highlights how people strategically use clothing as a tool to create positive impressions (Bluvstein Netter & Raghubir, 2021).

A particularly interesting observation made by one participant referred to a pretty recent situation in the Oval Office in the US, where Ukrainian President Zelensky was blamed for not wearing a suit during a diplomatic meeting. According to the participant, the critique was less about aesthetics and more about using clothing as a populist tool, aimed at an audience who expects a politician to dress in a certain way. It also confirms that clothing mirrors one's role and values – given Zelensky's stance on avoiding formal clothing while his citizens fight in a war – which underscores the power clothing carries in impression management (Bluvstein Netter & Raghubir, 2021).

Similarly, another participant referred to a Moldovan pro-Russian oligarch, who strategically appointed aesthetically pleasing women who dress impressively to lead his political parties and charm anti-European voters. This observation aligns with other reflections from the interviews: in a post-Soviet context like Moldova, impressive clothes reflect status, act as external symbols of success, and can be used to attract attention and trust

(Banister & Hogg, 2004). And within such collectivistic cultures, the opinions of trusted actors outweigh any information provided by experts (Loureiro et al., 2017).

Lastly, some participants claimed that the pressure to conform to societal norms stems from a constant social comparison, insecurity, and an internalised fear of not being liked: "*I don't know a single Moldovan [...] that has [...] a very healthy relationship with […] not caring about [...] what others wear. Like how much money the other has or what house they live in*" (Participant 2, Netherlands). This mirrors Burrow and Rainone's (2017) claim that people whose self-esteem is influenced by what others think of them will be dependent of external feedback when measuring their self-worth.

Discussion

Main findings

The main research question of the current study was "In which ways does social identity shape Moldovans' consumption behaviour in Moldova and the Netherlands, in relation to material, social, psychological and cultural influences?". It aimed to explore potential similarities and differences in how Moldovans in Moldova and those in the Netherlands express their social identity through clothing. Moreover, it examined the potential influence of materialism, consumerism, social and cultural norms on their clothing choices. And it also investigated the social and cultural pressures that shape and influence Moldovans' behaviours of and attitudes towards dressing to impress, and the potential psychological and cultural drivers for these behaviours. To address the research question, data were collected via 30 individual semi-structured interviews with Moldovans residing in Moldova or the Netherlands.

Considering expressing one's social identity through clothing, this study showed that participants from both countries use clothing and accessories to reflect their role and personality, or project how they want to be perceived by others. This can be explained by the

sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which posits that some people behave and dress according to a role they have internalised. While for recipients living in the Netherlands, the desire to express national identity through clothes was more prevalent, participants residing in Moldova revealed a greater focus on choosing clothes for social conformity. This behaviour can be explained by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the social conformity concept (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999), both of which underscore the huge role group membership plays in shaping individual choices and behaviours.

The findings related to consumeristic and materialistic values in choosing clothes revealed a division between consumerist and non-consumerist participants. While the latter group involves people low on the materialism spectrum – which were mostly participants from the Netherlands – the former category involves people from both countries, including participants who openly identified as materialistic, and those who were less direct but described materialistic behaviours, like impulse- and emotional buying. Notably, participants in the Netherlands declared that easy access to clothing stores facilitates consumption, which aligns with Sobol et al.'s (2018) claim that materialism is associated with global consumerism.

Considering the exploration of social influences on Moldovans' fashion choices, two main influences stood out: social media, and gender norms and pressures. Participants from both countries recognised rigid gender expectations for both men and women in Moldova, consistent with Popov et al.'s (2020) findings that Moldova is a collectivistic culture, where gender roles are divided, and freedom of expression is constrained. Interestingly, participants from the Netherlands seemed more aware of any societal pressures, potentially as a result of deep reflections triggered by relocation (Haslberger et al., 2014).

Next, findings consistently pointed towards two key cultural drivers behind dressing to impress: tidiness and post-Soviet remnants; and two psychological drivers: the need to

belong and fear of judgement. Participants often linked them to influences from Moldova's Soviet past, supporting the Pavlovian learning model of consumer behaviour outlined by Voramontri and Klieb (2019), which suggests that consumption can help overcompensate for the past deprivations. Cultural and psychological drivers seemed to intertwine often, with norms shaping people's beliefs and behaviours which, in turn, will shape culture over time. Interestingly, the pressure to blend in and conform was more evident among participants from Moldova, reflecting the collectivistic tendency to adhere to social norms (Chen, 2021).

Furthermore, there are several aspects that interviewees reflected on during the interviews, related to the main concepts of the study. Many participants reported feeling either superior or inferior to others after engaging in social comparison with peers or out-group members, which aligns with existing literature on social comparison theory. According to this theory, people compare themselves to their peers (Yue & Cheung, 2000) to assert their status, often as a means to obtain an ideal identity (Weinstein, 2017). Although participants' responses did not reveal highly contrasting findings, encountering both experiences of upward and downward comparisons across participants confirmed that people negotiate their self-worth and identity through appearance.

Lastly, considering the findings on national identity, it is important to mention that contemporary Moldovan culture does not impose a traditional Moldovan way of dressing, although participants described adopting traditional elements in jewellery, tote bags and casual clothes. Instead, it gives a broad push for people to look elegant and presentable. As a result, national identity does not function as a cultural driver in shaping people's dressing to impress behaviours, as traditional clothes are usually worn at special occasion to express national pride. Conversely, within diaspora communities, wearing national clothes serves as a means for cultural connection and group belonging, especially in the context of traditional celebrations.

Limitations and future research

One limitation of the present research is that multiple participants from the Netherlands were in their twenties and had relocated for their studies, without having experienced full financial independence while living in Moldova. As such, their consumption habits and identity expression may not reflect the patterns of older or more financially autonomous individuals. Future research could specifically target participants who spent several years of their adulthood in Moldova before relocating, to better understand Moldovans' general consumption patterns. Moreover, while the researcher, a native Romanian speaker, thoroughly reviewed the translations of interviews conducted in Romanian to enhance the comparability of participants' answers, she acknowledges the possibility of losing some nuances in interviewees' responses. Future studies might consider involving professional translators or conducting all interviews in the same language to further avoid any detail loss.

Additionally, while the current study compared Moldovans in Moldova and the Netherlands, the findings may not be applicable to all diaspora contexts. Future research could extend to other countries with significant Moldovan populations, even outside Europe, to explore how host country cultures and norms shape identity negotiation for Moldovans who reside there, and whether the trends observed among participants of this study are context-specific or reflect a more general pattern.

Finally, as the interviews conducted for this study also covered topics like sustainable consumption, participants enumerated several strategies to consume less and promote more sustainable consumption behaviours. Their suggestions included the creation of NGO's specialised in sustainable clothing and awareness campaigns, the need for education about sustainable consumption, the need for strict rules from authorities, and the role of influencers. Future research could investigate how such interventions might be designed to fit Moldovan

culture characteristics and to be positively perceived by Moldovan audience, as well as explore how attitudes toward sustainability developed in other post-Soviet societies.

Implications

Theoretical implications

The present study offers several contributions to existing literature on identity, culture, and clothing consumption, especially within the SIT framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Hofstede's (2011) cultural value models, Leary and Baumeister's (2000) sociometer theory and Adam and Galinsky's (2012) concept of enclothed cognition.

First and foremost, the findings reinforce the central principle of SIT that people need to belong to and identify with a group through visible assets like clothing (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This study illustrates how Moldovans, regardless of location, value group assimilation and adjust their clothing to fit into desired categories. Notably, participants who moved to the Netherlands often described a deeper awareness of their identity, revealing a potential identity reconfiguration in response to the need to belong to the new environment. This reflects Haslberger et al.'s (2014) view that relocation might cause deep reflections and identity renegotiation. This offers a more complex interpretation of SIT, by revealing how social identity is reconfigured not only through group membership but also through comparison with new cultural norms.

Secondly, this study challenges Hofstede's (2011) classical framework of cultural dimensions. While Moldova has been categorised as a feminine culture (Popov et al., 2020), participant narratives reflected values often associated with more masculine cultures, such as competition and constant comparison, status signalling, image consciousness, and social control. These findings echo critiques by Minkov et al. (2018), Catalin and Cerasela (2012), and Gerlah and Eriksson (2021) that Hofstede's cultural dimensions are too rigid to capture the continuous shifts in cultural identities caused by socio-political changes or technological

advances. These limitations confirm that cultural values may evolve over time or manifest differently across various contexts, calling for an updated framework, suitable for the current dynamic and fast-changing times.

Lastly, this study contributes to the sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), by confirming that clothing functions as a tool for social validation, especially in collectivistic societies. It also expands the enclothed cognition theory (Adam & Galinsky, 2012), as participants described using clothing not only to boost self-esteem by conveying an intelligent persona or to adhere to a professional role, but also to manifest national pride and reconnect to their Moldovan identity. As such, traditional clothes, which were often described by participants as symbolic markers of their collective identity, offer them a sense of belonging and identity while abroad, emphasising how one can reinforce their sense of identity through clothing.

Practical implications

The findings of this research suggest that clothing choices among Moldovans, both in the country and in the Netherlands, are shaped by complex cultural, psychological, and social factors. These include inherited beliefs about success, appearance, conformity, and self-worth. Based on these insights, several practical steps can be taken to support people in making clothing choices that reflect their evolving identities and emotional well-being.

To begin, diaspora platforms and online communities can play a key role in sharing personal stories of both people who dress to impress and those who value comfort and authenticity in their clothing, broadening perspectives of what clothing can represent. Normalising these narratives might help people feel more comfortable dressing in ways that represent their personal values and preferences, rather than conforming to societal standards. Furthermore, social media advertisements that emphasise authenticity, originality, or

individuality, rather than perfection, may be especially effective among younger viewers, who are more exposed to idealised styles and bodies online.

Secondly, concerning people who view cleanliness as a requirement for social acceptance, public health and mental health programs – particularly those targeting young people – have the potential to reframe cleanliness and grooming behaviours as aspects of personal well-being rather than public performance. This shift may promote the view that caring for oneself is valuable even in the absence of external validation. Furthermore, NGOs and community groups could consider creating short-form video campaigns or targeted social media content that emphasises autonomy in decisions regarding appearance, encouraging resilience to any unsolicited criticism. By giving people a chance to reflect on whether these dynamics affect them, such initiatives may help reduce stigma while cultivating healthier, more autonomous perspectives among people affected by societal pressure.

Finally, educational or youth development programs could integrate conversations about how cultural history and societal changes influence perceptions of attractiveness and success. Encouraging these critical reflections may help young people in better understanding the sources of the pressures they or others face, providing them with skills to accept, revise, or remove themselves from them in accordance with their own emerging sense of self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights how clothing serves not merely as a tool for self-presentation, but also as a medium for negotiating belonging, status, and emotional security. The findings confirm the importance of SIT, impression management, and cultural norms in shaping everyday clothing choices, while also revealing how cross-cultural relocation can prompt self-reflection, cultural comparison, and identity negotiation. As such, this research contributes to discussions on how post-Soviet cultural legacies and collectivist values impact everyday-life aspects like clothing choices, particularly in conservative environments where

social validation is key. Additionally, relocation to the Netherlands emerges as a facilitator for self-awareness, reflection and renegotiation of identities inherited from Moldova.

Importantly, the implications of this study go beyond the Moldovan context, to other post-Soviet or collectivist societies, such as Ukraine or Georgia. Understanding social identity dynamics in these contexts can contribute to developing healthier relationships with self-expressions and consumption, by promoting more inclusive and culturally sensitive mindsets, as well as sustainable consumption strategies. In a world where identity is constantly negotiated across borders, cultures, and screens, understanding how people use clothes to express who they are and who they want to be is crucial. Further exploration of these topics could offer scholars greater understanding of identity, culture, and human behaviour, paving the way for a more inclusive and adaptable world.

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Appendices

Appendix A: AI use statement

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT, to improve the writing style where necessary, transcribe parts of the interview recordings, check for APA guidelines, and find synonyms for some concepts. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

Appendix B: Ethical approval

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Dear Andreea Glavan,

This is a notification from the Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS) Ethics Committee to inform you that your research project has received a **positive advice.**

Application nr.	: 250273
Title	: Dress to Impress: How Social Identity Shapes Moldovans' Consumption Behaviour at Home and Abroad
Application date	: 24-Feb-2025
Researcher	: Andreea Glavan
Supervisor	: Meike Belter
SONA	: No
Date of advice	: 10-Mar-2025

The ethics committee has reviewed the ethical aspects of your research project. Based on the information you have provided in the web application, the ethics committee has no major ethical concerns for the research project to go forward as proposed. Please find attached the PDF with the application together with the review comments and advice.

It is your responsibility to ensure that the research is carried out in line with the information provided.

Future communication regarding this research project should also be directed to the secretary of the HSS Ethics Committee via ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl, stating the Application nr. 250273.

If you later make considerable changes to the research project that might affect the ethical aspects or raise new ethical concerns, you must submit an amendment. For this, please send a concise description of the intended changes to the secretary of the HSS Ethics Committee, stating the Application nr. 250273. An additional review of the proposed changes will be performed.

Best regards,

Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS) Ethics Committee

Appendix C: Informed consent

Information sheet

The purpose of the current research is to examine whether Moldovans prioritise appearance as part of their social identity, researching how motivations and practices differ between Moldovans living in Moldova and those living abroad. It also explores how exposure to diverse cultures impact identity and consumer behaviour, addressing the lack of empirical data on short-term oriented societies like Moldova, which are underrepresented in academic studies.

By taking part in the current study, you have the opportunity to reflect on your personal experience with clothing choices and whether these are influenced by your social identity or the culture you are exposed to. Your involvement will help to better understand how Moldovans negotiate identity in various cultural settings and offer a novel perspective on how cultural factors affect clothing consumption, potentially impacting future research or policies on identity and overconsumption.

The current research project has been reviewed and approved by the BMS Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences (application nr. 250273).

Data will be collected by audio recording each individual interview, which will further be transcribed, and anonymised. There are no physical risks involved in this study. To minimise any risk of breeching anonymity, consent forms (identifiable documents) will be stored separately and securely from the **anonymised** interview data. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to skip any questions you may find uncomfortable or withdraw from the study at any time, with no consequences. You are always free to request any rectification or erase the data provided.

The data will be archived on the university P drive in a private folder accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor. The finished thesis will be available on the University of Twente Thesis Repository and will therefore be publicly available.

For any additional details, please contact the researcher:

Andreea-Ceslava Glavan

a.glavan@student.utwente.nl

Or her supervisor:

Meike Belter

m.belter@utwente.nl

Consent Form for "Dress to Impress: How Social Identity Shapes Moldovans' Consumption Behaviour at Home and Abroad"

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking part in the study		
I have read and understood the study information dated [DD/MM/YYYY], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	□	□
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions, and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	□	□
I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview that will be further transcribed as text, and that the recordings and any traces of the data collected will be deleted as soon as practical but at the latest upon completion of the master thesis project (04.07.2025).	□	□
Risks associated with participating in the study		
I understand that, to minimise any risk of breeching anonymity, consent forms (identifiable documents) will be stored separately and securely from the anonymised interview data.	□	□
Use of the information in the study		
I understand that the information I provide will be used for a Master thesis, which will be uploaded on the online repository of the University of Twente and might serve as input for future research.	□	□
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me [e.g. my name or where I live], will not be shared beyond the study team.	□	□
Consent to be Audio Recorded	□	□
I agree to be audio recorded.		
Future use and reuse of the information by others		
I understand that the finished thesis will be available on the University of Twente Thesis Repository and is therefore publicly available so it can be used for future research and learning.	□	□

Signatures

_____	_____	_____
[Participant Name]	Signature	Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

_____	_____	_____
Andreea-Ceslava Glavan	Signature	Date

Study contact details for further information:

Andreea-Ceslava Glavan
a.glavan@student.utwente.nl

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl

Appendix D: Interview Questions

For recipients living in Moldova

Personal background and cultural perceptions

1. Tell me a bit about yourself about who you are as a person. What do you do for a living? What do you do in your free time?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your occupation?
4. Where do you live?
    a. What country have you been living in for the past 3 years?
5. How do you find Moldovan culture, generally and considering fashion?

Clothing consumption behaviour and materials priorities

6. How often do you purchase new clothing?
7. What factors influence your decision to buy something new?
8. In what way do a) social media, b) your favourite artists, c) some TV shows, or d) current global fashion trends influence the way you choose your clothes?
9. When buying clothes, do you focus more on utility, trends, or brand names?
10. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you think materialism influences your clothing consumption?
11. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you think you dress to impress other people?

Cultural influences on dressing to impress

12. How do Moldovan culture and society influence your desire to dress to impress?
13. Have you ever experienced criticism in Moldova for the way you dress?
    a. For those who mention experiencing criticism: How did you manage to stop caring about other people criticising you?
14. Do you feel that cultural expectations in Moldova influence your clothing expenses?

Social identity

Fashion and social identity expression

15. What do you think is your personal identity?
16. How do you think you're maintaining that identity living in Moldova?

Social comparison and group belonging

17. How do you feel about comparing your appearance to others in your social circle?
    a. If they ask for clarification: Does that comparison ever make you feel more superior or inferior to the other person?
18. How do you think others perceive you based on your clothing choices?
    a. For those who mentioned they were criticised/got side eyes from others: Do you think they criticise others because they would like to have the courage to dress like that, but they cannot get past societal norms there?
19. Do you think you are part of any category considering your clothing choices?
    a. Does having the same fashion style make you feel more connected to that person, to start a conversation with them?
20. When it comes to clothing, do you identify with the Moldovan identity? Why do you think that is the case?
21. Do you feel any pressure regarding your clothing choices? If so, what kind?

Identity, impression management, and fashion norms

22. How do you feel about the idea of dressing to impress in Moldova?
    a. Why do you think Moldovans dress to impress others?
23. Do you feel the need to own traditional clothes, to maybe feel more connected to your Moldovan roots/identity?
    a. If yes: Have you always wanted to, or did it start at a certain point in your life?
24. How important is it for you to follow local fashion trends in Moldova?

25. Do you ever feel the need to dress in a way that aligns with certain social categories or statuses in Moldova (e.g., professional, wealthy, fashionable)?
26. Is your clothing style similar to that of other generations in Moldova?
    a. Do you think people should dress for their age?

Awareness and responsibility for sustainable fashion

27. What should people do to consume less clothing items?
    a. For people to make conscious choices, they need access to information or the motivation to seek it. However, some lack both. Who is responsible for making sustainability information more accessible and helping less-informed consumers make better choices? / Who should help them do that?
28. Who bears greater responsibility – the producer or the consumer?

Follow-up questions

**The following questions are to be used in case a participant provides short answers and further exploration of the topic is needed.*

1. How do you prioritise clothing purchases?
2. What major changes did you make in your style to fit your new social environment?
3. Do you think your clothing choices are influenced more by personal preference or by societal expectations?

For recipients living in the Netherlands

Personal background and cultural perceptions

1. Tell me a bit about yourself about who you are as a person. What do you do for a living? What do you do in your free time?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your occupation?
4. Where do you live?

a. For how long have you been living in the Netherlands?

5. How do you find the Dutch culture, generally and considering fashion?
    a. What about Moldovan culture?
6. How long do you think it took you to integrate in the culture of the Netherlands, if you think you're integrated?

Clothing consumption behaviour and material priorities

7. How often do you purchase new clothing?
8. What factors influence your decision to buy something new?
9. In what way do a) social media, b) your favourite artists, c) some TV shows, or d) current global fashion trends influence the way you choose your clothes?
10. When buying clothes, do you focus more on utility, trends, or brand names?
11. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you think materialism influences your clothing consumption?
12. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you think you dress to impress other people?

Cultural influences on dressing to impress

13. How do Moldovan culture and society influence your desire to dress to impress?
14. Have you ever experienced criticism from someone in Moldova for the way you dress?
    a. For those who mention experiencing criticism: How did you manage to stop caring about other people criticising you?
15. Do you feel there are any cultural expectations in the Netherlands invite you to spend more money on clothing?

Social identity

Fashion and social identity expression

16. How do your consumption habits differ compared to when you lived in Moldova?

17. What do you think is your personal identity in terms of clothing?
18. How do you think you're maintaining that identity in the Netherlands?

Social comparison and group belonging

19. How do you feel about comparing your appearance to others in your social circle?
    a. If they ask for clarification: Does that comparison ever make you feel more superior or inferior to the other person?
20. How do you think others perceive you based on your clothing choices?
    a. What about in Moldova?
    b. For those who mentioned they were criticised/got side eyes from others: Do you think they criticise us because they would like to have the courage to dress like that but they cannot get past societal norms there?
21. Do you think you are part of any category considering your clothing choices?
    a. Does having the same fashion style as someone else make you feel more connected to them, or more prone to starting a conversation with them?
22. In your host country, do you identify more with other Moldovans, with the Dutchies, the internationals, a blend of them, or with none of them?
23. Do you feel any pressure regarding your clothing choices? If so, what kind?

Identity, impression management, and fashion norms

24. How do you feel about the idea of dressing to impress in the Netherlands?
    a. Why do you think Moldovans dress to impress others?
25. Do you feel the need to own traditional clothes, to maybe feel more connected to your Moldovan roots/identity?
    a. If yes: Have you always wanted to, or did it start at a certain point in your life?
26. How important is it for you to follow local fashion trends in the Netherlands?

27. Do you ever feel the need to dress in a way that aligns with certain social categories or statuses in the Netherlands (e.g., professional, wealthy, fashionable)?
28. Do you see any similarities between your clothing style and the style of other age groups in the Netherlands?
    a. Do you think people should dress for their age?

Awareness and responsibility for sustainable fashion

29. What should people do to consume less clothing items?
    a. For people to make conscious choices, they need access to information or the motivation to seek it. However, some lack both. Who is responsible for making sustainability information more accessible and helping less-informed consumers make better choices? / Who should help them do that?
30. Who bears greater responsibility – the producer or the consumer?

Follow-up questions

**The following questions are to be used in case a participant provides short answers and further exploration of the topic is needed.*

1. How do you prioritise clothing purchases?
2. Do you ever feel conflicted about your clothing choices since moving to the Netherlands, considering your roots in Moldova?
3. What major changes did you make in your style to fit your new social environment?
4. Do you think the way your style has changed shows you adapting to the Dutch culture or staying connected to your Moldovan roots?
5. Is your dressing style still typical for Moldovans, or closer to the Dutch fashion style?
6. Do you think your clothing choices are influenced more by personal preference or by societal expectations?