



Authenticity-Based Consumer Responses: Do Individualistic or Group-Affiliating Messages in Instagram Advertisements Enhance Gen Z's Perception of Personal Authenticity?

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Abstract
English

The growing interest in consumers perception of authenticity results from the fact that it does not only result in higher psychological well-being and health but also has established a crucial competitive advantage for brands aiming at building strong relationships. Especially members of Gen Z are characterised by their demand for authenticity.

The present study explores how individualistic and group-affiliating advertisements on Instagram impact Gen Z's perceived personal authenticity and consumer responses. Utilizing a 2x2 between-subjects design (social belonging priming: inclusion/exclusion; advertisement message: individualistic/group-affiliating) with 123 participants, the research reveals a significant interaction. Socially excluded Gen Z members reported higher personal authenticity, expected pleasure, and purchase intention with group-affiliating advertisements, while socially included individuals benefited from individualistic messages. Group-affiliating advertisements also drove higher sharing intentions across both social belonging conditions. Importantly, perceived personal authenticity is positively correlated with purchase intention. Therefore, it lastly influences tangible business outcomes.

Keywords: Personal Authenticity, Gen Z, Social Belonging, Advertising Messages, Instagram Advertisements, Consumer Response

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Portuguese

Reconhecendo a crescente importância da autenticidade percebida para o bem-estar do consumidor, relacionamentos com marcas e o valor distinto que a Geração Z lhe atribui, este estudo investiga como mensagens publicitárias individualistas versus de afiliação a grupos no Instagram influenciam a percepção de autenticidade pessoal desta geração e suas respostas de consumo.

Empregando um delineamento experimental 2x2 entre-sujeitos, manipulando o pertencimento social (priming de inclusão/exclusão) e o tipo de mensagem do anúncio, os resultados de 123 participantes revelam uma interação significativa. Indivíduos socialmente excluídos relataram maior autenticidade e intenção de compra quando expostos a anúncios de afiliação a grupos, enquanto indivíduos socialmente incluídos mostraram preferência por mensagens individualistas. Notavelmente, anúncios de afiliação a grupos também aumentaram as intenções de compartilhamento em ambas as condições, e a autenticidade pessoal percebida previu positivamente a intenção de compra. O estudo conclui que adaptar as mensagens publicitárias do Instagram ao senso de pertencimento social predominante da Geração Z é crucial para aumentar a autenticidade percebida e gerar resultados de consumo favoráveis.

Palavras-chave: Autenticidade Pessoal, Geração Z, Pertencimento Social, Mensagens Publicitárias, Anúncios no Instagram, Resposta do Consumidor

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Over the past two decades, the interest in customers' perception of authenticity and its role in consumption has been on the rise. People strive to feel authentic in every aspect of their lives, as perceiving a high level of authenticity across diverse contexts results in higher psychological well-being and health (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021; Aday et al. 2018). In the field of marketing, making the consumer feel authentic is not only "one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing" but also a crucial competitive advantage for building and maintaining strong relationships with consumers (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003, p. 21).

Generation Z, defined by people born between 1996 and 2010, stands out for its strong emphasis on authenticity as a core value (NielsenIQ, GfK, and the World Data Lab 2024). As digital natives, members of Gen Z spend a considerable amount of time online, significantly sharpening their consumption habits. This trend has led brands to intensify their online advertising efforts, particularly on social media platforms like Instagram (Burke and Edell 1989; Dixon 2022). With their spending potential projected to reach \$12 trillion USD by 2030, brands that prioritise addressing their authenticity-driven preferences will be well-equipped to succeed in an increasingly dynamic, competitive, and saturated global market (NielsenIQ, GfK, and the World Data Lab 2024).

The extent to which advertisements shape the consumers' perception of personal authenticity depends on different factors. Prior research suggests that social belonging in the sense of inclusion or exclusion significantly affects the authenticity of consumer behaviour and thus one's own perception of alignment between inner thoughts and actions (Mead et al. 2011). Moreover, it influences how consumers perceive and respond to advertisements based on the message conveyed (Baek et al. 2019).

The key question is what circumstances shape these perceptions and resulting preferences and how can brands create interactions that make people feel authentic.

The present study takes a novel approach by focusing not on the perceived brand authenticity but on the impact of advertising messages on consumers' personal authenticity. Understanding how individualistic versus group-affiliating messages in advertisements affect Gen Z's perception of personal authenticity is crucial for brands seeking to win through creating effective and resonant marketing campaigns.

1.2. Research Question

The present study aims to explore approaches to address the research gap on perceived personal authenticity among Generation Z, focusing on the impact of mainly external influences and their effects on consumer response.

Accordingly, the research question is: How do individualistic and group-affiliating advertising messages on Instagram impact Gen Z's perception of personal authenticity and their consumer responses?

To address this question, existing academic research is reviewed to establish a theoretical foundation, which then serves as a base for the development of a customised quantitative study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Individualism and Group Affiliation in Advertising

To uncover how individuals respond to individualistic or group-affiliating messages in the advertising context, it is crucial to first explore the meaning of each component.

Advertising is the act of communicating a message from a sender to a recipient. It is widely used for commercial promotion of products and brands, but also to enhance the image of individuals, groups, or organisations. Advertisements, also called ads, can embody different elements such as verbal language but also visual artefacts whose meaning must be decoded by the recipients. The language used in advertisements serves as a form of image-making and is deliberately crafted to achieve the desired effect on the recipient (Goddard 2002). Depending on the social pattern that an advertisement is intended to address, it can be designed to convey individualistic or group-affiliating messages.

Individualism is a social pattern in which individuals are motivated by their own needs, benefits, and preferences and consider themselves mostly independent of the whole. It is defined as “a belief that the individual is an end in herself and ought to realise the self and cultivate judgement, notwithstanding the weight of pervasive social pressure in the direction of conformity” (Triandis 1995, p. 6). Personal goals, self-expression, and one’s own advantages are prioritised over the needs of others or the group. This pattern appeals to the individual's sense of self and personal achievement and goals. Especially those who feel socially included value differentiation over assimilation (Triandis 1995). Advertisements highlighting individualism often emphasise the uniqueness, independence, and success of individuals (Choi, Lee, and Kim 2005). Figures 1 to 4 present examples of advertisement campaigns that embrace

individuality by incorporating aspirational messages, emphasising uniqueness, or encouraging differentiation, such as the well-known “Think different.” campaign by Apple. The campaign, shown in figure 1, conveyed that those who dare to think differently leave their footprint on the world. It encouraged recipients to stand out from the crowd and go their own way. By spotlighting individuals who challenged the norm and took bold, unconventional paths, the campaign reinforced the idea that uniqueness is a strength. Examples of personalities used in the campaign include Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, and Martha Graham.

It is the human tendency to group and categorise the world that helps to define meaning to the stimuli exposed to. This cognitive process helps to define what a group and its norms are and when an individual acts in deviation.

At the social level this means that if a person has internalised a category as a self-concept, they will feel like a member of this group and act according to this affiliation. Social groups are a construct where members feel a connection towards each other and a collective sense of differentiation towards people who are not in the community (Harmeling et al. 2017). Group affiliation has the power to affect decision-making by changing identity judgements so that the importance of group affiliation in self-relevant decision-making increases (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Once a person senses group affiliation, they conform to the group, sometimes to the extent that they define themselves by group norms rather than by unique characteristics of the self (Terry and Hogg 1996). Group norms are shared behaviours, feelings, attitudes, or beliefs that minimise the differences within the group and maximise the differences between groups (Harmeling et al. 2017).

The effectiveness of group-affiliating messages in advertisements strongly depends on the psychological affiliation with the focal group. The affiliation can be “arbitrarily assigned, assumed through self-selected membership, or primed even if the customer acknowledges no prior affiliation (e.g., ‘You are part of the running community’)” (Harmeling et al. 2017, p. 3). Especially when people explore new categories, such as a new hobby or parenting, information carried by the group evokes trust and makes presented information seem valuable and relevant. Moreover, group affiliation reduces the discomfort of an outsider position (Harmeling et al. 2017). As “the desire for social relationships is one of the most fundamental and universal of all human needs” (Mead et al. 2011, p. 2), even individuals who are not truly feeling like a group member but aspire to be one might adopt this behaviour. In fact, people who feel socially

excluded tend to have a high need for assimilation and a low need for differentiation (Triandis 1995).

Figures 5 to 8 show examples of advertisement campaigns that emphasise group affiliation. For instance, Vodafone's campaign "Together we can" from 2021, shown in figure 5, highlights the power and potential of collective action. It shows that great changes are a result of collaboration and shared goals, and by using the word 'we', it triggers a group affiliation rather than addressing the recipient individually.

2.2. Social Identity Theory

As observed by many researchers, including Harmeling et al. (2017), categorising the world lies in human nature. This notion applies not only in the context of groups but also in the concept of the self. The self is reflexive, meaning it can consider and define itself in relation to classifications or social categories. This process, referred to as self-categorisation, is central to the Social Identity Theory. Together with social comparison, self-categorisation shapes a person's social identity as individuals place themselves in various existing social groups or categories within the society. These categories only exist in relation to opposing categories (e.g., academic vs. non-academic) and are pre-defined by a perception of power, prestige, or status. Over time, each individual incorporates many social categories that influence their concept of the self. "The set of social identities making up [a] person's self-concept is unique" (Harmeling et al. 2017, p. 225).

Through the process of social comparison, individuals internally categorise self-similar others as the in-group while labelling those who differ from the self as the out-group. This leads to a reinforcement of perceived similarities between oneself and in-group members and, consequently, to an increased perception of the differences to members of the out-group (Stets and Burke 2000). Having similarities with others supports the human need for affirmation (Chan, Berger, and van Boven 2012). The distinctions between groups extend to attitudes, values, emotional reactions, behavioural norms, speech patterns, and other characteristics. Often, individuals use group labels to describe themselves. These perceptions are further sharpened through the process of social comparison by selectively applying this accentuation effect to dimensions that promote self-enhancement. Individuals are inclined to increase their self-esteem by evaluating their own group positively and the out-group negatively based on criteria that favour their in-group. Once identified with a group, in-group members feel strong attraction to the group as a whole and display a greater commitment to it. These feelings result

in a low desire to leave the group, even when the societal perceived status is low (Stets and Burke 2000). Developing and maintaining a social identity can be the key to balancing the deep-rooted need for belonging but also for differentiation and uniqueness in order to maintain a positive self-concept (Harmeling et al. 2017).

In conclusion, understanding the self-categorisation processes of the target group is crucial for crafting advertisements that effectively resonate, whether aiming to affirm an individual's unique self-concept or reinforce their sense of group belonging.

2.3. The Concept of Personal Authenticity

People strive to be authentic and feel like they are being their true selves, which in fact is a complex and dynamic cognitive structure and subjective perception. Several scholars have studied the concept to make it more tangible. Humanist A. H. Maslow understood personal authenticity as discovering, accepting, and expressing one's inner self (Aday et al. 2018). Goor et al. (2020) found that the feeling of personal authenticity results from the consistency of one's actions and inner thoughts and feelings, including the representation of one's authentic self to others. However, this cognitive structure is not absolute; the feeling of authenticity does not present an either/or experience but rather exists on a spectrum of perceived authenticity (Erickson 1995).

The conceptualisation of authenticity is best understood as a “composite formative construct” (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021, p. 2), as it is shaped by multiple interacting influencing factors that collectively define the overall perception. The notion that the composite construct is formative means that it is built from its parts rather than reflecting them. Changes in how the components are consciously or unconsciously evaluated change the overall perception, which has no independent existence. Authenticity thus derives its meaning from the interplay of involved influences (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021).

Influencing dimensions for personal authenticity are self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influences. The first dimension, self-alienation, focuses on the gap between a person's understanding of the true self and the associated schematic beliefs and their actual consciously perceived experiences. The subjective experience of feeling disconnected from the true self indicates the degree of self-alienation. This dimension is linked to authentic living, which refers to an alignment between a person's awareness of their true self in terms of feelings, values, beliefs, and thoughts and the coherence in actions and behaviours. Authentic living involves maintaining one's own personality consistency across different situations and social

roles. The third dimension reflects the ability to act in ways that are self-directed and rooted in personal choice, rather than conforming to others' expectations or being influenced by external pressures (Wood et al. 2008). An empirical study by Sheldon et al. (1997) found that greater feelings of personal authenticity are positively correlated with self-esteem and subjective well-being while showing a negative correlation with stress, anxiety, and depression.

Driven by the intrinsic motivation to experience personal authenticity, people actively seek and prefer products, brands, and experiences that evoke a sense of personal authenticity and reinforce their perception of being in line with their true selves. The primary focus of seeking personal authenticity lies in an asset's ability to reveal consumers' authentic selves (Bartsch, Zeugner-Roth, and Katsikeas 2022).

2.3.1. The Role of Social Belonging

Safe and supportive relationships promote the feeling of personal authenticity through proximity to like-minded people. Group membership can, as already discussed in the "Social Identity Theory" chapter, shape one's self-identity. As a result, there often is an alignment between group and individual preferences (Beverland and Farrelly 2010).

People report higher levels of perceived authenticity in the presence of friends and increased inauthenticity in situations where they feel socially isolated or judged (Aday et al. 2018). An experimental study by Mead et al. (2011) revealed that socially excluded people tend to have rather strategic than authentic consumer behaviour, prioritising opportunities for social connections and affiliation over sticking to their personal preferences and values. Socially excluded individuals are more likely to adapt to the opinion of others, which stems from their increased passivity or desire for acceptance and group belonging. When motivated to establish social connections, these individuals are particularly receptive to marketing messages highlighting group preferences or approval, such as 'top sellers', as they seek to blend in rather than to stand out (Mead et al. 2011). Moreover, altruistic appeals that highlight the benefit of a group or others are more persuasive to them (Baek et al. 2019).

For socially included individuals who feel part of a group, on the other hand, self-benefit appeals that are directed only at individuals and convey selfish motives are more likely to be convincing (Baek et al. 2019). With their human need for belonging being satisfied, they concentrate more on their personal benefit and motives.

2.3.2. Individual Need for Uniqueness

The individuals' need for uniqueness and differentiation plays a role in their consumption responses. Researchers found that individuals with a high need for uniqueness demonstrate a preference for individuality among in-group choices to stand out, meaning they choose less popular options among those that are associated with their social group. Like this, they assimilate and differentiate simultaneously (Chan, Berger, and van Boven 2012). Other researchers found that the motivation to stand out within the group might result from the expectation to be viewed more favourably (Ariely and Levav 2000). In-group members with a low need for uniqueness who hold the desire to strongly signal group membership, on the contrary, prefer options highlighting group affiliation. In general, situational factors – such as the social context, the contextual triggers that reinforce uniqueness or affiliation, or the identity relevance of the choice – activate people's desire to either distinguish themselves or affiliate (Chan, Berger, and van Boven 2012).

2.3.3. Cultural Impact

Another factor influencing the consumer response to individualistic or group-affiliating messages is the cultural orientation, as attitudes and behaviour vary across cultures. Members of individualistic cultures, such as the U.S., tend to hold an independent view of the self, emphasising uniqueness, self-enhancement, and internal attributes. Autonomy is particularly important to them. In contrast, members of collectivistic cultures, such as China, traditionally are more receptive to messages that highlight group affiliation and social connectedness (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997). Naturally, there are tendencies towards individualism and collectivism in every society and in every individual, but a person's social behaviour and values are a consequence of the norms, duties, and obligations of their environment (Triandis 1995). Yet, environments are dynamic, and shifts towards individualism are mediated by exposure to mass media and modernisation (Zhang and Shavitt 2003). Despite this tendency, the term individualism has negative connotations in Japan, a collectivistic culture, as it is associated with selfishness. Japanese prefer terms such as “contextualist and interindividualism” (Triandis 1995, p. 7) as it implies a balance between individuality and within-group harmonious coexistence. This perspective reflects the cultural emphasis on maintaining social harmony while allowing for evolving personal autonomy, demonstrating that cultural shifts towards individualism adapt to existing values rather than replace them entirely (Triandis 1995).

2.4. Mental State

Consumer responses to advertisement messages are influenced by the receiver context, out of which the mental state, also referred to as a mood, is important (Bronner et al. 2007).

A mood is a “general reaction to the world at large” (Burke and Edell 1989, p. 69) rather than a short-term emotional response to a specific stimulus. Since a mood exists before the exposure to an advertisement, it is considered an antecedent state. Compared to emotions, moods tend to be less intense but longer lasting and influence elements of the cognitive system such as behaviour, evaluations, judgements, and recall. Therefore, a person's mood can affect their reaction to a seen advertisement (Burke and Edell 1989). Mood is often described as a bipolar phenomenon without a salient preceding cause, ranging from positive to negative. Even if the cause is apparent, there are determinantal factors that can influence a person's mood: personality traits towards optimism or pessimism, ability to influence the social environment, satisfaction, quality of social interactions, appreciation of objects, and mood swings linked to weather conditions or the day of the week (Bronner et al. 2007 and Gardner 1985).

Literature shows that different behaviours are encouraged by different moods. A positive mood strengthens a person's sense of personal power and perceived freedom. People are more confident to express their unique identity and feel less dependent on groups (Gardner 1985). They are more likely to engage in self-reinforcing and exploratory behaviour (Elen et al. 2013).

People in a negative mood, on the other hand, are generally more considerate about their behaviour and choices, as their judgements tend to be more pessimistic and concentrated on potential threats. As a result, they rather seek familiar and safe choices, situations, and environments (Elen et al. 2013).

2.5. Generation Z and the Role of Instagram

Generation Z, also called Gen Z, is the first generation of digital natives that grew up in a world where digital technology and constant connectivity through the online world always existed (Tuten 2023). Members of this generation were born between 1996 and 2010 and make up 32% of the global population (Confetto et al. 2023). Their spending potential is estimated at \$12 trillion USD by 2030, making them not only an influential force in society but also in the international economy. According to research conducted by NielsenIQ, GfK, and the World Data Lab (2024), Gen Z is projected to become “the largest, wealthiest and highest-spending generational cohort in history” (p. 7).

Having grown up immersed in technology and social media, Gen Z spend a significant amount of their time online, with an average of three hours daily spent on social media (Dixon 2022). To them, going online is natural. A 22-year-old respondent of a research by Francis and Hoefel (2018) stated: “I need to be free; I need to be myself, increasingly be myself, every day. With the internet, I feel much more free.” (p. 3). Among the options in social media, Instagram has emerged as a favourite due to its emphasis on visual storytelling and interactive features like instant reactions or direct messages (Tuten 2023). This digitally driven lifestyle extends to their shopping habits, with most Gen Z shoppers' starting their shopping journey online, underscoring the importance for brands to capture their attention on the platform. Equally crucial is creating interactions that evoke consumer responses, such as the feeling of authenticity, as feelings triggered by advertisements shape perceptions of both the advertisement and the brand itself (Burke and Edell 1989). Being able to make the consumer feel authentic is a significant competitive advantage in contemporary marketing (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003).

Gen Z is defined by their strong demand for personalisation, individuality, self-expression, and authenticity. Given that modernisation and exposure to mass media foster individualism (Zhang and Shavitt 2003) and Gen Z was raised in the digital age, it is unsurprising that this generation exhibits such tendencies. Alongside this, they place high importance on social consciousness and a sense of belonging. The latter stems from their reliance on virtual interactions resulting from the digital connectivity and time spent online. This behaviour has contributed to higher rates of reported loneliness and deepened their desire for social belonging (NielsenIQ, GfK, and the World Data Lab 2024). On the other hand, the virtual interactions result in the creation of online communities, which can promote authenticity through interaction with like-minded people beyond physical boundaries. For those who feel genuinely connected, the distinction between online and physical friendships becomes indistinct (Francis and Hoefel 2018). Therefore, it can be assumed that physical presence in a group is not necessary for members of Gen Z to be influenced by group-affiliating messages – online connections might have the same effect.

In this context, Instagram’s 2024 trend forecast reveals an emerging paradox: while Gen Z plans to use social media primarily to stay in touch with friends and family, they are also focusing on self-optimisation and stepping into an “unapologetically myself era”, implying a self-centred mindset (Instagram 2023). This trend reflects a tension between group affiliation and individualistic self-expression, raising the question of which type of messaging best aligns with

Gen Z's demand for authenticity. Instagram's ability to serve both social and individualistic goals makes it a powerful platform for engaging with the generation.

The usage of social media technologies, platforms, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange valuable offerings to stakeholders is defined as social media marketing. Through using the interruption-disruption model, businesses present advertisements and messages to users even if they are not actively seeking them (Tuten 2023).

Instagram advertisements are displayed to Instagram users when they scroll through their feed or discover new content. Although they must be labelled as paid advertisements, they can seamlessly blend in with organic content due to their design and use of language. Unlike traditional advertisements that are exposed to a wider mass, Instagram allows for the creation of advertisements tailored to the target audience, enabling businesses to address their customer's preferences more effectively (Instagram n.d.). Instagram's advanced algorithms ensure that there is a match between advertised content and people's interests, minimising disruption and amplifying the advertisement's relevance and social media marketing's effectiveness (Tuten 2023).

3. Hypotheses

To answer the research question 'How do individualistic and group-affiliating advertising messages on Instagram impact Gen Z's perception of personal authenticity and their consumer responses?' while considering the findings from the literature review, the following hypotheses arise:

H1a: For socially excluded individuals, group-affiliating messages in Instagram advertisements will lead to a higher perception of personal authenticity than individualistic messages.

H1b: For socially included individuals, individualistic messages in Instagram advertisements will lead to a higher perception of personal authenticity than group-affiliating messages.

H2: Social belonging moderates the effect of advertisement messages on expected pleasure: socially included individuals report higher pleasure expectations after exposure to individualistic advertisements and socially excluded individuals for group-affiliating ones.

H3: Group-affiliating messages in an Instagram advertisement will generate higher engagement intentions in the form of likelihood to share content via direct message among Gen Z compared to individualistic messages regardless of the social belonging condition.

H4: Individualistic messages in Instagram advertisements will generate higher purchase intentions among socially included Gen Z participants, while group-affiliating messages will generate higher purchase intentions among socially excluded ones.

H5: Higher levels of perceived personal authenticity after exposure to an advertisement on Instagram are positively associated with increased purchase intentions for the offering advertised.

4. Methodology

This study uses a conclusive research design to gather primary data, ensuring a structured and quantitative approach to address the specific research question at hand. The developed survey can be revised in the [appendix section](#).

Participants

The target population for this study is members of Gen Z, regardless of other characteristics such as gender or occupation. For Gen Z, diversity is highly valued, and the exclusion of any group is generally unacceptable. Therefore, age was not included as a screening question but was asked in the demographic section in the end to avoid the impression of age discrimination. A slider was integrated into the survey to enter the participants' ages. As members of Gen Z are born between 1996 and 2010, only answers from participants from 15 to 29 years old will be included in hypothesis testing.

The number of participants was aimed at a minimum of 120 members of Gen Z to have a representative number of 30 participants per each cell in the 2x2 between-subjects design.

To recruit participants, the link to the online survey was shared where the intended target group could be reached. In addition to individual requests to potential participants, it was distributed in university groups and the internship group of the company where I worked. Furthermore, SurveySwap.io, a platform and collaborative community that allows researchers to exchange survey responses, was used. Participation was entirely voluntary. To provide some incentive, respondents who completed the survey had the option to enter their e-mail for a chance to win a 20€ Amazon gift card. Participation in the draw was optional and not a requirement for participation in the study.

Since the survey was in English, participants were required to have a confident command of the language.

Independent Variable Social Belonging

There were two conditions of social belonging: social inclusion and social exclusion. To place participants in the test condition, a social priming task was used. The condition of social inclusion presented participants with the task to recall and briefly describe a moment where they felt socially included or accepted. The condition of social exclusion presented participants with the task to recall and briefly describe a moment where they felt socially excluded or left out.

The concept of priming for social belonging is well-established in the academic research. However, the methodology differs with regard to the possibility of the physical presence of the participants.

A widely utilised method among researchers for studies involving physically present participants is Cyberball, a virtual online ball-tossing game simulation that is preinstalled in the computers used by the participants. Participants in the social inclusion condition receive the ball regularly, accounting for 10 out of 30 tosses. Conversely, participants in the social exclusion condition are initially included with three tosses but are subsequently excluded for the remainder of the game (see Duclos, Wan, and Jiang 2013; Mourey, Olson, and Yoon 2017; Williams and Jarvis 2006).

A suitable method for studies with participants taking part online, like the present one, is to recall a past experience or event in which the participant felt socially included or excluded. Participants should take some time to think about such an event and then write about it (see Baek et al. 2019; Su et al. 2017). To check whether the desired priming effect was achieved, a manipulation check is conducted afterwards by asking participants to rate the extent to which they felt socially excluded and rejected in the situation they just described on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very).

Independent Variable Advertisement Message

There were two conditions of advertisement messages to which participants from both priming conditions were randomly assigned: individualistic or group-affiliating messages.

Participants were presented with an Instagram advertisement of a fictional brand for high-quality sports equipment named RUNOVA with either an individualistic or group-affiliating message on it (see figures 9 and 10). A conscious decision was made not to use an existing

brand in order to leave out what a brand stands for and what possible associations already exist with it in the minds of the participants. This was to ensure that the answers were influenced by the message in the advertisement and not by prior knowledge or brand favouritism.

The sports equipment category was chosen for its relevance, appealing equally to all genders and a wide range of demographics. Running in particular was selected due to its simplicity and accessibility, making it relatable to most participants. Additionally, running it is an activity that can be performed individually or as part of a group, i.e., in running clubs, providing opportunities to explore both individualistic and group-affiliating dynamics.

Individualistic messages in advertisements emphasise independence and personal success. Accordingly, the phrase ‘RUN YOUR WAY.’ was chosen, accompanied by an image of a single runner in the background (Choi, Lee, and Kim 2005). In contrast, for the group-affiliating message, the phrase ‘JOIN THE MOVEMENT.’, as used by the brand French Connection, was paired with an image of a group of people running together.

For the manipulation check, which aims to assess whether participants focused on the intended message of the advertisement they had just seen, they were asked to evaluate whether the advertisement they had just seen focused more on 1 (group belonging) or 5 (individualism) on a scale from 1 to 5.

Beyond that, the present study measures purchase and engagement intentions using a scale ranging from 1 (Not likely at all) to 5 (Extremely likely) and expectation of pleasure through a RUNOVA product on a scale from 1 (Not at all) 5 (Extremely). Uneven scales such as these that offer a neutral selection option are commonly applied in research (Machado 2023). The additional variables were selected to test the commercial relevance of the findings.

Control Variables

Need for Uniqueness

Three statements from the Need for Uniqueness (NFU) agreement scale developed and validated by Snyder and Fromkin (1977) were used. The agreement-scale assesses an individual’s desire to be different from others by indicating their agreement to statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An individual with a high need for uniqueness emphasises a sense of independence, anti-conformity, inventiveness, achievement, and self-esteem. Higher scores on the NFU Scale indicate a stronger need for uniqueness.

Attitude towards Instagram

To control for potential biases related to participants' general perceptions of the platform and the overall impression of advertisements on it, a scale was implemented to assess the attitude towards both. On this 5-item scale, participants responded to two statements from 1 (Not favourable at all) to 5 (Extremely favourable) to measure their attitude.

Mood

Mood was measured using items from the validated Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) developed by Watson et al. (1988). This scale assesses mood across various time frames through altering the instructions using a five-point scale rating from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). For this study, the time frame was set to 'today'. A balanced number of items from the Negative and Positive Affect subscales was chosen to ensure a comprehensive assessment. The positive and negative items on the scale were intentionally mixed to encourage active participation from the respondents, prompting them to carefully consider their answers rather than responding mechanically. After finishing data collection, the scales were rearranged to ensure consistency in interpretation by reversing negative items so that higher scores consistently indicate a better mood.

Dependent Variable Perception of Personal Authenticity

To measure the perception of personal authenticity, participants were asked to rate five statements on a scale from 1 (Does not describe my experience at all) to 5 (Describes my experience very well). To ensure reliability and validity, a modified version of a validated scale was employed. The Authenticity Scale, developed by Wood et al. (2008), is rooted in a person-centred conception where personal authenticity is considered a three-part construct with different dimensions that influence it: self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence. It "behaves consistently across diverse demographic groups" (Wood et al. 2008, p. 395). To minimise agreement bias and encourage respondents to critically evaluate each item, the scale includes both positively and negatively worded statements.

The scale was adapted to focus on how the statements describe the participants' personal experiences when imagining purchasing from the fictive brand rather than describing the self ("does describe me experience" rather than "does describe me"). Also, the number of response options was reduced from seven, as in the originally developed scale, to five to align with the

rest of the survey. These modifications tailored the scale used for the study while maintaining its core validity.

During the process of data cleaning, negatively worded statements, such as “I feel out of touch with my true self”, were reverse coded to ensure consistency and interpretation. Consequently, higher mean scores from items on the scale indicate higher levels of perceived personal authenticity.

Research Design

The chosen method for data collection was an online survey, allowing for greater flexibility and anonymity, which encourages honest and candid responses for sensitive topics like feelings and past experiences of social belonging (Machado 2023). To further protect anonymity, responses to the social belonging priming question where participants were asked to recall a past experience were removed from the dataset after data cleaning to prevent any potential attribution to individuals.

By allowing participants to complete the survey at their own convenience and in an environment they feel safe in, this method of data collection provides accuracy and minimises errors such as social desirability bias, courtesy bias, or shame caused by external intermediaries (Machado 2023). Moreover, the subject of this study revolves around advertisements on the online platform Instagram, making the online survey format a suitable environment for participants to evaluate an advertisement without context displacement.

To ensure participants' full attention throughout the survey, the number of questions was carefully limited to those essential for obtaining meaningful results. In order to obtain objective data, balanced rating scales with equal choices for positive and negative options and a neutral choice were used. All questions in the survey had a forced response as a response requirement to avoid participants skipping questions, resulting in missing data. To minimise the risk of participant dropouts due to uncertainty about the survey's length, a progress bar was integrated. This visual indicator provided respondents with real-time feedback on their completion status, thereby enhancing user experience and encouraging survey completion.

To test the hypotheses, a 2 (social belonging prime: exclusion vs. inclusion) x 2 (message in the advertisement: individualistic vs. group-affiliating) between-subjects design was integrated into the online survey. Randomisation was used to ensure that a participant was only exposed to one testing condition at a time.

Procedure

Participants were provided a consent form and were told they would be participating in a study about consumer responses to Instagram advertisements. They were assured that all provided information would remain strictly confidential and anonymous.

First, participants were assigned to the task to indicate their agreement to the statements from the NFU scale control for their need for uniqueness. The position for the scale was carefully placed in the beginning to ensure the responses were not influenced by other factors in the study, allowing for an unbiased assessment.

Second, participants were randomly assigned to the social belonging priming task and therefore the condition of social inclusion or exclusion. To ensure that participants take time to reflect on an experience in question in the context of an online survey, a timer was implemented, requiring that responses could only be submitted after a minimum of 30 seconds had passed. As in the research by Duclos, Wan, and Jian (2013) and Su et al. (2017), their feeling of being excluded and rejected was measured right after as a manipulation check.

Next, participants were asked to fill the PANAS scale items presented to control for the role of mood. Since the priming question could potentially influence or amplify participants' mood, the mood assessment was positioned after the manipulation check for social belonging.

Afterward, based on randomisation, participants were presented with either the individualistic or group-affiliating Instagram advertisement by RUNOVA. After viewing the advertisement, the question of whether the focus of the advertisement was on group affiliation or individualism was asked, serving as a manipulation check for the independent variable.

Subsequently, participants indicated their purchase intention and pleasure expectation for a RUNOVA product. They were then asked to fill the Authenticity Scale to measure their perception of personal authenticity, imagining that they had purchased a product from RUNOVA. Afterward, they were asked about their engagement intention.

Lastly, participants were asked to answer questions regarding their attitude towards Instagram and their overall impression of advertisements on the platform to control for any potential biases.

Demographics were collected, and a small debrief about the study was presented at the end of the survey.

5. Results

After excluding incomplete responses, the study achieved a total of 127 participants. As only responses provided by members of Gen Z were included in hypothesis testing, the total number of participants was 123, with 76 females, 46 males, and one non-binary person. Thereby, the predefined criterion for representativeness was met. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 29 years, with a mean age of 24.31 ($SD=2.56$). Among the respondents, 56.9% were students, 30.9% were employed full-time, and 10.6% were employed part-time. The majority of respondents reported German as their first language (63.4%), followed by English (8.1%), French (6.5%), and Portuguese (4.1%). The cultural homogeneity of the sample, which is characterised by the dominance of a single first language, results in insufficient variance to observe cultural influences.

A total of 64 respondents were exposed to the social belonging priming condition for social inclusion, while 59 respondents were exposed to social exclusion. Participants in the social inclusion condition took an average of 114 seconds to complete the priming task before submitting, whereas those in the social exclusion condition completed it in 97 seconds on average.

Regarding the advertisements presented, 63 respondents were exposed to the advertisement featuring an individualistic message, whereas 60 respondents viewed the advertisement with a group-affiliating message.

The uneven distribution of respondents between the experimental conditions of social belonging and advertisement message is due to the exclusion of incomplete responses and answers from participants who were not part of Gen Z.

The overall attitude toward Instagram as a platform was found to be generally favourable, with a mean of 4.00 on a 5-point scale where 5 represents an extremely favourable attitude. The standard deviation of 0.992 indicates relatively low variability in responses, suggesting a positive perception among participants. With a mean of 3.36, attitudes toward advertisements on the platform were considered less favourable. The higher standard deviation of 1.216 reflects bigger variability in responses, indicating a more diverse range of opinions regarding advertisements on Instagram.

The SPSS output can be found in the [appendix section](#).

5.1. Manipulation Checks

The manipulation checks for both manipulations were tested using independent samples t-tests.

Social Belonging: As expected, significant differences between both social belonging groups could be found. Participants exposed to the social inclusion condition (1) reported low levels of feeling rejected ($M=1.39$, $SD=0.789$) and similarly low levels of feeling excluded ($M=1.56$, $SD=1.067$). In contrast, participants in the social exclusion condition (2) reported significantly higher levels of feeling rejected ($M=3.90$, $SD=0.941$) and feeling excluded ($M=4.41$, $SD=1.052$). The measures of the manipulation check ($t_{\text{rejected}}(121)=-16.06$, $p<.001$; $t_{\text{excluded}}(121)=-12.87$, $p<.001$) indicate that the manipulation of the independent variable was effective.

Ad Message: The mean for participants exposed to the individualistic message "RUN YOUR WAY." was 4.84 ($SD=0.368$), signalling that the message was strongly perceived as individualistic. In the same way, participants exposed to the group-affiliating message "JOIN THE MOVEMENT." reported a mean of 1.23 ($SD=0.427$), confirming that the advertisement conveys group belonging. The measures of the manipulation check ($t(121)=50.28$, $p<.001$) indicate that the manipulation of the independent variable was effective.

5.2. Hypotheses Testing

H1a: For socially excluded individuals, group-affiliating messages in Instagram advertisements will lead to a higher perception of personal authenticity than individualistic messages.

H1b: For socially included individuals, individualistic messages in Instagram advertisements will lead to a higher perception of personal authenticity than group-affiliating messages.

Social Belonging	Advertisement Message	Mean Personal Authenticity	Std. Deviation	<i>N</i>
Social Inclusion (1)	Individualism (1)	4.17	0.830	36
	Group Affiliation (2)	3.27	0.880	28
Social Exclusion (2)	Individualism (1)	3.32	0.975	27
	Group Affiliation (2)	4.19	0.893	32

Table 1: Perception of Personal Authenticity Based on Social Belonging and Advertisement Message

Among socially excluded individuals, the group-affiliating advertisement message resulted in a higher perception of personal authenticity ($M=4.19$) compared to the individualistic advertisement message ($M=3.32$, $\Delta=0.87$). Conversely, for socially included individuals, individualistic messages resulted in a higher perception of personal authenticity ($M=4.17$) compared to group-affiliating messages ($M=3.27$, $\Delta=0.9$).

A two-way ANOVA revealed that neither advertisement message ($F(1,119) = 0.01, p = .935$) nor social belonging ($F(1,119) = 0.04, p = .834$) alone significantly affects the dependent variable. Yet, the interaction between those two variables is highly significant ($F(1,119) = 29.75, p < .001$), indicating that while the main effects of advertisement message and social belonging are not significant on their own, their interaction plays a crucial role in influencing perceived personal authenticity. The interaction variable explains 20% of the variance in perceived personal authenticity.

Both hypotheses H1a and H1b are supported. This means that for socially excluded individuals, group-affiliating messages on Instagram enhance their personal perception of their personal authenticity. For socially included individuals, individualistic messages in Instagram advertisements lead to a higher perception of personal authenticity.

H2: Social belonging moderates the effect of advertisement messages on expected pleasure: socially included individuals report higher pleasure expectations after exposure to individualistic advertisements and socially excluded individuals for group-affiliating ones.

Social Belonging	Advertisement Message	Mean Expected Pleasure	Std. Deviation	N
Social Inclusion (1)	Individualism (1)	3.86	1.150	36
	Group Affiliation (2)	3.61	0.875	28
Social Exclusion (2)	Individualism (1)	2.93	1.107	27
	Group Affiliation (2)	3.72	1.250	32

Table 2: Expected Pleasure From a RUNOVA Product Based on Social Belonging and Advertisement Message

As predicted, socially included individuals reported higher expected pleasure from a RUNOVA product after exposure to the individualistic advertisement ($M=3.86, SD=1.15$) than the group-affiliating one ($M=3.61, SD=0.88; \Delta=0.25$). Conversely, socially excluded individuals reported higher expected pleasure after exposure to the group-affiliating advertisement ($M=3.72, SD=1.25$) than the individualistic one ($M=2.93, SD=1.11; \Delta=0.79$).

The analysis of results from a two-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant effect of the social belonging condition on expected pleasure ($F(1,119) = 4.16, p = .044$). No significant main effect was found for the variable advertisement message alone ($F(1,119) = 1.78, p = .185$). Yet, a significant interaction between the variables social belonging and advertisement message was found ($F(1,119) = 6.72, p = .011$). The interaction suggests that social belonging moderates the effect of the advertisement message on expected pleasure. Hypothesis H2 is therefore supported.

H3: Group-affiliating messages in an Instagram advertisement will generate higher engagement intentions in the form of likelihood to share content via direct message among Gen Z compared to individualistic messages regardless of the social belonging condition.

Advertisement	Social Belonging	Mean Engagement	Std.	N
Individualism (1)	Social Inclusion (1)	2.08	1.13	36
Group Affiliation (2)		3.57	0.10	28
Individualism (1)	Social Exclusion (2)	1.67	0.88	27
Group Affiliation (2)		3.81	1.15	32

Table 3: Engagement Intention in the Form of Likelihood to Share Content via Direct Message Based on Social Belonging and Advertisement Message

As predicted, the engagement intention, measured in the form of likeliness to share content via direct message, is higher for the group-affiliating advertisement ($M_{Social\ inclusion}=3.57$, $M_{Social\ exclusion}=3.81$) compared to the individualistic one ($M_{Social\ inclusion}=2.08$, $M_{Social\ exclusion}=1.67$) across both social belonging conditions.

The analysis of the two-way ANOVA results showed that the p-value is statistically significant for the type of advertisement message ($F(1,119) = 90.01$, $p < .001$), indicating that it is the key factor influencing sharing intentions via direct message on Instagram. The other variable, social belonging ($F(1,119) = 0.21$, $p = .647$), as well as the interaction variable ($F(1,119) = 2.95$, $p = .089$), are not statistically relevant. The advertisement message type explains 43.1% of the variance in engagement intentions. Hypothesis H3 can be supported.

H4: Individualistic messages in Instagram advertisements will generate higher purchase intentions among socially included Gen Z participants, while group-affiliating messages will generate higher purchase intentions among socially excluded ones.

Advertisement Message	Social Belonging	Mean Purchase Intention	Std. Deviation	N
Individualism (1)	Social Inclusion (1)	4.11	0.919	36
	Social Exclusion (2)	2.56	0.934	27
Group Affiliation (2)	Social Inclusion (1)	2.79	1.031	28
	Social Exclusion (2)	4.03	0.967	32

Table 4: Purchase Intention Based on Social Belonging and Advertisement Message

The purchase intention by socially included respondents after viewing the advertisement with an individualistic message ($M=4.11$) is higher than after exposure to the group-affiliating message in an advertisement ($M=2.79$). Socially excluded individuals show a contrary trend with a higher purchase intention after exposure to group-affiliating messages in advertisements ($M=4.03$) than for individualistic messages ($M=2.56$).

A two-way ANOVA revealed that the interaction between advertisement message and social belonging is statistically significant ($F(1,119) = 64.47, p < .001$), explaining more than one-third of the variance in purchase intention (Partial $\eta^2 = 0.35$). However, neither advertisement message ($F(1,119) = 0.19, p = .667$) nor social belonging ($F(1,119) = 0.79, p = .376$) alone shows statistical significance. These findings support hypothesis H4, but only under the condition that both variables are considered in interaction rather than independently.

H5: Higher levels of perceived personal authenticity after exposure to an advertisement on Instagram are positively associated with increased purchase intentions for the offering advertised.

A linear regression was conducted to test this hypothesis. The created model demonstrates a moderate explanatory power of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 42.9\%$). The unstandardised coefficient B is positive ($B = 0.787$), confirming a positive relationship between perceived personal authenticity and purchase intention – as one increases, so does the other. The statistical significance of the model is strongly supported ($F(1,121) = 91.06, p < .001$), highlighting its relevance in predicting purchase intention. Furthermore, the absence of multicollinearity is confirmed, as the tolerance exceeds 0.4 (1.0), the Variance Inflation Factor is below 2.5 (1.0), and the Condition Index is < 15.000 , indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

6. Discussion

Creating advertisements that can enhance the consumer's perception of personal authenticity does not only enhance their psychological well-being but also results in tangible business outcomes. This study found that perceived personal authenticity is positively linked to purchase intention, which is in line with other research done in the field of authenticity, highlighting that consumers prefer brands and products that evoke or reinforce a sense of being in line with their true selves. The positive emotions triggered through this sense create a positive brand association, which, if repeated several times, strengthens brand preference and deepens customer loyalty. Therefore, fostering perceived personal authenticity through the right advertisement strategy helps build strong customer relationships and drive repeat purchases.

Even though Gen Z is characterised by a strong demand for individuality, the present study found that those members experiencing loneliness and seeking social connection derive their sense of personal authenticity through different approaches than those with established social ties. Hence, the question of which type of advertisement best aligns with Gen Z's demand for

authenticity cannot be answered uniformly for the entire generation – it must account for the nuances of social belonging.

Members of Gen Z who feel socially excluded report higher levels of perceived personal authenticity, expected pleasure the product can bring and purchase intention after exposure to group-affiliating advertisements on Instagram. A possible cause for this finding is that such messages mitigate the discomfort of feeling like an outsider and resonate with them seeking social connections.

During the day, Gen Z spends about a fifth of the time they are awake on social media, which has led to an increased sense of loneliness among some members, strengthening their desire for social connections and making them more receptive to group-affiliating marketing messages. As concluded by Mead et al. (2011) and Trinadis (1995), the reason behind this receptiveness is the desire to rather assimilate than differentiate. In this context, group belonging shapes identity judgements and becomes personally meaningful, affecting self-relevant decisions such as purchasing selections.

However, the appeal of group-affiliating messages depends on the consumer's psychological affiliation with the focal group portrayed in the advertisement. Brands must not only identify the desired social identity of their target audience but also visually integrate it into their communications. While the set of social identities that define a person's self-concept is unique, there are commonalities within the target group due to shared experiences, desires, and social roles.

Gen Z members who feel socially included, on the other hand, report higher levels of perceived personal authenticity, expected pleasure and, lastly, purchase intention after exposure to individualistic advertisements on Instagram. With their fundamental human need for belonging already being fulfilled, they shift their focus towards personal successes and adopt a self-centred mindset, as predicted by the Instagram trend forecast.

In this context, it is important to highlight that advertisements on the platform are not as well received as the platform itself. This aligns with Instagram's trend forecast, suggesting that Gen Z users primarily use it to stay connected with friends in family. To them, the platform represents a familiar environment in two ways: they know it well due to the significant time they spend on it, and they use it for personal, intimate purposes. As a result, brands face greater challenges in establishing relationships due to users' tendency to avoid commercial content.

However, once a brand succeeds in building trust, it has strong potential to foster deep connections.

Creating advertisements that resonate with the target audience is a powerful way to initiate deeper connection and encourage trial. The present findings highlight a positive relationship between social belonging and the effectiveness of a well-matched advertisement message. Aligning the advertisement type with an individual's social belonging status enhances the expected pleasure of product ownership and strengthens perceptions of personal authenticity. Since personal authenticity and purchase intention are positively correlated, and a high expectation of pleasure suggests an increased likelihood of trial, a strategically tailored social media strategy can drive long-term brand loyalty and commercial success due to repurchases if the product itself is compelling. Through tailoring advertisements to the recipient's needs, brands can create competitive advantages.

Instagram's algorithm is likely to detect whether a user feels socially excluded or included based on the user behaviour on the platform. By analysing engagement patterns such as time spent on certain posts and behavioural tracking, the algorithm can tailor exposure to advertisements. Brands can leverage this by creating different versions of an advertisement: one with an individualistic message and another with a group-affiliating one. The algorithm then ensures that each is presented to the right audience. Through the interruption-disruption model in social media marketing, users are exposed to advertisements even if they are not actively seeking them, but their user behaviour suggests they might like them.

While a social media marketing strategy using the Instagram algorithm enables brands to reach their desired audience, it also raises ethical concerns. Although reinforcing the consumer's sense of personal authenticity supports their psychological well-being, tailoring the advertisements exploits their psychological state for commercial gain, especially for socially excluded individuals who seek a change in their situation. Further, the algorithm reinforces social bubbles through exposure to similar content, which limits the users' exposure to diverse perspectives.

When looking at another key performance indicator (KPI) for social media marketing, such as engagement from sharing content via direct message, the advertisement message type is a strong predictor of content sharing. Group-affiliating advertisements are more likely to be shared with others, regardless of social belonging situation. One possible explanation for this is the tendency of users to share content that shows scenarios they can imagine experiencing as a means of

strengthening their relationship. Group-affiliating content provides a natural reason to reach out, sparks conversation, and encourages shared activities, making it more engaging and meaningful in social interactions. A brand should therefore clearly define the intended KPIs when creating a social media campaign and use the findings elaborated in this study to optimise the advertisements accordingly.

In conclusion, this study elaborates on the importance of creating advertisements that align with the target's psychological needs, particularly their sense of social. The advancement of algorithm-driven consumer insights represents a significant development and chance in this regard, enabling brands to better understand their target through categorisation based on online behaviour. Ultimately, it allows brands to expose users to content that resonates with their needs. Given the substantial amount of time Gen Z spends on social media, their digital consumer profiles provide valuable insights to develop targeted social media marketing strategies.

By strategically leveraging Instagram's targeting capabilities, brands can create more impactful and consumer-centred marketing campaigns that enhance the consumer's well-being and foster stronger brand relationships. This does benefit both the consumer, as they feel more authentic and see relevant content, and the brand, as this perception of personal authenticity positively influences the purchase intention and, lastly, the business outcome.

However, data-driven approaches present not only opportunities but also ethical considerations. These, along with legal restrictions, must be carefully addressed, particularly in the context of the interruption-disruption marketing strategy, to ensure responsible and transparent use of consumer data.

6.1. Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Even though this study was able to provide valuable answers to the question of whether individualistic or group-affiliating messages in Instagram advertisements resonate better with members of Gen Z, there are some limitations to the explanatory power and therefore implications for future research.

A limitation to this study is that the advertisements were designed to convey either an individualistic or group-affiliating message, which they did effectively. While the chosen category was broadly appealing and the group-affiliating advertisement featured a diverse portrayal of individuals, the specific preferences and psychological affiliations of potential

target groups were not considered, as it was out of scope. Therefore, it is unclear if participants were affiliated with the individuals visualised in the advertisements of this study. The effect size may be enhanced, especially for group-affiliating messages in advertisements, if the visuals participants are exposed to align with their focal group and social identity. However, this requires a deeper understanding of the target audience and a more selective participant recruitment.

Another limitation is the lack of control over participants during the social priming task. Although the manipulation checks showed that the priming for a social belonging condition was successful, the effect could potentially be enhanced by requiring participants to spend more time fully immersing themselves in the condition. As this study was conducted online and offered minimal incentives for prolonged participation, extending the priming duration was not feasible, as this would have increased the likelihood of participants dropping out of the survey prematurely.

Repeating the study with stricter priming conditions for social belonging and defining the target audience more precisely to repeat the experiments with corresponding visuals will help to validate the findings.

A valuable direction for future research is to investigate whether the feeling of social belonging resulting from virtual interactions differs in its sense of social belonging from real, physical connections.

Another avenue for further research that could not be involved in the present study is the analysis of the potential impact of cultural background. Scholars should explore whether individuals from collectivistic cultures experience different levels of personal authenticity after exposure to group-affiliating messages in Instagram advertisements compared to those from individualistic cultures. Incorporating cultural background as a dimension would improve the applicability of the findings and allow for more nuanced advertisement strategies that not only target specific audiences but also account for geographical and cultural differences in consumer responses.

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Appendix

Figures

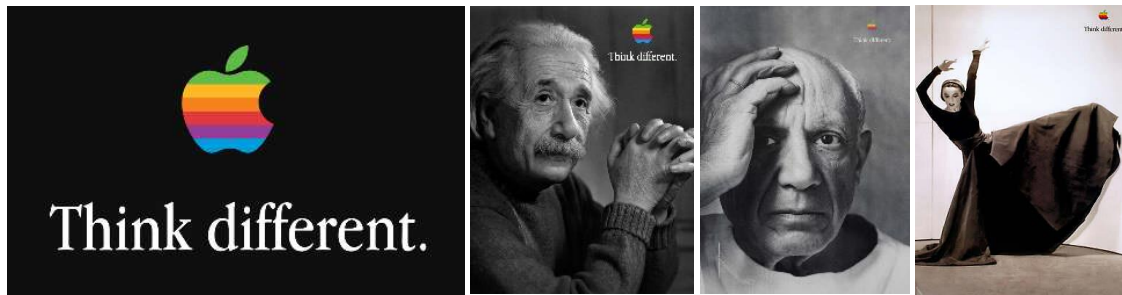


Figure 1: Apple "Think different." campaign, 1997- 2002.



Figure 2: Schick "Be you. No one else can." campaign, 2022.



Figure 3: Burger King "Have it your way" campaign, 1974-2025.



Figure 4: Starbucks "The best coffee for the best you" campaign, 2022.



Figure 5: Vodafone "Together we can" campaign, 2021.



Figure 6: French Connection "Join the Movement" campaign, 2023.



Figure 7: Coca Cola "Together tastes better" campaign, 2020.



Figure 8: Levi's "Go Forth" campaign, 2012.

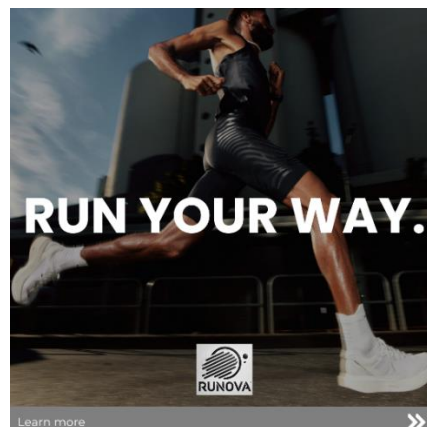


Figure 9: Instagram Ad for fictional brand RUNOVA with individualistic message.

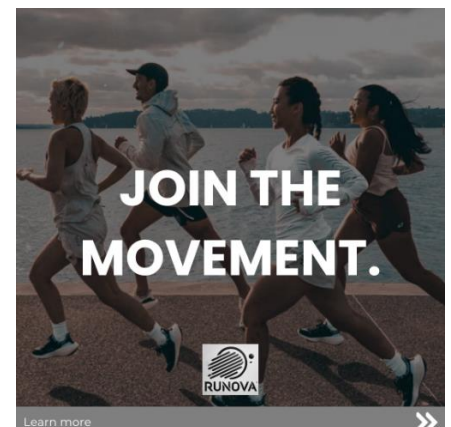


Figure 10: Instagram Ad for fictional brand RUNOVA with group-affiliating message.

The survey created and conducted

Dear participant,

Thank you for taking the time to contribute to this survey that aims to explore consumer responses to Instagram Ads. Your input is invaluable to this study!

Completing this survey will take approximately 5 minutes. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers – your honest and intuitive responses are what matters most.

All information you provide in this survey will remain strictly confidential and anonymous.

If you have any questions or require assistance, feel free to contact me at sageinez@ucp.pt.

At the conclusion of the survey, you will have the opportunity to win a 20€ Amazon gift card. Moreover, this survey contains credits to get free survey responses at SurveySwap.io.

Thank you for your participation!

Best regards,

Anita Geinez

Master of Management Student at Católica Lisbon SBE



Please indicate your agreement to following statements.

	Strongly disagree				Strongly agree
I dislike being similar to others around me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I tend to avoid mainstream trends and prefer unique options.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is important for me to feel unique in comparison to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Please take a few seconds to think of a time when you felt socially included or accepted. Briefly describe the situation, including what happened, who was involved and how that made you feel.

Timing

These page timer metrics will not be displayed to the recipient.

First Click 0 seconds
Last Click 0 seconds
Page Submit 0 seconds
Click Count 0 clicks



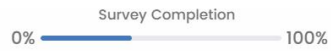
To what extent did you experience the following during the situation you just described?

	Not at all				Very
Excluded	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rejected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Please take a moment to think about how you feel today. Please rate the extent to which you felt:

	Not at all				Extremely
Excited	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Frustrated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Upset	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attentive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Enthusiastic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Nervous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Runova is a new brand that designs high-quality sports equipment, where cutting-edge performance meets sleek design to empower athletes of all levels to push beyond their limits.

Please take a careful look at their Instagram advertisement below.



Runova is a new brand that designs high-quality sports equipment, where cutting-edge performance meets sleek design to empower athletes of all levels to push beyond their limits.

Please take a careful look at their Instagram advertisement below.



Think about the Instagram Ad you just saw. Did the message in the Ad focus more on being part of a group or community, or was it more about individualism and personal achievement?

Group belonging				Individualism
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



How likely are you to purchase a product from Runova after seeing the Ad?

Not likely at all				Extremely likely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



To what extent do you expect a product by Runova to bring you pleasure?

Not at all				Extremely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Imagine you decided to purchase a product from Runova after seeing the Ad. Please indicate to what extent these statements reflect your personal experience and your feelings about yourself in relation to that experience?

	Does not describe my experience at all				Describes my experience very well
I live in accordance with my values and beliefs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually do what other people tell me to do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel out of touch with my true self.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The opinion of others strongly influence my actions and beliefs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My actions reflect my true self.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



How likely are you to give a like to this Ad on Instagram?

Not likely at all <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely likely <input type="radio"/>
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How likely are you to share this Ad on Instagram via direct message?

Not likely at all <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely likely <input type="radio"/>
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Please answer the following questions.

	Not favourable at all				Extremely favourable
How do you feel about Instagram as a platform?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How would you rate your overall impression of advertisements on Instagram?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



What gender do you identify the most with?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

What is your age?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Age in years



What is your current occupation?

Employed full time

Employed part time

Unemployed

Retired

Student

Other

What is your first language?

0%  100%

Thank you for your time spent taking this survey and your valuable contribution!

Your responses have been recorded.

For a chance to win a 20 EUR Amazon gift card, please enter your email [here](#). Your email will be used exclusively for the prize draw, and the winner will be notified after the survey concludes.

The following code gives you credits that can be used to get free research participants at SurveySwap.io: <http://surveyswap.io/sr/VYIJ-SLWD-4BQ6>

Alternatively, you can manually enter the following code: VYIJ-SLWD-4BQ6

SPSS Output

Results:

Statistics					
		Gender	Age	Occupation	First Language
N	Valid	123	123	123	123
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		1,39	24,31	3,41	
Median		1,00	25,00	5,00	
Std. Deviation		,506	2,561	1,864	
Minimum		1	17	1	
Maximum		3	29	5	

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	76	61,8	61,8	61,8
	2	46	37,4	37,4	99,2
	3	1	,8	,8	100,0
	Total	123	100,0	100,0	

Occupation					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	38	30,9	30,9	30,9
	2	13	10,6	10,6	41,5
	3	2	1,6	1,6	43,1
	5	70	56,9	56,9	100,0
	Total	123	100,0	100,0	

First Language					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Chinese	1	,8	,8	,8
	Croatian	2	1,6	1,6	2,4
	Danish	3	2,4	2,4	4,9
	Dutch	3	2,4	2,4	7,3
	English	10	8,1	8,1	15,4
	French	8	6,5	6,5	22,0
	German	78	63,4	63,4	85,4
	Hungarian	1	,8	,8	86,2
	Italian	3	2,4	2,4	88,6
	Portuguese	5	4,1	4,1	92,7
	Russian	3	2,4	2,4	95,1
	Spanish	2	1,6	1,6	96,7
	Swedish	1	,8	,8	97,6
	Turkish	2	1,6	1,6	99,2
	Ukrainian	1	,8	,8	100,0
	Total	123	100,0	100,0	

Age					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	17	1	,8	,8	,8
	18	4	3,3	3,3	4,1
	19	1	,8	,8	4,9
	20	6	4,9	4,9	9,8
	21	5	4,1	4,1	13,8
	22	9	7,3	7,3	21,1
	23	14	11,4	11,4	32,5
	24	14	11,4	11,4	43,9
	25	30	24,4	24,4	68,3
	26	15	12,2	12,2	80,5
	27	14	11,4	11,4	91,9
	28	7	5,7	5,7	97,6
	29	3	2,4	2,4	100,0
Total	123	100,0	100,0		

Independent Variable 1_ Social Belonging					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	64	52,0	52,0	52,0
	2	59	48,0	48,0	100,0
	Total	123	100,0	100,0	

Independent Variable 2_ Ad Message					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	63	51,2	51,2	51,2
	2	60	48,8	48,8	100,0
	Total	123	100,0	100,0	

Statistics			
		Attitude towards IG as a platform	Attitude towards advertisements on IG
N	Valid	123	123
	Missing	0	0
Mean		4,00	3,36
Median		4,00	4,00
Std. Deviation		,992	1,216
Minimum		1	1
Maximum		5	5

Manipulation checks:

T-Test

Group Statistics

		Independent Variable 1_ Social Belonging	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Independent Variable 1_ Manipulation	1		64	1,39	,789	,099
Check_Rejected	2		59	3,90	,941	,123
Independent Variable 1_ Manipulation	1		64	1,56	1,067	,133
Check_Excluded	2		59	4,41	1,052	,137

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
										Lower	Upper
Independent Variable 1_ Manipulation	Equal variances assumed	1,420	,236	-16,055	121	<,001	<,001	-2,508	,156	-2,817	-2,198
Check_Rejected	Equal variances not assumed			-15,940	113,604	<,001	<,001	-2,508	,157	-2,819	-2,196
Independent Variable 1_ Manipulation	Equal variances assumed	,117	,733	-14,865	121	<,001	<,001	-2,844	,191	-3,223	-2,465
Check_Excluded	Equal variances not assumed			-14,874	120,442	<,001	<,001	-2,844	,191	-3,223	-2,466

T-Test

Group Statistics

		Independent Variable 2_ Ad Message	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Independent Variable 2_ Manipulation	1		63	4,84	,368	,046
Check	2		60	1,23	,427	,055

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
										Lower	Upper
Independent Variable 2_ Manipulation	Equal variances assumed	4,388	,038	50,281	121	<,001	<,001	3,608	,072	3,466	3,750
Check	Equal variances not assumed			50,102	116,602	<,001	<,001	3,608	,072	3,465	3,751

Hypothesis 1a & 1b:

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Dependent Variable_Authenticity_Mean

Independent Variable 1_ Social Belonging	Independent Variable 2_ Ad Message	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	1	4,17	,830	36
	2	3,27	,880	28
	Total	3,77	,957	64
2	1	3,32	,975	27
	2	4,19	,893	32
	Total	3,79	1,021	59
Total	1	3,80	,983	63
	2	3,76	,993	60
	Total	3,78	,984	123

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Dependent Variable_Authenticity_Mean

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	23,688 ^a	3	7,896	9,946	<,001	,200
Intercept	1694,704	1	1694,704	2134,684	<,001	,947
IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging	,035	1	,035	,044	,834	,000
IndependentVariable2_Ad Message	,005	1	,005	,007	,935	,000
IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging * IndependentVariable2_Ad Message	23,619	1	23,619	29,751	<,001	,200
Error	94,473	119	,794			
Total	1877,600	123				
Corrected Total	118,161	122				

a. R Squared = ,200 (Adjusted R Squared = ,180)

Hypothesis 2:

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Pleasure

Independent Variable 1_ Social Belonging	Independent Variable 2_ Ad Message	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	1	3,86	1,150	36
	2	3,61	,875	28
	Total	3,75	1,039	64
2	1	2,93	1,107	27
	2	3,72	1,250	32
	Total	3,36	1,242	59
Total	1	3,46	1,216	63
	2	3,67	1,084	60
	Total	3,56	1,153	123

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Pleasure

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	14,988 ^a	3	4,996	4,036	,009	,092
Intercept	1511,429	1	1511,429	1221,007	<,001	,911
IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging	5,147	1	5,147	4,158	,044	,034
IndependentVariable2_Ad Message	2,203	1	2,203	1,780	,185	,015
IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging * IndependentVariable2_Ad Message	8,315	1	8,315	6,717	,011	,053
Error	147,305	119	1,238			
Total	1722,000	123				
Corrected Total	162,293	122				

a. R Squared = ,092 (Adjusted R Squared = ,069)

Hypothesis 3:

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Engagement Intention_Share

Independent Variable 2_ Ad Message	Independent Variable 1_ Social Belonging	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	1	2,08	1,131	36
	2	1,67	,877	27
	Total	1,90	1,043	63
2	1	3,57	,997	28
	2	3,81	1,148	32
	Total	3,70	1,078	60
Total	1	2,73	1,300	64
	2	2,83	1,487	59
	Total	2,78	1,388	123

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Engagement Intention_Share

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	102,591 ^a	3	34,197	30,717	<,001	,436
Intercept	940,698	1	940,698	844,967	<,001	,877
IndependentVariable2_Ad Message	100,209	1	100,209	90,011	<,001	,431
IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging	,234	1	,234	,210	,647	,002
IndependentVariable2_Ad Message * IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging	3,283	1	3,283	2,949	,089	,024
Error	132,482	119	1,113			
Total	1186,000	123				
Corrected Total	235,073	122				

a. R Squared = ,436 (Adjusted R Squared = ,422)

Hypothesis 4:

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

Independent Variable 2_ Ad Message	Independent Variable 1_ Social Belonging	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	1	4,11	,919	36
	2	2,56	,934	27
	Total	3,44	1,202	63
2	1	2,79	1,031	28
	2	4,03	,967	32
	Total	3,45	1,171	60
Total	1	3,53	1,168	64
	2	3,36	1,200	59
	Total	3,45	1,182	123

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	60,501 ^a	3	20,167	21,836	<,001	,355
Intercept	1379,644	1	1379,644	1493,811	<,001	,926
IndependentVariable2_Ad Message	,171	1	,171	,186	,667	,002
IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging	,729	1	,729	,790	,376	,007
IndependentVariable2_Ad Message * IndependentVariable1_SocialBelonging	59,540	1	59,540	64,467	<,001	,351
Error	109,905	119	,924			
Total	1632,000	123				
Corrected Total	170,407	122				

a. R Squared = ,355 (Adjusted R Squared = ,339)

Hypothesis 5:

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,655 ^a	,429	,425	,896

a. Predictors: (Constant), Dependend Variable_Authenticity_Mean

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	73,171	1	73,171	91,055	<,001 ^b
	Residual	97,235	121	,804		
	Total	170,407	122			

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention
b. Predictors: (Constant), Dependend Variable_Authenticity Mean

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error				Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	,471	,322		1,462	,146		
	Dependend Variable_Authenticity_Mean	,787	,082	,655	9,542	<,001	1,000	1,000

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

Collinearity Diagnostics^a

Model	Dimension	Eigenvalue	Condition Index	Variance Proportions	
				(Constant)	Authenticity_Me...
1	1	1,968	1,000	,02	,02
	2	,032	7,845	,98	,98

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention