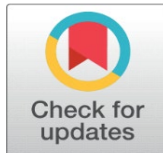
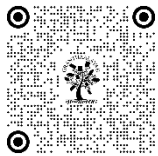


# GEN Z AND SOFT MASCULINITY: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN FASHION & BEAUTY INDUSTRY

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in societal perceptions of masculinity. It is characterised by a departure from traditional masculine norms towards a more inclusive, emotionally engaged, and empathetic approach, also known as Soft Masculinity. Generation Z, born between 1996 - 2010, are the most diverse generation, inclusive, digital natives and known for their strong sense of individuality, social consciousness, and preference for authenticity. Reports have estimated their global spending power of around \$4.5 trillion by 2025, making them one of the most significant target group. In contrast, their previous generation, Millennials, commanded over \$1 trillion in spending power in 2010. In this zeitgeist, there are market opportunities for fashion and beauty brands to capitalise on growing demand for gender-inclusive and emotionally resonant products. Through a comprehensive, mixed-methods research, this study observed a notable openness towards embracing soft masculinity and beauty-related products traditionally associated with femininity. However, the influence of peer pressure or gender stereotypes appeared to be less pronounced in beauty and skincare domain compared to fashion consumption.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, Soft Masculinity, Fashion Trends, Consumer Behaviour, Beauty Trends

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion and beauty industry is a rapidly evolving sector, driven by changing consumer preferences and societal norms. The industry is continually adapting to meet the demands of diverse consumer segments. At the same time, Generation Z also known as Gen Z, which comprises people born between 1996 and 2010 (Patel & Mehta, 2021), has emerged as a strong force within the consumer landscape. Their spending power is expected to be worth over \$4.5 trillion by 2025 (Shejale, 2023). This group is known for their digital fluency, diverse perspectives, and strong sense of individuality. As such, they wield considerable influence over market trends and brand perceptions.

In contemporary society, traditional masculine norms and stereotypes have been deeply entrenched, emphasizing characteristics such as strength, dominance, and emotional stoicism. This historical narrative is evident in depictions of masculinity found in literature, art, and media. Masculinity theories, such as Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, offer frameworks for comprehending the construction and perpetuation of dominant forms of masculinity within societal

structures while acknowledging the diversity and fluidity of masculine identities. However, societal transformations, including feminist movements and evolving gender roles, have catalyzed the emergence of alternative concepts such as Soft Masculinity. This paradigm shifts challenges traditional notions of masculinity by embracing qualities like empathy, vulnerability, and emotional expression.

Soft Masculinity signifies a departure from rigid, traditional masculine norms, embodying a more inclusive, emotionally engaged, and empathetic approach to gender expression. It finds its roots in various cultural movements, including the men's liberation movement of the 1970s and contemporary dialogues surrounding toxic masculinity and gender equality. The men are in continual transformation, that takes time and effort. (Lorello, 2019)

It advocates for a redefinition of masculinity as multifaceted and fluid, empowering men to express a broader spectrum of emotions and behaviors without fear of societal judgment or condemnation. We can observe that the softboy, someone following soft masculine traits, has been divided into numerous sub-genres, each with somewhat different characteristics and behaviours. (David, 2019)

Sun Jung has introduced that the concept of soft masculinity popularized by the Korean Wave (AZIZAH & DWIYANTI, 2021). K-pop idols perform characteristics where masculinity is purposefully "watered down" for a more relatable, egalitarian image by having softer appearances, child-like behavior, and more emotionally expressive personalities (Sihan, 2023). In the United States, softboy culture has become highly influential and pervasive, exerting a significant impact on mainstream societal norms, values, and behaviors. America's pop culture, much like its politics, is undergoing a hard split, with the music charts largely ruled by R&B acts and softboy-leaning pop artists (Robertson, 2021). This trend is emerging around the world and one can be influenced by this even if geographically not close to it. Looking beyond the internet into mainstream culture, attitudes to gender are changing and that's impacting the way men see themselves. (WGSN, 2021)

Generation Z represents the most diverse generation to date, characterized by a strong emphasis on individuality, social consciousness, and inclusivity. Raised in the digital age, members of Generation Z exhibit fluency with technology, social media proficiency, and a preference for authentic, socially responsible brands. They prioritize diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability in their consumer choices, often gravitating towards brands that resonate with their values and beliefs.

The explorative journey towards self-discovery and identity formation initially unfolds within the realm of aesthetics, where young individuals, both men and women, embark on a multifaceted exploration of their identities by transcending conventional boundaries. Through this process, they envision themselves embodying diverse gender and cultural identities concurrently. These endeavors extend beyond mere aesthetic experimentation, serving as catalysts for initiating transformative shifts within cultural hegemony. (Iida, 2006) Soft masculinity embraces qualities such as emotional intelligence, empathy, and inclusivity. As a result, it resonates deeply with Gen Z's values of authenticity and social consciousness.

Existing literature suggests that Soft Masculinity can exert influence on consumer behavior by challenging traditional gender norms and broadening the scope of products and experiences deemed acceptable for men. Studies indicate that individuals adhering to more traditional masculine norms may exhibit lower propensity to engage in certain consumption behaviors, such as purchasing beauty or self-care products.

Globally, this trend has already penetrated the market and used for commercialisation. Cosmetic and skincare giants, like Estee Lauder and L'Oréal are responding to the growing demand with a litany of grooming products targeted towards men (Lim, 2018). The Korean beauty and skincare market customized for men was estimated to gain 1.19 trillion KRW in 2018. A recent survey in Korea suggests Gen Z is more open to men openly wearing makeup (Lee, 2018). British men now spend more on grooming products and treatments each month than women (Barclays Consumer Spend Index, 2017)

Despite burgeoning interest in Soft Masculinity as a cultural phenomenon, a notable gap exists in research exploring its impact on Generation Z consumer behavior within the fashion and beauty industries in India. This paper aims to explore the intersection of soft masculinity, fashion, and beauty within the context of Indian Gen Z consumers.

## 2. METHOD

This study was conducted using mix method research via surveying respondents who identify as Gen Z male. The questionnaire was prepared to test the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this research, and was circulated online using convenience sampling technique. Measurable data was gathered through questions on personal income, spending on clothing, accessories, and grooming products to analyse the quantified patterns. Qualitative insights were also gathered on their perception of masculinity, awareness, perceived reactions and individual attitudes. Since, the attention

span of the target cohort group is short, the questions were accompanied with fun, interesting GIFs and few trap questions were asked to check if the respondents read the questions or not. In total, 110 Gen Z male filled the survey, out of which Five were identified as random responders and their responses were nullified.

### 3. RESULTS

#### DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

From 105 respondents, 40% are aged between 18-21 years, 37.1% aged between 26-28 years and 20.9% were between 22-25 years. 77.1% respondents were from Tier 1 cities in contrast to 8.6% from Tier 3 cities in India. For their current occupation, 45.7% are working professionals, followed by 42.9% of students pursuing bachelors and 2.9% were entrepreneurs. Since, Gen Z is digital native, and born in the age of internet (Fromm & Read, 2018), their Social Media usage was on the higher side. 28.6% respondents use social media platforms for more than four hours a day in striking contrast to just 8.6% respondents using social media less than an hour.

#### PERCEPTIONS ON MASCULINITY AND GENDER ROLES:

As we see the shift in overall concept of gender and its assigned roles and characteristics, this research also aimed to understand the perception of Gen Z on this theme. For the study, the list of characteristics are taken from literary works of Michael Kimmel and Judith Butler but also reflect common societal beliefs and expectations that have been culturally ingrained over time. On asking the traditional characteristics that define masculinity, Independence and self-resilience was highest with 68.6% responses, followed by protectiveness, strength and toughness, assertiveness and leadership and others as shown in figure 1 below.

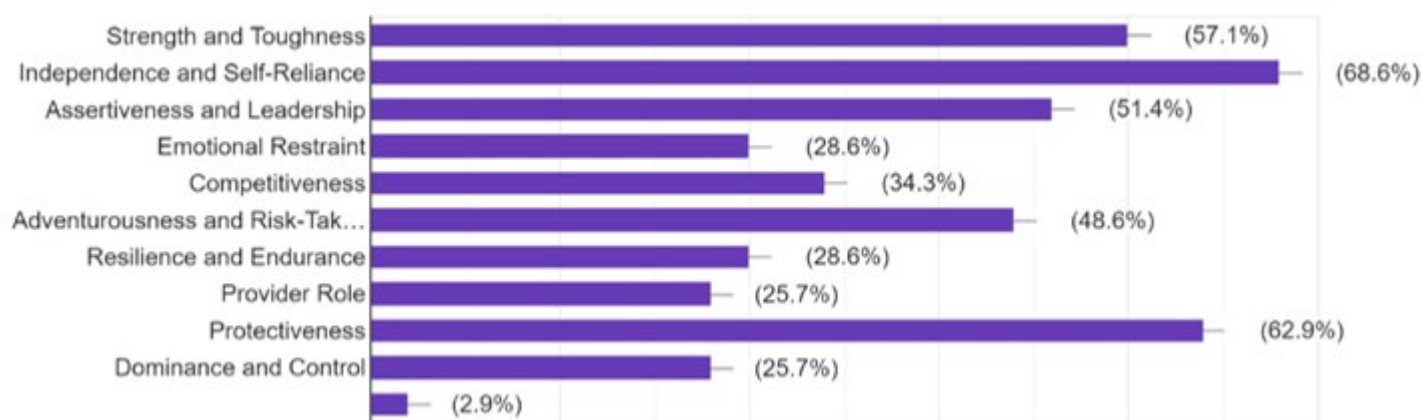


Figure 1 Traditional Masculine traits as per the respondents

25.7% respondents strongly felt that they don't match up to all the traditional traits, and more than 60% of them have felt pressure to conform to these traditional masculine norms where as 40% feel that these norms are outdated and not relevant in today's time with 37.1% respondents feeling that these norms are toxic. 67.7% of respondents who feel or sometimes feel traditional masculine traits are toxic rate Soft Masculinity positively

In contrast, when asked for their understanding of traditional feminine characteristics, traits such as Nurturing and caregiving, sensitivity and emotional expressiveness, patience etc. were selected the most as shown in the figure 2 below.

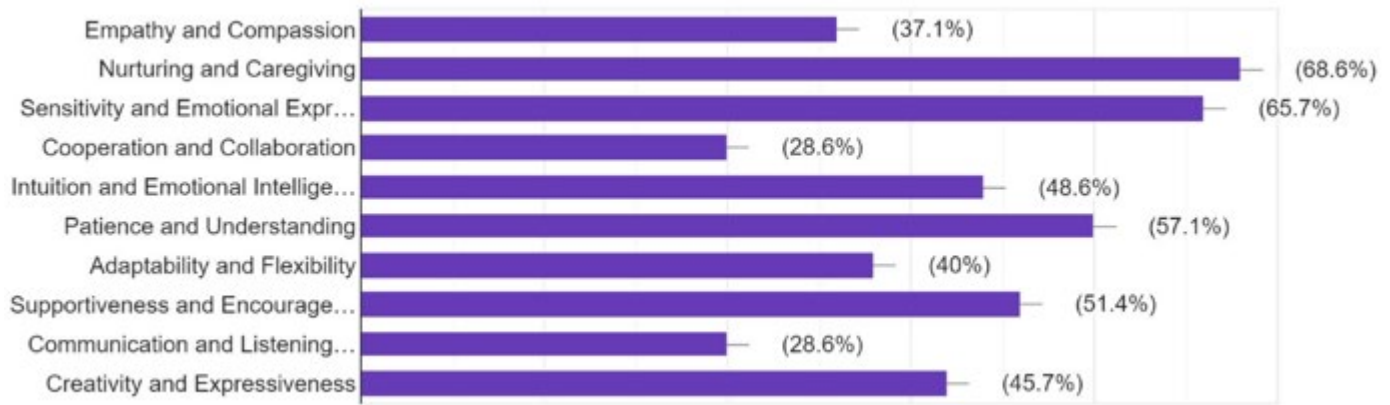


Figure 2 Traditional Feminine traits as per respondents

### PERCEPTION ON SOFT MASCULINITY

From the total respondents 57.1% have not heard the term “soft masculinity” before the survey, out of which 48% considered it a positive and welcoming change, with 80% of total respondents felt that it is a positive trend for men’s mental health. Furthermore, 84% of older Gen Z showed more acceptance of the soft masculinity and only 31% of Gen Z between age 22-25 thought soft masculinity as a welcoming change.

At the same time, 10% of the respondents felt that the men in their surroundings will reject this concept. 17.1% of respondents also felt that using term “Soft Masculinity” actually reinforces the gender stereotypes. More than 83% felt that they’ll be teased or stereotyped for following soft masculinity traits by the men in their immediate circle.

### SOFT MASCULINITY AND FASHION CONSUMPTION

On an average, 80% of the respondents have spent more than ₹3000/- on clothing in last six months, and 88% are comfortable in expressing themselves through clothing. This cohort group is highly active on social media as mentioned earlier, social media platforms were ranked first for their fashion inspiration, followed by popular media, friends and at the end family members as shown in figure 3 below. 37.1% of the respondents have been following social media influencers who practice or promote soft masculine fashion.

When it comes to shopping clothes which are traditionally associated with feminine look, 40% have already purchased something from the opposite gender section and 37.1% are willing to shop if it is not overpowering. But given a choice, only 40% will spend money on clothing and accessories associated with soft masculine fashion and 37.1% would only spend less than ₹1000/- on soft masculine fashion, out of which, majority were from the age group of 18-21. Gen Z aged 26-28 showed willingness to spend more money on soft masculine fashion compare to other age groups, clearly showing their purchase power and individualistic choices. It was noteworthy, that 37.2% felt that men in their immediate circle will criticize them for sporting a soft masculine fashion.

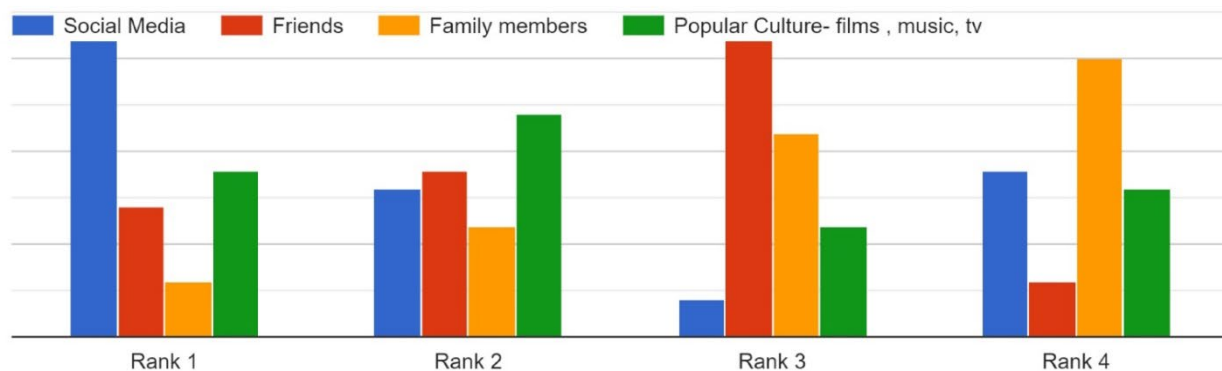


Figure 3 Source of fashion inspiration for Gen Z

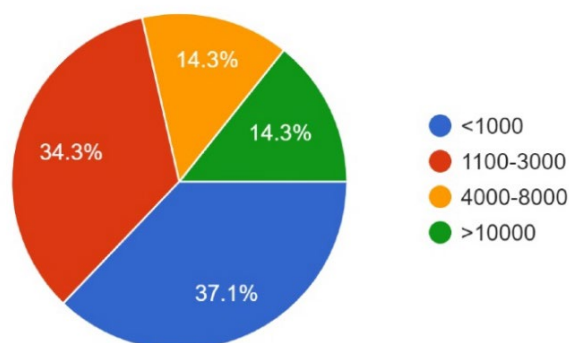


Figure 4 Willingness to spend money of soft masculine fashion

### SOFT MASCULINITY AND GROOMING/ BEAUTY CONSUMPTION

When it comes to the grooming and beauty related consumption in Gen Z men, the results were quite positive. For 82.9% respondents their grooming was important. In last six months, 14.3% spent more than ₹10,000/- on their grooming and beauty products, while only 20% spent less than ₹1,000/-. These products were mainly related to hair and facial hair, fragrance and skincare followed by intimate care and nail care at the end.

It was also observed that the awareness of skincare/ beauty products has increased in this cohort group, as 62.9% respondents are aware of various skincare products available in the market and 65.7% have also used them in some or other way. More than 60% respondents are willing to spend money on these skincare/beauty products with 5.7% respondents willing to spend more than ₹10,000/- as shown in figure 5 below.

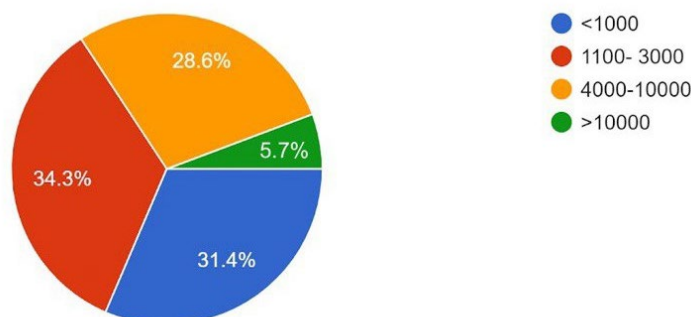


Figure 5 Willingness to spend money on beauty and grooming products

In contrast to the soft masculine fashion consumption, 68.6% respondents had men in their immediate circle using these products. Also, the peer pressure or gender stereotypes were not influenced while using these products. When it comes to using these products which are traditionally associated with women, 37.1% of them felt it neutral and 48% felt it irrelevant, meaning they would all try the products. Only 14% respondents felt that the men in their circle would not approve of them using skincare/ beauty products. From all the respondents willing spend more than ₹4000/- on skincare and grooming products, 50% respondents were of age 26-28, again showing their financial independency.

Although, 54.2% respondents would highly purchase beauty/ skincare related products, if they were promoted, featured and referred by men. This also reflects on the way marketers are changing their communication. The cosmetic industry in South Korea was dominated by women that shows preference towards women ambassadors, but there has been a recent trend in the industry to feature male K-Pop idols as the brand ambassador.

Younger Gen Z in age 18-21 are heavily influenced by social media and popular culture in their fashion and grooming choices and are more experimental and open to blending traditional and modern traits of masculinity. Whereas, older



Gen Z in age 26-28 have shown a more varied spending pattern, with 30% willing to spend more than ₹10,000, suggesting a higher disposable income or greater interest in soft masculine/gender-inclusive styles within this group.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The concept of "soft masculinity" emerged as a relatively new term for many respondents, with varying perceptions of its significance. While a significant portion viewed it positively, associating it with improved mental health for men, there was also apprehension regarding acceptance from peers and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. This reflects the complexity of navigating evolving gender norms and the challenges associated with changing traditional perceptions of masculinity.

Regarding fashion consumption, social media played a pivotal role as the primary source of inspiration, particularly for soft masculine fashion. Despite a willingness to explore clothing traditionally associated with the opposite gender, there was hesitance in fully embracing soft masculine fashion, with concerns about peer criticism and societal norms.

In contrast, grooming and beauty consumption among Gen Z men showed a more positive trend, with a majority considering grooming important and expressing willingness to spend on skincare and beauty products. The increased awareness and usage of skincare products signify a shifting attitude towards self-care and personal grooming among men. Importantly, the influence of peer pressure or gender stereotypes appeared to be less pronounced in this domain compared to fashion consumption. The study highlights the challenges faced by Gen Z individuals in navigating evolving gender norms and consumption practices while also presenting opportunities for businesses and marketers to cater to changing preferences and attitudes.

The data indicated that Gen Z males are increasingly embracing soft masculinity and gender-inclusive fashion due to a combination of exposure to new trends, the influence of social media and celebrities, changing attitudes towards traditional masculinity, and a growing focus on personal expression and self-care.

As a future direction, this study can be taken further through longitudinal study to assess the impact of soft masculinity trend on Gen Z also a cross-cultural study can take place to understand the impact of socio-cultural factors on gender perceptions and consumption patterns.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None

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