CROSS - CULTURAL COMPARISON OF URBAN YOUTH SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION

A comparative study of urban youth symbolic consumption in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia and Miami, Florida, USA as influenced by information globalization

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the similarities and differences in symbolic consumption of clothing brands (clothes, shoes, accessories, perfumes) in urban youth in Skopje, the capital of the Republic of North Macedonia ("North Macedonia"), a developing country in south-eastern Europe, and Miami, a large city in the United States of America, a developed country. The study was done in the context of existing socio-cultural and economic differences among these two groups. It analyzes brand symbolism within social groups and addresses the fluidity of self-expression accompanying the information globalization of the 21st century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My name is Arin (Aleksandra) Copeland, and I am a Macedonian-American high school student living in Miami, FL, USA. My mother Zdravka immigrated to the US in graduate school and married my father, an Oklahomian native. Growing up, I was separated from Macedonian culture through location and lack of information, but lived in several locations in the United States (Atlanta, Boston and Miami) and witnessed different lifestyles within the same nation. Upon moving to Miami, Florida, I learned that this city is a hub where Latin America and American populations converge, and this social and cultural amalgamation yields interesting outcomes, including heightened importance of symbolic consumption among youth influenced by Miami's "clout culture"(clout is a teenager/youth colloquialism for influence, manifested in exhibition of wealth, social media followers, relative fame, or some combination of all of the above). As a high-school student, I have observed common manifestations of "claut" by other students, primarily focused on showing off wealth and status through clothing brands, regardless of true social or economic standing.

In the summer of 2019 (between my sophomore and junior year of high school) I travelled to Skopje, Macedonia to live with my grandmother for a month. Everyday life- not a vacation or tourism- in a foreign country was a definite culture shock for me, but I took great pleasure in experiencing daily life and learning about symbolic consumption among youth in Skopje, which is also a unique socio/cultural hub.

In my first anthropological research paper, I put my heart and soul into identifying and contrasting the major motivators for youth symbolic consumption (self-expression, self-esteem, social status, and association/dissociation with a group/social class) among youth in these two cities, with particular interest in the effects of information globalization. I interviewed 29 young people, read many pre-established sources, and condensed it all into this paper. I truly hope you enjoy reading it and reflecting on my insights.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The importance of symbolic consumption has been explored in depth among adult customers and adolescents in developed countries. The aim of this study is to explore the similarities and differences in symbolic consumption of clothing brands (clothes, shoes, accessories, perfumes) with urban youth in Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia (a developing country in south-east Europe) and Miami, a large city in the United States of America (a developed country) in the context of changing socio-cultural norms among these two groups as influenced by information globalization. As a result of information globalization, while the brands may be different, clothing brand influence on symbolic consumption is similar between urban youth in Skopje, North Macedonia and Miami, FL, USA.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research Context

A brand is defined as a "name, sign, or symbol used to identify items or services of the seller(s) and to differentiate them from the goods of competitors," (Aledin, 2009, 13). Although brands can affect any market of goods, the clothing and accessory industries are known for the value consumers place on brand names. Brands have become important elements of popular culture, which educates and fosters more brand-dependent consumers than any other constructing cultures and societies that are heavily influenced by brands and the importance of symbolic consumption (Aledin, 2009, 13). Individuals use brands as tools to cultivate and preserve their identities; consumer goods are capable of serving consumers in this way due to imbedded symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1983, Leigh and Gabel, 1992). For young people these symbols are especially pertinent, as they are often in stages of uncertainty, gathering material possessions as a way of establishing identity and gaining prestige within their society (Belk, 1988). This phenomenon is not exclusive to young people in developed countries, immersed in consumer culture. The globalization of information and social media during the last 10 years is overcoming cultural barriers and, to some extent, monopolizing popular culture-including the hierarchy of and demand for brands. Youth in both developed and developing countries is experiencing a shift from locally based cultural trends surrounding clothing to broader, international fashion.

Symbolic Consumption

Individuals use goods as materials with which to create, foster and develop their identities (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Brands are primarily used in two ways: a symbolic meaning of goods is used as an outward expression of self concept and connection to society and as a tool to affect self-esteem (Elliott, 1999). Self-concept refers to the set of an individual's beliefs and knowledge about his or her personal qualities, and constitutes one of the two elements of self-knowledge (Aledin, 2009, 17). Self-esteem stands for how we feel about ourselves (Smith & Mackie 2000, 104).

Thompson (1995) describes the self-concept as a 'symbolic project' that is actively constructed and preserved through symbolic consumption behavior. The use of symbols for communicating with others is related to the use of goods in the development of self-identity; communication is the individual's external projection of self, while self-identity is an internal generation of personality. There is evidence that people use specific products as means of encoding messages to others through their consumption, and also for decoding messages from others' consumption practices (Holman, 1980). How successfully these processes are carried out depends on the individual's knowledge of the codes involved, as the messages will be

successfully communicated only if the symbolism in the offering is socially recognized (McCracken and Roth, 1989, Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). The globalization of information and popularity of social media with young people expand the recognition of these consumption codes across various cultures and societies, increasing their influence on youth over local cultural norms.

As previously described, the self-concept and self-esteem have both individual and social qualities. People learn about and evaluate their personal qualities by making comparisons between themselves and others (Smith & Mackie 2000, 107). Social identity is the "systematic establishment and signification, between individuals between collectivities, and between individuals and collectivities, of relationship of similarity and difference" (Jenkins 1996, 4). This external self may benefit from consumer symbols in attaining more opportunities, attention, or prestige depending on how society interprets them. Recognized consumer symbols can imply a belonging within a group and individual qualities of the owner.

Individuals use the symbolic content of chosen consumption objects to reflect their affiliation or connection to a particular social group (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Similarly, they might reject certain products on the basis of their symbolic meanings (Elliott, 1999). Consumer product choices reflect socio-cultural standing and heritage as they relate to social groups they are or would like to be associated with and aversion towards social groups they perceive as undesirable. For instance, in the USA, purchasing "fair trade" clothes sends a symbol that the wearer belongs to an "ethical fashion" group, whereas in North Macedonia, not purchasing clothes sold by ethnic minorities (e.g. Albanians, Turks, Roma) represents that the wearer has a perceived aversion and does not belong to that ethnic group.

Another aspect of consumers' use of individual and social consumption symbolism is the use of product brands to signify social distinction or status. Barnard (1996) claims that clothing and fashion are often used to express social worth or status, and people tend to make judgements concerning other people's social worth and status on the basis of what such people are wearing (Barnard 1996, 58). Status aspirations are an important driver of human behavior, and consumption objects can be very instrumental for satisfying them (Veblen, 1970 [1899]). Material objects are cultural artifacts (McCracken, 1990) differing in their accessibility and social symbolism in a culture (Richins,1994). Status consumption is defined as "the acquisition and use of consumer goods symbolizing status both to the individual and to relevant others, motivated by a desire to maintain, protect, and/or enhance one's social status" (Eastman, Goldsmith & Flynn, 1999). Clothing has been used from times immemorial as a marker of one's status in the social hierarchy. Clothing is always on public display and it is a relatively easy way of showing one's perceived social worth and status to others in everyday life.

Comparison of economic and socio-cultural landscapes

North Macedonia is a relatively new market economy in South Eastern Europe. Since the country split from Yugoslavia in 1991, it has been undergoing a transformation from socialism to capitalism.

The 2019 average annual salary in Skopje, North Macedonia and Miami, Florida is $13,056 (Salaryexpolorer.com) and $52,790 (payscale.com), respectively. Consumer prices in Skopje are 54.55% lower than in Miami and consumer prices including rent in Skopje are 67.7% lower than in Miami. Purchasing Power in Skopje is 62.28% lower than in Miami, FL. (Numbeo.com)

In North Macedonia, 95% of youth have access to the Internet. Young people on average spend 6 hours/day on the Internet (Youth Study North Macedonia, 2018/2019). Pew Research Center states that 95% of teens in the US have access to a smart phone and close to 100% have access to the Internet. According to Common Sense Media, teens spend an average of nine hours a day online.

On-line shopping is not common in North Macedonia. The big on-line retailers (Amazon, Walmart, Etsy, Target) do not have offerings in North Macedonia.

According to Internet Retailer's analysis from Feb 28, 2019, E-commerce in the USA represented 14.3% of total retail sales in 2018, up 15.0% from the year prior.

METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, a theory-driven (Russel, 2011) qualitative approach was used. The study was conducted through structured interviews with focus groups, with supporting participant and nonparticipant observation. A topic guide was used covering the main themes and a list of questions was identified to explore each theme. During the interview the interviewer adopted an active listening approach, reacting and responding to particular issues raised. Prompts and probing were used to encourage collaboration. Data collection was performed from June - August 2019.

The North Macedonia research subjects were 15 informants between the ages of 15 and 24, living in Skopje, divided into four (4) focus groups. None of the informants had been to the United States of America.

Skopje Group 1 (SG1)	Five (5) participants: two (2) male, three (3) female; between 19 and 22 years old; college students
Skopje Group 2 (SG2)	Four (4) participants: two (2) male, two (2) female; 15 to 16 years old; 9th and 10th grade students
Skopje Group 3 (SG3)	Three (3) participants: two (2) male, (1) female; 21 years old; college students
Skopje Group 4 (SG4)	Three (3) participants: all females, 22 to 24 years old; college students or employed.

The United States research subjects were 14 informants between the ages of 16 and 23, living in Miami, divided into four (4) focus groups. None of the informants had been to North Macedonia.

Miami Group 1 (MG1)	Three (3) participants: two (2) females, one (1) male; between 16 and 17 years old; 10th and 11th grade
Miami Group 2 (MG2)	Two (2) participants: all females; 16 years old; 11th grade

Miami Group 3 (MG3)	Six (6) participants: three (2) male, four (4) female; 19 to 23 years old; college students
Miami Group 4 (MG4)	Three (3) participants: two (2) male, one (1) female, 19 to 22 years old; college students

Age, sex, social position and country standard of living were considered. Interviews were conducted with a uniform set of questions and individual deviations based on subjects' knowledgeability.

For data analysis a systematic coding via content analysis was used (Morgan, 1988) to group the answers according to the previously identified main themes and to include emerging concepts identified in the interviews.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

BRANDS AND SELF-IDENTITY

Both in Skopje and Miami, selective consumerism is increasingly used as a representation of individual character and group associations through the subconscious symbolism of brands.

Youth in both cities associated certain brands with:

a) Personality traits and style (self-expression),

b) Self-esteem (feeling good about oneself),

c) Social status (making an impression), and

d) Association (or dissociation) with a particular group, or social "class"

Urban youth in Skopje and Miami are affected by brand culture within everyday life. In Skopje, the demographic for branded clothing start in late teens and early twenties, in comparison to early to mid-teens in Miami. Although a secondary issue for most Macedonian adolescents, who mainly utilize clothes for self-expression, by late teens and early twenties brand discrimination becomes more visible. First impressions are increasingly influenced by brands and some see clothing as an external expression of worth and social status.

Brand prominence in Miami often infiltrates the everyday lives of adolescents in high school and even middle school, depending on the specific environment of each young person. Public and private schools in Miami differ individually on dress codes and uniform policies, as opposed to Skopje's public schools' lack of uniform requirements. These environments create varying motivations for the purchase of branded clothing, and even in schools in which uniforms are required branding still influences group division through branded accessories such as designer shoes and handbags. These choices provide a sense of belonging within the group and can boost confidence and feelings of security for uneasy teens.

Personality Traits and Style

Skopje Informants

Interviewer: What is your favorite brand, and how do you choose your clothes/accessories?

Participant: I like Dior because it smells good and projects well, and lasts long. It's

overpriced but I spent all my birthday money on two bottles of perfume. (SG2, Female)

Participant: My favorite outfits are more minimalist, like black chinos, sneakers, a grey T-shirt, and a watch. I like it because it is simple and doesn't have as many things to worry about. (SG2, Male)

Participant: I think that the quality is better with those Brands. I personally use brands with glasses. I don't save money with glasses. I think that glasses are important stuff for me. And maybe purses and bags but not very high end brands also for me. (SG1, Female)

Miami Informants

Interviewer: What is your favorite brand, and how do you choose your clothes/accessories?

Participant: I don't really have a favorite brand, but I like to buy clothes that are ethically made. Brands that support working conditions are really important to me, and I like brands that push a positive message. (MG4, Female)

Participant: I love the Gucci belt. I like the brand, the look, and the style, so I'm willing to buy a knockoff because I like that style and I've seen that it works with a lot of clothes. (MG3, Female)

In the last decade, ethical concerns have grown for the potential harm done to workers, animals, and the environment in the fashion industry. This new awareness created a niche for brands marketed as morally upstanding, embracing local industries, higher wages, and charitable action as company values. The cruelty-free movement is a reflection of consumers themselves, in that wearing a well-known ethical brand asserts similar assumed qualities in wearers. Young American consumers are increasingly concerned with the environmental and ethical consequences of their brand choices, while those in Macedonia are focused on the resurgence and support of local brands.

Self-Esteem

Urban youth in Miami, as in Skopje, are discovering their identities and attempting to define themselves through external appearance.

The appeal of "limited edition" and high-end products is a sense of exclusivity attributed to affiliated consumers. This exclusivity-based mentality leads to personal attachment to certain brands, seen as an extension of one's own characteristics and values. In both Miami and Skopje exclusivity plays an important role in determining a brand's worth, along with other socially

accepted brand characteristics. Individual and group symbolism surrounding brands act as an indicator of desirable traits of the wearer. Clothing becomes more than a reflection of personal style; it can act as an affirmation of qualities a person has (or wants to project) that are easily culturally recognizable.

Skopje Informants

>**Interviewer**: What is your favorite brand, and how do you choose your clothes/accessories?

>**Participant**: I like branded perfumes (colognes) like Dior, Prada, and high end brands. I like perfumes that are not mass produced and are limited edition. (SG3, Female)

>**Participant**: I mostly buy Nike, Adidas, and the cologne Nautica. I mostly buy what just looks good to me. (SG2, Male)

Miami Informants

>**Interviewer**: What is your favorite brand, and how do you choose your clothes?

>**Participant**: When I choose what I want to wear in the morning, I look for Brands like what I want to wear that looks good. (MG2, Female)

>**Participant**: First of all, in my perception and relationship with brands maybe it doesn't affect me in the way other people are affected. Some people can put on some branded shirt and feel more worthy, but I don't feel like that. But sometimes when I go out I want to put on something a bit classy and I feel good. (MG3, Female)

Status - Making An Impression

In addition to the projection of certain traits on consumers, brands assert a status onto wearers based on cultural recognition of luxury. Status in relation to fashion brands is a transaction-paying for higher-end brands is an indication of affluence. While most study participants played felt negatively about the importance of clothing symbols in forming judgements of others, many conceded during the discussion that brands have an important role in their social judgements and appeared resigned to this bad, but necessary, wrong. Individual quality and branding can be interrelated in the process of networking and first impressions, marking the ordinary from the extraordinary and fostering initial biases both in Miami and Skopje.

> **Interviewer**: How do brands and fashion affect your daily life?
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> **Participant**: Well, It does affect our lives. For example the way we make a first perception of someone, when you meet someone the first thing that the person sees in you is how you're dressed, what clothes you wear, so that is really important. I mean, it should not be like that in my opinion because it is really bad to you know, you have to think of all the time about how you dress- what you wear and the first impression is really important. (SG4, Female)
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> **Participant**: I know a girl that, when she meets you, she scans you to see what kind of clothes you are wearing, how expensive they are, and she calculates the whole person based on it. People judge based on first impression and that is really wrong. (SG3, Male)

Miami Informants

> **Interviewer**: How do brands and fashion affect your daily life?
>
> **Participant**: I'm sure whenever you see someone with a Gucci belt you notice it. If you're wearing a luxury brand it's usually for attention. To me, it personally doesn't matter what I'm wearing. I can see in other people's eyes though, when they see you that some people will think less of you for wearing a cheaper shirt, cheaper shoes, and cheaper jeans. (MG4, Female)
>
> **Participant**: There are people out there that look at you and see name brands and assume you're a certain way. To a certain extent brands look cute, but you can definitely go overboard. (MG3, Male)
>
> **Participant**: If someone thinks they are better than you just because they're wearing a brand, they are too involved. When I walk around college wearing Adidas I get so many compliments and people saying "Three Stripe Life" - people hype you up. But all I can think is I looked really good yesterday in my Forever 21 workout clothes and you didn't say anything, but now that I'm wearing a basic Adidas brand name shirt people are noticing. (MG2, Female)

Association with a particular group or social class

The emergence of desire for brands in youth is an accompaniment to the search for personal identity many teenagers feel throughout puberty. In attempting self-discovery, brands are used not only as a way to display personality and status but also in order to identify with a particular desired group (social, age or gender) or dis-identify with groups that are undesirable.

Clothing choices signal belonging, being accepted into the 'in-group', while refusal carries a neutral to negative connotation depending on sub-communities.

Brands, as an expression of self, project an affiliated status on the wearer. Based on societal agreements on the collective symbolism and hierarchical position of specific brands, the usage of branded items categorizes individuals into different social groups. Without direct interaction with the wearer, certain perceptions are pre-established by the clothing they choose to wear. Brand accessibility and exclusivity contributes to perceived social class through the digital accessibility to brand prices. Both Miami and Skopje are affected by brand perceptions around status, despite the brands themselves being different- certain brands correspond to hierarchical levels and are commonly recognized within demographic groups as such.

Skopje Informants

Interviewer: What would you say your relationship with brands is/What would you say is the relationship between brands and your peers?

Participant: I think if you look at different classes there will be differences. For middle class people like us, we can't really afford it but we can admire it. If you have the money, you might shoot for the name brand because why would you do anything less (SG1, Male)

Participant: Here, brands and fashion are perceived as higher status, but I don't think it goes to the extremes of Miami. I think functionality is more important than brands, but people sometimes like to wear classy things and show off. I don't think it has a negative or positive impact. (SG3, Male)

Miami Informants

Interviewer: How do brands and fashion affect your daily life?

Participant: There are a lot of people (for example, Kylie Jenner) where if I saw her walking around in a Walmart shirt I would be surprised because I know she could afford brand name clothing. It really depends on your class. (MG1, Female)

Participant: In high school it's all about popularity and fitting it based on how everyone is dressed. (MG1, Male)

Participant: My mom got me Airpods the year they came out and I left them in the box for 2 years. I told her to take them back because they were too expensive and I thought they weren't worth the money. No one talked about airpods until years later....I remember one day everyone just started caring about airpods. People were obsessed and everyone

started wearing them, I only started wearing them after they became popular. (MG2, Female)

Participant: I think in our society if you choose to just express yourself you're seen as weird and an outcast. If you aren't wearing what everyone else is wearing and you aren't trendy then you're unfashionable and labelled that way...Style and popularity are the driving factors in clothing. Finding belonging is the biggest thing. (MG4, Male)

Dissociation with a particular group or social class

As brands can be used to represent assimilation with certain social groups, the use of brands can create an anti-brand group mentality that associates branded clothing with undesirable traits. The connotations within social circles assign negative stereotypes onto wearers, reversing the content of trait projection while maintaining the principle. In both Miami and Skopje, some teenagers actively avoid brands in order to separate themselves from what they see as shallow and materialistic, subconsciously creating their own anti-brand social group.

Skopje Informants

Interviewer: What is your favorite brand and what are the guiding factors that determine how you choose your clothes?

Participant: There are schools, private and public that I are known for kids that wear high-end fashion and hair and makeup and that stuff and I think that those children go to those schools and they are in some group I think and they're separate from the other children and they're like," you cannot be friends with me" and those kind of stuff in our city. (SG2, Female)

Participant: I really respect people who don't care. Like if you're gonna dress like that you say your thing. I focus on some other things. I don't really obsess about how are you clothed. I just worry about my life, about what I love to do, what makes me happy and not what makes you happy. That's nice. It's a good like mentality I have.(SG3, Male)

Participant: I think that the older people here that have started to make a lot of money and have jobs wear brand name clothes. Now that I've started working, all of my colleagues are older women and they wear brands like Armani and Guess. (SG4, Female)

Miami Informants

Participant: Sketchers are really great shoes but you won't see anyone wearing Sketchers that are our age. A bunch of middle aged people will be wearing Sketchers and they're so

comfy but that is unacceptable for us. (MG1, Male)

Participant: It depends on what box you're trying to fit in, but people use it as a status symbol instead of self-expression. They try to use brands to try and be someone particular. I make a conscious choice not to use brands that way for authenticity. When I see a person wearing lots of name brands I think they're trying to fill a void because they have this shallow need to elevate their status using these clothes, but I try not to judge other people based on what they wear and just go with it. (MG2, Female)

KEY INFLUENCES ON SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION

In Skopje, teens mainly utilize clothing for self-expression, but there is a growing popularity of the aesthetic of globally popular influencers, such as Kylie Jenner and Ariana Grande. Social media and Youtube have heightened the appeal of the concept of universal attractiveness. Both foreign and local celebrities have some effect, as seen by the trend of males mimicking the hairstyles of famous football players. On a smaller scale, reference groups within youth environments may act as a model for personal style, although that is not as common as other motivators and has declined with the rise of the Internet.

For Miami urban youth, the local reference groups and popular online influencers define fashion on a much larger scale than seen in Skopje, directing teens towards certain brands and styles in attempts to identify with a group they see as socially admirable. Self expression was expressed as a minor motivation in Miami when juxtaposed with local and global idols and reference groups, as opposed to the limited but expanding reach these instigators have on consumers in Skopje.

Notably, popular figures referenced in Skopje were also widely sought after in Miami, displaying the novel global effects of influencers and celebrities through the technological advancement of the world.

Advertising

Miami Informants

Participant: Social media tracks what you look into and it's super creepy. It tailors your advertisements. But the real effect of social media is more about what other people see than your ads. Like when airpods became popular and everyone kept saying "too broke to hear you". Trends carry a lot of weight. Luxury brands don't even have to officially advertise because they can sponsor one influencer and then everyone knows about it. Social media is definitely the biggest influence. (MG2, Female)

Participant: It pops up everywhere, on social media, the tv, the radio- you can't get away from it, so you learn to live with it. Social media is the most prevalent because you have little slots of time through the day to check it. In a certain situation, influencers are doing something that you like and will make you happy, like makeup. If it's a brand deal, it really depends on the company. Some companies can push a positive message and that depends on who's running it. Diversity in body image is something we need to work on. There can be some, but not enough. You'll see the same types of bodies over and over and it can be discouraging. (MG3, Female)

Participant: People are moved more by idols and reference groups than anything else. People I know try to mimic celebrities' outfits and looks just to get reposted and get attention. Self expression is furthest on the list. (MG3, Male)

Skopje Informants

Interviewer: How does brand advertising influence your life?

Participant: Advertising definitely comes mostly through Instagram. We have fashion bloggers but they aren't official- brands don't pay them to advertise but they will give them free clothes to wear and promote. I think the problem is we don't have a lot of local brands. (SG3, Female)

Participant: There are billboards and lots of advertisements through the internet, TV, and facebook. (SG1, Female)

Participant: There are a few influencers and influencer culture is kind of popular in Skopje. (SG3,Male)

Participant: There are not many people here that are an example for others to follow, but I've seen some that really want to copy or imitate foreigner influencers, like social media influencers or Youtubers. (SG2, Female)

Skopje's main brand advertisement appears virtually, through the international success of social media. Popular brands utilize Instagram advertisements and promotions with Macedonian "influencers". Most fashion bloggers are unofficial but receive free clothing in exchange for exposure to the demographic that brands aim for. Influencer culture continues to permeate both Miami and Skopje, along with the popularity of apps like Instagram as a method of global communication. Social media can have negative effects by propagating an idea of perfection, similar to problems with social media in Miami teens. Regardless of actual wealth or happiness, platforms like Instagram seem to showcase influencers with abundant vacations and expensive wardrobes. This disparity between virtual and real life is international and ever-expanding,

causing youth to struggle to separate everyday standards from the glamorized snapshots of luxury.

Skopje Informants

> **Participant**: There's a running gag here in our country that it's like a picture of a well dressed little kids of five years with branded clothes and there's another picture of apparently back in 2004 when we were younger and it's like they have branded clothes and iPhones and then we still eat mud and play in the sand, that kind of stuff. (SG1, Male)

> **Participant**: Macedonians like to joke about having brands like Gucci and Louis Vuitton, but in reality there are not many people that actually wear those brands. (SG4, Female)

> **Participant**: I think there is a big difference though on Instagram, they are not living that life that is presented on this around like traveling all over the world and wearing expensive clothes. (SG3, Female)

High-end brands and wealth are culturally interchangeable in Miami. One naturally indicates the presence of the other, and this link is further strengthened by the heightened accessibility of products in the past few decades. The affiliation of brands and status create a societal expectation for public figures to propagate brand culture in addition to other lifestyle ideals, as shown through the prominence of social media influencers. Celebrities in the 21st century tend to glamorize their lives in order to gain a following, and this glamorization is increasingly dependent on the appearance of abundance and luxury. The recent shifts in the scope and intensity of celebrity-fan relationships in the digital age provide novel intimacy between parties and increased pressure to consume brands as a way to both find personal identity and belonging within a group.

The widespread popularity of social media and an abundance of influencers in Miami heighten the reach and effects of brand advertising compared to in Skopje. Although advertisements are present on television, billboards, and the radio, individually tailored digital advertising is the newest form of targeting consumers. Additionally, celebrity and influencer endorsements are a common marketing technique through both social media platforms and websites like Youtube.com, promoting brands in relation to a popular figure with seemingly personal connections to their audience. Influencers may also release their own merchandise, capitalizing off of their image to invent a brand of personality. Diversity is an issue, albeit improving, and the collections offered to consumers may be tailored to a specific size or shape. Overall, advertising "interrupts life"and is increasingly surrounding consumers in their daily routines, markedly more than those in Skopje.

Social Influences

Miami Informants

> **Participant**: I go to a school that is sponsored by Adidas, so everything we get is Adidas. The shoes are so popular there and nicely styled, so I'll always be wearing Adidas (MG3, Male)

> **Participant**: There's definitely a lot of hype about brands on social media. For example, when Supreme makes a new drop everyone at my school is on it and everyone's trying to buy stuff. We have uniforms but people will just come to school wearing their Supreme hoodies and get detention but it doesn't matter to them because they want to show off. Shoes are the only thing we can really customize. (MG1, Female)

> **Participant**: Definitely from school. There are a lot of people at our school that use brands, like for example Louis Vuitton or Gucci, to define what their worth is, and they'll purposely "flex". Are Gucci sneakers really any different from Adidas sneakers? This girl in eighth grade kept telling me I really want these Gucci shoes- they literally look like normal converses but are worth $400 because they're branded. (MG2, Female)

> **Participant**: I think in school on about like a reference groups, but like groups and school kids in school, like individuals if they wear like higher end stuff then like other people will want to wear it too because they want to have like social status. (MG4, Male)

Despite uniforms with the aim of eliminating status/wealth-driven divides, brands continue to pervade daily life for teenagers. The digitalization of the 21st century both increases accessibility to brands and widens the scope of influence for advertisement and status. Social media allows for extended reach both for brands themselves and for wearers to show their purchases.

DEMOGRAPHICS & GENDER DIFFERENCES

There is a disparity between men's and women's symbolic consumption in Skopje, as male participants reported to care less about fashion and notice smaller interaction with brands in daily life. In Skopje brand marketing is mainly targeted towards young adults who are transitioning into more financial independence, with an emphasis on women. Among teen males, haircuts imitating those of famous football players' were more popular than most particular brands during youth, with the exception of some sportswear. Women listed more common brands and displayed more awareness of differences between brands than men.

Skopje Informants

>**Interviewer**: What are the most popular brands?

>**Participant**: Zara, Mango, Bershka, Adidas, Guess, Armani (Bershka and Pull&Bear are considered lower end, Zara and Mango are considered higher end). (SG4, Female)

>**Participant**: I mostly buy Nike, Adidas, and the cologne Nautica. (SG3, Male)

>**Participant**: Basically, we're guys. We don't like to wear that kind of branded clothes. But nowadays you can't you can't find a person that hasn't worn at least one branded item. (SG1, Male)

>**Participant**: I have a cousin that used to play football, and when he was younger, he used to idolize a player. He would have a haircut just like him. (SG3, Male)

Brand marketing in Miami spans both genders and a much younger audience. From childhood, brands begin to become an integral part of identity and placement within a group. Influencer sponsorships and advertisement desensitization condition teens and young adults to accept trends and popular brands and most informants said they have indulged in branded clothing/accessories.

Sportswear brands such as Nike and Adidas and "clout"-centric streetwear brands (Supreme, Bape, Gucci, Stussy, etc) are dominators in the male field, while young women are targeted by luxury brands such as Gucci, Yves Saint-Laurent, Louis Vuitton, Jimmy Choo, Calvin Klein, etc. as well as millennial - centric stores such as Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister, & Urban Outfitters . Branding is overall more prominent and invasive in Miami's culture, affecting a larger and younger group of consumers, than in Skopje. Trends are semi-fluent throughout both socio-cultural environments and fashion in Skopje is developing quickly and seems to continually resemble the American fashion market.

BRANDS ACCESSIBILITY AND COUNTERFEIT CULTURE

Brands Accessibility

Online shopping is not common in Skopje as the big online retailers (e.g. Amazon, Walmart, Etsy, Target) are not offered in North Macedonia. However, some internationally popular American and European brands have opened stores within the city that sell global goods. Most clothes are purchased in local malls, while travelling out of the country or through friends/relatives living in foreign countries.

Interviewer: So I've heard a lot of people say that they go traveling to buy stuff. They'll go to like Serbia or Italy or Greece. Okay. So do you guys participate in that like when you go traveling you'll shop there and then bring stuff back?

Participant: Well, yes because before we didn't have so many options here, so we are when we are in another country. Yeah, that's not the frustration. That's like something that we want to do and is fun. The funny fact is that here the prices are a bit higher than prices in other countries. All right, and maybe that's because we're not part of the European Union and the taxes are higher here. Personally I have never went to travel to another country or city just to buy some clothes. But if I'm there, you know, yeah traveling I will. (SG4, Female)

Participant: The clothes that we are buying are through the relatives in foreign countries, because the prices are lower than our country. (SG1, Male)

In Skopje, luxury brands including Gucci, Versace, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel are popular counterfeit items, but it is relatively rare to find authentic versions of any clothing, footwear or accessories from these high end brands. There are easily accessible markets overflowing with counterfeit goods ranging from the above brands to sportswear. These provide an easy, convenient alternative for youth to find status inducing clothing, and is somewhat common among more fashion inclined social circles. Additionally, the Eastern region of North Macedonia is sustained on agriculture and textile work for major brands such as Gucci, Versace, and Armani. Misprinted items of clothing from these brands can be obtained for very low prices and are responsible for much of the more authentic pieces found in Skopje. The abundant market for counterfeit goods is physically centered in open markets (Bazaars) and acknowledged as a common resource, in comparison to emphasis on authenticity and secrecy around fakes.

Counterfeit Culture

Miami Informants

Participant: There are not too many counterfeit stores but you can go on Amazon and get fake brands super easily. I think that counterfeit culture in Miami is really pretty high. There's maybe 25% of people wearing real brands and the rest are fakes. Fake chains are also really popular as well as fake shoes. People can't tell what's fake or real when another person's wearing it. Today my mom bought a fake ring and I couldn't even tell.

(MG4, Female)

Participant: It's not publicized here, unless you go on the Internet. People will be straight up on the internet but in real life it's looked down upon and people will pass things off as real. Fake brands are not currently sold on the streets for the most part. (MG1, Female)

Skopje Informants

Interviewer: Is there a counterfeit culture?

Participant: We have a few local brands. The whole eastern part of the country lives on agriculture and sewing, and we sew a lot of things for Gucci, Armani, Versace, etc. the big brands for very low prices. They bring the materials and the models from Italy. So you can go there and shop for brands for crazy cheap, maybe $15. They sell any misprintings that may be invisible but unsellable- so we have those places. We also have the Pazar (Bazaar) counterfeit market. (SG1, Female)

Opinions on counterfeits in Miami range from indifference to strong distaste, in relationship to individual environment. However, a marked change from the counterfeit system prominent in Skopje is the digitalization of consumerism. The recent technological age has transferred physical markets (like the Pazars) into websites and independent sellers- increasing the scope and availability of counterfeit high-end products. The accessibility of digital selling expands its reach to teens and young adults, although counterfeits are rarely outright publicized. The act of buying counterfeited brand products is generally looked down upon, but the anonymity of the internet allows for some fake goods to enter wardrobes undetected.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Identity is generally developed during teens and dictates behavior patterns and defining characteristics of individuals (Samil Aledin, 2009, 63). Fashion choices can be used as a tool to confirm this identity, identify with a particular group, or project certain traits onto oneself, and as such brands serve a unique range of purposes for teenagers discovering themselves.

In Skopje, teens mainly utilize clothing for self-expression, but with young adults there is a growing popularity of the aesthetic of globally popular influencers, such as Kylie Jenner and Ariana Grande. Social media and Youtube have heightened the appeal of the concept of universal attractiveness, a set of bodily or facial characteristics the majority of the world finds beautiful. Both foreign and local celebrities have some effect, as seen by the trend of males mimicking the hairstyles of famous football players. On a smaller scale, reference groups within youth environments may act as a model for personal style, although that is not as common as other motivators and has declined with the rise of the Internet. Although self-expression is still highly correlated with clothing choices for teenagers, global advertising influence has added other motivators in clothing choices for young adults, such as status or social "class" association.

Youth in Miami, as in Skopje, are discovering their identities and attempting to define themselves through external appearance. The local reference groups and popular online influencers define fashion on a much larger scale than seen in Skopje, directing teens towards certain brands and style in attempts to identify with a group they see as socially admirable. Public and private schools in Miami differ individually on dress codes and uniform policies, as opposed to Skopje's no uniform policy in all public schools. This environment creates varying motivations for the purchase of branded clothing, and even in uniform-ridden schools branding still influences group division through accessories such as designer shoes and handbags. These choices provide a sense of belonging within the group and can boost confidence and feelings of security for uneasy teens.

Notably, popular figures referenced in Skopje were also widely sought after in Miami, displaying the novel global effects of influencers and celebrities through the information globalization phenomenon. Self expression was expressed as a minor motivation in Miami when juxtaposed with local and global idols and reference groups, as opposed to the limited but expanding reach these instigators have on consumers in Skopje.

The increased accessibility of information and media provided within the last century is in the process of overshadowing local cultural fashion trends with an overarching, new global

cultural norm. Despite variations and nuances across the world, trends are comparatively monopolized in the twenty-first century across nations due to the online community. Brands themselves may be different between Macedonia and America, but the underlying motivations for consumerism and platforms for advertising have become uniform. While local cultural identity may be threatened by the larger trends introduced within the digital age, this global platform could be seen as its own culture, in which norms are diffused across the world and modified by preexisting communities. As technology develops and the world becomes increasingly interconnected, self-expression may reasonably change in definition and methods across many cultures around the world.

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APPENDIX A

Basis for Interview Questions

1. How do brands and fashion affect your daily life?
2. What is your favorite piece of clothing/outfit and why?
3. What is your favorite brand and why do you wear it?
4. How does wearing one of your favorite brands make you feel?
5. What would you say your relationship with brands is/What would you say is the relationship between brands and your peers?
6. How does brand advertising influence your life (social media, influencers, etc)?
7. What trends do you notice are popular and why?
8. Do you think brand culture is a "problem" in your society? Why or why not?
9. Do young people in your city tend to imitate the image of a)particular popular figures, b) particular reference groups, or c) other (ex. self-expression)?
10. What is your perception on/ how would you describe/ qualify (in terms of quantities) young people/teens using brands?