

# Young Consumer Conformity and Identity Amplified by Social Media: Marketing Applications

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## ABSTRACT

As social media and the internet become integral to producer-consumer relations, it is necessary to understand how to properly use these tools to maximize consumer acquisition. Companies and customers must be aware of how psychological factors influence consumer decision-making to improve marketing tactics. The author examines the need for belonging that young consumers face in the technological world and the conforming influences that impact young consumer decisions. The phrasing of product and sales promotions changes psychological reactions, thus emphasizing the need for careful phrasing during campaigns to convey the right messages. Young consumer identity formation is recognized as a variable in consumer behavior. Despite studies arguing that identity expression has a limited influence on consumer behavior, the author recommends companies apply it in business and marketing strategies. Two forms of social media marketing, word-of-mouth marketing and celebrity marketing, are compared by their appeal to young consumers' belonging and identity needs. A discussion on marketing strategies implements results from the studies on the influence of conformity, identity, and social media on consumer behavior. The author applies word-of-mouth marketing successful qualities to the traditional celebrity/social media influencer marketing deals to incorporate psychological influences of trust and genuineness while maintaining the pressures to belong and form an identity. The paper finds that marketing strategies should incorporate identity expression and formation features, as well as taking the expressive elements and targeted narratives from word-of-mouth marketing and implementing them into celebrity endorsements to create an honest, genuine campaign that attracts young consumers.

## **Introduction**

Today's young consumers have been exposed to technology and social media throughout their lives at an unprecedented means of information and data accessibility. According to a survey of US adults conducted by the Pew Research Center from 2005 to 2021, the percent of participants reporting they use at least one social media service jumped from 5% to a whopping 72%. More specifically, 84% of those of ages 19-28 have used social media, with 70% of them having used Facebook and 71% Instagram (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2022). In the United States alone, a survey sent to 1000 consumers on online shopping habits by Curalative found that 78% of consumers from the age of 18-34 years old have discovered at least one retail product they were interested in purchasing through Facebook, while 59% found the same on Instagram, two of the largest social media marketing networks to date (Retail TouchPoints, 2020). Generation Z has been more exposed to social media than the "digital immigrants" before them, likely contributing to their greater usage of it (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016). Social media is taking over the marketing world. With the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, online marketing and shopping platforms have become essential for businesses to improve their sales and exposure. Not only does social media marketing prove useful in reaching consumer audiences, but Pookulangara and Koesler's (2011), study indicated that social media provided an outlet for 25 percent of consumers to further the awareness of products and services that they found useful by uploading links and information to retail websites (Al-Dhuhli

et al., 2015). Communication and information technology serve as networks for marketing influence to take hold of consumers on a mass scale. Additionally, Andzulis (2012) identifies 4 phases in which social media is used by marketers to make a sale, in which it first establishes a presence and general information, then drives customer traffic for awareness of the brand, then implements sales measures and campaigns, and finally specifies procedures to complete the sale. Today's consumers tend to be younger, more educated, wealthier, computer literate, and spend time browsing the internet (Swinyard & Smith, 2003).

Two variables ultimately influence online consumerism in terms of generational differences: how generations use social media differently and how generations differ psychologically. To fully take advantage of this digital marketing opportunity, especially when targeting younger audiences, it is necessary to understand how their developmental psychology factors into their consumer behavior and decisions. Consequently, the following research questions frame this study: 1. How does the need for belonging and identity in young consumers influence their decision-making process? 2. How does technology enhance young consumers' internal psychology and external influences on their behavior? Psychological factors such as a need for belonging and identity serve as indirect influences, apart from the general usability and efficiency of a product or service. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that once physiological necessity and security are established, self-esteem and belonging become the next attainable goals for the general human (Kendrick et al, 2010). Recognized by the National Library of Medicine, an official United States government website, developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychological Development explains how adolescents must conquer their psychological dependence to develop an identity, or they will be confused as to their role in society. However, young adults from the age 20 to 40 desire intimacy, or they feel isolated in society (Orenstein, 2021). However, middle (40-60) and late (60+) adults face issues such as generativity or stagnation and integrity or despair, both having to do with one's overall sense of purpose in the world rather than fitting among peers and society. Thus, an in-depth study on young consumers is more crucial than one on all age groups because, theoretically, young consumers will be more influenced by the need to belong and form identity. The Asch Conformity experiment helps to clarify the role of conformity with informational influence, while the Sherif Social Judgment experiment examines the normative influence of peers (Venkatesan, 1966). However, research on conformity to societal norms influencing decision-making in consumers is not definitive. Consequently, concrete studies analyzing the extent of influence conformity has on consumers is necessary to understand the scope of psychological influence (Venkatesan, 1966). In terms of youth consumer issues, teenagers become vulnerable to impulse and inefficient spending due to their lack of consumer experience, low self-esteem and self-confidence, adherence to group pressures, and the Internet's lack of barriers in the online purchasing space (Batat, 2010). However, little research has been synthesized connecting social media with youth psychological crises that influence their consumer habits.

## Methods

There is a three-step process in understanding how to incorporate psychology in the marketing process: identifying and understanding each psychological factor (need for belonging and identity), describing ways in which social media already incorporates these factors, and synthesizing a strategy to incorporate findings into a marketing campaign. This paper explores conformity and the need to belong through: 1) analysis from an evolutionary perspective; 2) the influence of phrasing through a quantitative experiment; and 3) developing an explanation of the data using two sources connecting group influence and youth vulnerability. Identity formation and expression are explored through a qualitative study measuring the perception of brand relevance for expressing one's identity or desired lifestyle, comparing personal and friend values. Identity expression is then compared to its marketing application through a study arguing that brands should proceed with caution when implementing a business strategy that allows for identity self-expression. The pros and cons of brand marketing based on its ability to express identity and desired lifestyle is compared, contributing to a holistic marketing

strategy. To answer the second question, two forms of marketing: word-of-mouth marketing and celebrity endorsements are compared by their success in tapping into the psychological needs of young consumers. Word of mouth marketing is compared to traditional reviews and product feedback. A different study of the Omani population claims that a website's ability to provide reliable information of a product and form trust are more important than peer influences in purchasing decisions. The psychological themes in both the word-of-mouth marketing and celebrity endorsement strategies are compared for marketing applications. Finally, a marketing strategy discussion incorporates studies and findings to maximize the use of young consumer psychological factors.

## Conformity and Belongingness

The first variable in this multivariable equation to be analyzed is the influence of humans' intrinsic desire to belong in a group in terms of their consumer behavior. During hunter-gatherer periods and in the first human civilizations, the vast majority of humans were followers. Evolutionarily, mammals' tendency to stick with herds led to their success. For many mammals such as wolves, the benefits of living in groups or packs include: conserving body heat, protection from predators with strength in numbers, hunting larger prey, and caring for the youth (Harding, 2022). According to an article by the Australian Museum, humans are mammals, more specifically primates, because all mammals have fur/hair on their skin, female mammary glands producing milk for the offspring, three bones in the middle ear to transfer sound, and two bones on the ends of the lower jaw (Blaxland, 2020). From an evolutionary perspective, humans, as social mammals, desire the same protective advantages that come with forming groups and staying in a pack of other humans. The psychological need for belongingness proposed by Abraham Maslow after physiological and safety needs comes from millions of years of adaptation.

Before the internet became integral to our society, Venkatesan's (1966) research experiment examines the influence and difference between conformity and independence through different phrasing of simple questions. The study provided two hypotheses:

- In the consumer decision-making situation where no objective standards are present, individuals who are exposed to a group norm will tend to conform to that group norm.
- In the consumer decision-making situation where no objective standards are present, individuals who are exposed to a group norm, and are induced to comply, will show less tendency to conform to the group judgment (p. 385).

The controlled laboratory experiment created an artificial simulation close to an actual transactional situation in which 144 male college juniors and seniors from the School of Business Administration at the University of Minnesota had to evaluate and purchase the ideal suit between three identical suits labeled A, B, and C. However, these suits all consisted of the same color, size, and style with no other identification present, symmetrically placed apart. The subjects were told that the suits were from different manufacturers, of different quality, and that a previous study conducted at the Center for Experimental Studies in the Business study concluded that subjects with experience in the clothing industry were able to choose the best one. They were told that the purpose of this study was to find out if consumers could do the same. However, the actual purpose was to test the reactions of subjects through three conditions with 48 subjects each (Venkatesan, 1966). The independent variable served as the unquantifiable, relative amount of group pressure:

- A "Control Condition" in which each subject individually and discretely provided their choice.
- A "Conformity Condition" in which three confederates of the study choose the same suit(B), testing to see if the subject answering at the very end would do the same.
- A "Reactance Condition" in which each confederate chose the same suit(B) but vocally confessed to following the first person who chose suit B. This is to test the conscious choice of conforming versus

standing apart, whereas the “Conformity Condition” tested the subconscious choice of conforming without being prompted to comply (p. 386).

The following conversation between confederates of the study added to the group pressure and served as the induction for compliance among the subject in the third condition:

- Confederate 1: I am not sure if there is a difference—it is not great; but if I have to choose, then B is the best suit.
- Confederate 2: (looking at Confederate 1) You say B.... Well, I cannot see any difference either—I will “go along with you”—B is the suit for me.
- Confederate 3: Well, you guys chose B. Although I am not sure, I am just going along to be a good guy. I choose B too (p. 386).

The table of the results of the study is shown below:

**Table 1.** Suit Purchase Choice Distribution (Venkatesan, 1966, p. 386)

	A	B	C
Control Condition	17	10	20
Conformity Condition	11	22	9
Reactance condition	14	14	19

Table 1 shows the three different experiments and their results. The results of the control experiment with only first-time participants indicate that most participants tend to choose either A or C, likely due to the serial positioning effect, which states that humans tend to remember the first and last parts of a list better than the middle (Murdock, 1962). However, the numbers are in favor of suit B, as expected, because of the exposure to a conformity condition introduced. This is important because B was chosen significantly less in the control condition, while B was selected increasingly more in the conformity condition. The Reactance experiment confirms the second hypothesis as participants’ awareness of the conformity condition made them more likely to resist the choice.

Lascu and Zinkham (1999) explain how different influences, both external and intrinsic, influence consumer conformity best explains the phenomenon in the study above. They assert that a combination of the situation, personal, brand, and group characteristics influence the extent to which consumers conform and that the influence of this conformity can be either normative or informational influence. The American Psychology Association (APA) references Meyers (2009) to define conformity as “a change in behavior or belief as the result of real or imagined group pressure.” He also defines normative influence as a type of conformity in which one’s actions are caused by an internal desire for group acceptance and expectation fulfillment, while informational influence encompasses accepting a group idea, belief, or general knowledge as reality (Bergen et al., 2012). Lascu and Zinkham (1999) take it one step further by dividing normative influence into compliance and identification while associating informational influence with internalization. Individuals choose to comply by accepting the influence, whether expecting a reward or avoiding a punishment, which theory follows the basic principles of motivation. However, this behavior is only enforced when observed, ensuring that the behavior leads to reinforcement (Kelman, 1961). In the case of the study, there were no forms of reinforcement or punishment, so compliance can be taken out of the equation. On the other hand, identification is when one conforms to establish or improve a relationship with a group that provides referent power (Kelman, 1961). In terms of

consumer spending, an individual might buy the latest shoe from Nike to show their friends, expecting praise from friends and a strengthened relationship. Kelman (1961) explains what he defines as internalization: when one accepts informational influence due to the similar values shared between the group and individual. For example, a brand that specializes in sports might bring one's favorite baseball player for a commercial who idealizes the brand. Fans of the baseball team or player may adopt a similar interest in the brand due to their shared value of baseball and idealization of the player.

There are several explanations as to why the participants conformed in the previous study. Because the suits were indeed the same, the indecisive and unsure participants likely succumbed to peer pressure of choosing a suit, doubting their ability because every other "participant" chose the same suit. Informational influence may have had a more successful effect because participants could not be sure as to which was the better suit with all of them so similar. Brand choice is similar, especially with the vast amount of options presented on social media and the internet. Marketers can use human indecisiveness to their advantage by providing plenty of product options. Milgram's (1963) study on authoritative conformity and obedience discovers how humans who feel inferior, whether socially or intellectually, tend to become obedient to authoritative influence. The study has a researcher commanding participants to trigger an electric shock to a person in a different room, and although the shock is fake, they can hear fake signs of pain, yet they tend to continue the triggers through discomfort (Stangor, 2022). The conformity study has participants develop doubt in their knowledge by having three initial "participants" say the same answer, thereby increasing conforming pressures. The Milgram study expands upon the idea of the "foot-in-the-door" phenomenon, when a minor request leads to a greater chance of compliance with a larger request according to the APA. In consumer decision-making, a simple click to a website might increase the chance of a purchase, as an initial step has been made to complete the larger request. Because humans tend to choose the simplest route, the simpler a marketing campaign, the higher chance of success it holds. However, the study also shows how one's independence and resistance strengthen when they are aware of the conformity, and how the phrasing of the previous stimulus changes the results. Thus, marketers must be careful as to how they approach the conforming stimulus, whether to use subtle or obvious cues. A young consumer's need for belonging strengthens the tendency to conform.

Batat (2010) explores qualitative, in-depth interviews, both observing and interacting with 10 boys and 10 girls between the ages of 11 and 15, to understand young consumer vulnerability. The study's objective was to explore how teenage vulnerability and a perceived self-incompetence due to low consumption experience leads to a lack of self-confidence that allows for external forces to exert their influence on decision-making. The researchers asked about a specific consumer experience, leisure activities, and general shopping habits, expanding on the emotions and pressures developed along the way. They found that school and peer pressures when developing a sense of identity caused a lack of self-confidence that can allow one to feel pressured to buy an item by a salesperson. More specifically, the group in the study felt pressured by societal standards to own certain products to define themselves as above a certain standard set by those around them. The pressure became even greater as their fear of becoming marginalized by their associated groups became prominent, with different social factors and cultural norms to be considered (Batat, 2010). Not only are material possessions a coping mechanism for low self-esteem and insecurity, but Batat (2010) also references Chaplin and Roeder-John (2005), who found an inverse relationship between self-esteem levels in adolescents and value for material goods, low self-esteem creating a higher perceived value. Suffering from low self-esteem, young consumers who impulse shop might rely on material goods to increase their perceived value by peers, a common misconception among teenagers and young adults. Not only are young consumers pressured by their surroundings, but also, their internal need for a unique identity influences their decision-making as well.

## **Identity Expression and Formation**

The second variable to be analyzed is the influence of identity expression and formation in purchasing decisions. Kim and Aimee (2003) theorize that “consumers will tend to choose a brand that they consider congruent with their self-image” (p. 104), thereby attempting to reflect personal identity by choosing a certain brand. However, among others in a social group, choices portraying each of their identities tend to become similar, founding a new social identity more in line with others that one associates with (Kim & Aimee, 2003). This is because the assumption is that people factor possessions and behavior into first impressions and infer past what they know about a person due to significant material goods (clothing, jewelry, electronics, cars, etc.), symbolizing a certain identity and status through brand possession (Han et al., 2010). Aanand and Shacar (2004) value brands that are easily recognizable and display several associations, a goal for many businesses for which they set aside resources to reach. The brand choice might not express identity, but it may reaffirm the desired identity, both what one wants for themselves and what others want for them (Munteanu & Andreea, 2014). Luxury brands such as Hugo Boss and Rolex might be desirable to someone who desires a luxurious lifestyle or someone who already identifies with an upper-class status, while sports brands such as Nike or Adidas might appeal to athletes or those who have surrounded themselves with athletes as their peer group. There are several reasons for choosing a brand, and the following study looks deeper into both personal identity, social identity, and desired lifestyle, comparing these variables and their influence on brand selection.

Munteanu and Andreea (2014) take 108 undergraduate students and randomly assign them to 2 groups. These participants were presented with three categories, four brands each: sportswear (Adidas, Nike, Puma, Lotto), deodorant (Rexona, Nivea, Fa, Dove), and fast food (McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, Subway). They distributed a total of 100 points to each category based on its relevance in each of the variables tested (see below). The study was conducted twice: the first to associate a brand with an expression of identity and the second to evaluate the brand's association with the desired lifestyle. In the first round, Group 1 had to choose brands relevant to themselves and their self-image while Group 2 chose brands relevant to their friends. The researchers expected “that respondents’ need for self-expression is weakened and respondents’ need to strive for specific lifestyle traits is strengthened due to convergent effects of social identity theory.” Meanwhile, the second experiment tests if brand selection “can act as a compliance stimulus for the desired lifestyle” (Munteanu & Andreea, 2014, p. 105). To do so, the same experiment was conducted, but rather than portraying identity, participants were asked to select the brand that best depicted the desired lifestyle. The following table summarizes the study's results in terms of the mean rating in the first study (identity), the second study (lifestyle), and is categorized into personal and friend references:

**Table 2.** Mean Ratings of Brand Relevancy in Expressing. Identity and Lifestyle (Munteanu & Andreea, 2014, p. 106)

Brand	Identity Self-reference	Identity Friend-reference	Lifestyle Self-reference	Lifestyle Friend-reference
Rexona	20.5	19.7	20.5	22.3
Nivea	18.2	18.4	16.6	16.7
Dove	41.1	36.9	38.9	41
Fa	20.2	25	24	20.1
Adidas	32	29.9	37.9	39.3
Lotto	19.2	20.3	12	11.1
Nike	36.5	34.5	34.6	35.7

Puma	12.3	15.3	14.5	13.9
McDonald's	23.7	27.8	12.3	10.1
Pizza Hut	21	21.1	33.2	30.9
Subway	29.6	27.5	40.3	44.5
KFC	25.7	23.6	14.2	14.5

Table 2 takes the averages of all the scores from each of the study's participants. The uneven allocation of the points in terms of brand relevance for expressing identity and desired lifestyle indicates that brands express identity differently for different people. Although the study does not include whether or not a brand choice is influenced by its ability to express identity during the purchasing process, it can be reasonably inferred that this is the case because of the nature of brands. Brands adopt a specific style that contributes to their uniqueness, confirming a consumer's uniqueness and self-concept through ownership and possession (Fournier, 1998). In the study, each individual has a different definition of relevance, so the scores underwent standardization. For the identity study, the most relevant perceived brand had the highest rating in the self-reference category (Dove = 41.1, Nike = 36.5, Subway = 29.6) over that of the friend-reference category (Dove = 36.9, Nike = 34.5, McDonald's = 27.8) for all three product categories, indicating that brand selection expresses one's identity, on average, higher than that of their friends' identities. For the lifestyle study, the most relevant perceived brand had the highest rating in the friend-reference category (Dove = 41, Adidas = 39.3, Subway = 44.5) over that of the self-reference category (Dove = 38.9, Adidas = 37.9, Subway = 40.3) for all three product categories, indicating that brand selection expresses one's desired lifestyle of those around them rather than their personal desired lifestyle (Munteanu & Andreea, 2014). Although the perceived brand relevance for the desired lifestyle is greater in the friend category than it is in the personal category, participants choosing the same brand for the desired lifestyle as they believed their friends to choose indicates that their social identity contributes to personal choices. The information indicates that brand selection can be used to express personal identity or a shared desired lifestyle. However, in what cases is brand selection more geared to personal or social identity? Those satisfied with their identity may select brands to showcase their identity to others, whereas those still searching for identity may select brands that they perceive to be a part of an identity they would like to adopt. This concept goes back to Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychological Development, in which adolescents strive to find their identity. Batat (2010) finds that as adolescents age, their self-uncertainty increases, finding the need to belong and develop a unique identity to be more important. Therefore, "conformity to peer pressure is considered to be one of the hallmarks of adolescents who are struggling to build their own identity and determine their social role within their peer groups." Identity formation and peer influence go hand in hand, as the farther one is from realizing their identity and accepting themselves, the easier they can be influenced by others. Therefore, brand selection may represent personal identity for older generations who don't struggle with identity formation, but for those continuing to develop their identity during adolescence and young adulthood, brand selection likely represents a desired lifestyle or the desired identity. The APA acknowledges Swann et al.'s (2009) categorization of a personal and social identity fused with a group, becoming "functionally equivalent" as a "fusion of identity" (Bergen et al., 2012). Because consumers can use brands to express identity, they can also develop an identity that they previously desired through brand choice.

As new brands develop to bring customization and choice to consumers, companies have been changing their business strategy to incorporate new ways in which their products can be used to express identity or a desired lifestyle for attracting diverse and unique consumers. The Internet, social media, and peer-to-peer communication allow consumers to develop a shared social identity with those of common interests, furthering the

need for self and social expression through brand choice (Chernev et al., 2011). Social media marketing algorithms further customize personal choices and interests, exposing consumers to several brands that meet their criteria. Keller (2007) defines brands as a marketing measure in which companies differentiate themselves and create an identity separate from other entities to provide value to consumers. Fournier (1998) emphasizes that beyond the attributes of a product or service, marketing can be used to form associations that increase brand value. For example, Gucci, a luxury brand, maintains high consumer demand by outlining trendy, fashionable products marketed by trendy, fashionable celebrities and models. The previous study establishes that consumers can use brands as a means of expressing their own identity, a social identity, and the desired lifestyle, but when it comes to marketing application, Chernev et al (2011) takes into account different ways in which identity expression can be satiated apart from consumer brand decision making. The study argues that a need for self-expression has its limits, often quenched by other means of self-expression without having to give up resources (money).

Experiment 1 of the study hypothesizes that the need to express identity through brands decreases as consumers become aware of other forms of identity expression unrelated to consumer behavior. One-hundred and two respondents randomly assigned to two groups had to either come up with eight relevant brands for themselves or their parents, comparing high and low self-expressive brands, respectively. Similar to the previous study, they then had to allocate 100 points to five product categories with five brands each in terms of personal relevance. A pre-experiment had participants draw a physical representation of themselves before and after reviewing their eight brands relevant for expressing identity. They found that those who reviewed high self-expressive brands drew a smaller physical representation of themselves and those who reviewed low self-expressive brands drew a larger physical representation of themselves. Through point allocation, those who reviewed high self-expressive brands had a more even distribution of brand relevance for the ensuing brand choices than those who reviewed low self-expressive brands (whose distribution was largely uneven). Therefore, both studies conclude that self-expressive brands are followed by a lower need to express identity through brand choice. Experiment 3 extends these findings to simply reviewing and evaluating self-expressive products rather than brands as a whole. The concept of identity saturation extends from the study's argument that consumer brand choice to express identity is limited and declining (Chernev et al. 2011).

The study deviates from consumer self-expression to alternate forms of expressing identity that substitute a brand's ability to influence identity in the way that producers desire. Experiment 2 studies personal interests that convey identity unrelated to consumer spending, such as favorite books, hobbies, sports, etc., and their influence on perceived brand relevance for self-expression. They measure marginal (highest - lowest) and absolute (highest) brand rating per category. The study finds that these two numbers are significantly lower for participants in the test group than in the control group (the group that did not name their favorite things), indicating that other forms of identity expression cause consumers to care significantly less about a particular brands' ability to express their own identity. Experiment 4 expands on these findings by manipulating participants' need for self-expression to test whether it influences brand preference. Experiment 4 asks a group of subjects about their favorites and interests, and tells some subjects that they are unique while telling others that they share similarities with the rest. The study finds that those who had their unique identity threatened had a higher range of brand preferences encompassing personal relevance, similarity, and willingness to pay. The experiment concludes that those with a need to express identity due to a disregard for their uniqueness will unevenly allocate their points to brand relevance in expressing identity, thereby validating the argument that particular brands can be used to express particular personal identities. The study as a whole encourages a relook at the business strategy of brands and companies today that center products around personal customization to allow consumers to express personal identity due to their findings that brands as a form of self-expression are limited, declining, and rely on other forms of expressing identity for its success (Chernev et al. 2011).

The researchers state that further research must be conducted to study the time of this "identity saturation" (Chernev et al., 2011, p. 80). If identity saturation lasts a limited amount of time, in this case, measured



by the time in between experimental procedures, brands shouldn't worry about identity saturation. This is because most products or services are either a one-time purchase or recurrently purchased due to simplicity. Customer acquisition requires more resources than customer retention, so brands should focus their energy on providing consumers with an outlet for self-expression because identity saturation itself is limited to the parameters of the study. For example, if the first experiment allocated two hours in between the brand expression and point allocation exercises, the conclusion of identity saturation is only proven to be significant for that period of two hours. However, most purchases do not happen within two hours, or within the same week, month, or even year in some cases. To prove that identity saturation has significant effects on consumer behavior in more realistic periods requires a longitudinal study. Additionally, Munteanu and Andreea's (2014) study has participants undergo a creative writing task that supposedly negates the effects of identity saturation. This process is supported by Experiment 4 in which a need for self-expression through brand choice is reinvigorated among subjects that felt their unique identity threatened. Thus, the conclusions from the first study surpass the limitations of the second study that encourage marketers and brands to refocus on unite attributes. As long as the concept of identity saturation is confined to the barriers of the experiment, brands should continue to create options that allow consumers to express their identity through possession. In the real world, other forms of self-expression occur daily, strengthening individual identity but reinforcing the limitations of self-expressive qualities addressed in the second study. On the other hand, societal pressures threaten people's unique identity by setting a standard that all are expected to reach. Societal pressures that threaten one's identity tends to increase the need to express identity through brand possession, congruent with Experiment 4's findings. Although identity expression through brands may be limited and decline for short durations of time, in the long run, their influence on consumer decision-making can be a valuable tool to maximize consumer traffic. Social media marketing campaigns incorporate these two psychological factors on a mass scale, some manipulative while others are sincere.

## **Connecting the Variables: Social Media + Psychology**

How does technology enhance young consumers' internal psychology and external influences on their behavior? The second question explores two unique forms of marketing that rely on psychology for their success: word-of-mouth marketing and celebrity marketing, two extremes in the marketing industry, one emphasizing realism and the other relying on deception and emotion.

### **Word of Mouth Marketing**

Word of Mouth Marketing is one of the best forms of marketing that taps into the peer influence side of marketing examined in this study. To understand word-of-mouth marketing and the different ways it is used, a naturalistic study examines a blog campaign and summarizes it into qualitative data (Kozinets et al., 2010). Blogs are becoming popular networks for these campaigns. Kutchera (2008) finds that the US blog advertising industry is valued at \$283 million in 2007, with half of the people on the Internet reading blogs regularly. A 2006 survey in Europe finds that people view blogs as second to newspapers for relevant information and trusted sources (Brown et al., 2007, p. 16).

In the examination, Buzzablog was hired by Mobitech to instill a marketing campaign for a mobile phone with camera-equipped technology, requiring all campaign bloggers to have a visitor traffic count of at least 400. The campaign resided in two cities with roughly seven million in population. Eighty four percent of the bloggers mentioned the phones at least once during the campaign. The director was pleased with the overall success of the turnover rate of influencer cooperation, their positivity towards the product, and their influence in increasing product sales (Kozinets et al., 2010). The study conducted an online ethnography, an approach to investigating people's interactions in this (blogging) online community (Kozinets, 2002). They not only observed the blog threads, but also, conversed with the Buzzablog campaigners, where they "met to discuss and

analyze ongoing individual participation in online communities, as well as readership of, participation in, and (in one case) authorship of blogs'' (Kozinets et al, 2010, p. 73). The following statistics represent their findings: 83/90 bloggers participated, 22-45 years old, 59% male, occupations including photography, design, writing, programming, consulting, and administrative positions. The researchers take a look at posts 3 months before and after the official campaign, sifting through 6722 total postings to find 220 posts and 700 comments relevant to the campaign. Analyzers organized all 1.376 million words into three categories: before, during, and after the campaign, which were analyzed and compared to find trends (Kozinets et al., 2010). The study is reliable as it identifies disconfirming cases, conducts multiple rounds of analysis with the large data set, and alters its theories through each analysis. However, the findings are limited in that it only takes a look at one campaign. Nevertheless, one well-conducted campaign should be enough to examine the different ways word-of-mouth marketing is used.

Word of mouth marketing seems like any ordinary promotional marketing that has others promoting products, but the informality of the marketing in blog and conversational settings makes it more culturally intertwined and relevant to the recipients. Some forms of social media marketing, although effective, lose their influence the more concentrated and ingenuine they become, but the informality and genuineness of word-of-mouth marketing proves useful. The study asserts that the success of word-of-mouth marketing by blog influencers relies on their ability to integrate the product into their narrative and express relationships with the campaign in different ways. The study analyzes how the different elements of the campaign, character narrative communication forum, communal norms, and marketing promotion features, influence each other to provide different promotional messages (Kozinets et al., 2010). There are four different forms of expressing one's relationship with the campaign, exemplified with a representative sample per section in the study. After several rounds of analysis, the study categorized most blog campaigns based on the transparency of the campaign.

The first representative case, Frank, is a man who moved to one of the cities seeking to fit in through online blogging and making connections through this forum. Now that he has a decent following and a good amount of connections, he takes an approach to the WOMM by explicitly stating how Buzzablog reached out to him with a free MobiTech phone, using humor, irony, and honesty to talk about the phone. He connects with his audience by acknowledging the two sides of this marketing, that although he is technically being bribed, he is only one of many in the blogger community. He approaches the campaign honestly, especially when it comes to the phone's capabilities, comparing its utility with other phones. Frank says, " I like being someone who can be a part of reviewing a product and actually do it with some honesty... [I]t's not the absolutely, greatest phone that beats out anything else out there that you could buy. It's also far from being the worst." For those who adopt an explanation narrative, they typically blatantly reveal the efforts of a campaign and their association with it. Blatantly expressing their tactics and adopting a "fitting into the community" narrative seems to be a common trend, and surprisingly it led to positive rather than negative comments on those posts (Kozinets et al., 2010, pp. 74-77).

Alicia, a mother of two and a stay-at-home writer, portrays an honest, humble, sincere personality through her blog narrative. Alicia treats the word-of-mouth marketing campaign as an endorsement rather than an honest review. She speaks highly of the phone, making it seem ingenuine. Although she tries to promote herself as a genuine individual, her approach to the campaign elicits negative responses and accuses her of taking the bribe and promoting the product. She speaks positively about the campaign and encourages others to participate (Kozinets et al., 2010, pp. 77-79), which also dilutes the impact of her words. Therefore, by simply evaluating a product in a way that destroys the honest relationship with her followers, she diminishes her influence in their consumer decision-making to buy the Mobitech phone.

Carrie, a young woman showcasing her daily life, goals, and youth through her blog, embraces a narcissistic and toxic attitude to entertain her readers. Because of her self-centered, judgmental personality, she receives polarized public opinion, those that idealize her lifestyle, and those that criticize her intentions. Carrie does not disclose much information about the campaign, but rather explains her conflict between being used by

the campaign and her excitement over the phone. Her promotional blogs seem to elicit negative comments because her narrative regards her personal life and the blogs deviate from her narrative (Kozinets et al., 2010, pp. 79-81). With her narrative, a more beneficial campaign model might have been to subtly include the phone throughout blog posts centered around other topics, and briefly explain how the campaign contributes to her wild activities.

Judith, a woman struggling with medical conditions to make a living, relies on the sympathetic and heartfelt support of her readers. She regularly takes part in endorsements, but her readers accept them because of Judith's narrative of survival through struggle. She proposes the marketing campaign as a relief to issues of her website being hacked and emphasizes the professional relationship as well as specifics of the phone, eliciting positive responses and support for her as a survivor (Kozinets et al., 2010, pp. 81-82).

The key factors influencing the impact of the word-of-mouth marketing campaign are its proper placement among one's marketing narrative and its ability to reach the intended audience. Marketing narrative simply refers to how every influencer incorporates the campaign into their blogs, whether upfront or discrete about it, and how the campaign influences their blogging channels, whether it be incorporated into their personal life or what their blog focuses on. Each blogger has a story to share and visitors attach themselves to the personal story, creating a connection that transcends a buyer-seller relationship. Other forms of social media marketing procedures that don't capitalize on one's narrative fail to incorporate an appeal to pathos, but this form of marketing becomes more influential when campaigns rely on influential bloggers with a preexisting connection with their audience.

Several marketers rely on logos to do the trick, simply providing information on the product. Al-Dhuhli et al.'s, (2015) study conducted in the College of Economics and Political Science of Sultan Qaboos University finds that successful marketing consists of abundant information on the product being provided, an aesthetically appealing design, and the appeal to the psychology and culture of consumers. The study consisted of interviews and questionnaires among the Omani population.

After reviewing the data, 61% of participants generally rely on the quantity of information about the product when making a purchasing decision, while 17% of online insiders desired trust, with only 10% influenced by friends and relatives' reviews and feedback of experiences with the product and purchasing website (Al-Dhuhli et al., 2015). Thus, the study emphasizes that information and trust, rather than peer influence, are larger deciding factors when purchasing an item. These are surprising results considering Eastern cultures tend to emphasize community over the Western individualist culture. However, according to the International Trade Administration, "Oman does not have a data protection law with detailed guidelines on the obligations of organizations that collect personal data from the public," and according to the 2021 Modor Intelligence study, "the most common barrier to online shopping in Oman was related to discomfort with making online payments" (Oman - Country Commercial Guide, 2021). These new findings are congruent with previous ones because, in the eCommerce world, the Omani population is not guaranteed safety. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, safety needs must be fulfilled before the need for belonging, explaining why the Omani participants relied on information and trust over the recommendation and feedback of their friends and relatives. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission extends its protection to online consumers from trust issues with social media marketing and prevents scamming, including the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, the CAN-SPAM Act, the Consumer Review Fairness Act, and provides guidance to companies as to how to safely reach consumers (Online Advertising and Marketing, 2022). In the United States, online security and reliable purchasing are less of an issue than it is in other countries because of these protective laws, so the next need to be satisfied in the eCommerce space is one of belonging and esteem. In the first study, the results seem to be effective when each narrative is taken advantage of, whether a mom, public figure, community helper, or professional. The forum in which the campaign is placed is equally important to reach a target audience rather than a holistic one. A blog forum refers to its topic of discussion, whether centered around sports, technology, or entertainment. Forums outside of social media may include dinner parties in which peer feedback on a product

may influence others to make a purchase. Going back to the importance of trust, the uniqueness of word-of-mouth marketing stems from its reliance on the trust built between peers and influencers to be successful. Community norms may also affect the expression, transmission, and interpretation of a word of marketing messages, such as population size, demographic, interests, and even age. Finally, promotional and product characteristics such as brand equity, cost, and conversational elements (humor, irony) influence the message of the marketing campaign. According to the study, “character type, blog forum, and communal norms affect the narratives and influence the audience attracted to the blog and members' response to its content” (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 74).

Word of mouth marketing is a prime example of social media as an outlet of psychological influence on consumer behavior. This form of marketing requires a pre-existing connection between the marketers and recipients, whether influential or as peers. The growth and success of this form of marketing are attributed to its genuine nature. Celebrity endorsements and advertisements fall on the other side of the spectrum, where the marketing campaign uses strict procedures, often feeling robotic and insincere. However, this form of marketing has proven itself through historical success with athletes, public figures, and artist celebrities increasing revenues for respective companies.

## Celebrity Marketing

Unlike word-of-mouth marketing, celebrity endorsements and marketing rely on deception and adherence to authority and influential figures. The conformity section establishes a connection between one's lack of knowledge of a particular product selection and its implications on increasing authoritative influence involving purchasing decisions. Celebrities or public figures often market a product for purely financial reasons, hiding this aspect of the campaign deal from the marketed audience. Celebrity marketing creates associations between the desired lifestyle (celebrity/public figure lifestyle) and a particular brand. However, celebrity marketing is typically not as transparent as word-of-mouth marketing, and the connection between an audience and celebrity is fan-based rather than peer-based. Despite its seemingly deceptive nature, celebrity endorsements work well for marketers because of their ability to tap into the emotions of an audience. Fans seeing their favorite singer or a political authority respect the association with a brand, chasing after the brand to portray the desired lifestyle. A study on influencer marketing by Tomoson (2015) finds that companies make a 650% return on investment marketing through influencers, one of the most cost-efficient ways to acquire customers (Zhang & Wei, 2021). Not only does influencer marketing increase customer traffic, but Zhang and Wei (2021) reference Olenki (2016) when they bring up that “on average, businesses see an increase of 4% in stock price and sales after they announce signing a celebrity endorser.” Celebrity marketing has expanded to social media influencers, otherwise known as micro-celebrities (Zhang et al., 2019).

Celebrity endorsements have been shown to direct the attention of consumers on a large scale, as well as influence their attitudes to view the product more positively for purchasing decisions when compared with endorsements from influencers not considered celebrities (Utami et al., 2020). Celebrities retain influence over others due to their attractive features, whether famous, politically powerful, athletic, fashionable, or trendy. Furthermore, those who long for power elicit a more positive response to promotional influencers with higher social status (Newton et al., 2015). People chase what they desire, and when they see someone with it, they will act more favorably toward that person. Therefore, when people see celebrities endorsing a product, they associate the celebrity with the product, increasing both trust and desire to obtain it. Social media influencers retain some of the same values, although on a lesser scale. Social media influencers, on the other hand, “serve as the communication hub that alerts their peers to what matters among consumer choices (Zhang et al., 2019), which makes them an effective tool for businesses to communicate with shoppers” (Zhang & Wei, 2021). Social media influencers are similar to the word-of-mouth marketing bloggers discussed above, but are typically less conversational and relatable.

Successful celebrity endorsements must balance the level of exposure that they provide to the marketed product. Too subtle exposure will not provide effective results, while too much exposure breaks the perceived bond between a celebrity and the endorsed product. Other limitations include the consumer audience disinterested in the fundamental marketing campaign concept, and if the celebrity is exposed to scandals, crimes, or any negative societal impact. Traditional celebrity endorsements may not prove a sufficient platform for strengthening the bond between the marketed entity and consumers. However, social media influencers may not have the experience or platform growth large enough to convey a meaningful message through a product endorsement (Zhang & Wei, 2021). Certain issues are among celebrity and social media influencers, and comparing endorsements to word-of-mouth marketing is essential to understand how marketers can maximize influence.

Word of mouth marketing and celebrity marketing are at two opposite ends in the marketing world in terms of building a connection and promoting transparency with an intended audience. Social media marketing contains some qualities of both. However, no matter where in the spectrum, each element relies on the psychology of its audience for success. Peer influence causes a desire to fit in, thus pushing consumers to buy a product. These peer influencers may be strengthened in younger consumers due to their desire to fit in and find their place in society. Authoritative and celebrity influence prey upon a desired lifestyle that may seem perfect on the outside. The brain takes shortcuts, called heuristics, and similar to these heuristics are our tendency to see patterns where they don't exist. Humans make fallacies in their logic that drive them to associate or trust a brand due to celebrity influence or to associate the trust they have with a particular blogger to a campaign. Social media and the technology expand the influence to anyone with access to the Internet, and the false realities perceived by many young adults on social media contribute to celebrity influence, especially during marketing campaigns and endorsements. Social media and the Internet also expand the desired lifestyle to what is perceived online, through photoshop, editing, and posting specific events that only showcase the best in people, concealing the worst. Nevertheless, certain aspects of social media and young consumers' psychological needs must be used by marketers.

## Marketing Applications

Influential celebrities and public figures are necessary components to marketing campaigns for young consumers' psychological needs to significantly benefit corporate success. However, the nature of current endorsement marketing does not utilize the bond between influential figures and consumers to increase customer acquisition rates. Creating meaningful, representative marketing campaigns will touch upon greater audiences and diminishes the societal standard set by the modeling and advertising industry. The insincere aspect of most marketing campaigns today leads young consumers to condition themselves to automatically skip and disregard them on social media. Realistic marketing with both positive and negative reviews of a product can decrease young consumer vulnerability and allow them to connect with a brand that does not attempt to capitalize on their internal struggles. Celebrities will be free to develop meaningful insights for consumers through the same freedom provided in word-of-mouth marketing campaigns. This form of marketing relies on trust for its success, a powerful tool for young consumers challenged by societal pressures. Trustworthy information will become more beneficial for customer acquisition than superficial agreements to scripted brand marketing terms. Celebrities of different backgrounds should connect with specific audiences allowing for a more meaningful marketing message. Similar to the struggles faced by the word-of-mouth marketing campaign, a celebrity's narrative and connection to society must be incorporated into the marketing campaign. For example, celebrities who convey a luxurious, trendy image must incorporate these aspects in their marketing campaign, while professional athletes must incorporate hard work, persistence, and success throughout their marketing campaign, comparing these qualities to a product to create a meaningful message for an intended audience. By incorporating

passive voice elements of word-of-mouth marketing into traditional endorsement marketing, campaigns can get the best of both worlds.

Brands should consider identity expression as expressed in the sections above. The most efficient way to provide outlets for unique identity expression is through personal customization expressed in commercials and social media. Promoting a brand or product's ability to express personal identity should be done through diverse and inclusive marketing campaigns targeting specific audiences. Campaign teams should focus on efficiently utilizing social media algorithms to do so. Social media marketing campaigns that post diverse and meaningful content and reach specific audiences can improve perceived brand self-expressive qualities. The introduction of social media as a tool for marketing contributes to the necessity for future research in data analytics that properly places marketing campaigns among different consumers of a unique demographic, geographic, and interests that can achieve high consumer acquisition and efficient use of marketing resources.

Marketing teams must also emphasize building trends around their products that boost young consumer traffic. TikTok, one of the most popular social media applications among young consumers today, utilizes clever hashtags and creates trends that indirectly promote products. Additionally, incorporating trends into campaigns and applying those messages to the possession of an intended product creates a meaningful message among young consumers who have a connection with the trend. Trends rely on young consumers' psychological need to belong and conform to group pressures because they subconsciously create an association of a certain trend to be popular, and associating that popular trend with a product boosts the social status of said product in the minds of the youth. Clever, short messages through marketing campaigns have also appealed to consumers because of the simplistic nature that comes with these campaigns. For example, Nike's "Just Do It" campaign increased its share of the domestic sports shoe sector from 18% to 43% as well as \$877 million to \$9.2 billion in worldwide sales from 1988 to 1998 (Bruins, 2010). As per the findings of the conformity study, young consumers must be exposed to a group norm, in this case, a trend created by a marketing campaign, without an induction to comply with the norm which would decrease its customer acquisition rates and push young consumers from following the trend. Campaigns must be careful in their phrasing to not explicitly provide details of their product in the trend itself, but rather incorporate irony, sarcasm, and other humorous components that make up the trends that have taken over social media today. This stage of the campaign, according to Andzulis' (2012) four stages in which social media marketing drives sales, falls under the first two stages in which general presence of a brand is established and consumer awareness grows. Corporations can build an efficient customer acquisition system by incorporating two fundamental psychological factors state which two that influence young consumer decision-making and by using social media to expand marketing influence on the masses.

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