



Language of Identity & Choice

March 2024



How we define our identities—to ourselves and to others—is made up of a million different little attributes. Some of them you're born with, others reflect the preferences and decisions you've made throughout your life. For some people, their identities are primarily formed by painful experiences. For others, they attach joy and pride to them. How we describe ourselves, and how we *feel* about these descriptions can completely color our views of the world.

As brands, we often rely heavily on identifying consumers in two-dimensional ways: demographics and purchase behavior. But this ignores all the complexities people deal with on a daily basis when it comes to who they are and what they need.

True cultural resonance lies in bridging this gap: between how regular humans describe themselves and how brands see and speak to them.

At Starcom, we sought to build a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which people define themselves and how we can better meet the ways in which they want brands to speak to them.



Our Methodology

We set out to get a true grasp of the nuances of identities beyond the checkbox, the Census demographic, the buying demo. To do this, we partnered with MESH to survey 1,000 Millennial and Gen Z consumers to understand the factors that determine their identity and the extent to which those identities impact how they experience brands. We oversampled for minority identities to get a better grasp for how these identities impacted lives and self perceptions.

We then augmented this using semiotic analyses: We asked dozens of Americans to speak about their identities and the ways those identities influence how they navigate the world.

To bring our clients a better sense of the attitudes and needs of their consumer audiences, we have evolved this research into a practice centered around inclusivity in our understanding of people, business and culture.

I am...

“...24, smart, a bit awkward, fun, stylish, funny, creative, kind, short.”

“...a Generation Z member, conflicted, exhausted, impatient, depressed, bored.”

“...gay, bold, caring, loved, creative, growing, learning, happy, strong.”

“...a Christian, a new father, a husband, a problem solver, employed, excellent at math, a good soccer player, a fan of Manchester United.”

“...genuine, funny, confused, hopeful, loyal, loving, intelligent, queer, objective.”

“...not a stereotype, an individual, a hard worker, a caring person, a friend to animals, a good sister, an amazing daughter, an attentive girlfriend, a good athlete, smart.”

Dimensions of Identity

While academics have nuanced social models to understand each of these dimensions, our research showed that everyday Americans tend to think of their identities in three broad categories, each of which tells us something vital about identity:

DIMENSION

KEY INSIGHT

My Ideas

The attitudes and beliefs that form **how we see the world** (e.g. values, personality, political beliefs)

Identity is fluid.

My Origins

The intrinsic characteristics that form **how the world sees us** (e.g. race, ethnicity, age, hometown)

“Gen pop” is an illusion.

My People

The affinities and subcultures that help us find **our place in the world** (e.g. hobbies, religions, fandoms)

Identity can be both isolating and unifying.

1 My Ideas

Identity is fluid.

Our identities are dynamic, always changing. The experiences we have, the messaging we see, the people we surround ourselves with mold how we see ourselves and others.



“Identity is who you choose to be as an individual, the choices you make.”

-Female, Multi-Ethnic, Age 34

“I feel like talking and engaging with others makes me realize how I’m different from everyone else, and how I decide for myself who I am by how I speak, interact, or just hang out with them. Your identity really is shaped by how you interact with others...Identity is often decided and ‘figured out’ by people as they grow up and mature as a human being.”

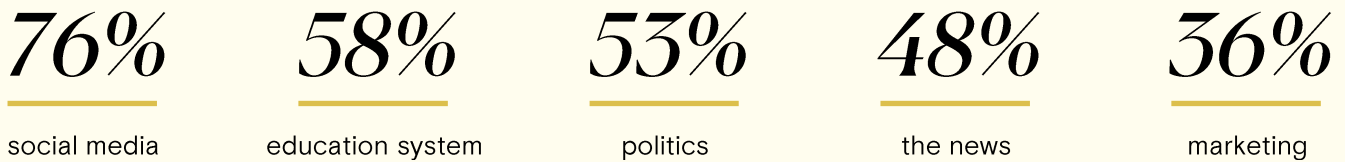
-Male, Asian, Age 18

We've seen the following in pretty much every holiday movie: The adult children come back to the family home, only to all fall back into the roles and patterns they occupied when they were kids. So often, we assume folks we meet are always going to be the same, but people rarely ever are. Particularly when it comes to the parts of our identity that are based in our personalities and attitudes, we're always changing.

“I think culture is something that can be predetermined at birth, however your ethnicity is something that is constantly growing and changing as you get old...I’m constantly evolving and finding who I am meant to be.”

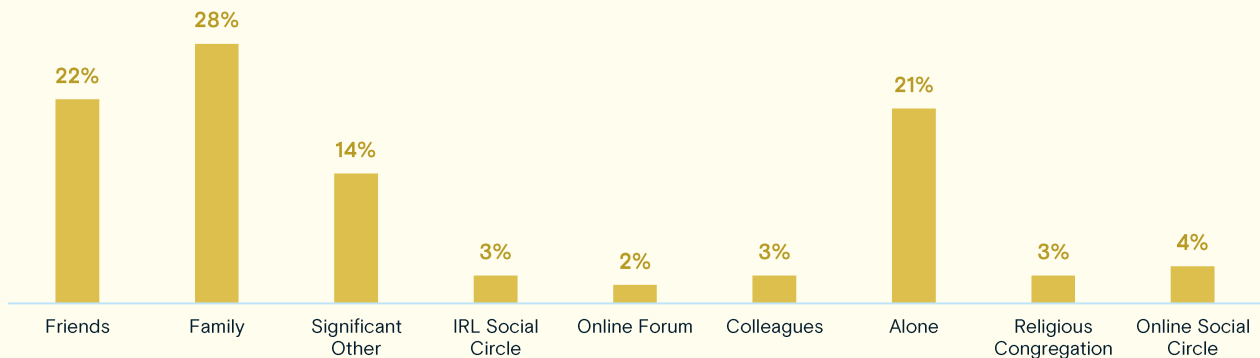
-Male, Black, Age 20

Our opinions—and thus our identities—are shaped by the people we meet, the media we consume, and any number of other factors. And these factors cause us to change our minds and our identities throughout our lives. People in our study cited the following as top influences on their identities:



Furthermore, our attitudes and beliefs can often be circumstantial. In other words, our identity can change just based on the room we're in. Our study found people felt differently about themselves and their personalities depending on whom they were with: IRL friends vs. family vs. online communities vs. alone, etc.

With whom people feel most authentic/confident:



It's not just comfort level that changes, either. Depending on the situation, different parts of someone's identity can become more or less important. For example, a person might not identify as a soccer player until they're at a bar with their rec league soccer team.

The new Apple AirPods Pro



In a category where most brands boast about deep bass and superior clarity, Apple switched tactics in 2023 with its “Quiet the Noise” spot advertising the AirPods Pro. The brand recognized its target audience was increasingly identifying as introverted, and spoke to this change by showcasing noise-canceling effectiveness rather than sound quality.

Brand Takeaway

Identities may be constantly evolving, but audience definitions are often static. We can speak to this evolution by regularly reevaluating the composition, values and needs of our audiences. And we should also consider our own role in shaping the identities of their consumers.

2 My Origins

“Gen pop” is an illusion.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Our demographic identities impact our access to, opinions of, and experience using products and services in a myriad different ways.



“I think that the media and marketing should help portray people’s identities not necessarily in accordance with stereotypes and the norms, but rather according to more specific traits, such as maybe a love of exercise or eating good food, rather than race, gender or more broad traits.”

-Female, Asian, Age 16

“As a teenager, it’s so hard to get people to not classify me as a child even though I’m practically an adult. It’s important to me for people to take me and my thoughts and opinions seriously...People make a lot of assumptions based on my age and appearance. Being Native but appearing white can create difficulty. And I get really tired of Millennial assumptions.”

-Female, Native/Indigenous, Age 15

Demographic identity markers can make a huge difference in how people perceive themselves and the people around them. Our race can inform our priorities, the language we speak and the stereotypes people have about us. Where we live can have a bearing on the cultural references that resonate with us. Our gender can impact the types of products and services we might need. And in the case of age/generation, it can even impact just how many experiences we've had at all.

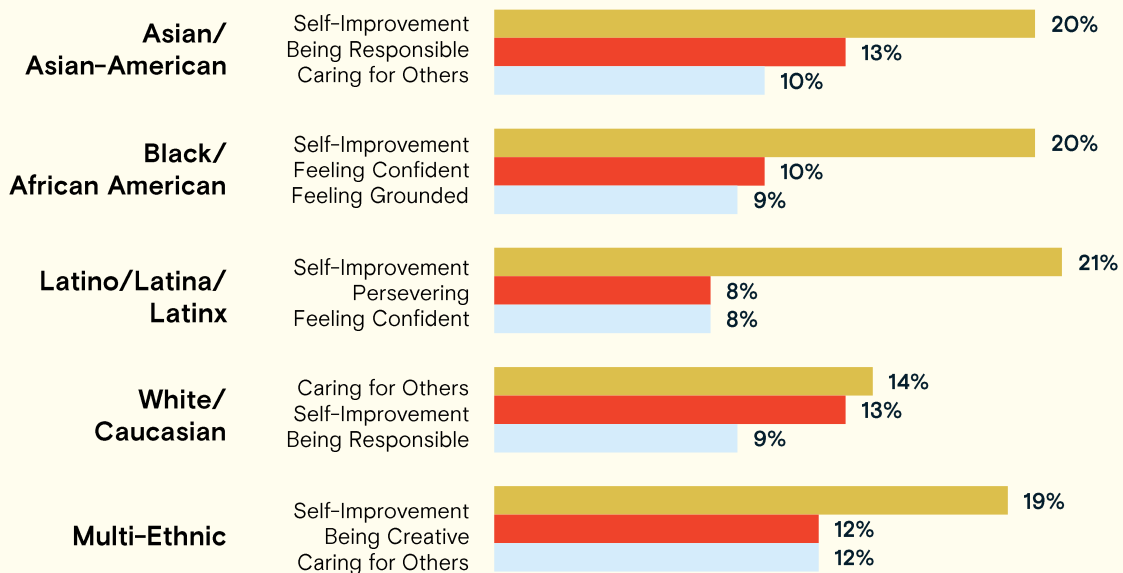
“Marketing should stop focusing on monocultures of people and focus on the multitude and diverse features of a person/community.”

-Survey Respondent

The bottom line is, people have different journeys to get to where they are. Their backgrounds—age race, birthplace, etc.—impact how they see themselves and the world. When we use a “gen pop” audience strategy, we are artificially collapsing all these disparate experiences into one and assuming everyone’s experience is more or less the same. The end result is often a campaign that speaks to the lowest common denominator. At best, it ignores minority experiences. At worst, it alienates everyone.

Multicultural campaigns are often a way of addressing the gen pop issue. It’s a good start, but every race and ethnicity can carry with it unique traditions, histories and motivators. Our study found significant differences between each race and ethnicity when it came to their top motivators in life.

Top Life Motivators by Race



And even if a multicultural campaign addresses the needs of many, it often doesn’t speak to other ways in which people’s demographic identities can be ignored or marginalized. These campaigns don’t address potentially important needs along the lines of gender, disability status or other aspects of demography. It can be more effective to group people based on what they need from a brand rather than what their demographic identity is.



Sometimes people with different identities don't actually need special attention. For example, Walgreens' women's earplugs create a gendered experience where one isn't needed. And when they are needed, it's important to show sustained commitment to supporting these identities. Nike's BeTrue Pride collection is part of a long-standing effort to speaking to LGBTQ+ audiences that has lasted over a decade.

Brand Takeaway

When we speak to specific, underrepresented identities, we can improve resonance by considering all of the factors that might impact a person's history with our brand and category to determine who might need unique attention and whose experiences might be more similar than we expect.

3 My People

Identity can be both isolating and unifying.

Too often, we use identity to isolate and discriminate. But identity can also unite people and create community over shared interests.



“My identity is unique to me because no one else can be me except me. Therefore, being the best version of myself sets me apart from everyone else. Identity is unique to a person or a group. It is used to identify and differentiate from others.”

-Female, Black, Age 21

“If you don’t embrace your differences, you can never be fully connected to your identity. These differences might not be your best characteristics, but like it or not, they’re [some] of the most crucial parts of the identity...Culture brings people together, while identity separates people.”

-Female, Multi-Ethnic, Age 24

Often, the parts of our identities that are the most important, are the ones that we see as being the biggest liability in society. In other words, the parts of us that we feel get judged or discriminated against, are the parts of us that are most integral to defining who we are. For example, respondents who identified as Black found their race to be a more important component of their identity than others. The historic—and continued—experiences they faced as a result of their race in turn impacted how they saw themselves. We saw similar patterns with marginalized groups along other lines as well, like sexual orientation and gender identity.

58%

of people who described themselves as “queer” had negative associations with their identity.

VS.

18%

of people who described themselves as heterosexual had a negative association with their identity.

Our study found that often people identify themselves using what they feel sets them apart from others: a physical disability, a minority ethnicity, a niche interest, an uncommon belief. In fact, to a lot of people, their identity is the set of characteristics that makes them unique.

“I think uniqueness and your personal identity go hand in hand with one another. You are often identified for the things that make you unique.”

-Female, Asian, Age 25

“[Being unique] is the thing that sets me apart and makes me me. Those differences are MY identity, and stand separately from aspects that were influenced by societal pressures and familial indoctrination.”

-Female, Black, Age 29

For brands, this can be daunting: While we endeavor to give people personalization whenever possible, brand experiences can't be bespoke for every single consumer we hope to reach. This is where community-oriented attributes can be particularly useful.

These identity markers are, almost by definition, communal. These are traits we cite when trying to find people who like doing the same things as us: the hobbies we share, the congregations we belong to, the groups we're part of. These components of our identity actually serve to unite people together instead of divide them based on differences. People in our survey identified as gamers, Christians, Democrats, music enthusiasts, foodies and hockey fans. They described themselves as animal lovers, crafters, bookworms and athletes. Yes, all of these are components of what makes someone unique. But they're also ways in which they reach out to the world to find others like them.

Brands that tap into the subcultures, fandoms and mutually shared activities their audiences care about can become relevant not because they're speaking to what is trending, but because they are speaking to core parts of people's identities.



LEGO's BTS set, Michelob Ultra's Beer Run, Oreo's Pokémon pack and Crocs jibbitz showcase brands tapping into elements of identity that can create community.

Brand Takeaway

We can speak authentically to people across multiple identities by finding synergies between our brands and the passion points our audiences see as core to their identity and the ways they build community.

“Advertising should...”

“...play a positive role and help people find a positive identity within themselves.”

-Asian, Female, Age 19

“...play the role of showcasing different views, cultures and lifestyles to broaden our viewpoint in the least biased way possible.”

-Female, Black, Age 22

“...promote understanding, acceptance and unity of different people.”

-Male, Black/AA

“...help people feel worthy and confident.”

-Female, White

“...show a variety of identities are possible from the same subcategory of culture.”

-Female, Hispanic



So What's Next?

Consumers want to feel seen more than ever and are calling on brands to provide more inclusive portrayals of everyday people. But inclusivity means more than just diverse casting, in part because people are expecting brands to speak to multiple parts of their identities.

So how do brands achieve this? We can start by asking ourselves the following questions:

To identify bespoke needs:

- Are there identities that have particular challenges using our products or engaging in our category?
- Are there people we have historically not spoken to?
- Are we meaningfully addressing the needs of marginalized groups we hope to speak to?

To achieve authenticity:

- Do we have ways of learning what barriers and opportunities exist for diverse audiences?
- Are we thinking beyond just race/ethnicity, age and gender when it comes to who might have unique needs?
- In what ways do we (or *can we*) help celebrate and shape the identities of our consumers?

To unify, not isolate:

- Are there shared hobbies, interests or values across all our audiences?
- Are there ways we can use these shared touchpoints to foster community centered around our brands?

To iterate and improve:

- How can we build in ways to continuously update our understanding of the audiences we reach?
- Are we regularly speaking to audiences with diverse needs to see how those needs are evolving?

More Resources

Category-Specific Insights

In order to understand the impact of identity on the clients we serve, we studied people's attitudes and approaches to engaging with 15 different industry categories. We examined both stated and derived feelings by race/ethnicity to understand category-specific motivators, stressors, consideration factors, consumption occasions and more.

Alcoholic Beverages

Alcoholic Beverage products continue to diversify in recent years, with hard seltzers and new RTD cocktails as the latest innovation trend. But diversity, equity, and inclusion remain a barrier for the industry. Looking at the drivers for the Alcoholic Beverages category, universal themes include being the first among one's peer circle to have the newest products, being fashionable and on-trend, leading an active social life, and feeling better with the right cocktail. All of these motivators had positives in a category that is dominant in social settings with varying style images associated with different products. And when we analyze motivators across racial/ethnic groups, it becomes even clearer that addressing Gen Z's drivers includes key nuances across non-White consumers - notably seeing into a need for Structure & Routine, those who strongly identify with their Gender, with their racial identity, and how the world treats you based on your racial identity.

Key drivers of category engagement by race/ethnicity:

Gen Pop	Latino	Black/AA	Asian	Multi-Ethnic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being fashionable and on-trend 2. Leading an active social life 3. Feeling better with the right cocktail 4. Being the first among one's peer circle to have the newest products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being fashionable and on-trend 2. Leading an active social life 3. Feeling better with the right cocktail 4. Being the first among one's peer circle to have the newest products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being fashionable and on-trend 2. Leading an active social life 3. Feeling better with the right cocktail 4. Being the first among one's peer circle to have the newest products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being fashionable and on-trend 2. Leading an active social life 3. Feeling better with the right cocktail 4. Being the first among one's peer circle to have the newest products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being fashionable and on-trend 2. Leading an active social life 3. Feeling better with the right cocktail 4. Being the first among one's peer circle to have the newest products

Brand Spotlight: Miller Lite

To highlight the **litelikes** fact that a group of women called "Ain't Wines" brought beer to America in the first place, Miller Lite reimagined their iconic logo and created a limited edition can to honor Mary Lee, the country's first recorded female brewer circa 1734. To further build on their commitment, the brand donated a portion of purchases to the Pink Boots Society, an organization inspiring women and those who identify as non-binary career advancement in beer through education. The new brewery career advancement for beer through education. The new brewery career advancement for beer through education.

Brand Spotlight: B&B

In recent years, celebrity brands have grown in popularity but the stakes are high if not done well as shown by Kendall Jenner's B&B Tequila. B&B has fallen to the back of mainstream and cultural appropriation, citing mentions of her cowboy clothing in advertisement and further questioning if it is "REAL" tequila made in Mexico. While much of the criticism has been dispelled, this suggests a strong passion among Tequila consumers. The argument has been made that Tequila consumers may prioritize support for Mexican-owned Tequila brands but other celebrity Tequila brands have not questioned the same level of scrutiny, including George Clooney's Casamigos and Dwayne Johnson's Teremana.

Advertising Evaluation

Stated vs. Derived Importance of Agreement with Each Statement

Statement	Stated	Derived
1. I am interested in this brand.	4.5	4.5
2. I like this brand.	4.5	4.5
3. I would recommend this brand to my friends.	4.5	4.5
4. I would buy this brand.	4.5	4.5
5. I would buy this brand again.	4.5	4.5
6. I would buy this brand often.	4.5	4.5
7. I would buy this brand every day.	4.5	4.5
8. I would buy this brand every week.	4.5	4.5
9. I would buy this brand every month.	4.5	4.5
10. I would buy this brand every year.	4.5	4.5

Category Brand Choice Evaluation

Stated vs. Derived Importance of Agreement with Each Statement

Statement	Stated	Derived
1. I am interested in this brand.	4.5	4.5
2. I like this brand.	4.5	4.5
3. I would recommend this brand to my friends.	4.5	4.5
4. I would buy this brand.	4.5	4.5
5. I would buy this brand again.	4.5	4.5
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8. I would buy this brand every week.	4.5	4.5
9. I would buy this brand every month.	4.5	4.5
10. I would buy this brand every year.	4.5	4.5

Reach out to Starcom US Insights to learn more about the following categories:

Fashion & Style

Home & Décor, Casual Wear, Skincare, Vacation Travel, Luxury Accessories

Tech

Technology & Tech Devices, Video Games & Consoles, Video Streaming & Mobile Wireless Services

Food & Beverages

Snacks & Treats, Fast Food & Quick Service Restaurants, Alcoholic Beverages

Function/Performance

Over-the-Counter Medication, Auto Insurance, Financial Services, Automobiles

More on Identity

This body of research is part of an ongoing Starcom Insights series on Identity. To learn more about how consumers view themselves and their world, check out the rest of the series:

