Identity in Consumerism: Exploring the Influence of Media, Brand Perception, and Group Identity on Economic Decision-Making

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Abstract

Modern society is full of consumer products, with suppliers pushing them to be sold and social engineering designed to push purchasing decisions in a certain direction. Whether consciously or unconsciously, tools like persuasive media, branding, and party divisiveness all affect human economic decisions. This paper analyzes the different ways that prevalent marketing techniques of the modern world impact consumerism.

By looking at case studies of identity-based marketing techniques in multiple contexts, this paper will investigate the sociological domain of how these strategies influence thinking. Connecting those insights will allow for a closer look into how economic decision-making trends are shaped.

Introduction

As the digital age allows for more complex marketing strategies, consumerism has been on the rise. Not only does it produce tons of waste, but it has also had extensive impacts on personal finances. People in modern society spend a lot of time utilizing technology and consuming media. A substantial portion of the media consumed often consists of advertisements, leading to a continual rise in purchasing. With the ease of new purchases quite literally at the fingertips, it is also more convenient than ever before. The dopamine hits received from both checking social media and purchasing new products are carefully orchestrated. Dominant technology companies have designed algorithms to target the exact receptors of the human brain that keep users engaged and consistently returning. Different brands use strategies to make shoppers feel left out unless they buy specific products. Constructed of digital media and pervasive advertisement, the modern world is a well-designed puzzle of psychological, sociological, and economic intricacies designed to influence consumer behavior through social engineering and identity-based marketing.

Social media allows people to curate a seemingly perfect life and consume highlight reels of everyone else's life, too. A huge part of human identity is expression, and social media allows us to do that on a newfound scale. By allowing people to carefully manipulate and select what parts of their lives they show to others, social media creates a hyper-focus on self-identity. This emphasis on identity means that people will go to new lengths to preserve the way they believe others see them, leading to trend-following consumer behaviors. To fit a certain identity, one must do the same things that the role model versions of that identity are promoting on social media.

Methods

Review: Brand Identity

These platforms also see users as products; therefore, they will make their content as engaging as possible to maximize profit. When users stay online for longer, platforms make more money and users get exposed to more content. Seeing more content increases the chances of seeing something interesting. If one person finds it interesting because it resonates with their personal identity, algorithms will push it to even more people. This means that the identity shaped by

social media is then further perpetuated by the content that is continuously consumed. If this content happens to be selling a product, there is a high likelihood that the product will be purchased. This is particularly true if the product enhances the user's sense of identity. Under the herd mindset that is closely linked with social media, this means many others will also buy it.

One of Gen Z's consumer behaviors exhibits a clear indication of the role that identity plays: the importance of brand value. According to a 2021 Consumer Culture Report by 5WPR, "45% of Gen Z have boycotted a business, and 36% enjoy buying products that display their social and political beliefs." This shows that within Gen Z shoppers, the values the brand itself holds, rather than the products it is selling, can be the deciding factor in whether consumers purchase anything or not. If the buying decision is not about the quality of the product itself, it becomes about the identity of the shopper and how well it aligns with the identity of the brand.

One example of this value alignment can be seen through the outdoor apparel and equipment brand Patagonia. They focus much less on selling their products and much more on selling their message of sustainability and conservation. Their customers are propelled by this message and thus purchase Patagonia products because they view themselves as furthering Patagonia's cause. The particular message of environmental sustainability has also garnered heavy attention on social media in recent years. With the pressing issue of climate change, many people have taken to social media as a platform for activism. Patagonia is a leader not only in their industry of outdoor gear but also in sustainable production across all apparel industries.


Image 1. Patagonia's logo.

Patagonia provides an example of consumer utility that is driven both by identity and by quality. The loyalty of the customer base can be seen by the value alignment that the brand focuses on. They are known to be extremely transparent with their manufacturing process, truly committed to sustainability through action, and more. While the price point for many of their products is somewhat higher, they manage an incredibly strong customer base because of the values that they stand for. Patagonia's brand image is also one that focuses heavily on high-quality products that are meant to last. In their Worn Wear campaign, they emphasize the longevity of their products, showing the stories of customers explaining their favorite memories they have experienced in the Patagonia gear that they have owned for decades. This means that the utility of purchasing a Patagonia product is not only getting a high-quality and long-lasting product, but also purchasing something that aligns with an identity.

Image 2. The logo of Patagonia's Worn Wear campaign.

While Patagonia is a brand that demonstrates the link between consumer and brand values, one company that demonstrates the importance of self-identity and consumer behavior is Lululemon, a Canadian apparel brand. The company was founded in 1998, targeting what would become major trends: yoga for women and "athleisure" wear. Lululemon is widely considered one of the original creators of athleisure and is also known for its high-quality products. Its marketing is also heavily focused on selling a lifestyle: community-focused athleticism. With lasting products, a unique marketing strategy, and a stellar reputation, Lululemon has price-making power in the athleisure market. While their prices walk the line of "luxury" with leggings nearing $100, they continue to be one of the most popular and profitable brands in the industry. It is important to note that while Lululemon is prominent in the market, it is far from a monopoly. Consumers have dozens of other choices: from other name brands (Nike, Adidas, Aritzia) to "dupes" that boast near-matching quality to Lululemon at half the price. Yet how does Lululemon still manage to be so dominant with a relatively inelastic demand?
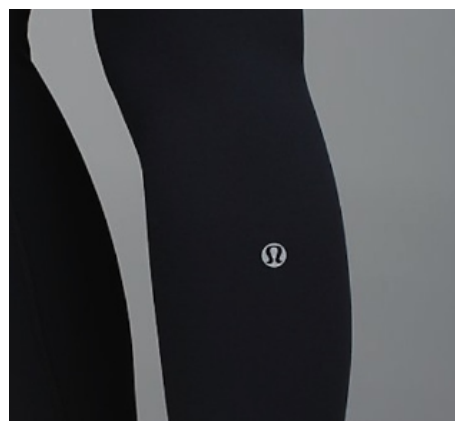
Image 3. Lululemon's logo.

Beyond just the products themselves, Lululemon has become a brand of status. Specifically with teenagers, the company has become a symbol of wealth. Even though consumers can buy similar quality products that are cheaper, the Lululemon logo shows that the person wearing the item has enough money to afford it. To fit the identity of a certain perception

of wealth, a consumer must buy the product of the name brand. The Lululemon identity is one of someone athletic and somewhat wealthy. This identity is also trending, particularly among teenage girls, which has led to the cult-like brand loyalty that Lululemon commands. The urge to fit in with this identity is further pushed through viral social media videos of trending teenage creators showing their Lululemon products.

While Lululemon's original target customer was an adult female with an interest in yoga, the age has slowly shifted down to high schoolers and now to middle schoolers. Developmental psychologists often cite middle school as one of the most developmentally important stages of a person's life when it comes to self-perception, and Lululemon products are a clear display of socioeconomic status. The shiny omega symbol that constitutes their logo creates an instantaneous and visible designation that the wearer of the product has a certain amount of money. Lululemon's rise to this status appears to mostly be driven by user-generated content. From major TikTok creators to now a whole rise of the "preppy" aesthetic featuring Lululemon products, the UGC that has taken over many "For You" pages has been instrumental in creating the customer base that the company maintains. This particular marketing path also means more appeal to consumers' identities; by seeing influencers on social media that have a certain desirable lifestyle, young children are more vulnerable to wanting the same products those influencers have.

Image 4. Example of the "preppy" aesthetic, featuring Lululemon products.

According to surveys done in a Wichita middle school, wearing products of certain status can prevent kids from being made fun of and getting turned into "outcasts." In middle school, classic "clique" groups frequent the school population, and being considered a "loner" can be isolating for young kids during a developmental time in their lives. With this kind of negative consequence on the line, creating an identity of higher socioeconomic status allows kids to

assimilate into the general crowd more and reduces the possibility of being considered a social pariah.

Chip Wilson was the original founder of Lululemon. While he has been removed from the brand for nearly a decade, he recently made statements about the direction of the company's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Wilson told Forbes that "they're trying to become like the Gap, everything to everybody," and that he thinks that "the definition of a brand is that you're not everything to everybody… You've got to be clear that you don't want certain customers coming in." These quotes created immediate backlash, to which the company responded that Wilson does not speak for the company and that his views do not stand for its values or beliefs. However, Wilson's point about creating a certain brand perception is something that can still be seen through much of Lululemon's customer base. The consumers of the company have created a distinct persona that appeals to a certain demographic of younger girls and teens who want to fit in with this standard. While Chip Wilson was not talking about this aspect of Lululemon, his conclusion that a brand must appeal to a certain target group can be seen through the identity that Lululemon products perpetuate.

Image 5. Lululemon's founder, Chip Wilson.

Social media exposes consumers to overwhelming amounts of different products per day. The speed by which new products can become trending is created through the amount of exposure social media can give, and this can create certain cliques of online identities. In order to fit the aesthetic that matches the perception of one's "identity," it is imperative that one purchase all the products of the aesthetic to be viewed as a part of that identity.

Review: The Power of Polarization

In many aspects of marketing, the goal is to create content with a certain audience in mind. Sometimes, however, the goal of marketing is to create the audience or identity itself. Through polarization, marketing can create an "us versus them" mentality that clearly defines who "us" is and who everyone else. This polarization allows brands to create a distinct group of their supporters, thus building brand loyalty. While this paper is mostly about consumer behaviors, in this section we will also look at the most extreme example of polarization: politics. By examining politics, we will discover how political groups use polarization to create loyalty and then use those thought processes to further explore how consumer brands use similar techniques.

Since the beginning of American history, political groups have been able to create polarization in campaigns to persuade people to support their causes. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson painted himself as the farmer who could empathize with the normal, working man to

separate himself from the trained professional he was running against: John Adams. In 2020, Donald Trump painted Joe Biden as an extremist who was "incompetent" and "cognitively impaired," whereas Biden painted Trump as a morally evil man who only caused chaos. The division between the two sides aims to either create isolation that can only be removed by joining one side or definitively dictate that the opposing side is morally wrong.

Image 6. Presidents Donald Trump (left) and Joe Biden (right).

To further explore the extremities of polarization, the two-party system, as the name suggests, creates an automatically clear division of two identities. Though political elections concern a vast multitude of issues, there is a clear side to take on major issues that are based merely on party. A Democrat is no longer a Democrat if they do not support abortion access, and a Republican is no longer a Republican if they believe in strengthening gun control laws. The two-party system separates each party into a clear identity: Democrats are progressive, change-loving people who support universal healthcare, gun control, abortion rights, and more, while Republicans are conservative, tradition-loving people who support a more capitalistic economic structure, limited immigration, the second amendment, and more. By having such clearly defined stances, parties can create more loyalty by painting a definitive "us versus them" line of battle when fighting for core issues.
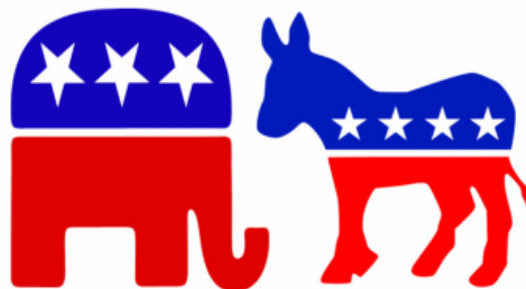
Image 7. Political party symbols (Republican Party, left and Democratic Party, right).

Polarization allows for the creation of loyalty to a certain identity. This loyalty is clearly seen through divisive party politics, where staying within a party's beliefs ensures that one is not seen as an "outcast" and creates a sense of self-perpetuating identity. According to the

Washington Post, "decades of research on citizens' political attitudes and behaviors suggest that many, perhaps most, people feel an emotional connection to and social identity with their political party," clearly showing a link between polarized party politics and identity. A similar example of identity-based polarization being used to create loyalty can be seen in brand marketing.

To tie the concepts of polarizing differentiation back to marketing and consumer behavior, an example of such a marketing strategy is Apple. In 1984, Steve Jobs launched Apple's first product: the Macintosh computer. One of the company's earliest advertisements features a play on George Orwell's classic dystopian story, *1984*. The advertisement, aired in that year, played to differentiate Apple from the previously existing "black-suit" culture of IBM, the leading company in the technology industry at the time. Apple focused on differentiating itself by painting IBM's style as dystopian and control-oriented while making itself a more free and creative explosion of color that disrupted the monotonous status quo. Roughly half a century later, Apple's marketing still focuses on the key point of differentiation by painting an image of their products as more "luxurious" and premium as opposed to their competitors. By creating this polarized differentiation between their products and everyone else's, they also created identities to go with each side. Apple's side is novel, creative, refreshing, and vibrant. Everything else is dark, serious, dystopian, and rigid. Marketing has the role of making one identity more desirable than the other; by clearly painting the "other" identity in a certain light, Apple's marketing does a good job showing their products as more desirable. In reality, Apple is not all innovation, and IBM is not all rigid darkness, but by creating these clear distinctions, Apple can create divisive identities. Those who want to try something new and innovative should purchase Apple products, and those who want to continue living in the status quo should not.

Image 8. Apple's 1984 advertisement.

With the example of Apple in particular, there is a distinguished line between buying products for identity purposes and buying products for functionality purposes. Many Apple users tend to buy products as part of the Apple ecosystem. This is a powerful demonstration of brand loyalty, as Apple uses a full product line to entice users to purchase for functionality because of the way that the technology works together. On the other hand, many people buy Apple products, specifically iPhones, because they tend to be more popular, especially in American markets. Similar to Lululemon, iPhones can be seen as status symbols rather than just for their functionality. Especially in younger generations, non-Apple phones are frequently looked down upon. iPhones dominate the market in this age group. According to Piper Sandler, "The iPhone

continues to reign as 87% of teens own one and 88% expect the iPhone to be their next mobile device." Ultimately, it boils down to what the consumer values more: identity or functionality. Apple is a good example of a combination of both; many Apple consumers are driven by the functionality of iPhone features, iOS updates, or the Apple ecosystem, while others are more driven by the identity aspect.

This type of identity-based differentiation can be seen through general market trends. For example, the rise of eco-friendly products and the theme of sustainability have created a new identity for producers to follow. Many major companies, including Ford Motors, Disney, and Hewlett-Packard have taken major strides toward creating new sustainability-focused campaigns. These campaigns allow them to appeal more towards the environmentally conscious consumer. Identity plays a role not only in consumer decisions but also in company branding.

While in most cases a consumer decision is based on some combination of identity and quality, sometimes it might only be one. One example of an instance where the only deciding factor was identity is the Palessi experiment. Payless is a shoe brand known for discounted prices. In 2018, it decided to experiment: create a fake luxury brand called Palessi and charge extremely high prices for the same shoes. They invited "fashion influencers" to come to their stores under the guise that it was a luxury brand to check out their products. These influencers were fully fooled. This entire experiment goes to show that identity often plays a larger role than functionality does. In this particular scenario, the functionality of the product was constant: it was the same shoe. However, the difference in identity clearly shows that certain people are willing to pay much more for a luxury product. Luxury is partially about quality, but in this scenario, it is much more focused on the identity of being wealthy.

Image 9. Influencer posing in front of the Palessi store

Conclusion

Ultimately, media influences consumer behavior by altering the way consumer identity is perceived in relation to the acquisition of the product or service. The utility of each product comes down to two major pieces: the quality of the product itself and the identity associated. The media seen in day-to-day interactions further emphasizes the importance of the identity associated with the product, which makes consumers act in certain ways. Marketers and brands can use this information to frame their advertisements around consumer identity points, rather than just the benefits of the product itself.

Definitions

Social engineering - The use of centralized planning in an attempt to manage social change and regulate the future development and behavior of a society (Oxford Languages).

Consumerism - The preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods (Oxford Languages).

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