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DIGITAL CONSUMERISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The article examines the transformation of consumer communication in the digital age and the role of social media in shaping qualitatively new types of communities around brands. The relevance of the study is determined by fundamental changes in social ties and identity under digitalisation when traditional institutions lose their monopoly on community formation, and brands increasingly assume functions of creating meanings, values, and rituals, which is particularly significant in the context of post-secular society. The research hypothesis is that brand communication strategies on social media evolve from instrumental to sacred, borrowing elements of religious discourse to form a deep emotional connection with the audience, leading to brand communities as a new form of sociality. The methodology is based on discourse analysis of social media content (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook), content analysis of marketing communications of leading brands (Nike, Apple, Starbucks, Glossier), and secondary analysis of sociological data on consumer behaviour in the digital environment. The results show that modern brands use communication strategies (storytelling, gamification, unique symbolism, co-creation) aimed at ritualising consumption and forming emotional attachment.

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ЦИФРОВИЙ КОНСЬЮМЕРИЗМ У ФОРМУВАННІ ВІРТУАЛЬНИХ СПІЛЬНОТ

Висвітлено результати дослідження трансформації споживчої комунікації в цифрову епоху та ролі соціальних мереж у формуванні якісно нових типів спільнот навколо брендів. Актуальність визначається кардинальними змінами в характері соціальних зв'язків та ідентичності під впливом цифровізації, коли традиційні інститути втрачають монополію на формування спільнот, а бренди дедалі частіше перебирають на себе функції створення смислів, цінностей та ритуалів, що набуває особливої значущості в контексті постсекулярного суспільства. Висунуто гіпотезу, що комунікативні стратегії брендів у соціальних мережах еволюціонують від інструментальних до сакральних, запозичуючи елементи релігійного дискурсу для формування глибокого емоційного зв'язку з аудиторією, що призводить до виникнення бренд-спільнот як нової форми соціальності. Методологія дослідження ґрунтується на комплексному застосуванні дискурс-аналізу контенту соціальних мереж (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook), контент-аналізу комунікативних стратегій (сторітелінгу, гейміфікації, створення унікальної символіки, залучення до співтворчості), спрямованих на ритуалізацію споживання та формування емоційної прив'язаності, та вторинного аналізу соціологічних даних щодо споживчої



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It was revealed that brand communities function similarly to traditional communities: they have hierarchy, value system, rituals, symbolism, and moral responsibility. It is proved that marketing communications increasingly borrow religious rhetoric, reflecting a trend towards the sacralization of consumption in post-secular society, where consumption becomes a key tool for constructing identity, and brand choice becomes a way of self-presentation and finding like-minded people. Scientific novelty lies in the comprehensive analysis of digital consumerism as a socio-cultural practice, identification of mechanisms of borrowing religious rhetoric in marketing, and characterisation of brand communities as a new form of sociality in the digital age.

Keywords: digital consumerism, virtual communities, brand communication, social media, discursive practices, individuality.

JEL Classification: Z13, L82, O33.

поведінки у цифровому середовищі. Виявлено, що бренд-спільноти функціонують за законами маркетингових комунікацій провідних брендів (Nike, Apple, Starbucks, Glossier). Отримані результати засвідчують, що сучасні бренди використовують комплекс, подібний до традиційних спільнот: мають власну ієрархію, систему цінностей, ритуали, символіку та почуття моральної відповідальності. Доведено, що маркетингові комунікації дедалі частіше запозичують релігійну риторику, що відображає глибшу тенденцію до сакралізації споживання в постсекулярному суспільстві, де споживання постає як ключовий інструмент конструювання ідентичності, а вибір брендів стає способом самопрезентації та пошуку однодумців. Наукова новизна полягає в комплексному аналізі цифрового консьюмеризму як соціокультурної практики, виявленні механізмів запозичення релігійної риторики в маркетингу та характеристики бренд-спільнот як нової форми соціальності в цифрову епоху.

Ключові слова: цифровий консьюмеризм, віртуальні спільноти, бренд-комунікація, соціальні мережі, дискурсивні практики, особистість.

Introduction

In the digital age, consumer behaviour undergoes fundamental transformations. Social media platforms have transformed into spaces where brand loyalty takes on religious-like features: consumption rituals emerge, symbolic brand capital accumulates, communities of devoted followers form, and "sacred texts" appear as brand manifestos. The relevance of this study is determined by changes in the nature of social ties under digitalisation, when traditional institutions (religion, family, territorial communities) lose their monopoly on community formation, and brands assume functions of creating meanings, values, and rituals in a post-secular society (Khan et al., 2025; Efendioğlu, 2024). The problem addressed lies in insufficient understanding of communicative strategies used by brands to form virtual communities and their impact on social relations transformation.

The theoretical foundation is formed by Anderson's "imagined communities" concept (Anderson, 2006), which allows interpreting brand communities as new community types based on shared ideas and symbols, in which print capitalism gives way to digital media. Castells' "network society" theory (Castells, 2010) explains the changing nature of communication in the digital age, in which power concentrates through horizontal information flows. Bourdieu's forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) enable analysing brands as sources of symbolic values converting into social status

and identity. Campbell's "digital religion" (Campbell, 2013) provides a basis for analysing religious rhetoric borrowing, proposing the "third space" concept where religious practice and digital culture intersect (Zamora, 2025). Hepp's research on mediatization (Hepp, 2020) helps understand media as an environment for the formation of social relations. Muniz and O'Guinn's "brand communities" research (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) identifies three key markers: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Zhang et al., 2022). Bauman's "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) explains why brands become identity anchors in conditions of traditional social structures. Baudrillard's critique of "consumer society" (Baudrillard, 1998) analyses consumption as a system of signs and simulacra that structure social relations. Ritzer's "McDonaldization" (Ritzer, 2019) offers critical view of rationalization of consumption practices. Oldenburg's "third place" concept (Oldenburg, 1999) allows analysing brand stores and online spaces as informal social interaction sites performing functions similar to traditional public spaces (Chuang, 2020).

The aim is to identify and analyse communicative strategies used by brands in social media to form virtual communities and understand brand communities as a new form of sociality in the digital age. Tasks: analyse main communicative strategies; investigate ritualisation of consumption; identify mechanisms of borrowing religious rhetoric; characterise brand communities as a new social form; analyse consumption's role in identity construction.

The hypothesis is that brand communication strategies in social media evolve from instrumental to sacred, borrowing religious discourse elements (rituals, symbolism, unifying language) to form a deep emotional connection with the audience, leading to brand communities as a new social form.

Methodology: discourse analysis of social media content (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook) to identify communication strategies and rhetorical devices; content analysis of marketing communications of leading brands (Nike, Apple, Starbucks, Glossier) to systematise tools used; secondary analysis of sociological data on consumer behaviour in digital environment (Efendioğlu, 2024). Limitations relate to concentration on brands operating primarily in Western cultural context and analysis of social media popular in this region.

Contemporary research on digital consumption focuses mainly on the economic, behavioural, and communicative aspects of brand interactions, while the symbolic and quasi-religious dimension of these processes remains insufficiently conceptualised. There is a lack of a comprehensive interpretation of brand communities as forms of post-secular sociality that arise at the intersection of digital communication and the symbolic production of meanings. Thus, the research gap lies in the need to integrate approaches from social philosophy, media theory, and consumption studies to analyse the sacralization of brand communication.

The article consists of five main sections.

Section 1, "Communication strategies of brands in social media," analyses four key strategies – storytelling, gamification, creation of unique symbolism, and co-creation – that brands employ to form emotional connections and virtual communities, drawing on theories of network society, imagined communities, symbolic capital, and liquid modernity.

Section 2, "Ritualisation of consumption in the digital environment," examines three major digital consumption rituals – unboxing, purchase demonstration, and participation in brand events – and their social functions in creating shared experience, confirming status, strengthening community ties, and countering anomie in conditions of liquid modernity.

Section 3, "Religious rhetoric in marketing communications," investigates the borrowing of elements of religious discourse in brand communications, including belief, manifestos as sacred texts, stores as temples, rituals as religious practices, and ambassadors as apostles, revealing a trend toward the sacralization of consumption in post-secular society.

Section 4, "Brand communities as a new form of sociality," characterises brand communities through their key markers – shared consciousness, rituals, and moral responsibility – as well as their hierarchical structure, value systems, language, and symbolism, positioning them as new "imagined communities" that provide belonging and identity in the digital age.

Section 5, "Consumption as identity construction in the digital age," explores the role of consumption in self-presentation, social differentiation, and like-minded people search, analysing how symbolic capital acquired through consumption converts into social status while also addressing the risks of excessive dependence on consumer markers, identity fragmentation, and authenticity loss.

1. Communication strategies of brands in social media

Brands move from direct advertising to emotionally rich content, forming a sense of belonging. This transformation is due to consumer audience changes under information overload, becoming increasingly demanding and sensitive to communication authenticity. Social media creates an environment for forming long-term emotional connections beyond rational choice (Sohaib, 2025). This phenomenon is interpreted through Castells' "network society" (Castells, 2010), in which horizontal information flows form the basis of a new social structure, and brands act as nodes around which communities form.

Storytelling creates emotional narratives evoking audience response. Nike's strategy is based on overcoming and self-improvement narratives; Apple creates narratives around creativity and innovation. Storytelling transforms consumption from a purchase act into joining a value system and identity, forming "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006) around consumer narratives where shared stories create a sense of belonging.

Gamification uses game mechanics in non-game contexts, increasing audience engagement and creating positive emotional associations. Starbucks uses gamification through a loyalty program where customers

collect stars and earn levels; Nike Run Club turns running into a game with achievements, challenges, and social interaction, deepening consumer-brand connection (Zhu, 2025). Gamification creates shared experience becoming basis for community formation, resonating with Bauman's "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) where stable social structures are replaced by temporary but intensive shared experience forms.

Unique language and symbolism creation make brands stand out in an oversaturated information space. Recognisable slogans, hashtags and visual images become cultural elements uniting brand followers. #ShotOniPhone became a global movement where users share iPhone photos; "Just Do It" became a cultural meme beyond sportswear advertising. Unique symbolism functions as a belonging marker, allowing followers to recognise each other and demonstrate identity, interpreted through Bourdieu's symbolic capital concept (Bourdieu, 1986), where brand symbol possession and demonstration convert into social status.

Co-creation fundamentally changes brand-audience relationships. Consumers become active participants in brand creation through contests, flash mobs, user-generated content calls and crowdsourcing. Glossier built a strategy on community interaction, involving customers in product development and marketing campaigns (Zamora, 2025). LEGO Ideas allows fans to propose set concepts that with community support can be produced. Co-creation creates a shared brand ownership sense, a powerful community formation factor, demonstrating the dialectic of "rationalisation" and "irrationality" described by Ritzer (2019): formal rationality of gamified systems creates irrational emotional attachment (Khan et al., 2025). The key communication strategies employed by brands and their functions in community formation are summarised in *Table 1*.

Table 1

Communication strategies of brands on social media

Strategy	Content	Brand examples	Function in community formation
Storytelling	Creation of emotional narratives around brand	Nike (overcoming, self-improvement), Apple (creativity, innovation)	Formation of "imagined community" through shared values
Gamification	Use of game mechanics (points, levels, achievements)	Starbucks (loyalty program), Nike Run Club	Creation of shared experience, increased engagement
Unique symbolism	Creation of recognisable slogans, hashtags and visual images	#ShotOniPhone (Apple), "Just Do It" (Nike)	Marker of belonging, symbolic capital
Co-creation	Involving consumers in product and content creation	Glossier, LEGO Ideas	Sense of shared brand ownership, deepening loyalty

Source: compiled by the author.

Collectively, these four strategies – storytelling, gamification, unique symbolism, and co-creation – do not operate in isolation but rather reinforce each other, constructing a coherent communicative ecosystem around the brand. Storytelling provides the narrative foundation, gamification adds interactive engagement, symbolism offers recognisable markers of identity, and co-creation transforms consumers into active co-producers of brand meaning. This synergy shifts the consumer-brand relationship from a transactional exchange to a participatory cultural experience, wherein brand loyalty is no longer merely a matter of repeated purchases but of emotional investment and social belonging (Sohaib, 2025; Zhu, 2025). In this sense, brands function as nodes within Castells' (2010) network society, generating horizontal flows of meaning that connect geographically dispersed individuals around shared values and aspirations (Anderson, 2006). Moreover, by offering consumers opportunities to accumulate and display symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), these strategies lay the groundwork for the emergence of brand-centred communities that exhibit characteristics traditionally associated with kinship or religious congregations. However, this evolution also raises critical questions about the authenticity of such connections and the potential for consumer manipulation, which will be further addressed in the following sections. The emotional and symbolic bonds cultivated through these communicative practices inevitably give rise to new forms of consumer behaviour – most notably, the ritualisation of consumption, which becomes the focus of the next part of this study.

2. Ritualisation of consumption in a digital environment

Ritualisation reflects the transformation of consumption practices from utilitarian into symbolic and socially significant actions (Chuang, 2020). Rituals, as known from classical anthropological studies, strengthen social ties, confirm community belonging, and mark important life events. In a digital environment, consumption rituals take new forms while maintaining basic social functions.

Unboxing has become one of the most widespread consumption rituals. Thousands of YouTube videos demonstrate unpacking new products – from smartphones to cosmetics, from toys to luxury watches. Unboxing ritual has a clearly defined structure: packaging demonstration, opening, content review and first use. This ritual creates shared experience for the brand community, confirms the owner's status as the desired object owner, and serves as a social exchange form where viewers receive information and emotional satisfaction. For many brands, unboxing videos have become an important marketing tool, creating demand and fuelling interest in new products, illustrating Baudrillard's concept (Baudrillard, 1998) where signs and symbols become more important than material value.

Purchase demonstration on social media is another widespread ritual. Instagram, TikTok and Pinterest users regularly post photos of acquisitions

with descriptions, evaluations, and recommendations. This ritual performs a self-presentation function, allowing taste, status, lifestyle demonstration, and serves as a social interaction form where followers ask questions, give evaluations, and exchange opinions (Sohaib, 2025). For brands, user purchase demonstrations are extremely valuable content providing social proof of product quality and stimulating demand, representing conversion of consumption practices into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) where public consumption demonstration increases social status.

Participation in brand events becomes an important ritual for follower communities. Apple's annual new product presentations, Nike collection releases, Starbucks special promotions turn into events uniting thousands worldwide. These events have a ritual character: anticipation, synchronous observation (often through live broadcasts), discussion, purchase, demonstration, creating shared experience, strengthening community ties and confirming values, demonstrating how in the "network society" (Castells, 2010) mass rituals transform into synchronised online events preserving a socially integrating function of traditional rituals.

Ritualisation creates a sense of predictability in "liquid modernity" conditions (Bauman, 2000), giving consumption deeper meaning, turning it from simple need satisfaction into meaningful social practice, strengthening consumer identity by confirming belonging to a certain community and value system, acting as a compensatory mechanism countering anomie and social experience fragmentation (Zhang et al., 2022). The main types of digital consumption rituals, their manifestations, and social functions are systematised in *Table 2*.

Table 2

Digital consumption rituals and their functions

Ritual	Description	Examples	Social function
Unboxing	Video demonstration of unpacking a new product	YouTube, TikTok videos	Shared experience, status confirmation, social exchange
Purchase demonstration	Posting photos/videos of purchases on social media	Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest	Self-presentation, taste/lifestyle demonstration, social interaction
Participation in brand events	Synchronous observation and discussion of brand events	Apple presentations, Nike releases	Strengthening community ties, confirming shared values

Source: compiled by the author.

The ritualisation of consumption in the digital environment represents a profound transformation of consumer behaviour, wherein utilitarian acts of acquisition are elevated to culturally significant performances that serve both individual and collective functions. As the table illustrates, these rituals – whether unboxing, purchase demonstration, or collective brand event

participation – share common structural features: they are publicly performed, socially validated, and emotionally charged, thereby generating shared experiences that bind community members together (Chuang, 2020). This process resonates with Baudrillard's (1998) assertion that consumption increasingly operates as a system of signs rather than mere material exchange, with rituals acting as the grammar through which these signs acquire meaning and social value. Furthermore, the compensatory function of consumption rituals becomes particularly salient in Bauman's (2000) "liquid modernity," where the erosion of stable social structures leaves individuals searching for anchors of predictability and belonging – a void that brand rituals effectively fill (Zhang et al., 2022). However, the very success of these rituals raises critical questions about their authenticity and sustainability: when consumption practices are deliberately engineered by marketing departments to mimic organic social traditions, do they retain their capacity to generate genuine emotional connection, or do they risk devolving into hollow spectacles of simulated community? This tension between authentic sociality and manufactured experience points toward a deeper cultural logic at work – namely, the gradual sacralization of consumption itself, wherein brands increasingly borrow not only ritual forms but also the rhetorical and symbolic apparatus of religion. It is precisely this quasi-religious dimension of contemporary brand communication that warrants closer examination, and to which the following section now turns.

3. Religious rhetoric in marketing communications

Active borrowing of religious rhetoric and symbolism reflects a trend toward consumption sacralization in post-secular society, where traditional religious institutions lose monopoly on meaning formation, and brands increasingly take over these functions (Khan et al., 2025). Terminology associated with faith has become integral to marketing discourse. "Belief in brand," "loyalty," "devotion" acquire almost religious significance describing emotional consumer-brand connection. Most devoted followers are called "brand apostles" actively promoting the brand. This borrowing reflects brands' need to create a deep emotional connection that religion traditionally provided. Campbell's "digital religion" (Campbell, 2013) offers a framework for understanding "third space" where religious practice and digital culture intersect, creating new meaning-making forms (Zamora, 2025).

Brand manifestos function similarly to sacred texts, formulating values, mission, vision, creating meaning systems beyond utilitarian product characteristics. Nike's manifesto proclaiming sport, overcoming, victory values has inspired millions; Apple's manifesto proclaiming creativity, innovation, "thinking differently" values has formed an entire follower subculture. These texts can be seen as secular analogues of religious texts, offering moral code and life philosophy.

Brand stores are increasingly designed as temple-like spaces. Apple Store with minimalist design, spacious halls, attentive non-pressuring staff creates a sanctuary-like atmosphere where brand culture initiation occurs. Starbucks designs coffee shops as "third place" (Oldenburg, 1999) – a space between home and work for belonging, ritual and emotional support, paralleling religious building functions (Chuang, 2020), illustrating how in post-secular society, sacred moves from traditional religious spaces into consumption spaces.

Brand rituals like daily Starbucks visits, Nike Run Club runs and Apple technology updates acquire the signs of religious practice, structuring everyday life, creating predictability and stability and strengthening identity and community belonging. These rituals often have a collective character: shared viewing of new product presentations, social media discussions and participation in brand events. Religious rhetoric borrowing reflects deep societal transformation where traditional institutions lose influence while the need for meanings, values, rituals and community remains (Efendioğlu, 2024). Brands occupying niche vacated in secularisation process offer ready-made meaning systems and identities, representing "post-secular religiosity" form where sacred doesn't disappear but moves into new spheres, particularly consumption, resonating with Baudrillard's theses (Baudrillard, 1998) on consumption as new mythology. Hepp's mediatization concept (Hepp, 2020) helps understand how media become an environment for these transformations. The parallels between religious institutions and brand marketing are systematically outlined in *Table 3*, which juxtaposes elements of religious discourse with their marketing equivalents and corresponding functions.

Table 3

Signs of religious rhetoric in marketing communications

Element of religious discourse	Marketing equivalent	Example	Function
Faith	Belief in brand, loyalty	"I believe in Apple"	Formation of emotional connection
Apostles	Brand ambassadors, opinion leaders	Nike influencers	Spread of "faith" among new followers
Sacred texts	Brand manifestos	Nike manifesto, Apple manifesto	Formation of value system and guidelines
Temples	Brand stores	Apple store, Starbucks as "third place"	Space for rituals and shared interaction
Religious practices	Brand rituals	Daily Starbucks coffee, Nike Run Club	Structuring everyday life, strengthening identity

Source: compiled by the author.

The systematic adoption of religious rhetoric repositions brands as quasi-religious institutions that provide meaning, identity, and community in a post-secular society (Campbell, 2013; Efendioğlu, 2024). As the table demonstrates, this borrowing is neither accidental nor superficial; rather, it reflects a fundamental restructuring of how meaning is produced and

consumed in the digital age, with significant implications for both marketing practice and social theory.

4. Brand communities as a new form of sociality

Brand communities combine traditional community features (shared values, rituals, identity) with new sociality forms characteristic of the digital age (global character, territorial attachment absence, mediated communication) (Zhang et al., 2022). They function similarly to traditional communities while demonstrating unique features due to their virtual nature. Muniz and O'Guinn (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) identify three key markers: shared consciousness – deep connection feeling with other brand followers; rituals and traditions – shared practices reproducing brand history and culture; moral responsibility sense – readiness to help other members and facilitate new follower recruitment. These markers demonstrate that brand communities are not merely marketing constructs but authentic social formations satisfying fundamental human needs for belonging and identity.

Brand community structure often has a hierarchical character resembling traditional social group organisation. At the top of the hierarchy are brand ambassadors – selected representatives who officially represent the brand, participate in special events and receive exclusive offers. Next are opinion leaders (influencers) shaping public opinion about the brand and influencing consumer preferences. Active members regularly interact with the brand and other members, creating content and participating in discussions. Peripheral members consume content, occasionally interact but aren't active community members. This hierarchy creates social dynamics stimulating more active interaction and status raising, interpreted through Bourdieu's social capital concept (Bourdieu, 1986) (Sohaib, 2025).

The value system ensures community unity and identity. The brand formulates basic values that community members share. For the Apple community, values are creativity, innovation, simplicity, and design. For the Nike community – sport, overcoming, achievement, self-improvement. The Starbucks community unites around values of community, cosiness and coffee quality. These values aren't merely declared but constantly reproduced in communications, rituals, events, creating shared purpose and identity sense, resonating with Anderson's "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006), where shared ideas and values create a sense of belonging.

Language and symbolism function as belonging markers, allowing members to recognise each other and demonstrate identity. Recognisable logos, slogans, hashtags, jokes and memes become community culture elements. Knowledge of this language and symbolism confirms "insider" status and provides access to internal community communication, especially noticeable in brand-dedicated online forums using specific vocabulary understandable only to members, demonstrating how new cultural codes form in "network society" (Castells, 2010; Zhu, 2025).

Brand rituals strengthen social ties and confirm shared identity. Collective new product presentation viewing, post-purchase impression sharing, joint challenge participation, brand event celebration – all rituals creating shared experience and strengthening community. Brand communities provide members with a sense of belonging, support and shared identity. In conditions of traditional social ties fragmentation, individualisation, and anomie described by Bauman (Bauman, 2000), brand communities offer ready-made identity and social network, especially important for youth seeking meanings and communities. Shared consumption becomes a basis for social capital formation and mutual assistance networks beyond purely consumer relations (Khan et al., 2025).

5. Consumption as identity construction in the digital age

Consumption increasingly becomes key tool for constructing and demonstrating identity. This phenomenon has deep roots in the social nature of consumption, which has always served not only utilitarian but also symbolic functions. As Baudrillard notes (1998), consumption in the modern world is not merely the satisfaction of needs but a sign system that structures social relations and hierarchies. In the social media age, where self-presentation has become a central element of social interaction, the role of consumption in identity construction takes on particular significance (Efendioğlu, 2024).

Brand choice becomes a means of self-presentation and identity communication. Consumers choose brands that align with their self-image and how they wish to be perceived by others. Brands offer not just products but ready-made identities consumers can "try on" and present to others. Choosing Apple may signal creativity and innovation, selecting Nike indicates athletic spirit and determination, and driving a Tesla reflects environmental concern and technological progressiveness. On social media, this connection becomes more obvious as consumers regularly demonstrate purchases, forming a visual identity image, representing "imaginary" self-construction through consumer signs (Sohaib, 2025).

Lifestyle becomes an important marker of social differentiation. Food preferences (veganism, organic products), leisure activities (travel, fitness, yoga), fashion attitudes (vintage, sustainable fashion) – all lifestyle elements that shape identity and determine social group belonging. Social media creates space for lifestyle demonstration where consumption practices become a visual self-presentation basis, illustrating Bauman's "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) where identity becomes a project constantly reviewed and reconstructed through consumer choices (Zamora, 2025).

Search for like-minded people through shared consumer preferences becomes an important social tie formation mechanism. Communities of fans of certain brands, musical groups, series and hobbies unite people with no other contact points. Shared consumption becomes the basis for communication, experience exchange, and friendship formation, especially

important for youth seeking communities where they can be understood and accepted, demonstrating how new sociality forms based on shared consumer interests emerge in "network society" (Castells, 2010; Chuang, 2020).

Bourdieu (1986) explains how symbolic capital acquired through consumption converts into social status and identity. Brands become symbolic capital that consumers can accumulate, demonstrate, and exchange in social space. In the digital age, social media creates a platform for this conversion where likes, comments, and shares serve as a social recognition form, creating a new symbolic exchange economy where consumption practices directly affect social status (Zhang et al., 2022).

Identity construction through consumption has risks: excessive dependence on consumer markers, identity fragmentation and social norm pressure. Social media creates a space where consumption practices are constantly under audience scrutiny, potentially causing anxiety, insecurity, envy. Ritzer (2019) warns against "irrationality of the rational" – dehumanisation and authenticity loss from excessive rationalisation and standardisation. Baudrillard's critique (1998) acquires new relevance where simulacra and signs play an increasing role and genuine social ties may be replaced by consumer simulations.

Conclusions

The research confirmed the hypothesis that brand communication strategies evolve from instrumental to sacred, borrowing religious discourse elements to form a deep emotional connection, leading to brand communities as a qualitatively new form of sociality in the digital age. The analysis yields the following original conclusions, which constitute the author's independent scientific contribution to understanding digital consumerism.

First, the study identifies four key communicative strategies that brands employ to transform consumer relationships: storytelling, which constructs emotional narratives that transcend product functionality; gamification, which leverages interactive engagement to deepen participation; unique symbolism, which functions as a marker of belonging and identity; and co-creation, which repositions consumers from passive recipients to active participants in brand meaning production. These strategies do not operate in isolation but form an integrated ecosystem that systematically shifts consumer-brand interaction from transactional exchange to participatory cultural experience. The effectiveness of this integrated approach lies in its capacity to appeal not to rational economic choice but to fundamental human needs for meaning, belonging, and recognition – needs that traditional institutions increasingly fail to satisfy in the contemporary digital environment.

Second, the investigation of consumption rituals reveals that practices such as unboxing, purchase demonstrations, and collective brand event participation have evolved from individual consumer behaviours into culturally significant social performances. These rituals serve multiple

functions: they create shared experiences that bind community members together, confirm individual status within the community hierarchy, facilitate social exchange and recognition, and provide a sense of predictability and stability in conditions of social fragmentation. The ritualisation of consumption represents a compensatory mechanism whereby individuals counter anomie and identity uncertainty by embedding their consumer choices within meaningful, socially validated practices. This transformation elevates consumption from a utilitarian act of need satisfaction to a symbolic practice that structures everyday life and reinforces social belonging.

Third, the analysis of religious rhetoric in marketing communications demonstrates that brands systematically borrow not only isolated elements but the entire semiotic apparatus of religious discourse – faith language, manifestos as sacred texts, stores as temples, rituals as religious practices, and followers as apostles. This borrowing is neither incidental nor merely metaphorical; it reflects a profound cultural shift wherein brands increasingly assume functions traditionally performed by religious institutions, including the provision of meaning systems, moral frameworks, collective identity, and a sense of community belonging. In the context of post-secular society, where traditional religious authority has waned, but the human need for transcendence and meaning persists, brands have occupied this cultural vacuum by offering secular forms of religiosity organised around consumption. This process of sacralization represents a fundamental transformation in how contemporary societies produce and consume meaning.

Fourth, the characterisation of brand communities as a new form of sociality reveals that these formations exhibit structural and functional features traditionally associated with kinship groups, religious congregations, or territorial communities – including hierarchical organisation, shared value systems, distinctive language and symbolism, collective rituals, and moral responsibility among members. However, brand communities simultaneously demonstrate unique characteristics that distinguish them from traditional social formations: they are globally dispersed, digitally mediated, voluntarily chosen rather than ascribed, and organised around shared consumption practices rather than inherited identities. This combination of traditional community functions with novel organisational forms makes brand communities particularly effective at satisfying the need for belonging and identity in conditions where traditional social structures have fragmented. They represent not merely marketing constructs but authentic social formations that address fundamental human needs in the digital age.

Fifth, the examination of consumption's role in identity construction establishes that brand choice, lifestyle expression, and consumption practices have become primary tools for self-presentation, identity communication, and the search for like-minded others in the digital environment. Consumers use brands as symbolic resources to construct and project identities, signal social status, and navigate complex social landscapes. Social media platforms amplify this function by providing spaces where consumption practices become publicly

visible and socially validated through likes, comments, and shares. While this process empowers individuals with unprecedented opportunities for creative self-expression and community formation, it also entails significant risks: excessive dependence on consumer markers may lead to identity fragmentation, social anxiety, and the substitution of genuine social ties with consumer simulations. The line between authentic community and manufactured consumer experience becomes increasingly blurred, raising ethical questions about the manipulation of human needs for commercial purposes.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive analysis of digital consumerism as a socio-cultural practice that extends beyond economic exchange into the realms of meaning production, identity construction, and community formation. The identification of religious rhetoric borrowing mechanisms in marketing, the characterisation of brand communities as a distinct form of post-secular sociality, and the application of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining sociological, anthropological, and communication perspectives collectively constitute an original contribution to understanding contemporary consumer culture.

The practical value of these findings extends to multiple domains. For marketers and brand managers, understanding the mechanisms of ritualisation and sacralization enables more conscious and ethically responsible approaches to communication strategy development, moving beyond manipulative practices toward authentic dialogue and meaningful consumer engagement. For researchers, this study provides a theoretical foundation for further investigation of social relations transformation under digitalisation, particularly regarding the intersection of consumption, identity, and community. For policymakers and educators, the findings highlight the need for critical media literacy that enables consumers to recognise and evaluate the quasi-religious dimensions of brand communication.

Future research prospects include comparative analysis of brand communities across different cultural contexts – particularly between Ukraine and Western countries – to identify culturally specific patterns of consumption sacralization; investigation of emerging technologies' impact, including virtual reality and augmented reality, on consumer communication and community formation; examination of the ethical dimensions and psychological consequences of consumption sacralization for consumer well-being; and exploration of brand communities' potential as sites for social capital formation and civic engagement beyond purely commercial relationships.

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