

Selling the "That Girl" Dream: How Brands Have Capitalized on the Viral Trend

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Abstract. *The “That Girl” trend came out in early 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a privileged segment of society with the chance to take a step back and change their daily habits in order to become a healthier, more confident version of themselves, turning a moment of crisis into a time for reflection. This paper aims to explore the influences of the “That Girl” trend on the economy, exploring different concepts like marketing strategies, demand shifts and price elasticity. By focusing on how the trend has been adopted by various companies, this research analyzes the adjustments implemented, such as product development and consumer targeting, to make use of a growing trend. The analysis shows how businesses have capitalized on a phenomenon, leveraging it to increase profitability. Moreover, the paper offers valuable insights into the role of influencers and social media in promoting the trend, focusing on how exclusivity marketing has changed consumer behaviour, by conducting quantitative research.*

Keywords: that girl, social media, consumer behavior, exclusive marketing, trends, influencer

Introduction

Generation Z has been the one that has lived the perfect lifestyle, always telling their stories through Instagram posts, TikTok Daily vlogs and Pinterest visuals, but does this mean that the life they are portraying is the ideal one? This paper is going to analyze how social media creates different trends that most people from Generation Z take part in and will try to take a deeper look at the impact of one specific trend that is still going on, with no prediction of going away too soon. The “That Girl” trend has emerged unintentionally, with the best reasoning and no expectations to have the big success that it did; however, it has managed to offer a new perspective in the digital marketing world. While it promotes positive habits such as organization, self-care and a healthy lifestyle, the trend also raises concerns about economic accessibility and societal pressures. This paper delves into the economic and social implications of the “That Girl” trend, examining how marketing strategies and public opinions shape consumer behavior.

Literature review

Origins and evolution of the trend

The “That Girl” aesthetic emerged in 2020 at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, when an opportunity presented itself for a privileged sector of society to focus on their self improvement, turning a devastating world event into a time for reflection and leisure activities. After the initial shock of the pandemic was over, in the summer of 2020 productivity videos labeled #ThatGirl started flooding the internet (Golden, 2023).

The “That Girl” movement can be considered a rebranding of the popular phenomenon “It Girl”, which was first used in the 1920s to talk about the famous actress Clara Bow after the release of her movie “It” in 1927. This figure was to have an enduring, or at least recurrent, media future. Over time, the “It Girl” label evolved, often referring to an attractive young woman who was stylish, trendy and admired by the media. Similarly, the “That Girl” phenomenon describes a woman who has a very aesthetically curated image, propagated through social media platforms. This progression illustrates the cyclical nature of fashion trends that resurface to align with modern concepts. As noted in Vogue Business (2024), it is very likely for old trends to make a comeback, as designers bring a fresh perspective and reinterpret old ideas to appeal to the contemporary world. At the same time, we can observe that these trends are targeted especially towards young women, reinforcing specific ideas of femininity and attractiveness. Throughout the years, beauty standards kept evolving and changing, and the public kept adapting as well did the brands that started capitalizing on women’s insecurities, coming up with ideas to “fix” them. “Beauty standards are often used in marketing as a powerful tool to influence consumer behavior. Advertisers often capitalize on society's perceptions of beauty by using images that conform to prevailing ideals of beauty to create a desired impression.” (Viktorovna, 2024). Companies keep releasing all sorts of products and marketing them as a tool to help them fit into the continuously changing beauty standards. In 2024, The Guardian published an article titled “I want to ignore beauty culture. But I’ll never get anywhere if I don’t look a certain way” which explained how some women feel accomplished after spending a lot of time, money and energy into their looks in order to reach the specific standards, while others experience feelings of low self-esteem caused by the pressure to maintain a certain image. “Of the over 3,200 people polled, about 60% identify as average- or below-average looking, of whom 74% still find their lives ‘fulfilling’. While 41% of total respondents believe their appearance *has* positively impacted their economic opportunities, only 27% feel good about the amount of time and brain space they’ve dedicated to cosmetic pursuits. The large majority of those surveyed doubt the benefits of beauty are worth that cost.” (The Guardian, 2024). This difference of opinion highlights how societal expectations can affect personal well-being, but also explains how the companies are searching for sensitive points in order to create more profitability.

A typical video shows “a day in the life” of a woman in her late teens or early twenties waking up as early as 5 am, heading to the kitchen and cooking a healthy breakfast, which is either an avocado toast or an açai bowl. Afterwards, she is preparing her signature vanilla matcha latte with vegan milk that she drinks while journaling or reading. Then, “That Girl” gets ready to go to her reformer Pilates class that she attends 5 times a week, she puts her hair up in a slicked back bun and does her signature natural, glowy makeup. When she gets home, she does her homework or studies using her aesthetically pleasing, colour-coordinated notes. She cooks another nutritious, yet presentable dish. “That Girl” ends her night by doing her 10 step skincare routine and getting into her silk pyjamas.

These videos essentially serve as a guidebook for viewers to become their happiest, most productive selves. The rapid commercial success was determined by social media platforms, which have transformed it from a simple micro-trend into a widespread commercial movement. Another factor that played an essential part into the rise of this trend is the accessibility of these platforms, which allows users to engage with “That Girl” content on a daily basis and, shaping their purchasing decisions. Additionally, brands started positioning their products as essential components of this lifestyle by using influencer collaborations, targeted ads and sponsored posts. Besides consuming content traditionally, social media also allows users to interact with each other, exchange opinions, information, create and share content, which opens the possibility for companies to continuously interact with customers. “The functionality of social media platforms can be understood by looking at seven essential

components: Identity, Conversation, Exchange, Presence, Relationships, Reputation, and Groups”, as seen in Figure 1 (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

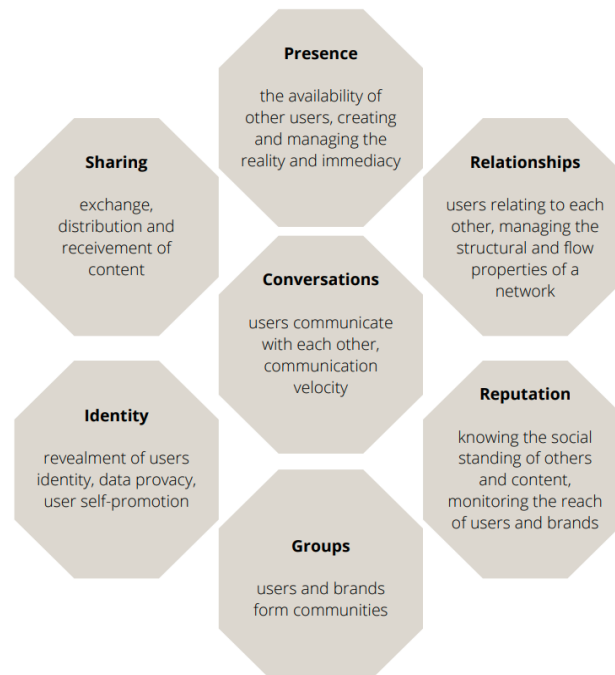


Figure 1 Social Media Functionality and Implications

Source: Anna-Lena Karst, Laura Katharina Trabold (2024), based on Kietzman et al. (2011)

This commercialization has raised concerns about promoting unrealistic standards and supporting consumerism. The trend encourages the public to buy specific products with the sole purpose to achieve the “That Girl” image, giving the upper class a clear advantage and leading to feelings of inadequacy among the lower class (Cijssouw, 2022). Additionally, the emphasis on a curated lifestyle may overshadow the original intent of promoting genuine well-being and self-care.

Demand shifts: How consumer preferences changed due to the trend

With the rise of social media influencers who promote an opulent lifestyle, the consumers’ desire for status has impacted the demand for personal luxury goods market. This market has increased its revenue steadily over the past decade with an annual growth rate of 3.22% (Statista, 2024), making it the second-largest segment of the luxury industry (Sabanoglu, 2024). The personal care and beauty industry is on the first place in the global wellness economy, as seen in Figure 2. According to an article published by Forbes and titled “16 Big Shifts In Consumer Behaviour That Are Impacting Marketing Today” (2024), over the past few years consumers have changed their purchasing decisions due to technological advances and societal values. Therefore, they now seek authenticity, and they crave a connection with brands, but also rely on fellow consumers, which drives companies to collaborate more and more with influencers to integrate their products into their ideal lifestyle and inspire people to buy them. Moreover, individuals nowadays have shorter attention spans, thus they prefer campaigns that are short, crisp and engaging. The “That Girl” trend thrives on aesthetically pleasing, easily consumable content, making platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels the perfect space for brands to promote their products in an aspirational yet attainable way.



Figure 2 Global Wellness Economy in 2022

Source: Global Wellness Institute (2023)

Rooted in self-improvement, productivity and minimalism, this movement encourages consumers to purchase specific categories of goods to maintain their idealized self-image. As a result, industries such as beauty, wellness, fashion and high-tech skincare devices have seen a rise in demand for products that embody the “That Girl” aesthetic. The constant proliferation of “clean” beauty led to a rise in popularity for organic skincare, supplements and high-end wellness brands, prioritizing natural ingredients, cruelty-free certifications and sustainability. The global beauty and personal care market is projected to generate approximately \$677.19 billion in revenue by 2025, with an expected annual growth rate of 3.37% from 2025 to 2030 (Statista). The European beauty and personal care products market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 6.2% from 2024 to 2030, driven by a growing inclination toward natural and vegan cosmetics (Grand View Research). The global wellness economy market size is expected to grow at a CAGR of 8.6% from 2023 to 2027, as seen in Figure 3.

Global Wellness Economy Market Size and Growth Projections, 2017-2027

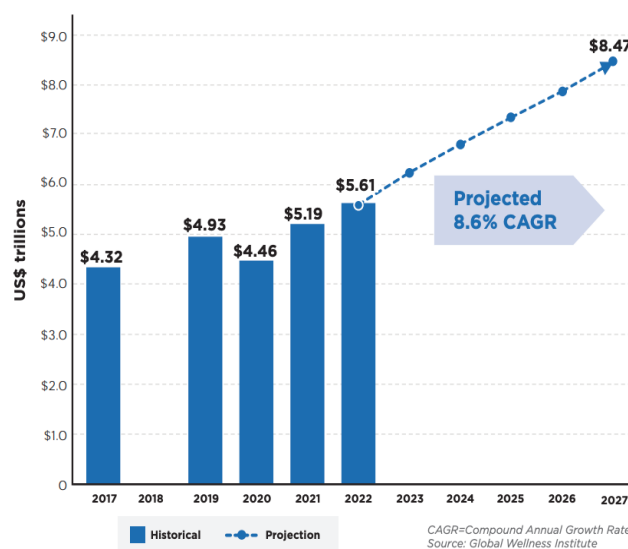


Figure 3 Global Wellness Economy Market Size and Growth Projections, 2017-2027

Source: Global Wellness Institute (2023)

Price elasticity: Are “That Girl” products luxury goods or everyday essentials?

The “That Girl” trend has drawn attention to many products, the main industries that have benefited from this phenomenon being the beauty and wellness sector. Although these two categories are usually used by the average consumer, the specific products that have been promoted are not, and so they could be classified as luxury goods.

A luxury good is defined as a good for which the increase in income generates a proportionally increasing demand, being known to be products that have a high income elasticity of demand. This category of goods is greatly desired by consumers; however, it cannot be classified as a necessity, not being able to offer a different type of quality or benefit. “Theory of the Leisure Class” by Thorstein Veblen was the first paper that approached the hypothesis that products are not bought only for their functionality but rather for the emotional aspects that can be determined, such as a greater social status or individual validation (Veblen, 1899). Thus, as Daniel Piette, an LVMH executive, told Forbes in 1997, affirming, “Luxury is crossing all age, racial, geographic, and economic brackets,” the high-end items are a way of distinguishing between people, the emotional exceeding the rational.

Kimberly Caserta explores in her study “Luxury Good Demand” how Veblen’s theory has changed within the past decade and the factors that have been firstly introduced in economics, such as social competition, that have been impacted by digitalization and consumers not being influenced by the people from their circle but through magazines, TV, and now social media platforms (Caserta, 2008). This means that the pressure on the individual to fit in with high society has increased, this having a direct impact on the demand for luxury goods.

Thus, the marketing behind this trend created a new opportunity for the businesses to sell more through the influencers who succeeded in portraying this luxurious lifestyle as a necessity to fit in society, which has a direct impact on the willingness of customers to purchase them. Even though the promoted products should have an elastic demand due to the fact that they should be easily replaced, especially when discussing a change in price, they switched to a more inelastic demand from the perspective that users of social media have been prepared to pay more just to obtain this new status.

Marketing strategies in shaping purchasing decisions

Marketing is a large domain that has as the main objective finding a targeted audience and understanding the mentalities of it as to be able to deliver the best product. The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (Mariadoss, 2015). Being defined as such, it is clear that this area of study is a broad one that is evolving constantly and so more areas have arisen from this main concept, nonetheless the most influential form of marketing being the digital one. The main forms of marketing that this study is going to approach are digital marketing and word of mouth marketing, as they have the largest impact when it comes to how social media platforms manage to distort the public’s opinion.

Digital marketing is characterized as a way for businesses to promote their products and services on social media platforms in the interest of creating a stronger and more reliable connection with the potential customers (Roy et al., 2019; Stephen, 2016). The main advantage that this way of marketing created was the dynamism of the market, providing a form of two-way communication between the brands and the customers, allowing users to express their views with the content they see. This way, digital marketing is able to provide businesses immediate feedback and vast geographical reach with limited efforts (Syahril et al., 2022).

Being defined as a form of communication in which individuals exchange information regarding different products or services based on their personal opinions (Alwan and Alshurideh, 2022), Word-of-Mouth marketing is essential when it comes to businesses creating an image of their brand, the vast majority of them trying to minimize as much as possible the negative feedback, as it can be crucial. Loudon and Bitta (1994) says: “When consumers spread negative word-of-mouth communication over dissatisfaction with a product or over a question or complaint that is ignored or unsatisfactorily resolved by the marketer, the effect may be quite damaging”. This statement exceeds in explaining the power that this form of communication can have over a company, due to the fact that it is the only form of marketing that can ensure credibility and trust among the customers. Originally being used only in direct conversations, the Word-of-Mouth communication extended with technological advancements, being the key principle in advertising on social media platforms. When different customers post their feedback on these networking sites they reflect in shaping consumer behaviour, most of potential customers being more driven to make that acquisition.

The role of influencer collaborations in driving sales

Influencers have a crucial impact in shaping trends and driving sales through their authenticity and engagement. They create a parasocial relationship with their audience through comments and responses which are limited two-way communications, making them perceived as trustworthy. With millions of social media users daily, “influencer marketing has become one of the most popular and effective forms of online marketing” (Statista, 2024). This can be seen by the increasing worldwide market value of influencer marketing which consisted of 21.1 billion U.S. dollars in 2023 (Statista, 2023). Additionally, the global influencer marketing spending amounted to 34.08 billion U.S. dollars in 2023 (Statista, 2023). Therefore, the ad spending on influencer advertising shows an annual growth rate of 11.06% and leads to a projected market volume of 52 billion U.S. dollars by 2028 (Statista, 2023). According to an article published by Forbes (2023), in 2022 influencers sold \$3.6 billion worth of goods, the most bought one being the Dyson Airwrap.

Perceived by most people only as a way of maintaining an efficient communication, social media platforms are seen by the marketing specialists as the most important and strategic tools. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and TikTok are known to be key actors when it comes to creating a name brand or a campaign for a new product. Acknowledging the fact that “Ideas and products and messages and behaviours spread just like viruses do” (Gladwell, 2000), the marketing specialists took advantage of social media platforms to spread their messages easily and to have a larger impact on the audience. What happened was that a new way of communication has been discovered and has been explored, the market starting to interact in other ways, different from the typical ads. Social media platforms let both businesses and consumers interact and present their points of view, which encourages the dynamism of the market.

The main purpose of the exclusivity market is to create the illusion of selectiveness, achieving to transform common products into indispensable ones, that cannot be obtained by the normal person (Upshaw, 2014). This desire that is generated by businesses that their products can offer a different social status to its customers, has been mastered in this generation, the sense of luxury and scarcity being key elements that have influenced the impulsive purchases. Apart from the basics of economics, supply and demand, what happened was that a new variable has been introduced in this function, how the products have been perceived by the audience has become more relevant in increasing the sales of a company. This specific type of marketing managed to incorporate emotional connection with a product, similarly to the main luxury brands, exclusivity marketing having an enormous impact on the customers. In essence, the main concept that this whole strategy is based on is the limited access

to the product, which creates in each viewer the fear of missing out. By relying on this psychological impact, desire and social status, this way of marketing is attracting numerous potential customers.

Methodology

The objectives of the research are identifying which aspects affect consumer behaviour when purchasing products associated with the “That Girl” trend, and to what extent does social media and influencer marketing have an effect on this. The purpose of the research is to identify the theoretical framework that relates to buying behaviour of goods promoted around this trend through secondary sources, and try to provide answers to the research questions by conducting a survey, which supports our hypotheses. In the case of “That Girl”-associated products and consumers’ attitude towards them, a quantitative method can be used to acquire certain findings.

This study investigates the economic impact of the “That Girl” trend in relation with key variables such as but not limited to spending behaviour, consumer demand, price elasticity and influencer impact through four key hypotheses:

H1: The rise of the “That Girl” trend has led to a significant increase in consumer demand for products associated with the trend.

H2: Increased engagement with “That Girl” content on social media is associated with higher monthly expenditure on beauty and wellness products.

H3: Consumers exhibit insensitivity to price changes in products associated with the “That Girl” lifestyle, affecting their purchasing decisions.

H4: Influencers embodying the “That Girl” aesthetic significantly impact consumers’ purchasing decisions regarding related products.

We collected the primary data by conducting a survey using self-administered questionnaires to collect data from a targeted population. A structured questionnaire was developed to gather numerical data from participants. The survey followed a logical structure by first asking basic questions about the respondents’ age and monthly income in order to acquire a general overview of what the sample group is like. The basic questions were followed by topics more related to the respondents’ spending habits on goods related to the trend, asking them to specify which categories they spend the most on. Subsequently, questions about how sensitive they are to a change in price when purchasing “That Girl”-associated products were posed in order to investigate if the demand for these is elastic or inelastic. The participants were also asked if they bought a product recommended by an influencer embodying the “That Girl” lifestyle on social media, in order to examine whether influencer marketing is valuable for this trend. The survey included multiple-choice questions, as well as Linkert scale ratings designed to quantify attitudes, behaviours, and purchasing decisions related to the “That Girl” trend. The questionnaire was distributed online to ensure a wide reach and convenience for participants. The data collection process was kept confidential and anonymous. All participants gave their consent and took part in this research without being given any incentives, while being guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure they meet the study criteria. For the sample size of 162, there is a confidence level of 85%, with a margin of error of 5.54%. The total number of responses were provided by Romanian female participants with ages between 14 and 25, who are active users of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Youtube and Pinterest and have been exposed to or engaged with “That Girl” content. Table 1 gives an inclusive depiction of respondents’ demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	162	100
Age	14-17	38	23.5
	18-21	93	57.4
	22-25	31	19.1
Monthly Income	<1000 lei	61	37.7
	1000-2000 lei	41	25.3
	2000-3000lei	25	15.4
	>3000 lei	35	21.6

Source: Authors' calculations using the questionnaire data

Results and discussions

According to Figure 4, the majority of respondents set aside between 200 and 1000 lei per month to maintain this ideal lifestyle. Since over 76% of participants fall within this spending range, it reinforces the idea that the trend sustains high consumer demand for beauty and wellness products (H1 supported). This consistent financial commitment indicates that the trend is not just a passing phase but a deeply ingrained consumer behaviour.

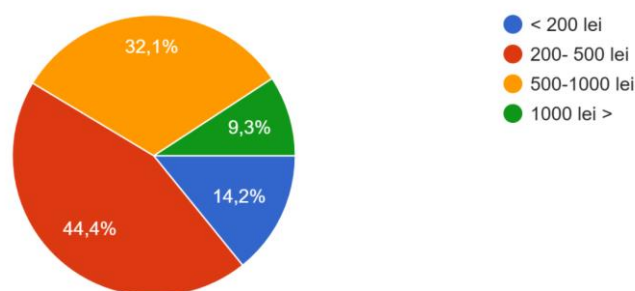


Figure 4. Monthly spending to maintain the "That Girl" lifestyle

Source: Authors' calculations using the questionnaire data

Looking at Figure 5, the majority of consumers spend their money on makeup (81.5%) and skincare (74.1%), confirming that the beauty industry benefits the most. Additionally, brand clothing (59.3%) and perfumes (41.4%) attract significant spending, while Pilates-related products (25.9%) and supplements (21.6%) exhibit lower demand, which suggests that respondents are more focused on aesthetics rather than deeper wellness investments. The data strongly supports H1, as it points out an increased demand for specific product categories as a result of the trend.

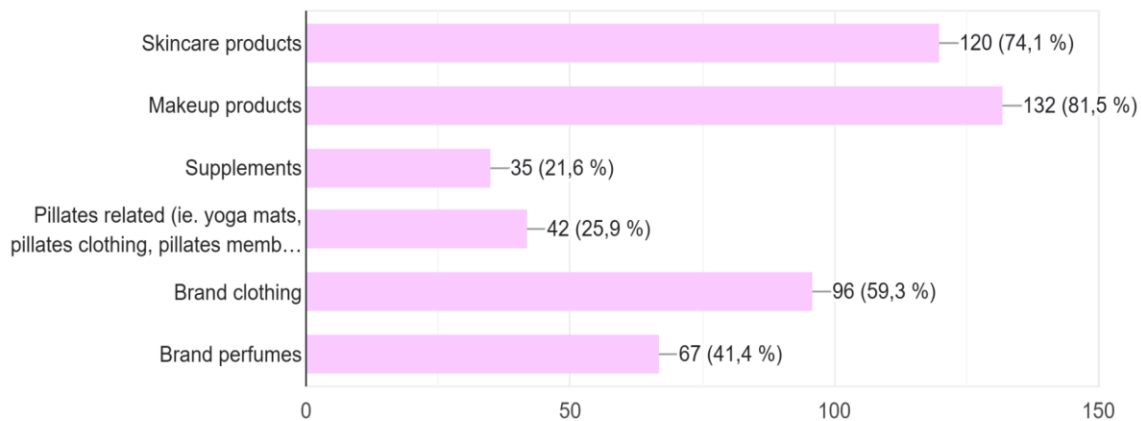


Figure 5. Demand for different product categories

Source: Authors' calculations using the questionnaire data

Spending frequency analysis in Figure 6 shows that most participants buy “That Girl”–related products monthly (56.8%), with a small percentage buying weekly (14.8%). This suggests that the trend fosters habitual spending patterns. Since social media is what keeps the trend alive, H2 is supported by the correlation between monthly purchases and ongoing exposure to influencers.

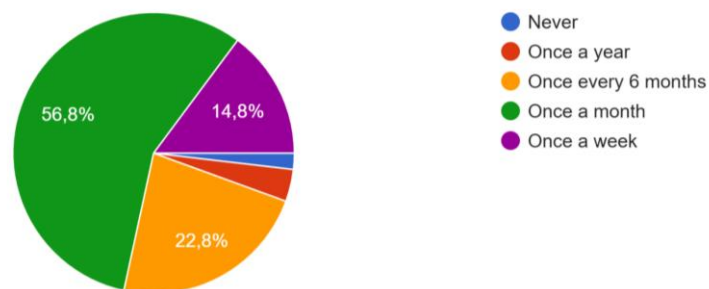


Figure 6. The consistency of purchasing “That Girl”-related products

Source: Authors' calculations using the questionnaire data

The conducting research has also shown valuable information regarding the price sensitivity. As shown in Figure 7, almost half of the participants (46.3%) start to reconsider their future purchases when an increase in price occurs, while 37% are not affected by the higher costs. A smaller percentage (13.6%) have stated that they do not notice price changes, suggesting a moderate level of price sensitivity, where only a few consumers are decisive in their purchases.

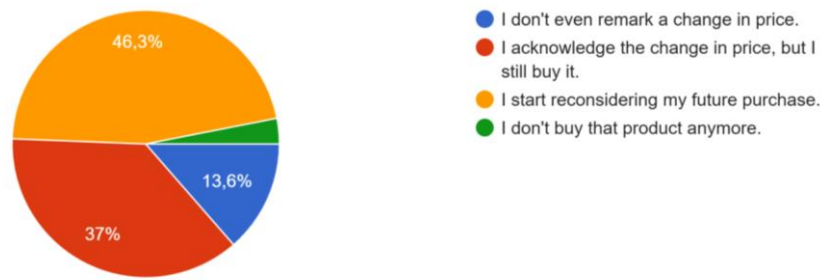


Figure 7. Price sensitivity of “That Girl”-associated products

Source: Authors’ calculations using the questionnaire data

The reaction to a 10% increase in price shown in Figure 8 has further analyzed the consumers’ behaviour which concluded that 34.6% will continue to purchase the product despite the changes of price, however 47.5% become more conscious, starting to reconsider, but not completely abandoning the idea of a new acquisition. This suggests that H3 is only partially supported, as only few consumers show insensitivity when it comes to price changes, while the main majority adjust their preferences based on the cost fluctuations.

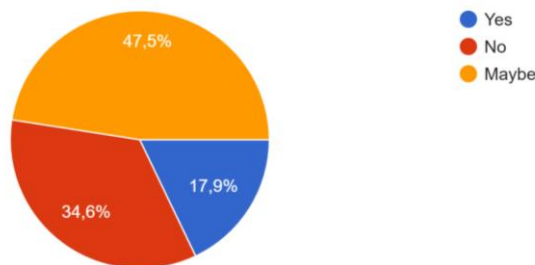


Figure 8. The effect of a 10% increase in price

Source: Authors’ calculations using the questionnaire data

The implications of social media influencers are visible in Figure 9, where participants express their views on the impact that they have on their purchases. Remarking that only a small percentage (6.2%) claim that influencers have no impact, while the majority acknowledged it, rating the influence between 3 and 5 on a 5-point scale. This confirms H4, suggesting that social media plays a key role through the influencers when it comes to decision making of the potential customers.

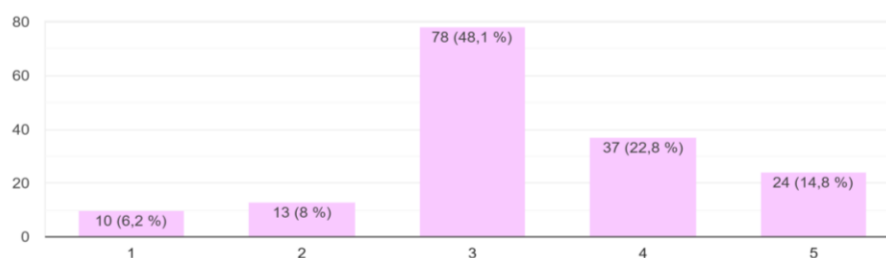


Figure 9. The impact of influencers on consumers’ behaviour

Source: Authors’ calculations using the questionnaire data

Overall, the data collected confirms the importance of the “That Girl” trend and the economic impact that it had over the consumers’ behaviour, the industries that benefited the most from it being the beauty and the fashion sector. The findings confirm H1, H2 and H4, while H3 is only partially confirmed, implying that further research should be conducted on how the income levels affect price sensitivity.

Conclusion

The paper examined the economic impact of the “That Girl” trend, focusing on Consumer Spending, Product Demand, Price Sensitivity, and the role of influencer marketing in driving sales among female Romanian consumers from Generation Z. The literature review presented how social media led to the appearance of a new way of marketing that helped businesses in reaching easier their targeted audience, but also how the “That Girl” trend succeeded in changing the consumers’ behaviour. Our research showed how females from Generation Z have been heavily influenced in purchasing specific products, which led to an increase in sales and consistent spending, benefiting industries such as fashion and beauty. Our findings also imply that influencers play a crucial role in adjusting the preferences of customers, being the ones that directly influence future purchases. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, such as not being able to analyze the price sensitivity in relation to income and other purchasing habits of the participants.

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