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EFFORTLESS SIGNALING: HOW INSTAGRAMMABILITY AND SOCIAL CURRENCY DRIVE BRAND EVANGELISM IN MATCHA CAFES

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-psychological drivers of specialty matcha consumption among Bangkok's first-jobbers, examining how Instagrammability and social currency foster brand evangelism. Grounded in Social Identity Theory, this qualitative multi-method research triangulates participant observations, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to investigate how this demographic uses cafe aesthetics to construct professional identities within digital networks. The findings reveal that matcha consumption serves as a dual-purpose mechanism, offering both psychological stress relief, recognized as a treat in culture, and strategic social performance. Crucially, the research identifies the "Paradox of Effortless Signaling," a phenomenon where young professionals meticulously curate high-status digital content while presenting it as casually unplanned to maintain social relatability. Despite having entry-level salaries, these consumers rationalized premium pricing as a highly justified investment in their cultural competence. Ultimately, brand evangelism emerges when a cafe's aesthetic utility perfectly aligns with the consumer's aspirational self-narrative. These insights significantly advance the understanding of contemporary liquid consumption in the metamodern era, highlighting the fluid nature of digital status signaling. By demonstrating how aestheticized spaces are transformed into powerful forms of social capital, this study provides valuable implications for modern lifestyle marketing.

Keywords: Brand Evangelism, Social Currency, Instagrammability, Effortless Signaling, First-Jobbers

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Introduction

The global transformation of food systems and contemporary consumption practices has significantly reshaped the status of traditional commodities, elevating them to experiential products in which cultural and aesthetic meanings often supersede functional attributes (Şahin & Şahin, 2025). Matcha, a powdered green tea with deep roots in Japanese tradition and national identity (Nakagawa, 2015), has recently emerged as a focal point of a global consumption frenzy, frequently framed in international media as a quintessential wellness symbol and a staple of modern lifestyle (Şahin & Şahin, 2025). This transition from a traditional ritual, historically associated with social stratification and religious philosophy (Nakagawa, 2015), to a modern superfood often entails cultural erasure, in which its historical origins are obscured in favor of functional health benefits and visual appeal (Dreher, 2018). In the current metamodern cultural logic, digital platforms like Instagram serve as powerful mediators, organizing these consumption experiences into small narratives of self-presentation and community building (Bataeva, 2024).

For young adult consumers, particularly first-jobbers navigating the early stages of professional life and financial independence, consuming specialty matcha in curated café environments serves as a potent tool for identity construction. In this context, Instagrammability has become a critical determinant in the design of cultural and commercial spaces, as physical environments are increasingly engineered to facilitate the creation of high-status visual content (Lobo, 2023). For the young middle-class demographic, these visually aestheticized experiences function as unwritten rules for status signaling, in which the display of intangible elements of consumption, such as the specific ambiance of a matcha café, conveys social standing and social currency within their digital networks (Kovarova & Chytкова, 2025). This drive for social validation is particularly intense among first-jobbers in emerging markets like Thailand, where social media buying pressure can lead to digital fatigue and compulsive consumption patterns (Sattayathamrongthian et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on the aestheticization of food and digital status signaling, a significant research gap exists regarding the transition from casual experiential consumption to deep-seated brand evangelism in the specialty beverage sector. While previous studies have explored the motivations behind purchasing intentions (Kirana & Windasari, 2019) and the impact of digital advertising (Methayanunt, 2020), there is a lack of empirical evidence on how Instagrammability and social currency collectively foster organic brand advocacy. Therefore, this qualitative inquiry aims to deconstruct the digital and psychological mechanisms driving this evangelism. Specifically, this study seeks to achieve three primary objectives: 1) To examine how the Instagrammability of matcha cafes translates physical aesthetics into digital social currency, fostering brand evangelism. 2) To identify the socio-psychological motives behind this consumption, particularly the dual role of psychological stress relief (treat culture) and strategic identity construction among first-jobbers. 3) To explore the nuanced dynamics of status signaling, specifically investigating the phenomenon of "effortless signaling" where consumers balance the display of high-status digital content with social relatability.

Literature Review

The Evolution and Cultural Globalization of Matcha

The historical trajectory of matcha represents a complex interplay between religious ritual, national identity, and global commercialization. Originally introduced to Japan from China, matcha was fundamentally shaped by the Zen Buddhist philosophy and the formalization of Sado (the Japanese Way of Tea). Nakagawa (2015) emphasizes that Sado served not only as a spiritual practice but also as a marker of social stratification and a cornerstone of Japanese national identity, deeply rooted in the aesthetic principles of harmony and tranquility. For

centuries, the consumption of matcha remained geographically and culturally confined, maintaining its status as a high-class cultural practice (Nakagawa, 2015). However, as green tea entered the global food network, its representation shifted from a localized tradition to an international commodity, often stripped of its original religious and class-based nuances to meet global market demands.

In the contemporary era, the globalization of matcha has been characterized by a global consumption frenzy (Şahin & Şahin, 2025). This rapid expansion is driven by the strategic repositioning of matcha as a superfood within Western wellness discourses. Dreher (2018) critiques this transition through the lens of cultural food colonialism, arguing that the modern marketing of matcha often leads to food from nowhere, a state in which the product is celebrated for its nutritional benefits and ceremonial-grade labels while its authentic historical and cultural origins are obscured. This process of cultural erasure allows global consumers to engage with matcha as a functional health product or a visual trend without necessitating a deep understanding of its traditional significance (Dreher, 2018; Şahin & Şahin, 2025).

Furthermore, the globalization of matcha is inextricably linked to the rise of a global food fashion, in which the beverage has been transformed into a versatile ingredient in desserts and lifestyle products (Ho, 2016). In urban centers like Hong Kong and Bangkok, the opening of Japanese-branded teahouses has catalyzed a matcha hit, particularly among young consumers who view these products through the lens of cosmopolitanism and modern consumption (Ho, 2016). This aestheticization of matcha, moving from the whisked tea of the Sado ceremony to Instagrammable parfaits and lattes, reflects a broader shift in how food is consumed as a form of symbolic capital. Consequently, the evolution of matcha illustrates a tension between preserving national identity and the pressures of global commodification, in which the product's digital visibility often takes precedence over its traditional cultural depth.

Instagrammability and the Aestheticization of Consumption Spaces

The rise of visual social media has fundamentally altered the relationship between physical environments and consumer behavior. Central to this shift is the concept of Instagrammability, which refers to the aesthetic quality of a setting that makes it worthy of capture and sharing on digital platforms. Lobo (2023) argues that Instagrammability is not merely an inherent quality of beauty but a result of technological mediation, in which physical spaces are intentionally engineered or "curated" to facilitate the creation of high-status visual content. This "Design for Capture" approach transforms cafes and cultural sites into stage-like environments in which the boundary between the physical world and its digital representation blurs (Lobo, 2023).

In the context of the metamodern cultural condition, Instagram acts as a primary tool for individuals to organize their lives into small narratives, fragmented yet curated stories of the self (Bataeva, 2024). For young consumers, photographing and sharing a specialty matcha drink in an aesthetically pleasing cafe is a performance of authenticity and spectacle (Bataeva, 2024). These visual practices allow consumers to signal their participation in a specific lifestyle, effectively turning the consumption space into a form of aesthetic capital. Consequently, the physical cafe is no longer just a place to consume beverages; it serves as a backdrop for constructing digital identity, where the space's Instagrammability dictates its perceived value and social relevance.

Moreover, the aestheticization of these spaces leads to what can be termed the commodification of landscapes, where the visual appeal of a location is exploited for commercial and social gain (Molinas, 2019). Kovarova & Chytкова (2025) further suggest that the display of these intangible and immaterial aspects of consumption, such as the specific ambiance and vibe of a specialty café, serves as an unwritten rule for status signaling among the young middle class. By engaging with these Instagrammable spaces, consumers are not only consuming a product but are also acquiring social currency that can be exchanged for social recognition and digital

validation. Therefore, the Instagrammability of matcha specialty cafes functions as a critical bridge between experiential consumption and the formation of deep-seated brand relationships.

Social Currency and Status Signaling in the Digital Age

In the contemporary digital landscape, the consumption of high-end lifestyle products has transcended functional utility, becoming a primary vehicle for social currency. This concept refers to the actual or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Bataeva (2024) expands this by suggesting that in the metamodern condition, social media users accumulate symbolic and cultural capital through the curation of their digital presence. For the younger generation, particularly those entering the professional workforce, the ability to demonstrate knowledge of niche trends, such as specialty matcha, serves as a marker of cultural competence that can translate into social status within their online communities.

The practice of status signaling has evolved from the display of physical luxury goods to the broadcasting of intangible and immaterial experiences. Kovarova & Chytкова (2025) identify that the "unwritten rules" of Instagrammability dictate that status is no longer just about what is consumed but also about how it is visually presented. By sharing meticulously framed images of ceremonial-grade matcha in minimalist specialty cafes, consumers signal their adherence to a sophisticated middle-class aesthetic. This form of "conspicuous consumption" is particularly prevalent among first-jobbers, who utilize these digital signals to navigate their new social positions and construct a professional yet trendy identity.

However, this constant need for digital validation and status maintenance can lead to significant psychological pressure. Sattayathamrongthian et al. (2025) highlight that first-jobbers in Thailand are highly susceptible to social media buying pressure, driven by the fear of missing out (FOMO) and the desire to maintain a certain digital image. This pressure often manifests as compulsive purchasing behaviors, in which acquiring Instagrammable products serves as a tool for social mobilization and identity signaling within peer groups. Consequently, the accumulation of social currency through matcha consumption is not merely a leisure activity but a strategic social performance aimed at securing a desirable position in the digital-social hierarchy.

Furthermore, the shift toward liquid consumption has introduced new complexities in how status is attained and displayed. Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020) argue that in a society characterized by transience and access-based consumption, traditional solid markers of status are being replaced by inconspicuous and experiential forms of distinction. For matcha consumers, this means that status is derived not from the ownership of expensive goods but from the ephemeral experience of a curated lifestyle shared digitally. However, this pursuit of digital status may encounter the Status Signals Paradox (Garcia et al., 2019), in which individuals mistakenly believe that displaying high-status markers will increase their social attractiveness, while potential connections often perceive such displays as less relatable. To navigate this, first-jobbers must engage in what this study conceptualizes as "effortless signaling"—a sophisticated aesthetic management in which they meticulously curate high-status digital content yet present it as casually unplanned. Thus, the Instagrammability of matcha requires this delicate balance to generate social currency and successfully foster genuine brand evangelism.

Brand Evangelism: Beyond Loyalty

Beyond mere repeat-purchase behavior, the consumption of specialty matcha among first-jobbers often culminates in brand evangelism, a psychological state in which consumers become proactive advocates for a brand. Harrigan et al. (2021) define this phenomenon as a combination of brand advocacy and brand defense, driven by deep customer engagement and value co-creation. For the digital-native generation, engaging with a matcha brand on social media serves as a form of value co-creation that strengthens their emotional bond with the

brand. Ultimately, this profound brand evangelism emerges when a cafe's aesthetic utility perfectly aligns with the consumer's aspirational self-narrative, transforming them from passive buyers into organic brand advocates who actively utilize the brand to construct and elevate their professional identities within digital networks.

Furthermore, brand evangelism in the competitive specialty beverage market manifests not only through positive recommendations but also through "oppositional brand referrals". Marticotte et al. (2016) highlight that high levels of brand identification and self-brand connection can lead consumers to express a desire to harm rival brands to bolster the status of their preferred choice. In the context of the matcha frenzy, this suggests that first-jobbers do not merely consume the product for its functional benefits; they utilize the brand's aesthetic utility to curate an aspirational self-narrative so deeply intertwined with specific cafes that they become organic evangelists. These consumers actively influence the social-digital hierarchy by effortlessly elevating their chosen brand while distancing themselves from perceived inferior alternatives.

First-Jobbers: Consumer Psychology and Digital Behavior in Lifestyle Consumption

The lifestyle consumption patterns of First-Jobbers are fundamentally shaped by a psychological transition from student life to professional identity, in which digital platforms serve as the primary landscape for both social interaction and consumption decisions. For this demographic, the act of purchasing lifestyle products, ranging from artisanal fashion to specialty beverages like ceremonial-grade matcha, is rarely a simple utilitarian transaction but rather a digitally mediated social performance. Sattayathamrongthian et al. (2025) observe that Thai First-Jobbers are increasingly influenced by social media buying pressure. In this phenomenon, the constant visibility of curated peer lifestyles creates a perceived necessity to align one's own consumption with digital social norms. This pressure often manifests as compulsive purchasing behavior, in which lifestyle goods are acquired not for their functional value but as essential tools for social signaling and identity construction within new professional circles.

Furthermore, the psychology of treat culture plays a significant role in how first-jobbers manage the initial stresses of the workplace, functioning as a dual-purpose mechanism. Faced with the exhaustion of new professional responsibilities and digital fatigue, many young professionals turn to specialty consumption not only for physiological stimulation but as a vital coping mechanism for psychological decompression and self-reward. Sattayathamrongthian et al. (2025) suggest that high-end lifestyle products provide tangible relief from mental fatigue, allowing individuals to convert financial resources into Instagrammable moments of personal pleasure that simultaneously reinforce their strategic social performance. This experience-driven consumption is amplified by the group's high responsiveness to visually superior content that can be showcased online. Consequently, despite having entry-level salaries, the immediate allure of digital trends and the need to signal cultural competence often drive them to rationalize premium pricing as a highly justified lifestyle investment (Maneerattanakulchai, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), as conceptualized by Tajfel & Turner (1979) and further refined by scholars such as Brown (2000) and Dreher (2018), posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong. According to Scheepers & Ellemers (2019), social identity is formed through three fundamental psychological processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Through social categorization, individuals organize their social environment into in-groups (groups they belong to) and out-groups (groups they do not belong to). In the context of lifestyle consumption, First-jobbers often categorize themselves into groups that value sophisticated, modern, and high-status lifestyles, such as the specialty matcha enthusiasts.

Once categorized, individuals undergo social identification, where they adopt the norms, values, and behaviors of their chosen in-group to bolster their self-esteem (Dreher, 2018). For young professionals, consuming premium matcha serves as a symbolic marker of group membership, allowing them to internalize the professional and trendy identity associated with this niche community. Brown (2000) emphasizes that the strength of this identification is driven by the desire for positive distinctiveness, where individuals seek to elevate the status of their in-group relative to out-groups through social comparison. By showcasing their cultural competence on digital platforms, first-jobbers engage in a strategic social performance aimed at achieving superior social standing. This process of seeking distinctiveness reinforces their aspirational self-narrative. It fosters a deep emotional connection to the brands whose aesthetic utility facilitates this identity construction, ultimately laying the psychological foundation for organic brand evangelism.

Research Methods

Research Design: A Qualitative Approach

This study employs a purely qualitative research design to explore the complex psychological drivers and social behaviors of first-jobbers in the specialty matcha market. To ensure the internal validity and credibility of the findings, the study utilizes methodological triangulation. By integrating three distinct qualitative techniques—participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions—the researcher can cross-verify data from multiple sources, thereby enhancing the robustness and reliability of the synthesized themes (Dreher, 2018). This multi-method approach allows for a holistic understanding of how consumption transcends functional utility to become a dual-purpose mechanism: psychological treatment and strategic, effortless signaling of social identity.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using Snowball Sampling, a purposive technique effective for reaching specific niche communities through social networks. Initial participants were identified via digital platforms and subsequently asked to refer other individuals who met the following stringent inclusion criteria:

- 1) Professional Status: Must be a first-jobber (individuals in their first year of professional employment).
- 2) Consumption Frequency: Regular matcha consumers who visit specialty matcha cafes at least once a month for a minimum of five consecutive months.
- 3) Digital Behavior: Must have a history of sharing matcha-related content (e.g., photos of beverages or cafe aesthetics) on their personal social media accounts.
- 4) Informed Consent: All participants must voluntarily agree to participate after being fully briefed on the research objectives and data privacy protocols.

While snowball sampling allowed access to a specialized niche of matcha enthusiasts, the researcher acknowledged potential selection bias. To mitigate this, initial 'seeds' were selected from diverse professional backgrounds (e.g., creative agencies, financial firms, and tech startups) within the Asoke CBD to ensure a broader representation of the first-jobber experience. This approach helped capture a variety of social signaling behaviors across different corporate cultures.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants. This method was chosen to capture the nuanced inner world of the consumers, exploring their personal motivations, emotional attachments to specific brands, and the dual-purpose mechanism of psychological threat culture and strategic identity construction that drives their premium consumption habits. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to examine the social dynamics and collective identity of this cohort; four FGDs were held, each with 5 participants (Total N = 20). The FGDs focused

on matcha's social currency, allowing the researcher to observe how participants negotiate digital status, manage their aesthetic utility, and exhibit effortless signaling within a peer-group setting.

Field Observation: Naturalistic observation was conducted at a prominent specialty matcha cafe located in the Asoke district, a major central business district (CBD) in Bangkok characterized by a high density of office workers and first-jobbers. The observation took place twice a week over five months. To maintain high ethical standards and transparency, a visible notice was posted at the cafe's counter informing patrons that research observation is currently underway. This ensured that the data collected, specifically regarding social interactions and aesthetic management (photo-taking behaviors), was obtained ethically while minimizing the observer effect.

Data Analysis and Reliability

The qualitative data underwent a rigorous six-phase thematic analysis. First, the researcher became familiar with the data through verbatim transcription and repeated reading. Second, initial codes were generated (e.g., 'psychological treat', 'aesthetic utility', 'hidden effort'). Third, these codes were collated into potential themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed against the entire data set. Fifth, themes were defined and named, leading to the formal discovery of the 'Paradox of Effortless Signaling' and the dual-purpose nature of consumption. Finally, the analysis was woven into the research narrative. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed: 1) **Methodological Triangulation:** Cross-verifying findings from interviews, focus groups, and field observations to ensure consistency. 2) **Member Checking:** Key findings were shared back with a subset of participants ($n = 3$) to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences. 3) **Peer Debriefing:** The coding process and emerging themes were reviewed by an academic peer to minimize subjective researcher bias.

Ethical Consideration

The research was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical principles for human subjects' research to ensure the protection and well-being of all participants. The following measures were rigorously implemented:

- 1) **Informed Consent:** Before every in-depth interview and focus group, participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written or recorded verbal consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection.
- 2) **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To protect participant identities, all data were de-identified using pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2). Raw data, including interview transcripts and recordings, were stored in a secure, password-protected digital environment accessible only to the primary researcher to prevent unauthorized access.
- 3) **Ethical Observation:** During field observations at the specialty matcha cafe, a clearly visible notice was placed at the service counter. This notice informed patrons that academic research was being conducted, thereby ensuring transparency while minimizing the observer effect on natural consumer behavior.
- 4) **Risk Mitigation:** The study posed minimal psychological or social risk, as it focused on lifestyle consumption patterns. However, the researcher remained sensitive to participants' privacy, ensuring that no sensitive personal or financial information was disclosed in the final report.

Research Results

Participant Profiles and Demographic Overview

The qualitative data synthesized from semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$), focus group discussions (4 groups, $n = 20$), and field observations revealed a consistent behavioral pattern among the target demographic. The participants were aged between 23 and 25 years, all holding

bachelor's degrees and currently employed in their first professional roles, with monthly incomes ranging from 18,000 to 22,000 THB. The gender distribution consisted of 8 males and 27 females across all methods. Data saturation was achieved as all three methodological streams, interviews, focus groups, and observations, converged on several key thematic findings.

Consumption Patterns: Treat Culture and Rationalized Luxury

The findings indicate that matcha consumption serves a dual-purpose mechanism for first-jobbers, offering both psychological stress relief—recognized within their peer groups as treat culture—and a platform for strategic social performance. Participants reported consuming matcha 3-4 times per week to sustain work performance, yet exhibited a collective rationalization of luxury when purchasing premium ceremonial-grade matcha priced at 200 THB or higher. Rather than viewing this as an irrational expense on an entry-level salary, participants perceived the premium pricing as a highly justified investment in their cultural competence and digital aesthetic.

One participant (P5) illustrated this rationalization of premium pricing as a form of "treat culture" and self-investment:

"It is more than just a drink; it is an experience. After a long week of work, sitting in a quiet specialty cafe and enjoying high-quality matcha is the most tangible way to reward myself. Even if it costs more than a full meal, I view it as a justified investment in my mental well-being and the cultural competence I gain from it."

The Paradox of Effortless Signaling

A central theme emerged regarding the Instagrammability of the consumption experience. Sharing matcha-related content via posts or stories was identified as a vital tool for social integration, allowing first-jobbers to signal their alignment with contemporary, high-status social circles. However, a significant socio-psychological nuance was uncovered: the necessity of effortlessness, conceptualized here as the 'Paradox of Effortless Signaling'. While participants strategically utilized premium matcha brands and minimalist cafe aesthetics as lifestyle accessories to construct a prestigious digital identity, they simultaneously masked this effort. By presenting highly curated images as casual and unplanned, they successfully navigated the tension between seeking elite social validation and maintaining approachability and relatability within their peer networks.

The meticulous yet "casual" nature of digital storytelling was frequently highlighted in the focus groups. For instance, P12 shared:

"When I take a photo of my matcha, I try not to make it look too perfect. I might leave some work items slightly messy in the frame to make it look like I just happened to stop by. In reality, I spend a lot of time choosing the right angle because I do not want to seem desperate for attention. I want my peers to see that my lifestyle has quality, but in a natural, effortless way." This strategic alignment between brand and personal identity often leads to organic advocacy, as explained by P8:

"Checking in at a specialty matcha cafe is like a badge that signals I am part of an 'informed' and 'high-end' group. The brand becomes a part of the professional and trendy image I want to project on social media. I am not just promoting a cafe; I am validating my own membership in an elite professional class."

Conclusion and Discussion

The results of this study underscore that specialty matcha consumption among Thai first-jobbers serves as a highly sophisticated social performance, extending far beyond the beverage's functional attributes. This behavior aligns with Bataeva's (2024) concept of the metamodern condition, where consumers accumulate symbolic capital through the meticulous curation of their digital presence. The participants' focus on specific premium brands and cafe

aesthetics reflects the unwritten rules of Instagrammability described by Kovarova & Chytкова (2025), where status is derived from the visual staging of the product. Furthermore, the rationalization of premium pricing as a justified investment in treat culture provides empirical support for the social media buying pressure identified by Sattayathamrongthian et al. (2025), highlighting how this demographic converts limited financial resources into potent social currency.

Crucially, the findings introduce a profound new dimension to the Status Signals Paradox (Garcia et al., 2019) through the identified 'Paradox of Effortless Signaling'. While Garcia et al. (2019) suggest that overt high-status markers can sometimes alienate peers, this study reveals that first-jobbers actively mitigate this risk through sophisticated aesthetic management. By intentionally masking the effort behind their curated digital content and framing it as a natural, casual part of their daily lives, these young professionals successfully balance projecting elite cultural competence with essential social relatability.

Ultimately, the transition from casual consumer to organic brand evangelist emerges when a cafe's aesthetic utility perfectly aligns with the consumer's aspirational self-narrative and social identity. As suggested by Harrigan et al. (2021), checking in and sharing meticulously framed—yet seemingly effortless—photos constitute a profound form of value co-creation. For first-jobbers, the highly Instagrammable matcha cafe is not merely a place for caffeine consumption; it is a curated stage where they perform their professional and trendy identities. Through this lens, brand evangelism is driven not by traditional brand loyalty alone, but by the brand's utility in generating social currency and helping consumers navigate the digital-social hierarchy of the modern workforce.

Moreover, the internal motivation to engage in brand evangelism is deeply rooted in the need for positive distinctiveness within peer networks. According to Social Identity Theory (Brown, 2000; Dreher, 2018), individuals do not merely consume products; they adopt the collective norms of an aspirational in-group to bolster their self-esteem. In this study, the choice of a specific matcha brand serves as a symbolic boundary that separates the informed professional from the mass consumer. This aligns with Scheepers & Ellemers' (2019) assertion that group features and norms drive social identification. For first-jobbers, the ability to discern and document the nuances of ceremonial-grade matcha acts as a form of cultural capital that validates their membership in an elite, trendy professional class. By sharing these experiences, they are not just promoting a cafe; they are reinforcing a collective identity that values sophistication and "cultural competence," thereby turning the digital space into a platform for mutual social validation.

Finally, the shift toward liquid consumption as proposed by Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020) provides a critical lens for understanding the ephemeral nature of this brand evangelism. Unlike traditional status symbols that rely on the permanent ownership of expensive goods, the status derived from matcha consumption is transient and access-based. First-jobbers derive distinction not from owning the brand, but from the experience of the curated lifestyle it represents. This fluidity allows them to navigate the modern social-digital hierarchy with agility, in which brand love is expressed through constant digital storytelling and effortless signaling. As the consumption of matcha becomes a habitual yet high-stakes social performance, it creates a unique form of brand loyalty contingent on the brand's ability to remain Instagrammable and socially relevant. This dynamic suggests that brand evangelism among digital natives is a continuous process of value co-creation, where the brand provides the aesthetic infrastructure for the consumer's aspirational self-narrative of professional and personal success.

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of how the consumption of specialty matcha among first-jobbers in Bangkok has transcended its traditional and functional roots to become a pivotal instrument for social identity construction and brand evangelism. By utilizing a

triangulated qualitative approach, the research successfully addressed its primary objectives, revealing that the "Instagrammability" of matcha cafes is not merely a visual preference but a strategic mediator that translates physical aesthetics into digital social currency. The findings underscore that for young professionals navigating the early stages of their careers, consuming and sharing premium matcha serves as both a marker of cultural competence and a means of securing positive distinctiveness within their digital networks.

A significant contribution of this research is the identification of the Paradox of Effortless Signaling. While a need for social validation drives first-jobbers, who are highly susceptible to social media buying pressure, they engage in sophisticated aesthetic management to present their high-status consumption as casual and unintentional. This pursuit of effortlessness is a key psychological mechanism that balances the desire for status signaling with the need for social relatability, effectively mitigating the potential social alienation often associated with conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that brand evangelism in this context is deeply organic; it is fueled by the brand's ability to provide a stage for self-narrative and identity performance. When a brand successfully aligns its physical and digital aesthetics with the consumer's aspirational identity, the consumer naturally transitions from a customer to an advocate, utilizing their curated lifestyle to influence the social-digital hierarchy.

In conclusion, the specialty matcha frenzy among Thai first-jobbers represents a complex interplay between emotional regulation, manifested through treat culture, and strategic social performance via effortless signaling. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, understanding these nuanced socio-psychological motives—particularly how aestheticized spaces are transformed into powerful forms of social capital—becomes essential for brands seeking to foster genuine brand evangelism. This research not only contributes significantly to the academic discourse on Social Identity Theory and the fluid nature of liquid consumption in the metamodern era, but it also provides highly valuable implications for modern lifestyle marketing tailored to the next generation of professional consumers.

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