

A Study on the Influence of Social Media Content Marketing on the Construction of Generation Z's Consumer Identity: The Case of Xiaohongshu Outfit Content

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Abstract: Social media has evolved from a tool for information sharing into a key arena in which young people express themselves and shape their identities. Taking Xiaohongshu outfit content as the research object, this paper adopts a literature-based approach and draws on social identity theory, symbolic consumption theory and self-presentation theory to analyse the marketing characteristics of such content at three levels: visual presentation, discursive expression and interaction mechanisms. It discusses how these elements shape the consumer identity of Generation Z. The study finds that, through mechanisms such as aesthetic imitation, tagged self-presentation, circle belonging and ideal self-projection, Xiaohongshu outfit content gradually transforms consumption behaviour into a practice of identity construction. Outfit consumption becomes an important way for Generation Z to articulate "who I am", "where I belong" and "who I want to become". On this basis, the paper offers suggestions for platforms, brands and young users.

Keywords: Social Media; Content Marketing; Xiaohongshu; Generation Z; Consumer Identity; Outfit Culture

1. Introduction

In an era when the mobile internet and algorithmic recommendation are deeply embedded in everyday life, social media has gradually evolved into a core arena where young people obtain information, form aesthetic preferences and construct identity. As one of the most visually expressive categories of consumption, outfits are particularly well suited to circulation on image-and short-video-based platforms. Among these, Xiaohongshu, with its "lifestyle sharing" positioning and content form centred on illustrated notes, has become a major platform on which young users discuss outfits,

gather inspiration and complete consumption conversion.

In this process, what users encounter is not merely product information but an entire set of identity imaginaries and lifestyle narratives associated with outfits. Having grown up with social media, Generation Z is more inclined to internalize platform outfit discourses as resources for self-expression, so that outfit consumption gradually becomes a way for young people to answer the questions "who am I" and "who do I want to become". Existing research tends to focus on communication mechanisms, blogger influence and consumption conversion, while discussion of the deeper issue of consumer identity remains insufficiently focused [1,2].

Against this background, this paper takes Xiaohongshu outfit content as a case and attempts to address the following questions: what marketing characteristics does such content possess? Through what pathways does it influence Generation Z's consumer identity? And what insights can be drawn for platforms, brands and young users?

2. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Social Media Content Marketing

Social media content marketing refers to the practice in which brands or individuals attract and maintain audiences, and ultimately influence their attitudes and behaviour, through valuable and coherent content output. It emphasizes the idea of content as medium, embedding brand value into illustrated posts, short videos and live streams, and disseminating it through platform algorithms and social networks. Xiaohongshu's planting grass notes are a typical example [2].

2.2 Consumer Identity

Identity refers to an individual's understanding of "who I am" and "which group I belong to".

Consumer identity emphasizes how individuals understand and express themselves through consumption behavior, brand choices, style preferences and lifestyle display. Belk's extended self perspective argues that possessions become part of self-identity [3]. In Xiaohongshu outfit content, consumer identity is reflected in self-expression, ideal self-construction and group belonging. Users express personal style through outfits and posts, imagine becoming more refined by viewing influencer content, and enter aesthetic circles through liking, commenting and sharing.

Symbolic consumption theory holds that consumption is not merely the acquisition of functional value, but also a process in which individuals communicate identity, status and group belonging through the symbolic meanings carried by goods and brands; in this view, what is consumed is the symbol as much as the object itself [3]. Extended self theory explains how material possessions participate in self-identity [3]. Self-presentation theory compares social interaction to performance. Individuals manage others' impressions through front stage and back stage distinction [4]. Schau and Gilly[5] further pointed out that consumers combine objects, symbols, places and personal narratives through online content posting, forming digital identities. Social identity theory suggests that self-concept includes personal identity and group-based identity. Wang et al.[6] show that social networking sites provide social comparison materials and group interaction.

2.3 Generation Z Consumer Culture

In this paper, Generation Z refers to the cohort born roughly between 1995 and 2010, that is, young people who came of age together with the mobile internet and social media. This generation is accustomed to acquiring information through online platforms and displaying daily life through social media. Consumption is frequently connected with interests, aesthetics, social circles and self-expression. In outfit consumption, Generation Z users possess strong style awareness. A white shirt can become "preppy style", "business casual" or "French style" through different styling. The value of products comes not only from materials and functions, but also from the aesthetic position and identity imagination they represent [1]. This forms a consumption cycle from seeding to purchasing to rumination.

3. Research Method and Analytical Framework

This paper adopts the literature research method as its primary approach. Since the questions addressed have strong theoretical and interpretive characteristics, it is necessary to sort out core concepts, theoretical perspectives and research contexts based on existing research. This paper mainly conducts theoretical analysis without directly measuring user behavior. Therefore, conclusions focus on explaining possible paths and mechanisms through which social media content marketing influences consumer identity.

Existing research has limitations. First, Xiaohongshu research focuses more on communication mechanisms and consumption conversion, with insufficient discussion on consumer identity. Second, identity research is abundant, but the specific platform context of Xiaohongshu outfit content remains inadequate. Third, there is lack of research on how young users form consumer identity through browsing, imitating, purchasing and sharing outfit content [1,2,7,8].

4. Characteristics of Xiaohongshu Outfit Content Marketing

4.1 Image-Centred Visual Presentation

Xiaohongshu outfit content is highly dependent on images: composition, colour palette, filter, scene and pose are all heavily stylized, forming an easily recognizable system of visual symbols [1]. Such presentation can convey a large amount of stylistic information in a very short time and prompt users' initial identification and imitation through visual impact. More notably, Xiaohongshu outfit content often standardizes visual symbols through style naming, with categories such as old money style, dopamine outfit and new Chinese style. These tags point not only to specific clothing combinations but also to an entire set of imaginings of lifestyle and aesthetic attitude.

4.2 Lifestyle Discourse and the Planting Grass Narrative

At the textual level, Xiaohongshu outfit content makes extensive use of first-person narration, colloquial expression and emotionally inflected discourse. A typical note rarely calls directly for purchase. Instead, expressions such as "I am

really into this combination recently" or "it also looks polished enough for commuting" embed consumption choices in personal life narratives. The key lies in turning product information into stories about the self. As such narratives are repeated, users gradually come to believe that buying the same items can let them live the same life and become the same kind of person.

4.3 Algorithmic Recommendation and Interaction Mechanisms

Under the logic of platformization, institutional accounts, individual influencers and ordinary users jointly participate in agenda-setting, with individual influencers exerting a particularly strong influence on ordinary users [7]. Algorithms generate personalized recommendation flows based on users' browsing, liking, collecting and searching behaviour, placing each user in an outfit world tailor-made by the algorithm. In terms of interaction, liking, collecting, commenting and posting form a complete chain of participation, in which users are simultaneously consumers and re-producers of content.

5. Pathways Through Which Xiaohongshu Outfit Content Shapes Generation Z Consumer Identity

5.1 Aesthetic Imitation

For many Generation Z users, Xiaohongshu is a major source of aesthetic learning in outfit matters. High-frequency exposure on the platform gradually becomes part of users' aesthetic preferences [1]. When users repeatedly browse notes of the same style and are continuously fed similar content by the algorithm, an originally vague liking becomes more concrete. It may turn into clear preferences for particular colours, silhouettes, brands and photo styles. This imitation extends beyond individual items to overall styling, lifestyle scenarios and even bodily posture. While buying commodities, users are also purchasing a complete template of how to dress, how to take photos and how to live.

5.2 Tagged Self-Presentation

Goffman points out that individuals continually engage in impression management in social interaction, seeking to convey an idealized self-image to others [4]. In the age of social media, the stage of self-presentation extends to the

platform interface, and users construct their self-image through carefully selected images, words and product symbols [5]. In the Xiaohongshu outfit context, such presentation is heavily dependent on tags. When users attach to themselves tags such as old-money-style enthusiast, dopamine girl or relaxed-style outfit, they are in fact completing an act of self-definition through consumption choices.

5.3 Circle Belonging and Group Identification

According to social identity theory, group belonging is an important component of identity [9]. In the Xiaohongshu outfit context, style tags naturally form a series of interest circles bound together by aesthetic preferences. Social networking sites not only expand users' social range but also provide individuals with space to express, manage and reconstruct social identity [6]. Users prove their presence in a circle by imitating its typical outfits, strengthen their connection with others through commenting and interaction, and consolidate their position by distinguishing themselves from other style circles.

5.4 Ideal Self-Projection

Giddens argues that, under high modernity, the individual must continually construct the self through reflexive narrative [10]. Xiaohongshu outfit content provides the raw material and the stage for such narrative. When browsing bloggers' notes, users are not merely admiring clothing but imagining a state of life they have not yet attained but desire to approach. Belk's concept of the extended self is useful here. By purchasing, wearing and sharing such commodities, users incorporate external symbols into the boundaries of the self and gradually turn the ideal image into part of the actual self [3].

6. Reflections and Suggestions

First, with respect to the algorithmic cocoon, content platforms such as Xiaohongshu should rebalance personalized recommendation against editorial diversity. Although tailored outfit feeds sustain platform activity, they tend to confine Generation Z users within a single-style information cocoon and reinforce aesthetic homogenization. Platforms should therefore introduce cross-style exposure, refresh-and-explore options and transparent recommendation cues, so that users retain the capacity to step outside the bubble curated by the algorithm.

Second, with respect to covert advertising, both platforms and brands need to clarify the boundary between sincere sharing and commercial promotion. Planting grass notes often blur the line between personal experience and paid endorsement, which over time erodes trust and pushes Generation Z toward over-consumption. Platforms should enforce clear sponsorship labels and strengthen the identification of undisclosed commercial content, while brands should move beyond covert seeding and participate in the construction of meaning through transparent, long-term value expression rather than disguised marketing.

Third, with respect to tagged self-presentation, Generation Z users themselves should remain reflexive about the identity work performed through style tags. While labels such as old-money-style enthusiast, dopamine girl or relaxed-style outfit offer convenient resources for self-expression on the platform, they also risk collapsing the self into a small set of consumable categories and driving repeat purchases in order to sustain a particular label. A healthy consumer identity should be grounded in a genuine understanding of the self, treating any tag as one facet of the self rather than the whole of it.

7. Conclusion

Taking Xiaohongshu outfit content as a case, this paper has discussed the role of social media content marketing in shaping Generation Z's consumer identity. The study shows that, through its three characteristics, namely image-centred visual presentation, the lifestyle planting grass narrative, and algorithmic recommendation and interaction mechanisms, Xiaohongshu outfit content constitutes a highly active field of meaning production. Within this field, Generation Z users, through mechanisms such as aesthetic imitation, tagged self-presentation, circle belonging and ideal self-projection, gradually transform outfit consumption into a practice of identity construction, making consumption a core means of articulating "who I am", "where I belong" and "who I want to become".

By combining research on social media content marketing with research on identity in the

specific context of Xiaohongshu outfits, this study offers a more fine-grained perspective for understanding youth consumer culture. Limited by the research method, this paper relies mainly on literature analysis, and its conclusions still need to be tested with empirical data in future research.

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