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Solo Fashion Shopping in Department Stores: Unique Style Journeys of Thai Female Customers

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Abstract

The rise of solo shopping behaviour across urban centres in Asia reflects cross-sociocultural transformations, including increased individualisation, the postponement of traditional family marriage, and evolving gender norms that afford women greater independence in public and consumer spaces. This study investigates solo fashion shopping among young women in Thailand a topic largely absent from fashion and consumer behaviour literature despite its increasing relevance in everyday life. Based on in-depth interviews with fifteen women aged 23 to 36 residing in major Thai cities, this research uncovers how solo shopping is a practice of self-direction, emotional regulation, identity construction, and lifestyle performance. Five key themes are identified: seeking independence, self-reflection, emotional restoration, focused decision-making, and the influence of retail environments. Participants described shopping alone not as a fallback but as a preferred mode of consumption that allows greater clarity, freedom, and self-exploration. This paper positions solo fashion shopping as a cultural and emotional act shaped by the transformation of Thai femininity and consumer culture. The findings investigate the understanding of gendered buying and use by drawing attention to how autonomy, cultural expectations, and personal routines converge within the context of solo fashion shopping, offering a lens through which to reconsider women's consumer agency in everyday life. At the same time, the study provides practical insights for fashion retailers navigating changing consumption patterns in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Solo Shopping; Thai Women; Fashion; Consumer Identity; Thailand

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Introduction

In places like Bangkok's large shopping malls and Chiang Mai's smaller fashion districts, the ways young women engage with retail are gradually changing. It is now common to see them shopping on their own, moving through stores, selecting garments, and making choices without the company of others. This everyday shift signals a quiet but notable change in the patterns of consumption and social behaviour. This quiet transformation reflects changing social habits and growing comfort with solitude in public consumer settings. Far from being a sign of social isolation, this emerging pattern reflects a more profound cultural shift toward individualised consumption, personal agency, and changing expressions of womanhood in urban Thailand (Phatra & Srisarntiwong, 2022; Skov, 2005; Jackson, 2020). As solo consumption becomes more visible in dining, travel, and entertainment (Galanaki, 2013; Kim et al., 2022), fashion shopping, too, has taken on new personal and symbolic meanings when performed alone.

Historically, shopping has been conceptualised as a social activity, particularly for women. Within both Western and Asian contexts, consumer spaces have served as sites for relational bonding, peer validation, and collective leisure (Craik, 2009; Miller, 1998). However, the increasing independent decision-making of young urban women, facilitated by higher education, career mobility, and access to personal income, has led to a redefinition of shopping as a solitary, self-directed, and, at times, even therapeutic practice (Long & Averill, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2019). In Thailand, these changes intersect with broader social developments: declining marriage rates, rising rates of solo living, and the emergence of a digitally connected yet emotionally privatised youth culture (Chulachai & Koanantakool, 2020; Tangworamongkon et al., 2021). Although solo buying behaviour has become increasingly visible in everyday consumer life, it remains underexplored in the academic literature, especially within Southeast Asian contexts. This gap is particularly notable given the region's dynamic consumer landscape, characterised by rapid technological adoption, evolving socio-cultural values, and significant shifts in purchasing behaviours (Rialisnawati et al., 2024).

Much of the existing scholarship on fashion consumption continues to centre on themes such as peer influence, normative conformity, and social signaling (Kawamura, 2005; McRobbie, 1998), often leaving unexamined the more introspective, affective, and agentic dimensions that characterise solitary shopping practices. Moreover, research that centres on Thai consumers frequently frames them within traditional familial roles or globalised consumption tropes (Leelakulthanit, 2003), rarely capturing the lived realities of everyday agency expressed through small acts of independence, such as shopping solo.

This study addresses this gap by exploring young Thai women's solo fashion shopping experiences. Through qualitative interviews with fifteen participants residing in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Khon Kaen, the research examines how women conceptualise and experience shopping alone. It focuses on the motivations behind solo shopping, the emotional and cognitive processes involved, and the meanings attached to fashion consumption as an individual activity. In doing so, the study positions solo fashion shopping not merely as a market trend but as a cultural practice loaded with significance in contemporary Thai society. In this light, the present study aims to illuminate the motivations and practical considerations that draw young Thai women to shop for fashion alone, to trace how these moments are lived as spaces of self-reflection, identity work, and emotional renewal, and to consider how retail environments contribute to shaping such solo shopping experiences.

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Literature Review

Solo Consumption and Shifting Gender Norms

Solo consumption is increasingly viewed as a marker of modern urban life. Defined as engaging in activities such as eating, travelling, or shopping without the company of others, it reflects logistical independence and evolving cultural values (Kim et al., 2022). In East and Southeast Asia, where collectivism has long shaped social behaviour, solo consumption challenges conventional assumptions about interdependence and social participation, particularly for women. This tension raises a key conceptual debate: Does solo shopping undermine collectivist expectations of togetherness, or does it coexist as a complementary practice, granting women greater freedom in some domains while preserving interdependence in others? Goodwin and Lockshin (1992) were among the first to identify the solo consumer as a distinct subject in marketing literature. Since then, scholars have explored how solo consumption relates to autonomy, emotional needs, and lifestyle aspirations (Galanaki, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2019). For women, shopping alone may be a form of resistance to gendered expectations that frame consumption as communal or dependent. Others interpret it as a pragmatic adaptation to urban lifestyles, while some suggest hybrid practices that blend independent decision-making with cultural propriety (Pham et al., 2021; Somasiri et al., 2022). More than the Asian contexts, previous research in Western societies has also examined solo consumption. In the United States and Europe, shopping alone is often tied to efficiency, privacy, and individualised decision-making (Babin & Attaway, 2000; Medrano et al., 2016). For example, studies on groceries (Turley & Milliman, 2000), books (Miller, 1998), and cosmetics (Kent & Stone, 2007) suggest that solo shopping extends well beyond fashion. Together, these works indicate broader lifestyle changes in the ways consumers navigate retail environments independently. These insights demonstrate that solitary shopping is not a uniquely Asian phenomenon but part of a broader global trend, though its cultural meanings and social implications differ across regions. What may appear as a subtle shift in consumer behaviour, therefore, signals a broader reworking of gendered norms in Southeast Asia's urban centres. Women navigating fashion spaces alone are not merely adapting to convenience; they are actively reshaping expectations about how, where, and with whom they appear in public. A closer examination of the gendered dynamics underlying solo consumer behaviour reveals that acts of shopping alone have often been interpreted as transgressive, especially in societies where female solitude in public is culturally restrained. The increasing normalisation of these practices in contemporary Thailand reflects broader shifts in women's social mobility, independent social participation, and engagement with public space. Although shaped in part by global lifestyle discourses, these changes are refracted through distinctly Thai cultural frameworks, particularly those rooted in ideals of propriety, familial harmony, and karmic balance, imbuing solo consumption with meanings that are both modern and locally grounded. These debates highlight the importance of focusing on fashion specifically, where consumer behaviour is not only social but also intensely tied to identity, creativity, and emotional labour. To understand how these processes unfold in everyday life, it is necessary to situate them in Thailand’s urban consumer spaces, where global influences intersect with local expectations of femininity and propriety.

Fashion as a Site of Identity and Emotional Labour

Unlike many other forms of consumption, fashion is deeply tied to personal expression and identity construction. Clothes are not merely objects but carriers of meaning, memory, and desire (Entwistle, 2000; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The dressed body, as Entwistle argues, is both a cultural object and an embodied practice through which identity is performed and

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perceived in social space. This view aligns with the idea that fashion is visual, experiential, and deeply situated within social life.

McRobbie (1998) expands on this by examining the cultural labour embedded in fashion, especially regarding female agency and economic participation. She argues that fashion is both a site of self-expression and a system of affective labour, where emotional, aesthetic, and performative efforts are embedded in consumer behaviour. In Thailand, young women navigate this space through visible styling and internal reflection, choosing clothes that align with personal narratives and evolving aspirations. Skov (2005) further situates fashion within global networks of production and meaning-making, suggesting that local practices are constantly in dialogue with global flows. Thai women's solo shopping practices should therefore be understood as embedded in a broader cultural exchange rather than as an isolated or uniquely national phenomenon. Local conceptions of femininity, modesty, and social respectability continue to inform consumer behaviour; however, these are increasingly interwoven with transnational currents that encourage individual self-styling, consumer individual choice, and aesthetic experimentation. People shop alone for many kinds of products, but fashion is different because it says a lot about who we are. Unlike groceries or books, the clothes we pick show how we want to present ourselves and can affect how we feel, which makes shopping for fashion alone especially interesting to study. This distinction underscores why research on solo shopping in fashion contexts offers more profound insights into identity work and emotional regulation than studies of other product domains.

Solo fashion shopping in this context offers a valuable lens through which to examine how women navigate these intersecting forces and actively participate in the redefinition of modern womanhood in Thailand. When unaccompanied, consumers are free from immediate judgment or peer validation, allowing more space for emotional introspection and experimentation. Long and Averill (2003) found that intentional solitude enhances creativity and emotional regulation, which is conducive to the imaginative and affective labor that fashion shopping entails. This links to the idea of emotional renewal, where being alone in shops can almost work like as form of self-care. To see how that plays out day to day, it helps to look at Thailand's city shopping areas, places where global trends mix, sometimes uneasily, with local views of femininity and what counts as proper.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Consumer Autonomy

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory suggests that three core needs, which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness, play a major role in shaping human behaviour. When these needs are met, people tend to feel more motivated, more in control of their choices, and emotionally clearer. Autonomy involves acting on choices that a person genuinely prefers, whereas competence concerns feeling able to manage routine decisions with assurance (Amenuvor et al., 2019; Takagi et al., 2024). In consumer settings, earlier studies note that when the retail environment gives shoppers room to decide for themselves, they are more likely to follow their own preferences instead of responding to subtle social cues or outside pressure.

SDT is particularly relevant to fashion consumption because clothing carries symbolic meaning and is closely connected to identity, mood, and emotional state. When a customer moves through a store on her own, she tends to follow the pace and direction that feels right at that moment. Without having to respond to another person's timing or opinion, their focus turns more directly toward what actually suits their needs. This kind of self-directed decision-making becomes especially relevant during periods when circumstances are uncertain or emotionally demanding (Appolloni et al., 2023).

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From an SDT perspective, competence emerges when individuals evaluate clothing in terms of cuts, colours, and silhouettes that align with their self-image. Even without companions, the relatedness of feelings remains through connections to fashion media, online communities, and cultural meanings attached to clothing (Appolloni et al., 2023; Lau & Ki, 2021; Li & Feng, 2022; Taljaard & Sonnenberg, 2019). By using the SDT in this research, it supports a clear theoretical link to the study and findings, showing how autonomy, inner reflection, and emotional renewal shape the solo fashion shopping experiences of young Thai women (Aggarwal et al., 2025; Appolloni et al., 2023; Han & Xu, 2022; Taljaard & Sonnenberg, 2019).

Thailand's Urban Consumers and Emerging Autonomy

Thailand presents a compelling context for studying solo fashion shopping. As the country balances Buddhist collectivist traditions with global consumer modernity, its urban centres have become laboratories for lifestyle experimentation. Among young women in Thailand's major cities, there is a noticeable shift toward career advancement, self-development, and digitally mediated lifestyles, often taking precedence over conventional expectations regarding family and domestic life (Phatra & Srisarntiwong, 2022). Among many young women in urban Thailand, changing priorities are expressed through the everyday acts of consumption. The pursuit of independence and adaptability does not remain abstract; it materialises in seemingly ordinary decisions such as when to shop, what to buy, and how to navigate those spaces alone. While these changes share affinities with emerging models of "modern femininity" observed elsewhere in East Asia, their expression in Thailand remains shaped by local cultural sensibilities. Norms that continue to prize grace, relational harmony, and social discretion are not discarded but reworked. In this context, shopping alone becomes a quiet strategy, and as an act through which women navigate personal independence while still moving within the bounds of what is considered appropriate, respectable, and feminine. This balancing act also resonates with goal efficiency, as many women use solo shopping to meet practical needs while negotiating the cultural expectations of time, money, and self-presentation**.** Across Southeast Asia, solo shopping takes different forms in each country. In Korea, individuals who shop alone often adapt their shopping habits to accommodate busy urban environments (Kim et al., 2022). Another study in Vietnam by Cam Thuy et al. (2025) also presents that buying clothes has become a way for people to show their independence. Found in her study with colleagues (Somasiri et al., 2022), local women who often travel alone in Sri Lanka often feel both freedoms and challenges. In Japan, fashion reflects a mix of local culture and global trends, shaping personal identity (Skov, 2005). These examples show that while solo shopping is becoming more common across Asia, what it means really depends on local context, making Thailand an especially interesting place to study.

The contemporary fashion mall in Thailand, as noted by Sombunjaroen (2024), functions as a hybridised space where commerce, leisure, wellness, and visual culture converge. Many participants commented on how the atmosphere of a store shaped their comfort when shopping alone. Features such as soft lighting, an uncluttered design, and staff who provided space rather than pressure contributed to a more relaxed experience. These environments encouraged unhurried browsing, self-reflection, and emotional satisfaction. Such details align with the sensory environment theme, as store atmospheres shape not only consumer comfort but also the depth of emotional engagement in solo shopping.

Moreover, digital fashion media and influencer culture have expanded the vocabulary of self-presentation and introduced new standards for taste, trends, and lifestyle. Many Thai women who shop alone also engage with fashion content online, drawing inspiration from social media and digital platforms. This blending of in-store experiences with virtual style communities gives new shape to what it means to be alone, not as a sign of absence or exclusion, but as a conscious and empowering way to participate in fashion culture.

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Research Methodology

Although previous studies often use surveys as a quantitative method and experiments to study women's fashion shopping, few have closely examined the personal feelings and experiences of women shopping alone. Given that the literature highlights solo fashion shopping as a space for emotional introspection, identity exploration, and individual agency, a qualitative interview approach is well-suited. Unlike prior quantitative studies, in-depth interviews allow for a culturally grounded exploration of the affective (Alexander & Thompson, 2024) and subjective aspects of women's solo shopping experiences (Roberts, 2020). This study therefore employed in-depth interviews to explore young Thai women's experiences and motivations regarding solo fashion shopping, reflecting the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen et al., 2007). Interviews were chosen because they help uncover women's views and reasons behind their shopping choices, providing a nuanced understanding of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This qualitative methodology further enabled the capture of rich, descriptive data that quantitative methods might overlook, particularly regarding the complex interplay of self-perception and consumer behaviour (Petruzzellis et al., 2021).

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited via purposive sampling through Instagram and LINE groups focusing on fashion, lifestyle, and urban living. Diversity in occupational background and geographic location was prioritised to reflect a range of urban Thai experiences. All participants were single, high school-educated, and residing in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or Khon Kaen. Bangkok was selected because it represents Thailand's largest and most globalised urban centre, where international fashion retailers and lifestyle malls are concentrated. Chiang Mai was designated as a major northern hub, reflecting both its creative and cultural industries and the modern consumption practices of its growing middle class. The authors also selected Khon Kaen province to represent the urban Northeast, an emerging regional centre in which retail development is expanding rapidly. Together, these three sites provide a balanced cross-section of Thailand's urban consumer landscapes, whereas provinces such as Phuket and Hat Yai were excluded because their economies are more tourism-driven and therefore less representative of everyday fashion consumption. This distribution across the three research locations is summarised in Table 1.

Using a sample of fifteen participants is reasonable for qualitative research. Previous studies show that in focused studies with similar participants, themes and codes are often fully captured with just a handful of people, usually in the low teens (Boddy, 2016; Guest et al., 2006). Capturing the deeper meanings behind those themes typically needs only a few more cases (Hennink et al., 2021). Consistent with the "information power" principle (Malterud et al., 2016), our narrowly defined aim (solo fashion shopping among single, high school educated, above urban women), theoretically relevant sampling across three urban centres, and iterative analysis support the adequacy of n=15 for rigorous, in-depth interpretation. Small, purposefully composed samples are also appropriate for case-oriented qualitative research prioritising depth over breadth (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In practice, data saturation was achieved by the 13th interview, without new themes emerging in the subsequent cases. There are only the final two interviews confirmed this saturation, consistent with Guest et al. (2006). At the same time, we draw on the "information power" approach (Malterud et al., 2016), which emphasises that a smaller, well-focused sample is sufficient when the research aim is narrow, participants are specific, and analysis is in-depth. This dual rationale further supports the adequacy of our final sample of fifteen participants. This distribution across the three research locations is summarised in Table 1.

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Table 1: Profile Summary of Interviewed Thai Female Fashion Shoppers

Code Name	Age	Occupation	City	Education	Last Fashion Item Bought Alone
Tida	23	Marketing Assistant	Bangkok	Bachelor's degree	Casual blouse
Noon	29	Graphic Designer	Khon Kaen	Bachelor's degree	Dress
Namfon	27	University Student	Khon Kaen	Pursuing degree	Jeans
Dao	26	Freelance Stylist	Bangkok	Bachelor's degree	Shoes
Mira	26	Social Media Manager	Chiang Mai	Master's degree	Bag
Mind	27	Self-business	Khon Kaen	Master's degree	Dress
Looknam	36	Lawyer	Chiang Mai	Bachelor's degree	Dress
Gade	25	Tour Guide	Chiang Mai	Bachelor's degree	Bag
Lalisa	23	Real Estate Agent	Khon Kaen	Conventional College	Shoes
Mook	28	Self-Business	Chiang Mai	Master's degree	Suit
Jarin	24	Boutique Staff	Bangkok	High school diploma	Accessories
Benjamas	29	Fashion Intern	Khon Kaen	Bachelor's degree	T-shirt
Jasmine	33	Marketing Officer	Bangkok	Master's degree	Workwear
Aom	25	Barista	Chiang Mai	College diploma	Skirt
Phing	25	Digital Content Creator	Bangkok	Bachelor's degree	Jacket

Note. All participants are Thai women with recent solo fashion shopping experience in urban areas.

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Data Collection

Interviews covered key topics, including participants' backgrounds, reasons for solo fashion shopping, their emotional experiences, and primary considerations during shopping trips. Example interview questions were: "What motivates you to shop alone? “How do you feel while shopping by yourself?", and "What specific aspects do you pay attention to when shopping alone?". During the interview process, initial coding was collected and scrutinized as each interview was completed. Interviews continued until participants had no new themes or ideas, ensuring enough data had been gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The final recording was transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed through thematic analysis, following the qualitative analysis guidance of Creswell and Creswell (2018). The analysis involved data preparation, coding, thematic categorisation, and interpretation of findings. To ensure research credibility, the analysis findings were discussed among multiple researchers, and translations from Thai into English were verified for accuracy by a bilingual translator familiar with the research context. This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in interpretive inquiry to capture the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of solo fashion shoppers in Thailand. Fifteen women aged 23 to 36 who had engaged in solo fashion shopping at least 4-5 times in the past two months were interviewed semi-structuredly. A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. NVivo 14 software was used to assist in data organisation. Codes and themes were derived inductively from the data, enabling analytical categories to emerge directly from participants’ language, experiences, and meaning-making frameworks. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the quality of qualitative research is assessed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, the authors conducted the data analysis and concentrated on discussing findings to ensure the appropriate data.

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Research Findings

Analysis of the fifteen in-depth interviews yielded five central themes that illuminate how young Thai women engage with and interpret the practice of solo fashion shopping. These themes reflect the intersection of personal independence, cultural context, and emotional intention embedded in their consumption behaviours. These themes reflect diverse motivations, emotional landscapes, and social negotiations in their solitary retail behavior. The five key themes include: (1) autonomy and independence, (2) self-reflection and identity exploration, (3) emotional renewal and self-care, (4) goal-oriented efficiency, and (5) the affective atmosphere of the shopping environment. Although participants articulated shared experiences within each theme, variations emerged based on mood, personal values, and past consumer encounters. To bring these findings together, we propose a conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The framework shows how larger structural factors influence why people shop alone and how this, in turn, leads to consumer behaviours. The antecedents in the proposed framework capture broader social and structural forces, particularly urbanisation and shifting gender norms, which set the stage for solo shopping practices.

The study shows the psychological reasons people shop alone, mainly wanting autonomy and expressing their identity. The outcomes show what participants experienced, as well as feeling empowered and having a sense of well-being as shoppers. From a theoretical perspective, this research also adds to consumer behaviour research by looking at solo shopping in the context of how people make decisions and express their identities**.** The findings fit well with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). People’s attitudes are more inclined toward independence, the social expectations they face around gender and propriety, and how

confident they feel moving through stores all influence whether they decide to shop alone. At the same time, the emphasis on self-directed choice and self-expression ties in with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), suggesting that shopping alone can fulfil basic psychological needs. Based on these ideas, the study presents a framework for understanding solo shopping: urbanisation and changing gender norms act as background factors, autonomy and identity expression are the main motivations, and empowerment and consumer well-being are the outcomes.

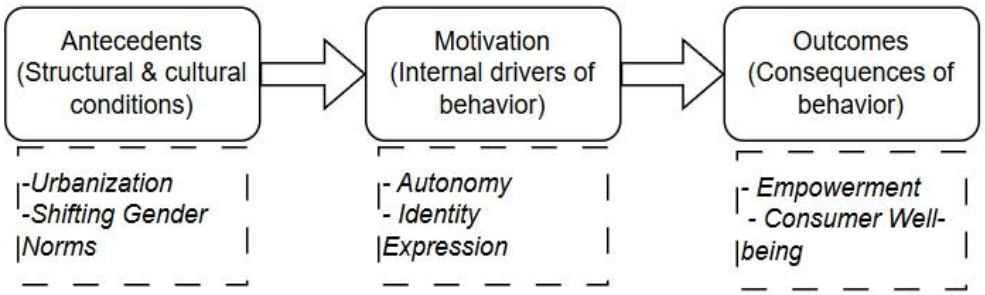


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Solo Shopping Behaviour: Antecedents, Motivations, and Outcomes

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1) Autonomy and Independence

For all participants, solo shopping was fundamentally about exercising personal freedom. Many strongly preferred shopping alone because it offered an escape from the interpersonal obligations that often accompany group or family shopping. This freedom extended to pace, path, budget, and decision-making.

> *"I like walking at my own rhythm. I can stay in one shop for 10 minutes or 2 hours, depending on my feelings. If I go with my sister or friends, I always feel like I am holding someone back or being held back." (Namfon, 27, Khon Kaen)*

Some women linked solo shopping to broader forms of individual life's independence. For instance, Jasmine (33, Bangkok), who lived alone and worked in marketing, equated solo shopping with managing her time and energy. She reflected:

> *"I work long hours. Weekends are mine. I do not want to negotiate what shop to go to or explain why I like this or that outfit. When I am alone, it is my time, my choices."*

This pursuit of independence was not always framed in opposition to social ties but rather as a necessary balance. Participants valued social shopping with friends or partners but described it as a different experience, one more centred on entertainment or bonding than introspective consumption.

> *"Going with friends is fun, but I buy less. I end up chatting or eating. When I am alone, I think more clearly. It is quieter in my head." (Aom, 25, Chiang Mai)*

Thus, Solo shopping served as a distinct domain of individual control over purchases, spatial movement, emotional bandwidth, and decision ownership.

2) Self-Reflection and Identity Exploration

Beyond convenience, solo fashion shopping was experienced as a deeply introspective process. Many participants described their solo time in stores as a "mirror" moment that allowed them to explore different facets of themselves through clothing. Trying on unfamiliar styles or imagining new looks was described as a safe, private rehearsal for possible versions of self.

> *"Sometimes I wear all black and feel strong. Other days I try on bright dresses just to feel soft again. I think shopping alone lets me test those moods without judgment." (Tida, 23, Bangkok), and this also applies to Looknam (36, Chiang Mai) "As a lawyer, I am generally in formal attire or suit and even with the dark tone color, when shopping alone, I am freely trying on any colors and styles I want without concern about my job related, or the colleagues around, I just want to try different styles without be manipulate or ideas from others" (Noon,29, Khon Kaen)*

For some, this exploration was connected to specific life transitions, such as entering the workforce, moving from home, or navigating new relationships. Shopping alone became a space to process these changes by reflecting them in one's appearance.

> *"After I broke up with my ex, I went to buy a dress, not for work, just to see how I look in one. I wanted to see myself as someone who can stand tall again. It sounds silly, but it helped." (Mira, 26, Chiang Mai)*

This theme often intersects with social media use. Several participants noted that solo shopping enabled them to focus more on how clothes made them feel physically rather than how they would look in photos.

> *"When I am alone, I think less about Instagram. I am not shopping for likes. I care more about how it fits me, how it feels on my body." (Jarin, 24, Bangkok)*

This distinction reveals the performative tension many young women face between public presentation and private resonance. Solo shopping is a rare moment when the latter can take precedence.

3) Emotional Renewal and Self-Care

Many participants described solo shopping as a form of emotional management or mood regulation. Being in a retail environment alone was seen as a therapeutic ritual after a long week at work or during stress. Browsing touching fabrics, seeing colour, and listening to music were often described as "calming" or "healing."

> *"I do not always buy things. Sometimes I go just to look. It is like meditation. I walk, I breathe, I see nice things. My mood resets." (Benjamas, 29, Khon Kaen). My full day works as a tour guide outdoors, making me exhausted. While browsing around the department store, I do not plan to buy anything, but I will see more things; sometimes, if something pops into my mind and the budget allows, I will consider it—especially at the skincare booths. It is a retreat to myself." (Gade, 25, Chiang Mai)"*

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Shopping alone was prevalent after emotionally charged events breakups, work conflicts, or family tension. The movement and visual stimulation ritual seemed to offer participants a temporary sense of control and aesthetic nourishment.

> *"When I feel sad, I go out alone. I do not even want to talk. I just walk in the mall, try on clothes, drink coffee. I feel like I am taking care of myself." (Phing, 25, Bangkok)*

Participants distinguished between "shopping to buy" and "shopping to feel better." The latter did not always result in a purchase but was valued as a form of quiet restoration. These accounts align with findings in consumer psychology, in which sensory immersion and physical movement are often associated with emotion regulation. Still, not all participants viewed solo shopping in purely favourable terms. A few described moments of guilt associated with impulsive purchases or with using shopping to cope with difficult emotions.

> *"I know I sometimes shop to fill a void. I buy too much when I am upset. I am working on it. But being alone helps. I can think more clearly without pressure." (Mook, 28, Chiang Mai)*

Such reflections reveal the empowering and ambivalent aspects of emotional shopping, which solo conditions may amplify by removing external feedback.

4) Goal-Oriented Efficiency

While emotional and symbolic motivations dominated many narratives, participants also emphasised the practical benefits of solo shopping, namely, time savings, focus, and better decision-making. Shopping alone was often framed as a task strategy, particularly for workwear, gifts, or the replacement of essentials.

> *"If I have something specific in mind, I go alone. It is faster. I go to two shops, compare prices, done. No small talk, no waiting."* (Lalisa, 23, Khonkaen)

Solo shopping also enabled stricter budgeting. Several women mentioned that group shopping led to overspending or buying under the influence, either to match friends' tastes or to avoid awkward refusals. "When I shop with friends, I end up buying things I do not need. They say, 'You look great!' and I say yes without thinking. Alone, I listen to myself." (Dao, 26, Bangkok)

Participants described a greater sense of control over decision sequences: when to browse, when to compare, and when to commit. This control was perceived as empowering, especially for women navigating competitive, time-constrained lifestyles.

> *"I do not have much time for shopping. I want to use it well. Shopping alone is much more preferred, so I can concentrate on making a decision."(Lalisa, 23, Khon Kaen)*

Participants often framed solo shopping to stay focused in environments that can otherwise feel overwhelming. Without the distraction of company, they could move through stores more quickly, make decisions on their terms, and spend time only where it felt worthwhile.

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5) The Sensory and Social Atmosphere

Many also reflected on how the feel of a store, its lighting, layout, music, and staff presence affected their overall comfort. Some spaces encouraged them to linger; others felt too intrusive or chaotic. These details shaped not only their shopping habits but also how welcome and at ease they felt when shopping alone. Clean design, gentle music, and non-intrusive lighting were repeatedly described as supportive of a calm, pleasant solo experience. Many participants avoided shops that were loud, crowded, or chaotic.

> *"Lighting and music matter a lot. If it is too bright or noisy, I feel anxious. I like quiet stores with natural colours." (Gade, 25, Chiangmai)*

Equally important was staff interaction. Most participants valued friendliness but emphasised the need for space. Being approached too early or followed by salespeople disrupted their sense of personal control and led some to leave the store altogether. *"I want help when I ask for it. But I hate it when they keep asking, 'What are you looking for?' every five minutes. It breaks my focus."* (Mind, 27, Khonkaen)

Others appreciated it when staff respected subtle cues, such as body language or extended browsing, as signs that assistance was unnecessary. When these boundaries were respected, participants reported a higher likelihood of staying longer, trying on more items, and purchasing.

> *"One shop I love, the staff just smiles and lets me be. If I need another size, they appear like magic. That is perfect service for me." (Dao, 26, Bangkok)*

Several participants reflected on how specific aspects of the retail environment, such as layout, lighting, scent, and colour, shaped their willingness to remain in a space. These sensory elements played a quiet yet meaningful role in whether the experience felt inviting or overwhelming. More than simply enabling solitude, thoughtfully designed settings seemed to support a kind of focused presence, in which being alone did not feel isolating but intentional and grounded.

Discussion

For many women in this study, shopping alone was more than a practical choice. They actively sought a quiet space where they could make decisions for themselves and pay attention to how they felt. In their stories, solo shopping became a way to try out different aspects of identity, outside the expectations of others. These patterns point to the need to take solo shopping seriously as a form of consumer agency that reflects broader changes in how women in Thailand navigate the space between traditional roles and urban independence. Among the themes that surfaced, autonomy stood out most clearly. Participants described how shopping alone allowed them to move at their own pace, make decisions without compromise, and engage more deeply with their sense of style. Their reflections echo work by Long and Averill (2003) and Nguyen et al. (2019), who suggest that solitude can foster both emotional clarity and a stronger sense of self-direction.

The findings confirm the principles of Self-Determination Theory that Deci and Ryan proved. (1985). In the context of solo shopping, participants drew on virtual style cues and imagined ties to broader fashion communities. With the said practices, participants built confidence in their own decisions (competence), experienced freedom in choosing without outside constraints (autonomy), and still found traces of connection with others (relatedness).

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Our findings highlight that even ordinary retail encounters can enact core psychological needs, extending SDT into the lived realities of consumer culture. In contrast to collectivist cultural expectations of harmony and group participation, the women in this study constructed shopping alone as a momentary escape from social obligation, suggesting a nuanced shift in how femininity and independence are being performed in contemporary Thailand.

This challenges dominant consumer behaviour theories that foreground peer influence, normative conformity, and group validation (e.g., Kawamura, 2005; Miller, 1998). Our findings show that meaningful consumer identity work can take place without direct social interaction. By highlighting solitude as a deliberate and empowering context, the study refines existing frameworks that have largely overlooked non-social forms of consumption. The theme of self-reflection also came through in how participants used clothing to explore who they were and who they were becoming. Shopping alone allowed them to try on styles they might not otherwise consider, sometimes to mark a personal transition, a new phase in life, or to see themselves differently. These moments of private experimentation often carried emotional weight, offering a way to align outward appearance with inward change. This supports prior work by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), who argue that consumption, particularly in fashion, is deeply entangled with emotional and symbolic meaning-making. The therapeutic use of shopping, described by many as a method for emotional restoration, extends the literature on the affective dimensions of retail experiences. This study approaches solo consumption not as a superficial or impulsive habit, but as a meaningful strategy for self-care and emotional recalibration. A few participants recalled moments when their emotions shaped the way they shopped, especially during times of stress. Still, many described solo shopping as a space where they could think more clearly and act without external input. Free from conversation or social feedback, they were able to focus more fully on what felt right to them in the moment. The absence of social input seemed to bring a kind of mental quiet, making it easier to notice what they liked and to make decisions that felt more personally grounded. For many, shopping alone was also a matter of practicality. Managing work, study, or family commitments often left little time for leisure, and the ability to move quickly and make decisions independently was not just efficient, it was essential. These everyday concerns add another dimension to solo shopping, showing how it meets both emotional needs and practical demands in the rhythm of modern life. Additionally, the sensitivity to the shopping environment, from store layout to staff behaviour, emphasises how emotional and psychological factors intersect with spatial design, influencing how long women remain in a store and whether they feel affirmed or intruded upon. These findings suggest that solo fashion shopping is a lifestyle practice deeply informed by broader socio-cultural transitions in Thailand. As women renegotiate the meaning of independence, self-care, and identity in a society where modern aspirations slowly challenge traditional norms, solo shopping becomes an expressive act of personal empowerment. This adds to consumer culture theory by showing that solo shopping is not just an individual choice but an emerging, socially influenced way of consuming, with meaningful implications for both research and practice.

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Academic Contribution

This study connects to the consumer behaviour literature by demonstrating how solo fashion shopping shapes decision-making, emotional regulation, and identity expression among young Thai women. The findings reinforce and extend theoretical perspectives such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), showing how individuals' internal motivations interact with broader social expectations to shape solitary shopping decisions. This aligns with findings from other Asian markets (Hong, 2013; Lee & Hwang, 2019) where young women use solo shopping to negotiate independence in consumption, but our study further reveals that Thai consumers place stronger

emphasis on emotional restoration, a dimension less visible in prior regional research (Hong, 2013; Lee & Hwang, 2019). The study shows how attitudes toward autonomy, perceived social expectations, and confidence in navigating retail environments influence solitary shopping practices. By showing how self-direct motivation functions both as a motivational driver and as an emotional outcome, the study extends existing applications of Self-Determination Theory within consumer behaviour research. The study also adds to consumer culture theory by illustrating that solo shopping is not merely an individual choice but a socially influenced mode of consumption linked to evolving lifestyle patterns and identity construction (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; McRobbie, 1998). These insights deepen academic understanding of how fashion consumption functions as emotional and identity work within everyday life.

Furthermore, this research supports symbolic self-completion theory by revealing how solo fashion shopping facilitates the communication of an ideal self through material possessions, particularly in the context of prestige sensitivity among young consumers. It gives individuals the space to choose items that fit the social roles they want to project and the way they see themselves, which in turn strengthens both their self-concept and their sense of social identity (McNeill & Venter, 2019; Woodruffe-Burton & Wakenshaw, 2011). This adds to work on identity and emotional labour by showing how, in the absence of social pressure, solo shopping settings give individuals more room to test and explore aspects of their identity (Entwistle, 2000; McRobbie, 1998). In addition to these contributions, the study also speaks to cultural sociology by placing solo fashion shopping within the wider social changes taking place in contemporary Thailand. The findings show how young women navigate evolving cultural expectations, especially those tied to femininity, appropriate behaviour, and personal independence.

From this perspective, shopping alone can be seen as a point where wider lifestyle influences coming from outside Thailand meet long-standing local cultural expectations. It clarifies how young women negotiate conceptions of modern womanhood and how urban cultural life in Southeast Asia is gradually shifting. Taken together, the research strengthens the relevance of the proposed framework by showing how different antecedents, motivations, and outcomes connect within Thai consumers' solo shopping experiences.

Social Contribution

This study offers practical value for both the retail industry and the wider social development in Thailand. The findings provide Thai retailers with clearer insight into what shoppers regard as important, helping them recognise key success factors and adjust their operations to better align with customer expectations (Iamratanakul, 2019). Consistent with research on customer experience design, retailers who understand the psychological needs of autonomy and comfort can create more effective service environments (Grewal et al., 2017).

By indicating that shopping alone can help young women restore their emotional balance (Petruzzellis et al., 2021) and reinforce their autonomy and decision-making clarity (Solér, 2022), the results suggest practical directions for department stores to adjust their services in ways that better support customers who prefer to shop independently. Earlier retail studies also note that elements such as store layout, lighting, and other sensory cues can shape emotional comfort and ease the mental effort involved in choosing products (Kotler, 1973; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Understanding the more detailed motivations behind solo shopping also gives retailers the basis to shape marketing strategies and in-store experiences that speak directly to the needs of these customers, which can help strengthen engagement and satisfaction (Khalid, 2024; Pujianto & Marwati, 2024).

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The study also carries implications for Thailand's creative and retail economy. Supporting solo shoppers does more than improve individual satisfaction; it can help department stores position themselves more competitively by responding to the lifestyle patterns emerging among young urban women. Studies from Asian markets indicate greater demand for retail spaces that allow shoppers to move independently while still providing a sense of emotional comfort, pointing to practical strategic opportunities for Thai retailers (Kim et al., 2022). These insights provide practical direction for updating service design in ways that match shifting cultural expectations around independence and personal agency.

Conclusion

This study contributes to fashion and consumer research by shedding light on the underexplored phenomenon of solo fashion shopping among young Thai women. In-depth interviews uncovered five central themes that characterise the solo shopping experience: autonomy, self-reflection, emotional renewal, goal efficiency, and the sensory environment. These align with earlier work highlighting shopping as a personal and symbolic activity tied to identity construction (Miller, 1998; Skeggs, 2004). Academically, the study connects with the theories of identity construction in consumer behaviour (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; McRobbie, 1998) by positioning solo fashion shopping as a form of emotional and identity work. It also extends more to the understandings of gendered autonomy in retail spaces, showing how everyday consumption can be a part of a site for negotiating and performing independence within culturally specific boundaries of femininity in Thailand. The findings suggest that solo shopping is far from a marginal or isolated behaviour. Rather, it functions as a flexible and deeply personal practice, supporting moments of self-direction, emotional recalibration, and quiet experimentation with identity. Public understanding of female independence in Thailand can likewise benefit from recognising solo shopping not as social withdrawal, but as a conscious act of self-expression and personal agency. In the context of Thailand's urban environments, where everyday routines are shifting alongside changes in gender roles, solo shopping is becoming increasingly normalized (Pholsena & Banomyong, 2006; Wilson, 1991). For many, it offers a quiet opportunity to move through the world on their own terms, unaccompanied, unhurried, and attentive to their own preferences. These seemingly ordinary acts of consumption can become spaces where women subtly test new ways of being in public (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998). For professionals in fashion and retail, these observations speak to the importance of designing spaces that are attuned not only to trends but to emotion. In the retailing and merchandising practice, the department store and retailers (such as visual merchandising or retail design strategy) could also reconfigure store layouts to allow smoother navigation and create spaces for independent browsing, while marketing communications might highlight shopping alone as a desirable practice tied to autonomy and self-care. Such strategies not only enhance the solo shopping experience but also contribute to the competitiveness of Thailand's rapidly evolving retail sector. Practical examples include designing semi-private fitting room areas, curating calming atmospheres, and training staff in emotional cue recognition so they can support solo shoppers without imposing pressure. Finally, this study confirms solo shopping as a symbolic expression of changing gender norms, autonomy, and urban womanhood in contemporary Thai society. What may seem like an ordinary act of consumption is, in fact, a meaningful social performance, one in which women navigate the evolving intersections of identity, emotion, and independence in the public sphere.

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Limitations and Directions of Future Research

Future research might build on this work by extending its scope to include different generations of female customers, social backgrounds, and regional and shopping-environment

contexts across Thailand, thereby offering a more layered understanding of how solitude, consumer solitude, and self-care take shape in everyday life. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian contexts could further elucidate the cultural specificities and shared patterns that shape the practice and perception of solo shopping. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian contexts could further elucidate the cultural specificities and shared patterns that shape the practice and perception of solo shopping behaviours, particularly given the rapid technological advancements and the increasing prevalence of e-commerce and social media that profoundly influence consumer interaction with markets in these regions (Rialisnawati et al., 2024) (Purcărea et al., 2025). This is particularly crucial, as consumer behaviour, including shopping preferences, is significantly shaped by cultural norms and societal influences (Chatterjee et al., 2024).

In parallel, investigating online shopping may provide valuable insight into how virtual spaces reproduce, mediate, or transform experiences of solitude, autonomy, and aesthetic engagement in ways that parallel or depart from in-person consumption. Ultimately, this research affirms that shopping alone is not an absence of company but a presence of self, a conscious, self-directed act of emotional and aesthetic agency grounded in the evolving landscape of Thai womanhood.

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