

Visual Consumerism in Borderless World: How Globalised Social Media Art Shapes Youth Desires and Cultural Practices

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Abstract

This article investigates the mechanisms through which globalised social media art comprising digital aesthetics, hyper-curated visual consumerism and visual interactions in everyday life. The intensification of digitally mediated global interconnectivity has amplified visual consumerism, defined as the consumption of symbolic and affective value through images disseminated across networked platforms. Algorithmically elevated stylistic forms configure youth desires, identity orientations and cultural practices within a borderless sociocultural milieu. Informed by Appadurai's (1996) theory of global cultural flows and Mirzoeff's (2015) conceptualisation of visibility, the study frames borderlessness as an emergent condition facilitated by platform-driven deterritorialisation and the transnational mobility of visual symbols. Employing a mixed-method approach integrating visual content analysis and interpretive user narratives, the research demonstrates that social media art functions as a potent vector of aspirational modelling, cultural hybridisation and performative self-representation among youth. The findings indicate that algorithmically circulated visual cultures simultaneously reinforce homogenised global aesthetics and enable localised reinterpretations, thereby producing a dynamic interplay between global consumer imaginaries and situated cultural negotiation. By situating these processes within broader scholarship on consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1998; Featherstone, 2007), the article elucidates the sociocultural implications of visual consumerism for identity formation, meaning-making and participation in contemporary globalised digital environments.

Keywords-*Visual Consumerism; Internet; Conspicuous Consumption; Cyber World; Social media*

1. Introduction

Visual consumerism refers to a socio-cultural condition in which images function as primary commodities shaping perception, identity and economic exchange within technologically mediated environments, while digital art denotes creative expression produced or distributed through computational tools, social media signifies interactive online platforms enabling user-generated content and networked communication, globalization describes the intensification of worldwide interconnectedness and the cyber world represents the virtual domain formed by digital networks and data flows; together these concepts constitute an integrated theoretical framework explaining contemporary visual culture. "Culture is a sum total of both material and non-material aspects of human society, in Internet world, in 'networked society', culture is also getting shaped and influenced by visualization, social media applications and most significantly through internet media and digital platforms. In modern societies, consumption increasingly operates through visual codes, supporting Debord's assertion that "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social

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relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord, 1994), which implies that images structure social interaction rather than merely decorates it. Digital art accelerates this process because, as Manovich notes, “New media objects are numerical representations” (Manovich, 2001), meaning artistic works can be endlessly reproduced, modified and circulated, thereby enhancing their commodity value within global markets. Social media platforms intensify visual consumerism by algorithmically prioritizing striking imagery, encouraging users to perform identity through aestheticized posts and fostering participatory culture; this aligns with Jenkins’s view that “Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2006). Globalization further amplifies these dynamics by dissolving geographic boundaries and allowing visual trends, memes and artistic styles to circulate instantaneously across cultures, producing hybrid aesthetics and transnational consumer desires. Within this system, the cyber world functions as the infrastructural environment enabling such exchanges, exemplifying Castells’ points that “The network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies” (Castells, 1996). In this line it is visible that “Consumer culture involves the consumption of signs and images.”(Featherstone, 2007)Consequently, visual consumerism, digital art, social media, globalization and the cyber world should not be understood as isolated phenomena but as mutually reinforcing processes forming a unified digital-visual economy in which images operate simultaneously as cultural symbols, technological data and market commodities, shaping how individuals perceive reality, construct meaning and participate in globalized digital life.

Visual Consumerism in a borderless world is more than a socio-cultural condition as in these symbols, images and digitally mediated representations operate as primary drivers of desire, identity formation and consumption patterns among youth within globally networked environments. In analytical terms, visual consumerism denotes the process through which visual media becomes a central commodity logic, shaping preferences and aspirations through constant exposure to stylized imagery, while digital art signifies creative production generated, modified, or circulated via computational technologies and social media represents interactive cyber world platforms that enable participatory communication and transnational image exchange. Under globalization, these elements converge into what Castells describes as “a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by information technologies” (Castells, 1996), illustrating how digital infrastructures dissolve geographic boundaries and enable cultural flows that influence youth practices worldwide. ‘The cyber world thus functions not merely as a technological space but as a symbolic environment where aesthetic trends’, lifestyle ideals and consumer values circulate rapidly, reinforcing McLuhan’s assertion that “The medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964), meaning that the structure of digital platforms themselves shapes perception and behaviour. Within this system, globalised social media art-memes, digital illustrations, short-form videos and algorithmically amplified visuals constructs aspirational lifestyles that encourage imitation, thereby intensifying consumer desire and redefining cultural participation as performative visibility. However, this borderless circulation also produces risks such as cyber-crime, which involves unlawful digital activities including identity theft or fraud; internet addiction, defined as compulsive online engagement that disrupts daily functioning; and cyber delinquency, referring to deviant or harmful online behaviour often performed anonymously. The normalization of these risks highlights the need for netiquettes, or ethical norms governing responsible online interaction, which function as informal regulatory frameworks guiding conduct in virtual communities. Debord’s observation that “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord, 1994) clarifies that visual consumerism is fundamentally relational, shaping how youth evaluate status, belonging and cultural legitimacy. Consequently, visual consumerism, digital art, social media, globalization and cyber world dynamics must be understood as an integrated system that simultaneously expands creative expression and economic opportunity while generating new psychological, ethical and criminological challenges, making it a critical field for interdisciplinary academic inquiry into contemporary youth culture.

2. Context of Visual Consumerism and Internet Media

Visual consumerism describes the increasing dominance of visual media, digital imagery and aesthetic representation in shaping consumer behaviour today through internet platforms. As social media platforms, online advertising and digital marketplaces expand rapidly, purchasing decisions are being influenced less by product functionality or quality

and more by visual appeal through internet. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok etc, have revolutionized marketing strategies by prioritizing visually compelling content that not only drives consumer choices but also cultivates lifestyle aspirations. The context of visual consumerism and media provides a historical foundation for understanding visual consumerism in a borderless world, particularly how globalised social media art shapes youth desires and cultural practices within the cyber world. Consumer culture may be defined as a socio-economic system in which identity, status and meaning are constructed through the acquisition and display of goods and symbols and its evolution in the 20th century is closely tied to industrial production, mass marketing and mediated communication. During this period, technological innovation transformed consumption from a needs-based activity into a desire-driven cultural practice, supporting ‘Baudrillard’s claim that “Consumption is a system which assures the ordering of signs” (Baudrillard, 1998), indicating that commodities function symbolically as markers of lifestyle and aspiration.’ The rise of visual media and advertising through cinema, print posters, photography and later television established the foundations of visual consumerism by privileging imagery as the most persuasive communicative form, conditioning audiences to interpret visual representation as evidence of value and authenticity. This visual turn intensified with globalization, defined as the acceleration of cross-border flows of information, goods and culture, which enabled early forms of global cultural exchange such as transnational film distribution, international art exhibitions and global brand campaigns, thereby creating shared visual vocabularies across societies. ‘McCracken notes that “Advertising works as a conduit through which cultural meaning moves from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods” (McCracken, 1988)’, illustrating how media industries historically linked symbolic imagery with commodity desire. In the contemporary era, these earlier developments culminate in digital art and social media ecosystems where algorithmically curated images circulate instantly, shaping youth preferences and behavioural norms while intensifying participation in global consumer networks. The cyber world thus represents a digitally constructed social environment in which interaction, commerce and creativity converge, but it also produces new risks such as cyber-crime, internet addiction and cyber delinquency, all of which emerge from unregulated or excessive engagement with online systems. These challenges underscore the importance of netiquettes, defined as ethical guidelines governing responsible digital conduct, which function as cultural protocols sustaining trust and cooperation in virtual communities. Jenkins emphasizes participatory dynamics when he states that “Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2006), a process that explains how contemporary youth not only consume but also produce visual culture. Therefore, the historical trajectory from the beginning of 21st century consumer culture to today’s digital visual economy demonstrates that visual consumerism, social media, globalization and cyber world structures form an interconnected continuum shaping modern cultural experience and youth identity formation.

3. Methodological Framework and Research Design

The present study employs an interdisciplinary methodological framework to examine the research topic, “Visual Consumerism in Borderless World: How Globalised Social Media Art Shapes Youth Desires and Cultural Practices.” The framework integrates sociological, cultural and visual arts perspectives in order to capture the multidimensional nature of visual consumerism as a phenomenon shaped by global digital environments. Theoretically, the research is informed by sociological approaches that conceptualize consumerism as a system of symbolic meaning-making in which images function as markers of identity, aspiration and social belonging. From a cultural perspective, the study draws upon interpretive frameworks that view media texts as carriers of values, ideologies and collective imaginaries circulating across borders. The visual arts perspective complements these approaches by providing analytical tools to examine aesthetic elements such as colour, composition, digital manipulation, symbolism and stylistic repetition, which contribute to the persuasive and affective power of social media imagery. Together, these perspectives create a holistic analytical lens capable of interpreting both the structural conditions and symbolic dimensions of global visual culture.

The research design adopts a mixed qualitative strategy, combining primary and secondary sources to ensure depth, triangulation and contextual reliability. Primary data are collected through a Google Form questionnaire administered using snowball sampling from 128 respondents, a technique particularly suited to digitally connected populations such as youth engaged in online platforms. In this approach, initial participants are invited to share the questionnaire

with peers within their social networks, thereby expanding the sample organically and reflecting the relational structure characteristic of digital communication environments. The questionnaire contains open-ended and semi-structured questions intended to generate descriptive responses about participants' exposure to digital art, interpretations of online visual trends, consumption motivations and perceptions of how global imagery influences their cultural preferences and everyday practices. This qualitative orientation prioritizes participants' subjective meanings, allowing insights into how individuals interpret and internalize visual stimuli.

Secondary data include academic publications, theoretical texts and publicly accessible digital visuals selected from social media platforms for analytical purposes. These sources provide conceptual grounding, historical context and comparative material against which primary findings can be interpreted. Visual materials are analysed through qualitative visual analysis, focusing on stylistic features and recurring motifs to understand how aesthetic conventions contribute to desirability and symbolic value. Thematic analysis is applied to questionnaire responses to identify patterns, categories and conceptual relationships, while cross-referencing these findings with visual data enhances interpretive validity. Ethical considerations guide the research process, including informed consent, anonymity of respondents and responsible handling of digital content. Reflexivity is also maintained to acknowledge the researcher's interpretive position and minimize bias. By combining interdisciplinary theory with mixed qualitative methods, this methodological framework enables a comprehensive exploration of how globalised social media art operates within a borderless cyber environment to shape youth desires and cultural practices. The design ensures that visual consumerism is examined not only as an economic or technological process but also as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon embedded in global networks of meaning, interaction and representation. By combining interdisciplinary theory with mixed qualitative methods, this methodological framework enables a comprehensive exploration of how globalised social media art operates within a borderless cyber environment to shape youth desires and cultural practices. The design ensures that visual consumerism is examined not only as an economic or technological process but also as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon embedded in global networks of meaning, interaction and representation.

4. Conspicuous Consumption and Youth Identity

'Thorstein Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption is contextual to the digital age. "Conspicuous consumption now occurs via online self-presentation:" consumers "accruing social prestige (and is seen as productive rather than wasteful)'. Social media applications displaying luxury items is a deliberate strategy to signal prestige and class. Bainotti finds that 'influencers' consumption displays follow a "logic of conspicuousness," where the "display of consumption" is central to digital world which directly influences real world'. Social media use is linked to stronger conspicuous consumption among young adults. Visual culture scholars argue that image-centric apps create new consumption patterns tied to identity and status. "Putra & Afrilian noted that Instagram's idealized visuals often set by influencers greatly influence youth self-image. They conclude that Instagram aesthetics, which portray "more 'perfect' images," strongly shape young users' standards of beauty and lifestyle." In sum, the literature shows that social media's visual culture encourages users to view goods and experiences as expressions of identity and status, reinforcing materialistic aspirations. Social Media platforms operate globally, exposing youth to diverse cultural symbols. Online, local traditions mix with worldwide trends, affecting youth identity construction. Research indicates that social media creates a "borderless" visual environment: user-generated images and influencer content circulate internationally. For instance, a qualitative analysis finds that social-media visuals in India promote a dream of upward mobility: influencers share luxury, fashion and travel imagery that "shape young people's understanding of success, happiness and modern life". In the Arab Gulf, female Instagram influencers similarly craft highly staged, aspirational lifestyles for followers: their posts create a "fantasy world" that promises fulfillment and belonging. These cases exemplify how globalized social media art blends local and foreign elements but often privileges Western-style consumption ideals. There is no boundary and no borders in internet society and is deeply connected through internet networks "This aligns with analyses of social media as a "double-edged sword" while it spreads global cultural trends (often Western) and can erode local traditions (cultural homogenization), it also provides platforms for cultural expression and community building. 'As of Jan 2022, (Kemp, 2022) there were more than 4.62 billion' social-media users worldwide (around 58.4% of population)." Internet penetration among youth in many regions is similarly high, underscoring social media's reach. Platform popularity among youth: In a 2023 Pew Survey (Anderson, 2023 of US

teens (13-17), roughly 90% reported using YouTube and majorities used TikTok (63%), Snapchat (60%) and Instagram (59%). Daily use is common: 70% of teens use YouTube daily and 58% use TikTok daily. Time spent: U.S. data show (Gallup & Walton, 2023) the average teenager spends 4.8 hours per day on social media apps. Girls and older adolescents tend to spend more time. Influence on spending: Surveys indicate social media heavily influences youth purchases. For example, 85% of Gen Z respondents said social media affects their buying choices and 45% named TikTok/Instagram as top influencers on their purchases. Likewise, 44% of Gen Z globally follow influencers for product information (statista, 2023). (These figures highlight that visual content directly shapes consumption behavior.) Here are some of the examples in context of social media conspicuous consumption are as follows;-Urban India-Aspirational Lifestyles: A visual content analysis in India found that Instagram posts by lifestyle influencers depict luxury fashion, travel and beauty. These images do more than advertise products they embody ideals of wealth and upward mobility. As one study notes, influencer imagery in urban India “promotes a dream of upward social mobility,” actively shaping youth beliefs about success and modern life. Young Indians exposed to such imagery may internalize these global consumption norms, adjusting local cultural aspirations accordingly. Further, in Gulf countries, female social-media influencers craft highly curated content. They don modest luxury brands and exotic locales to project empowered identities, emphasizing authenticity and confidence. Researchers observe that Gulf influencers “gain prominence not just for their identity but for the aspirational lifestyles they present,” using staging and storytelling to create a “fantasy world that resonates with followers”. Followers, in turn, may adopt similar fashion and beauty practices, blending global and local symbols. Even within the US, diaspora youth reinterpret global visuals. For example, Latinx teens combining Western fashion trends with traditional celebrations (e.g. quinceaneras) illustrate cultural hybridization. Similarly, Pew data show higher social media intensity among Black and Hispanic teens, suggesting they may engage with different aesthetics (e.g. hip-hop or Afrocentric influencers) though detailed studies are needed. Visual consumerism not only includes digital perceptions and internet choices but also deviant and illegal behaviours too, like identity theft, cyber-pornography and other cyber-crimes too.

These trends have mixed cultural effects. On one hand, social media homogenizes global youth culture: Western-style consumer norms and beauty ideals diffuse widely. “Balogun & Aruoture (2024) note that African youth increasingly adopt “predominantly Western” consumer behaviors and fashion via social media, often at the expense of indigenous traditions.” On the other hand, digital platforms can foster cultural hybridization, as youth blend global influences with local identity (e.g. localized fashion adaptations, diaspora creativity). Policy-makers and educators must be mindful of these dynamics. UNESCO highlights ethical concerns: constant exposure to idealized social-media images can worsen adolescent anxiety and body dissatisfaction. Protecting youth mental health and diversity is vital. UNESCO recommends “bridging the digital divide” and encouraging “respectful cultural exchange”. This means ensuring all communities have access to media literacy and that algorithms do not privilege one cultural vision over others. Privacy and advertising regulations are also needed, since youth may be unaware of influencer marketing tactics. In effect, content policies should balance the benefits of connectivity with safeguards for vulnerable users. Below is a comparative key findings pf selected contextual works: -

(Author, Year)	Method	Sample/Field	Key Findings
Fatima <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Survey (cross-sectional)	120 Pakistani young adults	Social media usage intensity positively correlates with conspicuous consumption, while higher self-esteem reduces conspicuous buying
Verma <i>et al.</i> (2026)	Visual content analysis	Instagram posts by Indian lifestyle influencers	Influencer posts on Instagram in urban India depict aspirational luxury (fashion, travel, beauty) that influence youth desires, constructing a “dream of upward mobility”

(Author, Year)	Method	Sample/Field	Key Findings
Bainotti (2024)	Qualitative (interviews)	15 Italian Instagram micro-influencers	Micro-influencers use curated consumption displays to gain status. The “logic of conspicuousness” means such displays are productive acts of status-building (not merely waste)
Balogun & Aruoture (2024)	Conceptual analysis	African youth context (Contextual Study)	Social media rapidly spreads global (Western) cultural trends. African youth increasingly adopt these global consumer behaviours, leading to cultural homogenization

Table-1

Further, in order to know the youth perception and view point on visual consumerism and internet society, primary data sourced through google form questionnaire in which out of 128 respondents 61.72% (79) respondents were female while 38.3% (49) respondents were male (Fig. 1). Among 128 respondents, 87.5 % (112) respondents were university students aged 19-23 years (Fig. 2). Smartphones are playing significant role in society not only in positive aspects but also in cyber-crimes even in context of watching porn movies. In 128 respondents 58.6% (75) respondents first accede internet at their home (Fig.3). All the social media applications were used by respondents but YouTube was significantly used by 16.4% (21) respondents daily (Fig. 4). Internet is also widely used by criminal and deviant activities among which cyber-pornography is most common out of 128 respondents, 43% (55) respondents believed that porn content shouldn’t be banned from internet. (Fig. 5). Further, 59.4% (76) respondents believes that internet and social media is influencing individual’s buying capacity and choices (Fig. 6). With this influence, the choices of individuals are affecting that, 75.8% (97) of respondents said that they use social media advertisements and platforms for shopping and buying products (Fig.7).

Gender

128 responses

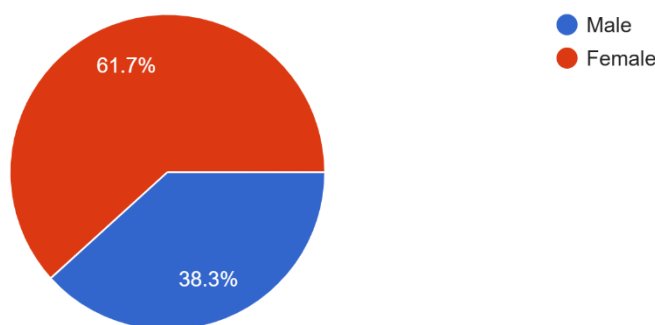


Fig. 1

Current Professional Status

128 responses

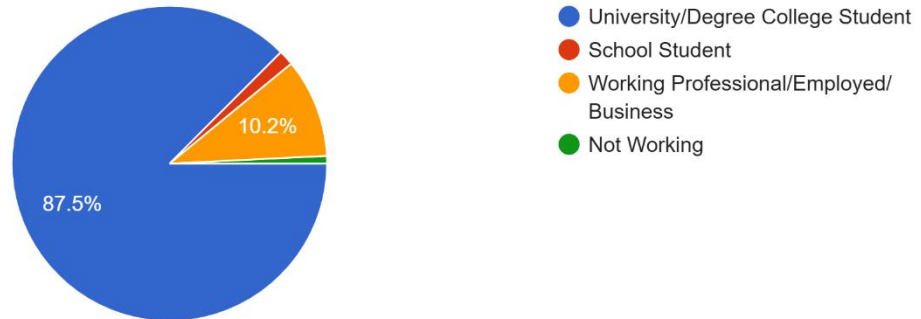


Fig. 2

Where did you first used/accessed the Internet?

128 responses

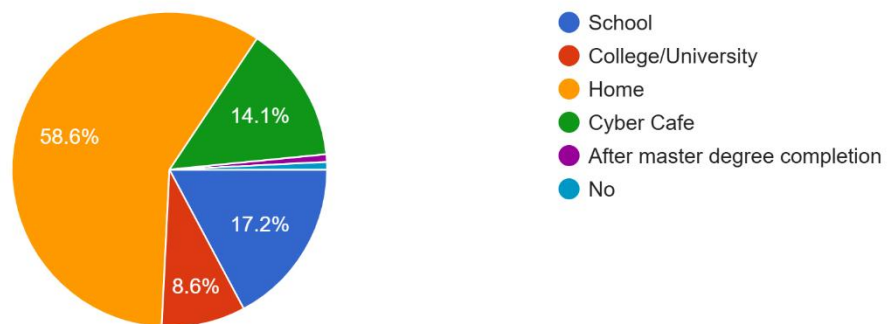


Fig. 3

Which social media application you have used for watching porn movies?

128 responses

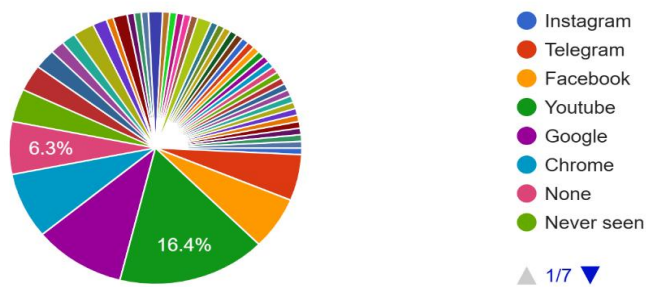


Fig. 4

Do you believe that porn movie should be prohibited and completely banned ?

128 responses

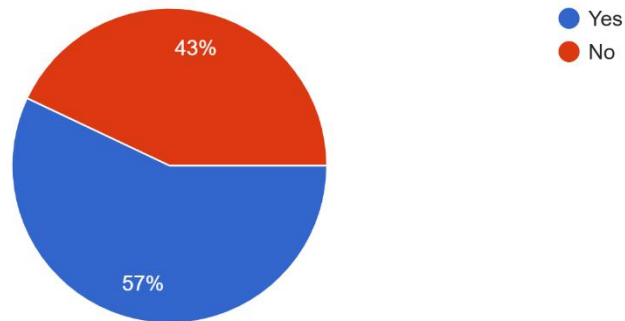


Fig. 5

Do you believe social media/internet is influencing your buying capacity/tendency ?

128 responses

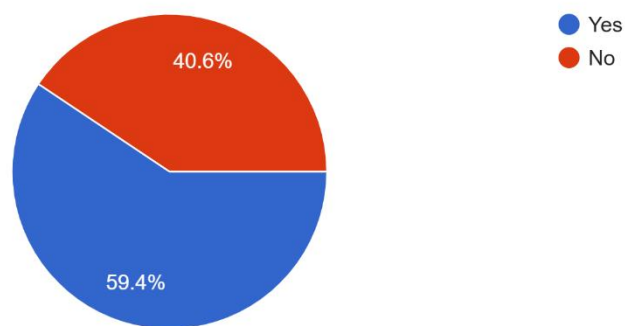


Fig. 6

Do you use social media advertisements for purchasing products ?

128 responses

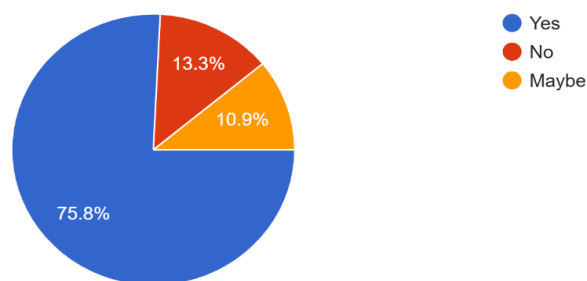


Fig.7

5. Visual Consumerism: Challenges and Future Directions

The rise of visual consumerism introduces a series of challenges that are not always easy to disentangle, especially in a media landscape where images move freely while the cultural tools needed to interpret them lag behind. Young people today scroll through an endless stream of polished visuals aspirational lifestyles, curated aesthetics and trends shaped quietly by algorithms. Over time, these visuals do more than just catch the eye, they subtly influence how youth come to think about success, attractiveness and what it means to “fit in.” Because these images arrive at such speed and volume, traditional sources of cultural grounding can struggle to keep up, leading to a gradual displacement of local tastes by global styles that feel universally available but are far from neutral. Although, social media presents itself as a borderless arena, the flow of visual culture is far from even. Certain regions, industries and cultural voices dominate the production of imagery, while others mostly receive and adapt to it. Youth audiences in many parts of the Global South, for example, regularly encounter visual narratives crafted in Western settings narratives that may clash with, rather than reflect, their everyday experiences. This imbalance feeds anxieties around the erosion of local aesthetic traditions and the slow drift toward homogenised global standards. At the same time, young people find themselves trying to merge global expectations with the lived realities of their own communities, producing mixed identities that can feel creative in some moments and conflicted in others.

Adding to this complexity is the fact that visual spaces online are heavily monitored and commercialised. The images young people upload are not simply self-expressions; they become material for platforms to analyse, circulate and monetise. As youth adapt themselves to the aesthetics that algorithms seem to reward, the line between genuine self-presentation and performance for visibility becomes increasingly blurred. Authenticity, once a personal ideal, now becomes something to be performed, questioned and sometimes strategically managed. Looking to the future, research on visual consumerism will need to develop approaches capable of addressing these overlapping tensions. Rather than relying solely on platform metrics or surface-level content analysis, scholars may benefit from more grounded methods ethnographic observation, cross-cultural comparison and research that gives young people a central voice in interpreting their own media experiences. These approaches can reveal the subtle ways youth reinterpret, resist or even reshape the visual cues that circulate globally. Attention should also be directed toward everyday acts of meaning-making: how young users combine local idioms with global trends, how they create alternative visual spaces and how they participate in online communities that challenge mainstream norms.

Technological shifts will continue to complicate the picture. Augmented-reality filters, immersive shopping tools and increasingly seamless visual interfaces may heighten the emotional pull of images. Meanwhile, emerging creative economies built around blockchain, NFTs and AI-generated artworks introduce new questions about value, authorship and labour. These changes underscore the need for updated, culturally sensitive media literacy programs that treat young users not as passive consumers but as active interpreters of the visual worlds they inhabit. Responding to the challenges of visual consumerism ultimately requires collective effort academics, educators, policymakers and platform designers all have a role. By keeping cultural diversity and youth agency at the centre, future scholarship can move toward a more nuanced understanding of how global visual culture shapes desires, identities and the everyday practices through which young people navigate the world.

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