

Empathy-Driven Marketing Strategies for Emotional Products Based on Generation Z's Personal Consumption Characteristics: A Case Study of Fan Economy

Xiyue Zhang

Foreign Language Department, Northwest University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710127, China

ABSTRACT

Under the combined effect of digitalisation and cultural transformation, Generation Z has gradually become the main force in the consumer market, and its unique emotion-driven consumption tendency presents brand-new challenges and opportunities for marketing strategies. Taking 'fan economy' as a typical consumer scenario, this paper explores the marketing path of emotional goods from the perspective of empathy marketing, taking into account the personalisation and emotional value orientation of Generation Z consumers. Through literature review, questionnaire survey and case study analysis, the paper reveals the core role of emotional connection in fan consumption, and proposes targeted empathy marketing strategies, with a view to providing empirical evidence and practical guidance for brand positioning and communication in the Generation Z market.

KEYWORDS

Generation Z; Fan economy; Emotional goods; Personalised consumption; Empathy marketing

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and motivation

Generation Z, usually referred to as people born in 1995 - 2009, grew up in the era of rapid development of the Internet and relatively affluent material conditions, and formed unique consumption characteristics in the environment of multiculturalism and information explosion. According to relevant statistics, China's Generation Z population exceeds 260 million, and in 2023, they will account for 20% of the total population, contributing 40% of the consumption power, prying more than 5 trillion dollars of the consumer market, and their influence on consumption should not be underestimated.

The consumption concepts of Generation Z are significantly different from those of previous generations, as they pay more attention to the emotional value of the consumption process and pursue self-pleasure, pressure release and social interaction. In terms of self-pleasing consumption, they are willing to invest in hobbies and pursue high-quality spiritual enjoyment, a characteristic that prompts commodities no longer only as a tool for material satisfaction, but also as a medium for conveying emotions and manifesting personality.

As a typical representative scenario of Generation Z's consumption behaviour, the fan economy fully demonstrates the close connection between emotional commodities and empathy marketing. In the fan economy, fans' love and admiration for idols do not only stop at the emotional level; the release of works, or even the sharing of daily life, can trigger strong emotional resonance among fans, which can be transformed into practical actions such as purchasing albums, peripheral merchandise, concert tickets, and online voting. Therefore, studying the consumption logic of Generation Z under the fan economy can help to understand the construction mechanism of empathy marketing strategy more deeply.

1.2 Research ideas and methods

In this paper, I first review the relevant theories of personalised consumption characteristics of Generation Z, emotional goods and empathy marketing, and fan economy to build up a theoretical foundation. Then, it analyses the consumption behaviour of Generation Z in the fan economy and the relationship between the two. By selecting typical fan economy case, the empathy marketing practices of emotional commodities are analysed in detail. Finally, based on the above research, we propose an empathy marketing strategy for emotional commodities for Generation Z. The research methods include: literature research method, which collects relevant literature from CNKI, Google Scholar and other databases; case study method, which selects representative cases for in-depth analysis; and questionnaire survey method, which conducts questionnaire surveys on consumers of Generation Z to obtain data.

2 Literature review

In the field of research on consumer characteristics of Generation Z, scholars at home and abroad have achieved a series of results. Tracy Francis and Fernanda Hoefel (2018) mentioned in their study that Generation Z consumers are more

inclined to choose products that can express their self-identity and values ^[1].

In the field of emotional goods research, Hung, K. (2020) suggested that based on the effect because of KOL endorsement, celebrity fans are at the receiving end of the marketing strategy, and they function primarily as brand purchasers ^[2]. However, existing research lacks a systematic analysis of how emotional goods can be precisely marketed for the personalised consumption characteristics of Generation Z.

Research on empathy marketing focuses on its principles and applications. Lehnert and Kuehnl proposed an empathy marketing framework based on the perception-action model, which emphasises the central role of empathy in shaping consumer experience ^[3]. However, existing research needs further in-depth studies on how to deeply explore the emotional needs of Generation Z and how to develop more targeted empathy marketing strategies based on these needs.

In the study of fan economy, foreign scholars Linden, H and Linden, S.(2017) proposed businesses in their quest for a larger market share want fans, not customers, and brand advocates, not followers ^[4]. However, current research has certain research gaps in combining the consumption characteristics of Generation Z and analysing in-depth the empathic marketing path of emotional goods in the fan economy.

To sum up, current research has achieved some results in the areas of Generation Z consumption characteristics, emotional commodities, empathic marketing and fan economy, but there are still gaps in combining these research contents organically and exploring the empathic marketing paths of emotional commodities under the personalised consumption characteristics of Generation Z in the fan economy scenario in depth. This study will focus on this area, and through the comprehensive use of various research methods, we will analyse the consumption psychology and behaviour of Generation Z, explore the unique value of emotional commodities in the fan economy, and explore the effective path of empathic marketing, with a view to providing new ideas and methods for marketing theory and practice.

3 Theoretical foundation

3.1 Anatomy of generation z's personalised consumption characteristics

Generation Z demonstrates a strong pursuit of personalisation in their consumer behaviour, rejecting uniformity and aspiring to express their unique personality and identity through consumption. They respond positively to personalized and interactive marketing, appreciating brands that offer customised experiences and engage directly through real-time feedback ^[5]. Generation Z is the main force of social networks, and their consumption behaviours have strong social attributes. Consumption is not only a behaviour to satisfy personal needs, but also a way of social interaction and self-expression. On social media, Generation Z will share their own consumption experience and recommend their favourite products, and at the same time, they will be influenced by the consumption behaviour and recommendations of others.

3.2 Theoretical framework of emotional goods and empathy marketing

Emotional merchandise is a special form of merchandise that has emerged in the context of the continuous development of the consumer market and the increasingly diversified needs of consumers. Through the emotional value, cultural connotation and unique experience carried by the commodity, it triggers the emotional resonance of consumers. In the fan economy, star-related merchandises are typical emotional commodities. Fans will buy idol signature photos, posters, support items, etc. The material value of these commodities is relatively low, but for fans, they carry the love and support for the idol and have a very high emotional value. When fans own these products, they can feel a close connection with their idols and gain psychological satisfaction and pleasure.

With the development of social economy and the improvement of people's living standard, consumers are more in pursuit of spiritual satisfaction and emotional pleasure after meeting the basic material needs. Emotional commodities are precisely to seize this consumer trend, through mining the emotional needs of consumers, emotional elements into commodity design, marketing and consumer experience, so that commodities become the carrier of consumer emotional expression and emotional support.

Empathy marketing is a marketing strategy based on consumers' emotional needs, and its core principle is to establish an emotional connection between brands and consumers by triggering consumers' emotional resonance, so as to promote consumers' purchasing behaviour. Empathy marketing emphasises the need for brands to understand consumers' emotional needs, values and lifestyles, to feel and think from the consumers' perspective, and to promote their products in a way that consumers can understand and agree with. Research has shown that trust in influencers is an important element that drive buying decisions ^[6]. In the fan economy, brands often take advantage of fans' love to trigger their emotional resonance by collaborating with them and launching co-branded products, for example. Brands will invite celebrities to endorse their products and use their image and influence to drive fan purchases.

3.3 The concept and mechanism of fan economy

In China, the budding of fan culture began in the 1980s and 1990s. With the reform developing, there was a huge influx of pop culture works. The emergence of Andy Lau, Jacky Cheung, Aaron Kwok and Leon Lai, attracted countless

fans, and people began to buy their albums, posters, concert tickets, and so on, and the behaviour of chasing after the stars gradually formed a cultural phenomenon. 1993, on the CCTV 35th anniversary, the sketch 'Star Chasers,' revealed the phenomenon of chasing after the stars at the time, and although the scale of chasing after the stars at this time was not large, it marked the beginning of 'Star Chasing Culture'.

The real rise and development of the fan economy is closely related to the development of talent shows and the Internet social media. In 2005, Super Girl held by Hunan TV became an important milestone in the development of the fan economy. The program attracted a large number of fans, and its selection criteria relied on viewers' mobile phone votes, which prompted fans to promote their idols in an organised manner and call on others to vote, as well as to buy products related to their idols, such as posters, stickers, postcards, etc., and the fan economy began to ascend to the stage of domestic history.

With the rapid development of mobile communication technology, the Internet industry has ushered in a golden age, providing a broader platform for the development of fan economy. Fan consumption has expanded from offline to online, and the way of support has diversified from single SMS voting to diversification, such as online charting, data brushing, social media publicity, etc. . Fans can pay attention to the idol's dynamics in real time through social platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Tiktok, share the idol's works and personal information, as well as communicate with other fans to form a strong fan community.

The operation of fan economy involves the interaction among fans, celebrities, and platforms, which builds a complex and efficient value creation and dissemination system. Fans, as the core participants of the fan economy, their love and support for stars is the driving force of the whole economic model. The support and consumption of fans provide economic benefits and motivations for stars, prompting them to continuously create high-quality content; the high-quality content and high popularity of content creators attracts more fans to pay attention to and join them, expanding the scale of the fan base; the platform attracts fans and content creators to join it by providing high-quality services and a good user experience, increasing the platform's commercial value.

4 Insights into the connection between gen z consumption and the fan economy

4.1 Anatomy of the current situation

In today's booming fan economy, Generation Z undoubtedly occupies a central position. According to the data of China Performing Arts Industry Association, in 2024, the box office revenue of national commercial performances will reach RMB 57.954 billion, with large-scale concerts contributing more than 40% of the incremental revenue, in which the Post-95 generation occupies a pivotal position. They are not only keen to buy concert tickets, but also spend money on concert derivatives, such as support items and celebrities' same clothes, etc. A concert can often leverage three times the related consumption. The active performance of Gen Z in the fan economy is also reflected in their active participation in a variety of fan activities. On social media, by creating topics, posting news, and participating in discussions, fans can create heat for the idols. For example, fans of TFBOYS create "super topic" on Weibo, which has hundreds of millions of readers and a large number of fan interactions. Fans share photos, videos, news and other contents of their idols in super topic, and increase the exposure of their idols' super topics through liking, commenting and reposting, etc. Generation Z fans are also actively involved in offline support activities. When their idols attend events, they hold support items such as light boards and banners to cheer the idols up.

Generation Z has had a far-reaching impact on the development of the fan economy. Their consumption behaviour has directly led to the development of fan economy-related industries, such as the manufacture of star-related products, concert organisation, and the operation of fan events, etc., which greatly expanding the influence of the fan economy. The active performance of Generation Z in the fan economy has also prompted brand owners and content creators to pay more attention to the interaction and communication with fans.

4.2 The influence path of generation z psychology on fan economy

In today's society, people are faced with fast-paced life, high-intensity work, and complicated relationships, and these pressures make people's inner desire for emotional comfort and spiritual support more and more intense. For Generation Z, growing up in the age of information explosion, they are faced with more choices and challenges, and their sense of loneliness and confusion is more prominent. Based on these, the fan economy has provided an emotional harbour for Generation Z. They find a sense of belonging in the fan base and gain emotional comfort through their support and love for their idols. Fans feel happy and proud of their idols' success, and support and encourage their idols when they encounter difficulties. This kind of emotional interaction and exchange creates a close emotional bond between fans and their idols.

In the fan community, they can find like-minded friends and share their love for their idols, the information they have collected about their idols, and the fan works they have made through social media. The sense of belonging to the fan community also enables Generation Z to realise their self-worth in the community. They gain a sense of achievement and

satisfaction by contributing to the group through supporting their idols and participating in various activities of the fan community. Some fans will organise public welfare activities on their own initiative, making donations in the name of their idols, etc. These activities not only contribute to the society, but also make fans feel their value and power.

In the fan economy, Gen Z can also pursue individuality in various ways. For example, fans can give full play to their creativity and imagination, designing unique support items and support methods. They express unique insights and emotions towards its idols by releasing fan works, such as hand-drawn drawings, video clips, and novels. These works often incorporate the personal style and creativity of Generation Z, showcasing their talent and individuality, and are widely disseminated through social media, gaining appreciation and recognition from other fans, further boosting their self-confidence and desire for personalised expression.

5 Analysis of emotional commodity empathy marketing cases in the fan economy

5.1 Background

From 14th February to 14th March, 2025, BBNEXDO's first national pop-up shop landed Beijing. BBNEXDO's image originates from the popular Korean boy group BOYNEXTDOOR, who officially debuted in May 2023 with the release of their debut single album 'WHO!' and quickly became popular with songs such as 'But I Like You' and 'One and Only', winning the hearts of fans with their friendliness and youthfulness. BBNEXDO has six characters, who are guards of the villages in which they live, and these characters have been incorporated into a variety of products.

The BBNEXDO pop-up shop is organised by Xidan Joy City, which has always been committed to creating a young, fashionable and trendy shopping environment, which is highly compatible with BBNEXDO's target audience. Opening on the special day of Valentine's Day added a romantic atmosphere to the pop-up shop and attracted more attention from consumers.

5.2 Empathy marketing implementation strategy

Inside the BBNEXDO pop-up shop, a wide range of character-related products are displayed, covering various categories from support sticks and selfie cards to canvas bags, as well as plush, pendants, and daily necessities. These products are not only beautifully designed, but also incorporate unique elements of the idols. The pop-up shop set up an interactive experience area, providing fans with the opportunity to 'get in touch' with their idols, enhancing their sense of participation and emotional experience. Fans could interact with BBNEXDO characters and take photos, through virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies, they could feel as if they were in the idol's world and interact with him. Some fans danced and sang with the members through AR technology, leaving behind wonderful memories. A fan message wall was also set up, where fans could write down their blessings and expectations for their idols, enhancing the interaction and emotional exchange between fans.

In order to attract more consumers and enhance the consumer experience, BBNEXDO pop-up shop launched a joint activity with 15 merchants in Xidan Joy City. With the pop-up shop purchase tickets, fans can enjoy a number of exclusive offers on retail, food and beverage. This activity not only enhances the fans' shopping experience, but also promotes sales at other merchants in the mall. During the whole business period, the cumulative traffic exceeded tens of thousands of people. On social media, the readership of the topic #BBNEXDO pop-up shop reached millions of times, and the discussion volume exceeded hundreds of thousands of times. Fans shared their photos and experiences in the shop on social media, further expanding the influence.

6 Building emotional marketing strategy for generation z

6.1 Precise insight into the emotional needs of generation z

In the era of digitalisation, companies can collect data from social media, e-commerce and gaming platforms through multiple channels. Enterprises can collect data on social media, e-commerce platforms, gaming platforms, etc., including their browsing records, purchasing behaviours, comments, likes and shares, etc..

Based on the results of big data analysis, enterprises can achieve precision marketing, and accurately push products and services that meet the interests, preferences and emotional needs of Generation Z to target customers. Using personalised recommendation algorithms, companies can push personalised product recommendations to Gen Z on various platforms. When a fan frequently buys products of a certain celebrity, the platform can push the latest products and concert tickets of the celebrity. Enterprises can also customise their marketing campaigns according to the emotional needs of Generation Z in different scenarios. During Valentine's Day, companies can launch couples' celebrity products and carry out interactive activities to satisfy the emotional needs of Gen Z in love.

6.2 Innovating communication channels for empathy marketing

Social media, as an indispensable part of Generation Z's life, provides a method for empathy marketing to precisely reach the target audience. Enterprises should make full use of the advantages of platforms to formulate communication

strategies. Weibo, as one of the most important platforms, has a huge user base and rich topic resources. Companies can create brand topics on Weibo, combining hot topics and publish content related to emotional commodities. On a celebrity's birthday, brands can create relevant topics, release information about limited edition products co-operated by the celebrity and the brand, and set up interesting interactive topics, such as 'Share your most memorable moments with your idol', to attract fans to participate in the discussion. This kind of interactive empathy marketing can not only enhance the goodwill of fans, but also effectively enhance the brand's fan loyalty^[7].

6.3 Establishing a long-term operation system for the fan community

In the fan community, fans will put forward a variety of opinions, the brand should listen carefully and respond in a timely manner. Brands should actively adopt the reasonable suggestions of fans and feedback the improvement measures to fans, so that the fans feel that their opinions are valued, and enhance their sense of identity and loyalty to the brand. Some studies have shown that the more interactive users are on the platform, the higher the perceived experience and the more positive the consumption will be^[8].

Co-creation of value between fans and brands is an important mode for the long-term operation of fan communities, and brands can encourage fans to participate in product design, marketing activity planning and other aspects through a variety of ways. For example, the theme, form and content of online and offline activities. For fans who participate in value co-creation, brands can give material rewards, such as giving limited edition star-related products, celebrity photocards, endorsement products and so on.

7 Conclusions and outlook

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the empathic marketing path of emotional goods in the fan economy under the personalised consumption characteristics of Generation Z. The following important conclusion is drawn: Generation Z has become the main force of the fan economy by virtue of their unique consumption psychology and behaviour. Their consumption behaviour in the fan economy is profoundly driven by factors such as emotional attachment, social interaction and personalised expression.

Based on research, the empathy marketing strategy for emotional commodities should start from precise insight into emotional needs, innovation of communication channels and the establishment of a long-term operation mechanism for fan communities. Using big data analysis technology, companies can gain a deeper understanding of Generation Z's interests, preferences and emotional needs, providing a strong basis for product design and marketing activities. With the help of social media, companies can expand the exposure of their brands and enhance consumers' sense of participation. By creating a sense of belonging through community interaction and promoting the co-creation of value and feedback between fans and the brand, the fan loyalty and long-term operation can be achieved.

However, there are still some limitations in this study. In terms of the research sample, although the data were collected through various channels, the sample mainly focused on the Generation Z group that is more active in the fan economy, which may not be able to fully represent the consumption characteristics and emotional needs of all Generation Z. In the questionnaire survey, the sample was mainly drawn from Generation Z users who are concerned about celebrities on platforms, while those who do not pay much attention to social media may not be fully represented. Future research should further expand the scope of the sample, improve the representativeness and universality of the results, explore how to effectively implement empathy marketing in different cultures and how technology can empower empathy marketing of emotional goods, and explore innovative marketing models and strategies.

About the Author

* Corresponding Author : Zhang Xiyue, 1355679853@qq.com

References

- [1] Francis T., Hoefel, F. True Gen: Generation Z and its implications for companies. McKinsey & Company, 2018, 12:1-10.
- [2] Hung, K. Celebrity and influencer in a fan economy: Unfolding the fans' roles in enhancing endorsement effects. In: Robert A. D. (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on media fandom*. IGI Global, Hershey, Pennsylvania, USA, pp.323-340. 2020.
- [3] Lehnert L., Kuehnl C. Empathy at the heart of customer experience: A holistic framework for understanding and enhancing consumer empathy through the lens of customer experience. *Psychol Market*, 42:332-358. 2025.
- [4] Alexandra Fong. A Loaded Label: Intricacies of Being a Fan in Henrik and Sara Linden's Fans and Fan Cultures. [J] *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Volume 13, Issue 4. 2019. PP 1-8.
- [5] Matsa Prasanna, A. Marketing to Gen Z: Understanding the Preferences and Behaviors of Next Generation [J]. *IJFMR*, 6:1-8. 2024.
- [6] Salsabila A.P., Ajibullo A.A. Pengaruh content marketing pada media TikTok Shop terhadap keputusan membeli pada Gen Z [J]. *CBJIS*, 2024, 6: 299-307.
- [7] Juliamida I. S., Bagaskhara A., Saleh M. Z. The Phenomenon of interactive marketing of " Skintific" products through social media and influencers on Gen Z And Gen Y [J]. *OPTIMAL Jurnal Ekonomi Dan Manajemen*, 2024, 4(1):150-157.
- [8] Kuo Y.F., Chen F.L. The effect of interactivity of brands' marketing activities on Facebook fan pages on continuous participation intentions: An S-O-R framework Study [J]. *J Retail Consum Serv*, 74:103446. 2023.