

Consumer Perceptions of Authenticity in Brand Campaigns

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Abstract

In increasingly multicultural markets, brands face growing scrutiny over how they represent and engage with culture, yet marketing research lacks a clear definition of cultural credibility distinct from traditional source or brand credibility. This study conceptualizes cultural credibility as a socially constructed consumer judgment grounded in perceived authenticity, shared values, cultural understanding, and relational alignment rather than surface-level representation. Drawing on cultural identity theory and social identity frameworks, the research examines how consumers interpret visual, narrative, and relational cues in brand campaigns and how they distinguish between cultural appreciation, appropriation, and exploitation.

Methods

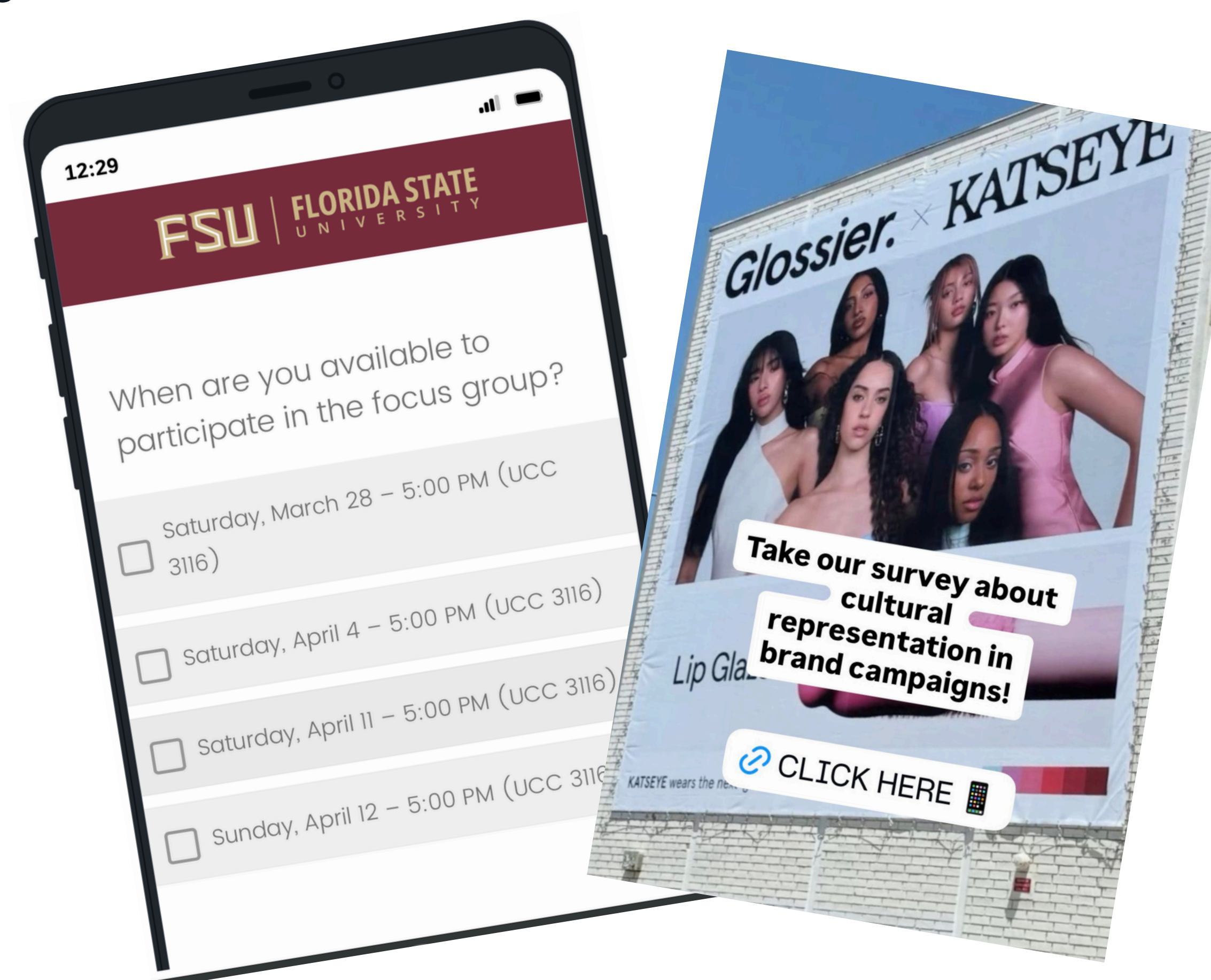
This research adopts a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with multicultural consumers. We will conduct 2 to 3 focus groups, each with 6 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds and of college age, recruited from FSU. Participants will be recruited voluntarily through emails and social media messages. Discussions will be led in person and recorded with the sole purpose of using the transcripts to analyze the data later. The focus group is designed to examine three core areas: (1) defining cultural credibility, (2) identifying credible cultural representatives, and (3) evaluating real-world examples of representation in brand campaigns. Questions prompt participants to describe authenticity cues (visual, language, behavior, or relationships), assess the role of lived experience and background in establishing authenticity, and distinguish between cultural appreciation, appropriation, and exploitation. Participants will also be asked to provide examples of campaigns they perceive as authentic or performative and explain their reasoning. Thematic data analysis will be used to identify recurring patterns in how participants define cultural credibility, interpret authenticity cues, and evaluate real-world brand examples. Patterns will be identified by comparing similarities and differences across participant responses, allowing for the development of overarching themes that explain how cultural credibility is defined and assessed.

A. Defining the Concept

- When you see a brand, collaboration, or campaign that involves culture, what makes it feel authentic or trustworthy to you?
- What qualities or factors make a brand's message feel like it really understands or respects the culture?
- How do you decide if a brand or campaign truly represents a culture, rather than just using it for marketing purposes?
- What kinds of signals (visual, language, behavior, or relationships) help you tell if a campaign or message is respectful and accurate?

Preliminary Findings

We are currently in the process of conducting focus groups and analyzing qualitative data related to cultural credibility in brand campaigns. Based on the literature review we wrote by researching existing studies, we expect participants to identify lived experience, cultural background, and community involvement as primary indicators of cultural credibility. We also anticipate that participants will view campaigns as more authentic when brands collaborate with individuals who belong to the represented culture and demonstrate accurate and respectful use of cultural symbols, language, and traditions. In contrast, campaigns that rely on stereotypes, aesthetics, or individuals perceived as disconnected from the culture are expected to be viewed as performative or exploitative. The small sample size and the specific demographic we selected are the main anticipated limitations of this study. Future research could expand the sample to include participants from more diverse cultural backgrounds to explore how definitions of cultural credibility vary across groups. Quantitative methods could be used to collect data on a larger scale.

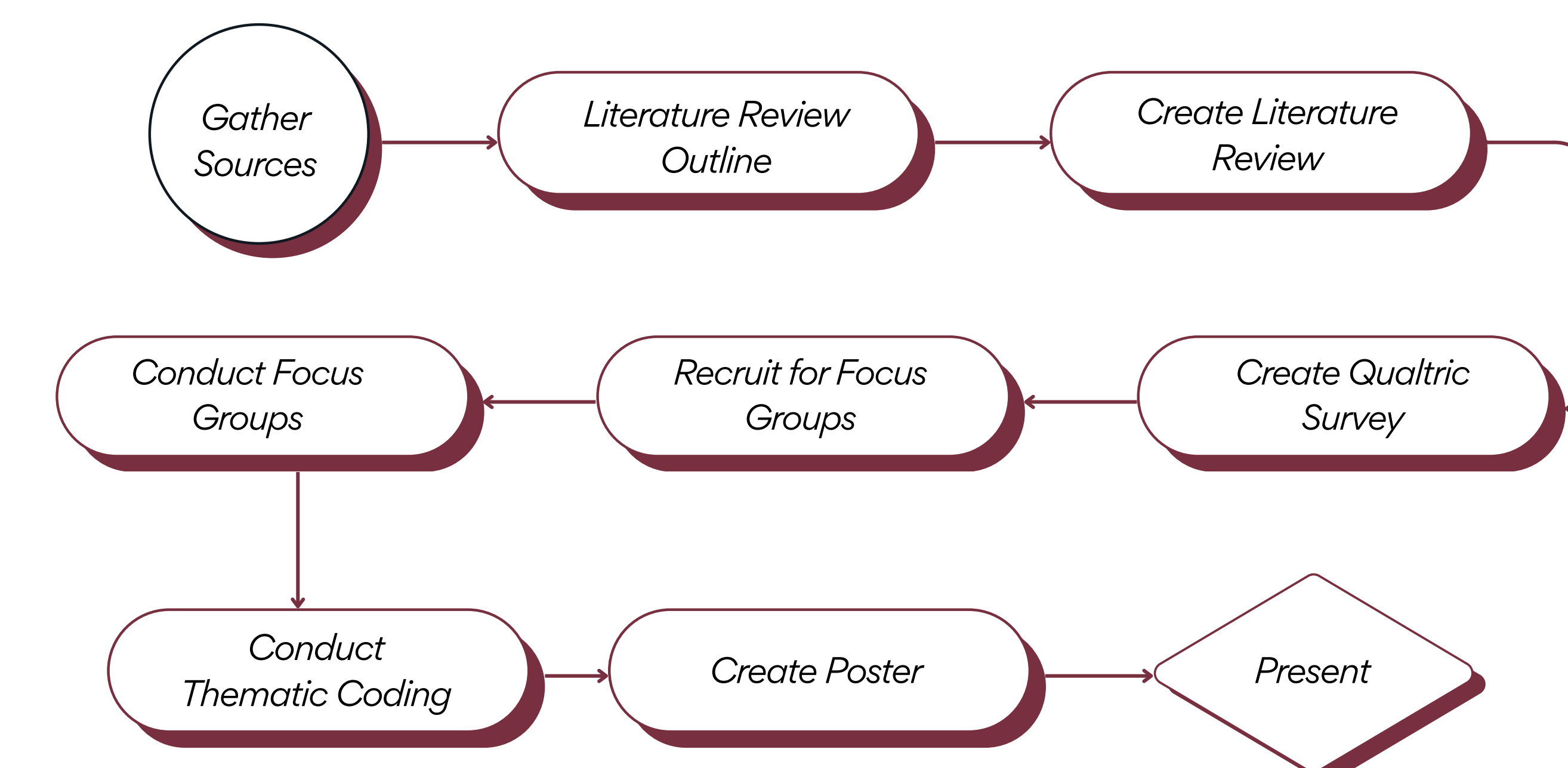


Conclusion

Preliminary findings suggest that consumers evaluate cultural credibility not only through visual representation, but through perceived intent, lived experience, and relational connection. Campaigns such as Adobe's Diverse Voices initiative illustrate how brands may establish cultural credibility by collaborating with creators from the communities being represented, amplifying their voices. In contrast, campaigns such as Dolce & Gabbana's Eating with Chopsticks series have been widely criticized for relying on stereotypical portrayals and lacking cultural understanding, damaging credibility and consumer trust. These examples highlight how consumers distinguish between authentic cultural engagement and performative or exploitative representation.

Next Steps

These findings emphasize that cultural campaigns rely on consumers' perceptions of whether brands demonstrate genuine cultural knowledge and respect. This research bridges credibility theory with cultural identity and cultural appropriation frameworks, providing a foundation for conceptualizing and eventually measuring cultural credibility. Practically, the findings offer guidance for brands seeking to engage multicultural audiences, underscoring the importance of authentic collaboration, accurate representation, and meaningful community involvement. While this study is limited by its small and specific sample, future research should expand to more diverse populations and incorporate quantitative methods to further assess cultural credibility. Overall, this research establishes cultural credibility as an essential factor in ethical and effective brand communication within increasingly multicultural consumer markets.



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References

