

Marketing Strategies of Subcultural Products:A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of rapid development in digital media and social platforms, subcultural-style products driven by Generation Z are increasingly entering the mainstream consumer market and have become an important pathway for brand differentiation and competition. This paper takes subcultural-style products in Asia as its research object. Through a literature review method, it summarizes relevant domestic and international research, analyzes the stratification, symbolization, and participatory characteristics in the marketing of subcultural products, and explores the active role of consumers in the commodification process of subcultural products. The study finds that Gen Z consumers are not only recipients of products but also co-creators and disseminators of symbolic elements. They promote the reproduction and dissemination of cultural values through social media and offline communities. Theoretically, this paper enriches the perspectives on subcultural commodification and participatory culture studies. Practically, it provides references for brands in terms of positioning, symbolic element construction, and community operations within subcultural marketing.

KEYWORDS

Subcultural style products; Generation Z; Stratification; Symbolic elements; Participatory culture

1 Introduction

In today's highly developed digital media and social media landscape, subculture-style products, driven by Generation Z, frequently appear in brand collaborations, fast fashion, IP licensing, and social platform e-commerce, gradually becoming an important component of the consumer market. This phenomenon reflects how subcultural symbols have evolved from symbolic acts of resistance within niche communities into vital resources for mainstream cultural consumption, mirroring the profound transformations in the cultural industry amid globalization and digitalization. Particularly in Asian markets like China, Japan, and South Korea, subcultural styles have been reimagined through platform dissemination and brand reinterpretation, giving rise to diverse commercial expressions that transcend geographical and media boundaries.

Existing studies indicate that the commercialization of subculture not only relies on brands' extraction and re-coding of style symbols but is also driven by consumers' active participation in meaning-making. Generation Z consumers, through social media, short-video platforms, and online communities, continuously endow subcultural products with new values and emotional connotations in the processes of purchasing, showcasing, sharing, and re-creation. This promotes a two-way interaction between brands and consumers. This interaction not only influences the speed of product dissemination and market acceptance but also shapes consumers' identity recognition and sense of belonging to specific circles at a deeper level. However, while there has been some research on subculture marketing from a brand perspective, systematic analysis of consumer participation mechanisms, psychological motivations, and community interaction pathways remains insufficient, particularly lacking comprehensive analysis tailored to the East Asian cultural context. Based on this, this paper focuses on the marketing paths of subcultural style products in Asia's current market environment. Through the method of literature review, it systematically examines relevant studies at home and abroad, emphasizing the role of user participation and identity construction in the marketing process and its implications for brand strategies. This study not only helps deepen the theoretical understanding of subcultural commodification mechanisms but also provides references for brands to achieve precise positioning and cultural resonance in niche markets. Around this theme, the paper mainly explores the following questions: What roles do consumers play in the marketing mechanisms of subcultural products? How do their consumption motivations, community interaction mechanisms, and identity construction paths influence the market dissemination of products? By addressing these questions, this paper aims to construct a consumer-centered analytical framework for subcultural product marketing and provide directions for future related research.

2 Research methods and theoretical foundations

This study adopts the method of literature review, systematically sorting out research results on subcultural product marketing strategies in Asia and analyzing the relevant content from a consumer perspective, focusing on research findings from the past five years to reflect the latest developments in this field.

In the process of literature analysis, this paper summarizes and compares the main viewpoints, theoretical frameworks, and research methods of different studies. The selected literature is read and summarized, and its research subjects, theoretical basis, research methods, and core conclusions are marked. The literature is classified according to research themes and compared across documents to identify the similarities and differences between the viewpoints of different

scholars and research gaps.

To enhance research reliability, this paper strives to cover multiple databases and combines Chinese and international literature, avoiding biases caused by reliance on a single source. At the same time, the analysis emphasizes critical thinking, providing objective evaluations of the limitations of existing research.

3 Results and discussion

Through a systematic review and thematic analysis of domestic and international research on the marketing of subcultural products, it can be observed that in a consumer market dominated by Generation Z, subcultural products exhibit notable trends such as interactivity, stratification, and symbolism. Research findings indicate that consumers are no longer merely passive recipients but are increasingly assuming the role of co-creators in the production and dissemination of brand content. This shift in role is closely linked to the development of participatory culture and user-generated content (UGC). Particularly in Asian markets, the visibility logic of social media platforms has further enhanced the dissemination efficiency and influence of subcultural products, enabling brands to achieve high-density diffusion within specific circles in a short period of time.

Regarding user participation mechanisms, domestic research often emphasizes the driving role of emotional recognition and group belonging, suggesting that consumers achieve “symbolic consumption” and “identity narratives” through purchasing and using subcultural products. In contrast, international studies focus more on technological factors such as platform algorithms and community interaction structures that affect the depth and breadth of participation. For example, Zulli (2022) revealed how TikTok’s logic of visibility shapes users’ expression and interaction patterns, which is comparable to marketing models in Chinese platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Bilibili. This finding demonstrates that technological and cultural factors interweave within subcultural product marketing mechanisms, jointly shaping consumer behavior patterns. In terms of brand communication strategies, existing literature analysis and synthesis reveal three prominent approaches. First, there is narrative communication based on emotional resonance. Subcultural products often carry the value recognition and identity recognition of specific groups. Therefore, brands use narrative expression to place products in a symbolic story context, which not only triggers emotional resonance among consumers but also quietly constructs collective memory and a sense of cultural belonging. For example, some brands connect their products with group identity by telling stories about the formation process, struggle, or rebellious spirit of subcultural groups, enabling consumers to participate in this cultural narrative while purchasing the product. Second, there is the diffusion effect of social media circles. In today’s digital communication environment, the consumer groups of subculture products often have high levels of cohesion and interactivity. Brands can utilize small, highly engaged communities as a starting point for dissemination, leveraging the active sharing of opinion leaders or core users to create a word-of-mouth effect within the subculture. Subsequently, this word-of-mouth effect spreads to the mainstream market through cross-subculture exchanges and platform algorithm recommendations, thereby achieving the spillover from “subculture circles” to “mainstream culture.” This communication path not only has relatively low costs but also enables precise targeting of core audiences in the early stages, providing support for subsequent large-scale market expansion. Third, collaborate across industries and develop derivative products around core symbolic elements. Subculture products often feature distinctive visual symbols, linguistic expressions, or behavioral patterns, which inherently possess high recognizability and reproducibility. By reinterpreting core symbols—such as through cross-industry collaborations with fashion, music, film, and gaming sectors—brands can continuously expand their cultural depth and commercial boundaries. Additionally, by developing related derivatives (such as limited-edition merchandise, collaborative editions, and digital collectibles), brands can extend their interaction cycle with consumers, preventing customer attrition due to diminished novelty. This strategy not only meets consumers’ diverse needs for collection, display, and exchange but also provides crucial conditions for brands to establish enduring cultural labels and identity symbols.

These three brand communication pathways are not only widely adopted in practice but also exhibit synergistic effects when combined. Together, they enhance the competitiveness of subculture products in the market and lay a solid foundation for brands to establish unique cultural symbol systems and differentiated identity recognition.

Building on existing research results, this paper proposes a “Subcultural Product Marketing Strategy Model” to present more clearly the consumer’s role within the marketing mechanism. This model consists of three interconnected stages. Consumers first establish and affirm their identity through the symbolic elements of subcultural products, where the product serves not only as a commodity but also as a symbol of community identity. Subsequently, consumers transform from passive recipients into active participants who re-create, re-disseminate, and re-code symbols through social media, short videos, and online communities. This process embodies the participatory feature, with user-generated content becoming a driving force of subcultural diffusion. Finally, on the basis of emotional recognition and community interaction, consumers deepen their sense of belonging through purchase and usage. This stage not only brings about direct consumption behavior but also strengthens consumers’ role in the co-creation of cultural value. The model resonates with the three characteristics summarized in this paper—stratification, symbolization, and participation: identity recognition corresponds to stratification, sharing and re-creation highlight participation, and purchase and belonging combine symbolization with consumer practice. Thus, the marketing mechanism of subcultural products can

be understood as a dynamic cycle in which consumers continuously reproduce subcultural values through recognition, creation, and consumption, while also influencing brand communication and product design in reverse.

It is worth noting that some studies point out the risk of “de-culturalization” in the process of subcultural commodification. That is, under the rapid advancement of commercialization, the original meanings of subcultures may be weakened or even lost, triggering resistance among core consumers toward brands. This reminds brands that when formulating marketing strategies, they should seek a balance between commercialization and cultural authenticity, avoiding the pursuit of mere traffic at the expense of maintaining cultural cores. In conclusion, the literature analysis not only verifies the importance of user participation and identity construction in subcultural product marketing but also reveals the dynamic interaction among platform mechanisms, subcultural communities, and brand strategies. These findings provide valuable insights for further refining the theoretical research on subcultural commodification and guiding brands in formulating precise marketing strategies in the Generation Z consumer market.

4 Conclusion

This study examines the marketing pathways of Asian subculture-style products. Through literature review and theoretical analysis, it explores the role of Generation Z consumers in the commodification of subculture products and their impact on marketing mechanisms. By organizing and comparing existing research findings, this paper reveals that consumers are not merely passive recipients but active participants in the creation and dissemination of subculture symbolic elements. Through social media platforms and offline communities, they drive the diffusion and reproduction of subculture products and values on a larger scale. Research has found that the marketing mechanisms of subculture-style products exhibit characteristics of stratification, symbolism, and participation. Subculture groups maintain identity recognition and boundaries internally; their core cultural elements serve both identification and emotional functions in product design and communication; and Gen Z consumers demonstrate proactivity in content co-creation, secondary creation, and brand interaction. The interaction of these three aspects constitutes the unique marketing ecosystem of subculture products in today's consumer market.

At the theoretical level, this paper enriches the study of subculture commodification and participatory culture, providing a new analytical perspective for understanding the consumption behavior of Generation Z. At the practical level, the research offers references for brand positioning, symbolic element construction, and community operation strategies in subculture marketing. Brands should establish sustainable participatory mechanisms based on respect for the core of subculture and expand cultural influence through platform-based communication.

However, this study also has certain limitations. Due to the use of a literature review method, conclusions rely on the breadth and depth of existing research and lack support from primary empirical data. Furthermore, since the study primarily focuses on the Asian market, its applicability in cross-cultural contexts requires further exploration. Future research could combine questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and digital ethnography methods to conduct more detailed comparative analyses of consumer behavior patterns across different cultural contexts, thereby further refining theoretical models and practical pathways.

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