

**COMMODIFICATION OF LIFESTYLE AS A MEANS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION:
EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT**

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Abstract

This article explores the commodification of lifestyle as a mechanism of individualization in the context of late capitalist transformations in Ukraine. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with middle-class respondents, the study demonstrates how consumer practices shape self-definition, group belonging, and identity construction under conditions of uncertainty and crisis. The findings reveal the ambivalent role of consumption as both an adaptive and compensatory resource, encompassing not only material goods but also symbolic and ideological domains. The research contributes to debates on individualization, highlighting the constructivist potential of consumption in transitional societies.

Key words: commodification, consumption, individualization, identity, immaterial goods, Ukrainian society

Introduction

Les choses que nous aimons nous disent ce que nous sommes.

- Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*

In late capitalist societies, the insatiable process of commodification - having long absorbed the material realm - now extends deeply into the immaterial: perceptions, aspirations, ideas, and identities. (Post-)modern consumption blurs the boundary between the tangible and the symbolic. Once defined simply as the transformation of commodities into use-values satisfying human needs (Marx, 1867; Smith, 2003), consumption now encompasses the circulation of immaterial goods such as knowledge, information, and values. Its functions have also evolved: consumer practices have become a key resource for identity construction, gaining particular importance amid social uncertainty and crisis-driven change (Saint Clair & Forehand, 2020). Access to goods, services, and symbols functions as a means of self-presentation and differentiation, while market instability and inequality enhance the compensatory role of consumption.

This evolution also reflects a shift in focus from collective subjects - family, kin, community - to the individual as the ultimate consumer. The emphasis on personal “uniqueness” serves as a marketing mechanism that reinforces isolation while framing distinctiveness as something to be performed through consumption (Chan et al., 2012). Rather than contradicting mass consumption, this logic redefines it as an interaction between the self and commodities, with social structures receding into the background.

These global tendencies, however, cannot be understood outside their local contexts. This study examines the commodification of lifestyle as a vehicle of individualization in contemporary Ukraine. Drawing on sociological and philosophical theories of consumption and employing qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and spontaneous observation), we analyze how individuals interpret their consumer practices while navigating between the pursuit of self-expression and the constraints of material and social conditions. The findings highlight both the

local specificity of the Ukrainian experience and its contribution to broader debates on individualization under conditions of crisis and transition.

Ukrainian Context

During wartime in Ukraine, consumption increasingly transcends the material sphere, becoming a means of preserving normalcy, expressing collective values, and maintaining social bonds amid crisis (Bilovodska & Berehovenko, 2025). Economic instability and insecurity constrain traditional consumption, prompting a turn toward symbolic and immaterial practices - digital participation, ethical purchasing, volunteering, and online learning - that function as sources of moral resilience and self-definition (Siddharth & Sokhatska, 2022; Kisiel & Reshetniak, 2022). Within this adaptive reorientation, everyday consumption acquires new ethical and social meanings even under material scarcity.

In the post-Soviet context, Ukraine offers a particularly revealing case for examining consumption as a mechanism of individualization (Skvorets & Kudinov, 2021). Persistent crises, institutional fragility, and uncertainty have made consumer practices key strategies of adaptation and self-assertion (Poliakova & Kohatko, 2025). Here, the ambivalence of consumption becomes explicit: it embodies aspirations for autonomy and freedom of choice while simultaneously exposing the constraints imposed by deprivation and dependence.

These dynamics unfold within an interrupted transition to post-industrial modernity, where modernization proceeds through militarization, politicization, and the persistence of (post-) Soviet institutional logics. The resulting hybridity defines the experience of Ukraine's middle class, whose consumer behavior reflects both the ideals of late capitalism and the structural limits of a crisis-driven economy (Bauman, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Hann & Humphrey, 2020). Through these practices, the contradictions of post-Soviet transformation and individualization have become visible once again - suspended between freedom and necessity, agency and constraint.

What Hans Geiger noted as early as the 1930s (Geiger, 1930) can now be clearly observed in Ukraine. The middle class, confronted with prolonged uncertainty and crisis, is losing its sense of stability. The expansion of large-scale industry has weakened small entrepreneurship, while a resilient capitalist system has yet to consolidate. Economic recession, political stagnation, internal and external migration, the mass mobilization of men, and persistent security threats intensify social anxiety. Consequently, society remains under continuous pressure not only from external aggression and internal divisions (Nekhaienko et al., 2023) but also from domestic elites, while individuals face sharply reduced possibilities for realizing their economic and cultural capital.

Theoretical Lens

As a theoretical point of departure, we turn to Erich Fromm's classic dichotomy of having and being in *To Have or To Be?* (1976). Fromm interprets human behavior through these two modes: the *having* mode, oriented toward possession and control, and the *being* mode, focused on experience and understanding. Everyday practices - such as collecting information or photographing moments *ad futuram memoriam* - illustrate how the *having* mode seeks to objectify the symbolic and reify the immaterial, extending the logic of commodification into spheres of meaning and emotion. This tendency, while not exhaustive, reflects a broader pattern of coping with uncertainty through materialization and ownership.

Similar mechanisms are explored by Rucker and Galinsky (2008), who demonstrated that feelings of powerlessness stimulate the desire for status-related goods as a compensatory response. Later studies confirmed that the psychological value of consumption can outweigh its functional utility, framing it as a means of stress reduction and social self-regulation (Mandel et al., 2017). In this sense, consumption becomes both a coping strategy and a mechanism of control - an effort to materialize desire and reassert agency in unstable conditions, echoing Marx's view (1856) of consumption as a form of domination over both objects and social circumstances.

For Ukraine's middle class, shaped by crisis, militarization, and migration, this logic manifests in an acute sense of vulnerability - not only regarding physical security but also social recognition and continuity. As Fromm observed, "*in the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning... I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property*" (Fromm, 1976. p. 77). In such a framework, self-presentation and self-perception are inseparable from consumer behavior: if one is what one has, then losing possessions threatens the integrity of the self.

In this study, we conceptualize the examined phenomenon as the influence of consumer practices on the process of individualization. We proceed from the assumption that individualization is the autonomous differentiation of the person, grounded in the articulation of characteristic traits and established behavioral habits. Following Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2001), we define individualization as the process through which individuals construct their own biographies and social identities rather than inheriting them from traditional structures - an increasingly market-mediated pursuit expressed through symbolic consumption and lifestyle choices.

The theoretical synthesis underlying this study connects three dimensions of late-modern transformation. First, capitalist restructuring in post-socialist societies has fragmented class boundaries and produced hybrid forms of labor and consumption (Hann & Humphrey 2020). Second, this restructuring has shifted the mechanisms of social distinction from production to consumption, as material and symbolic goods have become the main resources for self-definition and social positioning (Bourdieu 1979), (Bauman 2001). Third, under these conditions, individualization operates as a reflexive response to structural uncertainty: individuals are compelled to construct their own biographies and moral orientations through market-mediated choices and cultural participation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

In the Ukrainian context, where capitalist development remains uneven and the institutional foundations of the middle class are fragile, consumer practices function simultaneously as instruments of adaptation and arenas of identity construction. To situate these processes within Ukraine's political-economic context, it is important to note that post-Soviet transformation has been marked by uneven industrial restructuring, persistent regional disparities, and the rise of precarious and informal employment (Poliakova & Kohatko, 2025; Hann & Humphrey, 2020). These structural features weaken collective occupational markers and stable career trajectories, making symbolic goods and immaterial practices more salient as flexible markers of status and belonging. In short, the political-economic conditions of contemporary Ukraine create a structural niche in which consumption operates as a compensatory and identity-forming mechanism. This intersection of economic transformation, symbolic exchange, and self-project formation provides the conceptual framework for interpreting the empirical material that follows.

Empirical Implements

To examine the possibilities and limitations of consumption's influence on individualization, we conducted an exploratory sociological study designed by the author. The empirical data were collected through 27 semi-structured interviews conducted between April and September 2025. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, targeting individuals who self-identified as members of the Ukrainian urban middle class. This criterion was operationalized through a combination of higher or professional education, stable income sufficient for discretionary spending, and engagement in digital consumer practices. The sample included respondents aged 18-44, residing primarily in Kharkiv, Kyiv, Lviv, and Dnipro, and representing diverse professional fields such as education, IT, creative industries, civil initiatives, public services, and industry. The selection sought to capture variations in consumer behavior and self-presentation among socially active and economically mobile groups. While the study does not claim

statistical representativeness, it follows the principle of analytic generalization (Yin 2018), identifying conceptual patterns rather than population-level regularities.

The interviews were complemented by two short-term participant observations conducted during non-formal education events. Although these observations do not claim methodological validity, they serve as illustrative material for understanding how everyday ideologies are “marketed” and consumed in practice.

The interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed through thematic coding, combining inductive and deductive procedures. Initial open coding identified recurrent motifs related to consumption motives, lifestyle choices, and moral evaluations, which were then grouped into broader analytical categories reflecting the study’s conceptual framework - the intersections of consumption, individualization, and ideological mediation. The analysis was carried out manually with iterative verification to ensure consistency and reflexivity. Special attention was paid to how respondents articulated self-definition and social belonging through consumer language and practice. This process led to the reconstruction of three analytically distinct consumption modes, discussed in the following sections as interpretive typologies rather than statistically generalized patterns.

The study’s working hypothesis was that the consumption of goods and services can itself be perceived as a factor of personal self-determination. Accordingly, the research instrument was structured around five thematic blocks: (1) the situational context of consumption; (2) the social and individual significance of consumer practices; (3) the role of needs and emotional involvement; (4) the impact of consumption on individualization and lifestyle; and (5) the characteristics of immaterial consumption. The combination of these elements provides an empirical foundation for analyzing how consumer practices contribute to processes of self-definition within conditions of social uncertainty.

Interpretations

Understanding Consumption

Consumption that shapes the process of individualization represents a subjective reinterpretation of social constructions. This methodological premise draws on the works of Klein and Kernan (1991), Levy (1959), Mick (1986), and Richins (1994), who emphasize the symbolic dimension of consumer behavior. Classical theories often treat the meaning of consumption as universal - an assumption increasingly questioned in contemporary research. The signification approach posits that social meanings are embedded within goods themselves; yet, as Holt (1997) convincingly argues, meanings are produced in use and differ across consumers and contexts. McCracken's (1990) heuristic model of the movement of cultural meaning through marketing and consumption integrates these perspectives, showing how commodities act as vehicles for the transfer of cultural values. As Gabriel and Lang (1995) aptly noted, whatever we seek - happiness, love, youth, or self-esteem - there is always a commodity promising to deliver it.

Empirical studies illustrate that goods acquire meanings through individual experience. For instance, Holt's (1997) interviews with collectors revealed that the same object may evoke distinct associations depending on its personal history and provenance: "*I'd rather put something on the wall that was painted by a friend*". Thus, the significance of objects lies not only in their utility but in their biography and the emotional ties they embody. Whether or not consumption carries universal meanings, its variability of interpretation remains central. Through this variability, consumption enters the process of individualization as a unique, situational act that neither presupposes nor excludes autonomy of choice.

Belk (1988), (1992) conceptualizes this as the "extended self", wherein possessions become part of one's identity, functioning as personal archives and instruments of recognition. Goods operate as manifestations of personality, mediating relations between self and others: "...we may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us" (Belk 1988:159). Similarly, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) view identity as a dynamic project in which

consumers continually renegotiate self-understanding through the symbolic meanings of objects. The market, in turn, supports these identity projects by providing a repertoire of symbolically charged goods. Capitalism thus sustains a mosaic of individualized structures, elevating self-construction through commodities into a defining feature of late modern life.

In contrast to the theoretical diversity discussed above, the empirical material appears far more pragmatic. At the declarative level, respondents' self-descriptions largely correspond to the classical understanding of consumption. Two habitualized consumer strategies were identified: impulsive and planned.

Impulsive consumption refers to purchases made at the moment of encountering a product - spontaneous, emotionally charged decisions that may later be rationalized. Some participants consciously created situations allowing them to "safely" express this impulse, treating the act of purchase as emotional release.

Planned consumption, by contrast, focuses on functionality and the perceived utility of goods. It is particularly common among individuals who associate spending with responsibility or investment in meaningful domains such as hobbies or professional growth:

"Everything necessary for the cat" (F., 22, illustrator)¹.

"This (planning) happens daily, because my profession requires constant updates. Plus I work online, so there are ongoing payments for digital platforms" (F., 21, speech therapist).

Overall, participants tended to prioritize expenditures related to "life projects" - hobbies, education, or work - allocating resources to areas they perceived as integral to self-development. Gender and income level did not show clear differences between strategies, though this observation would require quantitative verification.

Nevertheless, our qualitative empirical findings partially confirm classical psychological models such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Respondents consistently prioritized basic

¹ Direct quotes from informants, translated from the original language by the authors of the article, are given here and below. Sex, age and main occupation are indicated in brackets.

material comfort - food, housing, and financial stability - before engaging in symbolic or immaterial consumption. Only after these needs were met did they invest in experiences, knowledge, or aesthetic pleasures:

“The material goods play a premier role in life - especially everything related to money... Material well-being will always be more relevant; it provides opportunities for development. That’s what people tend to focus on” (F., 23, healthcare worker).

Yet many participants also recognized immaterial consumption - content, emotions, and ideas - as essential for psychological balance and self-expression:

*“You consume content to meet a need that arises in everyday life. For example, I have a need to consume pseudo-philosophical content... Needs **depend on lifestyle**. People who work long hours in factories tend to have more basic, everyday needs ... When you’re tired after work, come home, and just want to doomscroll YouTube Shorts - everyone gets tired in their own way”* (F., 22, programmer).

Participants often equated material and immaterial consumption, perceiving both as ways to “close” a need or desire. Some distinguished these practices more precisely, emphasizing the ritual and affective aspects of consumption beyond simple use:

*“**Buying** is a one-time act, while **consumption** can be continuous - it’s a ritual that includes not only the purchase itself but also the process of choice and the satisfaction it brings”* (M., 22, café manager).

*“**Using** and **consuming** are different. You can use something out of necessity or obligation, but consumption is about satisfying a need or emotion. You can eat an apple because you’re hungry, or because you f...g love apples. It’s also a way to **manage your emotional state** - like when you’re sad, you watch something, and voilà, you feel better.”* (F., 22, travel agent).

*“I distinguish between **consumption** and **consumerism**: the former is inevitable, the latter is the result of choice. Consumerism is consumption without purpose. More precisely, the*

purpose of this consumption is consumption itself, a kind of masturbation by money” (M., 31, veterinarian).

When asked about immaterial consumption, most participants referred to digital content - videos, games, online books, subscription services, and AI tools:

“In the digital world, consuming immaterial things is important... It’s absolutely normal for people aged 20–25 now” (M., 21, café manager).

For them, content consumption functioned as a form of interiorization, blurring the line between entertainment and self-education. They intuitively contrasted a consumerist, passive mode (Fromm’s having mode) with a more engaged, “authentic” or “serious” approach (being mode).

*“Learning is when you have a **plan**. If I’m studying something, I remember it. But if it’s consumption, I can just have it playing in the **background**”* (F., 22, programmer).

This contrast echoes the long-standing debate in critical pedagogy, from Freire’s (2000) “banking model” to Hartley (2012), who interpret the commodification of education as a symptom of consumerist learning. A noteworthy feature of immaterial consumption is its *backgroundedness* - the seamless integration of media into daily routines. Harald Schmidt (2011) describes this as the stage at which media no longer require active attention: people do not so much watch or listen as simply exist alongside them. Slavoj Žižek (2009) similarly speaks of omnipresent media noise that resists focused perception, while Guy Debord’s (1994) earlier notion of the spectacle anticipated this total absorption of life into mediated imagery.

This perspective helps explain why the act of consumption itself becomes an end in itself - a kind of self-reinforcing ritual. Participants often acknowledged this dynamic, describing situations in which the experience of “having consumed” outweighed genuine engagement:

*“Sometimes we get together with friends to watch a movie, and someone starts yelling, ‘I don’t want to watch this, I’ve already seen it.’ That’s dumb consumerism - when it’s just about **ticking a box**. What stops you from watching a good film a second, third, or tenth*

*time? Every viewing gives you something new, something **real**, not just another **checkmark** that says 'consumed'” (M, 33, software developer).*

Such reflections reveal the internalization of the consumerist logic even within reflexive critique. Backgrounded media consumption turns attention itself into a scarce resource, while the very act of “consuming” becomes a way to affirm participation in the social flow. In this sense, the spectacle is no longer external to everyday life - it constitutes its texture.

Consumption Approaches

The study made it possible to develop a typological model of consumption approaches encompassing universal behavioral patterns and motivational orientations toward purchasing.

(1) *Functional–utilitarian motivation*. This is the most evident and universal orientation, associated with the intention to use a product’s practical function or a service’s specific purpose. It primarily concerns material goods of everyday necessity - housing, food, clothing, and medical care. While relevant to both impulsive and planned strategies, this type of motivation lies outside the central focus of our analysis, as it reflects primarily adaptive rather than self-reflexive consumption.

(2) *Sensory–emotional motivation*. This orientation captures the affective dimension of consumption - the pursuit of pleasure, excitement, or emotional regulation through purchase or possession. It is more characteristic of impulsive consumption, yet appears across different contexts, underscoring consumption’s self-referential nature: consumption for its own sake. Participants often described it as a purchase of feeling rather than function:

*“It’s a **purchase of emotions**. I feel happier when I watch something. But to consume comfortably, I have to pay - for convenience, for subscriptions. I pay for my comfort. Like amusement parks - that’s adrenaline, emotions. I pay for emotions, to feel happier in the moment. It’s **good for my mental state**” (F., 22, travel agent).*

*“It’s the same motivation as everyone’s - ‘a bit of childhood in your head’, that old, **unfulfilled desire to buy** something. You think you need it, and you’ll go and get it” (F., 23, healthcare worker).*

These findings resonate with Fromm’s (1976) and Rucker & Galinsky’s (2008) observations that consumption is often driven by emotional compensation and the externalization of affective control. Emotional gratification derived from consumption thus operates as a form of delegated self-regulation:

*“Tourism is fundamentally based on the **consumption of emotions**. And not just the emotions of travel, but those of possessing stylish photos of yourself in fashionable destinations. I rarely take photos on my trips, and even less often post them, but the inner satisfaction of “having been there” is important to me” (F., 41, designer).*

This emotional dimension reveals how consumption acquires quasi-autonomous status - not merely a leisure activity or hobby, but a vital psychological mechanism. It also exposes the symbolic transfer of power relations, as emotional control shifts from internal reflection to external acts of acquisition.

The logic of consumption further extends into interpersonal relationships, reflecting the economic metaphors through which social ties are perceived:

*“**Relationships with people are mutual consumption**. I also give something in return - support, attention. It’s like being able to visit close ones anytime, uninvited, and just sit together. I can’t live without that” (F., 22, healthcare worker).*

*“We **consume people** too. Catch a celebrity on the street, take a photo, and post it on Instagram. Or watch the entire concert through your smartphone camera. What could be more stupid? But we all do it and like it” (M., 37, teacher).*

These statements illustrate the internalization of the consumerist logic at both emotional and interpersonal levels, where relationships, experiences, and identities are reframed through the grammar of exchange and ownership.

3. *Self-definition and the attainment of social status through goods and services.* This motive is analytically central to the study, as it links consumption directly with the process of individualization. When goods and services become instruments of self-definition, consumption acts as an indirect driver of individualization by shaping elements of identity. The appropriation of commodities - assigning them symbolic meanings and personal significance - serves not only as a demonstration of individual traits but also as a mechanism of self-perception. These self-perceptions, in turn, structure social differentiation and define the contours of individualization itself.

A related dimension is the role of consumption in acquiring and displaying social status. Two aspects stand out here. First, there is the need to signal social position through possessions and their contexts of acquisition - where, how, and under what circumstances goods are obtained. Second, consumption enables demonstrative imitation of a reference group or class. In this sense, actual, desired, and performed social positions - often diverging - function simultaneously as indicators of identity and as mechanisms of individualization, delineating the symbolic boundaries within which the self is expressed.

The social dimension of consumption also manifests in its communicative and integrative functions:

*“The non-material includes entertainment too. Going out somewhere, like to play billiards. It’s for emotions or communication. Usually not because I wanted to play, but as a reason to **socialize**”* (M., 21, entrepreneur).

*“Movies, music, or football are **common topics** of conversation in many companies. Or memes. I have several friends who built their careers simply by being able to keep up*

conversations on these topics with others. Or by sending good memes in work chats. And they themselves became these memes” (M., 33, software developer).

The relationship between individualization and consumption is most clearly observed in goods and services that respondents identified as expressions of individuality, uniqueness, and style. Predictably, these centered on appearance - clothing, accessories, cosmetics, hairstyles - but similar patterns were found in immaterial consumption, where courses, subscriptions, and habits were used to structure everyday life. Respondents with strong hobbies emphasized goods and services that supported their creative or professional pursuits, such as tools, instruments, and technical equipment:

*“Mostly some clothes, things. Sometimes also cosmetics. And, of course, music - I am 24/7 with headphones. People **don't recognize me** without headphones” (F., 18, singer).*

A methodological challenge - and a revealing finding - was respondents' tendency to equate consumption almost exclusively with tangible goods. This narrow understanding points to a broader cultural pattern: in social consciousness, consumption remains primarily associated with visible, material objects that complement the self and organize the rhythm of everyday life.

Group Identity and (Self) Identification through Consumption

In contemporary Ukraine, consumption plays a far more significant role in shaping social relations and defining social position than might be assumed - even under conditions of economic instability and material scarcity. This observation indirectly confirms the conclusions of Siddharth & Sokhatska (2022) and Bilovodska & Berehovenko (2025), who emphasize the adaptive and symbolic dimensions of consumption during wartime. Informants repeatedly highlighted the importance of goods and services that serve as attributes of identification, complementing or embodying meaningful aspects of daily activity.

In this sense, goods and services are perceived not merely as instrumental but as symbolic. They mediate between personal and collective identities, functioning as markers of belonging and as extensions of the self. Identity thus becomes expressed through commodities directly tied to one's hobbies, professional practices, or lifestyle - elements that define social roles and provide a basis for self-definition.

"You can't join a roller community without skates, or a biker community without a bike"

(M., 44, coach).

Goods often serve as recognizable markers of group belonging, especially within subcultural or class-based communities defined by lifestyle and income. Respondents easily identified such associations in everyday interactions:

"Clothing immediately reveals whether it is some national group or church representatives"

(F., 44, accountant).

"Colored hair, unusual clothes - you think, 'those are teenagers'" (F., 22, philologist).

Accordingly, one of the most salient properties of commodities remains their capacity to signify status and communicate social position. Informants most frequently referred to clothing and accessories as media of distinction and self-presentation. This confirms that consumption functions not only as a means of expressing individuality but also as a shared social language through which identity becomes legible to others.

From this perspective, both the functional and symbolic dimensions of goods and services operate as a code. They not only enable the display of personal uniqueness but also situate the individual within a socially intelligible framework of recognition. In other words, commodities - most visibly clothing - translate individuality into a set of signs that can be read and interpreted within broader systems of social meaning.

"I think it's pleasure, psychological relief. The feeling that you seem more interesting if you have something to show off. In short, status" (M., 25, lawyer).

“There is a certain image I want to project. For example, if I’m going to a meeting today, I know what manicure, what makeup, what I want to present” (F., 41, pastry chef).

The notion of identification - and of identity itself - must therefore be expanded beyond social visibility. Goods reflect not only the social position of their owners but also their traits, values, and aspirations. In this sense, consumption functions as a way of externalizing the inner world and affirming personal distinctiveness. Demonstrating one’s social rank appears secondary; rather, consumption becomes a means of objectifying subjectivity, making individuality tangible and communicable.

This mechanism corresponds to the logic of distinction outlined by Bourdieu (1979): difference acquires meaning only when socially recognized. Yet in the late-modern context, the desire for recognition merges with the fetishization of the subject - an outcome of individualization, which frames the individual as autonomous, self-sufficient, and inherently valuable. To consume is therefore to affirm one’s existence as a subject, to materialize identity in visible, adjustable form.

“Values, style, what a person wants to demonstrate - that’s interesting. You immediately see their character. Right away it’s clear what you can talk about, what not, what hobbies they have, and so on. This self-expression makes life brighter. Earlier everyone looked the same; now there are more possibilities” (F., 41, pastry chef).

Assessing the impact of consumption on individualization thus requires considering both how individuals attribute meaning to their own practices and how these meanings are socially perceived. According to respondents, the strongest influence of consumption on self-perception arises from goods and services that enhance comfort or expand personal capacities:

“After the renovation, it became much more comfortable to live. I finally had my own space” (F., 44, accountant).

In the short term, consumption often serves to regulate emotional state:

“Shopping lifts my spirits” (F., 22, teacher).

“[About a book collection) It’s hard to describe the feeling, because I just don’t know - it was like a mini-ecstasy inside, when you’re just, wow, this is what I’ve loved so much, what I’ve wanted to buy for so long. It won’t bring me any financial benefit, it won’t be useful in any way, but I’m happy” (F., 22, illustrator).

The connection between consumption and individualization becomes most evident when goods are perceived as indispensable elements of self-expression - extensions of hobbies, professions, or personal passions. Respondents whose work or creative interests coincided with their leisure described these items as markers of authenticity and individuality:

“I have a friend who is associated with Hello Kitty - she buys that merch. Another friend is associated with Hatsune Miku, because she also buys that merch. And I have a friend associated with Spotify, because she constantly renews her subscription; she really loves music” (F., 21, speech therapist).

This mechanism operates symmetrically for practices often coded as “bad habits,” where the identity bond with goods is equally strong:

“My image is alcohol and cigarettes” (M., 20, photographer).

“These nicotine pouches - I usually bring them when I’m with friends, kind of like my thing”
(M., 25, lawyer).

When hobbies or personal projects are absent, this identification often shifts toward the body and its adornments - the closest and most accessible medium of self-expression:

“Do I become unique and stand out? No. But for me, yes - for me it’s important. Things become part of my individuality. The same with nails, hair” (F., 22, philologist).

Here the body itself becomes a semiotic surface on which individuality is inscribed. As Baudrillard observed, *“Tights, elastic belts, stockings, gloves, dresses and other items that ‘fit closely to the body,’ not to mention suntan, all realize one and the same leitmotiv of a ‘second skin’: the body is ceaselessly plasticized, wrapped in a transparent film”* (Baudrillard, 1993: 129). This

illustrates how identity is not merely expressed through things but also fused with them, as if material continuity between body and object were necessary to sustain subjectivity.

On a broader scale, these findings reaffirm Baudrillard's insight that, in late-modern societies, individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, but actualize themselves through consumption. The self becomes perceivable only when materialized, verbalized, or otherwise objectified - through words, actions, or possessions. In this sense, consumption functions as both the medium and the metaphor of individualization, transforming the act of "having" into a condition of "being."

Consumption of the Immaterial

Beyond the realm of tangible goods, consumption also encompasses entities whose symbolic value outweighs their material worth - information, knowledge, lifestyle, and even the possibility of belonging. For such phenomena to acquire the status of commodities, the prior dissemination of the ideology of consumption itself is required: only by framing ideas in market terms can they be bought, sold, and exchanged.

Critical sociology pays growing attention to this dimension, particularly to the consumption of ideologies. As S. Miles (1998) notes, consumer logic penetrates the entire structure of everyday life, becoming both legitimate and invisible: "*We accept the routine of the consumer experience as legitimate, and the powerful ideological elements of this experience remain largely unnoticed*" (Miles, 1998: 11-12). The illusion of consumer freedom, he continues, conceals the fact that "*such freedoms are inevitably constructed and constrained*" (Ibid). In other words, the logic of consumption not only structures daily life, but also determines how we perceive agency and choice.

A similar view is expressed by Martin Lee (1993), who describes consumption as the intersection where economic and cultural practices converge, producing a new ideological order - one in which cultural meaning itself becomes commodified.

One of the clearest manifestations of this process is the commodification of ideology. Everyday ideologies, as Bilous (2017) observes, merge utopian and value-driven motives with the logic of the market, creating hybrid products that combine moral appeal with commercial profit. A striking example is Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, which appropriated feminist and body-positive ideals to legitimize a consumerist message. The campaign appeared to promote diversity and self-acceptance, while simultaneously transforming these values into profitable branding.

Similarly, the "Like a Girl" campaign by Always - widely praised for its inclusivity - reframed feminist discourse within a marketing narrative. By featuring women of different ages, faiths, and backgrounds performing everyday acts, the campaign symbolically opposed gender stereotypes, while normalizing the purchase of a product as a gesture of empowerment.

These cases illustrate how ideology is not merely reflected in the market but produced through it. The dissemination of ideologically charged goods shapes expectations and moral evaluations, prescribing how social problems are to be perceived and resolved. What appears as the celebration of freedom and diversity, often conceals the imposition of a market-mediated moral order: one that commodifies belief itself.

Although most respondents did not explicitly reflect on the consumption of ideologies, a few offered insightful examples that reveal its underlying mechanisms. Two cases stand out.

(1) The commercialization of national symbols: *"It's no secret that everyone is now cashing in on the blue-and-yellow flag, the trident, and vyshyvanka. They're exploiting national sentiments. And people, buying such goods, think they're **buying patriotism**... But we know that all the flags, bracelets, and shirts are made in China"* (M., 31, veterinarian).

(2) The ideology of success: *"It's like info-gypsies who sell successful success. They fool you into thinking everyone should dress like that, drive fancy cars, surround themselves with models, and that's real success. Yes, they're selling themselves, but they're also **selling a worldview**"* (M., 33, software developer).

These reflections, though rare, point to a growing awareness of how ideology is commodified and sold as a lifestyle. However, they also highlight a methodological limitation: in exploratory interviews, such themes tend to emerge only in abstract or generalized form. To examine the “sale of ideologies” systematically, further research would need to shift the focus from the consumption side to the product side - that is, to analyze specific ideological goods and ideologemes as marketable entities.

To deepen the analysis, we examined two additional cases observed through participant observation, both of which exemplify how ideology is “sold” through educational and developmental projects.

Case 1: Utopian Development². The first case involved an educational project organized by foreign universities, aimed at promoting sustainable development and ecological technologies in urban planning. The program included online lectures, a week-long study visit abroad, and a competition for grant funding of participants’ local initiatives. Officially, the project sought to transfer knowledge and competencies to enable participants to implement similar initiatives in Ukraine.

Yet the motivation structure revealed the primacy of economic capital over cultural capital: the grant component served as a stronger incentive than the educational content itself. Ideological “sale” occurred through the uncritical promotion of behavioral and managerial models imported from another socio-economic context and presented as universal and obligatory. The “green” and “ecological” discourse functioned as a legitimizing label for managerial and engineering practices framed as public goods, regardless of local needs or conditions. In effect, sustainability was commodified as an unquestionable ideological good - a utopian standard of modernity rather than a reflexive developmental model.

² Since we did not discuss the possibility of such a study with the organizers of events, we have maintained confidentiality by coding the cases ourselves.

Case 2: The Imposition of Activism. The second case concerned a three-week residential training program for community leaders, organized by a local NGO with international sponsorship. Its stated goal was to promote civic engagement and community governance, yet the event carried a distinct ideological dimension. Participants were introduced to normative vocabularies and “new ethical norms” drawn from Western liberal discourse - for instance, replacing “disabled person” with “person with movement difficulties”. Those who failed to adopt these formulations were implicitly shamed. Alongside these linguistic practices, the training normalized ideologemes such as feminism, environmentalism, and “non-violent communication,” presented as universal moral imperatives.

The immersive residential format reinforced this influence: ideological elements were embedded not only in formal sessions but also in everyday routines and informal interactions. The resulting environment promoted the reproduction of prescribed ideologemes rather than their critical reflection. Participants frequently repeated key slogans without understanding their content - for example, in sessions about stereotypes and community cohesion, they inadvertently reproduced the very stereotypes under critique.

The long-term outcome of such interventions was the diffusion of externally constructed ideological orientations through participants who later replicated the training locally, often under the same funding frameworks. This process illustrates how ideology can be commodified as an educational product, blending moral legitimacy with market mechanisms and converting symbolic conformity into a criterion of success.

Conclusions

This study examined how the processes of lifestyle commodification and the expansion of consumption into immaterial domains affect the forms of individualization in a contemporary Ukrainian context. Based on a series of semi-structured interviews and two spontaneous observational case studies, several interconnected tendencies were identified.

First, consumption appears not only as a way to satisfy basic needs but also as a means of self-construction and the maintenance of personal meaning. This applies both to material objects (clothing, tools, accessories) and to immaterial practices such as subscriptions, educational courses, cultural content, and participation in communities. For the informants, goods and services function as elements of self-presentation, reflecting professional, aesthetic, and value orientations.

Second, the data reveal the dual role of consumption under conditions of social and economic instability. On the one hand, a pragmatic logic persists - purchases made for functionality, comfort, or security. On the other hand, a compensatory and demonstrative function becomes more pronounced: in situations of uncertainty and disruption of long-term life plans, consumption partly replaces stable forms of self-definition, offering rapid and visually expressive means of maintaining internal coherence and a sense of belonging.

Third, the expansion of the concept of a “commodity” to include immaterial and ideological products enhances the instrumental dimension of individualization. Educational, civic, and cultural initiatives increasingly operate as forms of symbolic exchange, where the value of knowledge, participation, or belief correlates with systems of reward - social capital, status, or network opportunities. Consequently, ideological and value-laden elements are often disseminated through institutionalized and marketing formats, which increase their reproducibility, but do not necessarily ensure deep personal integration.

Fourth, there is variation in the ways consumer practices are internalized. For some informants, consumption takes a background, habitual form - content and services become part of the everyday flow. For others, it is a deliberate act of self-assertion and identity performance. This heterogeneity indicates that the influence of consumption on individualization depends on a combination of factors: social position, professional field, level of digitalization, and subcultural affiliation.

Finally, the findings can be summarized in four analytical statements:

1) Under conditions of crisis, consumption simultaneously instrumentalizes subjectivity (through the improvement of living conditions) and substitutes long-term forms of self-determination with short-term symbolic acts.

2) In the Ukrainian context, consumption functions as a dynamic and context-dependent mechanism of individualization: it expands the possibilities of self-expression while reinforcing the subject's dependence on markets of symbols, services, and institutional frameworks.

3) The reflection of commodification of the immaterial - education, ideologies, values, etc. - by the consumers themselves is possible but is an exception (yet).

4) The fact that consumers can reflect on the connection between immaterial consumption and individualization was recorded only indirectly: if informants spoke about it, it was not about themselves, but about other consumers.

Practical and research implications:

To gain a deeper understanding of the interaction between consumption and individualization, future studies should move beyond declarative (survey-based) indicators toward the analysis of actual practices - through observation (following Boltanski & Thévenot's (1991) conceptual framework), diary methods, and the study of digital traces. It is also necessary to investigate not only the demand for "ideological goods," but also the mechanisms of their production and circulation. For social and educational initiatives, a key challenge lies in balancing the commercialization of values with the preservation of their substantive, non-instrumental significance.

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