You Are What You *Feed*:
Identity in the Digital Age

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Advertising Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Advertising
at
Savannah College of Art and Design

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Dedication

This thesis is for my parents. I truly would not be where I am without them, and even in the many moments I doubted myself throughout my journey at SCAD, they were always the first ones to keep me grounded, inspired, and believing in what I was capable of. Their endless support, encouragement, and belief in me carried me through every challenge, every long night, and most importantly, every achievement.

I also dedicate this thesis to my professors. Beginning my MFA at SCAD felt like a leap of faith, but their guidance, encouragement, and expertise helped shape me into the creative I am today. Thank you for not only challenging me to grow, but also helping me realize that I am exactly where I need to be.

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Abstract

You Are What You *Feed*:
Identity in the Digital Age

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March 2026

Identity has historically formed through slow, collective cultural processes shaped by lived experience, social interaction, and repeated participation within communities. That said, the rise of digital platforms has significantly changed the pace at which cultural material travels. It is true that social media has expanded access to participation and connection, but it has also accelerated cultural visibility to a speed that often outpaces the human processes through which identity can inherently develop. This thesis introduces the concept of identity lag to describe the growing disconnect between the rapid cycling of cultural signals online and the slower formation of meaningful identity. Drawing on anthropological perspectives of identity, cultural theory, and contemporary critiques of algorithmic media, this research examines how digital systems restructure cultural participation, influence performative identity, and push people to constantly adapt how they present themselves just to stay visible. It also explores how advertising and influencer culture reinforce this dynamic. Finally, the thesis explores experiential design as a potential response to identity lag. By creating environments that encourage participation, presence, and memory, experiential design offers a framework for reintroducing the time and friction historically necessary for cultural meaning and identity to take hold within an increasingly networked world.

Keywords
Identity Formation; Social Media Culture; Online Identity; Cultural Acceleration; Algorithmic Influence; Performativity; Influencer Marketing; Experiential Design.

Introduction

Culture today moves at a speed that would have been almost unimaginable just a few decades ago. Trends appear overnight, aesthetics spread globally within days, and entire cultural moments can rise and fall within the span of a single scroll. Social media platforms have dramatically expanded access to participation and expression, allowing individuals to publish, share, and connect at an unprecedented scale. Yet alongside this expansion, many people experience a subtle but persistent tension: the feeling that identity itself struggles to keep up with the pace at which culture now travels. Signals of belonging appear, spread, and disappear so quickly that individuals are often left adopting, adjusting, and discarding them before they can meaningfully relate to them.

In this thesis I explore that tension through the concept of identity lag; the growing disconnects between the rapid distribution of culture in digital environments and the slower human processes through which identity and meaning traditionally develop. When cultural signals move faster than lived experience can absorb them, identity risks becoming performative and reactive instead of truly internalized. Understanding this imbalance requires looking not only at how digital platforms shape cultural participation today, but also at how identity and culture historically developed before the feed.

Identity in a Nutshell

In today's society, identity is typically considered to be something very personal, internal, and self-chosen. From an anthropological standpoint, however, identity has never actually been 100% personal, but in fact social at its core. Identity is not something we simply obtain or decide on a whim, but something that is nurtured through relationships, environments, and experiences (Munro 201).

For a very long time, anthropologists have understood identity as stemming through processes of classification and belonging. People come to know who they are through the ways

they are “addressed” by others, be it through gender, class, profession, ethnicity, or nationality, or even more informal cues such as personal style or behavior. These classifications brought together ultimately form the cultural framework that give individuals a place within the social world. In this sense, identity always depends on various factors aside from how we see ourselves, including how people interpret or acknowledge us (van Meijl 63). Because identity is formed socially, there is a level of performativity that is unavoidable. In no way does this mean identity is artificial, but the external influence causes identity to be enacted through certain repeated behaviors and ‘communal’ expectations. This can include the way we dress, talk, rituals we have, and the overall accordance with norms that are widely recognizable. Over time, these actions merge into what we feel is a natural expression of ourselves, even though in reality they were significantly shaped by cultural context. The fact that what is considered to be appropriate, scandalous, authentic, or respectable varies so much across both time and place ultimately paints identity as a continuous negotiation between individuals and society, more so than it is inherently at our core (Chinn 105). Rituals play a particularly important role in this process. Across cultures, certain practices of celebration, mourning, work, and interaction, among others serve as mechanisms through which identities are shaped and passed down. These rituals are what connect individuals to family histories, traditions, and values that far precede a single person’s lifetime. This, much like culture, makes identity something that is lived collectively instead of decided upon in isolation. Even the most customary routines, like what we wear to work, how we greet others, and what we consume, serve as small but repeated acts that establish a sense of who belongs where (Munro 210).

Overall, it is important to note that identity has never actually been ‘self-chosen’. While modern Western societies often emphasize individuality and personal freedom, there’s always external influences that impact those personal choices. The whole concept of “being” someone in a social sense will always require some sort or acknowledgement from outside forces, thus making identity something that we actively choose and perform, but within boundaries we did

not create. Historically, these dynamics unfolded at a human pace. The formation of identity was always tied to physical distance, face-to-face interactions, and the slow accumulation of social recognition. The way to become a member of a group was not instant, but through active and gradual participation. Understanding identity, therefore, also requires understanding the cultural environments that shape it.

Culture B.F. (Before the Feed)

As we begin unpacking this relationship, it is helpful to clarify what culture actually is and how it has historically functioned. Culture is often labeled as something people passively consume, like trends, aesthetics, media, or lifestyles that circulate through society. From an anthropological perspective, however, culture is not a product but more so a process. It is something people actively participate in, and indirectly shape through shared meaning and behavior. Culture forms through rituals of belonging, systems of exclusion, and everyday practices that allow individuals to recognize themselves as part of a group. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams described this idea simply, but powerfully: “culture is ordinary”, meaning it is created not by a specialized elite but through the lived experience of everyday people and their common ways of life (Williams 2).

Historically, identity has emerged through these cultural processes. Social groups defined themselves through language, dress, music, values, and customs that developed gradually over time. These indicators of identity were not optimized for visibility or mass appeal, but more so depended on lived experience. Fashion changed due to material availability or for political reasons (Field). Political identities shifted alongside social movements. Music scenes formed locally before spreading outward; like hip-hop, for instance, which began as a block party in the Bronx in the early 1970s. Slang developed within specific communities as a way to signal belonging and distinction. Younger generations pushed against established norms for none other than because it felt culturally necessary (Hsu). In this context, identity was always

shaped through influence, but that kind of influence operated slowly, unevenly, and differently across place, class, and community.

Raymond Williams argued that culture is made through what he called a society's "common meanings and directions", which are continually debated and revised through experience. Culture at the time was never something instantly broadcasted (Williams 2). It had to be lived and shaped into existence. Shared meanings were built through repetition, participation, and adaptability within particular environments. Because of this, culture forms could not simply be copied and pasted across contexts; they were interpreted or adapted depending on local conditions. And thus, identity formation required time, proximity, and social reinforcement. Given that cultural evolution has always been a defining part of how society is shaped, the issue is not that culture changes. What distinguishes the current moment is the speed, scale, and most significantly the *uniformity* with which these changes now occur. Prior to industrialization, media and communication were slower, more localized, and often controlled by gatekeepers. While this limited access in many ways, it also *allowed variation to exist*. Difference was preserved by distance, by subculture, and by the simple fact that not everything traveled everywhere at once. In Raymond William's terms, culture was still anchored in "ordinary" life, so in specific, local processes of people making meaning through shared routines, relationships, and lived experience. That grounding mattered because it meant new meanings had to be absorbed into real social worlds before they could become 'the norm'.

That is, until industrialization began to alter this balance. Mass production transformed manufacturing by prioritizing efficiency and scale, making objects more accessible but also more standardized. While this shift was not negative in nature, it introduced a new logic that preferred mass production and distribution over uniqueness, and that same logic gradually extended into media and communication. Williams describes this shift not just as technological innovation, but as a "reorganization" of how people lived day to day (14). As work moved people from farms to factories and villages to cities, older community structures began to break apart,

and people were brought into entirely new routines, environments, and relationships. Because culture is formed through those everyday interactions, this shift essentially also changed the conditions under which culture itself was created. At the same time, improvements in communication created what Williams calls “multiple transmission”, meaning that communication was now sent out to large numbers of unknown people at once, instead of it being exchanged within specific communities. The target audience suddenly changed from neighbors, workers, or locals to a more generalized “mass”. Interestingly, this is when cultural expression began to adjust to ‘content’ that could reach everyone simultaneously. With the reproduction and distribution efforts of products becoming much easier, and messaging increasingly shaped to be broadly legible rather than locally meaningful, a new pressure toward simplification and standardization emerged (10).

Even then, however, cultural change retained some form of resistance. Messages still moved through local interpretation and social context before they became associated with identity. At this point in time, culture could scale, but it could not yet move faster than the people experiencing it.

Social Media, The Beast That Changed It All

The arrival of social media did not create a new cultural force so much as it removed the final limitations on one already in motion. Industrialization scaled production and mass media accelerated distribution, but digital platforms are what ultimately functioned like a cultural Big Bang—what had at one point expanded gradually and more linearly now exploded outwards, instant, limitless, and replicable.

Social media is commonly viewed as a conglomeration of *channels* that we can use to distribute information. I would argue that this is a misnomer. As opposed to earlier communication channels, which were used solely to send and receive messages, social media acts as such, while also actively shaping what moves through it. Algorithms sort, prioritize, and

disperse content based on engagement predictions, which means that what we see is not only what was shared, but what has been curated for maximum visibility. As a result, instead of a channel or pipeline, social media functions more like an environment that structures interaction, prefers certain behaviors, and quietly guides how culture is expressed and received.

This system becomes somewhat of a new kind of cultural infrastructure. “In place of the human gatekeepers and curators of culture, the editors and DJs, we now have a set of algorithmic gatekeepers” (Chayka 11). Platforms rely now on automated filtering that is determined by engagement (clicks, shares, comments, and watch time) instead of cultural or historical significance. What emerges is a cultural landscape shaped not by human curation, but a system engineered to keep users scrolling—or as kids say, “for the likes”. Because platforms reward what is most repeatable, cultural visibility itself then begins to function like a filter, in that what spreads fastest becomes what feels most “normal”, regardless of relevance, longevity, or impact. That’s the shift that matters most for identity. Instead of identity forming through lived participation and slow cultural malleability, it becomes something closer to RTO; constant adjustment based on what reads clearly, performs well, and signals ‘belonging’ in the most scalably superficial sense of the word.

Like the domino effect, this shift also inevitably changed the incentives behind participation. Because of the fact that visibility is tied to engagement, user behavior adapts accordingly. Kyle Chayka’s *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flatten Culture* describes how digital platforms encourage the production of content that is easily legible and endlessly reproducible across contexts. Instead of fostering difference and diversity, the system nudges creators towards formats, aesthetics, and tones that prove to be successful and ‘safe’, always in terms of engagement (33). This incentive structure shapes what people make, but it also reshapes how culture work is valued in the first place. In Scott Timberg’s *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class*, he argues that the same digital systems that expanded access to publishing and sharing also dismantled many of the local institutions that once sustained creative life, such as

editors, records stores, independent radio stations, and other forms of human curation that helped culture develop within specific communities (53). Visibility increased, but stability did not follow because the slower structures that once supported artistic continuity weakened. Because of this, creatives are now often expected to circulate endlessly online for attention while receiving little of the economic or institutional support that previously allowed cultural identities to be practiced and developed over time (Timberg 73).

One visible effect of this restructuring is what Chayka calls a “convergence” of taste, where geographically distant users tend to come across similar imagery, language, and references at the same time (25). Therefore, variation has less room to take hold, and cultural expression begins to mirror itself across platforms and places, ultimately overshadowing the true diversity and expression that such expansive reach and connectivity could make possible. On that note, it is a fact that platforms have undeniably expanded access to participation—a lot of which is utilized for significant and culturally beneficial reasons. Social media overall has enabled voices, such as political activists that have been historically excluded from traditional media systems, to reach audiences without needing any sort of approval or mediation. Moreover, creative professionals can publish freely, movements can gain visibility overnight, and individuals can find communities that would have once been inaccessible. It’s a bit ironic that the same mechanisms that flatten culture seem to also democratize entry into it. That said, that same democratization comes with a catch. While it is true that more people can contribute, content is still formatted to appeal to standardization through metrics, templates, and recommendations, causing variation in messaging to actually narrow. Timberg notes that digital platforms tend to operate on winner-take-all dynamics, where attention concentrates around what performs best instead of what is most meaningful, pushing creators to compete inside systems designed for scale over depth (218). This is why emotionally charged material tends to travel farther and faster, as platforms are programmed to ‘blow up’ whatever holds the most attention, regardless of whether that attention comes from curiosity, outrage, or excitement.

We have always been influenced by others; influence itself is not new. What is new is the scale, speed, and automation of that influence. The truth is that platforms industrialize attention in the same way that factories industrialized production, contradictorily reducing expression into a metric. What begins to dissolve under these conditions is not culture itself, but the time-based processes that once allowed identity to take hold. Earlier cultural systems still moved, changed, and even scaled, but they did so at a pace that people could organically inhabit. Today, cultural material circulates faster than it can be lived through. Trends are encountered, adopted, and replaced before they accumulate meaning through repetition or shared moments. The result is not simply cultural acceleration, but a growing disconnect between how quickly "culture" moves and how slowly identity is actually formed.

Identity Lag, Too Fast to Become

If culture now moves at a speed that outpaces lived experience, how could a socially formed identity stabilize in an environment that rarely stays still long enough to live it? This question addresses the issue that is not that people have stopped looking for and caring about meaning, but that the conditions that once allowed true meaning to form, those being things like time, repetition, and long-term attention, have become increasingly difficult to hold on to in the digital world.

As I've mentioned, in earlier cultural environments, this process was unavoidable. One had to actively seek out music, stores, books, or communities. Discovery involved "friction", and that friction gave choices more weight. Taste formed gradually because exposure itself was gradual. As Kyle Chayka describes in *Filterworld*'s section on "The Disruption of Personal Taste", cultural engagement once depended on "the slow building of our individual sensibilities", shaped through repeated encounters rather than instant responses and reactions to new content (15). Algorithmic culture interrupts that process. Instead of revising and refining preferences over time, people are continuously presented with new options calculated from

predicted engagement. Recommendations do not wait for identity to develop; they anticipate it, simulate it, and feed it back as suggestion. This results in taste becoming something pre-assembled instead of expressed, which is where the so-called lag in identity sets in.

One clear example of identity lag is the rise of instantly recognizable aesthetic categories or "templates" that can be adopted with very little effort. We've all heard of "GRWM", "Day in the Life", "Van Life", or the endless variations of "____ core" aesthetics that package identity into easily recognizable formats. To the point that even the voiceovers, humor, and speaking styles influencers use in their videos often sound nearly identical (Fig. 1-3). These are not identities in the anthropological sense discussed earlier; I would personally say they function more like shortcuts that offer the appearance of individuality while in fact being widely tied to a more copy-paste kind of culture. The algorithm reinforces this by grouping users up into behavioral clusters, essentially showing them what people "like them" already engage with. While this might feel personalized, it is actually statistical averaging that significantly narrows down the field of discovery and becomes more of a content loop. Over time, this loop subtly shifts the goals behind participation, and instead of using culture to explore identity, individuals use tacked-on identity to keep up with what's 'culturally relevant' in the moment.



Figure 1. "GRWM Compilation," *YouTube*, 2025.

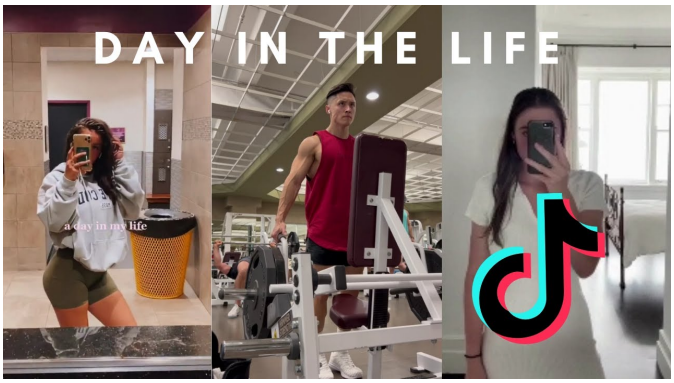


Figure 2. “Day in the Life | TikTok Compilation.” *YouTube*, 2022



Figure 3. “Van Tour | 5+ Years Living on the Road.” *YouTube,* 2024.

When every interaction carries the pressure that comes from competing for relevance with the rest of the world, the way people present themselves on social media can begin to feel more like maintenance than self-expression. Kyle Chayka also describes how algorithmic environments encourage constant adjustment and adaptation in order to remain visible, which causes people to have to follow or be nudged to certain preferences that are never fully their own (14). This helps explain a broader cultural unease: the feeling that one is constantly encountering oneself through mirrors built by data instead of human experiences. People may very well consume more “culture” than ever while feeling the least personally connected to it they’ve ever been. Identity, in this context, does not disappear, but it does stall, and becomes caught between the human need for meaning and a technological environment designed for profitable speed (6).

Research Approach

Up to this point, this thesis has examined identity lag mainly through cultural and theoretical frameworks. To better understand how these dynamics take shape in everyday digital life, a small-scale survey was conducted through Prolific, focusing on how individuals perceive the relationship between identity, content, and advertising online.

While the broader argument draws from cultural theory, anthropology, and media critique, this research introduces a more grounded perspective, that is, how people actually interpret and move through these conditions as part of their daily routines. The survey adds perspective from lived experience, therefore offering more tangible insight into how these systems are encountered other than just how they operate. The research was built around the idea that identity takes shape through interaction. Platforms, as we know, structure what people see, but it is interpretation, repetition, and absorption that ultimately determine the *meaning* behind the content. Much of the existing discourse focuses on algorithms, metrics, and distribution, but less attention is given to how everyday users process those environments while participating in them. This survey essentially focuses on that space, and was sent out through Prolific, targeting a general population of adult social media users. Participants were not limited to a specific demographic or professional group, allowing for a broader range of everyday engagement with digital platforms, as well as painting a basic but clear picture of how everyday users move through spaces where visibility, content, and self-presentation are constantly in motion. Both quantitative and qualitative formats were used. Multiple choice and scaled questions helped surface patterns in how participants perceive influencer content, product integration, and online authenticity. Open-ended responses provided room for more detailed reflections, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. This approach reflects the subject itself. Some patterns can be identified, but interpretation carries equal weight. Responses often included contradictions or shifts in perspective, which became just as relevant as any consistent trend.

The survey was tailored around navigating specific moments within social media use where identity or formed opinions come to light, with questions designed to touch on recognizable behaviors, such as deciding what to post, reacting to content, and encountering product marketing within personal feeds. One set of questions focused on how participants respond when products appear within casual content such as routines, vlogs, and “day in the life” videos. These formats place promotional material alongside everyday activity, shaping how it is interpreted and responded to. Responses from this section help clarify how closely advertising now sits within the flow of ordinary content, and how blurred the lines are between promotion and authenticity efforts. Another set of questions addressed self-presentation. Participants reflected on whether their online presence aligns with how they see themselves, along with what influences their decision to share, edit, or hold back content. These responses highlight the smaller, often unnoticed adjustments that shape how identity is presented publicly. Moreover, the survey explored how individuality is perceived across different platforms. Participants considered whether social media expands or constraints self-expression, along with how trends and widely shared formats influence what feels appropriate or recognizable. Together, these areas capture how identity is shaped through ongoing interaction with content, expectations, and platform norms, thus revealing patterns that are embedded within everyday use, which can be more effectively explored than mere isolated moments of reflection.

Responses show a high level of awareness around how products appear within everyday content. Participants frequently described these as being embedded within personal moments, with some calling them “manipulative” or "disguised". Several responses point to a preference for more traditional advertisements, where the intent feels more forthright and direct. When that clarity fades, discomfort tends to follow, often tied to how the content is framed regardless of the product itself. This awareness does not interrupt engagement, however. Many participants described these formats as expected, using language that reflects familiarity with how these platforms operate. Comments such as “It’s just how it works”, “I’m fine with it”, or “I

find it comforting" popped up alongside more critical reactions. These responses point to how the reality of how these systems work are not news to anyone, and are in fact so effective and stealthy in reeling people in, that most users don't even have a problem with it. That said, some responses also show how the way content is delivered can play a huge role in shifting perception. Participants described recommendations as more acceptable when they appear connected to everyday use, especially when the product fits naturally into the creator's routine. When that connection feels forced, responses describe the content as unconvincing and artificial. The distinction often comes down to whether the moment feels continuous or interrupted. Similarly, this same pattern appears in responses about individuality. Participants described social media as a space where expressions and pressure exist side by side. Some pointed to flexibility in how they present themselves, while others described comparison, trend cycles, and shared formats as shaping what feels acceptable to posts. Several responses referenced a sense of sameness, describing content as "homogenous" or influenced by what others are already doing.

Across these responses, engagement continues alongside critique, with participants recognizing patterns within the system while adjusting their behavior within it. Identity develops through the adjustment, shaped by repeated exposure to content, expectations, and shared formats that guide how it is expressed over time.

Identity for Sale

The cultural condition that is the identity lag did not emerge accidentally. The acceleration of culture has been reinforced, scaled, and monetized for years, turning social media into somewhat of an advertising machine that learned how to profit from the speed and instability of identity.

In *Filterworld*, Kyle Chayka describes how the early internet gradually erased the boundary between self-expression and self-promotion. While posting onto digital platforms was once merely participatory, it quickly became more about visibility, that is, since visibility became

measurable, and measurement became profitable (8). Likes, shares, comments, watch time—these are now not just signals of support or appreciation, but behind-the-scenes data points that are turned into advertising value. Thus, what I describe as identity lag in the previous chapter—the inability of individuals to organically adopt cultural signals before they are replaced—turns out to be of high economic value. This is because an identity that never settles is an identity that keeps consuming. Influencers are often talked about as trendsetters, cultural leaders, curators, etc., but I find that framing to be misleading. Most social media influencers do not generate culture more so than they function as translators between algorithm and audience. Their success depends less on originating taste than on recognizing what the feed rewards and embodying it convincingly. Because they embody what performs well, influencers as a result begin to model a particular version of life; highly curated, aesthetically fueled, and effortlessly aspirational. Everyday moments are framed as 'main character' scenes, homes are staged, coffee is always photogenic, relationships appear polished with the complexity of connection trimmed down to what reads best on camera, and even vulnerability becomes formatted. Advertising integrates seamlessly into this performance. We see skincare products sitting casually on a nightstand. Sponsored outfits appearing mid-vlog as though it were simply part of the day. The goal is not to interrupt life with advertising, but to make advertising look like life.

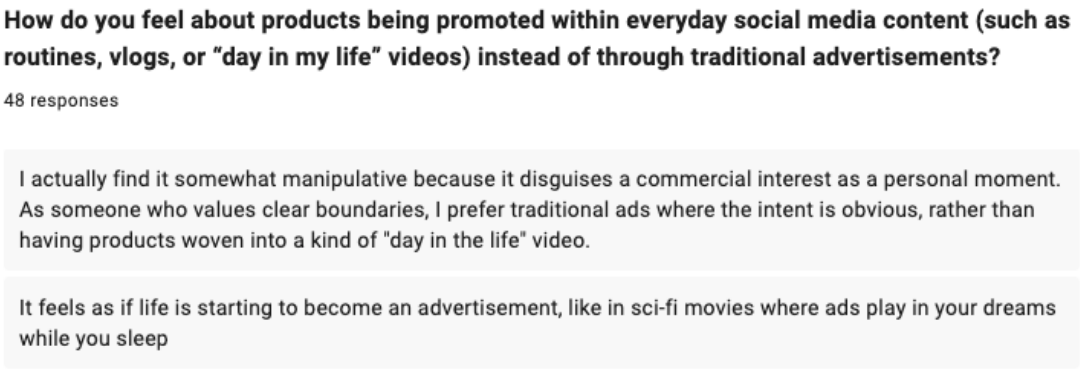


Figure 4. "How do you feel about products being promoted within everyday content?" *Prolific Survey,* 2026.



Figure 5. "What kinds of advertising trends or tactics do you notice most on social media?" *Prolific Survey*, 2026.

The result? A subtle romanticization of existence. What performs well is not life in its raw, inconsistent, often uninteresting form, but life edited and filtered for clarity, aspiration, and shareability. This does not necessarily mean influencers are insincere, but it means their presentation is structured by what will reward them and their personal brand. In this way, influencers are not simply selling products, but modeling optimized versions of themselves that will 'influence' people into buying the specific lifestyle and all that comes with it (Fig. 4 & 5). This dynamic becomes particularly ironic when placed next to Raymond Williams' claim discussed in chapter 2 that "culture is ordinary". For Williams, culture emerged from everyday practices or ordinary life; routines, relationships, and experiences that gradually accumulated meaning within communities (2). On social media, however, 'the ordinary' rarely performs well. What circulates most widely tends to be a version of that appears aestheticized and aspirational. In this sense, the digital attention economy subtly reshapes cultural visibility, favoring moments that stand out over the mundane routines that culture has historically been grounded in. In earlier cultural systems, as mentioned, value was shaped by human gatekeepers such as editors, critics, curators, etc. In the digital advertising age, those gatekeepers are replaced by metrics. If a post performs well, it is interpreted as resonant. If it fails, the reach is quietly limited. Over

time, creators learn to adjust accordingly, and brands operate under the same logic (Timberg 53). Marketing decisions are increasingly driven by KPIs: click-through rates, engagement percentages, impressions, conversions. Evidently, engagement is much easier to measure than cultural nuance. So, the things that get clicks start to look “authentic”, while anything runs the risk of being lost in the feed. Same as how industrial production favored standardization for efficiency, digital advertising favors standardization for optimal visibility and, therefore, profit.

When visibility becomes the measure of value, identity is pressured to remain visible at all costs. This pressure helps explain why certain types of content dominate feeds. In chapter 3, I touched briefly on how engagement does not distinguish between admiration, humor, relevancy, or outrage. A comment section fueled by anger can register the same as one fueled by agreement because of the fact that intensity is valuable regardless of the emotional triggers behind it. This is why platforms often appear saturated with catastrophic headlines, polarizing commentary, or emotionally charged conflict. The feed prioritizes what keeps attention hooked, and outrage is highly efficient in doing just that. The same dynamic fuels what is often referred to as “rage baiting” or “click baiting”. Some creators intentionally post exaggerated or controversial takes, not because they necessarily believe them deeply, but because they understand this will cause their comment sections to erupt, their shares to multiply, and their visibility to increase (Fig. 6 & 7). In a metric economy, controversy is quite profitable, and I see this as somewhat of a subtle loophole within the system. Just as liking one’s own post artificially increases engagement, provoking conflict is an artificial amplification of reach because sincerity is not what platforms focus on when evaluating content.



Figure 6. "Rage Bait & Engagement Farming," *Facebook*, 2025.



Figure 7. "Why Rage Bait Works," *Facebook*, 2025.

This logic extends far beyond individual posts and influencers. It shapes the entire advertising environment. When engagement becomes the primary measure of value, identity itself becomes something that can be adjusted in real time. With cultural signals constantly being tested by the algorithm, what works spreads, while what doesn't fades; meaning that advertising did not create identity lag, but it did make it profitable.

With that said, one thing that I find very interesting and noteworthy is how even within this fast-paced environment, people continue looking for meaning, belonging, and connection. Ultimately, outside of the influencer world, culture has not flattened into one homogenous

version of itself. Communities still form. Subcultures still emerge. Movements still take shape in ways that feel lived rather than curated. This suggests that while digital systems can speed up culture, they cannot entirely replace the human process of forming it. It isn't that culture disappears online, but it does circulate in a way that makes it difficult for inherent identities to take root. So, if speed and visibility are not the same as depth, then what creates depth? And what happens to culture when the friction that once shaped begins to disappear?

Digital Culture - Everything, Everywhere, All at Once

Digital culture has undeniably expanded access and connectivity. More people can publish, discover, participate, and connect than at any other moment in history. Entire subcultures that once relied on proximity to develop now circulate globally. Obscure genres, niche aesthetics, independent creators… None of them are limited by distribution in the way they once were.

Expansion is real, but it also is not synonymous with formation. In *Filterworld*, Kyle Chyka reflects on what it felt like to step away from algorithmic feeds and rediscover cultural material through slower, more deliberate channels. What he describes is not the disappearance of culture, but the disappearance of the friction that forms it. Without feeds, he had to research, wait, follow threads manually. It was less efficient, but it was also much more *immersive*. The experience of encountering something required effort, and that effort changed the meaning, intention, and lasting impact of what was found. This is the distinction that matters. Visibility can be instant, but formation cannot (51), a gap that becomes more apparent in the way social media content is experienced as constant and repeatable (Fig. 8).

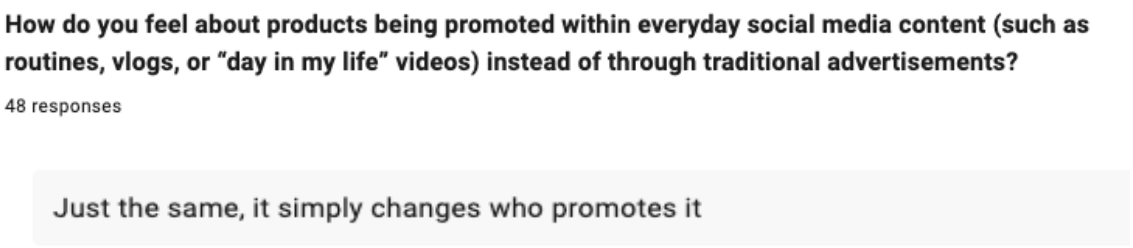


Figure 8. "How do you feel about products being promoted within everyday social media content?" *Prolific Survey,* 2026.

As I talked about previously, earlier cultural systems had friction built into the process, shaping culture through material and context accumulating over time. When friction disappears, culture becomes shallow and ambient. Songs auto-play, images refresh, trends appear and disappear before they can establish a real sense of meaning. Everything is available at once, which means nothing demands commitment or extended attention span. Chayka notes how streaming platforms encourage shorter songs and more immediate hooks, optimizing for skip rates and engagement metrics (54). The structure of the platform subtly reshapes the structure of the art—the concept of art itself being an entirely separate pillar in this subject that would end in the rabbit hole of *value versus mass production*. But this same logic applies to visual culture, language, and identity signals. The reality is this: digital systems have expanded cultural access while at the same time diminishing the time required for authentic cultural meaning to develop. We encounter a lot but inhabit and absorb not even a fraction of the content, ultimately thinning out the actual depth of engagement. This in no way suggests that culture itself is 'worse' or 'different' than it used to be, especially outside of digital platforms, it just means that the conditions under which it forms have changed. Chayka describes how algorithmic feeds construct an "endless middle", where adjacent content is similar enough to feel coherent, but rarely disruptive enough to transform taste (20), often resulting in content that feels consistent across accounts and formats (Fig. 9). That constant overexposure can mistake reflex and habit for personal choice.

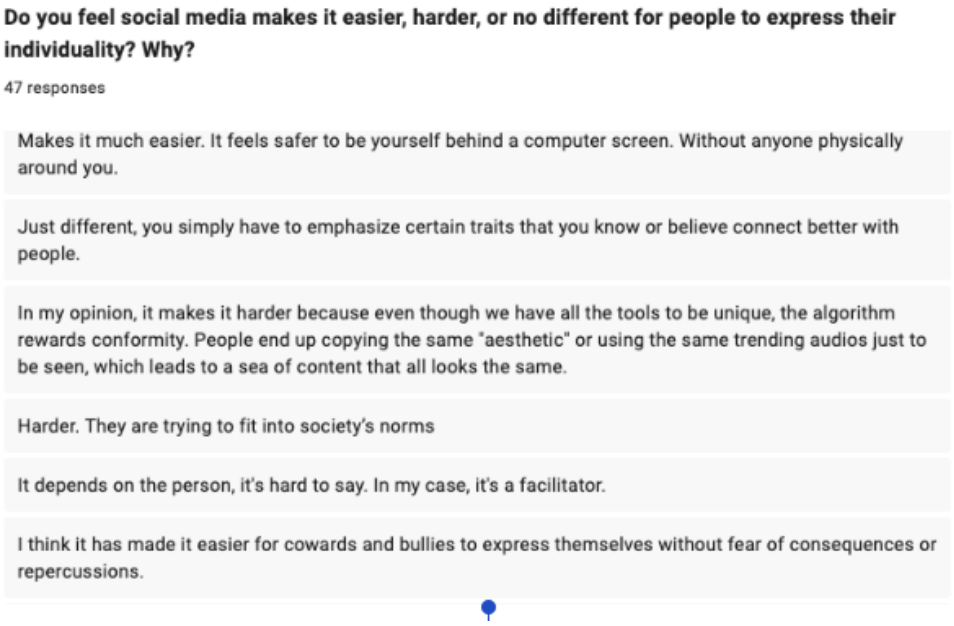


Figure 9. "Do you feel social media makes it easier or harder for people to express their individuality?" *Prolific Survey*, 2026.

Formation—of culture, of taste, of identity, etc., on the other hand, requires resistance, or as I've been calling it, friction. Something that takes time to understand and force engagement beyond the average 6-second glance. If friction once shaped identity organically, through scarcity, slowness, and repetition, then could friction be intentionally reintroduced? Not as regression or nostalgia, but as design. Because if identity requires time, then any system that accelerates culture faster than it can be processed or internalized will inevitably produce a lag. And if that lag is structural, then it cannot be solved by individual willpower alone. It requires rethinking how culture is delivered, encountered, and lived.

Designing for Presence in a Networked World

If social friction was what once shaped identity and culture organically, then advertising and design may just be the way to bring some of that back. The goal is not to reject digital platforms. The connectivity they provide is undeniably powerful. More people can participate in cultural conversations than ever before, and ideas can circulate globally in seconds. Thus, the

issue, as discussed in the previous chapter, is not expansion itself. The issue is that the current digital environment prioritizes circulation at the expense of depth, as digital networks seldom provide the immersive conditions needed for meaning to actually take hold.

This is where experiential design becomes important. Rather than replacing lived experience with digital representation, experiential design creates environments where people can actively participate in a moment. Physical space, sensory interaction, and shared presence introduce a level of human engagement that scrollable, short-form content will never achieve. In “The Experience Economy”, Pine and Gilmore describe these experiences as events that individuals do not simply observe but inhabit, arguing that immersion and participation create stronger emotional and cognitive memory than passive consumption. Memory is significant because identity forms through moments we resonate with and remember, not just exposure to information. According to Freeman’s EventTrack report, immersive brand experiences are significantly more likely to leave lasting impressions and motivate sharing than traditional and digital advertising formats. The key is for participants to not simply see a brand and a call to action, but to encounter the brand within an environment that can easily become part of their own story (Fig 10). What makes experiential design particularly powerful today is that these moments no longer need to remain limited to the location where they occur, because we have digital platforms that allow experiences to travel.

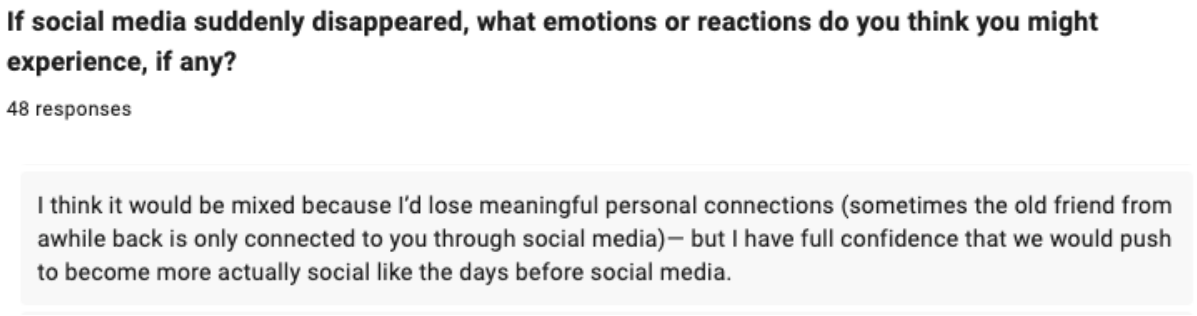


Figure 10. “If social media suddenly disappeared, what emotions would you experience?” *Prolific Survey*, 2026.

One of my favorite examples of this hybrid structure of experiential design can be seen in BBDO's "Meta Thrillboards" campaign for MetaQuest (Fig. 11). At first glance, the installations appeared to be traditional outdoor posters promoting the headset's VR games. But as visitors approached, they realized the graphic they were seeing was actually projected onto a wall of water that doubled as an entrance to a physical environment, transforming what looked like a 2D billboard into a fully immersive space. Participants could then move through themed sets inspired by popular franchises like Ghostbusters and The Walking Dead, interacting with props and effects before ultimately trying the Quest 3 headset itself. The design flipped the traditional logic of advertising. Instead of simply showing the product's immersive capabilities, the campaign recreated that immersion in the real world in a way that allowed more people to *live* the brand.



Figure 11. "Meta Thrillboards", *BBDO*, 2023.

The experience itself then extended beyond the installation through photos, videos, and highlight reels that people could share online. Rather than relying on endless content production and forced reach, the campaign's impact came from the ripple effect of a real multi-sensory moment. Some participants lived the experience, while others encountering it online—

such as myself—experienced curiosity, and even the FOMO that came with seeing something they wished could have been a part of. Instances like these provide a different, and arguably more forward-thinking way of understanding the relationship between experiential design and digital culture. Social media does not need to function as the place where culture originates. Instead, it can simply operate as the channel through which experiences are shared and amplified across distance. In many ways, this dynamic is also strengthened by the concept of *time* itself. Because experiences like the Meta Thrillboards installation only existed temporarily, they required presence. You just *had to be there* to fully encounter it. That limited availability created a level of attention and excitement that endless digital content would likely never have gotten close to (Fig. 12-14).

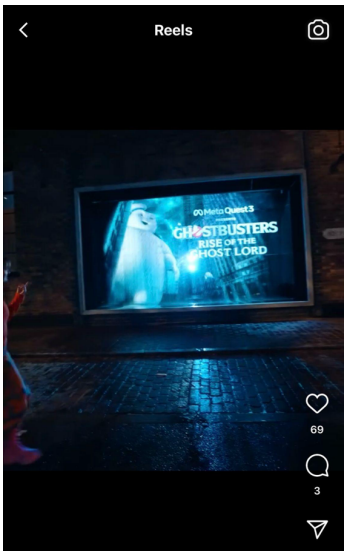


Figure 12. "Meta Thrillboard Reveal." *Instagram*, 2023.

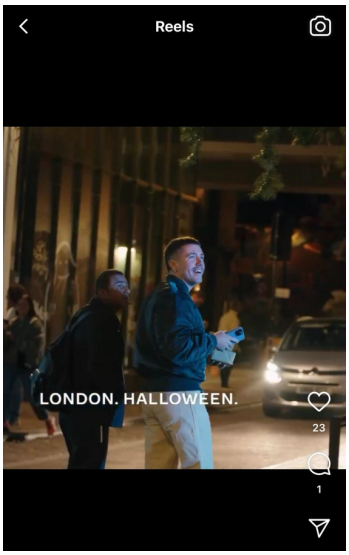


Figure 13. "Meta Thrillboard Street Interaction." *Instagram*, 2023.

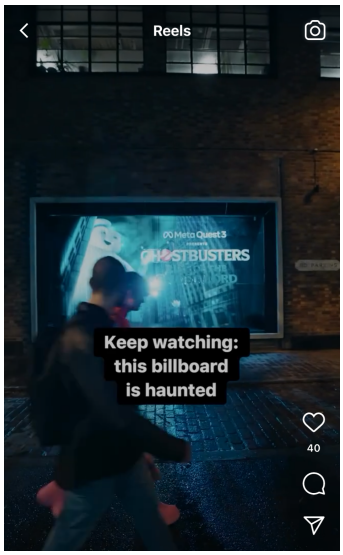


Figure 14. "Meta Thrillboard Digital Marketing." *Instagram*, 2023.

It is worth distinguishing this kind of scarcity from the type that many brands attempt to manufacture online. In digital culture, "limited availability" is often used as a tactic to generate hype around products that trend briefly before disappearing altogether. The exclusivity, in that sense, becomes performative; essentially a signal that someone was able to obtain something others could not. Experiential scarcity, on the other hand, functions differently. When

something memorable exists for only a short moment in time, the impact does not come from ownership, but from participation. The fact that it no longer exists does not diminish its value either; if anything, it heightens curiosity around it and the brand itself. What spreads online in these cases is not simply the want to possess something others do not, but the story of having witnessed—or missed out on—something meaningful and unique.

It is evident that technology can play a significant role in the expansion of what these experiences can look like. Experientiality today is not limited to physical installations or live events. Augmented reality, virtual environment, interactive platforms, and networked installations all create opportunities for immersive encounters that blend physical and digital presence for maximum impact. So, what matters most is not necessarily the medium itself, but the degree of participation it invites. Experiences that require time, effort, or presence naturally carry more weight than content that is always available and endlessly scrollable. Therefore, it becomes clear that designing for presence in a networked world requires prioritizing memory over metrics. Metrics measure visibility, but memory is what measures real impact. And interestingly, when experiences are designed for memory, the desire to share and engage often follows naturally as people love to document what they find meaningful, unique, or emotionally resonant.

This ultimately generates a hybrid model of cultural formation, where experiences create the moments where meaning forms, and digital networks then allow those moments to reach a much wider audience, inspire participation and inspiration elsewhere, and thus accumulate real cultural significance. Not to say that culture needs to slow down in order to regain depth. But it may need intentional moments where people can stop long enough to live inside it, and experiential design offers powerful ways to create those moments.

Conclusion

The identity lag described throughout this thesis should in no way be interpreted as cultural failure or downgrade. We can more accurately perceive it as a transitional phase. Every major technological shift has always reshaped how culture comes, travels, and stabilizes over time. Industrialization reorganized production and media expanded distribution. Digital networks have now accelerated circulation to a scale and speed that previous culture systems were never built to absorb. Knowing how evolution and innovation naturally occur, I truly believe that what we are experiencing is not the disappearance of identity, but a temporary imbalance between the speed at which culture moves and the slower processes through which meaning is actually formed.

It is certainly encouraging that signs of adaptation are already visible. Younger generations, particularly Gen Alpha and young Gen Z, appear increasingly drawn to participatory and tactile forms of engagement. Lots of creative platforms often emphasize making over simply consuming, communities gather around shared hobbies and niche interests, and digital spaces are often used to organize in-person activities and collaborative experiences. Instead of rejecting technology, these patterns suggest a growing desire to interact with it in ways that feel more active, social, and human (Rubin). This shift also hints at an important fact: technology is not going anywhere. Instead, the future of culture will likely involve technology paired with more international opportunities for lived experience. Digital platforms are such powerful tools for communication, but they are the most meaningful when they are used to extend moments of real human connection. When experiences come first and circulation follows, digital platforms amplify meaning instead of replacing it. In this case, experiential design represents more than a marketing strategy. It offers a framework for real impact in how culture might regain depth within highly networked digital environments. By creating these moments that require presence, interaction, and memory, designers and brands have the opportunity to reintroduce the kinds of friction that historically allowed identity and cultural

meaning to latch on. As I previously stated, these moments do not slow culture down, but they allow people to evolve alongside it.

All in all, culture has always adapted to new technological conditions. The difference today is that the systems shaping culture are no longer emerging slowly or quietly—quite the opposite. They are designed and optimized in real time. Because of that, adaptation may no longer be something that happens organically over decades, which means it will require more conscious design choices addressing how experiences are created, shared, and remembered. If identity lag reflects a moment where culture has outrun the spaces that once allowed it to form, then the task moving forward is to use every advantage provided by technology to design environments where true connection and meaning have room to develop again. The tools already exist, so what remains is deciding how intentionally we choose to use them.

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Survey Results

Figure 15: Respondents Usage of Social Media

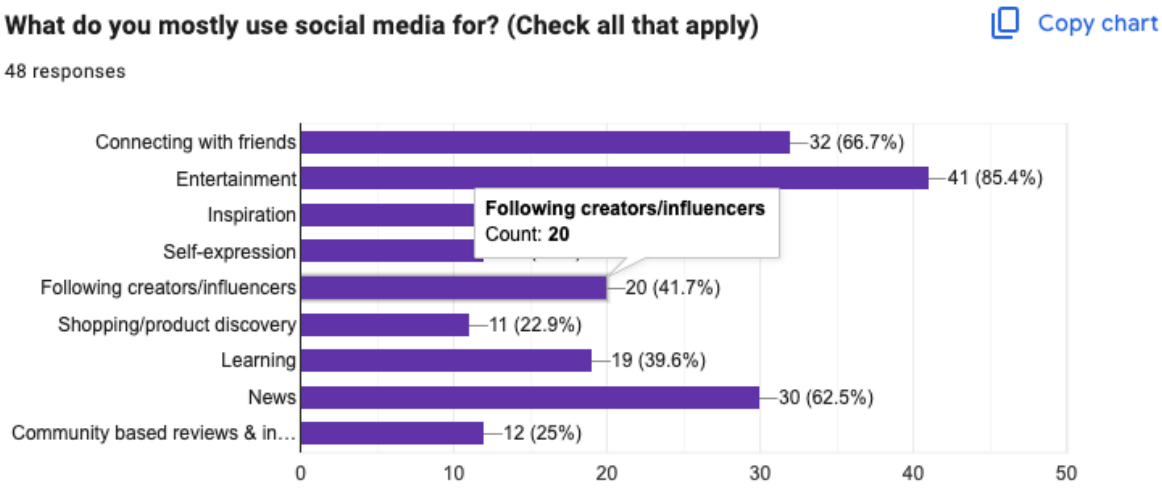


Figure 16: Respondents Online Persona

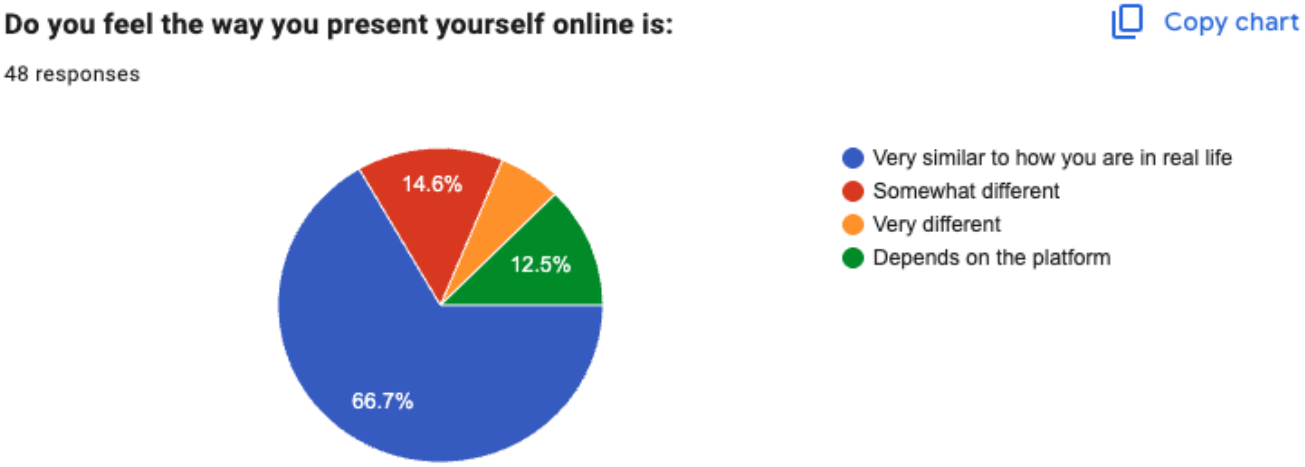


Figure 17: Respondents Online Personality Changes

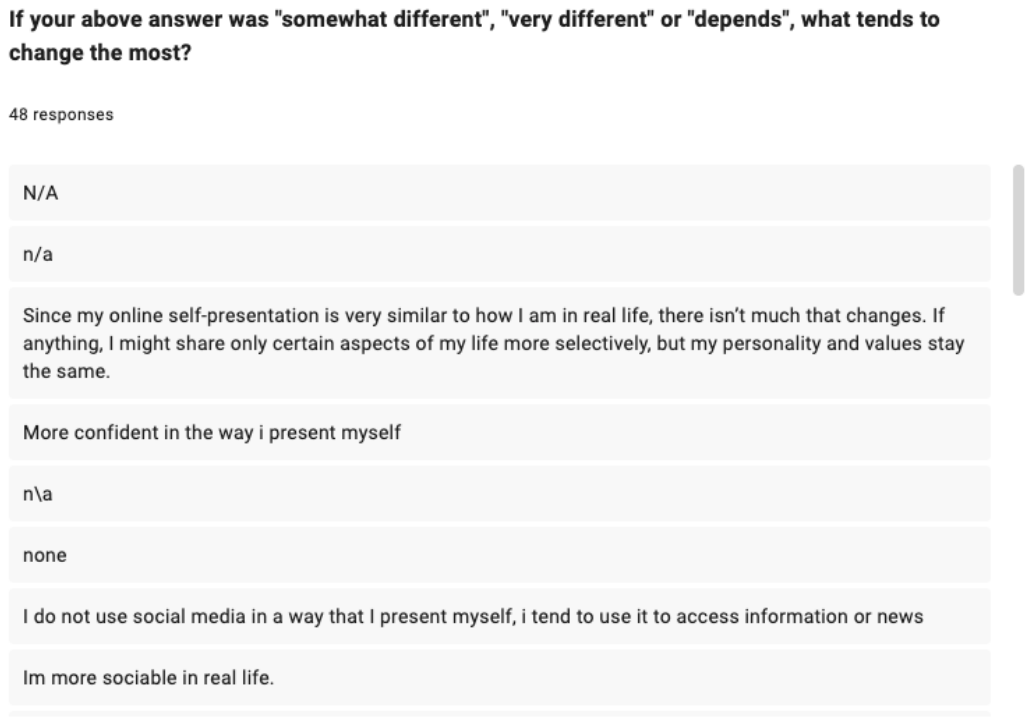


Figure 18: Personality Changes 2

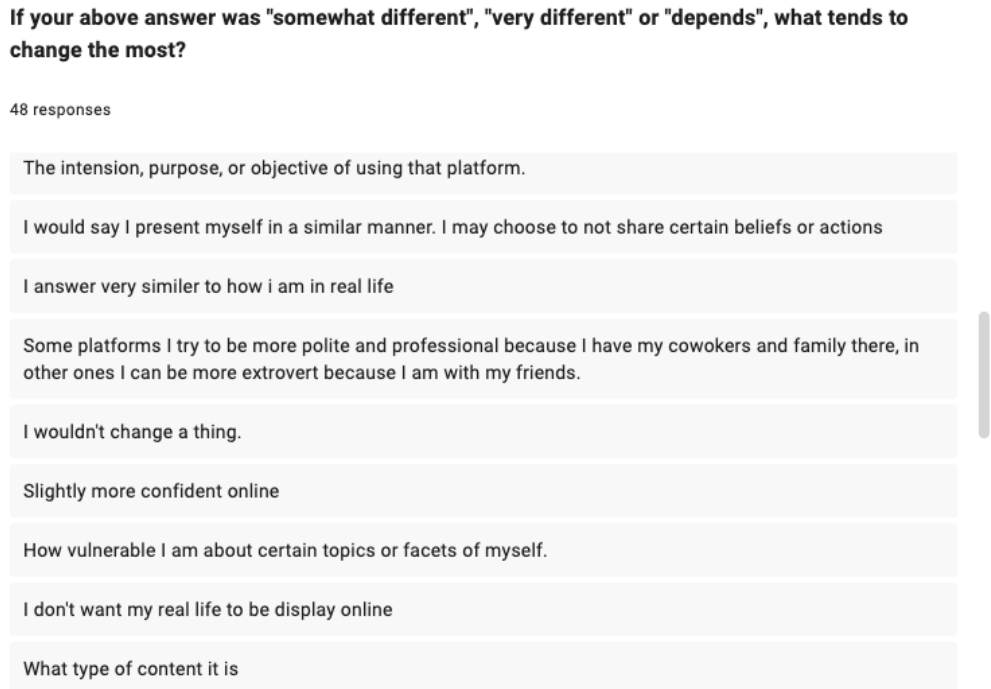


Figure 19: Personality Changes 3



Figure 20: Respondents Examples of Social Pressure

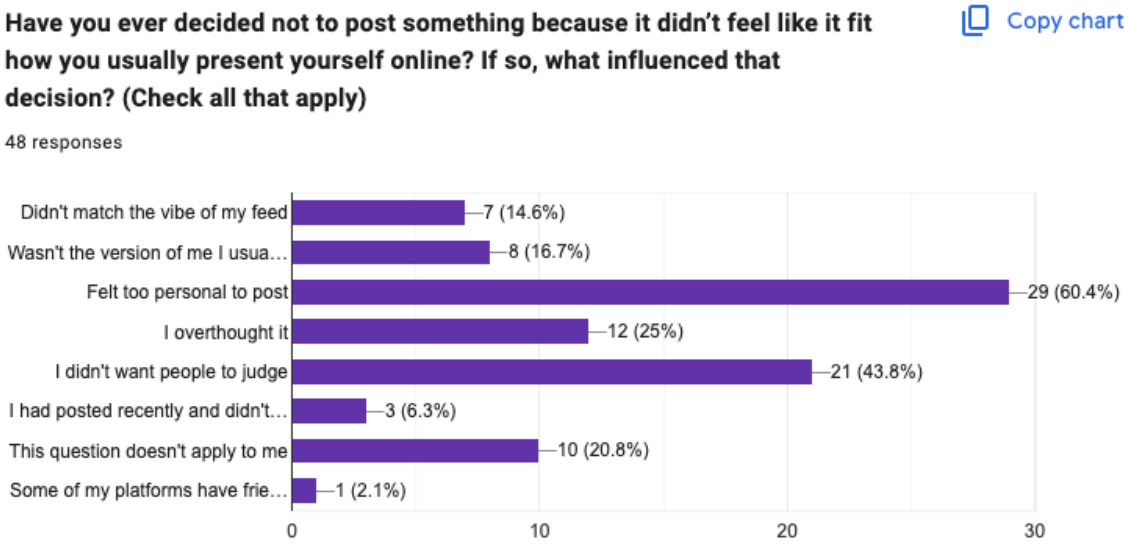


Figure 21: Popular Social Media Advertising Tactics



Figure 22: Social Media Advertising Tactics 2

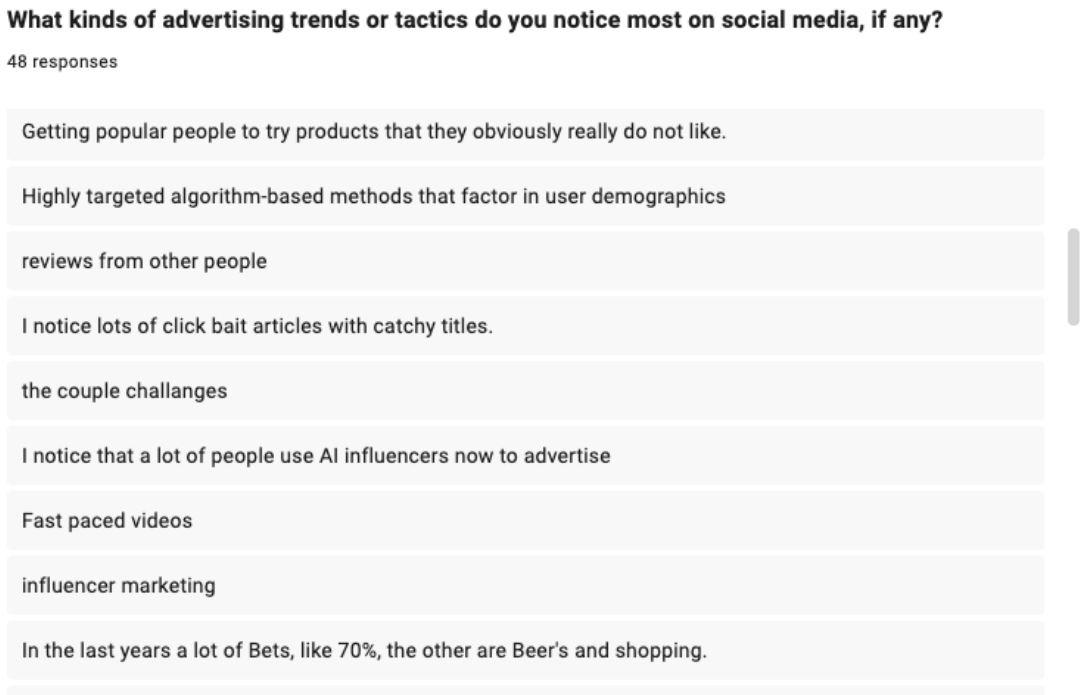


Figure 23: Social Media Advertising Tactics 3

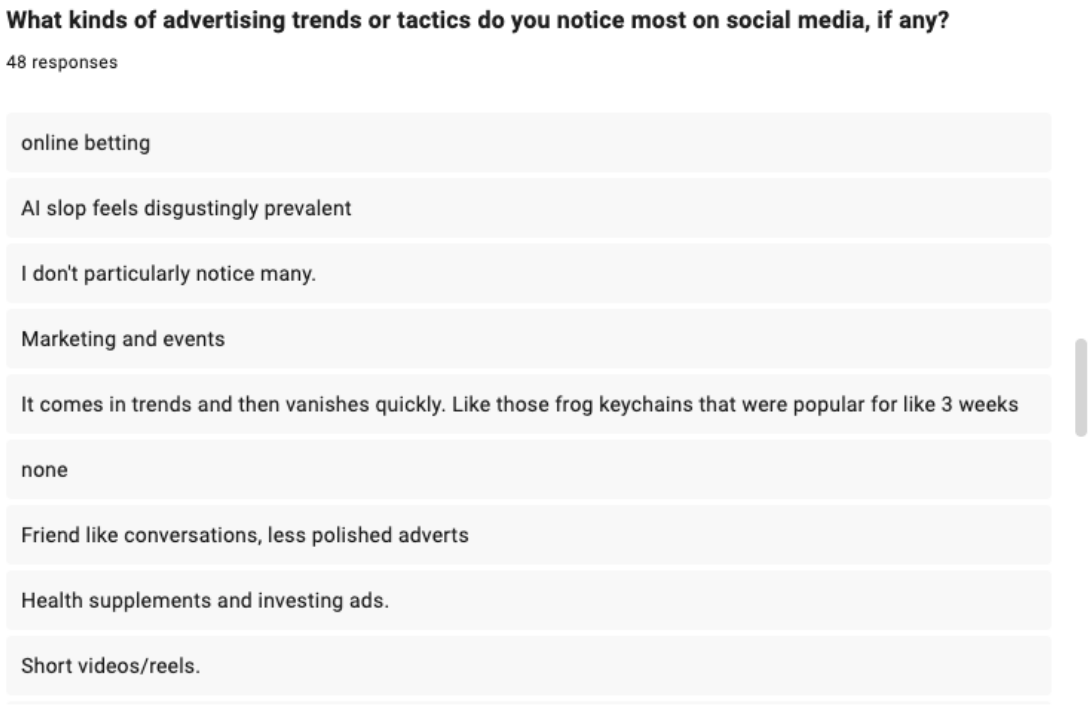


Figure 24: Social Media Advertising Tactics 4



Figure 25: Social Media Advertising Tactics 5

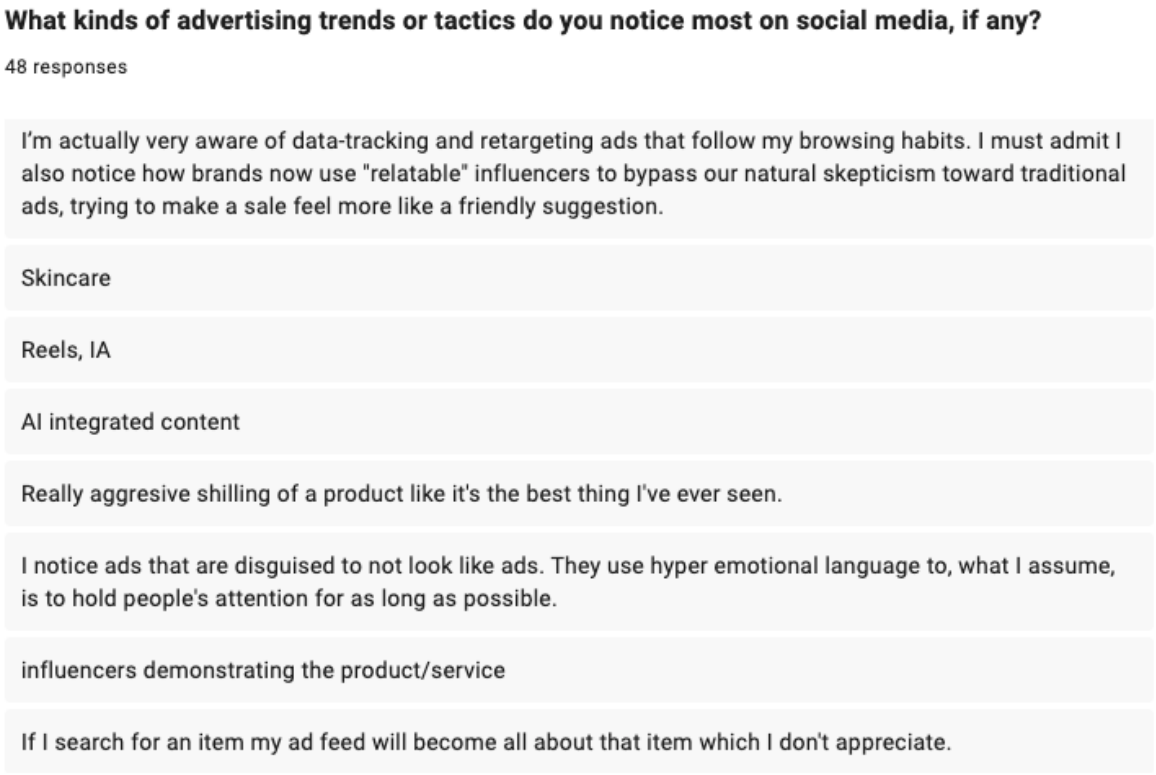


Figure 26: Social Media Advertising Tactics 6



Figure 27: Respondents Trend Participation

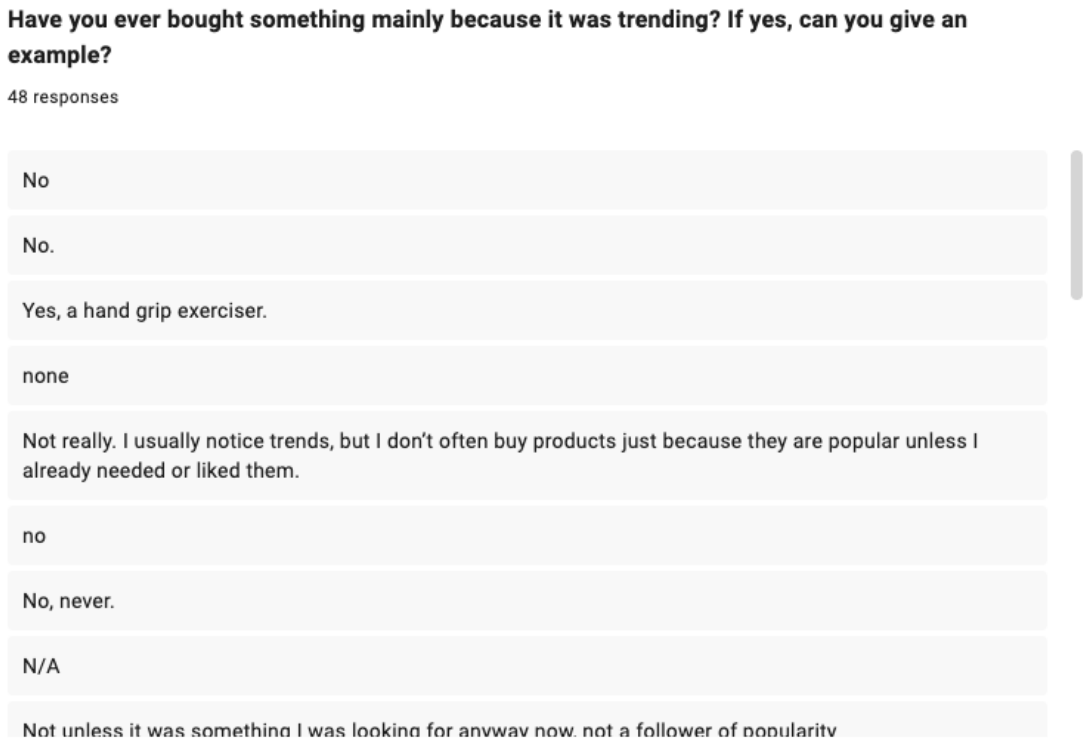


Figure 28: Respondents Trend Participation 2

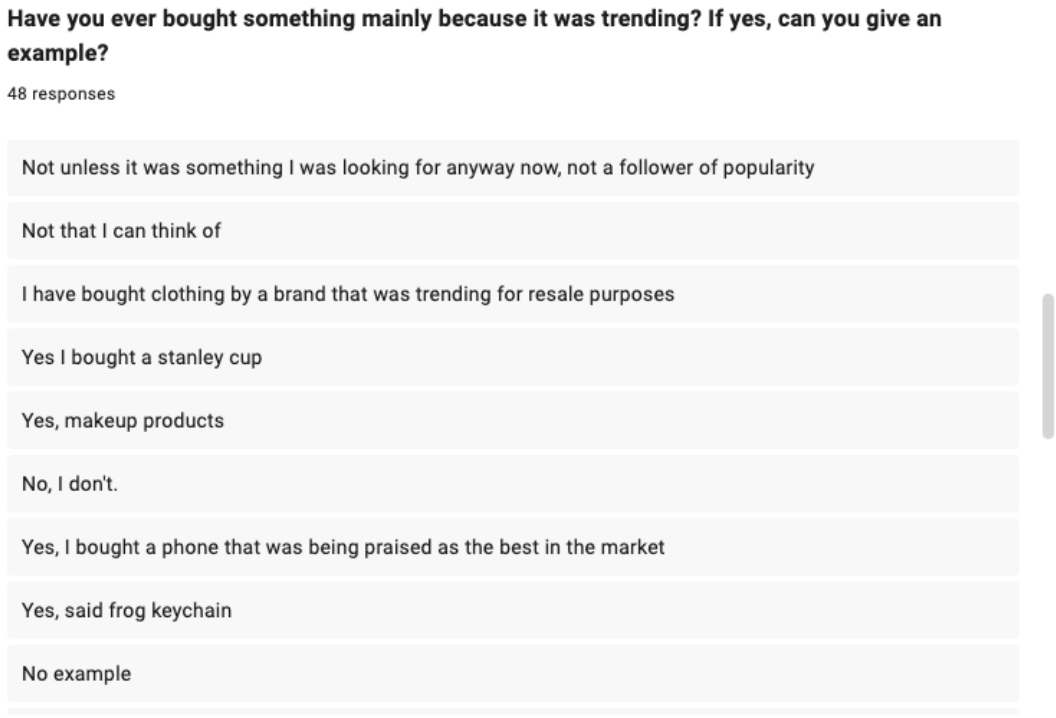


Figure 29: Respondents Trend Participation 3

Have you ever bought something mainly because it was trending? If yes, can you give an example?

48 responses

Not really, only thing I can think of is the fidget spinner.

Yes, hand grip exerciser.

Yes, Mascara that was trending on facebook

While I don't think I've done it often, I have. A long time ago, when Blackberry phones were all the rage, I bought one. More recently, I could also mention the Stanley thermos and brands that became popular in my country, like The North Face, and since everyone around me had one, I bought one too.

I have bought hair products to try because of their incredible results.

no im not interested in things purely because of trends. I buy things I need.

Yes, I once bought a specific brand of minimalist sneakers because I saw them in every "outfit of the day" video out on Tiktok. I actually felt that owning them would make me part of that specific aesthetic or community.

Figure 30: Respondents & Authenticity

Where do you feel most comfortable being yourself?

Copy chart

48 responses

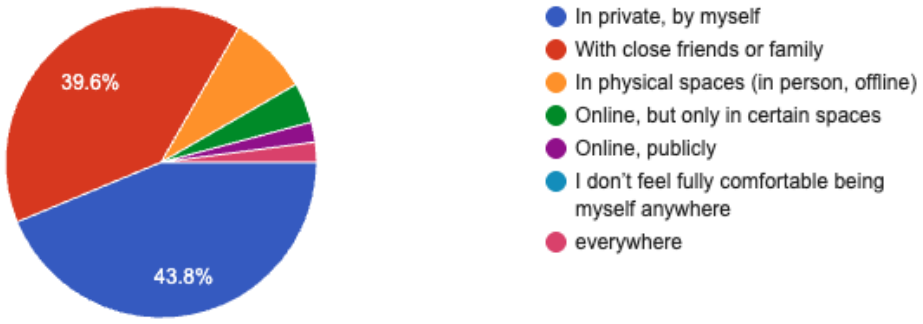


Figure 31: Respondents Opinions on Influencer Marketing

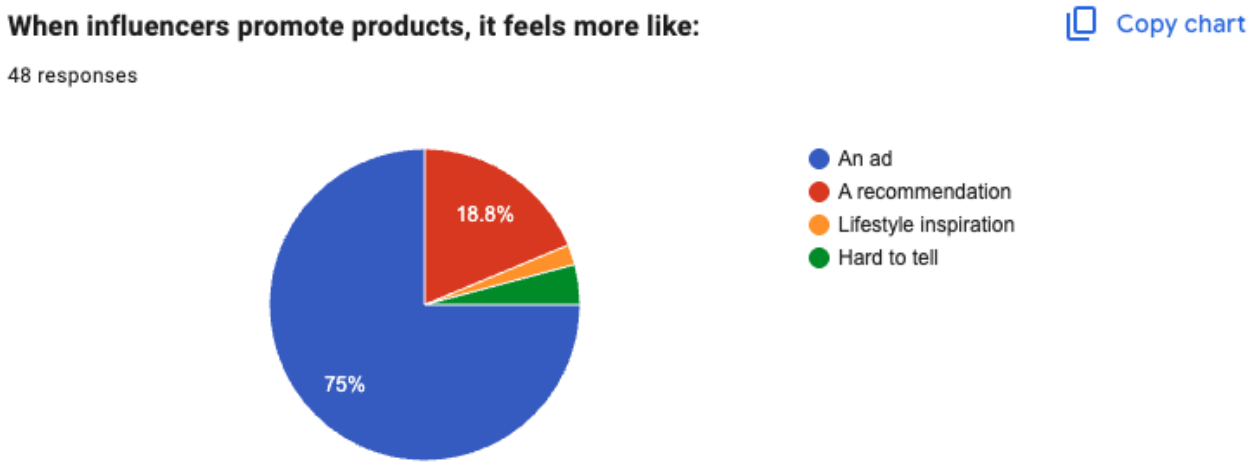


Figure 32: Influencer Vs. Traditional Marketing

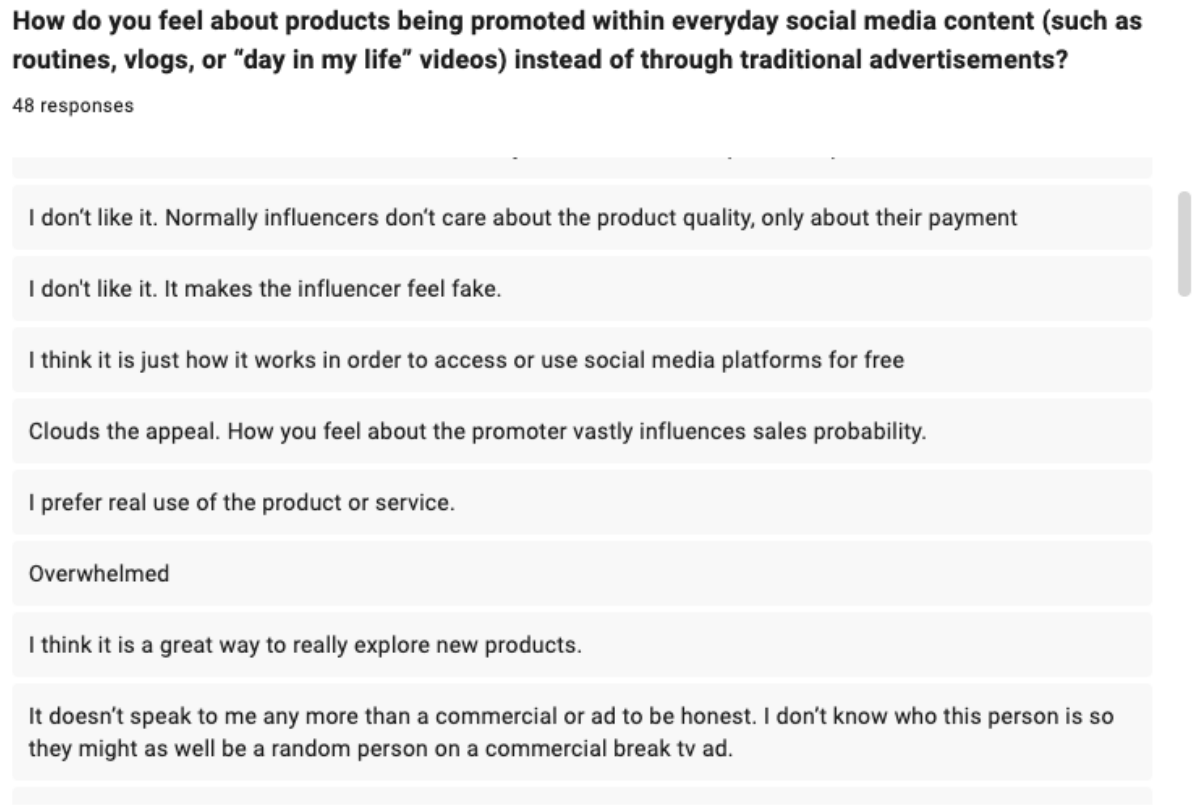


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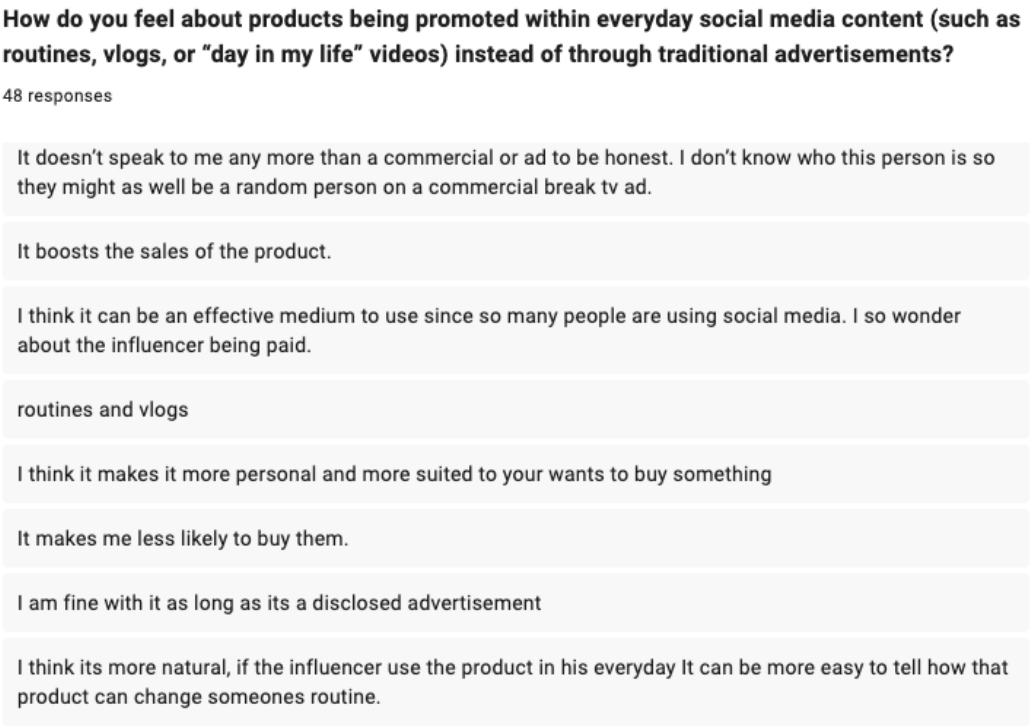


Figure 34: Influencer Vs. Traditional Marketing 3

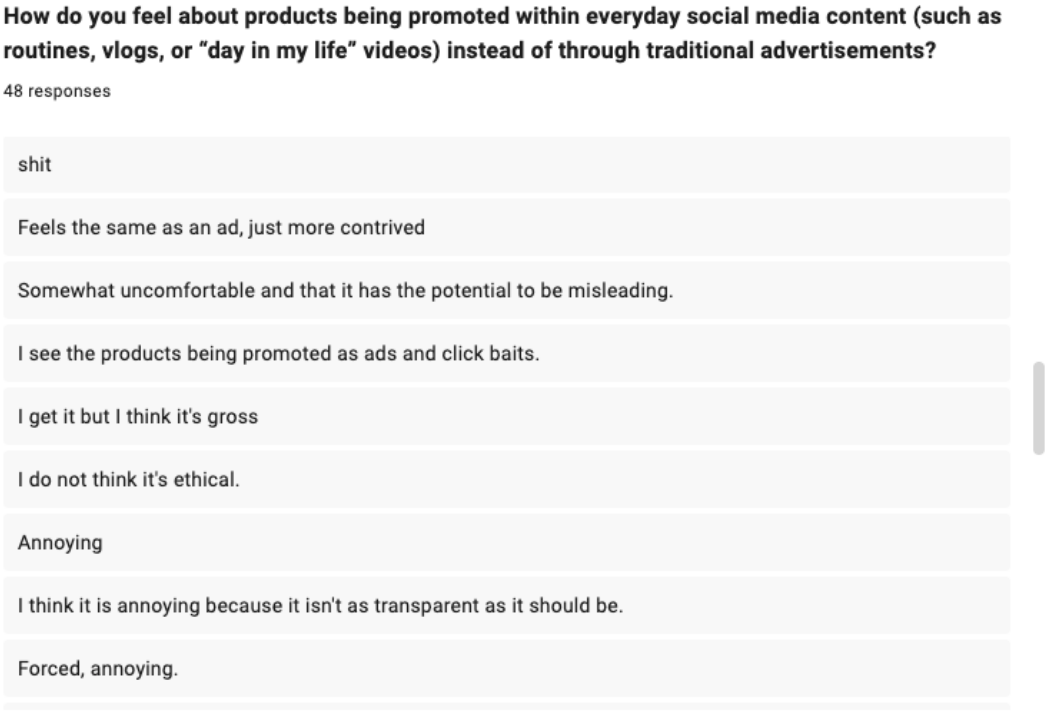


Figure 35: Influencer Vs. Traditional Marketing 4

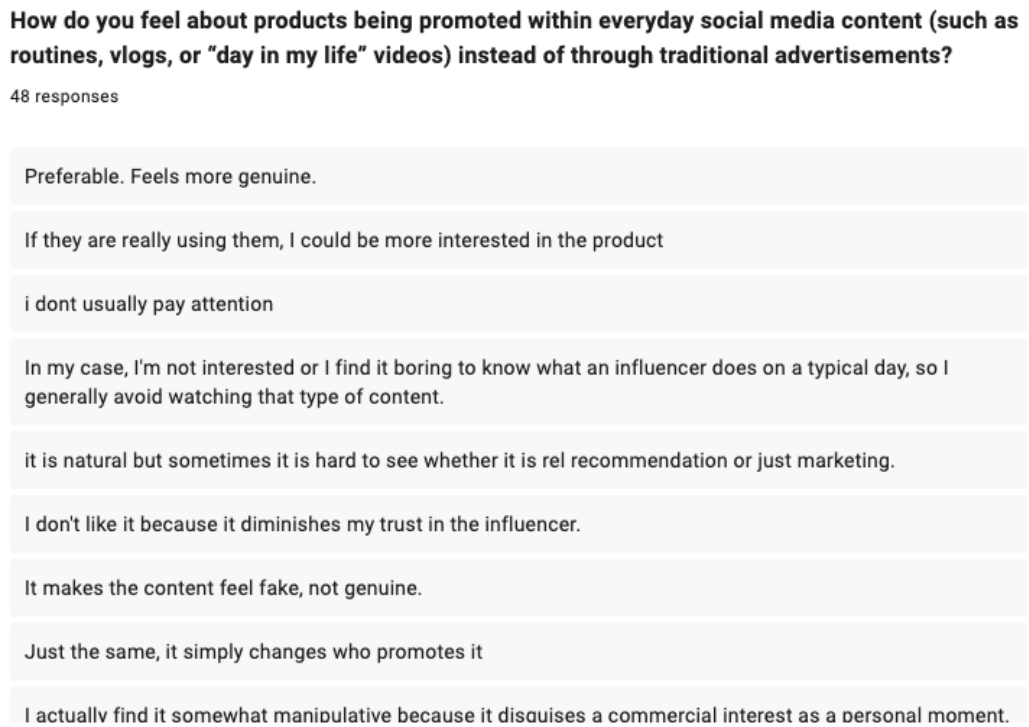


Figure 36: Influencer Vs. Traditional Marketing 5

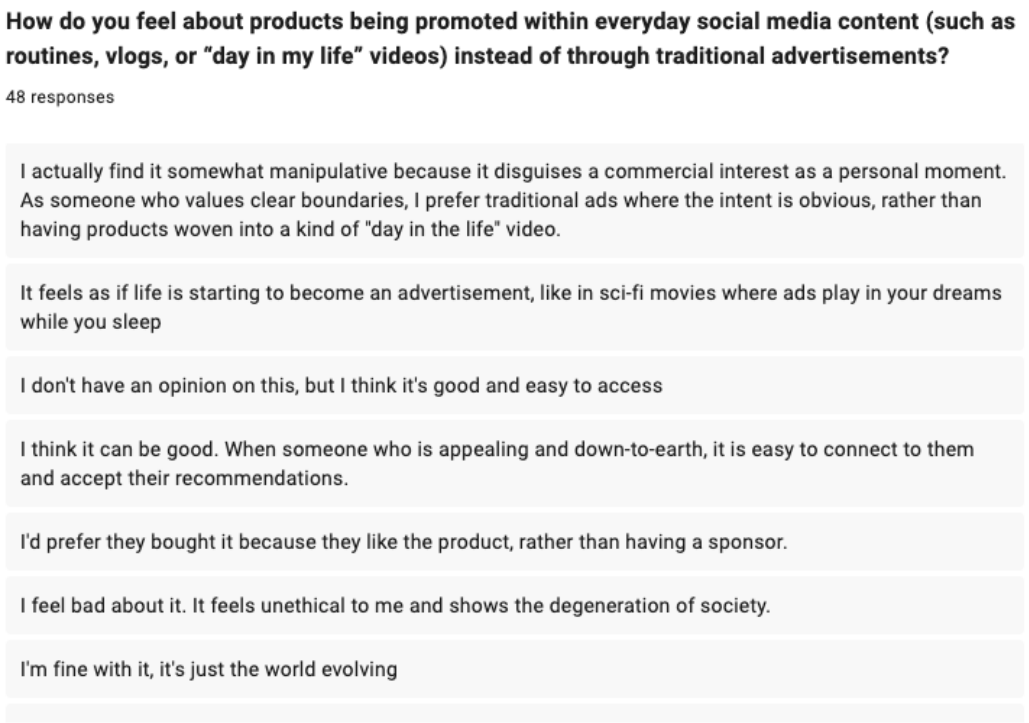


Figure 37: Respondents Brand Experiences

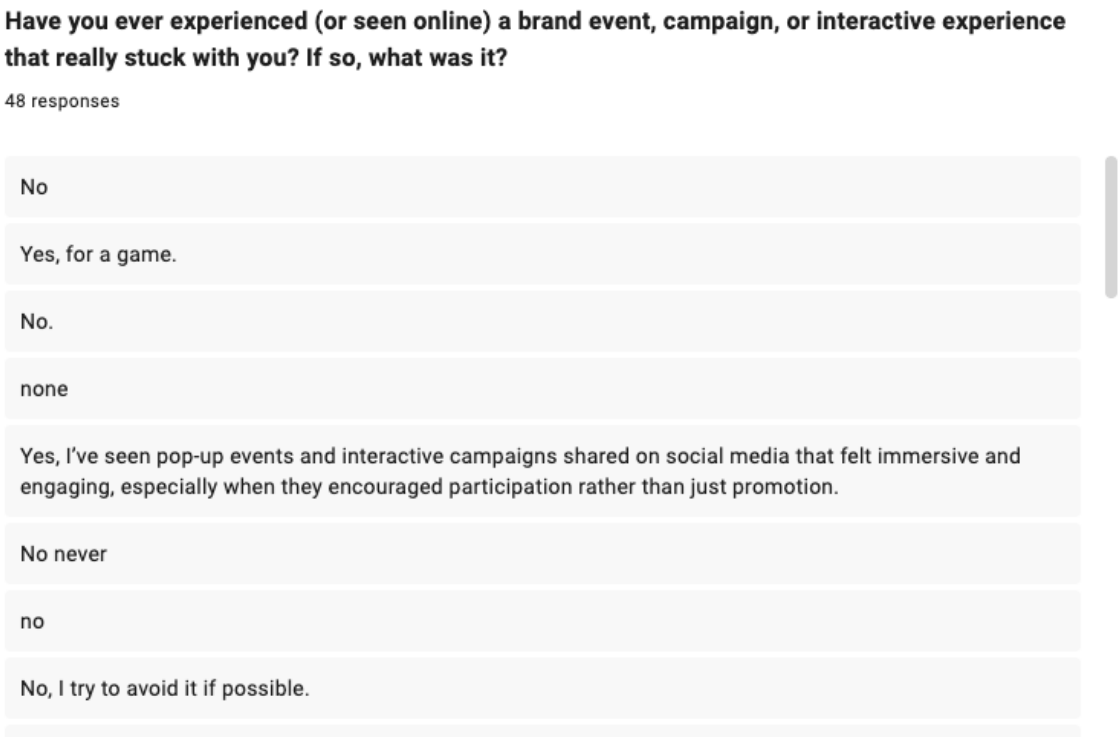


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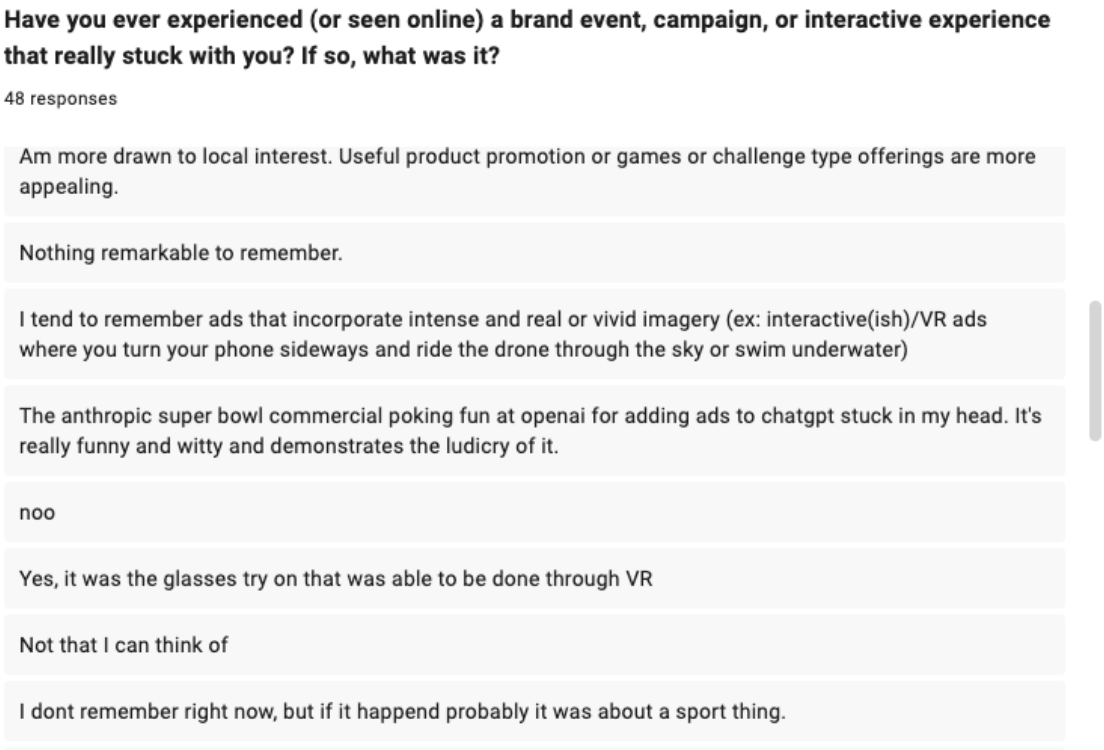


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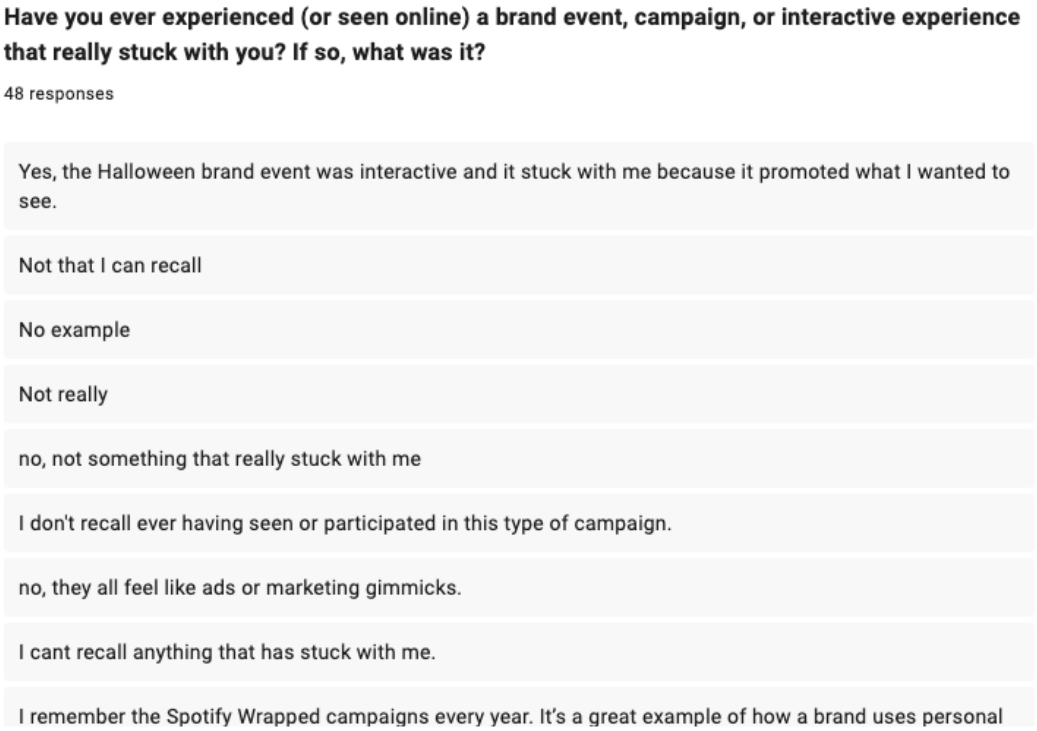


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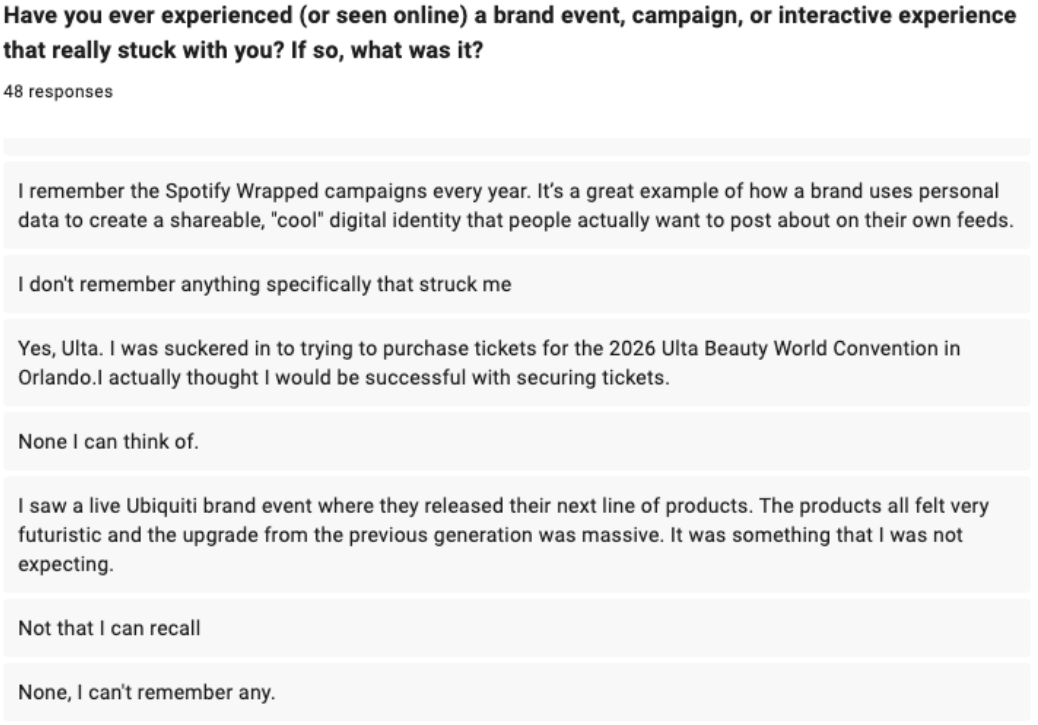


Figure 41: The Absence of Social Media

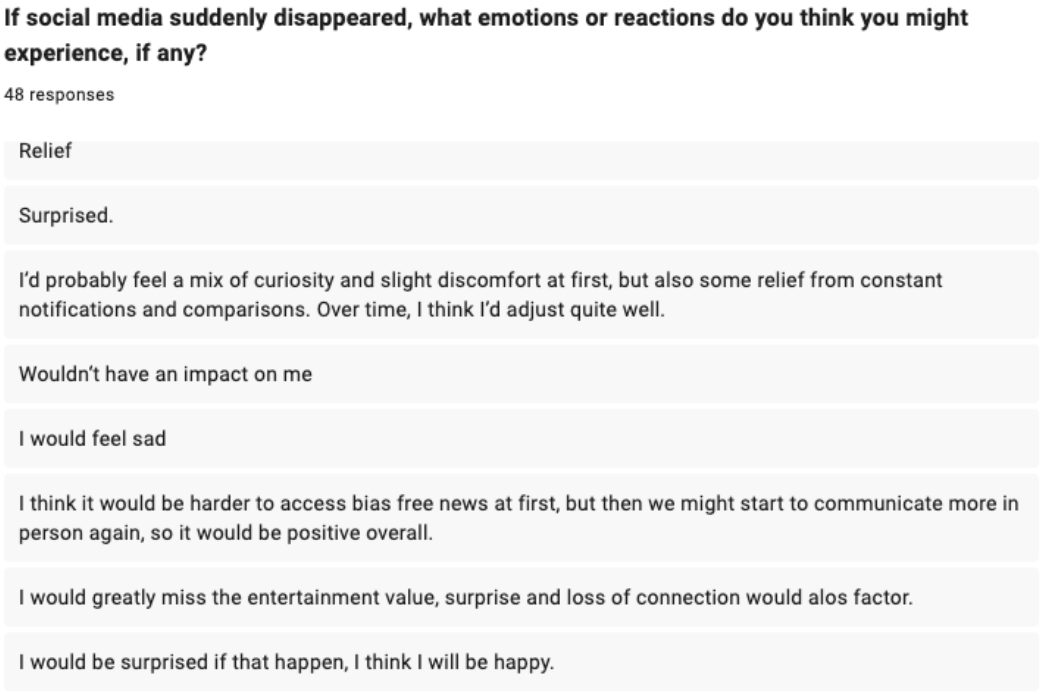


Figure 42: The Absence of Social Media 2



Figure 43: The Absence of Social Media 3

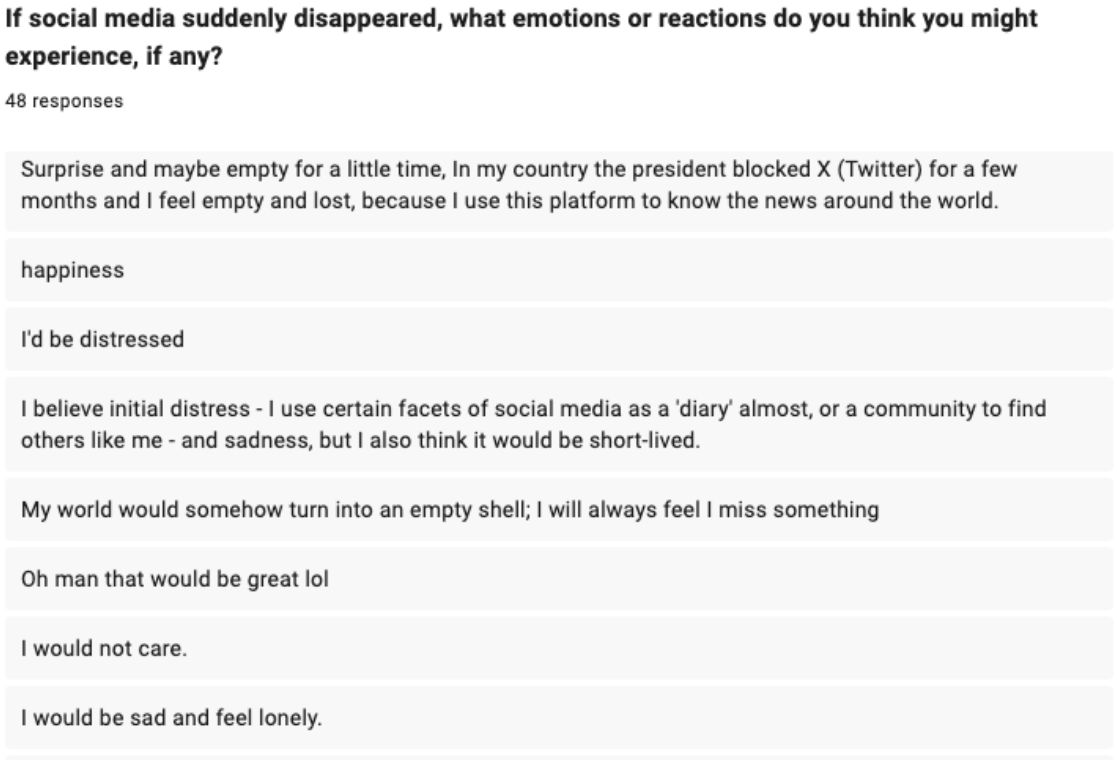


Figure 44: The Absence of Social Media 4

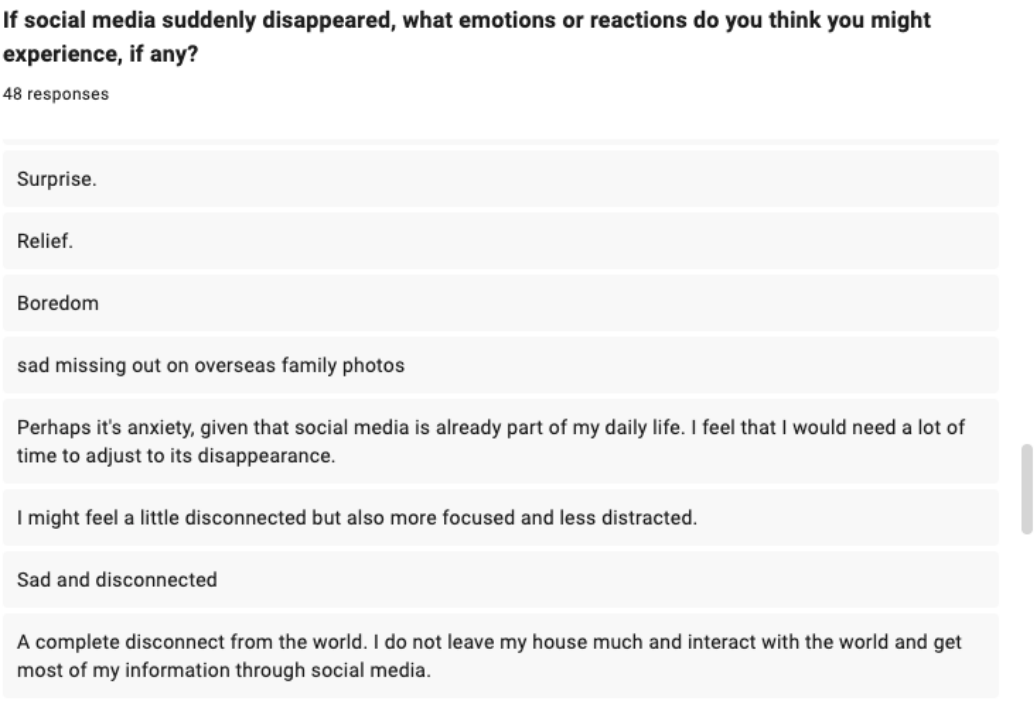


Figure 45: The Absence of Social Media 5

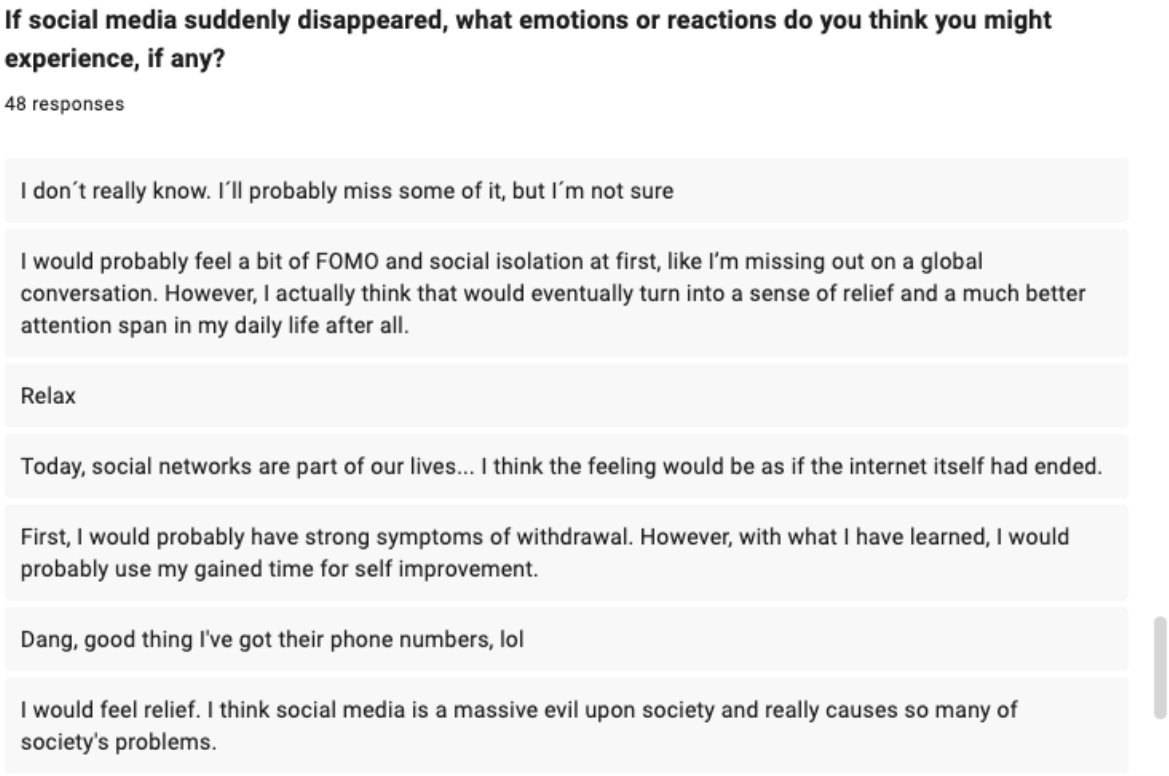


Figure 46: Respondents on Taking Break from Social Media

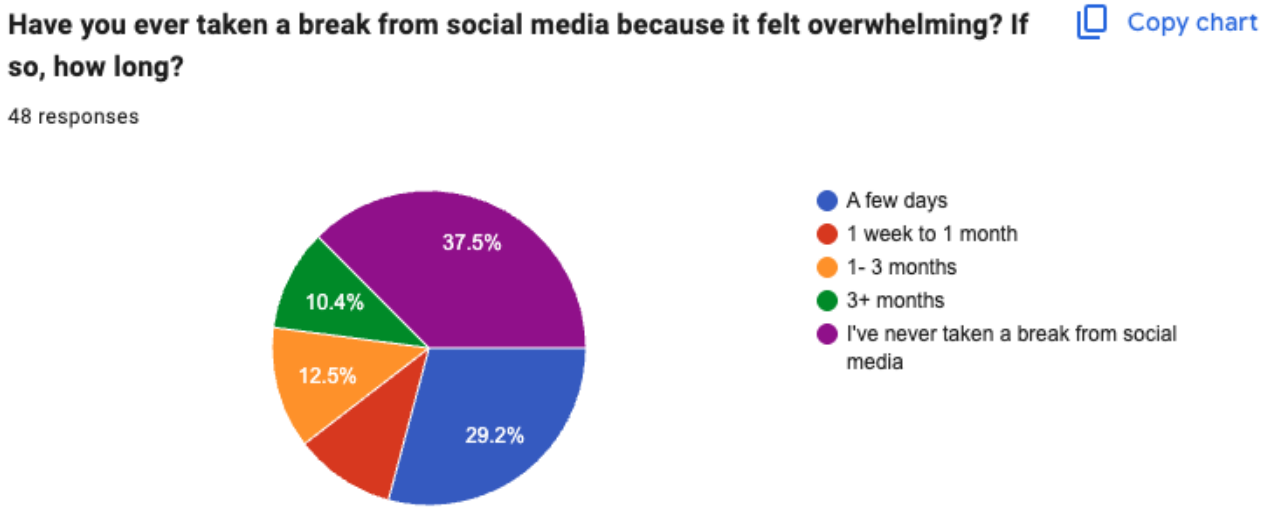


Figure 47: Online Individuality

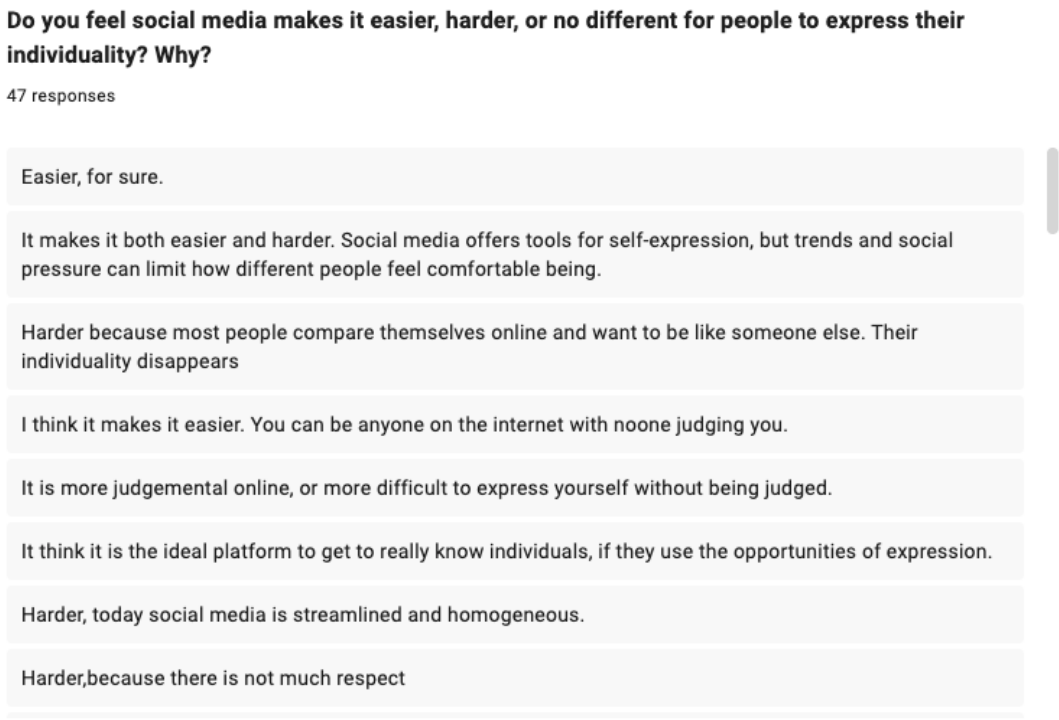


Figure 48: Online Individuality 2

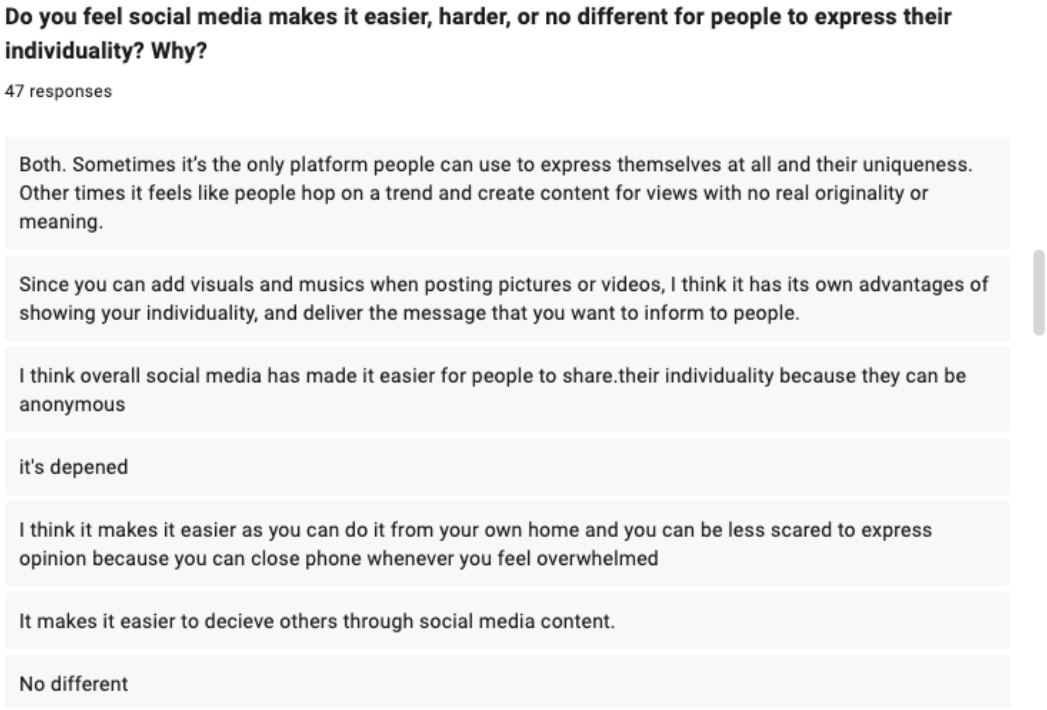


Figure 49: Online Individuality 3

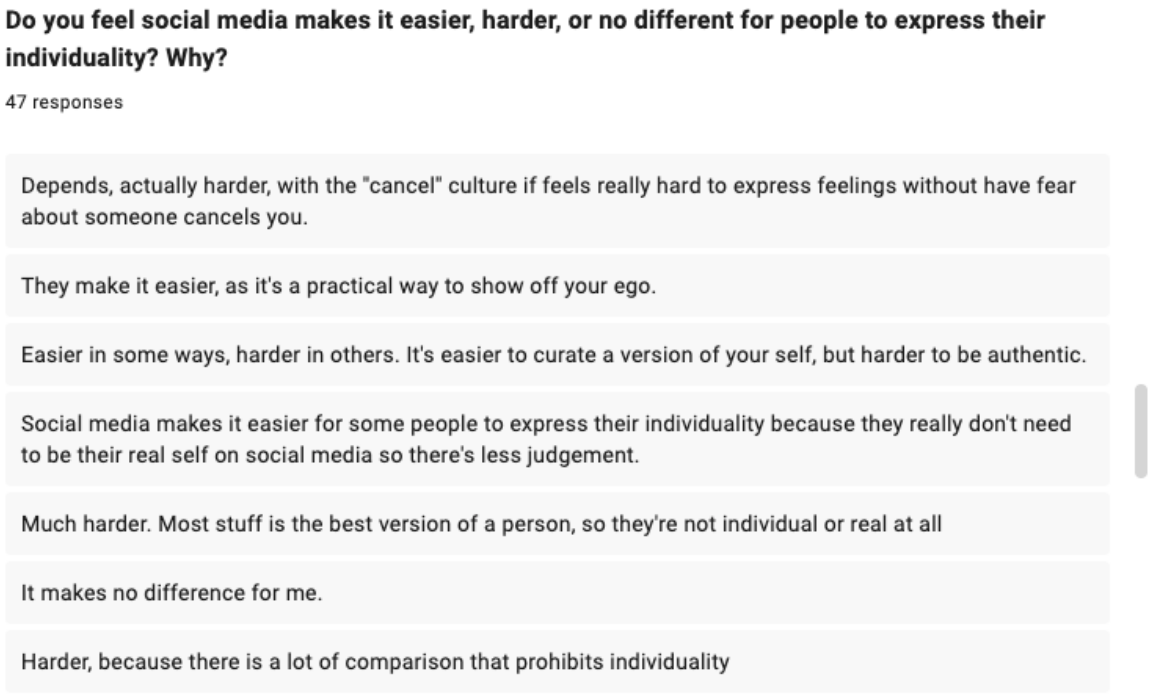


Figure 50: Online Individuality 4

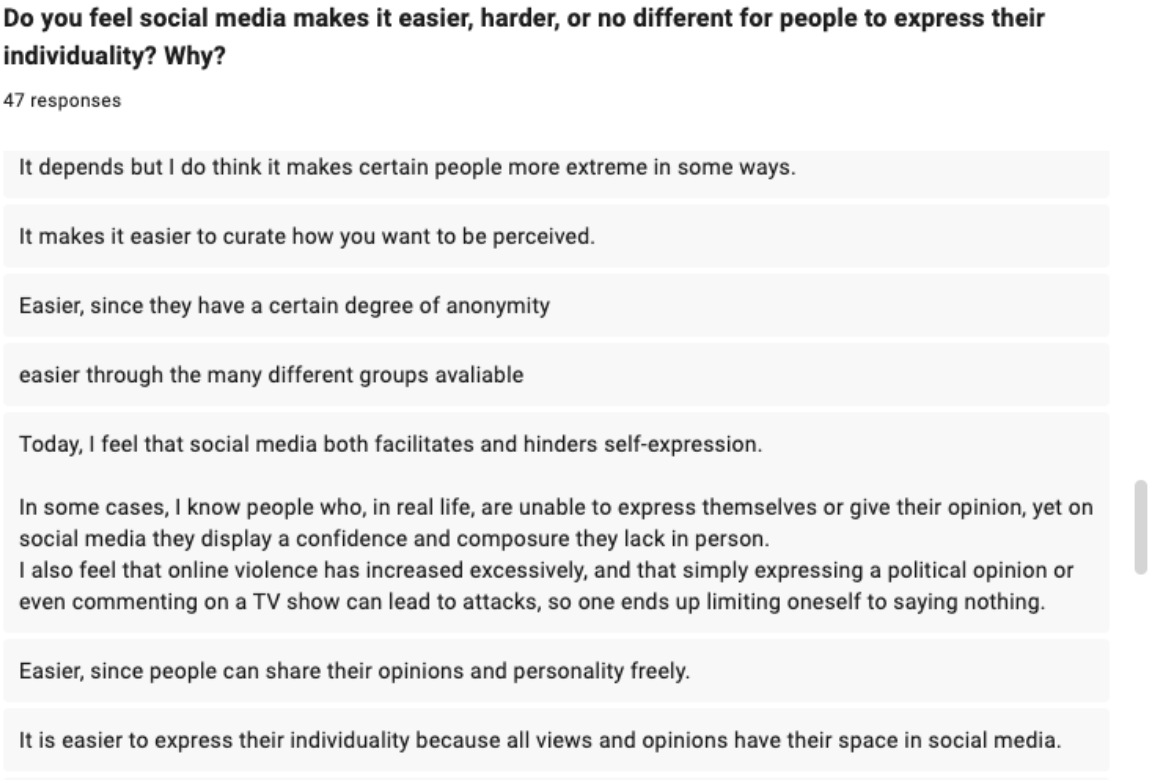


Figure 51: Online Individuality 5

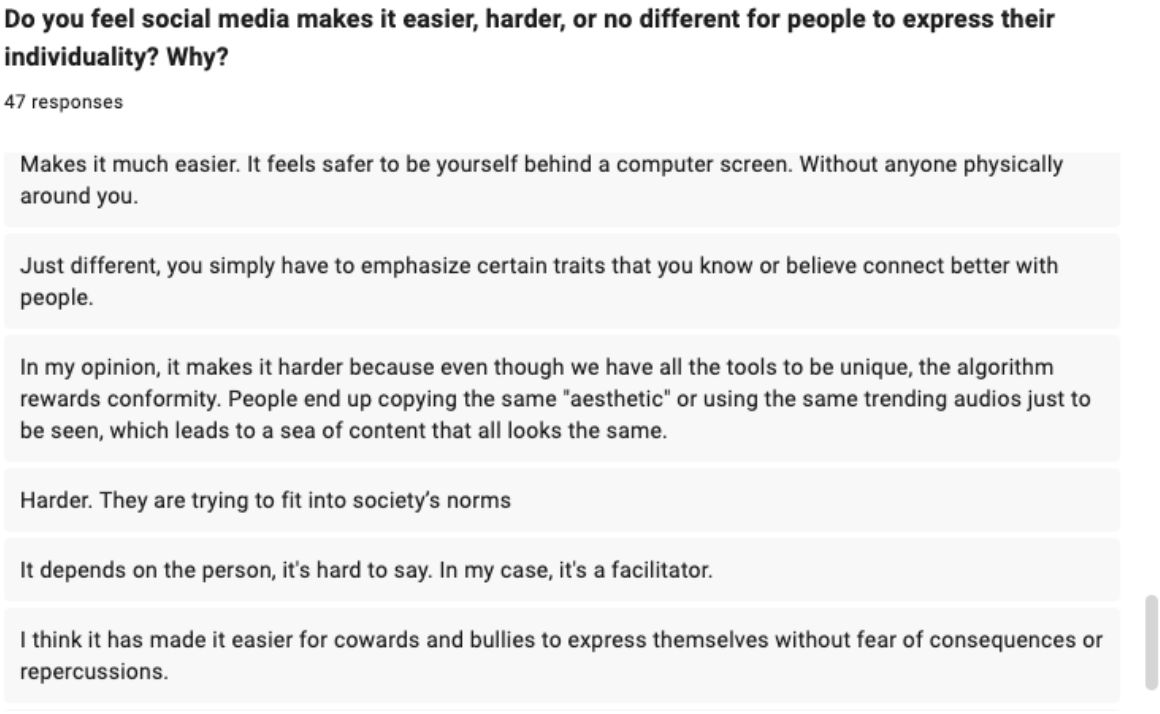


Figure 52: Online Individuality 6

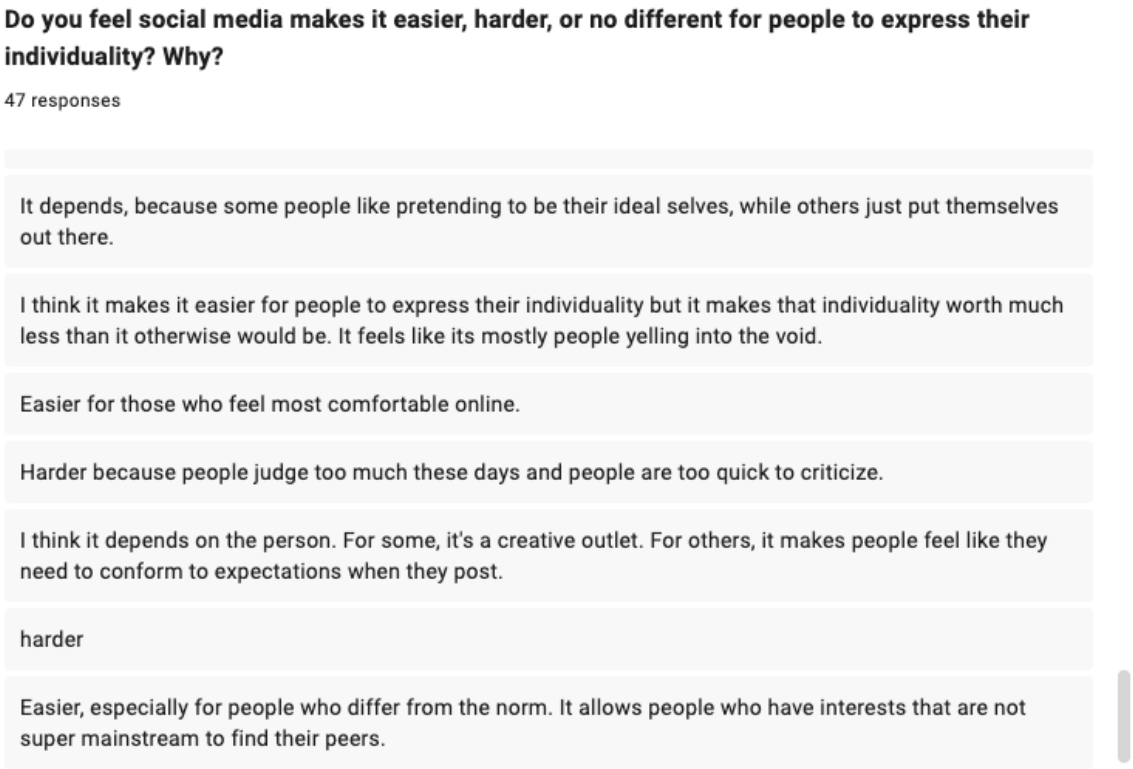


Figure 53: Identity Influence on Social Media

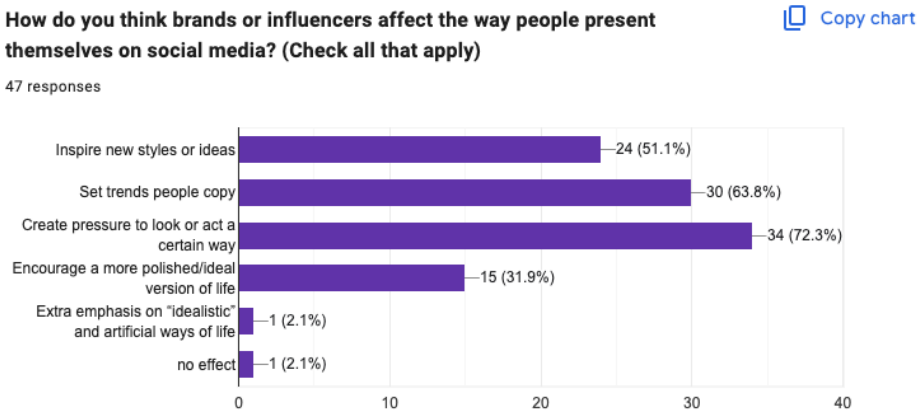


Figure 54: Respondents on Caption Inspiration

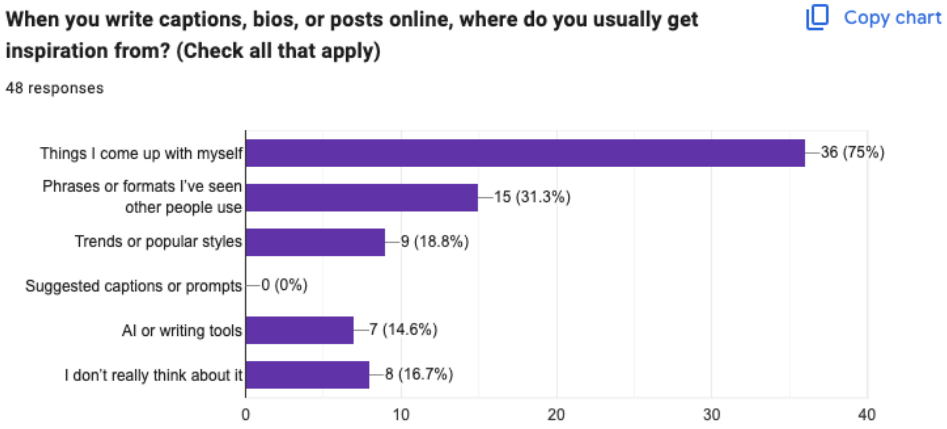
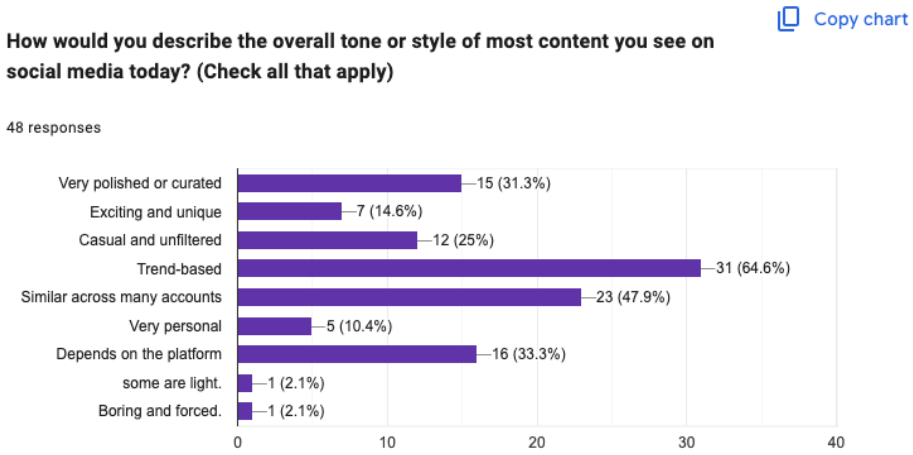


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Figure 57: Game Goals and Instructions

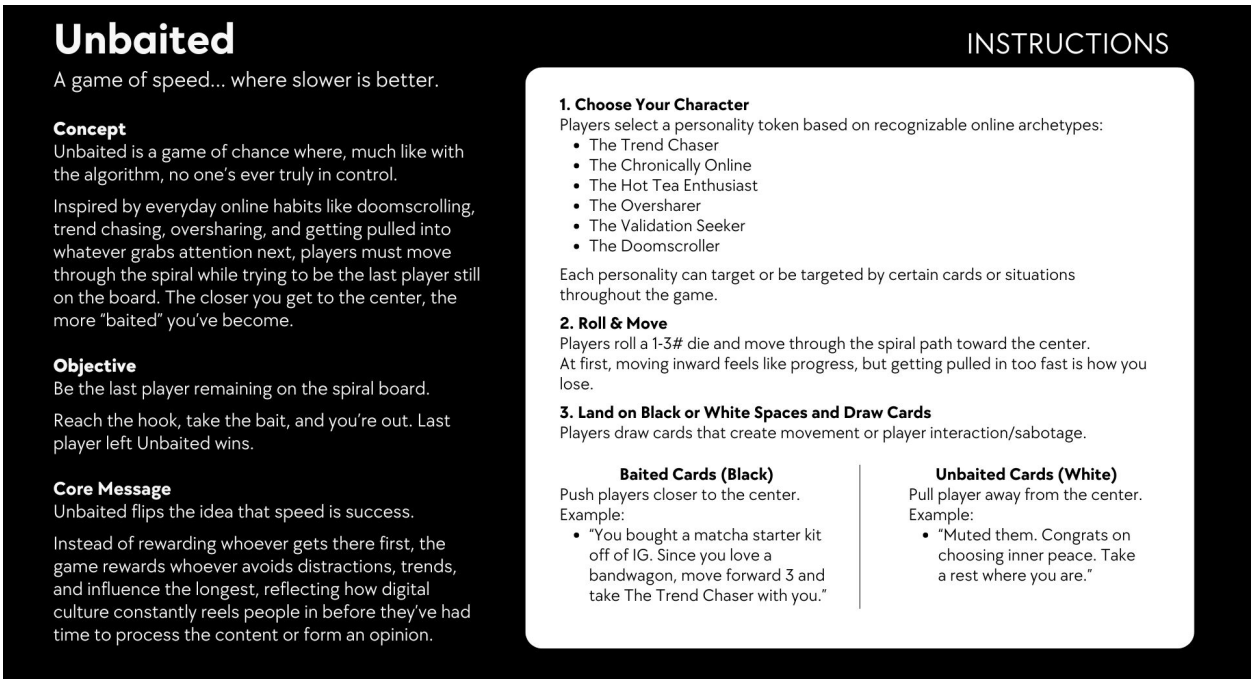


Figure 58: Game Goals and Instructions (Continued)

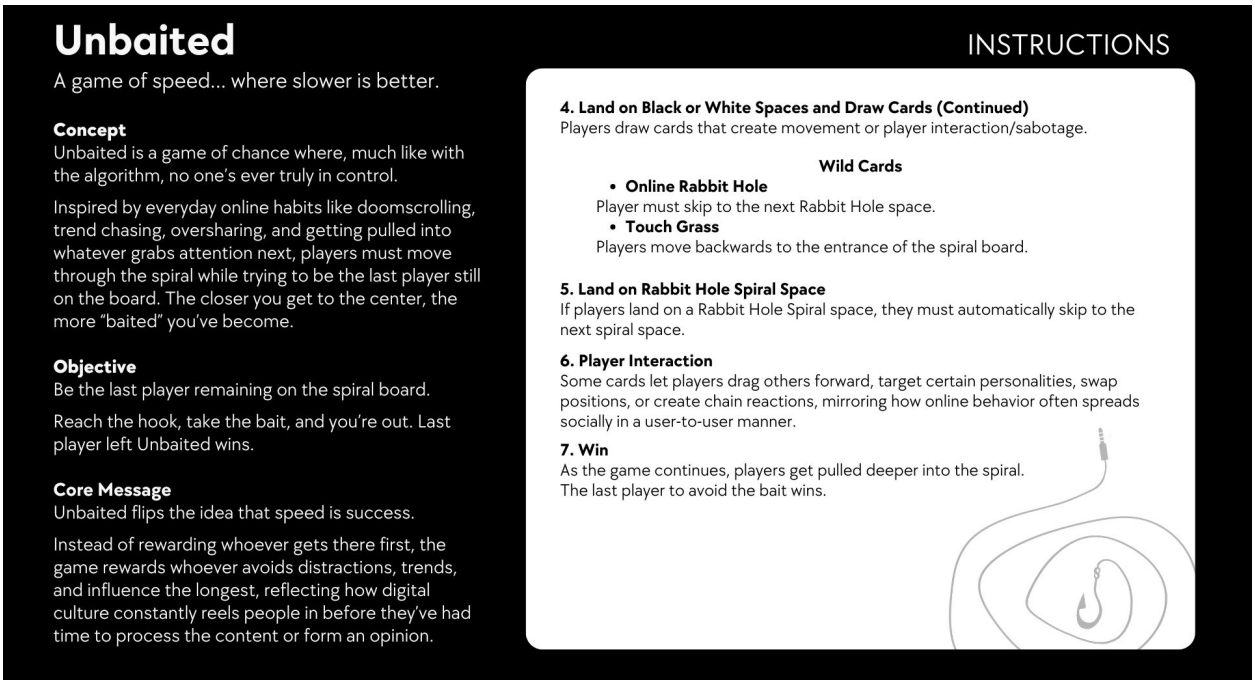


Figure 59: Front of Box

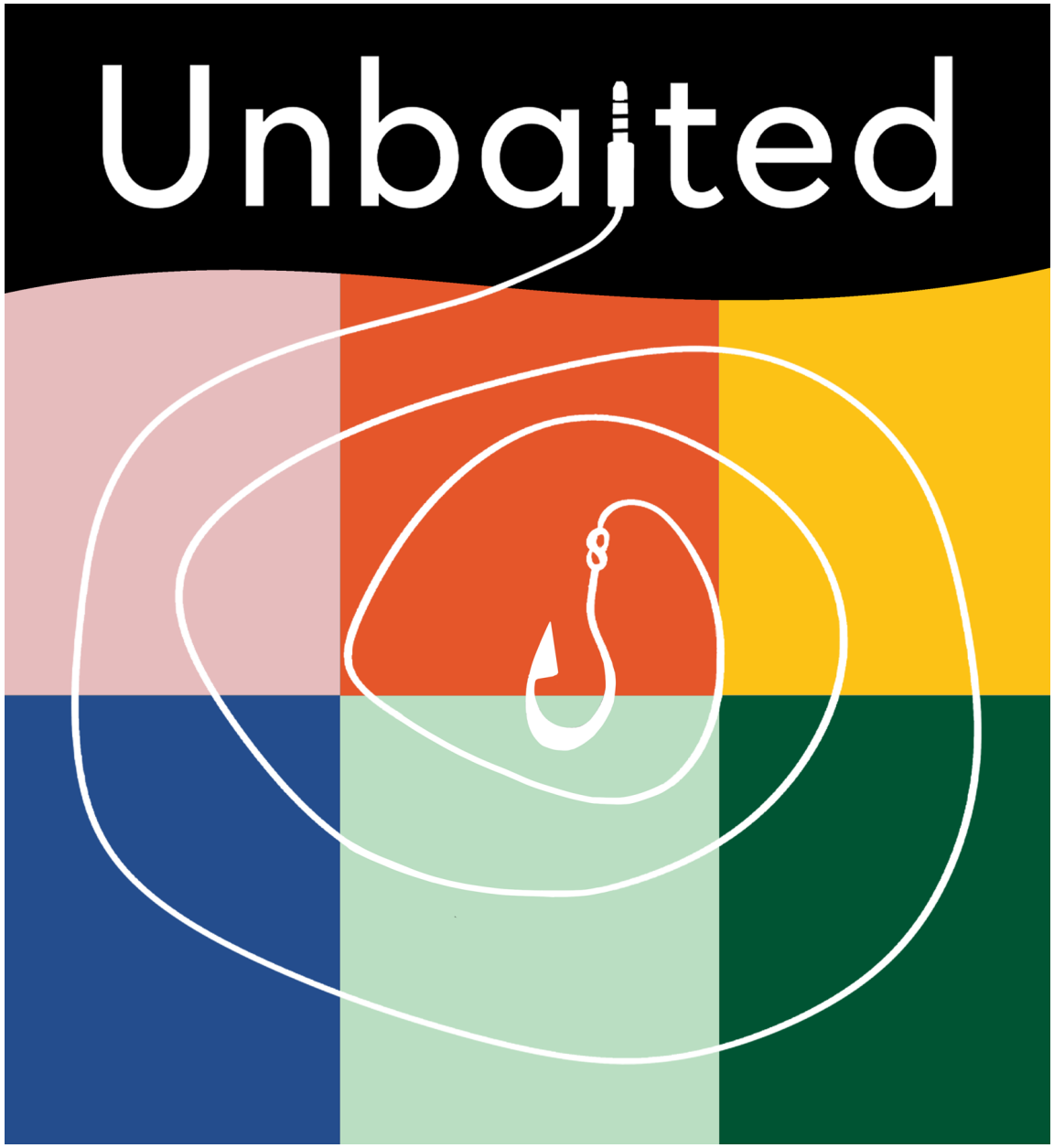


Figure 60: Back of Box



Figure 61: Game Board



Figure 62: Moving Pieces



Figure 63: Playing Cards



Figure 64: Mock Up 1 - Box Front

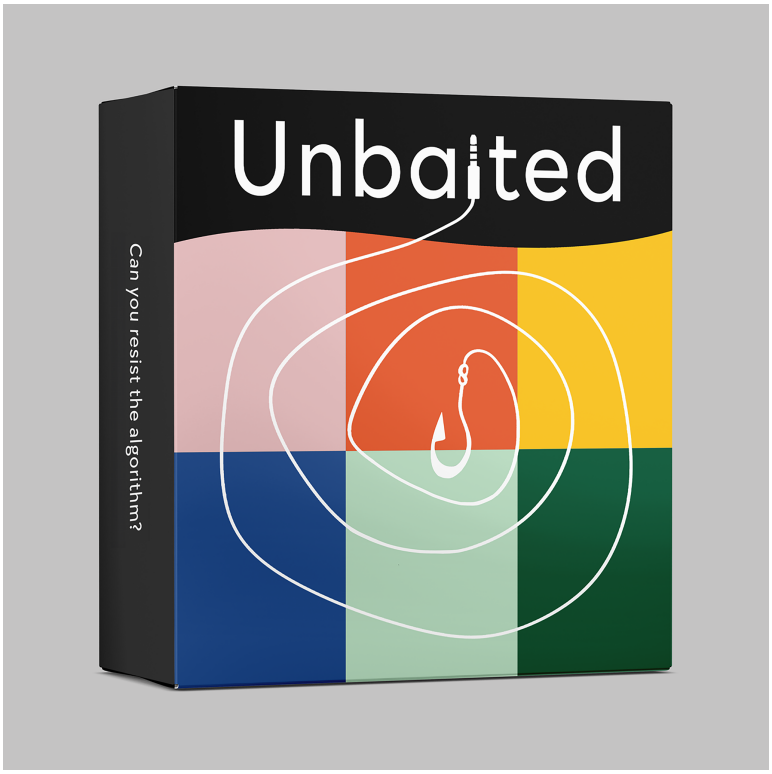


Figure 65: Mock Up 2 - Box Back



Figure 66: Mock Up 3 - Box Front & Back



Figure 67: Mock Up 4 - Moving Pieces



Figure 68: Mock Up 5 - Influence Cards



Figure 69: Mock Up 6 - Resistance Cards



Figure 70: Mock Up 7 - Resistance Wild Card



Figure 71: Mock Up 8 - Influence Wild Card



Figure 72: Mock Up 9 - Board & Wild Cards



Figure 73: Mock Up 10 - Complete Set



Figure 74: Mock Up 11 - Unbaited in Action



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