

Chapter 12



EXPERIMEDIA



What's the Trend?

Content creators use social experiments and real life interactions to study human behavior in unique new ways and build more realistic and entertaining narratives.

It took speaker, thinker and futurist Santiago Swallow exactly 72 hours to change the way the world would think about social influence online.

On April 17, 2013 he was introduced to the world as “one of the most famous people no one has heard of” through a flattering profile on Quartz.com written by Kevin Ashton, the man who first coined the term *Internet of Things*. By that point, Swallow already had tens of thousands of Twitter followers, plenty of seemingly astute observations about the human condition shared as tweets and a website promoting his upcoming book on the topic of imagined identities in the age of the Internet.

As if that were not enough, his tiny Twitter thumbnail bio photo showed a ruggedly handsome Mexican American male who was also described (by his own website) as “one of the greatest thinkers of the Millennial generation.” It wasn’t until about halfway down Ashton’s glowing introductory article about Swallow that you reached the real punch line: he wasn’t actually a real person.

As a social experiment, Ashton had created Swallow's profile a mere three days before, purchased thousands of fake Twitter followers for him and set up a fake WordPress account behind all of it. The total investment for all these efforts came to a grand total of \$68 and two hours of set-up time.

Santiago Swallow was followed by hundreds of real people, retweeted by others and even achieved a social influence Kred score of 754 out of 1000, as measured by a leading social influence tracking company at the time.

If a fictional persona like Swallow can fool so many people (and algorithms) so quickly, Ashton seemed to be asking what that says about the way that we measure influence today?

This is exactly the type of question that more and more content is posing online with *Experimedia*, the inventive new method of using social experimentation as a lens through which to tell a story or uncover an interesting aspect of humanity.

The Woman with the Photoshopped Face

There is no more interesting topic to test human perception than beauty.

The world is filled with clichés about how we each perceive beauty differently and there is well-proven cultural bias attached to what people generally see as beautiful. It was this second truth that inspired freelance journalist Esther Honig to launch an ambitious mid-2014 project designed to explore beauty on a global scale.

She sent a photo of herself to designers in 25 countries with this simple instruction:

“Hi my name is Esther Honig and I would like you to enhance this image [of me] using Photoshop. I trust you will take whatever steps you see necessary. Make me look beautiful.”

The resulting images she got back varied widely as designers from Pakistan, Serbia and the Philippines each applied a different filter to the idea of beauty. The effort captured the attention of media worldwide thanks in part to a featured story on BuzzFeed with the glanceworthy

headline “This Woman Had Her Face Photoshopped in Over 25 Countries to Examine Global Beauty Standards.”

Her aim was to discover if a global beauty standard exists, but during a later interview with Vice.com, she ultimately concluded it ended up in “a special spot between self-reflection, social commentary, and photo journalism that [was] made for social media channels. ... [which] seems to be the future of how we interact and discover information.”

This future also happens to be true even if the vision behind it isn’t quite as noble as shining a light on global perceptions of beauty.

Can an Expensive Car Make You More Attractive?

In a story seemingly crafted perfectly for British tabloids, two teenage pranksters armed with a handheld video camera and a YouTube account decided to visit a college campus and test a theory every teenage boy has likely heard at some point: that a beautiful and expensive car can make you more attractive to women.

To test the theory, Andrey Smygov and Victor G decided to take turns filming themselves using a Bugatti Veyron exotic car as a backdrop to asking female university students if they would be interested in sleeping with them. Of the five women who they approached, only two declined, which helped the video go predictably viral on YouTube.

Around the same time of this prank, a UK-based dating app was running its own social experiment with a far more romantic concept.

Aimed at testing the theory that we can form a love connection with someone before we see their face, they staged a speed-dating event where all the participants agreed to wear paper bags over their heads throughout the evening.

Though the bags had cutouts for your mouth and eyes, the test was enough of a stunt to entice journalist Marisa Kabas, a Today.com contributor, to attend and write about her experience. While the story didn’t end with her meeting a soul mate, it did offer a captivating experiment about whether love is actually blind and what might happen if we tested that belief.

Why It Matters

There was a time when social experiments were primarily conducted by students and professors working in psychology or anthropology departments at universities. We would hear the results of these experiments through research studies published in journals, or (if you weren't an academic) through the mainstream media simplifying and reporting on the results after they were published.

Today these social experiments are being launched with far greater frequency and resulting in interesting explorations of all aspects of humanity—and they are published by everyone from individual content creators and thinkers to brands looking for unique ways to engage audiences more deeply.

In the coming year, this style of *Experimedia* will be used far more consistently and dramatically to make a point or promote a point of view.

Who Should Use This Trend?

This trend has been used quite frequently by brands targeting beauty and health products, thanks to the highly visible efforts of Dove over the decade since launching their global “Campaign for Real Beauty.” Outside of beauty and fashion, though, plenty of consumer packaged goods, alcohol and even financial services brands can realize value from trying to use this technique of *Experimedia* to create interesting and engaging content that people can't help but share. It is also increasingly used by independent content creators who are trying to build their own audiences to start careers in media and entertainment, or to build enough of an audience individually to get discovered by larger platforms.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Visualize complex topics** – One of the most successful recent efforts using this trend was a series of ads from Prudential Financial produced in partnership with Harvard professor Dan Gilbert. The ads depict real-life visual experiments

designed to motivate Americans to better understand and prepare for retirement. The brand's latest ad in the series involved toppling the world's tallest domino and setting a world record in the process. What it illustrates is that using visual experiments can simplify a complex topic and capture attention in the process.

- ✓ **Tell an emotional story** – In 2013, Dove crossed the 50 million-view mark on YouTube with its latest video in the “Campaign for Real Beauty.” Like its previous efforts, Dove used a social experiment—this time a former FBI sketch artist drawing women's faces—in order to underscore the brand's message: “you are more beautiful than you think.” The real life social experiment was so compelling, that delivered the brand message far more powerfully than a traditional ad.
- ✓ **Recreate experiments** – One of the nicest things about the rise of social experiments covered in the media is that you have plenty of ideas to pull from for when it comes to building your own experiments. While doing this well may seem like it requires an entire video team and a vast experience you may not have internally, launching your own experiments only takes curiosity and a willingness to engage people and freelance resources online who may be able to help with the details.

Chapter 27



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The 2016 Perspective

Over time, some trends evolve to become deeper more incisive commentaries on our social behaviour or expand into adoption from new industries or unexpected brands. Then there are trends like Experimedia which remain exactly as they were originally described – and just bring plenty more of the same types of examples a year later.

In the past 12 months since this trend was first introduced, dozens more examples from the world of media, brand marketing and consumer behavior appeared to illustrate that this trend has no signs of fading in the near future. Honest Tea, for example, created a series of 27 pop-up stores in major U.S. cities all designed to test the honesty of the city's residents by giving them to opportunity to pay for their beverages on the honor system if no one appeared to be watching. The winner of this "National Honesty Index" by thin margin: Honolulu, Hawaii.

Longtime social good pioneer Toms Shoes invited people around the world to enjoy a day #withoutshoes on May 21 for the eight straight year

in order to support their mission to provide shoes for the poor and gave more than 265,000 pairs of shoes to kids in need.

Greeting Card brand Hallmark followed its highly successful Valentine's Day involving hidden cameras with a Mother's Day campaign using the same method to challenge adult children to show their love without using the usual greeting card platitudes.

Even Dove, the brand that started using social experiments back in 2004 when it first launched the *Dove Campaign For Real Beauty*, continued to evolve its insight that only 2% of women consider themselves beautiful. In 2015, the latest effort from the brand involved creating signs above two doorways into buildings – one labeled beautiful and the other labeled average. Women were encouraged, via a campaign hashtag, to #choosebeautiful – yet another social experiment designed to remind women that they are more beautiful than they think.

All these examples from brands seeking to create more moments to engage consumers to charitable brands aiming to bring the urgency of their causes to life led to plenty of examples of *Experimedia* – and 2016 is likely to bring more of the same.

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