

Abstract

Contemporary consumer culture is increasingly governed by the value of singularity—the ideal that goods, experiences, and selves should be perceived as unique, non-interchangeable, and incomparable. This article theorizes singular consumption as a distinct consumption logic shaped by the sociocultural turn toward singularity. We conceptualize singular consumption as emerging from a singularization regime, a macro-level configuration of economic, social, technological, and ideological forces that elevate singularity as a normative cultural good in consumption. Within this regime, we identify the defining characteristics of singular consumption, delineate its core motivational and evaluative orientations, formative dimensions and interpretive markers. Finally, we theorize three paradoxes that structure the lived experience of singular consumption and point to future research avenues. By articulating the cultural logic of singular consumption, this research contributes to the theorization of consumption in post-industrial consumer societies and offers new insight into the dynamics of meaning-making and distinction in platform-mediated marketplaces.

Keywords: singular consumption, uniqueness, distinctiveness, value, sociology

Singular Consumption

Introduction

In this article, we introduce singular consumption as a novel and increasingly important logic guiding consumer behavior. Singular consumption revolves around the pursuit of singularity as the aspiration to be perceived and to perceive oneself as meaningfully unique, distinct, and incomparable. It marks a shift in postmodern consumer culture, where the pursuit of distinction is no longer an occasional desire or stylistic preference, but a cultural value embedded into the design of markets, the architecture of platforms, and the expectations of everyday life. Consumers curate identities, performances, and possessions that must stand out in saturated fields of visibility.

We propose singular consumption as an overarching consumption logic extending the existing work on differentiation and uniqueness and complementing existing models of consumption. While the field of consumer research has long engaged with related constructs—such as uniqueness (Fuchs & Schreier, 2024; Tian et al., 2001), personalization and customization (Arora et al., 2008), and identity signaling (Berger et al., 2007; Chan et al., 2012)—these perspectives often treat uniqueness as dispositional trait, transient desire, or product attribute in separate interrogations. Broader consumption models remain tethered to frameworks of fit, utility, or symbolic alignment, developed in the context of mass production and standardized offerings (Lynn, 1992; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) or more recently focus on access and liquidity in consuming (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017). As a result, they underestimate the structural and cultural rise of singularization, that is a broader sociotechnical regime in which products, experiences, spaces, and selves must increasingly appear as singular in order to be valued (Karpik, 2010; Reckwitz, 2020). We argue that singular consumption should be understood as a

sociocultural embedded logic that reorganizes how consumers engage with products, experiences, brands, and each other.

This paper advances the thesis that singularity has become an institutionalized cultural value that governs contemporary consumption practices. In doing so, it reorients key domains of marketing theory. Where earlier frameworks emphasized the balancing of individual and collective motives (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), identity (Chan et al., 2012), or user–brand fit (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), the logic of singular consumption centers on the curation of a singular identity. Consumption extends into the aesthetic and algorithmic labor of making the self appear singular across highly visible and networked arenas. This singularity goal introduces new tensions and contradictions in self-expression as labor, personalization and algorithmic homogenization, autonomy and obligation.

We define singular consumption as a consumption logic oriented toward singularity. In conceptualizing singular consumption we build on and extend prior theorizing on consumer culture and value creation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 1997, 1998), with singularity as a deep structure of meaning within contemporary marketplaces. Importantly, our conceptualization of singularity draws on Reckwitz’s (2020) definition of the singular: an entity is singular when it is not produced, experienced, or evaluated as a mere variation of a general type, but as something qualitatively distinct and incomparable. Singularity is not reducible to quantitative variation or objective quality¹—more or less, better or worse—but represents a shift into a different ontology of valuation: an entity is experienced as this one, not one among many. This difference has

¹ In this definition, we explicitly follow Reckwitz and deviate from work in economic sociology, specifically Karpik’s theorizing in the “Economics of Singularities,” which exclusively comprises singularity in the sense of one-of-a-kindness (e.g., artworks, experiences). While an underlying idea of increasing importance of singular goods applies to our theorizing as well, we do not define singularity as objective quality of being one of a kind (Krause et al., 2023).

profound implications for how goods, experiences, and selves are perceived and valued—and thus for how markets and consumption must be theorized.

Theoretically, this paper addresses a critical blind spot in marketing thought. While consumer researchers have explored facets of what we term the logic of singular consumption these perspectives have rarely been integrated into a holistic account of the structural cultural logic of singularity that increasingly organizes consumer life. By positioning singularity as a cultural value and singular consumption as emerging logic, we offer a unifying framework to reinterpret familiar phenomena and emerging market dynamics alike.

In proposing singular consumption as an organizing principle of late-modern consumer culture, we respond to long-standing calls for stronger conceptual work in consumer research (Kozlenkova et al., 2025; MacInnis, 2011) and contribute to updating and refining models of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017; Belk et al., 1989; Holt, 1995). Our framework enables reinterpretation of established domains—material and symbolic value creation, personalization and prosumption, digital authenticity work, social distinction and community formation, and the paradoxes of abundance and scarcity—through the lens of singularity. The value of this contribution lies in providing a new interpretive schema through which marketing phenomena can be theorized more incisively and more culturally attuned.

This paper is organized as follows. We begin by describing the singularization regime as the cultural and structural rise of singularity as a governing value in consumer society. We then develop a conceptual ontology of singular consumption: what singular consumption is (core characteristics), why and how it is pursued (motivational and evaluative orientations), where it resides (vectors) and how it is perceived (interpretive markers). We identify key paradoxes of singular consumption. Finally, we propose an agenda for future research.

The Singularization Regime

Singularization, in our conceptualization, constitutes a regime: a discursive system that generates its own logics and norms. Similar to the notion of “taste regimes” (Arsel & Bean, 2013), which link aesthetic discourse to everyday practices, the regime of singularization links the cultural value of singularity to the symbolic, affective, and material practices of consumption. As a regime of practice in the Foucauldian sense (Burchell et al., 1991), singularization prescribes what counts as desirable, reasonable, and self-evident in consumer behavior: it renders singularity not only valuable but necessary. Drawing on Reckwitz’s (2020) diagnosis of a “society of singularities,” we propose that contemporary consumption operates under an institutionalized singularity imperative—an interlocking configuration of economic, technological, and cultural forces that compels individuals to pursue, perform, and display distinction. This regime does not operate through explicit coercion but through systemic incentives, infrastructural nudges, and norms. What follows is an exploration of the historical and structural developments that have given rise to this regime and how they coalesce into a dominant cultural logic of singular consumption.

Similar to other developments transforming consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Dellaert, 2019; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), the rise of singularity as a guiding cultural value in consumption is rooted in the broader shift from a production-centered to a consumption-centered society, accelerated by technological change and the global expansion of market mechanisms into everyday life (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As more domains of life become mediated by market logic, the imperative to pursue and perform singularity increasingly organizes consumer behavior and value creation.

The cultural valorization of uniqueness, nonconformity, and personal distinction in Western societies is rooted in long-standing historical, philosophical, and sociopolitical developments

(Russell, 1946; Zhu et al., 2024). The ideal of singularity emerged alongside the intellectual shifts of modernity, beginning with the Renaissance, which elevated individual creativity, self-expression, and personal achievement as central virtues. These ideals gained further traction during the Enlightenment, when thinkers such as Locke advanced the notion of inherent individual rights—particularly liberty and property—positioning the individual as a self-governing agent endowed with autonomy and rationality. These philosophical foundations have deeply influenced Western political and cultural thought, finding particularly pronounced expression in American ideals of self-determination and individualism (Kim & Markus, 1999).

In the centuries that followed, the cultural value of the singular was further reinforced through romanticism, which celebrated authenticity, self-realization, and the pursuit of one's unique essence (Milnes & Sinanan, 2010). The rise of modern consumer culture in the 20th century expanded these ideals into everyday life, making personal distinction not merely a philosophical ideal but a lived practice mediated through goods, lifestyles, and symbolic consumption. As sociologists of modernity have argued, late modern societies demand that individuals continuously construct and perform their identities through self-chosen narratives, a process that places singularity and distinction at the heart of social life (Beck et al., 1994). This process of individualization further dissolves traditional social anchors, making the project of constructing a singular, differentiated self a social expectation and necessity.

In this work, we build on sociological analysis by Reckwitz who diagnoses a fundamental transformation in the logic of modern society, which he describes as “Society of Singularities” (2020). He argues that we have moved from a regime that valued the general, the standardized, and the functional to one that valorizes the singular, the exceptional, and the authentic. Across diverse spheres, contemporary societies—particularly in the Western hemisphere and in person of the emerging educated upper middle class—now operate under a logic of singularization. What

Reckwitz identifies can be understood as the emergence of a broad-based singularity imperative, which we theorize applies with particular force to the domains of consumption and marketing.

In this section, we examine four interwoven transformations—economic restructuring, social individualization, ideological neoliberalism, and technological personalization—that converge to produce a consumption logic organized around the creation and performance of singularity. Rather than treating these dimensions separately, we argue that singularity is systemic and institutionalized: each domain reinforces and amplifies the others in reproducing a culture where to be standard is to be invisible, and to be singular is to be valuable—and therefore actively pursued.

Economic Restructuring and the Commodification of Singularity

Central to the singularity imperative is the transformation of capitalism itself. In contrast to the Fordist economy of the mid-20th century organized around scale, efficiency, and standardization contemporary capitalism increasingly prizes singularity (Karpik, 2010; Reckwitz, 2020).

Economic value today stems not from producing more of the same, but from generating and marketing differentiated offerings perceived as singular. Firms thrive by staging goods and experiences that are non-interchangeable, narratively rich, and emotionally resonant (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

This transformation marks a broader shift toward an economy centered around cultural goods which are valued not merely for their functional utility but for their capacity to symbolize identity, elicit affect, and project individuality (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). These cultural goods span material products, services, and media formats. They are produced not simply for consumption but to be perceived, shared, and performed as singular. The shift also extends to experiences that blur the line between consumption and self-

expression, where events, personalized content, and curated interactions become key vehicles for enacting singularity (Schmitt, 1999).

In this sense, the economy of singularity commodifies singularization itself. From mass customization (e.g., NikeiD), to algorithmic personalization (e.g., Spotify), to hyper-localized narrative branding (e.g., Starbucks' personifying practices), marketing and consumption is increasingly structured around "markets of one" (Arora et al., 2008; Belk et al., 2023). Firms now sell not just goods or services but opportunities for singularization: objects and experiences designed to be individualized, personalized, and narratively appropriated by consumers.

Singularization—once an act of decommodification, as exemplified by the counterconformity motives underlying need for uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001)—is now increasingly built into the commodity form itself. Whereas consumers infused mass-produced goods with meaning to move a good away from commodified object to a singular decommodified possession (Kopytoff, 1986), today, markets systematically design offerings to enable, invite, and monetize this process. Singularization is no longer an act of consumer resistance to commodification, but an integral part of how commodities are produced, marketed, and consumed. In this economy, the tension between commodification and decommodification collapses: the capacity to singularize has itself become a commodified value proposition.

In this structure, singularity becomes both economically functional and normatively expected. Firms that cannot deliver singular offerings risk obsolescence in markets where attention and symbolic value are the true scarcities. Consumers, in turn, are socialized to seek singularity not only in peripheral or elite domains, as exemplified by luxury or conspicuous consumption, but across everyday life. From curated playlists to bespoke travel, from artisanal goods to algorithmically tailored content, the consumer economy now teaches subjects to desire, perform, and demand singularity as the new norm.

Social Individualization and the Aestheticization of the Singular Self

The economic valorization of singularity intersects with the broader sociocultural transformation of individualization: the erosion of traditional collective identity structures and the corresponding rise of the individualized, self-reflexive subject (Bauman, 2013; Beck et al., 1994). In modern societies, identity is no longer anchored in stable, ascribed categories such as religion, class, gender roles, or family lineage. The modern identity project requires individuals to engage in a continual process of self-definition and self-performance (Giddens, 1991), positioning themselves as singular beings within increasingly visible and competitive social fields.

This transformation gives rise to the aestheticization of the self (Featherstone, 1991; Reckwitz, 2020). As traditional moral and social scripts lose their binding force, the self becomes an aesthetic project—a curated composition of tastes, experiences, and expressions designed to signal uniqueness. The pursuit of singularity emerges as a normative expectation permeating everyday life. Across consumption, career trajectories, educational paths, leisure practices, and even moral and political expression, individuals are increasingly expected to cultivate and display singularity (Schau et al., 2003).

The aesthetic imperative intersects with visibility structures: singularity must be seen and recognized. The social value of self-differentiation is increasingly mediated by networked publics and algorithmic infrastructures that reward legibility and performance (boyd, 2010). Singularity becomes performative and strategic, shaped by audience expectations, platform grammars, and symbolic competition.

Neoliberalism and the Entrepreneurial Enforcement of Singularity

The social pressure toward singularity is further intensified by the spread of neoliberal ideology, which reframes individuals as optimizing entrepreneurs of the self (Davidson et al., 2008). Within

this logic, the self is to be continuously developed, differentiated, and marketed. Singularity thus becomes both a professional necessity and a moral obligation.

This imperative is deeply institutionalized across key social fields. In education, university admissions valorize distinctive personal narratives and unique extracurricular profiles (Stevens, 2009). Professionally, subjects are increasingly required to cultivate a singularized labor identity. Beyond formal qualifications, workers are evaluated on their exceptionality: their unique personal profile, authentic style, and distinctive charisma. Job applications and professional networking platforms reward candidates who can present themselves as singular contributors, blending competence with personal flair (Gershon, 2024). Even in intimate life, dating platforms structure attention around self-curated profiles designed to signal originality and individuality (Hobbs et al., 2017). In this landscape, to be generic is to be invisible—an economic and existential liability.

These neoliberal dynamics have also deeply shaped marketing practices and market offerings. As singularity becomes a normative demand, markets increasingly provide tools, platforms, and experiences that enable consumers to pursue and perform singularity across domains of life (Fuchs & Schreier, 2024; Karpik, 2010). From personal branding and curated subscription boxes to workshops on crafting unique career narratives, consumption is framed as a means of building and signaling singular identity.

Marketing discourses actively reinforce the neoliberal singularity imperative. Advertisements and brand narratives consistently valorize individuality, self-expression, and entrepreneurial distinction, framing consumption as a vehicle for standing out and realizing one's unique potential. The language of “being your authentic self,” “finding your unique voice,” and “curating your life” pervades contemporary marketing, embedding singularity expectations in everyday life.

This dynamic turns consumption into a key site of entrepreneurial singularization.

Consumers are taught to view their purchases, experiences, and self-presentations as strategic tools for constructing competitive distinction. In this way, neoliberal ideology and marketing co-produce a consumption culture in which singularity is simultaneously pursued, performed, and monetized, deepening the cultural entrenchment of the singularity imperative.

Technological Infrastructures and the Automation of Singularity

Finally, digital infrastructures play a pivotal role in institutionalizing and automating the cultural logic of singularity. Far from neutral intermediaries, digital platforms are engines of singularization (Reckwitz, 2020). They embed the singularity imperative deep into the architecture of everyday life, shaping how consumers encounter, engage with, and value cultural goods and market offerings.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube organize visibility and attention around what is distinctive, emotionally resonant, and visually arresting (Cotter, 2019). Algorithmic curation rewards content that stands out from the norm, training users to continuously perform and signal singularity in order to be seen. This dynamic creates a structural bias toward the exceptional: on participatory media, what is singular attracts amplification, while the generic disappears into algorithmic obscurity.

At the same time, personalization technologies operationalize the “market of one.” Recommendation engines on platforms, such as Spotify, Netflix, and Amazon tailor content and offerings to individual profiles, producing an illusion and expectation of personalized, singular treatment (Zuboff, 2019). Platform-mediated consumption structures both the supply and demand for singular goods: consumers come to expect offerings that align with their self-narratives, while firms optimize offerings to meet this demand at scale.

This infrastructure actively trains consumer behavior. Platforms generate feedback loops, wherein users produce content to attract quantifiable recognition—likes, shares, comments (Dijck, 2013)—that reward performances of distinctiveness. Uniqueness becomes algorithmically measurable, hierarchical, and commercially incentivized.

Moreover, the digitization of markets enables new forms of infrastructural singularization. Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) offer a striking example. In a medium defined by infinite reproducibility, NFTs simulate scarcity and embed singularity into blockchain protocols (Frieman, 2023). They represent the infrastructural capture of singular value, turning uniqueness itself into an explicit, tradable market property.

In this sense, digital technologies enforce singularity. They bring new forms of singularity into consumer practice and shape value creation around the pursuit and performance of singularity. From algorithmic curation to personalized branding, from data-driven user experience design to digitally tradable uniqueness, contemporary marketing is inseparable from the infrastructures of singularity now built into the digital economy.

We have laid out a framework for understanding how and why uniqueness has become a dominant cultural logic of post-modernity. In sum, the singularity imperative is a structural condition of contemporary capitalism. It spans the economic, social, ideological, and technological domains with each layer reinforcing the next. The singular has become a dominant logic by which value, recognition, and identity are organized and consumed. In this system, uniqueness is no longer exceptional, it is required with profound implications for consumption and marketing.

Mind, the singularity logic is not without cost and inherently paradox. The demand for it is exhausting, unevenly distributed, and potentially alienating. Not everyone can be equally singular, and not all singularity is equally rewarded. Moreover, the commercialization and

commodification of singularity risks hollowing out its promise, turning authenticity into performance and difference into style. We discuss some of these implications in later sections.

Singular Consumption

Singular consumption is the consumption logic oriented toward singularity as a cultural value. Examining cultural values and their reflection in consumption has long been of interest to consumer research and singularity satisfies key criteria of cultural values: it is broadly affirmed within a population, it signals what is considered socially and personally desirable, and it exerts influence over behavior and interpretation (Nicosia & Mayer, 1976). We define singular consumption accordingly as a mode of consumption aimed at the pursuit, performance, and experience of singularity—that is, of being perceived and feeling meaningfully unique, distinct, and special. Importantly, the concept of singularity here builds on Reckwitz’s (2020) foundational articulation: an entity is singular when it is not perceived or evaluated as a mere variation of a general type, but as something qualitatively distinct, non-interchangeable, and incomparable. Singularity does not reside in quantitative difference alone (e.g., more or less, better or worse), but in an entity being experienced as possessing a unique quality that escapes standard comparative schemata. Singularity marks a shift from generality to particularity; an object, experience, or self is perceived as this one rather than one among many.

Following the distinction put forward in Jarvis et al. (2003), we conceptualize singularity as a composite formative construct (see Figure 39 for an overview). Consumers experience singularity not as a unitary latent property, but through the combined activation of distinct composites; that is, vectors and markers of singularity, such as scarcity, provenance, or authenticity (see below). Its conceptual and experiential meaning emerges through them. The combination and interplay of these composites makes an offering or experience perceived as

more or less singular. Thus, singularity is a socially constructed judgment of these composites made by a particular evaluator in a particular context rather than an intrinsic or objective attribute; in Peirce's semiotic tradition, singularity is ultimately a personal experience—something constituted in the interpretive encounter between subject, object, and context (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Merrell, 1995).

Yet not all forms of particularity are socially legible as singularity. Here it is useful to distinguish, as Reckwitz (2020) does, between the general, the idiosyncratic, and the singular. Whereas generality refers to standardized types and functional categories—entities governed by abstract classification—idiosyncrasies exist outside of this ordering altogether. From an “offensive” ontological stance, one could argue that all entities are originally idiosyncratic: they are incomparable, incommensurable, and not substitutable with anything else. Every person, object, place, or memory holds a quality of particularity that resists generalization. But while idiosyncrasies are ubiquitous, they remain largely invisible to social systems—unmarked, uninterpreted, or unintentionally generated through the byproducts of social action. As such, they are not necessarily valued or even noticed.

Singularities, by contrast, occupy a middle ground. They are not mere deviations from the norm, nor ineffable particularities that escape social relevance. Rather, singularities are entities that are actively made particular through socio-cultural practices. They are observed, evaluated, and treated as unique within the symbolic economy of recognition. Singularities emerge through what Reckwitz calls doing singularity—through acts of curation, narration, distinction, and valuation that render something special, noteworthy, and non-interchangeable in the eyes of an audience.

This framework sharpens the conceptual understanding of singular consumption. It suggests that singularity in consumption does not refer solely to the acquisition of objectively

one-of-a-kind goods, nor can it be reduced to the pursuit of counterconformity as framed in prior uniqueness research in marketing (Fuchs & Schreier, 2024; Tian et al., 2001). What matters is the social production of perceived singularity—how an entity is rendered unique through interpretive and cultural labor, both by consumers and by the market actors who scaffold their meaning-making.

Singularity in consumption can be anchored in multiple ontological targets. It may be attributed to the entity being consumed, such as a bespoke product, a digital collectible, or a curated travel experience. It may reside in the consuming subject, as an expression of a singular identity, personality, or life trajectory. Or it may emerge from the relationship between the two, when an offering is perceived as uniquely fitting, affirming, or reflective of the consumer's sense of self. What unites these expressions is not the entity's objective attributes, but its ability to participate in the symbolic labor of singularization: to help the consumer appear, feel, or become singular.

From this perspective, consumption becomes less about acquiring utility, status, or even self-consistency and more about constructing a socially recognized identity that feels unique, authentic, and worthy of attention. In line with a cultural value system that increasingly prizes singularity across domains, consumption is no longer simply about what one consumes, but how it is curated, interpreted, and received as singular within a wider semiotic field. In the following, we discuss related marketing and consumer research and then describe key characteristics of singular consumption and their implications for consumers and brands.

Singularity in Marketing and Consumer Research

Prior marketing and consumer research has conceptualized the idea of singularity mainly through studying uniqueness. Many studies offer valuable building blocks for understanding singular

consumption advanced here. However, most of this work has approached uniqueness as a localized phenomenon, rather than as a systemic cultural value.

One influential stream of research has emphasized trait-level motivations, most notably through the Need for Uniqueness (NFU) framework (Tian et al., 2001), which views uniqueness as a stable individual difference linked to a counterconformity motive. Consumers high in NFU are more likely to seek products that differentiate them from others, prefer nonconforming brands, and avoid mass-market offerings. This line of work usefully shows how motivations to seek distinctiveness vary across individuals and the implications for marketing (Fuchs & Schreier, 2024).

Moving beyond trait-based approaches, other research has framed uniqueness as a goal-oriented pursuit—a motive that is situationally activated to serve broader identity or social goals (Chan et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2012). In this view, consumers strategically pursue uniqueness to manage impressions, affirm individuality, or signal status within dynamic social contexts. This stream highlights how the value of uniqueness depends on context and audience, rather than being purely dispositional.

Uniqueness has also been extensively examined as a product-level attribute and market value driver (Berghueser & Spann, 2024; de Bellis et al., 2016; Fuchs & Schreier, 2023; Krause et al., 2023). Scholars have studied how uniqueness can be embedded into offerings through scarcity (Lynn, 1992), customization (Franke & Schreier, 2008), or limited editions (Dornyei & Lunardo, 2021). From this perspective, uniqueness serves as a competitive differentiator that enhances desirability, pricing power, and brand equity. However, this perspective largely treats uniqueness as an objectified feature to be engineered into goods.

A smaller body of research has explored uniqueness as a symbolic and experiential value—one that arises in the subjective relationship between consumers and products, and is multi-

dimensional and constructed through narratives, rituals, and cultural practices (Belk et al., 1989; Holt, 1998, 2002; Sun & Pham, 2025). This line of inquiry recognizes that perceived uniqueness is not reducible to objective product features or consumer traits but emerges through meaning-making processes situated within a broader sociocultural field.

Collectively, this body of work demonstrates that uniqueness matters in consumer behavior—whether as a motive, a signal, or a value proposition. However, it has largely framed uniqueness narrowly and as relative differentiation: a good is unique because it differs from others; a person is unique because they stand out within a reference group. This relational framing is useful but limited. Most such differences do not, by themselves, guarantee cultural or economic significance. Much of what is technically unique remains unnoticed, uncelebrated, or readily replaceable.

While these theories have generated important insights into the psychology of uniqueness and hold value for understanding singular consumption, they primarily conceptualize it as an individual-level, motivational phenomenon, with limited attention to how broader cultural, economic, and technological forces shape the pursuit and performance of singularity. In contrast, the condition of singular consumption that characterizes contemporary markets reflects a more systemic dynamic: singularity is now embedded within, amplified by, and monetized through market structures and digital infrastructures.

Our framework builds on this literature but introduces several key theoretical advancements. First, it shows that singularity now functions not only as an intrinsic motive but as an extrinsic cultural and economic currency, increasingly rewarded through algorithmic amplification, market value, and social visibility; extending work that advocates for a broader look at the uniqueness motive (Zhu et al., 2024). Second, it reconceptualizes uniqueness as a structural and systemic imperative—a cultural value that demands consumers curate, display, and

perform distinctiveness across domains of life, while simultaneously shaping how goods are produced, marketed, and experienced. Third, it moves beyond static conceptions of uniqueness to theorize singularity as a relational performance. That is, an emergent, dynamic status co-constructed through interactions between consumers, technologies, objects, and cultural narratives. This reconceptualization calls for a more processual, culturally embedded, and sociotechnically situated understanding of singular consumption (Nicosia & Mayer, 1976).

Core Characteristics

To understand how singular consumption takes shape in practice, it is essential to examine its core characteristics that define how consumers and brands enact, express, and negotiate singularity. In what follows, we identify and elaborate on the key characteristics that structure singular consumption, beginning with the central role of curation.

Curation

In the cultural logic of singular consumption, curation emerges as the foremost mode through which consumers engage with goods and experiences in singular consumption—and through which brands must now design and manage their offerings. While consumption typically centered on acquisition or use, singular consumption revolves around curation. Similar to curation in high culture (e.g., museums) or fashion, it involves the intentional filtering, selection, arrangement, and presentation of heterogeneous elements to compose and perform a singular identity (cp. Danatzis et al., 2025); critically in the general absence of traditional gatekeepers and conducted by ordinary consumers.

Applying a practice theoretical stance along the tripartite typology of objects, doings and meanings (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Reckwitz, 2002), we define curation as the continuous, reflexive project of assembling goods, media, experiences, and symbols into an affectively resonant and

socially visible singular self. Curation transforms consumption from a series of discrete transactions into an ongoing process of identity construction and cultural positioning.

Several structural shifts underpin the rise of curation as the core practice of singular consumption. First, hyperabundance of choice renders acquisition alone insufficient for expressing singularity. In a world where almost everything is available to almost everyone (Anderson, 2008), value no longer lies in what one possesses, but in how one curates from this vast field of possibilities. Second, platformization and algorithmic infrastructures foreground visibility and aesthetic coherence as key dimensions of consumer value (boyd, 2010; Dijck, 2013). Social media platforms and content ecosystems incentivize consumers to maintain ongoing curatorial performances, for example, Instagram grids, Spotify Wrapped playlists, TikTok aesthetics. Third, curation aligns with the broader shift away from material ownership to experiential and symbolic value (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Belk, 2013): singular consumption increasingly revolves around performing an aestheticized life project, not simply accumulating material goods. It is a practice uniquely suited to the fluid, reflexive, and visibility-oriented conditions of late-modern consumer culture (Bauman, 2000).

This shift is mirrored on the brand side. In the era of singular consumption, brands no longer succeed by offering fixed identity propositions or pre-assembled lifestyles. Instead, they must provide offerings that function as curatable resources—elements that consumers can selectively integrate, modify, and perform within their singularity projects. The challenge is to create products and experiences that possess sufficient semantic openness to support identity constructions yet retain enough symbolic coherence to remain desirable and culturally resonant (Holt, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2013; Navas, 2012). This demands a shift from brand coherence to brand interoperability within heterogeneous identity ecologies. Offerings that are too prescriptive risk being excluded from the curatorial field. The deeper implication is that openness has become

a core value proposition. Brands must think of their products as symbolic material that can travel across consumer doing singularity; being appropriated, remixed, combined, and displayed in ways the brand may not fully control. This requires new capabilities: designing for semantic openness, supporting platform interoperability (so curation can happen across networks), and enabling ongoing consumer co-creation of brand meaning.

This dynamic is visible across categories. In fashion, brands that thrive under singular consumption increasingly design products that invite personalization, aesthetic reinterpretation, and curatorial play. In digital goods, platforms such as Roblox or Fortnite succeed because they enable consumers to curate, modify, and perform singular identities within highly visible social fields. Even in more traditional categories, from home decor, personal technology, to luxury goods, brands are pressured to design offerings that can support multiple readings and enable consumer-led curation.

Networked Validation

A core characteristic of singular consumption is that the value of singularity does not solely rest in the object, the individual's self-perception, or institutional authority, but is increasingly produced and sustained through networked validation. In earlier consumption regimes, claims to value and particularly singularity itself were largely governed by cultural intermediaries and institutional gatekeepers: critics, cultural elites, editors, curators, or brand authorities (Bourdieu, 1987; Corciolani et al., 2020; Karpik, 2010). These centralized actors conferred legitimacy on certain goods, styles, or identities, shaping what counted as culturally valuable or distinctive.

In contrast, singular consumption unfolds within a networked and participatory media environment where authority is increasingly decentralized and dynamic (Jenkins et al., 2013). The perceived singularity of a product, experience, or identity is no longer validated primarily by expert judgment or institutional endorsement, but through distributed social networks—followers,

peers, algorithmically shaped audiences, and communities of taste (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015).

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit structure visibility and value through network effects (Jenkins et al., 2013): the more an act of singular consumption resonates within a network (likes, shares, comments, endorsements), the more it is elevated as singular and valuable. In this system, singularity becomes a relational and performative outcome of networked interaction.

This shift has profound implications for both consumers and brands. For consumers, achieving and maintaining singularity now requires continuous participation in networked validation loops (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Posting curated content, engaging with communities, and optimizing visibility are integral parts of performing singularity in the contemporary landscape. Aesthetic curation, narrative construction, and even restraint (strategic absence or minimalism [Wilson & Bellezza, 2021]) are all subjected to network feedback, shaping how singularity is perceived and rewarded.

For brands, this dynamic means that singular value is increasingly co-produced with consumers and their networks. No matter how scarce, customized, or symbolically rich an offering may be, its cultural singularity is not fully realized until it is picked up, validated, and circulated through networked audiences. Marketing strategies thus evolve toward facilitating and amplifying this process: designing for shareability, fostering community participation, and enabling consumer-led content creation. Singular consumption is increasingly about how offerings are mobilized within networks of taste and recognition.

Networked validation also fundamentally differentiates singular consumption from earlier uniqueness-seeking behaviors. Even if singularity could be pursued privately or through stable reference groups in the past, currently, even intrinsically oriented performances of singularity (also see 4.3.3) or those not directly including social comparison are often entangled with

networked audiences, at the least indirectly through algorithmic inferences and visibility hierarchies.

Finally, networked validation introduces new dynamics of contingency, volatility, and feedback. What is perceived as singular is no longer determined once and for all but is constantly renegotiated through ongoing network interaction. This volatility both intensifies the demand for continuous singularity work and reinforces the centrality of curation and performance in sustaining the appearance of singularity within ever-shifting networks of validation.

Algorithmic Mediation and Capital

Algorithmic infrastructures have decisively shaped the nature and conditions of singular consumption, reframing how distinctiveness is performed, perceived, and rewarded. Historically, value in consumer culture was negotiated through human-centered systems—critics, curators, and cultural elites conferred legitimacy upon goods, styles, or identities (Bourdieu, 1987). Today, singularity is increasingly constructed and sustained through algorithmic mediation: platform-driven systems that shape visibility, recognition, and cultural salience in opaque and dynamic ways (Dijck, 2013; Pasquale, 2015).

On the surface, algorithms appear to personalize content streams and product recommendations, reflecting individual preferences (Arora et al., 2008). But their deeper role lies in constructing the value ecology of singular consumption itself. Algorithms shape which forms of singularity are legible, visible, and socially valuable. Specific aesthetics, narrative tropes, and performance styles are favored because they optimize engagement and virality, not because they are necessarily more authentic or innovative.

This creates a recursive loop between consumer curation and algorithmic selection. Consumers express singularity through curated content, but increasingly do so with an eye toward algorithmic logics of visibility (Cotter, 2019). The pursuit of distinction is thus not only

oriented toward the self or peer audiences, but also toward the invisible algorithm arbiter.

Singularity becomes platform-dependent, shaped by optimization practices that subtly converge into dominant performance codes, even in spaces ostensibly dedicated to individuality.

In earlier consumption regimes, uniqueness was tied to cultural capital: the symbolic mastery to consume rare or meaningful goods (Bourdieu, 1987). While cultural capital remains relevant, it is increasingly supplemented and, in some contexts, displaced by what might be termed algorithmic capital: an individual's capacity to navigate, manipulate, and optimize digital systems of ranking, recommendation, and visibility in the pursuit of singularity. Today, that mastery increasingly includes knowing how to craft content that resonates with algorithmic systems. The value of singularity thus shifts from being rooted in the object (the rare good, the refined aesthetic) to being located in the data-driven performance of the self within algorithmic systems.

Algorithmic capital involves multiple competencies (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2013). First, it involves an understanding of platform dynamics: knowing when and how to post, what formats and aesthetic styles are favored by current algorithmic regimes, and how to structure content to maximize engagement and virality. Second, it requires skill in optimizing self-presentation for algorithmic legibility—crafting identity performances that can be read and rewarded by platform systems while still maintaining an appearance of authenticity and singularity (Duffek et al., 2025). Third, it entails network activation: strategically mobilizing digital networks to trigger engagement and enhance feedback loops. Those with high levels of algorithmic capital—micro-celebrities, influencers, or savvy users—can translate curation into cultural recognition more effectively than those relying solely on traditional taste.

Algorithmic mediation also restructures the temporal conditions of singular consumption. Algorithms operate on accelerated attention cycles, compressing trend lifespans and fostering an

environment of ephemeral singularity. Distinction is increasingly volatile—singular today, generic tomorrow—demanding continuous engagement and real-time adaptation. This intensifies the reflexivity and labor involved in self-curation: consumers must not only be distinctive but remain so within fast-changing logics of algorithmic relevance.

This dynamic has profound implications for how singular consumption operates. It intensifies the reflexivity and strategic labor involved in identity curation, as consumers must not only construct a singular self but also continually adapt that construction to the evolving logics of algorithmic visibility. It also exacerbates the fragility of singularity: algorithmic favor is volatile, and visibility can rise or collapse rapidly as platform dynamics shift. Finally, it contributes to new forms of inequality in the pursuit of singularity: those with greater algorithmic capital enjoy disproportionate access to the cultural and symbolic rewards of singular consumption, while others struggle to achieve recognition despite the quality of their curation or content.

For brands and marketers, this shift underscores the need to move beyond traditional targeting based on cultural or lifestyle segmentation. Successful engagement with singular consumption now requires an understanding of platform logics and the cultivation of algorithmic resonance. Brands must design content and experiences that can be easily mobilized and amplified within networked systems—not simply products with inherent cultural cachet. Moreover, they must recognize that influence and distinction increasingly flow through consumers with algorithmic fluency, making partnerships with such individuals a critical avenue for achieving cultural visibility.

Fragility and Ephemerality

A defining characteristic of singular consumption is its profound fragility. Far from being a stable or enduring state, the experience and value of singularity are inherently precarious, contingent, and difficult to sustain (Jameson, 2015). This fragility stems from the very nature of singularity

as a relational and performative status that must be continually reaffirmed in a shifting cultural field. Singular value depends on distinctiveness (Reckwitz, 2020), yet in a saturated and networked cultural economy, difference is always on the verge of being copied, commodified, or rendered generic. As soon as a singular act of consumption or expression gains visibility, it becomes a candidate for imitation. Singularity requires visibility to be validated, but visibility accelerates its erosion. Thus, singularity is always time-sensitive—it is only singular for as long as it remains perceived as distinct.

This fragility is amplified by networked and algorithmic dynamics. Platform infrastructures operate on accelerated cultural rhythms (Rosa, 2013), driving rapid cycles of adoption and abandonment. Content becomes singular not simply because of its qualities, but because it briefly resonates within algorithmically shaped attention economies. These systems favor novelty and engagement, further compressing the temporal window in which something can be experienced as distinctive.

Brands, too, operate within this fragile logic. They cannot rely solely on one-off acts of distinction but must continuously reframe and renew their singular offerings to avoid fatigue and imitation. The fragility of singularity becomes a driver of constant innovation, fueling the pursuit of ever-new aesthetic directions, collaborations, and formats that can momentarily escape commodification and capture cultural attention.

Adding to this fragility is the ephemerality characterizing singularity. In earlier consumption logics, singularity was often anchored in durable, tangible possessions—heirlooms, hand-crafted artifacts, or rare collectibles (Bourdieu, 1987; Reckwitz, 2020). These material goods embodied singularity through their rarity, craftsmanship, and personal or cultural meaning. To possess such an object was to embody a stable, symbolic form of distinction. In contrast, singular consumption today increasingly privileges the one-of nature of and participation in

ephemeral performances. This shift is mainly driven by the liquefaction of social structures and rise of digital technologies that enable transient, performative modes of value creation (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Bauman, 2000). Virtual items, augmented reality filters, time-limited drops, and live-streamed events are intentionally designed to be temporary. Their value lies not in their permanence or ownership, but in their temporal exclusivity, networked visibility, and symbolic resonance.

In its ephemerality, singular consumption resonates with the logic of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), which emphasizes access over ownership and the mobility of consumer experiences. Singular consumption leverages the affordances of liquidity, but orients them toward curated, temporally staged performances of singularity. Moreover, while liquid consumption often emphasizes functional and utilitarian mobility, singular consumption re-centers aestheticization, symbolic positioning, and affective intensity.

Singular value thus migrates from static possession to dynamic participation. What matters is not what one owns, but what one has experienced, created, or momentarily embodied. Participating in a viral challenge, minting an NFT during a specific launch, or being part of a fleeting experience can now constitute valuable singular capital. These performances of singularity are often more meaningful than material accumulation, precisely because they are limited, unrepeatable, and socially witnessed.

For brands and marketers, this shift demands a rethinking of value creation. Singular brand value no longer resides solely in the longevity of products or a static brand identity. It lies increasingly in enabling and curating ephemeral, resonant experiences that allow consumers doing singularity. Designing for fleeting yet impactful moments—ones that capture attention, spark engagement, and facilitate distinction—becomes essential for navigating the fragility and ephemerality at the core of contemporary singular consumption.

Singular Identity

In singular consumption, identity moves from class-based belonging and collective identity toward a coherent singular self. Historically, identity construction was primarily anchored in relatively stable collective structures—social class, subculture, nationality, ethnicity, political affiliation, or tightly bounded lifestyle groups (Bauman, 2013; Giddens, 1991). To consume was often to perform belonging within such a group, or to differentiate oneself in relation to its hierarchies (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980).

In the contemporary logic of singular consumption, this foundation has eroded. Individuals are no longer expected or able to construct identity through coherent, unitary group memberships. The model of singular identity is also distinct from the multiple identity model in consumer theory (Reed et al., 2012). In postmodern accounts, consumers were seen as adopting multiple, fluid, fragmented, and even ironic identities, moving playfully across subcultural boundaries and embracing contradiction and pastiche (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In contrast, singular consumption fosters a different demand: consumers are expected to construct a singular, curated identity—one that draws from heterogeneous cultural sources, but which must appear integrated, distinctive, and performatively coherent. Rather than embracing fluid multiplicity, the contemporary consumer crafts a singular self that is plural in its sources, but unified in its expression.

This curated singularity might integrate elements of wellness culture, streetwear aesthetics, indie music sensibilities, and political progressivism into a coherent persona of the “mindful creative”; or fuse entrepreneurial hustle, techno-optimism, and minimalist design into the identity of the “digital nomad.” Others may blend queer activism, high fashion, and niche internet humor into the persona of the “post-ironic aesthete.” These are not random composites but carefully

managed performances of singularity—distinctive, recognizable, and socially legible identities shaped through the curatorial labor demanded by singular consumption.

For a singular identity, temporary alliances, complicities, and collaborations emerge not from shared group belonging, but from the ability of diverse singular selves to recognize and resonate with each other's curated singularity. This dynamic is visible in digital fashion communities: creators with radically different aesthetics, for example, high fashion minimalism, DIY punk, vaporwave kitsch, may collaborate or cross-promote, each bringing a recognizably singular voice to the exchange. In creator economies, influencers cultivate niche singular identities, yet routinely participate in joint campaigns or co-curated drops where the value lies in the contrast and interplay of distinct identities rather than homogenous branding. The same holds for offline spaces, such as pop-up art markets or music festivals, diverse singular participants engage in collaboration where each maintains their own aesthetic and narrative and mutual recognition of singularity enables fleeting alliances and shared cultural production.

Thus, alliances, communities, as well as recognition emerge not from shared identity, but from the interplay of curated singularities—each participant maintaining their own distinctiveness while engaging in symbolic collaboration and relational performance. The cultural logic of singular consumption rewards those who can simultaneously preserve their singular self and participate in networks of plural singularities, forming temporary aesthetic, narrative, or symbolic bonds without subsuming into collective identity.

Motivational and Evaluative Orientation

Singular consumption is not a uniform pursuit. While prior research has often treated uniqueness as a relatively unitary motive or product attribute, the logic of singular consumption is multidimensional. To clarify this landscape, we distinguish between two core axes that structure how consumers pursue and experience singularity: a motivational orientation (social vs.

existential) and an evaluative orientation (horizontal vs. vertical). Together, these axes yield a conceptual typology that illuminates how singularity is sought, constructed, and enacted in consumption practices (see Table 161).

The first axis distinguishes social from existential motivational orientations. Social singularity reflects an outward-facing motivation to be perceived as distinct by others. It is performed through acts of visibility and public signaling, for instance via fashion, social media, or lifestyle curation. Singularity is enacted within the social field and validated through recognition and attention. This orientation is deeply intertwined with processes of social comparison (Gerber et al., 2018). The consumer's sense of being singular is shaped in relation to how they are seen vis-à-vis others, and algorithmically mediated platforms often intensify this comparison dynamic by continuously ranking and surfacing signals of distinctiveness.

In contrast, existential singularity is primarily inward-facing. It reflects a desire to feel inherently unique and authentic to oneself. The emphasis lies in cultivating a personal sense of distinctiveness that resonates with one's own values, experiences, and identity—regardless of whether it is publicly recognized. This form of singularity relies comparatively less on visibility, external validation and explicit social comparison. Instead, it is pursued through private or personally meaningful practices: personal rituals, aesthetic choices, creative expression, ethical commitments, or life decisions that affirm the individual's self-conception as singular. Importantly, this does not imply that existential singularity is entirely immune to social influence. Cultural norms, peer environments, and mediated ideals still shape one's understanding of what it means to be singular. Comparisons with others may implicitly inform one's self-perception. However, the primary focus remains on achieving and sustaining an internally coherent sense of uniqueness, i.e., to feel that one's life, identity, and actions are authentically one's own, rather than on securing distinction in the eyes of others.

The second axis distinguishes horizontal from vertical orientations of singularity. It is conceptually related to horizontal and vertical differentiation as examined in marketing and psychology (Dommer et al., 2013; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). Horizontal singularity expresses difference without hierarchy. It reflects a desire to be different in kind, not superior in degree. Curating an unconventional aesthetic, exploring niche cultural interests, or expressing idiosyncratic tastes exemplify horizontal singularity. In this mode, social comparison is present but less competitive, it centers on achieving distinctiveness rather than superiority.

Vertical singularity, by contrast, is hierarchical. It signals not only distinctiveness but exceptionality, that is, being better, rarer, or more refined. This orientation is strongly driven by comparative dynamics. Consumers pursuing vertical singularity actively engage in social comparison to establish and defend their position in (symbolic) hierarchies. Here, consumption practices such as acquiring limited-edition luxury items, joining exclusive networks, or investing in elite self-optimization are explicitly designed to confer relative advantage.

The intersection of these two axes yields a 2×2 typology of singular consumption orientations, each representing a distinct mode through which consumers do singularity (see Table 159). Across these modes, a key feature of singular consumption is that it is rarely about isolated dimensions (Bellezza et al., 2013). Rather, it involves the ongoing curation of a multidimensional identity project across dimensions aimed at sustaining a culturally valued sense of singularity. Consumers navigate these orientations dynamically, weighting them differently across life domains and contexts.

Table 1: Typology of motivational and evaluative orientation in singular consumption

	Horizontal	Vertical
Social	<i>Expressive Idiosyncrasy</i>	<i>Status Signaling</i>
	Being seen as different in kind	Being seen as superior or elite
Existential	<i>Authentic Self-Differentiation</i>	<i>Singular Excellence</i>
	Feeling inwardly distinct without hierarchy	Feeling inherently exceptional or gifted

The first mode, expressive idiosyncrasy, reflects a socially motivated yet horizontally evaluated pursuit of singularity. Here, the goal is not to appear better than others but to appear distinct in kind. Consumers in this mode might curate visible forms of difference that are playful, unconventional, or eccentric. They may wear colorful vintage clothing, design quirky online profiles, or personalize digital avatars, not to assert superiority but to signal nonconformity and individual expressiveness. Technologies that enable algorithmic personalization and aesthetic experimentation, such as social media filters, playlist curation tools, or custom product platforms, actively support this form of expressive horizontal singularity.

In contrast, status signaling, well studied in marketing and consumer research (Bellezza et al., 2017; Griskevicius et al., 2010), combines a social motivation with a vertical evaluative frame. It is oriented toward comparative superiority—being seen as exclusive, elite, or ahead of others. Consumers with this orientation seek goods and experiences that confer prestige and social distinction, such as limited-edition luxury items or exclusive memberships. In this mode, singularity is constructed through visibility and social comparison. Digital platforms that foreground metrics, rankings, or displays of exclusivity, such as verified accounts, “likes,” or follower counts, reinforce this dynamic, amplifying the symbolic value of being seen as rare or unattainable.

A different motivational pathway is found in authentic self-differentiation, which is existentially driven and horizontally evaluated. In this mode, the pursuit of singularity is primarily inwardly oriented: the individual seeks to feel distinct from others in ways that are authentic to their own values, identity, and life project, rather than aiming for public recognition or hierarchical superiority. The goal is not to be seen as “better” or even necessarily different by others, but to cultivate a personal sense of being a singular self or to live a life that feels uniquely one’s own—linking to needs of agency and autonomy (Beverland et al., 2024; Wertenbroch et al., 2020). In this sense, the experience of singularity is pursued as a form of internal alignment and existential authenticity. This orientation may manifest in many forms: living according to a personal philosophy, practicing private rituals, or making consumption choices that reflect deeply held values—such as ethical sourcing, spiritual alignment, aesthetic coherence, or intellectual commitments. What matters here is not external validation, but internal coherence and self-fidelity: the sense that one’s identity and life trajectory are aligned with one’s personal singularity. It is not primarily motivated by a desire for social comparison or public recognition. On the contrary, it often involves a preference for privacy or selective sharing. Market offerings that foster reflection, self-customization, and personal meaning-making without requiring public exposure support this mode of singularity. Examples include journaling apps, mindfulness platforms, personal knowledge systems, or anonymous forums.

Finally, singular excellence represents an existential motivation combined with a vertical evaluative orientation. It involves a belief in one’s inherent exceptionality—a sense of being gifted, destined for greatness, or uniquely capable of making a lasting impact. Consumers expressing this mode invest in elite education, engage in intensive self-optimization, or cultivate expertise in domains where they can position themselves as irreplaceable or extraordinary. Here, singularity is both deeply personal and aspirationally performative. Technologies that quantify

progress, showcase expertise, or enable personal branding—such as productivity apps, elite coaching platforms, or professional networking services—often align with and amplify this orientation.

Together, these four orientations provide a nuanced framework for understanding the varied reasons and ways consumers do singularity and help categorizing various consumption behaviors and orientations under a new lens of singularity. They clarify that singularity is not just a matter of standing out, but of why and how one seeks to do so: to be different, to be better, to be true to oneself, or to fulfill an exceptional promise.

Vectors and Markers

Singularity in consumption emerges through a set of constitutive vectors. These distinct yet interrelated vectors represent the forms through which singularity is instantiated and thus define how singularity is materially embedded, structured, and framed within consumption. They answer the question: What makes a good, experience, or performance potentially singular? These vectors capture the structural and contextual dimensions—such as time, space, or design—along which singularity can be realized.

However, whether and how these vectors are psychologically activated and experienced as singular depends not only on their structural properties, but on the presence of specific markers that guide consumer interpretation. Following Peirce's semiotic tradition (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Grayson & Shulman, 2000), these markers (or signs) link to the phenomenological experience of singularity. We discuss these markers in the section following the vectors.

Vectors

One key dimension is temporal singularity, which captures the singularity of a moment. Goods and experiences anchored in specific timeframes, for instance, ephemeral digital content, limited-

time product drops, or early access to beta programs, derive their singularity from their temporal boundedness. Increasingly, consumers seek singularity not only through what they consume, but when they consume it. Ephemerality, defined as the condition of being fleeting, transient, or limited in duration, thus becomes a scarcity structure in itself, making certain events or products feel unrepeatable and therefore singularly valuable (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Henkel & Toporowski, 2023). This dynamic is visible in formats that emphasize irreproducibility and temporal exclusivity, for example, flash sales, pop-up events, disappearing stories, and live-streamed content. For marketers, this suggests that singularity lies not only in ownership, but in participation at a specific moment, as exemplified in the phrasing: “I was there when...”. Such framing reveals that FOMO (fear of missing out) reflects a deeper desire for temporal singularity.

Complementing this is spatial singularity, which is rooted in geographic or virtual exclusivity. Locally sourced products, regionally restricted goods, or experiences that exist only in specific digital spaces (such as geofenced apps or metaverse locations) gain their singularity from spatial boundedness. Here, place functions as a differentiating force, conferring meaning and rarity through limited accessibility across physical or virtual geographies. The spatial singularity of consumption helps consumers perform singularity through what is accessible only to them, in a specific place.

Quantitative singularity is perhaps the most widely recognized vector in prior consumer research, given its clear and measurable form (Berghueser & Spann, 2024). It refers to goods or experiences made distinct through explicit numerical limitation, for example, limited-edition labels (“1 of 100”), capped production runs, or serialized digital assets. This form of singularity is typically grounded in supply-side rarity (only a few units exist), though it may also stem from demand-side scarcity (high demand renders access exclusive). Quantitative singularity reinforces the idea that singularity is also something that can be counted, verified, and displayed (Karpik,

2010). Moreover, the value lies in enabling public visibility and portability of that quantification (e.g., blockchain proofs integrated into social platforms; verifiable provenance that can be displayed across digital identities).

Aesthetic or design singularity refers to the sensory and stylistic features of a product or experience that make it visually, materially, or sensorially stand out. This includes custom colorways, artistic embellishments, handcrafted details, or retro and vintage styles that evoke nostalgia. Aesthetic singularity can be achieved through the well-studied phenomenon of (mass-)customization (Krause et al., 2023) and it enables consumers to experience goods as singular through their perceptual distinctiveness, often supporting highly visible performances of singularity. This suggests designing products with intentional aesthetic flexibility (colorways, texture variants, collaborative remixability), and enabling consumers to document and share aesthetic choices (through design communities, AR filters, user-generated content integrations).

Another critical dimension is identity-based singularity, which arises when a product or experience aligns closely with a consumer's self-concept (Weiss & Johar, 2013, 2016). These items feel uniquely “mine” not because they are technically singular, but because they resonate with the consumer's values, beliefs, memories, or aspirations. Identity-aligned singularity can be deeply personal and emotionally charged, even when the item itself is widely available. Here, the marketer's role is not to provide a static identity proposition, but to offer symbolic scaffolds that consumers can appropriate and reconfigure within their singularity narratives. Successful strategies involve creating open, flexible identity spaces. Marketers must design for semantic plasticity—so that the same product can resonate differently for different singularity projects.

Closely related is narrative singularity, which emerges from the stories attached to an object or experience, such as its origin, history, or trajectory. Specifically, provenance, which emphasizes an object's traceable and narrativized history—its known creator, place of

production, or ownership lineage can be subsumed under narrative singularity, anchoring even physically indistinct goods in documented singular value (e.g., “handcrafted in X,” “previously owned by Y”). Narrative singularity allows even physically indistinct items to be experienced as singular through narrativization by embedding them within arcs of personal memory, cultural significance, or relational meaning. Narrative singularity implies that value is created when consumers can integrate products into meaning-rich stories. For marketers, this suggests designing mechanisms through which consumers can attach personal meaning to the product (through origin tracing, personalization rituals, collaborative storytelling platforms). Moreover, brands should enable narrative portability, making it easy for consumers to carry and share their personal product stories across platforms and communities.

While narrative singularity and identity-based singularity are conceptually adjacent—both rooted in meaning rather than materiality—they operate through different mechanisms. Narrative singularity is grounded in the (hi-)story of the object—its origin, prior trajectory, or commemorative value. It imbues goods with singularity based on where they have been or what they signify within a timeline (e.g., “This belonged to my grandfather”). In contrast, identity-based singularity arises from the alignment between an object and the consumer’s self-concept. A tote bag with a political slogan, a book articulating one’s worldview, or a fragrance that feels like “me” are experienced as singular not because of their history, but because of their capacity to symbolically represent the self. Where both identity-based and narrative singularity intersect, nostalgia can enable singular consumption. Nostalgia evokes emotionally charged connections to personal, cultural, or collective pasts (Santini et al., 2023). A product or experience gains singularity when it resonates with nostalgic memory structures—“this reminds me of my childhood,” “this belongs to an era I value”, or “this connects me to a lost cultural moment.” Nostalgia allows consumers to infuse offerings with deep personal meaning, transforming even

mass-produced or replicable items into singular artifacts. It is leveraged in retro product lines, heritage brand storytelling, re-released iconic designs, and experience marketing that reactivates historical aesthetics or cultural memory.

Last, social or interactional singularity refers to the uniqueness of goods or experiences as defined by the specific social relations and co-experiences in which they are embedded (Hamilton et al., 2021). A product or moment gains singular value not because it is scarce, aesthetic, or aligned with identity alone, but because it was shared with certain people, at a particular social juncture, or within a relational context that cannot be replicated. This might include a limited group event, a gift exchange with symbolic resonance, or even a jointly co-created product in a friend group or fan community. Social singularity foregrounds the co-constructed nature of singularity, highlighting that distinctiveness can be forged through intersubjective meaning, not just individual differentiation. It reveals that “this is ours” can be as powerful a marker of singularity as “this is mine.” It also connects to how communal, social, or peer validation makes singularity visible, meaningful, and emotionally charged. From a marketing standpoint, this suggests designing experiences and offerings that support co-creation, social participation, and shared authorship. This could include collaborative playlists, group customization tools, co-branded limited drops with community leaders, or features that document and surface shared consumption narratives. The key is to allow consumers to anchor singularity not only in the object or the self, but in the social field in which that object lives.

Markers

While singularity may be structurally anchored in certain vectors—such as time, space, or design, these alone do not guarantee singularity. Its perception depends on specific markers that function as interpretive cues or semiotic signals. They make singularity legible, meaningful, and experientially resonant to consumers. Following Peirce’s semiotics, different markers of

uniqueness activate different experiential and affective responses, shaping how broader dimensions such as temporal or aesthetic singularity are activated and interpreted (Grayson & Shulman, 2000). In other words, markers mediate the process through which consumers experience something as singular. If the markers are not present, singularity vectors might not translate into singular consumption instances.

A central interpretive marker of singularity is authenticity—the perception that an object, experience, or identity expression is aligned with a meaningful origin, whether cultural, historical, or personal (Bartsch et al., 2022; Nunes et al., 2021). In the context of singular consumption, authenticity functions as a key signaling device, distinguishing what is merely different from what is singular. When a product or experience is perceived as “true” to a tradition, a place, or a self-concept, it accrues singular value by conveying sincerity, depth, and resistance to commodified flattening. Authenticity allows consumers to determine whether something transcends generic production and connects to an anchored, non-interchangeable meaning (Reckwitz, 2020).

Authenticity itself is multifaceted. One foundational distinction can be made between three dimensions of authenticity, each corresponding to a different form of alignment (Bartsch et al., 2022). Existential authenticity refers to the extent to which an offering feels true to the self—it captures whether the product or experience resonates with the consumer’s intrinsic motivations and self-concept. This dimension can reinforce identity-based singularity, as singular value emerges from perceived personal alignment and coherence. Indexical authenticity, by contrast, relates to the factual truth of an offering—what is true to fact (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). It grounds singularity in origin, provenance, or evidentiary connections, thereby, for instance, supporting temporal, spatial, quantitative, narrative, or relational singularity. Iconic authenticity reflects the degree to which an offering aligns with cultural ideals or standards—what is true to

ideal (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). This form of authenticity relates closely to narrative or aesthetic singularity.

These three dimensions are further elaborated through six components of authenticity that shape how consumers interpret and evaluate singular offerings, whose role changes according to consumption context (Nunes et al., 2021). Accuracy refers to how transparently and reliably a product or provider represents itself, reinforcing perceptions of truthfulness and trust. This supports various singularity vectors by ensuring that what is claimed corresponds with what is materially verifiable. Connectedness captures the extent to which consumers feel emotionally or experientially engaged with a source or offering and contributes to identity-based or relational singularity by rendering the product personally transformative or relationally significant (Beverland et al., 2021). Integrity reflects whether a producer is seen as intrinsically motivated and autonomous, rather than driven solely by profit, potentially supporting the perceived genuineness of various singularity offerings. Legitimacy concerns whether an offering adheres to shared norms or traditions, mediating singularity through narrative or relational vectors. Originality refers to the extent to which a product stands out from mainstream offerings without unnecessary embellishment. For example, imperfection or irregularity, particularly in artisanal, handmade, or vintage contexts—such as a misshapen ceramic bowl or uneven brushstrokes—can function as perceptual markers of non-replicability (Suher et al., 2021). These signals can support both aesthetic and narrative singularity by evoking a sense of human touch, craftsmanship, and historical depth. Finally, proficiency reflects the perceived skill or craftsmanship involved in the creation of a product, which can contribute to both aesthetic and narrative singularity by suggesting excellence in form and depth. Effort or craftsmanship operates as a marker by signaling the investment of time, skill, or labor in a product's creation (McCracken, 2022). Consumers often infer singularity from signs of fine detail, material quality, or a maker's

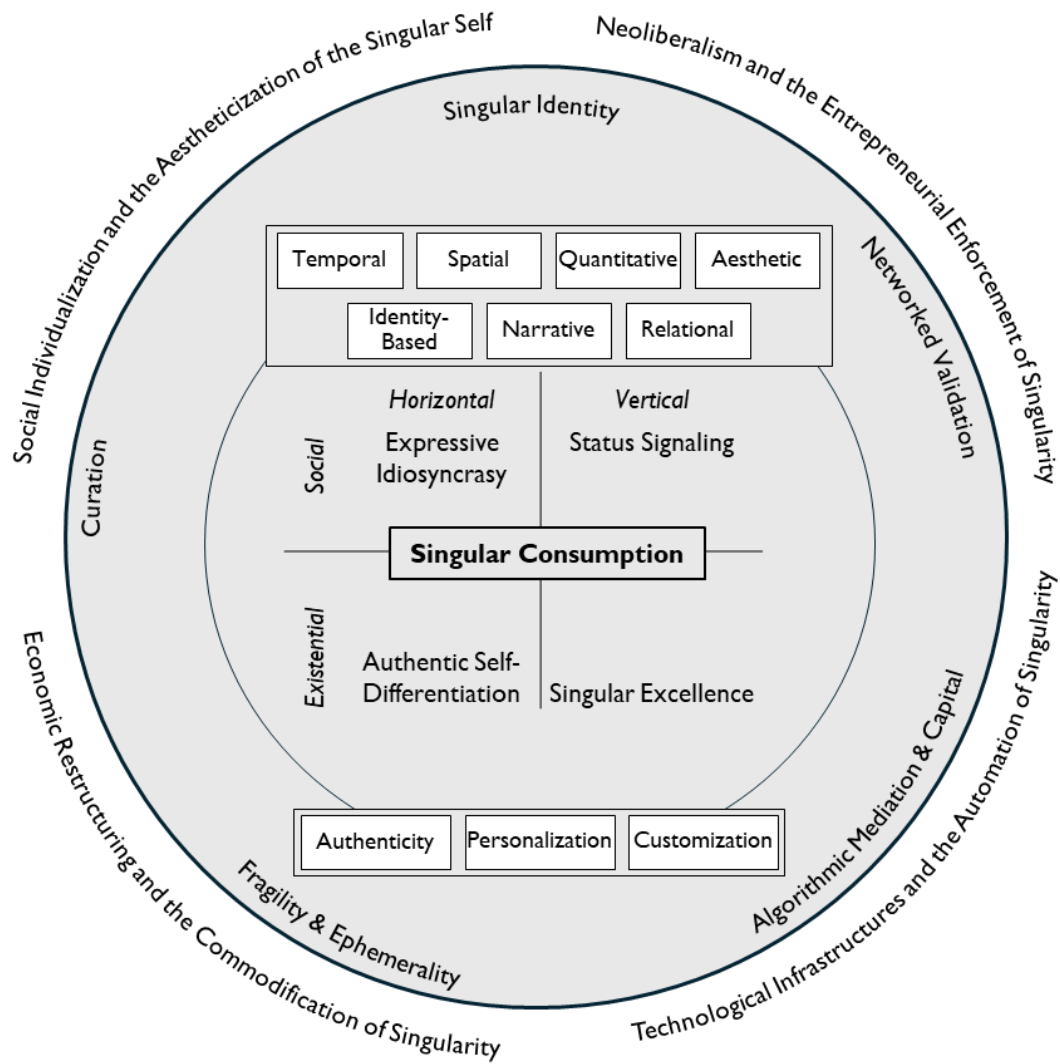
narrative of process. Effort cues render the object or experience resistant to mass replication—the visible trace of human effort transforms the product into an authentic singular artifact within the consumer’s curatorial repertoire. Together, these dimensions and components reveal that authenticity is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic and interpretive frame that structures the experience of singularity. Consumers rely on authenticity to assess whether a good or experience is worthy of singular status.

Personalization marks singularity through perceived individual fit and alignment, typically enabled by automated or system-driven tailoring (Vesanen, 2007). Algorithmically curated content (e.g., tailored feeds, personalized recommendations) and system-generated adaptations (e.g., dynamically personalized homepages or product suggestions) contribute to singularity by making offerings (appear) uniquely aligned with one’s preferences, behaviors, and interests. Crucially, in personalization, the singularity is often passively received rather than actively performed, consumers experience products as “made for me” even though they play little active role in shaping them (Arora et al., 2008). This complements customization and co-creation, where consumer authorship is more explicitly enacted and thus arguable holds greater potential as singularity marker.

Customization and co-creation act as powerful markers of singularity by signaling active consumer authorship. In contrast to passive personalization, customization involves intentional consumer modification of the offering (e.g., selecting product features, altering design elements) which translates in stronger investment of the self in the outcome (Franke et al., 2009; Norton et al., 2012). Both customization and co-creation contribute to singularity by making the consumer’s creative agency materially visible in the final offering—“this exists in part because of me.” They also foster narrative singularity, as consumers can publicly or privately recount their role in shaping a product.

Together, these markers of singularity explain how consumers detect, interpret, and construct the experience of singularity. They make the vectors of singularity perceivable, meaningful, and socially actionable. Singularity is not passively observed; it is actively read and performed through the interplay of vectors and interpretive markers within the specific consumption context.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of singular consumption



The Paradoxes of Singular Consumption

The pursuit of singularity is entangled with systemic forces that both support and subvert it.

Singularity is pursued and performed within markets and infrastructures that increasingly

standardize, instrumentalize, and routinize this very pursuit. As such, singular consumption is not a stable or uncontested phenomenon. It is riddled with contradictions that stem from its embeddedness in cultural systems, technological infrastructures, and market logics.

To fully understand the consumer experience of singularity, it is necessary to examine the paradoxes that animate and complicate its pursuit (Mick & Fournier, 1998). These paradoxes do not negate the cultural force of singular consumption. They rather expose new dynamics of consumer experience and agency, with important implications for marketing. The paradoxes examined here operate at distinct levels: at the level of cultural outputs, where the mass pursuit and offering of singularity collapses difference into sameness; at the level of production, where the promise of expressive freedom imposes increasing symbolic labor on consumers; and at the level of autonomy, where the imperative to differentiate undermines the very freedom it is meant to affirm. Together, these paradoxes illuminate the evolving dynamics of consumer agency in a society of singularities and the new forms of market value creation and ethical responsibility this landscape demands.

Homogenized Difference

A foundational paradox of singular consumption is that the more singularity is pursued and offered, the less singularity remains. As singularity becomes a cultural imperative and a marketing strategy, it risks collapsing into patterned repetition, producing what can be called homogenized difference.

This paradox unfolds through two systemic mechanisms. First, brands increasingly aestheticize their offers with the veil of singularity—limited editions, personalization, authenticity claims. Engineered singularity becomes a market default. As Adorno (1991) argued, such “pseudo-individuation” offers the illusion of distinction while standardizing experience.

When every product or experience is marketed as singular, nothing truly differentiates anymore. The value of singularity is diluted; the market becomes saturated with templated difference.

Second, technology and platform infrastructures further collapse singularity into homogenized outputs. Personalization systems, recommendation engines, and content curation algorithms optimize for user groups, population-level engagement metrics, and algorithmic legibility (Zuboff, 2019). Algorithmic personalization tends to cluster users into behavioral segments, fostering homogeneity beneath the surface of personalization. Rather than creating authentic singularity, platforms may generate predictable patterns of behavior and aesthetic convergence, as seen in viral mimicry on TikTok or Instagram (Bravin et al., 2025). The result is statistically inferred sameness masquerading as personalization. Spotify is another illustrative case, where personalization paradoxically can foster more homogenized listening patterns (Holtz et al., 2020; Knox & Datta, 2020). Furthermore, digital reproducibility has exacerbated what Benjamin (1953) famously identified as the loss of “aura” in mechanical reproduction. When everyone has access to what is labeled as singular, the perceived value and symbolic power of singularity diminish. Even technologies meant to guarantee singularity, such as blockchain, risk saturating the marketplace with serialized “one-of-a-kind” goods, thus devaluing their meaning. Across technologies and platforms, this dynamic produces homogenized difference shaped by the grammars of platforms and technology rather than intrinsic expression.

For brands, this paradox creates both risk and opportunity. Simply adding more engineered singularity will not resolve the problem; it will rather deepen the cycle of symbolic devaluation. Brands should instead focus on creating conditions where authentic singularization remains possible: offering symbolic materials of depth, ambiguity, and interpretive openness, and designing experiences that resist the gravitational pull of platform-standardized singularity.

Labor of Curation

A second paradox of singular consumption concerns the shifting burden of symbolic labor onto consumers. While singularity is marketed as an opportunity for expressive freedom, it increasingly demands that consumers engage in continuous unpaid labor to produce and maintain a singular self—an affectively charged, unevenly distributed effort to manage the self as a semiotic project (Gill & Pratt, 2008). The relentless demand for personal optimization and creative self-performance generates emotional exhaustion and alienation (Sennett, 2007). As laid out before, singularity work is inherently curatorial. Consumers must continuously assemble and reassemble constellations of goods, experiences, and signs that signal social difference, existential coherence, or aesthetic divergence. Yet curation is not free-form or leisurely; it is a performative practice structured and capitalized by platform logics. To be recognized as singular, one's curated outputs must be algorithmically legible and socially intelligible, optimized for the dominant grammars of visibility and validation (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Moreover, as singular consumption becomes normatively demanded across social fields, from social media, professional identity to everyday consumption, curation becomes an obligatory, ongoing activity. In an economy of networked validation and accelerating trends (Rosa, 2013), visibility and symbolic currency demand constant renewal. Consumers face a form of expressive inflation: as more individuals engage in curatorial singularity, symbolic returns diminish, requiring ever-greater effort to sustain it.

For brands, this dynamic calls for a shift from celebrating curation as empowerment to recognizing its hidden costs. Brands should provide curation scaffolds—tools that ease identity work without prescribing narrow aesthetic templates—and create spaces where consumers can engage in low-intensity or non-performative modes of identity construction.

For consumers, greater awareness of the labor dynamics of curation can foster more mindful and reflective curation practices. Brands that acknowledge and support this reflection will strengthen their position as partners in singularity work, rather than contributors to its burdens.

Singularity as Demand

A third paradox of singular consumption lies in its impact on autonomy. While singular consumption promises an ideal of personal freedom of expressing the singular self in all facets, it increasingly functions as a normative demand. Consumers are expected to differentiate in ways that are platform-legible and culturally validated.

This paradox operates at a deeper level than homogenized difference or curation labor. It concerns not what consumers do or how they do it, but why they do it—and whether they could choose otherwise. Motivational orientations that should emerge from volitional desire are increasingly shaped by prescribed cultural scripts. As Reckwitz (2020) observes, one is free only if one is singular, and singular only if one conforms to recognizable modes of singularity.

Autonomy is eroded not by explicit restriction but by normative saturation: a cultural environment so saturated with the imperative to express singularity that genuine deviation becomes unintelligible or unrewarded. Singular consumption thus generates a paradox of conditional freedom in which one is free to be singular only in ways that fit within system-compatible patterns.

For brands, this paradox signals the risk of exacerbating consumer fatigue and resistance through relentless differentiation rhetoric. A more sustainable strategy is to embrace pluralism—offering pathways for both performative and non-performative participation, and valorizing forms of singularity that transcend hyper-visible aesthetic performance—such as personal meaning, craftsmanship, ritualized use, or collective affiliation.

For consumers, awareness of the autonomy obligation can foster the capacity to discern when one is pursuing singularity for intrinsic reasons versus performing it to meet external expectations. Brands that support this reflective stance can become trusted allies in helping consumers navigate the deeper ethical and emotional tensions of singular consumption.

Open Questions and Future Research

As the logic of singularity increasingly organizes contemporary markets, consumer behavior, and branding practices, marketing scholarship must evolve to address the novel tensions and opportunities it creates. Singular consumption introduces a new ontology of value. This shift invites a deeper interrogation of how singularity is experienced, produced, and structured across consumer, brand, and technological systems. Below, we outline three domains where marketing research can generate new insights by adopting a singularity lens.

Consumer Experience and Singularity Work

At the core of singular consumption lies the consumer's active engagement in what we have termed singularity work: the symbolic, aesthetic, and performative labor required to appear meaningfully different. Future research should explore how consumers experience and navigate this imperative across different motivational orientations—social versus existential, horizontal versus vertical. For instance, how do consumers pursue singularity as a means of authentic self-expression versus social distinction, and what tensions emerge between these goals? Researchers might also examine how consumers respond to the fragility of singularity—when their curated identities are imitated, trend cycles dilute aesthetic signals, or previously rare markers become mainstream (D'Angelo et al., 2019; White & Argo, 2011). Longitudinal and ethnographic research could offer insights into how singularity work evolves across life stages, identity transitions, or cultural contexts (Chan et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2024). Furthermore, it is essential to

investigate how the continual demand for distinction affects consumer well-being, self-concept clarity, and the perceived authenticity of consumption choices (Bartsch et al., 2022; Rifkin & Etkin, 2019; Stuppy et al., 2020). By doing so, marketing research can expand its understanding of how consumer singularity work operates not only in relation to brands, but also within algorithmically mediated, socially networked, and symbolically saturated environments.

Market Structures, Brand Strategy, and the Design of Singularity

Singular consumption reframes traditional questions of value creation and brand differentiation. Brands are no longer evaluated solely on functional performance or symbolic alignment, but increasingly on their ability to provide credible materials for consumers' singularity work (Brakus et al., 2009). This raises new questions for marketing strategy: How can brands move beyond personalization-as-efficiency to support personalization-as-singularity (Vesanen, 2007)? What does it mean to design offerings that enable authentic differentiation rather than stylized sameness (Nunes et al., 2021)? Brands might experiment with semantic openness and curation scaffolds—semi-structured tools or modular content that help consumers build symbolic coherence without collapsing into templated aesthetics (Holt, 2016; Wichmann et al., 2022). Research could also explore how different industries (e.g., fashion, gaming, luxury, wellness) vary in the types of singularity they support, and which consumer segments gravitate toward existential versus social modes of uniqueness. In a marketplace governed by the logic of singularity, firms must balance symbolic empowerment with the risks of over-saturation, consumer fatigue, and perceived inauthenticity. Insights from this stream could help marketers avoid the paradox of offering “mass uniqueness”—where every product promises distinctiveness but none delivers it credibly.

Technological Mediation and the Structuring Role of Platforms

Finally, singular consumption unfolds within a digital environment increasingly shaped by algorithmic infrastructures and platform architectures. These systems not only mediate what consumers see and do, but also profoundly influence how singularity is defined, performed, and validated. For marketing researchers, this raises urgent questions about the algorithmic logics that structure visibility, recommendation, and identity signaling (Banker & Khetani, 2019; Rifkin & Etkin, 2019). How do personalization engines—designed to cluster similar users—conflict with the consumer’s desire for differentiation? Under what conditions do consumers perceive algorithmic outputs as authentic markers of singularity versus generic predictions based on user-type (Gai & Klesse, 2019)? Future work could investigate the rise of algorithmic capital—the skill or literacy required to produce platform-legible uniqueness—and how it intersects with traditional forms of cultural and social capital. Research might also examine how different platform features (e.g., ephemeral content, niche community tools, audience analytics) shape the performance and perception of singularity (Henkel & Toporowski, 2023). Understanding the interaction between personalization systems and singularity pursuits will be key to designing more reflexive and empowering technological environments for consumers. Marketing research should explore how platforms and brands jointly govern singularity work (Wichmann et al., 2022). Should firms build proprietary ecosystems to provide more expressive freedom, or adapt to the templated formats of dominant platforms? How do consumers perceive brand authenticity when brand expression is filtered through algorithmic constraints? And how might marketers develop alternative metrics—such as expressive depth, symbolic resonance, or identity authorship—to evaluate success in singularity-centered markets?

Finally, this domain raises ethical questions about autonomy, visibility, and manipulation. As platforms increasingly script the modes through which uniqueness can be performed,

marketing must ask: are we supporting consumer freedom or narrowing it under the guise of personalization?

Contributions

This conceptualization of singular consumption contributes to consumer research in several important ways. First, we introduce singular consumption as a distinct logic of consumption oriented toward singularity as a cultural value. While prior research has documented phenomena such as personalization (Arora et al., 2008; van Osselaer et al., 2020), identity expression (Reed et al., 2012), or authenticity-seeking (Bartsch et al., 2022) in isolation, we synthesize and elevate these under a broader theoretical umbrella that captures the socio-cultural imperative to be perceived and to consume as unique. We also contribute a fresh perspective to prior work proposing consumption logics of post-modernity, such as liquid and access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Second, we contribute by developing a multi-layered framework of singular consumption, encompassing the singularization regime as contextual enabler, key characteristics, motivational orientations, formative vectors, and interpretive markers. By clarifying what singularity means and how it operates in consumption, we offer a vocabulary and structure that helps to explain why certain goods, experiences, and brands carry heightened symbolic and affective value in contemporary consumer culture (Belk et al., 1989; Sun & Pham, 2025).

Third, we advance theorizing on the paradoxes of contemporary consumption (Mick & Fournier, 1998; Schwartz, 2004). We show how the imperative to be singular often collides with the very systems designed to support it leading to tensions such as homogenized difference, curation labor, and singularity as demand. These paradoxes not only enrich our understanding of consumer experience but also illustrate how market-mediated cultural ideals are always mediated, ambivalent, and contested.

Fourth, our work contributes to the theory of singularities (Jameson, 2015; Karpik, 2010; Reckwitz, 2020) by examining its application in consumer culture. Whereas Reckwitz outlines how the logic of singularization transforms social structures, professions, and cultural production, we show how this logic manifests in everyday consumer behavior—how people consume, curate, and perform singularity in their lives. In doing so, we reveal how the societal turn toward singularity reshapes consumption itself.

Finally, we make several practical contributions. For brands, understanding singular consumption opens up new strategies for designing promising offerings and experiences that support rather than simulate uniqueness. This includes enabling open-ended curation, avoiding algorithmic flattening, and providing interpretive flexibility, allowing consumers to co-create value. For policymakers and educators, our work offers insight into how cultural pressures toward uniqueness may amplify social comparison, stress, and inequality, prompting the need for reflective spaces that temper the demand to stand out with the freedom to simply belong.

In sum, by introducing singular consumption, we provide a new lens for understanding consumer behavior in an era marked by the cultural primacy of singularity. We hope this framework stimulates further empirical and conceptual research on when, where, and how singular consumption manifests and how it shapes the values, practices, and contradictions of contemporary consumer life.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1991). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (J Bernstein, Ed.; Vol. 1). Routledge.
- Anderson, C. (2008). *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. Hachette Books.
- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868–882.
- Arora, N., Drèze, X., Ghose, A., Hess, J., Iyengar, R., Jing, B., Joshi, Y., Kumar, V., Lurie, N., Neslin, S., Sajeesh, S., Su, M., Syam, N., Thomas, J., & Zhang, Z. J. (2008). Putting one-to-one marketing to work: Personalization, customization, and choice. *Marketing Letters*, 19(3), 305.
- Arsel, Z., & Bean, J. (2013). Taste regimes and market-mediated practice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(5), 899–917.
- Banker, S., & Khetani, S. (2019). Algorithm overdependence: How the use of algorithmic recommendation systems can increase risks to consumer well-being. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 38(4), 500–515.
- Bardhi, F., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2017). Liquid consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(3), 582–597.
- Bardhi, F., Eckhardt, G. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2012). Liquid relationship to possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(3), 510–529.
- Bartsch, F., Zeugner-Roth, K. P., & Katsikeas, C. S. (2022). Consumer authenticity seeking: Conceptualization, measurement, and contingent effects. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50(2), 296–323.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press.

- Bauman, Z. (2013). *The Individualized Society*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Beck, U., Giddens, A., & Lash, S. (1994). *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford University Press.
- Belk, R., Das, G., & Jain, S. P. (2023). The ubiquity of scarcity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 51(6), 1191–1196.
- Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended self in a digital world. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(3), 477–500.
- Belk, R., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry, J. F. (1989). The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(1), 1–38.
- Bellezza, S., Gino, F., & Keinan, A. (2013). The red sneakers effect: Inferring status and competence from signals of nonconformity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(1), 35–54.
- Bellezza, S., Paharia, N., & Keinan, A. (2017). Conspicuous consumption of time: When busyness and lack of leisure time become a status symbol. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(1), 118–138.
- Benjamin, W. (1935). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Penguin UK.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge from others: Identity signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 121–134.
- Berghueser, S. M., & Spann, M. (2024). The value of distinctiveness: Product uniqueness in crypto marketing. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, In Press.
- Beverland, M. B., Eckhardt, G. M., Sands, S., & Shankar, A. (2021). How brands craft national identity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 48(4), 586–609.
- Beverland, M. B., & Farrelly, F. J. (2010). The quest for authenticity in consumption: Consumers' purposive choice of authentic cues to shape experienced outcomes. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(5), 838–856.

- Beverland, M. B., Fernandez, K. V., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2024). Consumer work and agency in the analog revival. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 51(4), 719–738.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- boyd, danah. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In *A Networked Self*. Routledge.
- Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, B. H., & Zarantonello, L. (2009). Brand experience: What is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 73(3), 52–68.
- Branding in the Age of Social Media. (2016). *Harvard Business Review*.
<https://hbr.org/2016/03/branding-in-the-age-of-social-media>
- Bravin, M., Clegg, M., Hofstetter, R., Pouly, M., & Berger, J. A. (2025). *How to follow social media trends? An empirical investigation using tiktok short video data* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 5117564). Social Science Research Network.
- Burchell, G., Gordon, C., & Miller, P. (Eds.). (1991). *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality ; with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault*. Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Chan, C., Berger, J., & Van Boven, L. (2012). Identifiable but not identical: Combining social identity and uniqueness motives in choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(3), 561–573.
- Corciolani, M., Grayson, K., & Humphreys, A. (2020). Do more experienced critics review differently?: How field-specific cultural capital influences the judgments of cultural intermediaries. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(3), 478–510.
- Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 895–913.

- Danatzis, I., Hill, T., Karpen, I. O., & Kleinaltenkamp, M. (2025). EXPRESS: Curating the crowd: How firms manage social fit to stage social atmospheres. *Journal of Marketing*, In Press.
- D'Angelo, J. K., Diehl, K., & Cavanaugh, L. A. (2019). Lead by example? Custom-made examples created by close others lead consumers to make dissimilar choices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46(4), 750–773.
- Davidson, A. I., Burchell, G., & Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Springer.
- de Bellis, E., Sprott, D. E., Herrmann, A., Bierhoff, H.-W., & Rohmann, E. (2016). The influence of trait and state narcissism on the uniqueness of mass-customized products. *Journal of Retailing*, 92(2), 162–172.
- Dellaert, B. G. C. (2019). The consumer production journey: Marketing to consumers as co-producers in the sharing economy. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 47(2), 238–254.
- Dijck, J. van. (2013). The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media. In *The Culture of Connectivity*. Oxford University Press.
- <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001/acprof-9780199970773>
- Dolbec, P.-Y., & Fischer, E. (2015). Refashioning a field? Connected consumers and institutional dynamics in markets. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(6), 1447–1468.
- Dommer, S., Swaminathan, V., & Ahluwalia, R. (2013). Using differentiated brands to deflect exclusion and protect inclusion: The moderating role of self-esteem on attachment to differentiated brands. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(4), 657–675.

- Dornyei, K. R., & Lunardo, R. (2021). When limited edition packages backfire: The role of emotional value, typicality and need for uniqueness. *Journal of Business Research*, 137, 233–243.
- Duffek, B., Eisingerich, A. B., Merlo, O., & Lee, G. (2025). Authenticity in influencer marketing: How can influencers and brands work together to build and maintain influencer authenticity? *Journal of Marketing*, In Press.
- Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2005). Self-construal, reference groups, and brand meaning. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(3), 378–389.
- Featherstone, M. (1991). *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. SAGE Publications.
- Firat, A. F., & Venkatesh, A. (1995). Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(3), 239.
- Franke, N., Schreier, M., & Kaiser, U. (2009). The “I designed it myself” effect in mass customization. *Management Science*, 56(1), 125–140.
- Frieman, C. J. (2023). NFTs as skeuomorphs: Weaponized sameness and fascist utopias. *American Anthropologist*, 125(1), 194–198.
- Fuchs, M., & Schreier, M. (2024). Need for Uniqueness. In J. Gollnhofer, R. Hofstetter, & T. Tomczak (Eds.), *Elgar Encyclopedia of Consumer Behavior* (pp. 221–223). Elgar Publishing. <https://www.elgaronline.com/display/book/9781803926278/ch68.xml>
- Gai, P. J., & Klesse, A.-K. (2019). Making recommendations more effective through framings: Impacts of user- versus item-based framings on recommendation click-throughs. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(6), 61–75.
- Gerber, J. P., Wheeler, L., & Suls, J. (2018). A social comparison theory meta-analysis 60+ years on. *Psychological Bulletin*, 144(2), 177–197.

- Gershon, I. (2024). *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today*. University of Chicago Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford University Press.
- Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory?: Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7–8), 1–30.
- Grayson, K., & Martinec, R. (2004). Consumer perceptions of iconicity and indexicality and their influence on assessments of authentic market offerings. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(2), 296–312.
- Grayson, K., & Shulman, D. (2000). Indexicality and the verification function of irreplaceable possessions: A semiotic analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(1), 17–30.
- Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., & Van den Bergh, B. (2010). Going green to be seen: status, reputation, and conspicuous conservation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(3), 392–404.
- Hamilton, R., Ferraro, R., Haws, K. L., & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2021). Traveling with companions: The social customer journey. *Journal of Marketing*, 85(1), 68–92.
- Henkel, L., & Toporowski, W. (2023). Once they've been there, they like to share: Capitalizing on ephemerality and need for uniqueness to drive word of mouth for brands with pop-up stores. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 51(6), 1284–1304.
- Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2017). Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology*, 53(2), 271–284.
- Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(2), 132–140.

- Holt, D. B. (1995). How consumers consume: A typology of consumption practices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(1), 1–16.
- Holt, D. B. (1997). Poststructuralist lifestyle analysis: Conceptualizing the social patterning of consumption in postmodernity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23(4), 326–350.
- Holt, D. B. (1998). Does cultural capital structure american consumption? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25(1), 1–25.
- Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(1), 70–90.
- Holtz, D., Carterette, B., Chandar, P., Nazari, Z., Cramer, H., & Aral, S. (2020). The engagement-diversity connection: Evidence from a field experiment on Spotify. *EC 2020 - Proceedings of the 21st ACM Conference on Economics and Computation*, 75–76.
- Jameson, F. (2015). The Aesthetics of Singularity. *New Left Review*, 92, 101–132.
- Jarvis, C. B., MacKenzie, S. B., & Podsakoff, P. M. (2003). A critical review of construct indicators and measurement model misspecification in marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(2), 199–218.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. NYU Press.
- Jensen Schau, H., & Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-Presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 385–404.
- Karpik, L. (2010). *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*. Princeton University Press.
- Kim, H., & Markus, H. R. (1999). Deviance or uniqueness, harmony or conformity? A cultural analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(4), 785–800.

Knox, G., & Datta, H. (2020). *Streaming services and the homogenization of music consumption*.

Tilburg University Research Portal.

Kopytoff, I. (1986). The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process. In A.

Appadurai (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (pp. 64–92). Cambridge University Press.

Kozlenkova, I. V., Warren, C., Kotha, S., Boghrati, R., & Palmatier, R. W. (2025). Conceptual research: Multidisciplinary insights for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 89(4), 1–20.

Krause, F., Görgen, J., de Bellis, E., Franke, N., Burghartz, P., Klanner, I.-M., & Häubl, G.

(2023). One-of-a-kind products: Leveraging strict uniqueness in mass customization.

International Journal of Research in Marketing, 40(4), 823–840.

Lynn, M. (1992). The Psychology of Unavailability: Explaining Scarcity and Cost Effects on

Value. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 13(1), 3–7.

MacInnis, D. J. (2011). A framework for conceptual contributions in marketing. *Journal of*

Marketing, 75(4), 136–154.

Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1

(75)), 137–160.

McCracken, G. (2022). *Return of the Artisan: How America Went from Industrial to Handmade*.

S&S/Simon Element.

Merrell, F. (1995). *Semiosis in the Postmodern Age*. Purdue University Press.

Mick, D. G., & Fournier, S. (1998). Paradoxes of technology: Consumer cognizance, emotions,

and coping strategies. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25(2), 123–143.

Milnes, T., & Sinanan, K. (2010). *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*. Springer.

Navas, E. (2012). *Remix Theory*. Springer.

- Nicosia, F. M., & Mayer, R. N. (1976). Toward a sociology of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 3(2), 65–75.
- Norton, M. I., Mochon, D., & Ariely, D. (2012). The IKEA effect: When labor leads to love. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(3), 453–460.
- Nunes, J. C., Ordanini, A., & Giambastiani, G. (2021). The Concept of Authenticity: What It Means to Consumers. *Journal of Marketing*, 85(4), 1–20.
- Ordabayeva, N., & Fernandes, D. (2018). Better or different? How political ideology shapes preferences for differentiation in the social hierarchy. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45(2), 227–250.
- Pasquale, F. (2015). *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Harvard University Press.
- Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. Harvard Business Press.
- Reckwitz, A. (2020). The Society of Singularities. In *The Society of Singularities* (pp. 141–154). De Gruyter.
- Reed, A., Forehand, M. R., Puntoni, S., & Warlop, L. (2012). Identity-based consumer behavior. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(4), 310–321.
- Rifkin, J. R., & Etkin, J. (2019). Variety in self-expression undermines self-continuity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46(4), 725–749.
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Columbia University Press.
- Russell, B. (1946). *History of Western Philosophy*. Allen & Unwin.
- Santini, F. de O., Lim, W. M., Ladeira, W. J., Costa Pinto, D., Herter, M. M., & Rasul, T. (2023). A meta-analysis on the psychological and behavioral consequences of nostalgia: The

- moderating roles of nostalgia activators, culture, and individual characteristics. *Psychology & Marketing*, 40(10), 1899–1912.
- Schmitt, B. (1999). Experiential marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 15(1–3), 53–67.
- Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less* (pp. xi, 265). HarperCollins Publishers.
- Senft. (2013). A Companion to New Media Dynamics. In *Microcelebrity and the Branded Self* (1st ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Sennett, R. (2007). *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. Yale University Press.
- Snyder, C. R., & Fromkin, H. L. (1980). *Uniqueness: The Human Pursuit of Difference*. Springer US.
- Stevens, M. L. (2009). *Creating a Class*. Harvard University Press.
- Stuppy, A., Mead, N. L., & Van Osselaer, S. M. J. (2020). I am, therefore I buy: Low self-esteem and the pursuit of self-verifying consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46(5), 956–973.
- Suher, J., Szocs, C., & van Ittersum, K. (2021). When imperfect is preferred: The differential effect of aesthetic imperfections on choice of processed and unprocessed foods. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 49(5), 903–924.
- Sun, J. J., & Pham, M. T. (2025). What makes consumption experiences feel special? A Multi-method integrative analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, In Press.
- Tian, K. T., Bearden, W. O., & Hunter, G. L. (2001). Consumers' need for uniqueness: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(1), 50–66.
- van Osselaer, S. M. J., Fuchs, C., Schreier, M., & Puntoni, S. (2020). The power of personal. *Journal of Retailing*, 96(1), 88–100.

- Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1), 1–17.
- Vesanen, J. (2007). What is personalization? A conceptual framework. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41(5–6), 409–418.
- Weiss, L., & Johar, G. V. (2013). Egocentric categorization and product judgment: seeing your traits in what you own (and their opposite in what you don't). *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(1), 185–201.
- Weiss, L., & Johar, G. V. (2016). Products as self-evaluation standards: When owned and unowned products have opposite effects on self-judgment. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42(6), 915–930.
- Wertenbroch, K., Schrift, R. Y., Alba, J. W., Barasch, A., Bhattacharjee, A., Giesler, M., Knobe, J., Lehmann, D. R., Matz, S., Nave, G., Parker, J. R., Puntoni, S., Zheng, Y., & Zwebner, Y. (2020). Autonomy in consumer choice. *Marketing Letters*, 31(4), 429–439.
- White, K., & Argo, J. J. (2011). When imitation doesn't flatter: the role of consumer distinctiveness in responses to mimicry. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(4), 667–680.
- Wichmann, J. R. K., Wiegand, N., & Reinartz, W. J. (2022). The platformization of brands. *Journal of Marketing*, 86(1), 109–131.
- Wilson, A. V., & Bellezza, S. (2022). Consumer minimalism. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 48(5), 796–816.
- Xu, J., Shen, H., & Wyer Jr., R. S. (2012). Does the distance between us matter? Influences of physical proximity to others on consumer choice. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(3), 418–423.
- Zhu, G., Hildreth, J. A. D., & Chen, Y.-R. (2024). Strategic uniqueness seeking: A cultural perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 128(5), 1050–1071.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Profile Books.

Summary of proposed conceptual model

A Conceptual Framework of Singular Consumption

1. Singularization Regime (Macro-Level Enabler)

The cultural, economic, technological, and ideological context that renders singularity a normative value in contemporary markets.

Constituent Forces:

- **Economic Restructuring and the Commodification of Singularity:** Post-Fordist capitalism shifts from scale and utility to aesthetic and symbolic differentiation. Singularity becomes a value-creation strategy.
- **Social Individualization and the Aestheticization of Singularity:** Identity must be authored and curated, not inherited. The self becomes an aesthetic project.
- **Neoliberalism and the Entrepreneurial Enforcement of Singularity:** Individuals are framed as entrepreneurial selves, expected to cultivate distinction to succeed.
- **Technological Infrastructures and the Automation of Singularity:** Platforms rewire visibility and value around curated, data-driven expressions of uniqueness.

These interlocking forces institutionalize singularity as a cultural value and systemic expectation, creating conditions where singular consumption is not only possible but culturally demanded.

2. Core Characteristics of Singular Consumption (Mesostructure)

These are the practices and features that define how singularity is pursued and performed in consumption.

(a) Curation

- The central practice of singular consumption.
- Consumers assemble goods, experiences, and media to perform and sustain a singular identity.
- Requires interpretive labor.
- Brand side implication: offerings must be semantically open and curatable.

(b) Networked Validation

- Singularity is increasingly socially ratified through platforms and peer networks.
- The consumer's distinctiveness gains value through circulation and recognition (e.g., likes, shares, community affirmation).
- Singular consumption becomes a relational and performative outcome.

(c) Algorithmic Mediation & Capital

- Algorithmic systems structure which kinds of singularity are legible and amplifiable.
- Consumers must learn to perform singularity in platform-friendly formats.
- Algorithmic capital becomes a resource: the ability to optimize distinctiveness for digital visibility.

(d) Fragility and Ephemerality

- Singularity is unstable and perishable.
- The same act of distinction can rapidly become generic.

- Consumers must continuously curate and adapt to maintain distinctiveness.

(e) Singular Identity

- The ideal of identity shifts from fixed group affiliation or playful multiplicity to aesthetic coherence with distinction.
- Consumers craft singular selves: integrated, narratively cohesive, and socially visible yet non-interchangeable.

3. Motivational and Evaluative Orientations (Micro-Level Pursuits)

These define why and how singularity is pursued.

Axes:

- Motivational:
 - *Social* (to be seen as unique)
 - *Existential* (to feel authentically unique)
- Evaluative:
 - *Horizontal* (difference without hierarchy)
 - *Vertical* (difference as superiority)

Resulting Typology:

	Horizontal	Vertical
Social	Expressive Idiosyncrasy	Status Signaling

Horizontal	Vertical
Existential Authentic Self-Differentiation Singular Excellence	

Each orientation implies distinct practices (e.g., aesthetic exploration, elite consumption, spiritual alignment, creative expression) and differing validation needs (e.g., external approval vs. internal coherence).

4. Formative Vectors of Singularity (Structural Dimensions)

Singularity is instantiated along vectors representing the structural pathways that render an object or experience potentially singular.

- Temporal Singularity: Ephemeral, time-bounded uniqueness (e.g., flash drops, live events).
- Spatial Singularity: Location-based or geofenced access (e.g., site-specific installations).
- Quantitative Singularity: Limited editions, numerical scarcity.
- Aesthetic/Design Singularity: Sensory distinctiveness (e.g., custom colors, textures, stylistic flair).
- Identity-Based Singularity: Personal resonance with self-concept.
- Narrative Singularity: Objects with a known history or story (e.g., provenance, heritage).
- Relational Singularity: Experiences that are co-constructed or relationally unique (e.g., co-creation, shared rituals).

These vectors shape the “raw material” of singularity, but require markers to be socially and subjectively legible.

5. Interpretive Markers of Singularity (Perceptual Mediators)

Markers are the semiotic and phenomenological cues through which consumers recognize something as singular.

- Authenticity:
 - *Existential*: true to self
 - *Indexical*: true to fact
 - *Iconic*: true to ideal
 - Related cues: accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, proficiency
- Personalization:
 - System-generated uniqueness (“for me”) via algorithms
 - Perceived fit without direct consumer authorship
- Customization & Co-Creation:
 - Active authorship by the consumer
 - Tangible traces of their influence

Markers make vectors actionable and interpretable. They turn structural potential into experiential recognition.