Services as emulation marketing: conceptualization and concerns

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce emulation marketing as an important strategy to consider for services marketing researchers and practitioners, given the ability to plant an aspirational goal in consumers' minds. Building on theories of lifestyle, values, self-concept and others, this conceptual paper presents the case for emulation marketing as an important consideration within services marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – To explore mechanisms that will define service research in the future, this conceptual paper reviews the literature across the spectrum of social comparison and learning, social adaptation, conformity, values, persuasion and role modeling. The authors analyze existing theories while proposing a new mechanism, emulation, to advance research in service literature.

Findings – This paper suggests mechanisms to promote emulation in services marketing through the consumer decision process. A research agenda for future work is provided with emphasis on lack of emulation, emulation and status, emulation and aging, emulation and technology, emulation and linguistics and the dark side of emulation. Within each area, a series of considerations are discussed.

Originality/value – This paper introduces emulation as an important mechanism within services marketing. It offers a research agenda focused on a variety of emerging areas in the field. The paper contributes to services marketing and future research by proposing a novel approach, via emulation, to services marketing.

Keywords Emulation marketing, Emulation, Lifestyle, Values

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Emulation is the "effort to match or surpass a person or achievement, typically by imitation," according to the Oxford Dictionary. In services marketing, emulation marketing paints a picture of how a consumer should focus attention and, simultaneously, highlights the potential elevation of a lifestyle. Through emulation people seek to achieve an idealized lifestyle. Understanding emulation marketing is vital to optimize many aspects of services marketing. This article describes and critiques the concept of emulation marketing.

Emulation is an important force behind emerging subareas of services marketing, including lifestyle marketing and sports marketing. A recent chapter (Valette-Florence *et al.*, 2022) shows that sports marketing and lifestyle marketing can be dialectically integrated (Kahle *et al.*, 2000), as both often are types of emulation (Goodin, 2018), especially when applied to marketing. The authors argue, "What do lifestyle marketing and sports marketing have in common? Plenty, it turns out. Emulation is often an important process in both cases. Both types of marketing often attempt to portray an idealized existence as a marketing strategy. Both use consumer information to reframe human

uncertainty about expected behavior" (Valette-Florence *et al.*, 2022, p. 286).

Services such as the haircut business Sport Clips incorporate four key characteristics of a service: intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability of services (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Kotler and Keller (2012) indicated that a challenge in services marketing is to give tangibility to intangibles while recognizing the opportunity to signal service quality to help uncertain consumers draw conclusions about the service. Emulation can provide that signal and give tangibility to the intangible. Goodin (2018) claimed that an emulation nudge, in which people were reminded of what their peers favored, influenced the rate of success in tax collecting and the rate of electricity consumption. Knowing what others do or expect often answers questions about how to act when faced with uncertainty or doubt. Emulation involves discerning a desirable social norm and seeking to comply with it or to aspire to it. Emulation is an important mechanism for transmitting information about appropriate or idealized behavior and lifestyle.

Services marketing efforts, for example, in health care, often emphasize benefits and assume rational consumers. Historically, the marketing parent discipline of economics has focused attention on the rational consumer. However, in recent years, some groups of consumers are ignoring "rational appeals" (e.g.

scientists say you should seek this service) and attending more to "tribal appeals" (e.g. people I like warn against seeking this service). Thus, exploring emulation marketing in more detail and understanding its nuances is necessary for a complete picture of strategies within services marketing.

This article explores the concept of emulation marketing as a mechanism within services marketing. The contention is that many services also do or should use emulation marketing. Without explicitly stating marketing propositions or tag lines, one important marketing goal of the service encounter often is to display role-relevant behaviors that consumers will want to copy or emulate at some level or another. Emulation can enhance the consumer's desire to buy, to try or to engage with services. This perspective opens a new way of viewing motivation from and for services.

Literature review

Lifestyle and social norms

Lifestyle entered psychology via the work of Adler (1916) viewing lifestyle as a manifestation of personality. Marketers refined this concept to focus on attitudes, interests and opinions (Wells and Tigert, 1971). A key lifestyle interest is sport, which is a pervasive type of nonfiction entertainment showcasing or linked to competition. Sports marketing involves selling participation in sport, watching sport and expressing identification with sport (King, Kahle and Close, 2011). A service is "[…]any act or performance one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything" (Kotler and Keller, 2012, p. 356). In all three cases (e.g. participation, watching and identity), emulation guides consumer choices.

Children learn these lifestyle attitudes, interests and opinions through emulation. "Children do not just imitate but over-imitate in order to identify and affiliate with others in their cultural group" (Tomasello, 2016, p. 643). Child learning through emulation extends beyond social norms from human-to-human and into computer entities, such as robots or avatars. One recent study at Massachusetts Institute of Technology showed that children's language-style matching was positively correlated with the emulation of a robot (Kory-Westlund and Breazeal, 2019). From a services perspective, this highlights the value of social norms and emulation as well as the potential for emulation of digital entities in service contexts (Čaić *et al.*, 2019). Within a family dynamic, Ruvio *et al.* (2013) proposed the possibility that adults will emulate kids' consumer behavior decisions. As an example, parents can emulate a younger consumer who uses a digital music streaming service, such as Spotify or Apple Music, or a health and wellness service, such as Apple Fitness+, in which case they, too, become users of the service.

Observational learning

Observational learning has been well-documented as a method to learn attitudes, behaviors, beliefs and a host of other components of human psychology and behavior (Bandura *et al.*, 1966; Bandura, 2008). Observation, however, is inherently focused more on seeing, noticing or perceiving, while emulating is inherently aspirational. As such, emulating better reflects the method and goal of marketing-related efforts.

The goal of many services marketing efforts is to encourage the marketing target to emulate the behavior and not just to see or notice it. From a services marketing and advertising perspective, Hirschman and Thompson (1997, p. 55) showed that "consumers who use an aspiring and inspiring strategy interpret media images by as worthwhile goals and motivating examples. The relationship is one of emulation, in which the images provide motivation for the investment of personal time, effort and self-sacrifice to attain a certain body type or lifestyle." Furthermore, they emphasize the role of athletes and fashion models in this process, which highlights the relations to the interplay between sports, lifestyle, services and emulation.

Social comparison

Building on this interlink between sports, lifestyle, services and emulation, social comparison has an extensive history in the psychology and marketing literature (Festinger, 1954). Wood (1989) highlighted the importance of target selection, the dimension under evaluation (i.e. the attribute) and surrounding dimensions in social comparisons. Eisert and Kahle (1982) showed how social comparison drives adolescents' very self-concept. Marketers have a unique ability, through a variety of means, to shape the target selection and, subsequently, nudge a consumer to emulate that target. Similarly, marketing mechanisms are in place to emphasize the dimension under evaluation (e.g. athleticism) and surrounding dimensions. For example, the iconic Gatorade advertising campaign "Be Like Mike" highlighted components of social comparison and emulation. The campaign featured an emulation target (i.e. Michael Jordan) while also providing dimensions to consider (i.e. professional-level basketball and basketball skills). The key message of the campaign, "Be Like Mike", emphasized the emulation efforts of Gatorade and provided a clear message: if consumers drink Gatorade, they can be like (emulate) Michael Jordan. Although Gatorade is not inherently a service, the emulation mechanism is pervasive in a host of services marketing campaigns, both current and historic. Examples range from State Farm Insurance's "Like a Good Neighbor State Farm Is There" to Apple's "Think Different," encouraging consumers to emulate aspirational characteristics through the use of their services.

Social adaptation

Social adaptation theory says that, for many people, fitting into a social category is an important part of attitude formation and behavior enactment (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Homer and Kahle, 1986, 1988). Consumers evaluate services in terms of the consequences for their social lives. Most social contexts are inherently ambiguous, leading people to look to others for guidance as to appropriate behavior. Consumers use social comparisons, among other strategies, to judge the desirability of their decisions. Being a part of one's tribe is an important goal for many people. Of course, on occasion, people pioneer new role enactments (Kahle and Shoham, 1995; Rose *et al.*, 2000). However, it is more common to deal with the uncertainty of social expectations by discovering what others do.

Values

One of the core values that drives human behavior is the sense of belonging (Kahle and Kennedy, 1988). According to their

research, the types of activities people select and their consumption behaviors denote their belonging or desire to belong to certain groups. Another important value that sometimes motivates people to emulate is "warm relationships with others." Although emulating and belonging are distinct concepts, striving to equal or imitating is a method to achieve belonging. For example, in a sports context, fans often emulate other fans in terms of their attitudes (e.g. perspective on the team or a given play) and behaviors (e.g. subscriptions to over-the-top broadcast platforms such as MLB.TV). Although emulation is not the only method to achieve belonging or warm relationships, it is a common approach in many other marketing contexts. Examples range from fitness services such as Peloton to online communication services and platforms such as Reddit. Recent research using the Linguistics Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software (Pennebaker *et al.*, 2001; Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2009) has shown that people's use of language in online communities contains measurable identifiers of group identity.

Conformity

One pioneer in the study of social influence and conformity was Sherif (1935) and his research on the autokinetic illusion. The autokinetic illusion occurs when someone looks at a pinpoint of light projected onto an unknown black surface through a tiny peephole. Although the light in fact does not move, it appears to move an unknown and unmeasurable distance. People typically guess that the movement is a matter of inches in the absence of other people's opinion. Sherif would bring two people into his lab, the first an experimenter's confederate and the second a true subject. Sherif would ask the confederate how far the light moved, and the confederate would estimate "several feet." The unsuspecting real subject would then be asked to estimate the movement. The influenced subject would then emulate with an estimate of "several feet," emulating the confederate's judgment. The confederate would then leave the room and a second real subject would come into the room, now a "second generation" real subject. The first-generation subject would share the estimate of "several feet," and then the second-generation subject would emulate the overestimate. The effect of using social judgments in the absence of empirical judgments in these experiments lasted for many generations of subjects, illustrating the persistence of emulation.

Asch (1956) provided another example of conformity when he asked subjects to judge the relative length of two, clearly different, lines. When confederates misjudged the lines, saying the shorter one was longer than the longer one, many real subjects conformed to the misjudgments. Often being "socially correct" via conformity is a stronger motive than being "objectively correct." It therefore seems appropriate to enact emulation as a mechanism of marketing services. This emulation activity has been charted neurologically as well. "The currently available evidence highlights the role of the posterior medial frontal cortex (pMFC) in social conformity and cognitive inconsistency, which represents the discrepancy between one's own and another person's opinion, or, more broadly, between currently inconsistent and ideally consistent states. Research on persuasion has revealed that people's susceptibility to persuasive messages is related to activation in a nearby but more anterior part of the medial frontal cortex" (Izuma, 2013, p. 456). The neurobiological and neuropharmacological underpinnings of social adaptation are heavily influenced by serotonin levels effecting these regions of the brain (Duerler *et al.*, 2022).

Persuasion

Building on theories of conformity and compliance are persuasion principles, such as authority, liking and social proof (Cialdini, 2016, 2021), which are commonly used in many services marketing efforts. Authority is obtained via expertise or one's position in a hierarchy. The question then becomes, "Is that expertise absolute (i.e. a certified level of expertise such as completing a PhD) or perceived (i.e. demonstrating depth of knowledge)?" In either case, a marketer can influence the marketing target via emulation. The marketing targets view the marketer as an authority because he/she emulates them. The persuasion principle of liking has, arguably, taken on a new life of its own in a digital world. On any given day, a user on Instagram can "like" dozens of posts. Does the "liking" occur simply because the user likes that account, or is the desire to emulate partially driving the behavior? In their article, "Friend influence over adolescent problem behaviors as a function of relative peer acceptance: to be liked is to be emulated," Laursen *et al.* (2012) showed that greater influence is given to the better-accepted member of a friend group. This finding strongly suggests an interplay between emulation and liking. The principle of social proof states that people are influenced to believe or do what others around them are doing (Cialdini, 2021). Given the nature of the principle, it is particularly suited for situations, like service contexts, when reducing uncertainty is the goal (Cialdini, 2021). Given the relationship between popularity cues and consumption risk (Wu and Lee, 2016), emulation plays a role in easing uncertainty, given the salience of the goal. Reciprocation is ideal for relationship cultivation and is based on the principle that people should try to repay what another person has given (Cialdini, 2021). One recent study (Sartori *et al.*, 2013) suggested that emulation is a precursor to reciprocity (i.e. complementary acts). In other words, people are more inclined to reciprocate the effort of someone that they emulate.

Role models

Intertwined with social comparison, conformity, persuasion and emulation is that of role models. As Paice *et al.* (2002) described, "Excellent role models will always inspire, teach by example and excite admiration and emulation." From a services marketing perspective, Ruvio *et al.* (2013) showed that consumers have the tendency to emulate their role model's consumption behaviors. Ki and Kim (2019) demonstrated the desire to mimic as a mechanism for how and why social media influencers effect consumers. Although mimicry is related to emulation, it fails to incorporate the aspirational and goal seeking aspects of emulation. Marketers often promote the concept of an idealized self to consumers and, when there is a match between the idealized version of the consumer and the influencer, the marketing efforts are more effective (Choi and Rifon, 2012).

Academic and managerial implications

The consumption of a service, whether a generic service or professional service, follows the traditional consumer decision

process (Hill and Neeley, 1988). At each stage of the process, whether a haircut at Sport Clips or a coffee at Starbucks, emulation, in coordination with other existing psychological mechanisms, plays a significant role. As an example, consider the potential role of emulation in the consumer journey of a service encounter at a coffee shop:

- The emulation of social norms, social identity and social comparison around coffee can drive behavior to buy a cup of coffee. The demonstration of this phenomenon is influenced by the "Instagrammable" and artistic nature of the venue or drink (e.g. a heart on the top) (Campbell *et al.*, 2022).
- Given leaders want to distinguish themselves from followers (Amaldoss and Jain, 2008), the purchasers often demonstrate their aspirational lifestyle and desire to be emulated by sharing their coffee purchases on social platforms.
- At the same time, followers want to become closer to the aspirational lifestyle of the leader (Amaldoss and Jain, 2008); hence, friends, family and followers of the original purchaser can desire to emulate the original purchaser and engage in the demonstrated lifestyle.

At each stage of the process, the pull of emulation has the potential to influence the original purchaser, and others in their social circle or within digital reach (i.e. followers on social media). Emulation paints a picture of where consumers should focus their attention and highlights the potential elevation of a lifestyle, which creates a loop, leading to followers continually emulating that behavior.

Awareness and problem recognition

As Akaka and Schau (2019) noted, imitation and improvement play an important role in the consumer journey (i.e. a child learning from a parent and wanting to improve beyond that level). The emulatory underpinnings (i.e. a desired lifestyle) lead to the recognition of a need or a want. A simple picture of a coffee cup with a heart on it or a photo of a person reading a book at a coffee shop fuels the viewer to emulate that lifestyle. As discussed, theories such as observational learning are components of this process as a person observes others' more active lifestyle and strives to emulate it through adoption of services (e.g. health services such as gym memberships or digital exercise services such as Peloton).

Awareness of a goal is a precursor to striving for it. In a health-care setting, influential people have been shown to play an important role in problem recognition (i.e. awareness) and search (Jeanne, 2001). Goal emulation occurs when "B learns from A the goal to pursue" (Whiten and Ham, 1992, p. 246), which is related, particularly in a marketing consumption context, with the dynamics of social adaption and the desire to fit into a social category (Homer and Kahle, 1986, 1988; Kahle and Homer, 1985). Byrne and Russon (1998) emphasized that emulation primes goals and that these activated goals are addressed first. From sports marketing to lifestyle marketing, this form of emulation is pervasive. From Nike featuring elite athletes with taglines such as "Just Do It" and "Find Your Greatness" to LeBron James promoting Calm, a meditation services app with a mission to "make the world happier and healthier," both follow a similar goal emulation process in

which the consumer learns from the marketer the goal to pursue (i.e. peak performance for Nike and mindfulness for Calm). Other industries benefit from use of emulation to inspire adoption of medically beneficial health behaviors or reduce uncertainty and risk in adopting technology for technology-averse consumers.

Building on awareness and goals, significant research has been done on identities and the potential to ease, or guide, a variety of in-group versus out-group dynamics (Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018). From a sports context, the superordinate identity represents the broadest group with which a consumer identifies, such as the team, brand or organization (Lock and Funk, 2016). As an example, a person who is a fan of the team (superordinate identity) may or may not participate in other subgroups of identification (e.g. student section in a college football context). In terms of what is emulated in a sports context, past research has shown that students emulated the sports preferences of their friends and family (Dimmock and Grove, 2006). Leadership at the subordinate level is a critical component as well as "a leader needs to be seen not only as sharing followers' beliefs and norms, but to be highly representative of the group and its aspiration" (Batalha and Reynolds, 2012, p. 750). Given the role of identity in sports and the aspirational nature of required leadership, emulation is a vehicle to shape identity and subsequently adoption of preferences for, or more collective agreement on, a variety of services. The home shopping strategy uses the bandwagon effect to develop awareness of and enthusiasm for services (Solomon, 2017). For example, Botox parties involve bringing people together to obtain botox injections intended to reduce skin wrinkling. The idea is that when people at the party see others deciding to receive the injections, they will perceive that the social risk is low and will "jump on the bandwagon" to receive that service.

One of the most effective ways to generate emulation is through celebrity endorsements. Assuming people want to copy certain celebrities, the endorsement process allows for, awareness of and the transfer of that information. Of course, celebrities vary in terms of credibility, likeability and attractiveness (Gurel-Atay, 2022). The attributions that consumers make regarding endorsements will determine the effectiveness of the endorsement (Malik *et al.*, 2013). One process by which celebrities facilitate marketing is through meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989). Celebrities pass along symbolic cultural meanings through endorsements. Another process by which marketers communicate with consumers via celebrity endorsements is matchup. The matchup hypothesis (Kahle and Homer, 1985) suggests that a matchup between the image of a celebrity and the message a marketer wants to convey is vital to the success of the endorsement. For example, if one wants to promote barbering services to enhance personal appearance, the celebrity endorser should appear to be attractive to the target market. In a service context, the service provider should also ideally match the marketing message and stimulate emulation.

Search and evaluation of alternatives

Search and evaluation of alternatives are subject to various biases, such as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), and are often driven by an individual's own values, attitudes, behaviors,

identity and, ultimately, lifestyle. Furthermore, a search is often conducted with the goal of improving the current status, such as to learn something or to improve in an area, or, in short, to emulate someone or something else. Combined with theories related to social norms and observational learning, emulation influences how people conduct their search and what they search for, to emulate those around them. As part of the prepurchase behavior, evaluation of alternatives is a critical step of the process and is, again, influenced by lifestyle emulation. What services are being evaluated? Why? How are they evaluated? A user evaluates one health service or another (e.g. Orange Theory versus Lifetime Fitness), based on social comparison and the psychological pulls, driven by emulation, to fit in. Tactically, this decision is achieved through persuasion efforts emphasizing things such as social proof to illustrate the emulatory target or widen the range of services being evaluated.

Emulation has implications for the range and type of services that a person considers. Hovland *et al.* (1957) and Sherif and Sherif (1965) suggested that latitude of acceptance is the range of acceptable answers that not only include a person's stance but also that of other acceptance positions. As an example, a person who identifies as a Democrat accepts (i.e. latitude of acceptance) ideas that have aspects of Republican ideals but rejects (i.e. latitude of rejection) ideas that stray too far to the Republican side. Similarly, in a sports context, a typical passionate Los Angeles Dodgers fan will be only minimally willing to accept ideas or arguments from a San Francisco Giants fan due to the nature of rivalry and those ideas falling outside the latitude of acceptance. This theory of latitude of acceptance has been adopted in the judgment and decision-making literature to explain comparisons in tasks (Simonson *et al.*, 2013). The authors describe latitude of acceptance as "the range and concentration of task-acceptable comparisons" (p. 140), which has implications for how consumers compare and decide on services.

Research on latitude of acceptance and emulation converges with the potential to extend the latitude of acceptance due to a consumer's emulation of the endorser. A significant amount of research focuses on loyal consumers within sports, lifestyle and services research (i.e. those consumers for whom the endorsed product from the emulated spokesperson falls within the latitude of acceptance) but neglects consumers on the other side of the spectrum who are "on the fence" or who, without emulation, place the service within the latitude of rejection. For example, consider a celebrity, who is emulated by a significant consumer base, promoting a service such as an iPhone application. A portion of the consumer base will probably try the app because of their unbridled emulation of the celebrity. There are also consumers who, due to their emulation of the celebrity, are slightly more willing to entertain the app (i.e. a broader latitude of acceptance) or, presented with a decision across multiple competing apps, incorporate their emulation of the celebrity into their focus on, and adoption of, the target app.

Purchase

The purchase stage represents the point at which a person can reach, or at least take a step toward, the emulated lifestyle. Persuasion factors such as authority, liking and social proof, combined with the pull of emulation, push a consumer to purchase a particular product or service. Similarly, celebrity

endorsements, influencers and testimonials/reviews provide tactical options for managers to encourage emulation. In other words, a celebrity endorsement or a customer testimonial at the point of purchase has the potential, via social proof, social adaptation and other methods, to cue emulation. In a product setting, the pull of emulation is pronounced, such that, for consumers who are unable to afford or acquire the luxury item, they will defer to counterfeits (Han *et al.*, 2010). Although this tactic is less likely in a services setting due to the intangibility of the product, there is acknowledgement of psychological ownership and of the fact that some consumers do lie or mislead to signal a particular emulated lifestyle (Wirtz *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, although emulation influences the binary nature of the purchase (e.g. to purchase a coffee or not), it influences the style of coffee (e.g. tall, nonfat latte with caramel drizzle) or the latitude of acceptance (Simonson *et al.*, 2013; Hovland *et al.*, 1957) of a different option (e.g. latte instead of coffee) to emulate an idealized lifestyle.

Post purchase behavior and loyalty

Embedding emulation into the consumer journey helps to foster increased participation and subsequently the continual behavior and loyalty. For example, Larsen and Kahle (2019) described the transmission of "Indie Girl Culture" through blogging. People who want to participate in that culture participate in that blog. The blog strategically mentions certain idealized services and products that Indie Girls should consume to be a functional member of that culture. Discussions can intensely direct significant groups of people toward value-consistent consumption. In an increasingly digital business environment, and thanks to automated linguistics analysis tools such as the LIWC software (Pennebaker *et al.*, 2007; Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2009), researchers are now able computationally to measure the effect of language cues. LIWC has been shown to correlate with actual human ratings (Alpers *et al.*, 2005); hence, automatic linguistic analysis can tease out emulation motivations in online sports, lifestyle and service communities. Research exploring online communities, including health, sports and politics, showed that the linguistic content of the message plays a role in the likelihood of a response and willingness to continue participating (Arguello *et al.*, 2006).

In their exploration of loyalty loops and involvement spirals, Siebert *et al.* (2020) suggested that one way to maintain a dwindling loop is to spark a new one. For example, consumers enter new involvement spirals with "significantly different structures, memberships, and challenges, athletes can be understood as entering a new involvement spiral. Eventually, some of these athletes may go on to compete at the CrossFit Games and related competitions, sparking new involvement spirals once again" (Siebert *et al.*, 2020, p. 61). The aspirational nature of the pursuit highlights emulatory motivations to match or surpass others in the peer group (e.g. advance in CrossFit Games) and further expand the desired behavior.

Future research

Although emulation presents a strong underlying construct and motivational factor for engagement with services, future considerations should be examined. From the prevalence of

emulation in day-to-day life, to technological implications, to the dark side of emulation, future research should explore a host of emulation-related areas.

Lack of emulation

This conceptual paper largely showcases the positive potential of emulation as an explanatory mechanism for a host of services marketing-related activities, including sports marketing and lifestyle marketing. In an interesting twist, and one that highlights the power of emulation, Antonetti and Maklan (2016) argued that one barrier to responsible consumption is the perception that consumers of responsible brands are *not* worthy of emulation because of existing stereotypes. In other words, the *lack* of emulation of the sustainable community resulted in less socially desirable behaviors. If users of responsible brands were emulated, would that activity accelerate responsible consumption? Are there opportunities for more sports or lifestyle influencers, who *are* emulated, to change perceptions of responsible consumption and service adoption? Past research has suggested that social media, which are popular within sports and lifestyle marketing, provide an ideal platform for green advertisers, given the ability of consumers to self-select into lifestyle groups (Minton *et al.*, 2012), but the extensiveness of emulation as a driver needs to be further researched.

Emulation and status

How much stronger are emulation forces when the featured demonstrator is someone with a significant social status versus a more general person (i.e. an unidentifiable person in an ad)? For example, when a typical person browses social media, are there stronger emulation effects with celebrities (e.g. Taylor Swift) than another, noncelebrity, user on the platform with a significantly smaller following and status? Although the literature on influencers and what makes them influential is extensive, additional research is needed on whether emulation can be created or earned independent of typical social media metrics such as "likes" or followers. Recent research has highlighted how traditional celebrities and Instagram "Instafamous" celebrities (i.e. their celebrity was generated exclusively via the platform and not other career endeavors) are viewed differently (Jin *et al.*, 2019); however, the research does not specifically explore the role of emulation nor the potential for "regular people" on social media to be influential via emulation. Does an unidentifiable person (i.e. not a known celebrity, athlete or influencer) carry the same emulation potential and thus drive service consumption behavior?

Emulation and aging

Although emulation has been heavily studied in primates and children for years, how does emulation evolve as a motivating construct as one ages? A recent special issue in the *Journal of Services Marketing* focused on aging and the servicescape, while acknowledging that "aging, its effects and outcomes are still an unexplored area" (Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2020, p. 4). As an example, does a younger consumer emulate an athlete or celebrity, and thus is more receptive to his services marketing endorsements (e.g. wireless communication services and media platforms) the same way that an older consumer does? Even if both parties emulate the celebrity or athlete in similar ways, is

the resulting effect on service adoption and consumer behavior the same? Similarly, is emulation more pronounced when the marketing target (i.e. younger vs older consumer) can reasonably believe that reaching the status of the demonstrator (i.e. younger vs older celebrity) is possible? As Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2020) highlighted, services research often focuses on younger samples and younger consumers. Thus, in a sports context, how does emulation of a younger athlete such as LeBron James vary from emulation of an older athlete such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for an older population? An exploration of emulation as a driving factor in an aging population opens the door to better and more effective services marketing efforts. Given the increasingly complex and digital focused servicescape, research through the lens of emulation supports recent calls for additional research on aging and the service landscape (Bae *et al.*, 2020; Bateson, 2021; Stockard *et al.*, 2014).

Emulation and technology

In proposing a framework for collaborative artificial intelligence (AI) in marketing, Huang and Rust (2022, p. 210) emphasized the role of emulation: "Among some of the AI capabilities are robotics to emulate human movement, speech recognition to emulate human listening, computer vision to emulate human vision, natural language processing to emulate human language, and analytics to emulate human thinking." The backbone and future success of AI is largely based on how well it emulates human intelligence and behaviors, both on the marketing service and the consumption sides. Building on the previous discussion of children and emulation of robots, future research should explore the role of emulation in AI. This perspective applies both in terms of designing AI that emulates actual human behavior, as noted by Huang and Rust (2022), and the potential for AI to *be* emulated. This perspective opens an entirely new area of research to further understand the potential for and effects of emulating AI intelligence or more advanced computer-driven services.

A recent *Journal of Services Marketing* issue explored the role of technology in the services marketing landscape. It notably suggested that "there is much attention put on managerial consequences and not so much focus on the impact of technologies for customers" (Kunz *et al.*, 2019, p. 482). Emulation represents a promising new lens through which to explore the impact of technology for consumers, young and old. As previously mentioned, one child's language style matching was positively correlated with the emulation of a robot (Kory-Westlund and Breazeal, 2019). This finding opens the doors to additional research on the impact of technology on the development of young consumers. For example, educational services or other types of language-based services (e.g. chatbots) are more effective if the computer language is matched to the consumer. Emulation plays a critical role in the future of augmented reality (AR) services marketing (Heller *et al.*, 2019, p. 101): "AR's uniqueness lies in its emulation of these mental imagery processes, which distinguishes it from other forms of media that either lack generation (e.g. verbal description) or transformation (e.g. static pictures) currently dominating older forms of the retail frontline." From a consumer decision-making perspective, AR's ability to emulate (i.e. match or surpass) mental imagery processes improves

processing fluency. A consumer can offload these mentally taxing processes to AR. Imagine a modern-day version of the "Be Like Mike" Gatorade commercial, in which the participant is immersed in the playground basketball game itself via AR or taking part via virtual reality. Future research can explore the role of emulation and its effect on adoption of and engagement with digital services and distribution, such as AR, virtual reality and AI.

Linguistics and emulation
A significant body of research has explored framing, when "equivalent descriptions of a decision problem lead to systematically different decisions" (Sher and McKenzie, 2006, p. 468), but limited research has explored it through the lens of emulation. In a marketing or product context, framing is described as occurring when consumers' "product judgments vary as a function of the verbal labels used to define specific product attributes" (Levin and Gaeth, 1988, p. 374). This phenomenon can be illustrated by a simple example, such as framing beef as 75% lean or 25% fat. Does the choice of frame or utilization of a spokesperson that is emulated influence the receptiveness to the message? According to van Buiten and Keren (2009), the possibility that "when listeners have reasons to distrust speakers, they might more carefully scrutinize speakers' messages and generate alternative formulations themselves." Future research should explore the importance of emulation in response to framing and information leakage within sports, lifestyle and services marketing campaigns. As previously mentioned, modern tools such as the LIWC can tease out various psychological processes, including brand messaging on social media (Lee and Kahle, 2016). In their recent paper exploring group identity and linguistics, Ashokkumar and Pennebaker (2022) suggested that future research should look at "social dynamics of language expressions of identity and also explore other features of identity that get conveyed in natural language." Given the underpinnings of emulation in a variety of social encounters, future research should explore identifying markers of emulation in language. For example, cues in consumer responses to athletes or influencers can indicate an emulation motivation and, subsequently, highlight ideal spokespeople for a variety of marketing services.

Dark side of emulation
Is emulation always a good thing, or does it go too far in a socially and visually connected world? In a recent study exploring the effects of Instagram influencers (Rodner *et al.*, 2022, p. 49), one participant stated, "[…]you regard them [influencers] as a perfect person that you want to look like […] and you think if they can look like that from having their lips done then maybe I can look like that as well…." Tsiotsou and Klaus (2021) discussed questions regarding the "nip and tuck" service framework in a recent *Journal of Services Marketing* issue. Emulation can play a powerful but potentially destructive role. Given the underlying role of emulation in a variety of psychological and marketing-related processes, there is a plethora of future research directions within the services marketing space. From a practical perspective, this line of research has significant health and safety benefits based on implementing safeguards to avoid risky, dangerous or unwise behaviors. As an example, one recent article on the dangerous viral phenomena referred to as the "Tide Pod Challenge"

suggested that adolescents consumed laundry detergent pods as a method to attain status (Murphy, 2019), for which, as suggested in the current paper, emulation can be a driving mechanism for status seeking.

Characteristics of services
The four characteristics of services mentioned earlier provide opportunities for further research on emulation. Consider an airline offering transportation. Can intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability be effected by emulation? Can emulation provide an opportunity to enhance service quality in each of these dimensions? Future research should continue to explore the relation between emulation and the characteristics of services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, emulation is one driving motivation in service encounters, certainly worthy of careful and enhanced examination. Marketers often seek to plant an aspirational goal in consumers' minds. Whether it is an athlete promoting an app service or a social media influencer modeling use of a service, marketers want consumers to buy, try or engage with a service that is a positive self-defining or enhancing experience, even in the grips of uncertainty.

In recent years, services marketing research has explored a variety of areas of marketing from sports marketing (Rejikumar *et al.*, 2021) to consumer lifestyle (Chouk and Mani, 2019) to the role of influencers (Lee *et al.*, 2020; Bargoni *et al.*, 2022). A key question, however, is what is the underlying construct or motivational principle driving this behavior? Building on existing research exploring the overlap between sports and lifestyle marketing (Valette-Florence *et al.*, 2022), this article argues that *emulation*, or the motivation to match or exceed others, is the driving mechanism behind many of these forms of marketing.

As Byrne and Russon (1998, p. 668) noted, emulation, particularly goal emulation, occurs when "the purpose or the goal towards which the demonstrator is striving is made overt as a result of its actions, and so becomes a goal for the observer, too." This purpose, in a nutshell, represents a vast swath of marketing efforts. Whether the consumer is successful at achieving an aspirational goal, marketing often aims to plant a goal in a consumer's mind. Marketers want consumers to strive to excel, to emulate and to approach the stature of the service. From using athletes to influencers, the underlying goal of the brand is for the consumers of that information ultimately to *emulate* (i.e. buy, try, engage with or simply strive for) what they are seeing. As such, *emulation marketing* represents a driving mechanism behind many subareas of services marketing. It is a defining construct that underpins a multitude of marketing efforts that "portray an idealized existence as a marketing strategy" (Valette-Florence *et al.*, 2022). It represents an additional strategy as a motive for seeking services.

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