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**Do Consumers Notice Exclusion? An Experimental Study on Inclusion
and Self-Brand Connection**

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Résumé

Les pratiques de diversité, d'équité et d'inclusion (DEI) en marketing attirent de plus en plus l'attention. Toutefois, des questions subsistent quant à la manière dont ces pratiques influencent les relations entre les consommateurs et les marques. Alors que les consommateurs exigent des pratiques inclusives, on comprend mal comment ils perçoivent leur mise en œuvre et s'ils se soucient de l'exclusion des autres lorsqu'ils sont eux-mêmes inclus. Cette étude explore l'effet de l'inclusion (des membres internes du groupe et des membres externes) sur la connexion personnelle à la marque. Des femmes ont imaginé voir une publicité pour une marque de maquillage proposant leur teinte en magasin et en ligne, uniquement en ligne, ou ne la proposant pas du tout. La marque incluait ou excluait également des personnes ayant une couleur de peau différente de celle de la participante. Nous avons examiné les effets de cette manipulation sur le sentiment d'appartenance et la connexion à la marque. Les résultats montrent que les consommateurs perçoivent l'exclusion surtout lorsqu'ils en font directement l'expérience, ce qui affaiblit leur lien avec la marque. Bien qu'il soit préférable d'offrir des options d'inclusion en ligne plutôt que d'exclure complètement, cela nuit tout de même à la relation consommateur-marque, faisant de l'inclusion totale l'approche la plus efficace. Cette recherche enrichit la littérature sur la DEI et le commerce de détail, notamment en ce qui concerne les pratiques consistant à proposer des gammes de produits étendues uniquement en ligne.

Mots clés : Connexion personnelle à la marque, sentiment d'appartenance, adéquation, implication valorisée, inclusion

Méthodes de recherche : Expérimentation, Recherche Quantitative

Abstract

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices in marketing have gained attention. However, questions remain about how DEI practices influence consumer-brand relationships. While consumers increasingly demand inclusive practices, there is limited understanding of how consumers perceive their implementation and whether consumers care about the exclusion of others if they are included. This study explores the effect of inclusion (of ingroup and outgroup members) on self-brand connection. In our study, women imagined seeing an ad for a make-up company that sold their shade in-store and online, online only, or did not include their shade. The brand similarly included or excluded people with a different skin shade from the participant. We examined the effects of this manipulation on belonging and self-brand connection. Our study shows that consumers perceive exclusion primarily when they experience it firsthand, which weakens their self-brand connection. Although offering inclusive options online is better than excluding them entirely, it harms the consumer-brand relationship—making full inclusion the most effective approach. This research adds to the DEI and retailing literature, particularly on practices like offering extended product ranges online only.

Keywords : Self-brand connection, belonging, fit, valued involvement, inclusion

Research methods : Experimentation, Quantitative Research

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SBC: Self-brand Connection

DEI: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Preface

Representation matters. Seeing yourself reflected in media — and in advertising — plays a powerful role in shaping how you perceive yourself and others. Diversity in representation fosters empathy, tolerance, and open-mindedness.

Marketing is not only a tool for generating profit; it also helps shape the cultural landscape we live in. I believe that, regardless of the industry, we each hold a responsibility to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable world — and marketing is no exception.

With this thesis, I wanted to contribute to the ongoing conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the marketing field. My goal was to offer insights that highlight the importance of inclusive practices and encourage further reflection and progress in this area. There is still much to be done, and I hope this research is one small step in the right direction.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years, some brands have seen their reputations tarnished because of scandals regarding a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their marketing communications and products. These scandals negatively impact their brand equity. For example, Brandy Melville has become a symbol of exclusion, marketing its “one size fits most” approach—more accurately, “one size fits small.” While Brandy Melville gained popularity in the 2010s for exclusively featuring thin, white models, it faced intense backlash when its explicitly racist managerial practices were exposed (McMenamin, 2024). For example, a documentary revealed how Brandy Melville systematically relegated workers of colour to the stockroom, fostering a work environment steeped in racism, misogyny, and body shaming (Orner, 2024). Similarly, in the cosmetics industry, Tarte faces skepticism due to repeated DEI missteps, including a foundation launch with only three dark shades and unequal treatment of influencers of colour on brand trips (Barbour, 2018; Lisitza, 2023; Tolentino, 2023). These controversies have lingered, making the brand’s DEI efforts less credible and subject to greater scrutiny. This concern for DEI illustrates its growing importance in marketing and how brand managers should mobilize DEI correctly to stay relevant and avoid backlash. This study examines the impact of inclusivity on the consumer-brand relationship through self-brand connection.

With the rise of diversity and inclusivity, one might assume that consumers prioritize these values in their shopping choices—boycotting exclusive brands and favouring those vocal about DEI efforts. Research shows that inclusive advertising generates 3.46% more sales in the short term and 16.26% in the long term (UN Women, 2024). Inclusive brands are also 62% more likely to be the consumer’s first choice compared to less inclusive brands. Consumers are demanding more inclusivity from clothing retailers (Esposito, 2021) and criticize brands launching lines with limited options (Howland, 2021; Naidu & Donnadieu Borquez, 2025). Exclusionary practices tend to lead to negative attitudes towards the brand because consumers feel negative moral emotions (Naidu & Donnadieu Borquez, 2025). On the contrary, consumers prefer

products from moral (inclusive) brands. They are 15% more loyal to brands with strong commitments to addressing social inequalities and have overall more positive evaluations (Brodzik et al., 2021; UN Women, 2024). Concretely, Naidu and Borquez's research found that consumers view brands as more inclusive and moral when their product lines either favour minority consumers or offer a balanced mix. This improves brand credibility, image, and purchase intentions, affirming that consumers value inclusivity in the marketplace (Naidu & Donnadieu Borquez, 2025).

Inclusive marketing was at an all-time high from 2015 to 2022 (UN Women, 2024). However, there now seems to be a shift in the culture regarding the role of brands in social issues. Inclusive advertising has been critiqued for appropriation of progressive values, commonly framed as “woke” branding, and a means of enhancing brand image and profitability (Healey, 2025). The backlash takes root from the opinion that brands commodified activism, thus diluting the significance of genuine social movements and reducing them to marketing tools. Where the engagement has been perceived as performative, the public criticized it, which prompted companies to scale back their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)(Healey, 2025). This retreat has, perhaps unintentionally, created fertile ground for conservative ideologies to gain traction as consumers grow increasingly disillusioned with the perceived insincerity of corporate messaging (Healey, 2025). The marketing industry is called to critically examine its role in adopting authentic and accountable stances when engaging with social issues.

In addition, some psychological research suggests that people often overlook exclusion unless they experience it firsthand, making their purchasing decisions less consciously driven by inclusivity than they might believe (Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Moreover, there are different perspectives on the role of exclusion in brand management. Some scholars argue that exclusion is relevant and important in the marketplace, as people use products to distinguish themselves from others. Circling back to the Brandy Melville case, a study shows that many customers wear the brand's clothing to highlight their thin bodies and signal their belonging to the target demographic (Hj Ahmad et al., 2023). Therefore, consumers may still seek exclusion when making consumption decisions to assert aspects of their identity.

Our research addresses this controversy, examining different instances where exclusion might affect consumers' relationships with brands. We find that consumers mainly notice brand exclusion when they themselves are affected, often overlooking the exclusion of others. Additionally, we examine what happens when diverse products (e.g., extended sizes, shade ranges) are offered only online. This online-only model weakens consumer-brand relationships compared to offering products both in-store and online; it remains a better approach than entirely excluding a market segment.

This research contributes to the literature on diversity, equity, and inclusion in marketing. First, it examines whether consumers prioritize inclusivity in their shopping decisions, even when they are not personally excluded. Second, it provides a first attempt at understanding the effectiveness of offering an extended product range online. We examine the effects of this practice on consumer-brand relationships, how it is received by consumers and how it impacts the brand. Finally, this study introduces a psychological approach to DEI in marketing, analyzing how inclusion and exclusion shape consumer-brand relationships through concepts like belonging and self-brand connection.

Chapter 2

Literature review

In 2014, Aerie launched the Aerie Real campaign, featuring women of different body types and ethnicities while also ceasing to airbrush models (Rodgers et al., 2019). This campaign ran counter to the prior media trend of using relatively low diversity in ad campaigns, including communicating society's expectations for thinness and beauty, contributing to low self-esteem and poor body image for women (Craddock et al., 2019; Himes & Thompson, 2007; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Rodgers et al., 2015).

This campaign received a very positive response from consumers compared to traditional ads of the thin ideal. It had positive effects on consumers' body image, mood and self-esteem, and it made consumers more accepting of diverse body shapes and sizes (Rodgers et al., 2019; Selensky & Carels, 2021). The campaign also increased consumer's brand attitudes toward Aerie in two ways. First, it signaled that the brand matched consumers' values (Rodgers et al., 2019). Second, it generated consumer confidence that the products would fit their body type (Rodgers et al., 2019). This improvement in attitude led to increased intentions to purchase products from the brand (Rodgers et al., 2019).

Following the Aerie campaign, consumers began to call for more companies to include more diversity in their marketing materials and to cease promoting unrealistic beauty standards (Diedrichs et al., 2011; Rodgers et al., 2019). This successful example highlights the importance of diversity and inclusion for a brand's image and its relationship with consumers.

This social movement for inclusivity had taken root at the end of the 2010s, notably with the body positivity movement. While these values are still relatively common today, there seems to be a backslide in media advocacy for body positivity and/or body neutrality. Culturally, we are seeing a return to traditional values regarding gender roles (Beatty, 2024), the popularization of weight loss medication (Basch et al., 2023), and the increasing accessibility of facial surgery (Wilson, 2023). These trends renew the pressure for consumers, especially women, to conform to narrow standards of beauty. Substack, a

social media platform geared towards longer text format, recently featured articles on how thinness is back on trend and a concerning diminution of body positivity (Luisa, 2025). Content creators also speak up on the subject on social media. Some clothing brands reduced their sizing, and plus-size clothing stores closed (ex, Penningtons closing stores and reducing sizes), emphasizing this shift in consumer mentality.

These trends conflict with the DEI work done in marketing over the last decade. Still, they highlight, now more than ever, the importance of understanding the role of inclusivity in the consumer-brand relationship, showing the need for more research like the present study.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are gaining visibility in the academic and public spheres. Diversity refers to differences among the people represented (Arsel et al., 2022). Equity is fairness in the treatment of these people (Arsel et al., 2022). Inclusion involves cultivating a culture where diverse groups feel a sense of belonging and are actively integrated, often defined in contrast to exclusion or marginalization (Arsel et al., 2022; Licsandru & Cui, 2018).

For marketers, DEI initiatives often include expanding product lines to include traditionally marginalized populations. For example, the expansion of product lines in make-up and skin-tone clothing to ensure every person has the right product fit (D'Angelo et al., 2024). Clothing brands like Girlfriend Collective include a wide variety of sizes of models on the website to accurately showcase the products, from XXS to 6XL, to accommodate plus-size consumers (LTK Studios, 2022). Tommy Hilfiger launched another DEI initiative when they introduced the Adaptive line, designed for people with disabilities without compromising on style. The clothing features magnetic closures, adjustable hems, and other modifications to make dressing easier for those with mobility challenges (Kenny & Keenan, 2023; Lyndal, 2024). In marketing, DEI initiatives can also focus on raising awareness and offering support for social causes in promotional materials. For example, The Body Shop promotes LGBTQ+ visibility in their marketing.

Additionally, they partnered with LGBTQ+ nonprofits like Minus18 LGBTIQA+ Young Leaders program and host events for the LGBTQ+ community (The Body Shop, 2024).

Inclusivity in marketing

As suggested by the Aerie example, prior work has demonstrated that a brand's adoption of inclusive marketing practices can positively influence both consumers and the brand itself. Below, we summarize the existing work on exclusion in marketing, first discussing how exclusion affects the excluded consumer and then whether included consumers are affected by the exclusion of others. Next, we move to the brand contexts, examining whether brands' DEI decisions can affect their bottom line.

For consumers

Consumers use the marketplace to create social belonging. Individuals seeking to belong to a particular social group will often consume in ways that align with the group's behaviour, thereby cultivating a sense of belonging (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Harding & Humphreys, 2011; Ward & Dahl, 2014). Moreover, consumers who see themselves reflected in a brand's advertising or its in-store offerings tend to feel a stronger connection to the brand community (D'Angelo et al., 2024; Harding & Humphreys, 2011; Licsandru & Cui, 2018). Given that the marketplace plays a crucial role in creating belonging, excluding any group from representation within it is a matter of concern.

Excluded consumers

Traditionally, the marketplace has excluded societally marginalized consumers in advertisements and in product design. For example, plus-size consumers (Campbell et al., 2023), consumers with physical and mental disabilities (Bernardi & Alhamdan, 2022; Campbell et al., 2023; Mirabito et al., 2016), older adults (Campbell et al., 2023), and LGBTQIA+ consumers (Campbell et al., 2023) are underrepresented in advertising. In other words, these individuals are more prevalent in the US population than in advertising. Furthermore, even when marginalized consumers are included in advertisements, they are often represented in a way that reinforces stereotypes (Bernardi & Alhamdan, 2022;

Campbell et al., 2023; Mirabito et al., 2016; Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015; Taylor et al., 2005). These individuals are also excluded in product design, for example, when brands do not carry plus-size clothes or make products accessible for people with physical limitations (e.g., physical disability, age-related physical decline; (Rodriguez-Vila et al., 2024).

Particularly pertinent to our context, many companies lack representation of different racial and ethnic groups. Although ethnic diversity is increasing in media, many groups are stereotyped, sexualized, or play minor roles in advertising (Campbell et al., 2023; Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015; Taylor et al., 2005). Product design can also exclude racial groups. For example, in the cosmetics industry, people of colour often struggle to find products that properly match their skin tones and undertones (D'Angelo et al., 2024; Fetto, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that underrepresented consumers face systemic limitations when making purchasing decisions (D'Angelo et al., 2024).

In systematically excluding marginalized individuals, the market delegitimizes marginalized groups. Consumers rely on more powerful actors—namely, brands and businesses—to improve products and services and to recognize them as a legitimate market segment (Epley & Waytz, 2010; Fiske, 1993; Lillqvist et al., 2017). When marginalized groups have fewer products available to them, their legitimacy as a market segment is diminished (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Market legitimacy, in turn, reflects societal legitimacy, mirroring the treatment of different groups in everyday society. It is perhaps then not surprising that exclusion from the marketplace has negative social and psychological effects on consumers.

Market exclusion has negative *psychological* effects on consumers. For example, consumers who do not see themselves represented in ads tend to report lower self-esteem (Craddock et al., 2019; Martin, 2010; Rodgers et al., 2019). Additionally, when consumers encounter inaccurate or negative representations of their social groups in advertisements, they will likely internalize the stereotypes portrayed (Mirabito et al., 2016).

Market exclusion also has negative *social* effects on consumers. Excluded consumers report a heightened concern about others' opinions of them and tend to exhibit

antisocial behaviours, such as aggressive behaviour (Twenge et al., 2001; Ward & Dahl, 2014). This response often stems from frustration with the treatment they receive from the marketplace. Such negative treatment contributes to the persistence of lower social status among marginalized groups, limiting their opportunities for both economic and social advancement (Mirabito et al., 2016).

In addition to affecting consumers social and psychological wellbeing, we suggest that marketplace exclusion affects consumers' relationship with the exclusionary brand. Specifically, we examine the effects of marketplace exclusion on self-brand connection—"the extent to which individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept" (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

H1: Consumers will report lower self-brand connection to brands that exclude them and include other consumers (vs. brands that include them and other consumers).

Included consumers

Though they might not realize it, included consumers experience shopping without having to worry about the availability of products that fit them. They can trust the market to cater to their needs. Instead, they are more focused on product efficacy (D'Angelo et al., 2024). For them, shopping carries less risk and might even be a fun activity to treat themselves, hence why they might fail to notice the exclusion of others. Privileged consumers tend not to think about issues like discrimination in products, production, marketing communication and corporate social responsibility when making consumption decisions (Carvalho et al., 2023). In general, conveniences become noticeable only when they are lacking (Ferose, 2017; Kimmelman, 2020; Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Furthermore, consumers possess an internalized bias that assumes the world is fair, leading them to overlook inequalities in consumption (Lajos Hüse et al., 2014; Lerner, 1980).

Notably, consumers use their purchasing choices to define themselves in similarity and contrast to others. Consumers tend to want to consume brands whose target customers are similar to them (Mirabito et al., 2016). They also tend to reject brands that do not align

with their identity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Solca, 2019). As such, defining who is included and excluded by a brand is an inherent aspect of marketing and perhaps consumption. Therefore, at best, inclusion is not a priority in many consumers' shopping decisions. At worst, the exclusion of outgroup members may be desirable.

However, included consumers may notice exclusion when it affects someone close to them (Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). They are more likely to care about exclusion when it impacts people within their close circles because they perceive the excluded party as an extension of themselves, sharing their experiences, viewpoints, and traits (Aron et al., 1992; Clark, 1983; Clark & Mills, 1979; Hoffman, 1976; Wegner, 1980). Additionally, people tend to react angrily when exclusion happens to those in their inner circle, as they believe the treatment is unfair (Lajos Hüse et al., 2014; Lerner, 1980). As a result, inclusion often becomes a consideration when individuals witness exclusion affecting someone close to them.

Overall, the marketplace is a key site in social belonging, as consumption helps individuals connect with certain groups, especially when they see themselves represented. However, marginalized groups face systemic exclusion in advertising and product design, reinforcing broader social inequalities and leading to negative psychological and social effects. Meanwhile, included consumers often overlook these disparities unless they themselves or someone close to them is directly affected, further perpetuating inequities in the marketplace.

~~This lays the foundation for our second hypothesis. Given that people tend to overlook exclusion unless it affects them or someone close to them, we propose that if the consumer is included by the brand, the exclusion of others may not significantly impact self brand connection.~~

~~H2: Consumers will report a similar self brand connection to brands that include them while excluding other consumers compared to brands that include both them and other consumers.~~

For brands

Victoria's Secret dominated the North American lingerie market until the mid-2010s, ensuring its position as the leading brand with over a thousand stores across the United States (Majumdar et al., 2025). The brand's popularity at the time was largely driven by its aspirational branding, embodied by the Victoria's Secret Angels—supermodels who were predominantly thin and white. The brand's annual fashion show further captured public attention by featuring high-profile artists in its performances. Known for promoting a specific beauty ideal, Victoria's Secret cultivated a sense of "fantasy," a concept explicitly said by its former CEO (Majumdar et al., 2025).

However, as societal values shifted toward greater diversity and body positivity, Victoria's Secret faced growing criticism for sexism and racism, as well as for promoting harmful beauty standards and excluding women of different body types. The new generation prioritized comfort, inclusivity, diversity and feeling good in one's skin (Majumdar et al., 2025). By 2021, this shift was evident in consumption practices, with two-thirds of Americans stating that their values influenced their shopping choices and 59% expressing more loyalty to brands that promoted diversity and inclusion in their advertising (Majumdar et al., 2025).

Victoria's Secret lost its dominance in the market as sales declined throughout the late 2010s, leading to the closure of 240 stores since 2019. The brand's relentless promotion of mostly unattainable beauty standards, which contributed to negative mental health impacts, drove consumers toward more inclusive alternatives such as Aerie, Savage X Fenty, and ThirdLove. In response, Victoria's Secret announced a rebrand focused on inclusivity in 2021. However, it was met with skepticism, as the brand's history of exclusion cast doubt on the authenticity of its efforts, with some critics labelling it as "inclusivity washing." As a result, consumer engagement with the brand and its marketing strategies has declined (Feng, 2019; Majumdar et al., 2025).

Victoria's Secret is a real-life example of a formerly successful brand that experienced a decline due to its lack of inclusivity. The evolving consumer mindset highlights the importance of prioritizing inclusion, as brands that fail to do so risk losing relevance and facing consumer backlash. In contrast, brands that embrace inclusivity tend

to build stronger consumer relationships and long-term success. The following discussion examines the factors that contribute to this outcome.

Brands that prioritize inclusion are more likely to attract and retain marginalized consumers. By reflecting diverse identities in their messaging and offerings, brands can foster a more favourable public attitude (Harding & Humphreys, 2011). Inclusive representation increases the likelihood that consumers will engage with the brand, make purchases, and recommend it to others (Harding & Humphreys, 2011). Additionally, when consumers perceive a strong alignment between their identity and a brand, they develop greater loyalty, emotional attachment, and responsiveness to brand messaging (Licsandru & Cui, 2018). Consequently, inclusive brands benefit from stronger consumer advocacy, which enhances their reputation and market influence.

Conversely, brands that fail to include marginalized groups risk fostering negative attitudes. Consumers who have been underrepresented or misrepresented in the past often approach these brands with skepticism, particularly regarding product fit, which hinders the development of positive brand attitudes (D'Angelo et al., 2024). Additionally, misrepresentation can trigger consumer backlash, leading to frustration with the brand, reduced purchasing power, and a decline in market share (Licsandru & Cui, 2018). As such, exclusion is not a sustainable strategy for any brand aiming to gain widespread consumer approval.

Inclusion has proven to be an effective strategy in advertising campaigns. Brands that align with inclusive values are more likely to attract consumers who prioritize these issues in their purchasing decisions (Carvalho et al., 2023). For instance, studies have shown that featuring a diverse range of models, including both standard and plus-size, reduces body-focused anxiety and social comparison while simultaneously increasing body satisfaction, all without compromising product promotion (Clayton et al., 2017; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). This evidence demonstrates that brands can and should prioritize the well-being of consumers, thereby fostering positive brand attitudes while effectively marketing their products.

Victoria's Secret's decline illustrates the consequences of failing to adapt to shifting consumer values. Once dominant, the brand struggled as diversity and inclusivity became key market priorities, leading consumers to favour more diverse alternatives. While attempts at rebranding were met with skepticism, the broader trend highlights the power of inclusive marketing in fostering consumer loyalty and long-term success. Brands that embrace diversity strengthen their reputation and engagement, whereas exclusionary practices risk alienation and backlash.

Belonging

As highlighted earlier, inclusion plays a pivotal role in shaping the brand-consumer relationship. In the context of consumer behaviour and marketing, subjective social inclusion revolves around individuals' perceptions of being accepted and included – a concept closely tied to belongingness (Licsandru & Cui, 2018). To gain a deeper understanding of its impact on inclusivity in marketing, it is essential to further explore the notion of 'belonging' and its role in consumer behaviour.

Defining belonging

Belonging is defined as a cognitive and emotional experience of feeling accepted, valued, and connected to a social group or society (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Hirsch & Clark, 2018; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Licsandru & Cui, 2018). Belonging is characterized by two key attributes: *valued involvement*, which refers to the experience of feeling valued, needed, and accepted (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995), and *fit*, the perception that an individual's characteristics align with the system or environment (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

Since belonging is important for consumers, strategies have been developed to cultivate it. One such strategy is the *general-approbation path*, where people seek belonging by gaining admiration through association with attractive individuals and avoiding associations with embarrassing others to avoid negative reflection (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirsch & Clark, 2018). Another strategy is the *group-membership path*, where people seek to belong to a group they intentionally wish to join, whether due to shared

attributes, interests, identities, or simply the desire to be associated with that group (Hirsch & Clark, 2018).

Consumption practices are utilized as a means to belong in both the general approbation path and group-membership path. People acquire material goods to gain approval and acceptance by others (Chang & Arkin, 2002). For example, wealthy individuals may buy expensive goods to display their wealth and gain admiration for it (Braun & Wicklund, 1989). People also buy products to belong to a particular group, for example, players of a basketball team might prioritize Nike shoes since they are highly associated with the sport, or how members of the Kappa Kappa Gamma buy Burberry products and avoid Old Navy (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Hirsch & Clark, 2018; Jiang et al., 2015). Possessions and brands reflect social ties, serving as symbols of connection and identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Swaminathan et al., 2007). Consumption, therefore, plays a significant role in how individuals express their affiliation with their groups.

Therefore, valued involvement and fit, which grouped form belonging, are key factors in consumption decisions. They will mediate the effects of inclusion or exclusion on self-brand connection.

H2: Any changes made in H1 (self-brand connection) are mediated by belonging (fit and valued involvement).

Online Only – Another form of exclusion?

One common approach brands use to integrate diverse customers is offering a wide range of options (such as diverse shade ranges and sizes) online while presenting a more limited selection in-store. This reluctance to provide the full range of products in all retail locations is partly attributed to inventory management—storing certain items in warehouses rather than allocating limited retail space, for example (Dockterman, 2025). Some companies cite logistical and cost-related challenges, such as increased material use and production adjustments, as barriers to expanding their offerings (Dockterman, 2025).

However, underlying biases still influence decision-making, shaping which consumers have equitable access to products and services (Dockterman, 2025).

However, whether consumers perceive this practice as inclusive or exclusive remains unclear, with valid arguments supporting both perspectives.

The positive arguments, though limited, suggest that offering a diverse range of options online has certain benefits. Online shopping provides advantages such as convenience, accessibility, and the ability to avoid unpleasant interactions while offering personalized service through data analytics (Srivastava & Thaichon, 2022). Additionally, this approach can be considered a step forward, as it is arguably better than not offering diverse options at all.

However, limiting specific sizes or products to online shopping can contribute to feelings of exclusion for some consumers. For individuals who rely on in-store shopping for accessibility, convenience, or personal preference, the lack of in-person options can create barriers to participation in mainstream retail (Wertheim, 2021). The inability to try on items before purchasing can be particularly frustrating for those struggling to find inclusive options, reinforcing a sense of being overlooked by brands (Srivastava & Thaichon, 2022; Wertheim, 2021). Additionally, the absence of in-store assistance—such as employees who can provide guidance—further isolates consumers who may already feel marginalized in retail spaces (Wertheim, 2021). Research has shown that consumers from underrepresented groups advocate for expanded in-store availability, emphasizing the importance of equal treatment and access to the same shopping experiences as others (Hasham, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Further research is necessary to assess whether the online-only approach is sufficient in achieving brand inclusivity.

Because when consumers see their fit online only compared to other consumers that are included, they feel it is an unjust consumption experience, their self-brand connection would decrease compared to if they and other consumers were included in-stores. However, we suppose that while being included is better than online only, being excluded is worse than online only. This poses the following hypotheses:

H3: Consumers will report lower fit and valued involvement in brands that include them online only while including other consumers in-store and online (compared to the self and others being included in-store and online).

H4: Consumers will report lower self-brand connection to brands that only include them online only while including others in-store and online (compared to the self and others being included in-store and online).

As previously established, people tend to overlook the exclusion of others. We propose that included consumers will not be affected by whether others are included only online. Therefore, self-brand connection should remain unchanged regardless of whether others are included online while they themselves are fully included.

H5: Consumers will report similar self-brand connection to brands that include them in-store and online, while offering online only options to others (compared to the self and others included in-store and online).

Chapter 3

Methods

Participants

Participants ($N = 627$) were recruited on Prolific. On the survey platform, we requested that only women should be recruited. We removed participants who failed an attention check ($n = 250$), where they had to recall the shopping scenario they were assigned (i.e., *Which of the following best represents the scenario you were in: My concealer shade was not available from this brand; My concealer shade was only available online from this brand; My concealer shade was available both in-store and online from this brand; I don't remember*). Following exclusions, we were left with 377 participants (370 women, 3 men, 4 non-binary; 231 White, 58 Asian, 50 Black, 18 Hispanic, 12 bi-racial, 2 Middle Eastern and 2 Indigenous, 4 Other). The average age was 39.38 years old (SD = 13.3).

Procedure

After completing a consent form, the participants started the survey by selecting the skin shade that most accurately matched their skin tone among 16 shades. This would determine which concealer shades we showed participants to ensure they felt included or excluded.

Participants imagined they were shopping for a new concealer, and they came across ads online from the fictional brand named Velorre. Participants saw one of the ads in Figure 1. Namely, participants were randomized to one of five conditions: (1) the brand sells concealer in-store and online for the participants' skin tone but not other consumers' skin tones (self-included, others-excluded); (2) the brand sells concealer in-store and online for other consumers' skin tones but not the participant's skin tone (self-excluded, others-included); (3) the brand sells concealers in-store and online for all skin tones (self-included, others-included); (4) the brand sells concealers in-store and online for the participant's skin tone, and makes concealers for other consumers available online only (Self-Included, Others-Online Only), and (5) the brand sells concealers in-store and online

for other consumers' skin tones, and makes concealers for the participant's skin tone available online only (Self-Online Only, Others-Included).

Note that in Figure 1, conditions are labelled as if the participant had light skin. The same ads were shown to participants with dark skin tones but in different conditions. For example, ad 1 represents self-included, others excluded to light skin participants and self-excluded others included to dark skin participants.

Table 1

Fictional Advertisements Presented in the Survey

Ad 1 (Self-Included, Others-Excluded)	Ad 2 (Self-Excluded, Others-Included)
<p>Try the new concealer from Velorre. Only available at</p> <p>Glossary</p>  <p>In-store and online</p>	<p>Try the new concealer from Velorre. Only available at</p> <p>Glossary</p>  <p>In-store and online</p>
<p>Ad 3 (Self-Included, Others-Included)</p>	<p>Ad 4 (Self-Included, Others-Online Only)</p>
<p>Try the new concealer from Velorre. Only available at</p> <p>Glossary</p>  <p>Instore and online</p>	<p>Try the new concealer from Velorre. Only available at</p> <p>Glossary</p>  <p>Instore and online</p> <p>Online only</p>
<p>Ad 5 (Self-Online Only, Others-Included)</p>	
<p>Try the new concealer from Velorre. Only available at</p> <p>Glossary</p>  <p>In-store and online</p> <p>Online only</p>	

After being shown their assigned ad, participants were asked seven 7-point Likert scale questions about self-brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003); $\alpha = 0.962$). We also measured belonging using the valued involvement and fit with scales from (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995) a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 4(strongly agree). Based on a factor analysis (described in more detail below), not all items from the belonging scales were retained. The final belonging scales can be seen in Table 4 (appendix). The final valued involvement scale had 15 items ($\alpha = 0.964$), and the final fit scale had five items ($\alpha = 0.814$).

Finally, participants completed demographic measures and reported how typically difficult it is to find their shade when they shop for a concealer on a Likert 7-point scale. (1 = not at all difficult, 7 = very difficult). At the end of the survey, participants were thanked, and there was an open space for their comments.

Chapter 4

Results

Factor Analysis. Table 4 shows the factor analysis results (varimax rotation) on the belonging items (valued involvement and fit). Items were grouped into two factors. As it is a well-established scale, self-brand connection was not included in the factor analysis.

Table 2

Self-Brand Connection: Mean Scores Across Experimental Conditions

Variable	<i>M(SD)</i>					<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Self included - Others excluded	Self excluded Others included	Self included - Others included	Self included - Others Online Only	Self Online Only - Others Included		
Valued Involvement	2.12 (0.76)	2.21 (0.71)	2.07 (0.76)	2.06 (0.80)	2.13 (0.78)	.41	.80
Fit	2.99 0.58	2.88 (0.39)	2.96 (0.59)	2.98 (0.48)	2.86 (0.53)	1.09	.36
SBC	3.48 (1.68)	1.98 (0.99)	3.62 (1.51)	3.29 (1.66)	2.55 (1.31)	15.20	<.001

Belonging. We did not observe an effect of condition on valued involvement, $F(4, 372) = .41, p = .80$, or fit, $F(4, 372) = 1.09, p = 0.364$. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2.

Self-Brand Connection. We observed a significant effect of condition on self-brand connection, $F(4, 372) = 15.20, p < .001$. Post-hoc tests revealed that participants in the self-excluded others-included condition ($M = 1.98, SD = 0.99$) had lower SBC than

participants in any other condition, all $ts \geq .02$, all $ps < .003$. Participants in the self-online only, others-included condition ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.31$) also reported lower SBC than any condition where the self is included, all $ts \geq 3.024$, all $ps < .001$. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2 and plotted in Figure 1.

Mediation. Using self-included others-excluded as the referent condition, neither fit nor valued involvement mediated the effect of the condition on SBC. The full results are in Table 3.

Table 3

Mediation of Fit and Valued Involvement

	Fit		Valued Involvement	
	<i>ab</i>	95%CI	<i>ab</i>	95%CI
Self-Excluded, Others-Included	-.08	[-.29, .04]	-.01	[-.08, .03]
Self-Included, Others-Included	-.02	[-.18, .12]	.01	[-.04, .07]
Self-Included, Others-Online Only	-.01	[-.12, .12]	.01	[-.04, .07]
Self-Online Only, Others-Included	-.09	[-.23, .03]	.00	[-.06, .05]

Chapter 5

General Discussion

This study examines the effects of marketplace exclusion on self-brand connection. We find that consumers only notice exclusion when they are excluded, negatively impacting their self-brand connection to the advertised brand. However, if the consumer is included, the full or partial (i.e., online only) exclusion of others does not affect their self-brand connection. We also found that consumers prefer full in-store inclusion over online-only inclusion, but online-only is still better than not being included. However, brands should be aware that by offering partial inclusion online (vs. full inclusion) to a segment of their customers, they are making a trade-off and damaging their relationship with consumers. Full inclusion across all targeted consumer segments is the optimal strategy.

Contributions

This study makes several contributions. First, we provide insights into whether consumers care about the inclusion of others and how this influences their relationship with the brand. Specifically, we examined self-brand connection to determine if it would be negatively affected when consumers see themselves included while another segment is excluded. One might assume that people align their purchasing decisions with their values and would, therefore, prefer inclusive brands (Rodgers et al., 2019). However, existing literature suggests that individuals tend not to notice exclusion unless personally affected (Ferose, 2017; Kimmelman, 2020; Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Our experimental findings support the latter perspective, confirming that self-brand connection is not significantly diminished when other consumer segments are excluded as long as the individual is included.

Second, we study a commonly used but understudied practice of making only extended (i.e., inclusive) product lines available online. Brands' rationale in offering certain products online is to expand their consumer reach online while avoiding the logistical challenges of stocking a complete product range in physical stores (Dockterman,

2025) . However, it was unclear whether this strategy effectively builds a positive relationship with the consumers who were excluded in-store but included online. This research was a first attempt at understanding how the practice of offering extended options online affects the brand-consumer relationship, specifically self-brand connection. The results demonstrate that including consumers online only is better than not including them at all, but it results in lower SBC than in-store inclusion. So, brands should act cautiously, understanding that offering products online only to a part of their consumer base will negatively affect their relationship.

Third, this study contributes to the marketing field by bringing a psychological approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We aimed to uncover the inner mechanisms at play when consumers—both included and excluded—engage with brands, focusing on belonging (fit and valued involvement) and self-brand connection. These psychological constructs provide deeper insight into how consumers form relationships with brands and how these relationships are influenced by inclusion or exclusion. A key finding is the role of socialization in shaping whether consumers notice the exclusion of others. Our results show that, in line with Western society's emphasis on individualism (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), consumers tend to prioritize their own inclusion and may remain unaware of others being excluded.

While rooted in the marketing context, this research also raises broader societal awareness of how passive exclusion often goes unnoticed unless personally experienced. This insight has implications beyond marketing, such as in policymaking, where decisions may inadvertently overlook excluded groups, or in social design, where equitable access to public spaces and technological tools is crucial. Understanding the psychological mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion can inform more inclusive approaches across all spheres of life.

Recognizing these dynamics is essential for brand managers, as they influence brand performance and consumer well-being. While exclusion negatively affects the excluded consumers' well-being and is noticed by them, results show that brands are safe in excluding people who are not their target customers. Brands should recognize that an

online-only approach can weaken their relationship with partially excluded consumers. Instead, they could specialize in specific consumer segments, tapping into the demand for products tailored to marginalized groups—for example, a cosmetics brand focusing exclusively on foundations for darker skin tones. However, this raises concerns about reinforcing exclusion in the marketplace. Since market segmentation influences the legitimization of groups in the social sphere (Lillqvist et al., 2017), a proliferation of specialized brands might reinforce the separation between the majority and marginalized consumers.

Table 4

Results of Hypothesis Testing

	Supported
H1: Consumers will report lower self-brand connection to brands that exclude them and include other consumers (vs. brands that include them and other consumers).	Yes
H2: Any changes made in H1 (self-brand connection) are mediated by belonging (fit and valued involvement).	No
H3: Consumers will report lower fit and valued involvement in brands that include them online only while including other consumers in-store and online (compared to the self and others being included in-store and online).	No
H4: Consumers will report lower self-brand connection to brands that only include them online only while including others in-store and online (compared to the self and others being included in-store and online).	Yes
H5: Consumers will report similar self-brand connection to brands that include them in-store and online, while offering online only options to others (compared to the self and others included in-store and online).	Yes

Limits

One major limitation of this research is that the scales used to measure belonging—specifically fit and valued involvement—did not mediate the effects of exclusion on self-brand connection. This highlights the need for future research to explore alternative mechanisms to better clarify the relationship between consumer exclusion and self-brand connection. For example, future research may examine consumers' emotional response to exclusion and how the evoked feelings influence the attachment to brands. The feelings could include resentment, aspiration, defiance, aversion, and anger.

Another limitation is the large proportion of respondents failing the attention check, reducing the valid responses by almost half (627 to 377). In subsequent research, to avoid this issue, the shopping conditions may need to be made more memorable.

Future Directions

These receding trends of DEI are especially concerning in light of our findings. If businesses do not suffer relational consequences from excluding consumers outside their target audience, there is no economic or social motive to continue offering products to a diverse range of customers. Given the role of the marketplace in legitimizing marginalized social groups (Epley & Waytz, 2010; Fiske, 1993; Lillqvist et al., 2017), a lack of diverse representation in products may have far-reaching consequences for DEI broadly.

Future research could examine the potential rise of niche brands exclusively serving marginalized consumers (e.g., brands offering only dark skin tone foundations or plus-size fashion). Our findings suggest these consumers do not mind shopping from brands that exclude majority groups. While these specialized brands could fill market gaps and foster deeper connections with their audience, future studies should also consider the broader implications for DEI: Could market segmentation undermine inclusion efforts by signalling that mainstream brands no longer need to cater to all consumers? This line of inquiry would further our understanding of how market dynamics shape social legitimacy and representation. From a broader perspective, it introduces the question that if brands

segment too much, could it normalize the idea that different groups should shop separately?

We suggest two future directions for this research. First, this research examines a specific facet of exclusion in retail — whether and how (in-store vs. online) the product is made available to consumers. Exclusion in retail could be further explored since many factors influence perceptions of exclusion in retail settings: the treatment of the employees, the configuration of the store (e.g., inclusive items at the back), and the accessibility of the store itself. More research is needed to understand which retailing factors truly make consumers feel excluded.

Second, this research focused on how inclusion and exclusion affect consumers' relationship to the brand. Nevertheless, there are other possible consequences of exclusion that merit further study. For example, the act of being excluded can lead consumers to feel that their self-worth and identity are being threatened, leading to frustration and anger towards the brand. Consumers may also experience anxiety to enter retailing environments where they fear being treated differently, or badly, by the sales employees due to stigma and prejudices. Marginalized consumers may worry about being ignored, scrutinized, dismissed, or subjected to stereotypes, stopping them from engaging in retail shopping. There are also the functional risks of being unable to test a product in-store, which is a crucial step when making a consumption decision. These consumers are also charged with logistical annoyances like having to buy the product, not knowing if it will fit and having to return it. In brief, retail shopping has a lot of emotional and practical considerations that can be obstacles to a seamless experience for the consumer.

Conclusion

This study finds that consumers only perceive exclusion when they personally experience it, which weakens their self-brand connection. While online-only inclusion is better than complete exclusion, it is still harmful to the consumer-brand relationship, making full inclusion the optimal strategy. This research contributes to the literature on DEI and on retailing practices like offering extended ranges online.

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Appendix 1 – CER Approval Copy



Comité d'éthique de la recherche

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE

La présente atteste que le projet de recherche décrit ci-dessous a fait l'objet d'une évaluation en matière d'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains et qu'il satisfait aux exigences de notre politique en cette matière.

Projet # : 2025-6104

Titre du projet de recherche : Consumer response to brand advertising

Chercheur principal : Alexandra Villon

Directeur/codirecteurs : Holly Howe, Professeur - HEC Montréal

Date d'approbation du projet : 16 septembre 2024

Date d'entrée en vigueur du certificat : 16 septembre 2024

Date d'échéance du certificat : 01 septembre 2025

Two handwritten signatures are shown side-by-side. The signature on the left is in cursive and appears to be "Maurice Lemelin". The signature on the right is also in cursive and appears to be "Holly Howe".

Maurice Lemelin
Président
CER de HEC Montréal

Signé le 2024-09-16 à 15:04

Appendix 2 – Consent Form

Consumer response to brand advertising

The following pages contain an anonymous questionnaire, which we invite you to complete. This questionnaire was developed as part of a research project at HEC Montréal.

Since your first impressions best reflect your true opinions, we would ask that you please answer the questions included in this questionnaire without any hesitation. There is no time limit for completing the questionnaire, although we have estimated that it should take about 3 minutes.

The information collected will remain strictly confidential. It will be used solely for the advancement of knowledge and the dissemination of the overall results in academic or professional forums.

The online data collection provider agrees to refrain from disclosing any personal information (or any other information concerning participants in this study) to any other users or to any third party, unless the respondent expressly agrees to such disclosure or unless such disclosure is required by law.

Please note that the following is automatically collected by the survey software: Worker ID, IP address, approximate geolocation. Although it is not the intent of the research team to do so, collecting your Worker ID means that information you provide in this survey could be linked to other responses you provide in other surveys.

De-identified data from this experiment (i.e., data without personal identifiers like your Worker ID, IP address, approximate geolocation, or any additional identifying details you provide) may be published on open science websites.

You are free to refuse to participate in this project and you may decide to stop answering the questions at any time. By completing this questionnaire, you will be considered as having given your consent to participate in our research project and to the potential use of data collected from this questionnaire in future research.

You may end the study at any time by exiting out of the browser window. You will not be paid for studies you do not complete.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the researcher, Alexandra Villon, at the email address indicated below, or contact her supervisor Holly at holly.howe@hec.ca.

HEC Montréal's Research Ethics Board has determined that the data collection related to this study meets the ethics standards for research involving humans. If you have any questions related to ethics, please contact the REB secretariat at (514) 340-6051 or by email at cer@hec.ca.

Thank you for your valuable cooperation!

Alexandra Villon

M.Sc. Marketing

HEC Montréal.

alexandra.villon@hec.ca

Holly Howe

Assistant Professor

HEC Montréal

holly.howe@hec.ca

Appendix 3 – Qualtrics Survey

Q1 Shade: Before we begin, please indicate which shade of make-up you feel best matches your skin tone.

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Q2 Ads: Imagine that you are shopping for a new concealer and you see the following ad online.

If Condition = Self Included-Others Excluded and skin tone = light
Or skin tone = dark and Condition = Self Excluded-Others Included

**Try the new concealer from
Velorre. Only available at**

Glossary



In-store and online

If skin tone = light and condition = Self Excluded-Others Included
Or Condition = Self Included-Others Excluded and skin tone = dark

**Try the new concealer from
Velorre. Only available at**

Glossary



In-store and online

If skin tone = light and condition = Self Included-Others Online Only
Or Condition = Self Online Only-Others Included and skin tone = dark

**Try the new concealer from
Velorre. Only available at**

Glossary



Instore and online

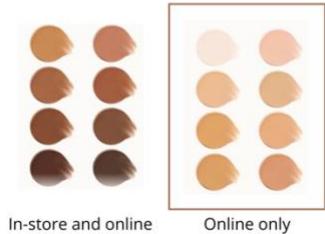


Online only

If skin tone = light and condition = Self Online Only-Others Included
Or Condition = Self Included-Others Online Only and skin tone = dark

**Try the new concealer from
Velorre. Only available at**

Glossary



In-store and online

Online only

If skin tone = light and condition = Self Included-Others Included
Or Condition = Self Included-Others Included and skin tone = dark

**Try the new concealer from
Velorre. Only available at**

Glossary



Instore and online

Q3 Self-Brand Connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003)

On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means "not at all" and 7 means "very much", please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

Scale endpoints: With 7-point scale (likert) where 1 = not at all and 7 = very much.

1. Brand X reflects who you are (not at all/extremely well).
2. You can identify with Brand X (not at all/extremely well).
3. You feel a personal connection to Brand X (not at all/very much so).
4. You (can) use Brand X to communicate who you are to other people (not at all/extremely well).
5. You think Brand X (could) help(s) you become the type of person you want to be (not at all/extremely well).
6. You consider Brand X to be "you" (it reflects who you consider yourself to be or the way that you want to present yourself to others) (not "me"/ "me").
7. Brand X suits you well (not at all/extremely well).

Q4 Belonging – Valued Involvement (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995)

On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is you strongly disagree and 4 you strongly agree, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

1. I often wonder if there is any place on earth where I really fit in.
2. I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends.
3. I would describe myself as a misfit in most social situations.
4. I generally feel that people accept me.
5. I feel like a piece of a jig-saw puzzle that doesn't fit into the puzzle.
6. I would like to make a difference to people or things around me, but I don't feel that what I have to offer is valued.
7. I feel like an outsider in most situations.

8. I am troubled by feeling like I have no place in this world.
9. I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family.
10. In general, I don't feel a part of the mainstream of society.
11. I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it.
12. If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral.
13. I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.
14. I don't feel that there is any place where I really fit in this world.
15. I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are usually around me.
16. I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them.
17. I feel left out of things.
18. I am not valued by or important to my friends.

Q5 Belonging – Fit (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995)

On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is you strongly disagree and 4 you strongly agree, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

1. It is important to me that I am valued or accepted by others.
2. In the past, I have felt valued and important to others.
3. It is important to me that I fit somewhere in this world.
4. I have qualities that can be important to others.
5. I am working on fitting in better with those around me.

6. I want to be a part of things going on around me.
7. It is important to me that my thoughts and opinions are valued.
8. Generally, other people recognize my strengths and good points.
9. I can make myself fit in anywhere.

Thank you for your participation, now we just have a few questions about you.

Q6 Gender: What gender do you most identify with?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary (3)
- Prefer to self-describe (4)

Q7 Age: What is your age in years?

Q8 Concealer: When you shop for concealer, how difficult is it for you to find your shade?

	Not at all difficult (1)	2	3	4	5	6	Very difficult (7)
Finding your shade is usually...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q9 Race: Which race do you most identify with?

- Hispanic or Latino
- Caucasian / White
- Black / African American
- Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern or Arab
- Native American or Indigenous
- Multi- or bi-racial
- Other or Prefer to self-describe

Q10 Attention Check: Which of the following best represents the scenario you were in:

- My concealer shade was not available from this brand
- My concealer shade was only available online from this brand
- My concealer shade was available both in-store and online from this brand
- I don't remember

Q11 Thank you for participating in this study, please leave any comments you may have (not required)

Appendix 4 – Factor Analysis

Table 5

Factor Loading – Scale Items

Item	Factor loaded	Included in a final scale?	Factor
I often wonder if there is any place on earth where I really fit in.	0.774	Yes	Valued Involvement
I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends.	0.815	Yes	Valued Involvement
I would describe myself as a misfit in most social situations.	0.817	Yes	Valued Involvement
I generally feel that people accept me.	-0.584	No	N/A
I feel like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle that doesn't fit into the puzzle.	0.856	Yes	Valued Involvement
I would like to make a difference to people or things around me, but I don't feel that what I have to offer is valued.	0.742	Yes	Valued Involvement
I feel like an outsider in most situations.	0.877	Yes	Valued Involvement
I am troubled by feeling like I have no place in this world.	0.798	Yes	Valued Involvement
I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family.	0.682	No	N/A
In general, I don't feel a part of the mainstream of society.	0.792	Yes	Valued Involvement
I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it.	0.788	Yes	Valued Involvement

If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral.	0.632	No	N/A
I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.	0.824	Yes	Valued Involvement
I don't feel that there is any place where I really fit in this world.	0.819	Yes	Valued Involvement
I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are usually around me.	0.718	Yes	Valued Involvement
I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them.	0.717	Yes	Valued Involvement
I feel left out of things.	0.830	Yes	Valued Involvement
I am not valued by or important to my friends.	0.724	Yes	Valued Involvement
It is important to me that I am valued or accepted by others.	0.804	Yes	Fit
In the past, I have felt valued and important to others.	0.626	No	N/A
It is important to me that I fit somewhere in this world.	0.802	Yes	Fit
I have qualities that can be important to others.	0.769	No	N/A
I am working on fitting in better with those around me.	0.693	Yes	Fit
I want to be a part of things going on around me.	0.768	Yes	Fit
It is important to me that my thoughts and opinions are valued.	0.674	Yes	Fit

Generally, other people
recognize my strengths and
good points.

0.639

No

N/A

I can make myself fit in
anywhere.

-0.582

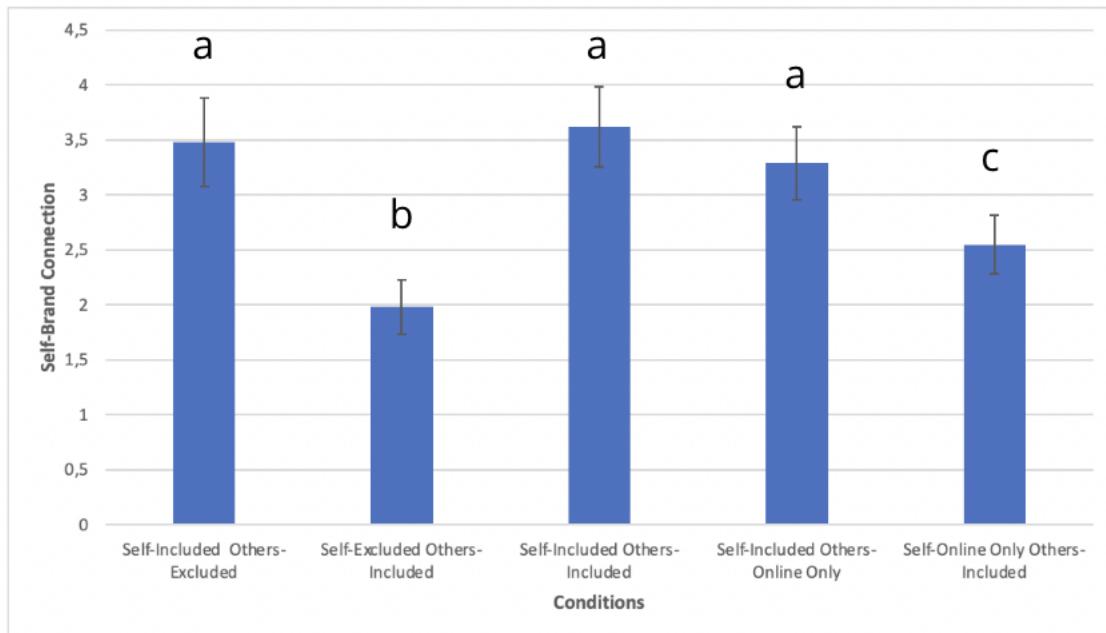
No

N/A

Appendix 5 – SBC Means and Error Bars

Figure 1

Self-Brand Connection Means and Error Bars



Appendix 6 – AI Declaration

As part of this project creation, I used artificial intelligence as an assistance tool for:

Translation and correction

AI was used to help review and improve the quality of my translation from French. This step was used to guarantee the quality of my sentences, while keeping my own ideas and way of writing.

Writing clarity

AI was also used to help improve sentence structures and ensure coherence and fluency throughout the text.

Limits and responsibilities

The development of ideas and final decisions remained entirely my own. AI was used solely to assist the writing process, without influencing the substance of the analysis or reasoning.

OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT (version GPT-4.0). [Correct this text]. <https://chatgpt.com/>

OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT (version GPT-4.0). [Translate this paragraph].
<https://chatgpt.com/>

OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT (version GPT-4.0). [Improve the flow of this sentence].
<https://chatgpt.com/>