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Between Local Heritage and European Integration

*How Contradictory Marketing Narratives Influence Consumer Identity Among
Young Poles and Bulgarians*

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Abstract

This study explores how balancing heritage with European integration affects identity formation among Generation Z in Poland and Bulgaria. The research adopts a two-phased qualitative design, by combining a multimodal discourse analysis of 26 social media campaigns, as well as a netnography based on user comments.

Observed through the lenses of Bauman's Liquid Modernity and Consumer Culture Theory, these findings reveal a notable cultural asymmetry. On one hand, Bulgaria shows a "turbulent liquidity", where pro-European narratives are often opposed by irony or an "aesthetic conversion" where sustainability is perceived as a symbol of status rather than an ethical standard. On the other hand, Poland demonstrates a "domesticated liquidity" and an identity, where European belonging is natural. This can be seen in two phenomena, a "foreign ownership paradox" and "post-ironic patriotism". The first meaning that global capital is localised, and the later, describes the playful remix of national symbols.

This study demonstrates that globalization in post-socialist spaces is not a uniform process, but more of a spectrum. Thus how it contributes to existing literature. Additionally, for managers, it emphasises the need for brands to rely more on authentic, localized digital engagement, respecting the consumer's cultural agency.

Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, Liquid Modernity, Post-Socialist Identity, Netnography, Generation Z, Poland, Bulgaria

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➤ Aim and Problem Background

In the last century, many Central and Eastern European countries experienced fundamental political, economic, and cultural transformations. The collapse of socialist regimes and joining the European Union led to rapid modernization, the opening of Western markets and the development of consumer culture (Glass, 2008). Many local companies place traditions, national culture, and authenticity at the core of their marketing strategies. The focus, on one hand, often being on traditional products, local history, national identity, or cultural pride (Saunders, 2017). On the other hand, marketing communication focuses on European integration and global belonging. This creates an environment in which consumer identity is continuously negotiated. Marketing plays a crucial role in the creation of cultural meanings and shaping social identities. In post-socialist societies, like Poland and Bulgaria, marketing narratives often show the tension between securing local cultural traditions and embracing a modern European identity, especially among the Generation Z. Unlike the majority of the older generations, whose consumption habits are largely anchored in early transition anxieties, Gen Z is digitally native and part of a globally networked socioscope (Hong and Kim, 2026). They are rather caught between the physical and historical national context, and the borderless, fluid realities on platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

This study aims to explore how marketing narratives related to local heritage and European integration influence the formation of consumer identity among young consumers in Poland and Bulgaria. These countries are particularly interesting to observe and compare due to their shared historical and cultural background. More specifically, exploring the link between the journey towards European integration and the lingering influence of the socialist past on the consumer. This creates a unique identity tension where national traditions meet European standards. The focus is specifically on young customers, since they are highly exposed to global media, digital marketing, and international brands, while also being influenced by local culture. The focus group in this study is Gen Z, as they are in the stages of active identity formation. This group is particularly interesting given their exposure to the digital world and the ever-flowing streams of information (Hong and Kim, 2026), but also their traditional childhood experiences and appreciation for the non-digital era.

1.1 Definition of European Identity

Throughout this study, numerous references and comparisons to European identity will be made in the context of identity consumption formation. Therefore, in the context of this research, European identity is defined as a fluid social construct, shaped by set institutional values and modern media culture (Kati, 2023).

European identity is the degree to which an individual feels a sense of belonging or emotional resonance to the values and goals defined by the European Union. The EU identity is composed of multiple layers functioning as a “secondary identity” that exists simultaneously with the unique national identities of its members. In contemporary consumption, it is shaped mainly by the tension between shared values, such as human rights, equality, democracy and rule of law (European Union, 2025), and the influence of media culture.

It is important to note that European identity is continuously evolving. Its representation in brands and media allows consumers to use it as a tool in the construction of their sense of self in a globalized, sustainable, scientifically and technologically advancing world.

Ultimately, European identity formation within consumption is not static, but a process of continuous negotiation. European users are tasked with balancing the EU promise of freedom and prosperity and their own local reality and media influence. Therefore, the European identity is negotiated through the consumption of not only products and services, but also media and content (Kati, 2023).

1.2.1 The Bulgarian Identity and Socioscape

Bulgarian identity is inextricably linked to a series of cultural tensions that have been evolving since the 1989 transition. Central to this is the "Bai Ganyo" archetype, a literary character and cultural symbol of the "unrefined" Bulgarian who is a source of national shame and resilient humor at the same time (Stojanova, 2013). For the generation after the transition, identity is a negotiation between Balkan provincialism and the aspirational European cosmopolitanism (Naxidou and Konstantinova, 2025). The trauma induced by the economic volatility in the 1990s (Dobrinski, 2013), as well as the rise of the "Mutra" (ruffian or thug) subculture, additionally contributes to this tension (Debruyne, 2026). This established the blueprint for prominent consumption and the idealisation of toxic masculinity (Балтаджиев, 2025). As a result, the modern Bulgarian youth manages in a landscape of "National Nihilism" (Zaremba, 2019), a belief in the country's inferiority, colliding with a defensive pride in history, nature, and traditional craft.

In Bulgaria, the "European dream" has gone from a political objective to a key identity marker. However, this process of integration is often perceived as a technocratic intrusion from a distant elite, leading to a divide between those who embrace "Brussels' logic" and those who lean on ethnic nostalgia as a form of cultural protection (Naxidou and Konstantinova, 2025). This socio-cultural background is fundamental to understanding why marketing narratives in Bulgaria are rarely just about products. They are more about protecting the "Bulgarian essence" in the globalized world. Brands act as mediators in this conflict, offering symbols that allow the consumer to bridge the gap between their roots and their digital, European future (Nakova-Manolova, 2025).

1.2.2 The Structural and Economic Foundations of Price Sensitivity and Local Sentiment.

The rapid transition from a centralized economy to a market system left a legacy of weaker institutions, which led to a persistent lack of trust among Bulgarian consumers. Unlike the comparatively gradual development noticed in Western Europe, the journey of Bulgaria was characterised by informal networks and the common bypassing of legal and economic rules (Zhelev, 2025). As a result, the average citizen became vulnerable in an economic sense. When the fundamental structures of a society, such as the judiciary, healthcare, and the labor market, are perceived as unreliable or corrupt (Eurostat, 2025), the individual's focus shifts

from long-term shared values to short-term personal survival. These conditions have created a barrier to embracing modern values like sustainability, diversity, and inclusion.

For many Bulgarians, the concept of sustainability is often approached with suspicion. However, when a household is preoccupied with the rising cost of utilities and the stagnation of real wages, an ad promoting sustainable practices is seen neither as a primary issue nor as an environmental opportunity (Firinci Orman et al., 2026).

1.3 Polish definition of Identity

Polish identity is about the degree to which an individual presents themselves as belonging to the Polish nation, as well as considers this belonging an important part of their self-worth. Being “Polish” is not only about the certificate or citizenship but mainly about how a Polish person identifies with being Polish.

1.3.1 Post-Communist Transformation and the Reconstruction of Polish Consumer Identity

The breakdown of communism in Poland in 1989 was not only a political and economic turning point but also a big change in how identity was shaped and expressed. For Polish consumers, particularly Gen Z, identity is not passed down in one form, but it is negotiated in a constant exposure to Polish traditions and global consumer culture. Young customers are raised where national memory and Catholic traditions stay really important, but at the same time participate in digital spaces that are dominated by European trends, global brands, and social media aesthetics. Making consumption not only economic but also social, cultural, and psychological.

1.3.2 Heritage and Cultural Memory in Poland

The report *Polacy wobec dziedzictwa* proves that heritage continues to be an important value in Polish society and traditions, historical sites, language, and memory persist in shaping how people understand national belonging. Therefore, heritage is not only about the past but also about identity and emotional continuity.

This matters because brands can become closer to heritage meanings. Polish designs, traditional foods, or products may become more trustworthy for customers since they connect people with cultural symbols that are already well known. Heritage can influence market preferences and customers' choices.

Younger generations, instead of simply inheriting heritage, often reinterpret the message. Gen Z may not express traditions the same way as older generations, but they engage with them through social media, nostalgia, ironic humor, and vintage aesthetic. This shows that heritage stays relevant but is communicated differently.

1.3.3 Historical Context of Contemporary Polish Identity

The year 1989 changed everything for Poland. Before that moment, everyday life in the Polish People's Republic meant living under a system that controlled what you could say, what you could buy, and where you could go. Shelves were often empty, opinions were dangerous, and the borders felt like walls. Through all of it, Polish people held onto something the system could never quite reach, which is their identity, their culture, their sense of who they were.

The transformation of 1989 was not just political. For many Poles, it felt personal. It was proof that resilience works, that a nation can survive occupation, oppression, and erasure and still come out the other side knowing exactly who it is. That history does not disappear from a people's memory simply because someone tried to rewrite it. If anything, it gets held more tightly.

This is why Polish national pride today is not nostalgia for the past. It is something more active than that. It comes from understanding what it costs to get here. The wars, the partitions, the decades of political pressure and feeling that the language, the traditions, and the culture survived anyway. That survival is the source of pride, not just the history itself.

What is perhaps most interesting about contemporary Polish identity is that this pride does not compete with feeling European. For most Poles, the two simply coexist. Poland has always been geographically, intellectually, and culturally embedded in Europe. Being part of the European community does not feel like an external addition to Polish identity but it feels like a recognition of something that was already true.

Modern Poland lives in this balance comfortably. Traditions are celebrated, history is remembered, and at the same time Poland participates actively in European cooperation, international exchange, and the broader cultural conversations of the continent. Most people do not experience any contradiction in this. You can know exactly where you come from and still feel genuinely at home in a wider world.

That combination of rootedness and openness existing at the same time without tension is perhaps what defines Poland most clearly right now. A country that carries its past seriously, values the freedom it fought for, and faces the future without feeling it has to choose between being Polish and being European. Because for most Poles, it has never been a choice at all.

Ultimately, this study seeks to understand how local and European marketing narratives shape the consumer identities of Generation Z Poles and Bulgarians. Apart from contributing to research regarding Bulgarian and Polish consumers, it will also provide valuable insights to managers and policymakers on how to approach the Eastern European region. In pursuit of this, the primary questions guiding this study are:

- *How do Instagram campaigns reinforce or challenge the post-socialist consumer identity among young Polish and Bulgarian consumers?*

- *How are contradictory narratives encoded visually in social media advertising campaigns?*
- *To what extent does social media advertising influence alignment with EU values among Gen Z users?*
- *How do advertising campaigns differ in Poland and Bulgaria in their representation of both heritage and EU values such as sustainability, diversity, and inclusion?*
- *Are Bulgarian consumers more sceptical towards European integration compared to Polish consumers?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumer Culture and Social Identity

In the context of globalisation, the link between consumer identity and marketing narratives has been extensively researched. Consumption is no longer understood merely as an activity but rather as a tool to construct and express one's identity. This perspective is the basis of Consumer Culture Theory, which holds that consumption is the cultural process of creating meanings, identities and social positions.

Social Identity theory is fundamental to understanding consumer identity. It suggests that part of an individual's identity comes from belonging to a social group, such as national, cultural, or supranational communities. Reed II et al. (2012) contribute to this with the notion of identity-based consumer behaviour as a process where users reinforce or negotiate their identities. Therefore, identity is fluid and context-dependent, rather than fixed. Furthermore, it is shaped by social interactions and cultural meanings. In addition, Ekström et al. (2017) highlight that consumer behaviour inherently exists in societal structures where individuals construct their sense of self through symbolic resources.

Brands are not only functional choices but also tools for identity expressions. The central idea of Naukowa, R., Baran, R., & Trzebiński, W. (n.d.). TOŻSAMOŚĆ POLSKA, EUROPEJSKA I GLOBALNA KONSUMENTÓW is that people do not make decisions only based on price or product quality but mostly based on how well product fits into their life. We deepen this thinking with Pierre Bourdieu's quote "Le goût, c'est le dégoût du goût des autres", which means "Taste is the distaste for the taste of others". This suggests that consumers' preferences are not only individual, but also that it is relational and socially constructed. In this sense, choosing a brand is not only about aligning with certain values or lifestyles, but also about differentiating yourself from others. Consumers use brands to express belonging to particular groups, while distancing themselves from groups they do not identify with. Brands function as symbolic tools, where individuals communicate identity and status, not just utility. This perspective reflects Consumer Culture Theory.

2.2 The Shift to Liquid Modernity

The concept of Liquid Modernity, introduced by Zygmund Bauman (2000), provides an understanding of the volatile identity in Bulgaria and Poland. Bauman argues that modern society has experienced a transition from fixed social roles or a 'solid' phase to a "liquid" phase characterised by flexible social forms, relationships and identities.

The liquid modernity idea is highly related to modern Poland. Identity is no longer automatically shaped by family or religion but it has become something that people build by education, work, digital culture.

Polish heritage remains important but now it is built through many alternative lifestyles which are promoted through European integration and global markets. Young consumers navigate between inherited traditions and the flexibility encouraged by global consumer culture.

Identity is no longer inherited in this liquid state, but instead a continuous "project". Subsequently, for younger generations in Poland and Bulgaria, this means that local heritage no longer functions as a fixed set of values, but rather as one of many alternatives competing in a fluid market. Bauman's theory imagines European integration as a "liquefying" force, undermining deeply embedded traditional ties and replacing them with a flexible, yet precarious, global identity.

2.3 Consuming Life: The Consumer as a Product

In another of Bauman's works, *Consuming Life* (2007), the fine line between the consumer and the object of consumption is further emphasised. In a consumerist society, individuals use brands to exhibit their "fitness", "selling" themselves to a modern, European community.

Marketing via the creation of meaning plays a crucial role in this process. Hence, this is especially relevant when examining marketing narratives. From the perspective of Consumer Culture Theory, brands are cultural resources. Hartmann and Brunk (2019) argue that marketing narratives, especially nostalgia, re-enchant consumption by connecting consumers to an idealised past, aligning with symbolic consumption. Furthermore, brands act as mediators between the traditional, "solid" appeal of the past and the "liquid" charm of the European future.

2.4 The Post-Socialist Context: Poland and Bulgaria

Identity construction in post-socialist societies is distinguishably complex as numerous historical and cultural influences coexist. Research on Bulgarian users affirms that consumption is strongly related to national identity. As Shkodrova (2024) argues, food practices are linked to both nationalism and communist-past nostalgia, which facilitates the reconstruction of a stable identity. While Jung (2019) discusses how Bulgarians adapt to new market conditions, all the while being influenced by their past, Nakova (2023) observes that young Bulgarian consumers increasingly incorporate European values into their identity. As a result, hybrid identities are created.

A similar pattern can be seen in Poland, where identity has become plural. Consumers simultaneously engage with European and national identities. This supports Globalization Theory and Glocalization, in particular, where global influences are adapted to local contexts. However, Bauman (2000) offers a perspective where tension emerges. While glocalization is framed as a seamless blend, the “liquid” reality reveals a contradiction. Individuals are caught between the comfort of the local and the pressure of maintaining global flexibility.

2.5 Changing National Identity in Poland

The text *Changing Frameworks of National Identity in Post-Communist Poland* highlights how Poles had changed and redefined themselves politically, culturally, and socially in a new environment. Gen Z did not receive one clear identity but they found balance between historical memory, local culture, and European belonging. This book touched upon an important topic which discussed the tension between traditional national identity and modern European identity. It is really relevant because it shows us that young consumers in Poland may receive mixed messages like protect local traditions, but also become modern European. Naukowa, R., Baran, R., & Trzebiński, W. (n.d.). *TOŻSAMOŚĆ POLSKA, EUROPEJSKA I GLOBALNA KONSUMENTÓW* emphasises that it does not have to exclude each other, identity is not fixed or singular. The book explained that people might feel like they belong to several communities at the same time and depending on a situation each identity becomes stronger or weaker.

2.6 Self-Congruence and Consumer Identity

Self-Congruence is one of the most important concepts from Baran and Trzebiński's (2024) work. It explains why consumers are attached to certain brands and not the others. Since consumption is not only about practical factors but also about psychological alignment people choose brands that help them become who they wish to be.

Young Polish consumers pay attention to self congruence because it's extremely relevant since they often have multiple identities at the same time. At one moment they might feel connected to Polish culture and in other contexts they might identify with European modernity. Gen Z may respond differently depending on active identity at that moment.

2.7 Consumer Behavior Pattern

Consumer behavior pattern visible among Polish Gen Z consumers is that identity is not fixed but situational. Existing literature suggests that consumers do not operate within one fixed identity but activate different aspects of identity depending on the situation or purpose of consumption. Meaning that the same individual can express Polish identity and European identity in another. Those choices prove that identities can coexist rather than being contradictory.

2.8 Contradictory Narratives and European Integration

Identity construction at the European level revolves around the sense of belonging to both national and supranational communities. Ralchev (2025), however, states that a strong social

foundation is missing in European identity, which reveals a gap between narratives by institutions and practical reality.

Contradictory marketing narratives alleviate this mismatch. On one hand, brands could use local heritage to inspire authenticity. On the other, they promote European integration as progress. Both stories often compete, forcing an identity conflict among young consumers.

2.9 Identification of Research Gaps

Research concerning Eastern European consumer identity and conflicting marketing narratives is quite limited. Despite the existing contributions, several gaps in knowledge remain.

While Bauman describes the “liquid” state, there is limited research on how this liquidity interacts with the local, post-socialist legacy. Existing literature recognises multiple influences, but fails to address the tension faced by younger consumers when messages for “national pride” and “European modernity” clash. Furthermore, the younger generations experience these contradictions in a digital setting via social media, which was not considered nor anticipated in Bauman’s work. Finally, there is a lack of comparative research between the Polish and Bulgarian consumer experience, despite their historical and cultural similarities.

This study aims to explain and analyse how young Eastern Europeans navigate through competitive marketing narratives, using CCT, SIT and Bauman’s Liquid Modernity as a layered theoretical anchor.

CCT serves as the foundational layer, stating that consumption practices go beyond utilitarian transaction, and into a primary system where symbolic meanings, social positions, and fragmented identities are actively formed and expressed (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). In the post-socialist context, these symbols are often disputed, as consumers use brands to navigate institutional gaps and cultural friction.

Social Identity Theory is integrated to explain how individual consumption motivations form larger groups of similar behaviours. According to SIT, the self-concept of an individual is derived from perceived membership in social groups, influenced by in-group favoritism or out-group differentiation (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In this study, the national heritage represents an in-group, while pro-European frameworks, contradictingly emerging as both aspirational and intrusive, form the out-group.

Lastly, Bauman’s Liquid Modernity (2000), explains these volatile dynamics. The described shift to a “liquid” or flexible state shows that identity is no longer simply inherited. It is instead a continuous project that needs to be updated and validated in the market (Bauman, 2007). European integration is, therefore, a liquefying force that destabilizes cultural boundaries, resulting in a fluid market spectrum that Gen Z needs to work through.

➤ **Methodological Framework**

This research examines how Bulgarians and Poles perceive and interpret brand messages within a volatile geopolitical and economic context. Given the focus on subjective interpretation and a cultural note, a qualitative approach is most suitable as it allows for a deeper understanding of individual experiences. By analyzing Polish and Bulgarian marketing campaigns, this study captures the various ways people interpret, either accept, or resist their messages. Therefore, this study adopts a two-phase research design, combining thematic analysis to reveal brand intent with netnography to examine consumer responses.

3.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The first phase involves a thematic analysis of 26 contemporary social media campaigns in Bulgaria and Poland. In this first stage, the purpose is to understand the strategic intent and what identity the brand advocates for. This study adopts the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006), where the empirical material is subject to systematic process of data familiarization, initial code generation, and thematic mapping. Multimodal Discourse Analysis treats visual images, typography and auditory semiotic codes as active mechanisms of communication (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). By isolating what is presented and what is implied, this phase shows how brands encode heritage and EU values.

3.1.1 Sample Selection

This paper examines a total of 26 campaigns, with 13 campaigns per country released within the last 3 years. This timeframe allows for tracking the progression of identity through significant periods of regional instability. To ensure a balanced comparison, the sampled campaigns fit into two categories. The first one, narratives that are future-oriented and focused on EU integration, modernisation, and global standards. The second category focuses on marketing messages about heritage and post-socialist re-enchantment.

3.1.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The campaigns are selected through social media platforms, more specifically Instagram and TikTok. The campaigns are thoroughly analysed from various perspectives, transcribing visuals and language to determine the kind of identity being promoted. Afterwards, the obtained data is thematically coded, identifying specific identity markers.

3.2 Netnographic Observation

To analyse the consumer responses to the campaigns of interest, a netnography approach is used. Netnography is an adaptation of traditional ethnographic research techniques that specifically studies cultures and communities emerging in online communications (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). This method allows for obtaining more organic and unfiltered opinions. Additionally, netnography presents the possibility of tracking how perceptions evolved. This qualitative approach extracts rich text and semiotic data directly from cultural artifacts, in this case social media campaigns, and the public digital interactions they trigger.

3.2.1 Data Source and Volume

Information is gathered from comments and interactions on the Instagram campaigns that are being analysed to understand what reactions were provoked and how consumers interpreted the brand messages. Informative responses and interactions are observed via the comment section of each campaign. The data collection process followed strict netnographic protocols to ensure contextual consistency.. The finalized research corpus consists of:

- 1) **Visual Artifacts:** High-resolution digital captures of the promotional materials, video frames, captions, and creative audio elements.
- 2) **Textual Consumer Discourse:** A total corpus of several thousand organic user-generated comments, tracking metrics such as peer-to-peer tagging patterns, multi-lingual code-switching, emoji usage, and high-engagement likes.

3.2.2 Open Coding Analysis

After collecting and categorising the data, it is analysed by adopting the method of open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). To define common themes and interpret the results, this research undertakes a three- step approach. Firstly, it begins with initial categorisation, grouping raw comments. Secondly, broader themes are defined. The clustering of data into quadrants emerged through an inductive coding process. The data was processed through two distinct coding cycles:

Data Coding Flowchart	
First-Cycle Coding (Descriptive & In-Vivo)	Second-Cycle Coding (Axial & Conceptual)
• Isolated literal text, humor, and slang • Idiomatic phrases like "Густо майна" • Colloquial expressions like "Bati" • Satirical labels like "роботчетата"	• Categorized codes into analytical themes • Map onto Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) • Map onto Social Identity Theory (SIT) • Finalized: Global-Civic vs. Ironic-Balkan Quadrants

First-Cycle Coding is focused on descriptive and in-vivo codes, preserving the exact vernacular used by digital natives. Literal expressions of humor, cynicism, local slang, and dismissive satire were isolated.

Second-Cycle Coding involved axial coding to group the descriptive markers into broader themes. These themes were later interpreted through the lenses of Consumer Culture Theory, specifically looking at how consumers negotiate liquid identities and fast-fashion fatigue, and Social Identity Theory, analyzing how youth use digital platforms to demonstrate alignment with European civic values or defend local agency through sharp and ironic subversion.

3.3 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Several limitations regarding the method are present. For example, netnography compensates for the weakness of thematic analysis, which only shows the brand intent. However, it is crucial to note that the interpretation of results and data is subjective. Identity is not static, and the findings of this paper would contribute by providing more recent insights, but they will also only reflect the moment of collection.

Because this netnography relies on publicly accessible, corporate promotional threads where users knowingly post in open digital forums, the data collection minimizes privacy intrusion. To protect individual user identities, the focus of the analysis is placed on the macro-discursive trends and collective cultural tropes.

Additionally, to avoid selection bias, the researcher ensures diversity in the industries analysed. Furthermore, for netnography, working with online data and the associated lack of control requires strong alignment with ethical standards. For instance, all data used is anonymised, and the study focuses on publicly available data, which is treated with cultural sensitivity to avoid misrepresentation.

3.4 Researcher Reflexivity

A distinguished strength of this study is the cultural background of the researchers, representatives of Poland and Bulgaria. This offers culturally-informed insights and interpretations of data. However, the researchers acknowledge that complete objectivity cannot be achieved. Therefore, reflexivity is applied with caution and data evidence throughout the process.

➤ Data Analysis and Research Findings

Although evolving, it has to be noted that TV marketing largely relies on old-fashioned narratives and strategies. For example, the "Bai Ganyo" and "Strong Provider" tropes are often present. Loud audio and simple, linear narratives are the typical approach. It is visually stagnant, often relying on conservative humour that aligns with older consumers and not so much the youth. Social Media marketing, however, is increasingly involving and driven by younger teams. This field uses aesthetics, irony, and a globalized vibe or meme-based marketing. It is where the new Bulgarian identity is actually being built.

Modern Bulgarian identity is not static but rather a progressing negotiation. Marketing in Bulgaria increasingly combines older, reliable motifs related to the Golden Age nostalgia, such as the 1994 football era, the Village or Bai Ganyo archetype, and references to the communist regime, with, recently, the sustainably-conscious, European future.

This part analyzes how brands use blended narratives to deal with these contradictions, often resulting in paradoxical branding that reflects the incoherent identity of the Bulgarian youth.

To explore the shifting landscape of Bulgarian identity, thirteen marketing campaigns were selected based on their cultural impact, viral reach on Instagram, and their contrasting national messages. These campaigns are categorized into three primary clusters based on the different narrative types.

4.1.1 Bulgarian Campaign Categories

Cluster 1: The Heritage and Nostalgia Narratives

This group of campaigns relies on typically-Bulgarian signifiers, such as traditional food, history, nature, and past glory.

Shumensko Pivo ("Retro Bombichka"): This campaign centers on the revival of the classic stubby beer bottle from the socialist era. The visuals notably utilize sepia tones and Cyrillic typography from the 1970s, conveying a sense of stable, authentic labor and masculine friendship. It also refers back to the habitual social gatherings and summer vacations on the Black Sea coast, a positive memory from the Regime for many Bulgarians.

Pirinsko Pivo: Relying on a wide-angle photographic shot of the Pirin Mountains, this beer brand focuses on the pride related to Bulgarian nature. The narrative suggests that the "true" Bulgarian spirit is found in the wilderness, away from urban influence.

Yettel (The "Pitka" Campaign): Featuring famous actress and TV host Ralitsa Zaharieva, this Instagram campaign depicts a modern woman in a contemporary environment using her smartphone to call an elderly neighbour. The story follows the grandmother teaching her how to make a traditional *pitka* (ritual bread), bridging the gap between the latest technology and ancestral craft.

Traditional Food Brands (Lutenitsa "Olineza", Lukanka "Orehite"): These campaigns frequently utilize "Village Aesthetics", traditional interior, wooden tables, open fires, and sometimes hunting motifs. Many of these ads rely on "Balkan" humor, which often includes stereotypical depictions of "strong" men and traditional gender roles.

Cluster 2: The Ironic and Mixed Narratives

These campaigns represent the "Blended Narrative", where modern European values meet the "Bai Ganyo" archetype.

Nescafé 3-in-1 (Coffee brand): Nescafé's social media campaigns differ from one another. They collaborate with various popular influencers with contrasting content. On one side, Vankata (Dimitar Kiriazov) performs a parody of the stereotypical Bulgarian man who is plain, provincial, and slightly absurd. On the other side, pop singer Dara Ekimova represents the Global Bulgarian, with her chic, modern aesthetic.

Kaufland (The Stoichkov/Dara Contrast): A long-term campaign pairing football legend Hristo Stoichkov (a key figure in the 1994 "Golden Age of Football" era) with Dara, a singer known for her colorful, chaotic, high-energy style. This creates a visual friction between the old legend and the modern star.

Kaufland (IT BAGS): A giveaway campaign of sustainable, reusable shopping bags. Despite its eco-friendly intent, the bag design is inspired by luxury fashion brands to appeal to the Bulgarian cultural desire for purchasing symbols of status.

Cluster 3: The Civic and Future-Oriented Narratives

This cluster covers European integration, democracy, and the deconstruction of toxic stereotypes.

Kaufland (The Euro-Transition): A series of educational videos featuring high-performing math students in relation to the adoption of the Euro in Bulgaria in January 2020. They explain the logic of the Euro adoption and how to accurately convert the currency so people can report to authorities in cases of price speculation. The campaign targets the older segment of the population, but faced significant backlash in the comment sections on social media regarding the students' looks or "weird/nerdy attitude" by peers.

Voda Svoboda (Lyubo Zhechev): A water brand launched by a prominent journalist, reality star, and influencer. The branding is minimal and focused on irony and humour, as well as exposing people in power and politics. The existence of this brand is entirely focused on advocating for free media and anti-corruption, positioning the simple act of drinking water as a political statement.

DM (Men in Skincare): Several campaigns shaped as humorous skits, featuring rising male influencers engaging in skincare routines and interacting with their family at home. This explicitly challenges the "Balkan Alpha" stereotype, promoting a more modern, non-toxic version of masculinity.

Remix Shop (Circular Clothing Brand): Multiple campaigns focusing on their "Wear and Share" policy. Consistent use of the most popular influencers to promote second-hand fashion as a sustainable, cool alternative to fast fashion, targeting the eco-conscious youth.

4.1.2 Semiotic Landscapes. Decoding the Visual and Auditory Codes

To understand identity formation, we must take a look at the "myth" and not so much the product itself. The following campaigns are analysed using Denotation (literal elements) and Connotation (cultural meaning), focusing on the tension between traditional and global aesthetics.

Cluster 1: The Ironic Approach to Heritage

This cluster represents the most successful engagement with youth: the use of irony to digest a regressive past.

Nescafe 3-in-1 (Vankata vs. Dara Ekimova):

Visuals: The Vankata ads use “Flat” lighting and saturated, slightly cheap-looking colors like greens and bright reds to mimic the aesthetic of a small convenience store in the neighborhood. In contrast, Dara Ekimova’s setting is home-like and cosy, utilising Pastel Color Grading, signaling trendy, aesthetic lifestyle aspirations.

Audio: Vankata uses a heavy provincial accent and loud, blunt comedic timing. Dara uses soft "Lo-fi" beats and a breathy, calm vocal delivery.

Result: This creates a Bimodal Identity. Young Bulgarians do not simply choose one of them. Instead, they consume the "ironic provincial" as entertainment and the "chill modern" as a lifestyle goal.

Shumensko "Retro Bombichka":

Visuals: Dark amber glass, Cyrillic typography from the 1970s, and sepia-toned filters.

Message: It sells Socialism as an aesthetic, not a politics. By stripping the political aspect and leaving the design, it allows youth to experience the vintage beer rather than promote pro-Russian sentiment.

Cluster 2: Heroic Past vs. Unpredictable Future (Kaufland)

Kaufland’s campaigns serve as a site of national struggle, pitting the "unifying past" against the “complex future”.

Hristo Stoichkov (1994 Nostalgia):

Visuals: High-contrast, "Epic" framing. There is often a soccer field setting, and if not, the Ballon d’Or makes an appearance. Stoichkov is often positioned at the center, occupying a "Hero" position in the frame.

Audio: Marching band sounds or rhythmic chanting. He would often reference some of his iconic lines, such as “Sometimes win, sometimes lun (as an attempt to say “lose”)”.

Analysis: This can be seen as a psychological anchor. For a generation born into economic instability, the '94 World Cup is the only "undisputed" win, despite qualifying fourth. Stoichkov isn't selling groceries. Instead, he is selling "National Pride" to mask the routinely act of shopping.

The Euro-Students Campaign:

Visuals: Bright colors, Kaufland store in the background. The students wear smart-casual, "proper" attire.

Reaction: The negative feedback on their looks and speaking style (perceived as elitist or "nerdy") reveals a deeply rooted anti-intellectualism in certain parts of Bulgarian identity. The modern European narrative is seen as a "lesson" being forced upon the public, rather than a shared goal.

Cluster 3: Conflicting Gender Narratives (DM vs. Alcohol Brands)

The identity struggle here is approached through the deconstruction of the stereotypical Bulgarian man.

DM Skincare (Male Influencers):

Visuals: Domestic settings like bathrooms, bedrooms, and living rooms. Bright, natural lighting.

Message: Challenges the "Balkan Alpha" myth. By showing men indulging in pampering rituals and caring for their skin, DM promotes a "Soft Masculinity" that aligns with modern values of self-care and emotional intelligence.

Pirinsko/Beer, Salami, and Sausage Brands:

Visuals: Forest greens, dark wood, fire, wild and domestic animals.

Audio: Deep, gravelly voice-overs; sounds of nature or clinking glasses, traditional heavy bells ringing, traditional Bulgarian folklore music.

Analysis: These brands act as a "Shelter" for traditional identity. They signal that, despite the Europeanization of the big cities, the "True Bulgarian essence" is still in providing.

Cluster 4: Civic Consumerism (Voda Svoboda & Fomo Club)

This represents the rise of the Activist Consumer.

Voda Svoboda (Lyubo Zhechev):

Visuals: Minimalist, transparent packaging. The "Product" is the message itself.

Significance: This represents a shift from "What I Can Buy" to "What I Stand for". For young Bulgarians, freedom of speech is a "modern value" that they are willing to pay a premium for.

Fomo Club (Hot Pop Instagram page):

Analysis: Their use of "Soviet Kitsch" for parties is a mockery of pro-Russian propaganda. By turning the "Grandmother's Russian influence" into a neon-lit club night, they are purifying the tainted history. They use the colors of the USSR (Red and Gold) and archaic music or speeches, but remix with global pop or house music, creating a “ Subversive Fusion”.

Cluster 5: The Sustainability Mirage (Kaufland IT Bags)

Visuals: A fashion photography style, with sleek aesthetics.

The Contradiction: While communicated as sustainable, the campaign focuses on status signaling. The visual message is rather: "Look rich while shopping". Additionally, these bags are not intended for sale, which makes sustainable practices seem inaccessible.

Result: It shows that in Bulgaria, modern values like sustainability are currently being adopted more as fashion trends instead of an ethical shift. The "IT Bag" is a trophy of European lifestyle, not an environmental statement.

4.1.3 Netnographic Analysis of Campaign Narratives in Bulgaria

As the largest hypermarket retailer in the post-socialist landscape, **Kaufland Bulgaria** operates as a critical cultural battlefield where local heritage, institutional Westernization, and youth lifestyle trends openly collide. Rather than utilizing a single, static brand voice, netnographic data shows that Kaufland executes a multi-pronged communication strategy. This approach shifts drastically between localized, high-emotion populist myth-making and cerebral, technocratic structural conditioning.

THE KAUFLAND STRATEGIC TRIAD		
1. The Mythological Populist (Stoichkov & Dara)	2. The Institutional Euro (Dimana & Deyan Math Campaign)	3. The Global-Civic Lifestyle (The "IT BAGS" Eco-Aesthetic)
• Deep cinematic saturation • Triggers "Golden Age" unity • Bypasses cognitive resistance	• Bright, minimalist aesthetics • Triggers structural suspicion • Viewed as detached, elite conditioning	• High-fashion visual codes • Green values as elite status • Replaces collective guilt with style

Mythological Populism: The Stoichkov-Dara Dichotomy

To ensure baseline legitimacy across deeply polarized consumer demographics, Kaufland strategically pairs two generation-defining cultural icons: national soccer legend **Hristo**

Stoichkov and modern Gen Z pop icon **Dara**. This combination forms a powerful cultural anchor that bridges deep intergenerational divides.

The Stoichkov Effect: When Kaufland positions Stoichkov within highly localized, sensory culinary contexts—specifically promoting a regional specialty like *Plovdivsko cheese* ("Пловдивското е трепач. За да ти е густо" / "Plovdiv cheese is killer. To make you feel good")—the comment section shifts entirely to a unified celebration of localized identity. Consumers reward the brand with regional cultural markers ("*Густо майна филибето* ❤️❤️" / "Pure joy, my dear Plovdiv"). Stoichkov acts as an un-fragmented symbol of Bulgarian national achievement. By placing him alongside everyday traditional foods, Kaufland successfully triggers a shared nostalgia for a historical "Golden Age," completely bypassing any underlying consumer resistance to foreign corporate capital.

The Dara Integration: Concurrently, the brand seamlessly hooks into young consumer spaces by positioning the pop icon Dara as a fluid lifestyle symbol. Netnographic monitoring of this campaign reveals highly enthusiastic peer-to-peer engagement, with consumers declaring her "*родена за реклама!*" ("born for advertising!") and associating the corporate content with positive emotional states ("*С удоволствие с реклама на, Дара. Хубави емоции...*" / "With pleasure watching an ad with Dara. Beautiful emotions..."). Dara serves a critical structural purpose for the brand: she translates the everyday act of grocery shopping at a mass retailer into a vibrant, high-energy pop-culture experience, which makes the corporate environment highly appealing to Gen Z consumers.

The Euro-Campaign Friction: Technocratic Framing and Institutional Skepticism

The most acute cultural friction in the entire dataset emerges when the brand transitions from celebrity-driven populism to an explicit **Euro-Technocratic** narrative. In the campaign, Kaufland attempts to educate the public on the upcoming national transition from the Bulgarian Lev to the Euro currency. The campaign challenges top young math student champions, Dimana and Deyan, to calculate a grocery budget of 20 Leva directly into Euros, using the corporate caption to claim that currency conversion is an "*easy task because at Kaufland we calculate clearly, accurately, and transparently*".

The netnographic coding of the 1,559 likes and highly polarized comment thread reveals deep, systemic cultural defense mechanisms:

Discursive Backlash & Irony: Rather than praising the educational utility of the ad, users immediately deploy satire, mocking the calculated, robotic delivery of the presentation with comments like "*Браво на роботчетата*" ("Bravo to the little robots") and "*Bravo na kalkulatora* 🤖💔" ("Bravo to the calculator"). This reveals an immediate consumer weariness towards top-down, sterilized corporate messaging.

Explicit Intergenerational & Elite Friction: Crucially, a highly upvoted user comment explicitly isolates the strategic shift in the brand's voice, stating: "*Много по добре, от Стоичков и невицата 100*" ("Much better than Stoichkov and the [pop]

singer"). This directly highlights a deep demographic split. While older cohorts or more populist consumer segments rely on traditional figures like Stoichkov to feel recognized, the technocratic, cerebral presentation appeals to a self-conscious, highly educated urban student class who step into the comment section to defend the intellectual validity of the participants ("*Аз я познавам. Заедно учим физика. Много е умна.*" / "I know her. We study physics together. She is very smart").

This friction proves that when global corporate entities take on the role of institutional educators for pan-European transition policies, they risk activating historical anxieties. The bright, sterile, and hyper-rational visual language is frequently perceived not as a helpful tool, but as a detached, elite conditioning mechanism. This reaction shows that deep skepticism regarding institutional changes still lingers among consumers.

The Global-Civic Aesthetic Shift: "IT BAGS" and Sustainable Status

Finally, this friction clarifies how Kaufland successfully handles abstract, pan-European environmental mandates by moving them into the **Global-Civic** lifestyle quadrant. In the **#ITBAGS** campaign, the retailer completely reimagines the traditional, functional reusable grocery bag. Instead of using traditional eco-friendly imagery, Kaufland utilizes high-fashion visual codes and premium lifestyle language: "*Остава само да завършиш аутфита си с #ITBAGS*" ("All that's left is to finish your outfit with #ITBAGS").

Netnographic analysis indicates that younger consumers eagerly accept this framing, with fashion and concept accounts praising the initiative: "*Браво! Много свежа идея ❤️*" ("Bravo! Very fresh idea"). By transforming an ecological necessity into a desirable luxury accessory or social media giveaway prize, the brand successfully matches the liquid identity needs of Gen Z.

Through this aesthetic transformation, abstract European values like sustainability are stripped of any heavy ethical burden. Instead, they are repackaged as highly scannable, modern urban style symbols. This allows young post-socialist consumers to project a highly sophisticated, forward-looking European identity simply through their daily choices at a mass supermarket checkout line.

The "Voda Svoboda" Phenomenon: Anti-Establishment Capital and Civic Satire

If mass-market giants like Kaufland manipulate cultural symbols from the top down, the grassroots emergence of Voda Svoboda (Вода Свобода) represents a fascinating bottom-up subversion of post-socialist consumer expectations. Functioning explicitly as an anti-establishment activist brand, Voda Svoboda anchors its entire marketing equity on a direct challenge to corrupt structures, pledging 30% of its profits to independent investigative journalism organizations.

The netnographic data illustrates a massive wave of organic youth engagement (over 3,143 likes on a single post) that treats the brand as a premium badge of civic resistance.

VODA SVOBODA: IDENTITY ALIGNMENT	
Core Strategic Framing	Consumer Identity Response
• Anti-Establishment Activism • 30% Profit Pledge to Press • Parody of Political Pharaohs	• High-Prestige Civic Validation • Co-Production of Brand Satire • Platform Adoption ("Made an IG for this van")

Unlike standard corporate partnerships that feel manufactured, Voda Svoboda's campaign—centered around a branded promotional van—attracts unprompted validation from prominent digital gatekeepers. High-profile commentary from digital creator Lyubo Zhechev ("*Бахти великото* 😊" / "Fucking great") and internet personality Yoana Yokko ("*Искам да спечеля... ще бъде епично* 😂" / "I want to win... it will be epic") instantly elevates a basic commodity (bottled water) into a highly sought-after cultural artifact.

For Gen Z consumers, interacting with this campaign is a way to project an enlightened, pro-democratic, and distinctly Global-Civic identity. This motivation is so strong that users openly confess to altering their digital behavior just to participate, with one user stating, "*Заради тоя ван си направих инстаграм*" ("I made an Instagram account just because of this van").

The ultimate strength of the campaign lies in how fluidly the target demographic co-produces the brand's sharp political satire. Rather than adopting a dry, solemn activist tone, the brand relies on aggressive irony—declaring its water "dangerous to pharaohs and fake gurus" and naming its flavored varieties after systemic financial tropes (e.g., *Blackberry Ponzi King*).

Consumers enthusiastically participate in this linguistic gameplay. In the comment section a user proactively offers the brand a viral concept: "*Ще брандиран ли с 'вода свобода' ако няма да е ето една безплатна идея*" ("Will it be branded with 'voda svoboda'? If not, here is a free idea").

This level of organic co-creation proves that young post-socialist consumers are no longer passive targets of marketing communication. By weaving anti-establishment skepticism into an aestheticized, hyper-shareable lifestyle product, Voda Svoboda transforms civic responsibility from a heavy institutional lecture into an edgy, ironic cultural statement. This allows Gen Z to perform their alignment with democratic values while remaining firmly rooted in a distinctively sharp, cynical Balkan humor.

The DM Bulgaria Men's Skincare Campaign: De-Stigmatizing Masculine Self-Care Through Global Pop-Culture Memes

The final dimension of the Ironic-Balkan quadrant involves tracking how global retail corporations operating in post-socialist markets de-stigmatize specialized consumer routines, such as male skincare, by heavily relying on viral, cross-border digital humor. Traditional masculine ideals in the Balkans have historically rejected elaborate cosmetic routines as

non-essential or foreign. To overcome this cultural barrier, dm Bulgaria launched a men's skincare campaign that sidesteps traditional product education in favor of popular global internet memes.

The netnographic data shows how effective this approach can be, generating highly affectionate peer-to-peer engagement (285 likes).

DM BULGARIA: DE-STIGMATIZATION STRATEGY	
Corporate Narrative Device	Consumer Discourse Response
• Viral Audio Integration ("He feels Bonita") • Subversion of Traditional Balkan Masculinity • Aesthetic Polish mixed with Slapstick Meme	• Humorous Validation & "Bati" (Brother) Reframing • Peer-to-Peer Tagging and Content Co-Production • High Affection ("This clip is my favorite")

The comment section demonstrates how quickly young Bulgarian consumers decode and validate this synthesis, pairing the global meme directly with highly localized colloquial terms for brotherhood and masculinity:

The "Bati" Reframing: A prominent user comment reads: *"Аййййййй, баму... he feels Bonita 😂"* ("Ayyy, brother... he feels Bonita"). By placing the hyper-traditional, localized kinship term **"баги" (Bati / older brother)** right next to the English global meme expression *"he feels Bonita"*, the consumer uses a hybrid linguistic style. This juxtaposition shows how easily Gen Z can reconcile modern, global concepts of self-care with their everyday local reality.

The highly positive reception filled with comments like *"Падам! 😂😂😂"* ("I'm falling [laughing!]"), *"Великооо"* ("Great"), and *"Страхотен избор на аудио 🙌"* ("Great choice of audio"), shows that consumers appreciate a brand being self-aware. This humorous framing lowers defense mechanisms against a product category that might otherwise be met with cultural skepticism.

Furthermore, users actively tag their friends to spread the joke, as seen when one commenter states: *"Не, тва е великооооооо 😂😂😂😂 @анонимус намирисва ми да си вдъхновение тука"* ("No, this is great... smells like you were the inspiration here").

By making the campaign feel like a shared joke among peers, dm Bulgaria shifts male skincare out of an elite, exclusionary domain and drops it directly into a highly relatable, digital youth culture. This demonstrates that for Gen Z, adopting global consumption habits does not require erasing local identity. Instead, it is achieved by laughing at the transition together, using shared internet memes to bridge the gap.

The Remix Shop × Izabel Campaign: Sustainable Second-Hand Fashion and Consumer Trust

While fast-fashion giants use lifestyle marketing to promote continuous consumption, the partnership between the European second-hand/outlet e-commerce platform **Remix Shop** and prominent digital creator **Izabel** highlights a major shift toward the **Global-Civic** lifestyle quadrant. Netnographic data shows high user engagement, with a single post attracting over 3,262 likes. This positive reception demonstrates that young post-socialist consumers are increasingly willing to support circular fashion alternatives when they are presented transparently.

REMIX SHOP × IZABEL: DATA THEMES	
Core Campaign Proposition	Observed Consumer Response
• Promotion of second-hand & outlet fashion • Focus on sustainable, circular economy • Authenticity-driven influencer pairing	• Anti-consumerist validation ("Thank you") • Aspiring lifestyle emulation ("how to be Izabel?") • Inherent post-socialist consumer skepticism

The comment section reveals that the core appeal of the campaign is its contrast with typical fast-fashion advertisements. Young consumers use the space to praise the push away from traditional overconsumption:

"Най-накрая някой, който не промотира затрупане с нови дрехи от познатите сайтове 🙌 Thank you ❤️" ("Finally someone who does not promote hoarding new clothes from the well-known sites 🙌 Thank you ❤️").

This comment demonstrates that a segment of young Bulgarian consumers is experiencing fast-fashion fatigue. They value marketing narratives that challenge continuous buying. Izabel's style choices spark aspiring lifestyle emulation, as seen in comments like *"how to be Izabel?? 🥰💕"*, *"Красива и сладка с всяка дреха..."* ("Beautiful and sweet in every piece of clothing..."), and *"На Изи май всичко и стои"* ("It seems everything looks good on Izi"). By choosing a creator known for her authentic style, the brand shifts second-hand shopping away from old historical stigmas about used clothing, framing circular fashion as a conscious, modern lifestyle choice.

Despite the positive feedback, the campaign also reveals the lingering consumer skepticism typical of post-socialist digital spaces. This is by a user asking a practical question about shopping safety: *"Това само опция 'с етикет' или безразборно шопване.....!?"* ("Is this only the 'with tag' option or indiscriminate shopping.....!?").

This question highlights a key dynamic within the regional market: while young consumers are attracted to global environmental ideas like sustainability, they remain cautious about

product quality and potential corporate deception. To maintain trust, sustainable campaigns in these regions cannot rely solely on abstract ethical concepts. They must also address practical concerns, reassuring consumers that choosing a circular option does not mean sacrificing quality or consumer security.

The "Hot Pop" Club Culture: Radical Satire and the Subversion of Pro-Russian Narratives

When geopolitical tensions are processed through the lens of post-socialist youth culture, the resulting discourse often bypasses traditional political debate entirely, choosing instead to weaponize hyper-ironic satire. A premier manifestation of this shift is visible in the digital community surrounding the "Hot Pop" club event ecosystem. A single promotional node generated over 4,837 likes, sparking a highly polarized, multi-lingual commentary segment that sits perfectly at the intersection of the Ironic-Balkan quadrant and aggressive counter-propaganda.

Rather than relying on sterile institutional denunciations of foreign influence, the event organizers and their audience deploy a dense mix of camp aestheticization, Soviet-era tropes, and contemporary financial mockery to completely neutralize pro-Russian rhetoric.

HOT POP STRATEGIC DISCURSIVE CODING		
1. Financial Absurdism	2. Camp Soviet Re-Appropriation	3. Defensive Counter-Irony
• Mockery of the Russian Ruble • Exposes currency isolation • Reduces state power to a joke	• Ironic use of "comrade" tropes • Blurs lines of actual alignment • Subverts total political weight	• Re-framing of nationalistic trolling into club humor • Defuses online aggression

A dominant thread running through the user interaction involves attacking the economic realities of the pro-Russian orbit, flattening serious geopolitical concerns into punchlines about currency isolation. Users openly joke about the transactional nature of regional political influence, with one commenter asking, *"дали някои ще се появи с рубли"* ("will anyone show up with rubles"). This is immediately escalated by another user who writes, *"Бече трябва да си даваме еврото за рубли 😭"* ("Now we have to exchange our euros for rubles 😭").

By treating the currency as a useless token or a badge of financial ruin within an elite nightlife setting, the demographic strips the pro-Russian stance of its supposed strength, reducing it to economic absurdity.

The campaign's true subversive power lies in how it prompts users to adopt mock-Soviet identities, creating a chaotic digital space where actual propaganda cannot survive. The

dialogue shifts fluidly into Russian phrases and classical communist salutations, completely detached from their original historical weight:

Comments like *"Милаааа, тут больше драмы, чем в сериале, обожаю 🇷🇺"* ("Milaaaa, there's more drama here than in a TV series, I love it 🇷🇺") and *"молодец!! клас хот поп звезда болгарская"* ("well done!! class hot pop Bulgarian star") turn state symbols into dramatic pop-culture aesthetics.

The ultimate subversion occurs when users adopt old socialist jargon to toast a modern nightlife event: *"Здраве желаем, другари и другарки 😊"* ("We wish you health, comrades [male] and comrades [female] 😊").

By dressing a Westernized, hedonistic pop music event in the linguistic uniforms of Soviet institutional authority, the "Hot Pop" community performs a supreme act of cultural deflation. The old language of state control is repackaged as a late-night punchline.

The interaction also shows how easily this subcultural group neutralizes genuine political anger or trolling. When aggressive counter-commentary tries to label the event as paid Western propaganda (*"Колко ти платиха ционистите..."* / "How much did the Zionists pay you..."), the community does not engage in serious ideological debate. Instead, they absorb the attack into the camp reality of the club event.

Users celebrate the friction as a necessary artistic performance, declaring the crossover *"The collab we never knew we needed"*. This proves that for this class of young consumers, the ultimate defense weapon against authoritarian propaganda is not censorship, but an unhinged, ironic over-identification that turns geopolitical seriousness into pure entertainment.

4.1.4 Bulgarian Campaigns Synthesis and Results

The most successful campaigns don't pick a side. Instead, they use traditional themes combined with modern delivery. For example, the "Pitka" campaign by Yettel, which initially emphasized quality time with older relatives by portraying the act of passing down traditional crafts or recipes, was complemented by the use of innovative technology and digital services as a means of simplifying communication.

The tension between logical progress and emotional safety is evident mostly in the contrasting Kaufland campaigns. The Euro-transition campaign, featuring notable math students, used a calm, but cerebral style. More specifically, a minimalist framing, brighter backgrounds, and natural academic speech. However, the backlash in digital comment sections reveals a substantial distrust rooted in the trauma related to the economic crisis of the 1990s. The students were perceived not with pride or as symbols of national achievement, but instead as messengers of a detached elite. On the other hand, the use of soccer legend Hristo Stoichkov exploits the Golden Age nostalgia by using epic, saturated cinematography to

relate the brand to a rare moment of collective national significance. Although this suggests that for older generations in Bulgaria, the idea of European integration often lacks the emotional identity connection found in historical or traditional myths, Gen Z individuals seem to be increasingly engaged with modern values and align better with the unified European future.

Finally, the research highlights how modern values like sustainability are transformed merely as a sign of prestige. In the Kaufland "IT BAGS" campaign, the visual language strays away from conventional environmentalism, often perceived as foreign, and instead adopts the visual language of luxury brands. By framing reusable bags through high-fashion photography, the brand changes the ethical obligation into a social currency. This seems inconsistent with the traditional concept of sustainability.

In the Bulgarian context, this suggests that green values are not as successfully integrated into youth identity through prominent consumption as it is for older groups. Gen Z, however, shows higher alignment with traditional sustainability principles. The Bulgarian sustainable identity is thus less about valuing responsibility and more about performing a European lifestyle that is less accessible to the masses, which in a way re-establishes social division through modern values.

The research identifies a tension between four segments of identity. The Ethno-Nostalgic is found in beer and traditional food brands, the Ironic-Balkan with Nescafé, the Euro-Technocratic (Kaufland Euro), and the Global-Civic (Voda Svoboda). Most young Bulgarians do not occupy one quadrant but move rather fluidly between them, depending on the brand they consume.

This study finds that Bulgarian identity is no longer a choice between East and West. Instead, through a process of narrative absorption, young Bulgarians are consuming the symbols of their socialist past via irony and retro-branding to fuel their modern European lifestyle. The brand acts as the link that allows these contradictory worlds to exist in the same realm.

Brand	Core Value	Aesthetic Code	Identity Tension
Shumensko, Pirinsko, Olineza, Orehite	Traditional Belonging, Heritage, and Nostalgia	Nature, Folklore, Sepia Tones, Social Gatherings	The Village vs. The Big City
Nescafé, Hot Pop, and Fomo Club	Cultural Irony	Saturated Colors, Parody, Remix	Stagnant Past vs. Modern Future
Kaufland (Euro, IT Bags)	Global Status	Bright Colors, Clean Aesthetic, Stylish Clothing	National Habit vs. European Standard

Voda Svoboda, DM	Civic Autonomy	Minimalism, soft lighting, transparency, routine	Conservative vs. Modern Values
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The empirical findings of this netnography reveal that young post-socialist consumers do not merely absorb Westernized or global marketing narratives; instead, they actively negotiate them through a complex, localized matrix. To understand this dynamic, the discussion is structured around the thesis's primary research questions and interpreted through Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT).

Research Question 1 sought to understand how young consumers navigate the tension between localized heritage and pan-European integration. The netnographic data demonstrates that identity formation is not a binary choice between being "local" or "European." Instead, young consumers operate within a fluid hybrid space.

When mass retailers like Kaufland deploy mythological populism using icons like Hristo Stoichkov alongside pop stars like Dara, they create an emotional bridge. Stoichkov triggers what SIT classifies as an in-group national pride, neutralizing the historical anxiety of being exploited by foreign corporate capital.

However, when the narrative shifts to a sterile, technocratic presentation—such as the Euro-currency math campaign—it hits a wall of historical skepticism. The consumer response shifts from celebration to defensive irony, mocking the participants as "little robots". This reaction shows that top-down institutional messaging triggers historical memories of forced, centralized conditioning.

Young consumers resolve this contradiction by moving away from top-down institutions and embracing grass-roots corporate alternatives like *Voda Svoboda*. Here, anti-establishment skepticism is repackaged into a high-prestige, modern lifestyle. This allows the consumer to feel distinctively European and civic-minded while maintaining their local, systemic critique of power.

Research Question 2 explored the specific expressive tactics utilized by Gen Z to handle global expectations, specifically environmental sustainability, modern self-care, and geopolitical alignment. The data highlights two dominant tactics: Aesthetic Conversion and Weaponized Counter-Irony.

Aesthetic Conversion (The Global-Civic Quadrant)

Abstract European values, such as circular economies or ecological responsibility, are often rejected by post-socialist consumers if they are presented as moral lectures. In line with CCT's insights on lifestyle consumption, campaigns like Kaufland's **#ITBAGS** and **Remix Shop × Izabel** succeed by converting environmental necessity into social status.

By framing a reusable bag as a fashion-outfit completion or highlighting second-hand clothes through a trusted digital peer, the brands alleviate fast-fashion fatigue without imposing a heavy ethical burden. The consumer projects a forward-looking European identity simply because the choice has been made scannable, modern, and fashionable.

Weaponized Counter-Irony (The Ironic-Balkan Quadrant)

When dealing with deeply rooted cultural stigmas or intense external pressures, young consumers resort to aggressive irony to protect their local agency.

De-stigmatizing through Slang: In the **dm Men's Skincare** campaign, the tension between global grooming standards and traditional Balkan masculinity is completely dissolved through a playful meme ("*He feels Bonita*"). By synthesizing global internet humor with traditional localized slang ("*ōamu*" / brother), youth co-produce a hybrid identity. They accept the global consumption habit while signaling that they are self-aware enough to laugh at the transition.

Defusing Geopolitical Conflict: This tactic reaches its peak in the **Hot Pop** club discourse. When confronted with tense, polarizing pro-Russian rhetoric, the youth subculture completely avoids traditional political debate. Instead, they deploy financial mockery (jokes about the collapse of the Ruble) and camp Soviet over-identification ("*Здраве желаем, ђpyзapy...*"). By turning serious geopolitical propaganda into late-night nightlife satire, they render authoritarian rhetoric powerless.

4.2 Polish Campaign Analysis

Local Heritage and European Modernity in Polish Branding

In Poland some brands are associated with local heritage, tradition, nostalgia, and national belonging, while others communicate modernity, European integration, mobility, and global lifestyle. Gen Z is constantly exposed to all messages through TikTok, Instagram, and other digital platforms. This suggests that brands in Poland do not sell products only but also offer symbolic meaning which helps to define who they are in a changing environment.

The Coexistence of Polish and European Identities

Polish and European identities can coexist since individuals may simultaneously feel connected to their nation and to Europe. In some cases these identities may also be in tension with each other since Gen Z often has multiple identities at the same time. Gen Z consumers demonstrate differences and the coexistence of Polish and European identities. Switching between local and international brands depending on the context, and responding most positively to campaigns that integrate both identities.

Brand / Campaign	Sector	Platform	Narrative Type	Identity Cluster	Selection Rationale
Tyskie – "Przejdźmy na Ty"	Beer / FMCG	TV + Instagram	Heritage / Ironic	Cluster 1 & 2	Longest-running identity campaign in Poland; PRL nostalgia encoded in linguistic tradition
Żywiec – "Chce się Ż"	Beer / FMCG	Instagram / FB	Heritage	Cluster 1	Mountain heritage + real-time cultural irony; strong youth engagement
Allegro – "English for Beginners" / "Dom"	E-commerce	YouTube / Instagram	Civic / Emotional	Cluster 3	Most internationally viral Polish campaigns; emigration trauma as national identity wound
Wedel	Food / Confectionery	TikTok / Instagram	Heritage / Nostalgia	Cluster 1	Strongest heritage brand in Poland; reproduced by Gen Z through ironic nostalgia formats
Reserved	Fashion	Instagram / OOH	Hybrid	Cluster 2	Polish-origin brand with Western aesthetics; exemplary hybrid identity strategy
McDonald's × Mata & Bambi	QSR / Food	Instagram / TikTok	Ironic / Mixed	Cluster 2	Gen Z rap collaboration; Warsaw urban irony meets global brand
Lidl Poland – "Lidl wchodzi na TikToka"	Retail / Grocery	TikTok	Ironic / Mixed	Cluster 2	Winner TikTok Ad Awards CEE 2024; anti-corporate humor as authenticity strategy

Brand / Campaign	Sector	Platform	Narrative Type	Identity Cluster	Selection Rationale
Biedronka – "Gang Świeżaków"	Retail / Grocery	TV + in-store	Heritage / Civic	Cluster 1 & 3	Largest loyalty campaign in Polish retail; foreign-owned brand performing Polishness
4F × Anna Lewandowska / Iga Świątek	Sportswear	Instagram	Civic / Future	Cluster 3	Dual model of Polish womanhood; national pride meets European athletic aspiration
Rossmann / DM – Male Skincare	Health / Beauty	Instagram / TikTok	Civic / Future	Cluster 3	Soft masculinity narrative; challenges post-communist male archetype
Żabka – "Żappka" Eco Rewards	Retail / Convenience	App + Instagram	Sustainability	Cluster 4	Eco-messaging undermined by product mix; sustainability as identity performance
Vinted Poland	Fashion / Resale	Instagram / TikTok	Sustainability	Cluster 4	Second-hand as European cool; economic pragmatism dressed as ethics
Zara Poland	Fashion	Instagram / TikTok	European Aspiration	Cluster 3	Global brand as vehicle for European identity; haul culture as belonging signal

Cluster 1 The Emotional Architecture of Heritage

This cluster relies on typically Polish indicators like traditional food, working-class solidarity, PRL-era warmth, regional pride, and the emotional continuity of family memory.

Tyskie "Przejdźmy na Ty" and the PRL Train

Visuals: The PRL era train interior is the most important semiotic choice in this campaign. The worn seats, warm lighting and compartments made for conversation are used not to celebrate socialism politically but to recall its social side. Unlike Bulgarian heritage campaigns that use sepia filters to make the socialist past look like an aesthetic, Tyskie keeps only the shared space and the culture of talking to strangers.

Audio: Everyday speech and regional accents are used alongside the ambient sound of a moving train. There is no voiceover and no loud repeated slogan. The brand communicates quietly and that choice is meaningful in itself.

Result: The message is not that the past was better but that people used to talk to each other more. For a politically divided Polish society, the train carriage becomes a space where both conservative and liberal consumers can share a beer without having to agree on anything. This is reflective nostalgia used as social therapy since the past functions here as an emotional resource rather than a political statement.

Żywiec – “Chce się Ż” (“Makes You Want to Live”)

One of the most famous beer brands created in 1856 in the town of Żywiec. The slogan is a focus on words because “Ż” refers both to the brand name and the Polish word “żyć” (“to live”). The brand presents itself as strongly connected to Polish nature, tradition, and brewing heritage, making it a symbol of Polish identity.

Wedel

Wedel is one of Poland's strongest brands connected with childhood, memories, family traditions. Many of Gen Z TikTok videos include Wedel products when talking about “snacks every Polish child remembers”. It allows younger consumers to touch the brand’s emotional and cultural meaning online. Buying Wedel often represents nostalgia, authenticity, and connection to Polish culture.

Allegro "English for Beginners" and "Dom"

Visuals: Both campaigns use warm, desaturated colours and everyday domestic settings like a small flat, a local park or a house being repaired. There is no epic framing or national symbolism. Polishness is not shown through monuments but through kitchens, phone calls and repaired walls.

Audio: The dialogue is restrained and the silences are long. A soft orchestral sound supports the emotional tone. The weight of the story is carried by what is not said, the distance between a grandfather and a granddaughter, the absence of a parent.

Result: Allegro does not sell nostalgia as a political idea but as something deeply personal. The emigration experience, since millions of Poles left after 2004, is reframed not as a loss but as a reason to stay connected. The brand positions itself as the bridge across that distance.

For Gen Z consumers whose parents may have been part of that wave, this works as what Hartmann and Brunk (2019) call re-enchantment. The brand becomes emotionally important by connecting itself to an experience that Polish society has never fully resolved.

Cluster 2: Ironic and Mixed Narratives

The campaigns show the global irony and European modernity meeting the Polish provincial everyman archetype.

McDonald's Poland × Mata and Bambi

Visuals: The footage is raw and handheld. Warsaw street aesthetics are used throughout, concrete, graffiti and urban informality. There are no polished product shots or studio lighting. The campaign looks deliberately unpolished and that is exactly the point.

Audio: The delivery is rap based and full of Warsaw slang and ironic self deprecation. The references are to everyday Polish life and they mix pride with mockery naturally.

Result: McDonald's, which is an American global brand, becomes the neutral space where the ironic Warsaw provincial and the globally aspiring Gen Z consumer can exist at the same time without contradiction. The brand does not pick a side but simply provides the stage. This works in the same way as the Bulgarian Nescafé bimodal strategy since young consumers enjoy the ironic version as entertainment while using the aspirational version as a lifestyle reference simultaneously.

Lidl Poland – "Lidl wchodzi na TikToka"

Visuals: The format is chaotic and fully native to TikTok. The aesthetics are intentionally anti corporate with a shaky camera, absurdist humour and no product focused shots.

Audio: The tone is conversational and self aware and full of references that only TikTok native audiences would recognise.

Result: A German owned discount chain manages to perform Polishness by completely abandoning the visual language of retail. The campaign communicates that it is not a corporation but one of the audience. The irony works structurally since everyone already knows Lidl is not Polish and that awareness makes the performance more effective rather than less. Identity here is not claimed but staged and Gen Z responds well to that kind of honesty.

Reserved

Reserved is an important case since it has Polish origin combined with international aesthetics. The campaigns frequently reflect Western European fashion through ambassadors, design or global presentations. For young Polish consumers it is an important step forward since they can simultaneously feel pride in a Polish company that is successful while gaining access to a modern European lifestyle image. Reserved is a great example how brands can successfully express the tension and control it rather than choosing one direction. It combines

both into a single model which allows Gen Z to express local belonging and at the same time international relevance simultaneously.

Biedronka – "Gang Świeżaków"

The largest Polish supermarket chain deeply embedded in Polish daily life ran a massively successful sticker loyalty campaign centred on cartoon vegetable characters. The campaign generated genuine forms of community behaviour like families collecting stickers, social media groups trading duplicates, children pressuring parents to shop at Biedronka. Although the campaign was framed through fresh produce and health, the underlying message and deeper function was to position an affordable, foreign-owned retail chain as a distinctly Polish community institution. The irony was that the brand was fined for labelling foreign products as Polish even while presenting itself as a symbol of Polish identity. This reflects the wider foreign/domestic identity paradox visible in both the Polish and Bulgarian retail market.

Cluster 3: Civic and Future-Oriented Narratives

This cluster covers European integration, civic participation, gender norms, and the figure of the successful Pole-in-Europe.

4F × Anna Lewandowska and Iga Świątek

4F has positioned itself between Polish national pride and European sporting success. Its two most visible ambassadors represent distinct models of Polish identity. Anna Lewandowska is a wellness influencer and a wife of Robert Lewandowski performs aspirational femininity through domesticity, health, and family values. Iga Świątek is world No. 1 tennis player and represents merit-based global excellence achieved on European and global stages. They create an image of modern Polish women who are both successful and approachable, similar to how DM's "Soft Masculinity" campaigns in Bulgaria try to redefine masculinity in a softer and more emotional way. At the same time, Robert Lewandowski plays for FC Barcelona while captaining the national team functions as Poland's living proof that Polishness and global success are not contradictory.

Rossmann – Male Skincare Influencers

Rossmann have run campaigns in which they created campaigns showing young male influencers openly talking about skincare, grooming, and self-care in everyday home settings like bathrooms, kitchens, and shared morning routines. These campaigns challenge the 'Polish Alpha', which is a strong, tough male figure connected to working-class culture and traditional Catholic gender roles. The consumer response has been mixed since younger audiences engage positively, while comment sections on traditional-learning platforms show resistance identical to the Bulgarian DM backlash like accusations of inauthenticity and failure to embody 'real' masculinity.

Zara Poland

Zara is a popular brand in Poland especially among young consumers because it represents broader European consumer culture and is positioned through TikTok hauls and influencer

collaborations as a symbol of being current and socially aware. Gen Z by choosing Zara they signal membership in a transnational community of taste. Shopping in Warsaw, Berlin, or Stockholm creates a structurally identical experience. It supports Hall's argument that European identity is constituted through participation in shared representational spaces rather than through explicit political allegiance.

Cluster 4: The Sustainability Mirage

Żabka – "Żappka" Eco Rewards:

Żabka has used its app-based loyalty programme to pilot a series of eco-messaging campaigns targeting young urban consumers which promotes reduced waste packaging, plant-based products, and cashback incentives for sustainable purchases. However, these eco-credentials are consistently weakened by the chain's strong promotion of cheap alcohol and processed food. The sustainability message is seen more as identity signalling for aspirational youth than as a structural ethical commitment.

Vinted Poland

The Lithuanian second-hand marketplace Vinted, which is deeply embedded in Polish youth consumer culture, has run multiple influencer campaigns framing pre-owned fashion as economically smart and environmentally conscious. Polish fashion micro-influencers consistently present Vinted finds as aesthetically desirable, 'vintage,' and globally aligned. The campaigns successfully rebrand frugality as cool but for most users, the primary motivation is price, not environmental ethics. The sustainability framing socially legitimizes what is primarily budget-conscious consumption which is a dynamic structurally identical to the Kaufland IT Bag campaign in Bulgaria, though with economic pragmatism replacing status seeking as the primary driver.

Identity Quadrant: Global-Civic / Transnational Youth Space

Zara's position in the Polish identity quadrant system is distinct from every other brand in the corpus: it is the only brand that occupies the transnational quadrant fully, without any local anchoring. It is not performing Polishness (as Lidl does through ironic domestication), not resolving Polish-European tension (as Reserved does through aspirational pride), and not processing a Polish social wound (as Allegro does through reflective nostalgia). It simply makes the question of Polishness temporarily irrelevant, which is a different and in some ways more radical move.

For a generation conducting significant portions of its social and identity life in digital spaces that are structurally indifferent to national origin where an algorithm serves the same aesthetic content to Warsaw and Stockholm. Zara's complete absence of national specificity is experienced not as cultural loss but as cultural freedom. The brand confirms what Polish Gen Z consumers already know from their digital lives that European belonging is available through aesthetic participation, and that this availability does not require them to stop being Polish. It simply requires them, for the duration of the shopping act, to be something larger.

The Three Brands as an Identity System

Read together, Wedel, Reserved, and Zara reveal the full architecture of the Polish hybrid identity system in a way that no single brand can show individually.

Wedel provides the emotional floor: the private, apolitical, generationally shared memory that grounds Polish identity in something that cannot be disturbed by politics, foreign ownership, or European integration. It is the identity resource consumers return to when they need to feel simply, warmly, unambiguously Polish.

Reserved provides the bridge: the proof that Polish origin and European modernity are compatible, that aspiration does not require self-erasure, that the post-communist anxiety about Polish cultural inferiority relative to the West has been answered, by a company from Gdańsk, no less.

Zara provides the horizon: the space in which the question of Polish identity temporarily recedes and the consumer participates in something larger, performing European-global belonging through aesthetic literacy rather than national declaration.

A Polish Gen Z consumer who shops at all three is not experiencing identity incoherence. They are demonstrating exactly the situational identity repertoire that the thesis's central argument describes, which is the ability to move between different registers of belonging. Wedel's rootedness, Reserved's pride, Zara's transnationalism depending on what a given moment of consumption calls for. The contradiction is not experienced as a contradiction. It is experienced as a range.

This is what post tension identity looks like from the inside. Not the resolution of competing narratives, but their peaceful cohabitation in a single consumer's life. Poland does not need to choose between Wedel's kitchen and Zara's Barcelona because, for Polish Gen Z, both have always already been available. The work of European integration and the emotional, not just the political work is what makes that peaceful cohabitation possible. And that is precisely what Bulgaria, in its current moment of liquidity, is still doing.

Table 1: Lidl Polska TikTok — Strategic Communication Triad

ALLEGRO "ENGLISH FOR BEGINNERS": IDENTITY FUNCTION ANALYSIS			
Core Campaign Proposition	Observed Consumer Response	Theoretical Coding	Nostalgia Type
Emigration as emotional wound: family separation bridged by e-commerce	Ritual annual re-viewing: "Otwieram kolejny sezon na oglądanie reklamy Allegro o dziadku" (3,800 likes)	CCT: re-enchantment — brand connects to unresolved social experience (post-2004 emigration wave)	Reflective — past as emotional resource, not political programme
Grandfather as symbol of generational continuity and aspiration across distance	Durability documentation: "jest 2022 rok, a ja dalej nie mogę wyjść z podziwu" (588 likes)	SIT: in-group warmth without nationalist framing — Polishness expressed through family, not flag	Reflective — present fracture processed through past warmth
Universal human connection transcending national context	International engagement: English teacher dedicates ad to students (328 likes); Chrysler/Eminem comparison	CCT: symbolic consumption — domestic platform positioned as participant in global creative culture	Neither restorative nor national — transcendent civic emotion
Tradition-as-practice: watching the ad has become an annual ritual	"Oglądanie tej reklamy to już tradycja XDDDD" (769 likes) — irony marker signals self-aware sentimentality	Post-ironic patriotism: emotional attachment is genuine but expressed through ironic register	Reflective — tradition actively chosen, not passively inherited

Source: Netnographic analysis of Allegro YouTube comment section (5,700 comments). Engagement figures reflect cumulative interaction across 9-year corpus.

Table 2: Allegro "English for Beginners" — Consumer Identity Function Analysis

LIDL POLSKA TIKTOK: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TRIAD			
	1. The Anti-Corporate Performer	2. The Peer-Level Responder	3. The Transnational Youth Space
Visual Code	Shaky camera, absurdist humor, no product shots, anti-retail aesthetic	Emoji-only replies, casual slang, zero corporate register	Multilingual threads: Polish, English, Ukrainian coexist without friction
Consumer Trigger	Ironic domestication of foreign ownership — the brand is laughed at and loved simultaneously	Brand-as-friend replaces brand-as-authority; peer validation over institutional messaging	European belonging performed through shared internet aesthetics, not national claim
Identity Function	Post-ironic patriotism: laughing at the foreign brand confirms cultural ownership	Peer validation: "Jesteśmy specjalistami 🍷" (127 likes) — brand mirrors youth register	National identity irrelevant; participation in global youth culture is sufficient anchor
Netnographic Signal	"przecież to jest żalosne" (490 likes) — critic still shops at Lidl 30 min later	"Lidl pozdrowi?" → "Pozdro, jak leci? 🍷" — brand replies in peer slang (206 comments)	Ukrainian comment "я тоже хочу такі тапки" received without friction alongside Polish (427 comments)

Source: Netnographic analysis of Lidl Polska TikTok comment sections, 2025. Comment data extracted from posts with 206–427 comments per video.

Table 3: Polish Campaign Clusters — Full Netnographic Summary

POLISH CAMPAIGN CLUSTERS: NETNOGRAPHIC SUMMARY					
Brand(s)	Core Value	Aesthetic Code	Identity Tension	Nostalgia Type	Netnographic Signal
Allegro ("English", "Dom")	Emotional Continuity, Diaspora, Family	Documentary warmth, desaturated domestic settings, restrained dialogue	Emigration Loss vs. European Reunion	Reflective — nostalgia as healing tool	5,700 comments; ritual seasonal re-viewing; international reach (4,100 likes, English comments)
Lidl Polska TikTok	Cultural Irony, Anti-Corporate Humor	Shaky camera, absurdist skits, no retail visual language	Foreign Ownership vs. Performed Polishness	Post-ironic — contradiction domesticated, not resolved	346–427 comments per post; peer-level brand dialogue; multilingual thread co-existence
McDonald's x Mata	Hybrid Cool, Warsaw Street Identity	Raw footage, urban Warsaw aesthetics, rap-based delivery, handheld camera	Provincial Polish Identity vs. Global Aspiration	Reflective — past recontextualised through irony and remix	785 comments; 2,368 likes on top comment; product mourning behavior across 73 reply threads
Biedronka Gang Świeżaków	National Pride, Collective Childhood Memory	Cartoon characters, loyalty gamification, community comment archive	Foreign Ownership vs. Performed Polishness	Restorative — recovering stable, unified childhood past	235 comments; personal sticker inventories; cross-brand childhood memory activation (Tesco, Angry Birds)
Wedel, Żywiec, Tyskie	Traditional Belonging, Heritage, National Memory	Sepia tones, folk motifs, PRL aesthetics, domestic warmth, regional accents	Village / Small Town vs. Cosmopolitan City	Reflective — past as emotional resource, not political programme	Strong TikTok nostalgia reproduction by Gen Z; ironic heritage formats; self-aware sentimentality
Vinted Poland, Żabka Eco Rewards	Sustainability, European Values, Economic Pragmatism	Clean lines, eco-palette, lifestyle photography, influencer authenticity	Ethical Performance vs. Economic Pragmatism	Neither — forward-looking; sustainability adopted as aesthetic before practice	Budget-motivated consumption legitimized through green framing; post-ethical consumption dynamic

Source: Netnographic analysis of Polish brand campaigns across TikTok and YouTube, 2023–2026. Compiled from comment sections of 13 campaigns selected for cultural visibility and narrative type.

Netnographic Analysis of Campaign Narratives in Poland

The Polish netnographic corpus indicates a consumer landscape that is fundamentally different from its Bulgarian counterpart. It differs not in the intensity of identity negotiation, but in its emotional register. Bulgarian comment sections frequently erupt into polarized tensions between defenders of traditions and European integration. Polish digital consumer discourse is what this study identifies as reflective co-ownership which claims that consumers do not argue about whether a brand belongs to them, they simply claim it as already theirs.

THE LIDL POLSKA TIKTOK: Performing Polishness Through Anti-Corporate Humor

The Lidl Polska TikTok account provides the most structurally exposing case in the Polish corpus. Even though the brand is a German-owned discount retailer, its content strategy generates between 346 and 427 comments per post through the use of ironic self-awareness, surreal humor, and platform-native TikTok trends. They develop native TikTok aesthetics and entirely abandon the visual language of retail.

The netnographic data reveals an interesting contradiction immediately. One user with 490 likes leads the comment section of a Lidl cooking video with a dismissal "przecież jest

żałosne" ("this is just pathetic") and yet the thread continues. The brand itself replies to another commenter who says "zrobiłem zakupy w Lidl 30 minut temu" ("I did my shopping at Lidl 30 minutes ago") with a cheerful "Udane?" ("Successful?"). The brand's casual, peer-level response tone as conversational is itself the content.

This dynamic is deepened in the post with 427 comments, where a top comment with 540 likes says: "Halo Lidl! Dołączcie do akcji Łatwogang!!! nie widać Was!" ("Hey Lidl! Join the Łatwogang action!!! You're nowhere to be seen!"). The consumer is not praising the brand but they are inviting it into their cultural space, treating it as a peer rather than a corporation. Another user asks "Na ile like dostanę klapki lidla za darmo???" ("How many likes for free Lidl slippers?"), to which Lidl replies only with 🙄. The brand's silence as irony is understood and seen immediately. It generates 15 reply threads without requiring explanation. Essentially, one comment in Ukrainian "я тоже хочу такі тапки" ("I also want those slippers") and another in English slang "tuff te ubranka" appear without friction alongside standard Polish. This multilingual co-existence in a single comment thread is not incidental. It demonstrates that the Lidl TikTok has become a transnational youth space, where European belonging is performed casually through shared internet aesthetics rather than through any clear national claim.

A further post (206 comments) shows Lidl employees outside a store, generating the comment like "Lidl - jedyny sklep, który ogarnia najbardziej kaucje" ("Lidl — the only shop that handles deposits best"), to which Lidl responds "Jesteśmy specjalistami 🧑🏻💻" ("We're specialists"). The exchange is structured identically to peer banter. The brand is not educating its audience about deposit systems but it is performing relatability through institutional self-deprecation.

The Lidl corpus also includes the Polish version of the institutional friction visible in the Bulgarian Kaufland Euro-transition backlash. Kaufland math students generated mockery "Браво на роботчетата" ("Bravo to the little robots", 1,559 likes) because their cerebral, technocratic delivery activated historical anxieties about top-down European conditioning. Lidl's cooking content generates a leading comment of "przecież to jest żałosne" ("this is just pathetic", 490 likes), followed immediately by continued engagement from the same community.

The Polish Lidl material functions differently. Under one cooking-related campaign, the leading comment describes the content as "just pathetic" ("przecież to jest żałosne", 490 likes). Yet the discussion continues casually, with users still engaging with the brand, joking with each other, and openly admitting that they continue shopping there regardless. The criticism never develops into rejection. Instead, it becomes part of the entertainment surrounding the brand.

This distinction is analytically important because it demonstrates two different relationships between consumers and foreign retail chains. In the Bulgarian case, irony operates defensively. Humour becomes a way of protecting cultural autonomy against a message

perceived as externally imposed. The foreign corporation remains visible as an outsider and therefore politically charged. In the Polish case irony has lost this protective function. Consumers mock the advertisement itself rather than the legitimacy of the brand behind it. Calling a Lidl campaign “pathetic” creates no tension with continuing to shop there, because Lidl’s foreign ownership no longer carries meaningful symbolic weight in everyday consumption.

This asymmetry between Bulgarian ideological friction and Polish aesthetic friction is perhaps the clearest single illustration of the liquidity spectrum the thesis proposes. In Bulgaria, irony is a weapon deployed to protect cultural territory. In Poland irony functions like background noise more constant, familiar, and stripped of any real political tension.

Second-cycle coding places this corpus clearly within the Ironic-Hybrid quadrant. Consumers are fully aware that Lidl is not a Polish company, and this awareness is shared by the brand as well. That is precisely what makes the irony work. People can joke about Lidl acting “Polish” because everyone understands that the performance is intentional. Consumers adapt the brand into their own cultural space and interact with it on their own terms rather than seeing foreign ownership as a threat to national identity. National cultural identity is not threatened by the foreign ownership, it is confirmed by the consumer's ability to domesticate it on their own terms and this is post-ironic patriotism in its clearest form.

McDONALD'S × MATA: The Global Stage as Neutral Ground

The McDonald's × Mata collaboration (785 TikTok comments) produces a different but complementary dynamic. The most-liked comment states “nie zdążyłam spróbować zestawu maty..” (“I didn't get to try Mata's meal..”) with 2,368 likes and is not about identity or Polishness at all. It is about a limited-edition product that sold out. And still the scale of emotional investment in that comment, 73 reply threads, reveals something the thesis already argues which states that the McDonald's × Mata campaign successfully converted a global fast food transaction into a locally meaningful cultural event.

The comment thread operates primarily through affect and product memory rather than explicit identity declaration. Users remember specific items (“jego matcha i cheeseburger były takie...”), ask for the soundtrack name as if it belongs to them (“Jak się ta piosenka nazywa”), and one creator account replies “pisze to na matmie od maty” (“writing this during maths class, inspired by Mata”). It is a piece of wordplay that collapses Mata the rapper, mathematics homework, and McDonald's into a single sentence of Warsaw youth slang.

Second-cycle coding places this example clearly within the Ironic-Hybrid quadrant. The American brand, the Polish rapper, Warsaw youth slang, and global fast-food culture all blend together naturally within the comment section. No user feels the need to resolve this into a coherent identity statement because for Polish Gen Z, as the thesis argues, the contradiction has already been domesticated.

ALLEGRO "ENGLISH FOR BEGINNERS": The Emigration Wound as Shared Cultural Property

The Allegro "English for Beginners" YouTube video presents the most emotionally significant corpus in the Polish dataset, with 5,700 comments accumulated over nine years. The netnographic material reveals something structurally distinct from nostalgia because it reveals ritual re-consumption. One of the most-liked comments with 3,800 likes reads "Otwieram kolejny sezon na oglądanie reklamy Allegro o dziadku." ("I'm opening another season of watching the Allegro grandpa ad.") The user is not simply remembering the ad but they are performing an annual viewing as a deliberate cultural practice, framing it in the language of a television series ("kolejny sezon" / "another season"). The advertisement has been absorbed into the Polish cultural calendar.

This ritual dimension is confirmed across the corpus. Another comment with 769 likes states simply: "Oglądanie tej reklamy to już tradycja XDDDD" ("Watching this ad is already a tradition XDDDD"). The "XDDDD" is an exaggerated form of Polish laugh marker and is critical here. The user treats the advertisement as part of a shared tradition while also joking about the fact that they are emotionally attached to it. This reflects a form of post-ironic patriotism in consumer culture. The emotional connection is genuine, but it is expressed through humor and self-awareness rather than direct seriousness.

A further comment, with 588 likes, dated four years after the campaign's release reads "jest 2022 rok, a ja dalej nie mogę wyjść z podziwu, że można stworzyć tak cudowną reklamę. Allegro top" ("it's 2022 and I still can't get over the fact that you can make such a wonderful ad. Allegro top"). The temporal marker, "it's 2022", functions as proof of durability. The commenter is not just praising the ad, they are documenting the fact that it still works on them, treating their own emotional response as evidence worth recording publicly.

The campaign also breaches national boundaries. An international commenter, identified as a language teacher, writes in English: "I dedicate this to all my English students after 44 years of teaching. This goes to prove it's never too late." The comment has 328 likes. A Polish e-commerce platform's Christmas campaign about a grandfather learning English has become a transnational text about human connection, aging, and aspiration. It is entirely detached from its commercial origin.

One domestic commenter draws a clear comparison to global advertising standards: "Brawo! Już dawno reklama nie zwróciła mojej uwagi. Ostatni raz to była reklama Chryslera z Eminemem - Imported from Detroit." ("Bravo! It's been a long time since an ad caught my attention. Last time was the Chrysler ad with Eminem — Imported from Detroit.") By placing Allegro alongside one of the most celebrated American advertising campaigns of the 21st century, the consumer is not performing Polish pride but they are positioning a domestic platform as a participant in global creative culture. This is the thesis's argument made visible in a single comment which is that Polish and European-global identities coexist not as competing frameworks but as simultaneously available registers.

Second-cycle coding shows that the Allegro corpus fits into two quadrants at the same time. Ethno-Nostalgic in its emotional architecture (emigration, family separation, the grandfather figure as a symbol of generational continuity) and Civic-Emotional in its function (the ad addresses the real social fracture of post-2004 Polish emigration without resolving it politically, offering instead an emotional bridge). The key distinction from the Bulgarian heritage campaigns like Shumensko, and Pirinsko is the type of nostalgia deployed. Bulgarian heritage brands use restorative nostalgia to recover an idealized past, Allegro uses reflective nostalgia to process a present wound. The past is not presented as better but it is presented as the source of the emotional resources needed to navigate the present.

THE BIEDRONKA GANG BIEDRONIAKÓW CORPUS: Memory Architecture, Material Nostalgia, and the Completion of the Foreign Ownership Paradox

The nostalgia associated with the Gang Świeżaków campaign extends beyond simple memories of collecting mascots. The campaign created emotional experiences centered around family, belonging, and shared rituals. Many consumers remember collecting stickers with parents or friends, making the campaign a source of positive childhood memories and emotional attachment.

This can be connected to Hartmann and Brunk's (2019) concept of nostalgia marketing and re-enchantment. They argue that successful nostalgic campaigns do not simply encourage consumers to remember an idealized past. They are trying to reconnect people with emotions, values, and social bonds that may feel missing in the present. In this sense, Gang Świeżaków offered consumers a feeling of togetherness, simplicity, and connection, and this explains why the campaign remains memorable years later.

The campaign can also be interpreted through Bauman's theory of liquid modernity (2000) and consuming life (2007). Bauman argues that in contemporary consumer societies, identities, relationships, and values are increasingly fluid and unstable. As a result, consumers often seek products and experiences that provide a sense of stability and belonging. The popularity of Gang Świeżaków suggests that consumers were not only collecting mascots but also consuming symbolic values such as family, community, and nostalgia. The campaign therefore demonstrates how brands can transform emotional and cultural meanings into consumer experiences, creating loyalty that extends far beyond the immediate purchase. The Gang Biedroniaków campaign represents the most structurally complete example of ironic co ownership in the entire Polish netnographic corpus. Campaigns comment sections reveal that when reading across multiple posts it is not simply consumer enthusiasm for a loyalty mechanic. It is the full architecture of how a Dutch owned discount retailer successfully became, in the lived experience of its consumers, a guardian of Polish childhood.

The Campaign's Semiotic Logic

The visual design of the Gang Biedroniaków mascot universe is the campaign's first and most significant analytical layer. The characters are not generic cartoon animals or fantasy figures. They are personified versions of the Biedronka store itself like a checkout till (KASA), a delivery van, eggs, pizza, a sandwich. The store has been transformed into a toy world.

Children playing with Gang Biedroniaków are not playing with licensed characters but they are playing with a miniature version of the space their parents shop in every week.

This design choice is not innocent. The campaign's caption makes the strategy explicit: "W dzieciństwie lubiliście bawić się w sklep? Zbierzcie nowe Biedroniaki i stwórzcie z nami swój świat" ("Did you love playing shop as a child? Collect the new Biedroniaks and create your world with us"). The brand directly addresses adult consumers, asking them to recall a childhood behavior like playing shop while simultaneously giving their own children the tools to do the same inside a Biedronka. Two generations of memory are being activated and manufactured simultaneously. The parent's nostalgia for playing shop as a child funds the child's attachment to Biedronka as the context in which that play now happens.

The Comment Section as Collector's Community

The netnographic data across the Gang Biedroniaków posts reveals a comment culture structured around active collection reporting rather than passive appreciation. The dominant mode is the progress update. People comment "Zbieram naklejki i właśnie już jedną maskotkę odbiorę niedługo 😊" (3 likes) "I'm collecting stickers and I'm about to pick up my first mascot soon." This is not a comment about the brand or the campaign. It is a personal milestone announcement made in a public space, treating the Biedronka comment section as the natural place to share a small life achievement.

The brand's response to this comment "Ale super, jaką wybrałaś? 🍷🐞" ("Amazing, which one did you choose?") is the mechanism through which the community architecture is maintained. Biedronka does not respond as a corporation managing customer relations but it responds as a fellow enthusiast who wants to know which mascot was chosen, as if the choice carries genuine personal significance. This response pattern repeats across the corpus, for example "Mega gang 🍷", Biedronka replies "Jaka jest Twoja ulubiona maskotka?" ("What's your favourite mascot?"). When Biedronka sends only a single red heart emoji, Biedronka responds "Masz swojego ulubionego Biedroniaka? 🍷" ("Do you have a favourite Biedroniak?"). The brand responds to a single emoji with a full personal question, treating the most minimal possible expression of engagement as an invitation to deeper conversation. The cumulative effect of this interaction pattern is that the comment section becomes a space where consumers feel individually seen by a brand with millions of customers. This is the ironic co-ownership mechanism operating at its most granular level. the Dutch retailer performs the attentiveness of a local shopkeeper who knows your name.

Material Nostalgia vs. Reflective Nostalgia

The Biedronka corpus allows for a theoretically precise distinction that the thesis's existing framework does not yet articulate. The Allegro "English for Beginners" corpus operates through reflective nostalgia which is that the past is recalled as an emotional resource for navigating a present wound, but it remains clearly located in the past. The grandfather's story is told in the past tense. The distance was there and now there is a bridge.

The Biedronka corpus operates through what this study terms material nostalgia which is an emotional connection anchored not in a narrative memory but in a physical object that the user either still possesses or is actively acquiring. The sticker characters from the original Gang Świeżaków campaign that many adult consumers still have in drawers at home are not

memories of childhood. They are childhood, still physically present, still owned. The new Gang Biedroniaków campaign extends this logic forward by manufacturing the material nostalgia of the next generation in real time, creating the objects that today's children will find in their drawers twenty years from now and feel the same involuntary recognition. This temporal double structure so called simultaneously activating past material nostalgia in adult consumers and manufacturing future material nostalgia in children is what makes the Gang Biedroniaków campaign the most architecturally sophisticated loyalty mechanism in the Polish corpus. It does not merely create attachment to the current campaign. It creates the conditions for intergenerational brand loyalty that will reproduce itself without any further marketing investment.

The Completion of the Foreign Ownership Paradox

The most significant finding from this expanded corpus is that the foreign ownership paradox does not merely operate at the level of brand perception but it operates at the level of childhood itself. A user who addressed the brand as "mój drogi" ("my dear") in the comment section "Jutro będę u was na 100 procent mój drogi" ("I'll definitely be at yours tomorrow, my dear") is not making a strategic choice to overlook Biedronka's Dutch ownership. The corporate structure is simply not present in the emotional register within which this interaction takes place. The consumer is talking to someone familiar, someone whose world of plush pizza mascots and checkout till toys has been part of her cultural landscape long enough to feel native.

This is the foreign ownership paradox in its most complete form. Biedronka's Portuguese-Dutch corporate identity has been so thoroughly overwritten by the accumulated emotional texture of decades of Polish daily life like the stickers, the mascots, the comment sections, the childhood memories of playing shop that the question of who owns the company has become genuinely irrelevant to the experience of being a Biedronka customer. The brand did not resolve the tension between foreign ownership and Polish belonging. It made that tension disappear by replacing it with something more powerful which is the feeling of home.

This dynamic illuminates the core asymmetry the thesis identifies when compared to the Bulgarian corpus. In Bulgaria, foreign corporate ownership remains a symbolically charged fact that brands must actively manage like the Kaufland Euro-transition campaign's backlash is partly a displacement of anxieties about foreign institutional control onto a visible corporate actor. In Poland, that displacement has already fully occurred and then fully resolved. The foreign retailer is not foreign anymore. It is where Polish childhood happened, and where the next generation's childhood is happening now. No amount of marketing strategy produces that outcome. It is the accumulated sediment of three decades of daily life.

What the Polish Netnographic Corpus Reveals

The four campaigns analyzed above paint a picture that differs from the Bulgarian corpus not just in scale, but in what the comment sections are actually doing.

In Bulgaria, the data keeps returning to the same underlying friction. Stoichkov versus the math students. The village aesthetic versus the Euro transition. Civic pride versus deep

institutional distrust. Every comment thread feels like a negotiation still in progress like consumers working something out in real time.

Poland feels different. The comment sections are not sites of negotiation. They are sites of confirmation. People show up already knowing what a campaign means to them, and they use the comments to say so, to repeat it, to make it a shared ritual. The Allegro grandfather ad gets rewatched every Christmas. The Lidl slippers are wanted without any irony about the fact that Lidl is German. The McDonald's × Mata meal is mourned when it disappears from the menu. Someone still has their Biedronka sticker in a drawer somewhere and tells you about it in a comment from 2023.

This is what post-tension identity actually looks like when you encounter it in raw data rather than in theory. The contradictions are all still there for example, a Dutch supermarket performing Polishness, an e-commerce platform carrying the weight of an entire generation's experience of emigration, an American fast food chain becoming a genuinely local cultural moment. None of these stop being contradictions on paper. They simply stop feeling like contradictions to the people living inside them. European belonging in Poland does not need to be defended or argued for. It is just the background condition. The water, not the weather.

The Polish Strategic Triad: Allegro, Biedronka, Lidl

Where the Bulgarian corpus is anchored by a single dominant retailer (Kaufland) executing three distinct communication strategies simultaneously, the Polish corpus reveals a distributed version of the same logic : three separate brands occupying three distinct positions in a shared identity system. Together, Allegro, Biedronka, and Lidl form a strategic triad that collectively covers the full emotional spectrum of Polish Gen Z consumer identity: the emigration wound, the childhood anchor, and the ironic everyday. No single brand could occupy all three positions.

	1. The Emigration-Civic (Allegro)	2. The Material- Nostalgic (Biedronka)	3. The Ironic-Hybrid (Lidl TikTok)
Core Emotional Register	Reflective grief, family separation, distance bridged	Restorative childhood, material memory, community belonging	Post-ironic detachment, peer-level humour, anti- corporate performance
Identity Function	Processes an unresolved national social wound	Manufactures intergenerational brand loyalty through physical objects	Domesticates foreign ownership through ironic co-ownership
Consumer Trigger	Ritual re-consumption ("kolejny sezon") — annual emotional event	Progress reporting, collection milestones, brand as fellow enthusiast	Criticism-without- rejection; brand as peer rather than institution
Theoretical Code	CCT: re-enchantment; SIT: in-group warmth without nationalist framing	CCT: material nostalgia; Bauman: consuming symbolic stability in liquid conditions	SIT: post-ironic patriotism; Bauman: liquid identity performed through aesthetic
Netnographic Signal	5,700 comments over 9 years; ritual seasonal re- viewing; international reach (328 likes from English teacher)	235 comments; personal milestone announcements; brand responds as fellow collector	346–427 comments per post; leading criticism followed by continued engagement; multilingual co-existence

Netnographic Analysis: The Allegro Strategic Communication Triad

Allegro's multi-campaign social media presence reveals a three-layer communication strategy that mirrors the structural sophistication of the Kaufland triadic approach in Bulgaria, but operates through emotional register rather than celebrity iconography.

THE ALLEGRO STRATEGIC TRIAD

	1. The Emigration-Emotional ("English for Beginners")	2. The Domestic-Civic ("Dom")	3. The Universal-Human (International Reception)
Visual Code	Documentary warmth, desaturated domestic settings, generational distance	Repair, rebuilding, quiet domestic labour, phone calls across distance	Emotional universality — no Polish-specific markers required
Consumer Trigger	Ritual re-enchantment — brand connects to unresolved post-2004 emigration experience	Present-tense fracture processed through past warmth	Platform adoption as transnational civic emotion
Identity Function	Reflective nostalgia as healing tool — past as emotional resource, not political statement	SIT: in-group warmth without nationalist framing — Polishness expressed through absence, not flag	Neither restorative nor national — transcendent civic emotion
Netnographic Signal	"Otwieram kolejny sezon" (3,800 likes) — ritual seasonal re-viewing; irony marker signals self-aware sentimentality	"jest 2022 rok, a ja dalej nie mogę wyjść z podziwu" (588 likes) — durability documentation	English teacher comment (328 likes); Chrysler/Eminem comparison — domestic platform positioned in global creative culture

The three layers operate simultaneously on different consumer segments. The emigration emotional layer reaches Polish consumers with direct family experience of post-2004 migration, a demographic that spans Gen Z children of migrants through to the migrants themselves, now returning or maintaining digital connection. The domestic-civic layer operates on a broader Polish consumer who recognises the quiet difficulty of distance without necessarily having lived it. The universal-human layer extends the brand's reach beyond Poland entirely, transforming a domestic e-commerce platform's Christmas campaign into a transnational text about aging, aspiration, and human connection.

The critical distinction from the Bulgarian Kaufland Euro-transition backlash is instructive here. When Kaufland attempted institutional communication, the math students explaining Euro conversion, it activated historical anxieties about top-down conditioning and generated defensive irony ("Браво на роботчетата"). When Allegro communicates about a structurally equivalent social fracture, the mass emigration of Polish workers after EU accession, it generates ritual emotional investment precisely because it makes no institutional claim. The emigration is not presented as a policy success or failure. It is presented as something that happened to families, and the brand positions itself as the bridge across that distance, not the explainer of its causes.

This asymmetry between Bulgarian institutional skepticism and Polish emotional absorption is one of the thesis's clearest empirical findings. In Poland, brands that speak to social fractures through personal emotional registers are absorbed as cultural property. In Bulgaria, brands that speak to structural transitions through institutional registers are resisted as elite conditioning.

The Full Polish Identity Quadrant Map

Equivalent to the Bulgarian four-quadrant synthesis in section 4.1.5, the Polish netnographic corpus resolves into five stable identity positions. Unlike the Bulgarian case where consumers move between quadrants with visible friction, the comment sections are sites of active negotiation. Polish consumers move between quadrants fluidly and without the sense that any position threatens any other. The quadrants are not competing but they are complementary registers in a settled identity repertoire.

POLISH CONSUMER IDENTITY QUADRANTS

Quadrant	Brands	Core Value	Aesthetic Code	Identity Tension	Consumer Behaviour Pattern
Ethno-Nostalgic	Wedel, Żywiec, Tyskie	Traditional Belonging, Heritage, PRL-era warmth	Sepia tones, folk motifs, domestic warmth, regional accents	Village / Small Town vs. Cosmopolitan City	Restorative — past as emotional anchor, apolitical and cross-generational; organic TikTok reproduction
Irony-Hybrid	McDonald's × Mata, Lidl, TikTok, Reserved	Cultural Irony, Hybrid Cool, Aspirational Pride	Raw Warsaw aesthetics, anti-corporate TikTok formats, international fashion codes	Provincial Polish Past vs. Global Aspiration	Reflective — past recontextualised through irony and remix; criticism without rejection; post-ironic patriotism

Emigration-Civic	Allegro ("English", "Dom")	Emotional Continuity, Family, Diaspora	Documentary warmth, golden light, restrained dialogue, generational distance	Emigration Loss vs. European Reunion	Reflective — nostalgia as tool for healing present fracture; ritual re-consumption; transnational reach
Restorative-Collective	Biedronka, Tyskie (football)	National Pride, Collective Memory, Material Continuity	Epic framing, crowd energy, gamification, cartoon characters	Foreign Ownership vs. Performed Polishness	Restorative — recovering a stable, unified national past; material nostalgia manufactured in real time for next generation
Sustainability-Aspirational	4F, Rossmann/DM, Żabka, Vinted	European Aspiration, Civic Values, Sustainability	Clean lines, eco-palette, lifestyle photography, influencer authenticity	Ethical Performance vs. Economic Pragmatism	Neither — forward-looking; sustainability adopted as aesthetic before practice; nostalgia absent or inverted

Reading the Quadrant Map: What Poland Reveals

The most analytically significant feature of this map is not any individual quadrant but the relationship between them. In the Bulgarian equivalent (section 4.1.5), movement between quadrants carries friction. The Ethno-Nostalgic and Euro-Technocratic positions are in active tension, and consumers must perform identity work to navigate between them. In Poland, the quadrants sit alongside each other without generating that friction.

A Polish Gen Z consumer can watch the Allegro grandfather ad and cry (Emigration-Civic), buy Wedel chocolate for their grandmother (Ethno-Nostalgic), joke about Lidl's German ownership while admitting they shop there three times a week (Ironic-Hybrid), and order from Vinted while knowing that their primary motivation is price rather than ecology (Sustainability-Aspirational), all in the same week, without any of these acts creating cognitive dissonance or requiring identity reconciliation.

This is the empirical content of what the thesis calls post-tension identity. It is not the absence of contradiction. The contradictions are all still visible: a Dutch supermarket performing Polishness, an e-commerce platform carrying the emotional weight of a generation's emigration experience, a German discount chain winning TikTok Ad of the Year. None of these stop being contradictions on paper. They simply stop feeling like contradictions to the people living inside them.

The theoretical implication, extending Bauman's liquid modernity framework, is that liquidity does not mean the dissolution of identity but its multiplication. Polish Gen Z consumers do

not have less identity than their Bulgarian counterparts. They have more available identity positions, and crucially, they have the cultural capacity to move between them without each move feeling like a betrayal of the others. This capacity is the ability to hold multiple identity registers simultaneously without hierarchising them. This is what advanced liquidity actually looks like from the inside.

Those cases show that young Polish consumers are not forced to choose between being Polish or European. It helps them to express different versions of themselves in a strategic way. Heritage brands offer emotional continuity but at the same time international brands show aspiration. Some hybrid brands offer both at the same time. From the consumer perspective contradictory marketing narratives are often not contradictory but are simply differently used in moments of everyday life.

Poland is a strong example for studying identity-based consumer behavior since it connects deep feelings of national pride and European integration. Polish national identity is strongly visible in everyday life as many Poles feel connected to their language, history, traditions and national symbols. Its pride is expressed through celebrations of independence, attachment to traditions and appreciation of domestic products. It shows how patriotism and consumer culture interact which makes Poland extremely relevant.

Contradictory Narratives Are Not Always Contradictory

Local heritage and European modernity may appear opposed at the level of branding strategy they often function together in consumers lives. For Gen Z identity is flexible so consumers might move without perceiving tensions.

It is relevant especially for Poland since national identity stays meaningful and European collaboration is normalized. Young consumers might feel connected to Polish traditions and cultural memory but at the same time appreciate modern European lifestyle and international trends. Those forms may overlap rather than compete.

This supports the Baran and Trzebiński idea that consumers might have multiple identities at the same time. Depending on the situation Gen Z rather than choosing one identity permanently they often combine both in everyday life.

Symbolic Meaning of Consumption

To fully understand consumer behavior we need to understand that consumption is not only functional but also symbolic. It is a form of communicating identity as we can learn from Consumer Culture Theory and the work of Baran and Trzebiński. Brands help individuals to express identity, values, and social belonging and they are chosen because of what they represent.

This idea was also connected by Bourdieu's concept of taste which suggests that preferences are chosen to differentiate oneself from another. For Gen Z, consumption became a way of signaling who they are and to position themselves with certain positions and cultural groups. It proved that different categories show different symbolic purposes. Emotional identity and local belonging is connected with food and everyday products but fashion and technology

strongly connected with self presentation and social visibility. Different brands are used to express different identities in different contexts.

Research Findings - Poland

As Bulgaria, Polish marketing operates in a sensitive area between two worlds. Traditional advertising focuses on conservative national tropes like hard working citizens, family around the table and football heroes. Meanwhile social media campaigns created for younger customers, follow global aesthetic and irony. Poland has its own distinct identity negotiation process.

In Poland, brands mostly operate within a cultural landscape where local heritage and European modernity no longer function as fully opposing forces. Some campaigns remain strongly connected to nostalgia, tradition, Catholic symbolism, regional identity, and emotional continuity. At the same time others promote mobility, cosmopolitan lifestyles, sustainability, and participation in global consumer culture. Among Polish Generation Z consumers, these narratives increasingly coexist rather than compete.

Polish and European identities are not experienced as mutually exclusive, but as flexible identity abilities that are activated depending on social context. In Bulgaria, European integration often remains emotionally contested, EU membership in Poland has largely become normalized within everyday life and consumer culture. The identity negotiation is no longer centred around the question of “Poland or Europe?” The focus is instead on which version of Polishness is most compatible with contemporary European belonging.

This shows a broader transformation in post-socialist consumer identity. European identity among Polish Gen Z consumers has become domesticated and incorporated into everyday Polishness rather than seen as an isolated aspiration. As a result, Polish marketing narratives increasingly rely on hybridity, irony, emotional nostalgia, rather than direct ideological tension.

To explore this dynamic, thirteen Polish campaigns were selected based on their cultural visibility, viral reach on Instagram and TikTok. Their opposing approaches to national identity, European integration, and contemporary consumer values.

Polish Campaign Conclusion

The five identity positions identified in this study — the Ethno-Nostalgic, the Ironic-Hybrid, the Emigration-Civic, the Euro-Athletic, and the Sustainability-Aspirational — do not compete for dominance among young Polish consumers. They coexist as repertoires, activated selectively depending on context. This is the fundamental insight that distinguishes the Polish case from the Bulgarian one.

In Bulgaria, the tension between local heritage and European integration remains structurally unresolved. The European dream is still contested, perceived by significant segments of the

population as an imposition from a distant elite, and brands must navigate this conflict carefully. In Poland, EU membership has been absorbed into the baseline of national self-understanding. The question is no longer whether to be Polish or European, but which version of Polishness, and which register of European belonging, is appropriate for a given moment of consumption.

What Poland therefore reveals — and what Bulgaria has not yet reached — is what post-tension identity looks like. It is not the resolution of contradiction, but its domestication. The dual identity is no longer a wound to be managed but a resource to be deployed. For marketers and policymakers alike, this suggests that the most important variable in Eastern European identity formation is not the content of the narratives being offered, but the degree to which European integration has been emotionally settled. Poland, more than any other post-socialist case examined here, shows what that settlement looks like from the inside.

This conclusion confirms the framework developed by Naukowa, Baran, and Trzebiński regarding the coexistence of identities. According to Hall (1980), identity is not an essence but a product of representation, shifting with context. Successful Polish brands among Generation Z are not those that choose between national and European positioning — they are those that create the conditions for both to be expressed simultaneously, depending on what the consumer needs at that moment.

Polish Campaign Clusters: Summary of Identity Tensions and Nostalgia Types

Brand(s)	Core Value	Aesthetic Code	Identity Tension	Boym Nostalgia Type
Wedel, Żywiec, Tyskie (Heritage)	Traditional Belonging, Heritage, National Memory	Sepia tones, folk motifs, PRL aesthetics, domestic warmth	Village / Small Town vs. Cosmopolitan City	Reflective — past as emotional resource, not political programme
McDonald's × Mata, Lidl TikTok, Reserved	Cultural Irony, Hybrid Cool	Raw footage, Warsaw trap aesthetics, anti-corporate humor	Provincial Authenticity vs. Global Aspiration	Reflective — past recontextualised through irony and remix
Allegro ("Dom", "English")	Emotional Continuity, Family, Diaspora	Documentary warmth, golden light, restrained dialogue	Emigration Loss vs. European Reunion	Reflective — nostalgia as tool for healing present fracture
Biedronka, Tyskie (Football)	National Pride, Collective Memory	Epic framing, sport iconography, crowd energy	Foreign Ownership vs. Performed Polishness	Restorative — recovering a stable, unified national past
4F, Rossmann, Żabka, Vinted	European Aspiration, Civic Values, Sustainability	Clean lines, pastel eco-palette, lifestyle photography	Ethical Performance vs. Economic Pragmatism	Neither — forward-looking; nostalgia absent or inverted

Integration of Identities Among Young Polish Consumers

This analysis presented above shows that Polish and European identity should not be seen or understood as mutually exclusive. Polish identity remains present and significant for younger consumers in today's world. Everyday habits, memories, traditions, and language remain powerful and shape how young consumers perceive themselves and communicate with others. For Gen Z, the key transformation is not Polish identity itself, but the way it is

expressed. Heritage is no longer simply passed down but it is selectively adapted, reshaped, and used differently depending on social context of consumption.

The difference is visible especially between campaigns focused on restoring a fixed image of the national past with those that approach nostalgia more critically, using it as an emotional or ironic reference rather than an unquestioned truth. Tyskie's PRL train campaign and Allegro's story of the emigrant grandfather both use the past to satisfy present emotional needs rather than to recreate or restore it. This difference also reflects broader attitudes toward EU integration like Polish campaigns often settle the tension between heritage and modernity.

Contradictory Narratives Are Not Always Contradictory

The main finding from this study is that what appears to be contradictory marketing narrative is often not experienced as conflicting by the audience. For Gen Z consumers identity is flexible and situational. The same individual can express Polish identity in one situation and European identity in another without experiencing any harm or disharmony. This supports Bauman's model of liquid identity, which says that the self is understood as a continuous project rather than a fixed structure.

The dual identity is comfortable in Poland since EU membership is accepted and the tension between national and European belonging has been fixed. Hall's encoding/decoding framework is extremely useful here since many Polish Gen Z consumers accept the message that "European values are good for you" in the way it was intended.

5. Discussions

5.1 Integration of Identities Among Young Polish Consumers

This analysis and examples presented in this case suggest that Polish and European identity should not be seen as a process of replacement. Polish identity remains present and meaningful for young consumers in a present consumer culture. Everyday practices, memories, traditions, and language still shape how young consumers perceive themselves and others around.

What the Polish case ultimately reveals is not the disappearance of national identity under globalization, but its transformation into something more fluid, situational, and performative. Polish Gen Z consumers do not abandon heritage in favour of Europeanness. They selectively move between different identity repertoires depending on social context, platform, lifestyle, or emotional need. Heritage therefore continues to matter, but it is expressed differently than for previous generations. The tension between Polishness and European modernity no longer functions as a cultural hurt that must be resolved. Preferably as a symbolic resource that can be continuously reinterpreted, adapted, and performed within contemporary consumer culture.

5.2 The Sustainability Paradox

The Polish market shows a paradox around sustainability. On one hand, eco-language is used to express European identity rather than as ethical practice. Vinted in Poland promotes sustainability values while serving primarily economic motivations.

This should not be seen as hypocrisy but rather the standard way of value adoption in societies experiencing rapid cultural change. As we see Bauman argues in his idea of liquid modernity, values in modern society often function like consumer goods, they are flexible, temporary, and shaped by changing social trends. In this context, Sustainability is a value that has been adopted as an aesthetic before it has been absorbed as a practice. Marketing is not the cause of this gap, but it is its most visible surface.

This finding has important implications for both marketing practitioners and policymakers. The main challenge is not only to explain sustainable values more effectively but to create the emotional and social conditions and connections. Those rather than only being performed would be genuinely lived and practised.

5.3 Poland and Bulgaria as a Comparative Mirror

The Polish and Bulgarian cases reveal that the relationship between marketing narratives and consumer identity is not universal but contingent on the degree of cultural settlement around European integration. In Bulgaria, brands must actively mediate between two competing identity frameworks (the ethnic-nostalgic and the European-aspirational) because that tension is still alive and unresolved. In Poland, that mediation has already happened at a societal level, which is why irony works so well: you can only laugh at a contradiction once you are no longer threatened by it. This comparative finding extends Bauman's liquid modernity framework in an important direction which tells us liquidity is not a uniform condition across post-socialist societies, but a spectrum. Poland is further along that spectrum than Bulgaria, and its marketing landscape shows exactly what more advanced liquidity looks like: flexible, ironic, hybrid, and entirely comfortable with contradiction.

5.4 Theoretical link

This study deepens CCT's concept of liquid identity within transitional societies. In post-socialist spaces, identity is inherently fragmented. Consumers use cultural artifacts (brands, clothing, memes) to temporarily anchor themselves to shifting global standards. Consumption in these markets is not just a commercial transaction; it is a tool for identity negotiation. Whether a Polish consumer is using Vinted to adopt an aestheticized European environmental stance, or a Bulgarian consumer is buying an eco-bag at a German hypermarket to gain modern status, purchasing second-hand clothes to reject fast fashion, or drinking water that funds investigative journalism, they are consuming to position themselves within a changing world order. As Bauman argues in his framework of liquid modernity, values function like flexible, temporary consumer goods. This advanced liquidity is visible in Poland's complete comfort with hybridity and contradiction, while in Bulgaria, consumption remains a critical, active tool used to resolve the lingering friction between local heritage and global integration.

5.5 Social Identity Theory (SIT) and In-Group/Out-Group Dynamics

SIT traditionally looks at fixed groups, but this netnography shows that post-socialist youth constantly cycle through different in-group alignments based on context:

- 1) When defending local intelligence against elite technocrats (such as the backlash against top-down corporate education campaigns), they align as the "Educated Local Class".
- 2) When reacting to traditional patriarchal stigmas, geopolitical pressures, or outmoded nationalism, they align with the "Global Digital Native Collective", using cross-border internet culture, memes, and English-language idioms to mock and defuse outdated local attitudes.

Irony serves as the primary boundary control mechanism. It allows young consumers to step into global European modernity while proudly preserving their distinct, skeptical local perspective. This is a spectrum of maturity: in Bulgaria, irony is a weapon used to safely step into Europe without feeling culturally threatened; in Poland, where European integration is normalized, irony has evolved into a "post-ironic patriotism". This allows Polish Gen Z to remix national symbols through humor without the fear of appearing backward or culturally outdated.

5.6 Post-Ironic Patriotism

A recurring pattern visible in Polish Gen Z branding is what could be described as post-ironic patriotism. National symbols, traditions, stereotypes, and cultural references are no longer completely rejected, but they are also not accepted in a fully serious or unquestioned way. Instead, they are consumed through humour, nostalgia, irony, and self-awareness. This allows younger consumers to feel connected to Polishness without appearing overly nationalistic, conservative, or culturally outdated. Campaigns such as McDonald's × Mata, Lidl's TikTok campaigns, Tyskie, or even football-related advertising show that patriotism among younger generations increasingly operates through remix and reinterpretation rather than direct celebration. Polish identity is therefore not disappearing under globalization, but being reshaped into more flexible and socially acceptable forms that fit digital culture and contemporary youth aesthetics.

5.7 Comparative discussion

Despite sharing a foundational post-socialist direction in navigating the collapse of centralized economies, the Western consumer culture flow, and integration into the European Union, the modern-day digital consumer landscapes in Poland and Bulgaria reveal very divergent states of cultural settlement. Instead of responding to globalisation the same way, the netnographic data reveals a deep asymmetry in the way Poles and Bulgarians negotiate heritage and European identities in the digital space.

The contributions of this study, particularly the comparative analysis can be summarised in four core socio-cultural dualities, presented by the table below:

Post-socialist Consumer Discourse Matrix		
Dimension	Bulgaria (Active Negotiation)	Poland (Domesticated Settlement)
Supranational Alignment Corporate Ownership Register Vernacular Irony Mode Sustainability Paradigm	Distant/Technocratic Institutionally Policed Defensive Counter-Irony Conspicuous Class Performance	Normalized Background Condition Emotionally Absorbed Post-Ironic Patriotism Pragmatic Budget Legitimation

A fundamental difference between the Polish and Bulgarian cases lies in the emotional position of Europe within the consumer imagination. Bulgarian campaigns often present Europe as something aspirational, distant, and still emotionally unresolved, something the country is trying to “catch up” to.

In Poland, however, European belonging has become far more normalized within everyday life and consumer culture. Because of this, Polish campaigns are generally more comfortable using irony, hybridity, and fluid identity performances. Brands in Bulgaria still need to carefully mediate the tension between heritage and European integration, while in Poland this contradiction has largely been absorbed into everyday identity. European belonging is no longer emotionally fragile in the same way, which allows Polish Gen Z consumers to move more freely between local traditions and global modernity without perceiving strong conflict between them.

The Foreign Ownership Paradox

A strong contrast is found in the empirical findings of how Gen Z consumers process the corporate structures behind hypermarket retailers like Kaufland and Biedronka. Despite both of them being managed by foreign conglomerates, the netnographic reactions reveal fundamentally different defensive mechanisms.

In Bulgaria, foreign ownership remains visible and symbolically charged. Whenever a brand like Kaufland attempts a more scientific or specialist-led communication, as in the Euro transition campaign, it triggers anxieties, often historically-rooted, with regard to external, elite oversight. Even the youth response is often dismissive and satirical (labeling expressions like “the little robots”). Irony in this case functions as a cultural autonomy shield.

In Poland, this emotional tension has already been resolved. The clearest example of this is the Biedronka Foreign Ownership Paradox, where the Portuguese-Dutch corporate structure is erased completely from the mind of the consumer. Childhood collectibles and loyalty stickers have instead replaced it. When a Polish TikTok user refers to the brand affectionately as “my dear”, the corporate reality is overshadowed by the feeling of home and memories.

Structural Triad vs. Monolithic Executions

While the Bulgarian market demonstrates a single retail giant like Kaufland building three competing layers of narratives simultaneously, the Polish ecosystem uses a decentralized and strategic triad with Allegro, Biedronka and Lidl. These three distinct brands form different parts in the psychological space of Polish Gen Z, covering seamlessly the emigration wound (Allegro), childhood anchor (Biedronka), and the everyday life (Lidl), without causing emotional friction.

Weaponized Counter-Irony vs. Post-Ironic Patriotism

Both consumer groups seem to rely considerably on humour to process identity, yet apply irony to oppose socio-psychological goals, which could be explained by Social Identity Theory.

Bulgarian consumers apply aggressive irony as a form of defense against internal stigmas and external geopolitical tensions. Faced with the polarizing archaic tropes of traditional media such as the “Bai Ganyo” and “Balkan Alpha” archetype, Gen Z manages to use a hybrid internet language to disarm the said local stigmas. This strategy reaches its peak in youth subcultures, like club Hot Pop, where political propaganda is actively neutralized via mockery and hyperboles. Irony, can therefore, be seen as a mechanism or a survival tool claiming agency in a volatile socio-political environment.

Polish Gen Zers, on the contrary, practice the so-called “post-ironic patriotism”, where national and historic symbols and stereotypes are remixed and consumed with a high level of awareness. Campaigns like McDonald’s x Mata or Lidl’s self-deprecating TikTok cooking commentary show how Poles preserve their “Polish essence” through playful consumerism. The existing criticism does not escalate further to brand rejection. Instead, it serves as a common cultural norm, affirming their dual identity as both completely Polish and global citizens.

Conspicuous Performance vs. Pragmatic Legitimization in Sustainability

When analyzing the reception of modern EU values like sustainability and circular economy practices, the comparison reveals a link between economic stability and symbolic brand value.

For Bulgarian consumers, price sensitivity and institutional distrust significantly affect green narratives. In a setting where individuals and families are preoccupied with short-term survival and rising utility costs, sustainability ads are seen through sceptical lenses. Subsequently, when a sustainability campaign is marketed successfully, e.g. the ITBAGS, it experiences an aesthetic conversion. Thus, sustainable lifestyle becomes a symbol of a privileged European status, inaccessible to the masses, and unintentionally enforcing class divisions.

In Poland, a register of economic pragmatism defines how the sustainability mirage plays out. In haul ecosystems like Vinted, green values are easily claimed, however, budget concerns remain the driving force. In this example, sustainability is used to justify a price-sensitive

consumption choice. Poles demonstrate a smooth absorption of “Western” principles, by consuming the aesthetic symbol of green compliance as a supplementary bonus to resourcefulness.

Refining Liquid Modernity

The comparative matrix built by this research expands Bauman’s notion of Liquid Modernity. While Bauman treated this liquefying force of global consumer markets as a homogeneous wave in the post-socialist countries, this study reveals that liquidity is culturally anchored and unevenly distributed.

In Bulgaria, consumer identity remains at a turbulent stage. European integration can still be viewed as a threat, colliding with local historical heritage. Polish consumer culture, in contrast, inhabits a domesticated liquidity phase. At this stage, identity negotiation is harmonious, and no longer perceived as threatening.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Synthesis of Findings

This thesis has investigated how contradictory marketing narratives influence the identity negotiation of young consumers in Poland and Bulgaria as they navigate the space between local heritage and European integration. Through a comparative netnographic analysis, this study demonstrates that post-socialist youth identity is characterized by highly sophisticated, strategic consumer behavior.

The findings reveal a distinct spectrum of liquid modernity across the region. In Bulgaria, where the tension between ethnic-nostalgic and European-aspirational frameworks remains active and emotionally unresolved, corporate institutional messaging triggers historical skepticism. However, youth eagerly embrace global values, such as sustainability, civic transparency, and modern self-care, when they are reframed through grassroots activism, fashion aesthetics, or viral digital memes.

In contrast, the Polish market reveals a more advanced stage of cultural settlement, where European belonging has become fully normalized in everyday life. This normalization manifests as a "sustainability paradox", where green values are consumed as an aesthetic marker of European identity before being absorbed as a practice, and as a "post-ironic patriotism," where youth comfortably remix national symbols through digital humor.

Ultimately, across both markets, young consumers refuse to choose between an insulated national identity and an assimilative European identity. Instead, they utilize weaponized irony, hybrid slang, and conscious lifestyle choices to construct a fluid, situational identity space that allows them to participate fully in global modernity while retaining a sharp, distinctively local perspective.

6.2 Theoretical and Managerial Contributions

Theoretical Contributions

This study expands Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) by mapping them onto the digital landscape of post-socialist societies in transition. It provides a new conceptual framework showing how liquid identity is negotiated through humor, irony, and camp mimicry, proving that irony can serve as a powerful tool for cultural defense, social alignment, and the performance of post-ironic patriotism. Furthermore, it extends Bauman's liquid modernity framework by demonstrating that liquidity is not uniform across post-socialist spaces but functions as a spectrum dependent on the cultural normalization of globalization.

Managerial Contributions

For international marketing practitioners and corporate social responsibility (CSR) directors operating in Eastern Europe, the study offers clear guardrails:

- 1) **Acknowledge the Regional Spectrum:** Marketers must avoid treating the post-socialist bloc as a monoculture; strategies in less-settled markets like Bulgaria must carefully mediate heritage tensions, while campaigns in advanced liquid markets like Poland can deploy fluid, hybrid, and highly ironic identity plays.
- 2) **Avoid Top-Down Dictates:** Brands must abandon dry, top-down educational messaging when communicating structural changes or sustainability mandates, as this approach activates historical anxieties and triggers consumer backlash.
- 3) **Build Emotional Connections:** To successfully connect with Gen Z, marketers must collaborate with authentic local creators, lean into self-aware humor, and respect the consumer's desire for cultural agency—moving from purely performed aesthetics to genuinely lived consumer connections.

6.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides rich, qualitative depth through netnography, it is limited by its primary focus on highly vocal, digitally active urban youth on Instagram and TikTok. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating comparative studies across other post-socialist contexts (such as Central Europe versus the Western Balkans) to see if this liquidity spectrum holds true across different regional socio-economic histories.

Additionally, combining netnographic observations with depth interviews could offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of less vocal consumer segments, tracing how these digital identity performances and "post-ironic" cultural adaptations translate into everyday offline behaviors and genuine sustainable practices.

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