

The Curated Self: Identity Marketing Strategies of Fashion Brands and Z Generation's Identity Construction in the Social Media Era

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ABSTRACT

Social media accelerates the spread of trends, causing the fashion industry to face the pressure of shortening the product life cycle. Concurrently, The dilemma of Generation Z's identity construction under digital monitoring has intensified. They desire for distinct self-expression, but hindered by the anxiety of social performance and fragmented self-exploration. In response, brands are increasingly adopting marketing strategies that target the identity needs of Generation Z. This study investigates how fashion brands commercialize these needs and examines the subsequent impact on both consumers and brands. Employing a multiple-case study design and critical analysis informed by theories of performance and identity, this research analyzes the landmark campaigns of Miu Miu and Gucci. It reveals that Gucci constructs and markets a repertoire of brand "personas" through cinematic narratives, while Miu Miu leverages influencers to cultivate a cohesive "girl" archetype via community marketing. However, the study argues that these strategies are effective, but risk intensifying the crisis of authentic self-exploration they purport to address. By framing identity as a curated commodity, this research provides a critical views on contemporary brand management and suggests pathways for sustainable growth that balance commercial imperatives with ethical considerations.

KEY WORDS: Identity Construction, KOL Marketing, Z Generation, Fad Model, Script Model, Dramaturgy Theory, Luxury Fashion

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Origin

People's pursuit of individuality in this era seems to be led to very similar outfits, expressions and even lifestyle choices, which are largely caused by the trend of virus transmission on social media. This phenomenon extends beyond fashion to a broader convergence in behavior and aspiration, raising a fundamental question. In an era that ostensibly values self-expression, why does visible uniqueness seem to be in decline?

Academic research has provided empirical support for this observed trend. A large-scale longitudinal study examined the "uniqueness needs" for 20 years (2000-2020) and found a significant decline, especially in the willingness to openly defend personal beliefs and increasing attention to the opinions of others. (Chopik, W., Götschi, K., Carrillo, A., Weidmann, R., & Potter, J., 2024).

For Generation Z, a large number of people feel that they have to constantly manage their image or persona; therefore, in terms of behavior, they dare not drink too much for fear of doing stupid things after getting drunk. A kind similar to living in a digital panorama unconsciously arouses a strong need for control and a fear of social violations.

When scrolling through social media, influencers' content is homogeneous and netizens' comments are consistent, because be different from other often risk online ridicule. Therefore, people pursue identity construction not through risky self-exploration, but through safer planning of pre-approved persona provided by the celebrity and fashion brands .

1.2 Research Question

- 1.What are the identity needs of Generation Z, and how do fashion brands commercialize these needs through marketing strategies?
- 2.What is the impact of this identity commercialization on both consumers and brands?
- 3.How can brands effectively manage this process to ensure sustainable growth?

1.3 Research Significance and Innovation

This study associate with Goffman's dramaturgy, Erik Erikson theory and fashion marketing practice. This research combine "how brands build identity" and "how consumers express identity through consumption" to reveal the process of how identity is "commercially produced" in the collusion between brands and consumers.

1.4 Overview

It mainly talk about how can psychology theory explain Gen Zer's consumer psychology, and how their consumer psychology affected by historical background. Cases analysis explain two of the marketing approach. Through comparative case analysis, the study identifies and contrasts two distinct, innovative paradigms in luxury fashion marketing. This study summarizes two models, Fad model and Script model. One is to promote a single and cohesive brand "role" through rapid trend cycles and influencer-led imitation, and the other is based on providing a narrative-rich "portfolio of personas" through cinematic storytelling, inviting consumers to role-play within a branded universe.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Consumption and Identity

Human selection of the way of consumption is highly related to human demand. In the past, the aristocratic class stood at the top of the pyramid and held most of the power and wealth. They engaged in high consumption ; it was a way to demonstrate their status and privilege. After the Industrial Revolution , a new class called the bourgeoisie emerged. They had wealth, but they did not possess the power and status of the aristocrats . The direct way to gain social recognition was to imitate or even surpass the high consumption of the aristocratic class. Thus, people wore ornate and extravagant hats and dresses during that era. This behavior can be summarized by the concept of conspicuous consumption, which is proposed by sociologist Thorstein Veblen. It explains the consumer practice of acquiring goods or other outward symbols of wealth in order to show others how much wealth one possesses.

As society developed , most people gained the ability to purchase basic luxury goods , such as bags with famous and expensive logos . People began to consider spiritual pursuits; they wanted to show their taste in fashion. Fashion began to reflect one's values and individuality as designers like Vivienne Westwood and Yohji Yamamoto burst onto the fashion scene.

With a social media penetration rate of about 63%, people started using online platforms to share videos of their lives, such as vlogs . This led others to compare their own lives to those of the individuals posting photos, indicating that people began to pursue a desirable persona.

As the generation known as millennials has come of age, they have encountered an economy where wages are relatively low and jobs are scarce. With low income and the impact of COVID-19, there is strong uncertainty about the future, and people are

more inclined to seek enjoyment in the present rather than delay gratification . This has led to excessive stress, anxiety, alienation, and individualization. Gen Zers are less inclined to buy luxury goods with long brand histories; instead , they target fashion brands that can provide them with emotional value and a sense of identity.

2.2 Social Media as the Front Stage of “Performance”

The core of Goffman's dramaturgy is the concept that individuals consciously and unconsciously perform roles to control how others perceive them. Most of performance are guided by social desirability and norms. Social media platforms display the number of likes and followers one receives, and this data directly quantifies the audience's attitude, leading to widespread anxiety and fear of missing out. The "front stage" is where the performance happens—Social media platforms serve as a 'front stage' where people present themselves, keep up with the latest fashion. Also they post video and photos to show their nice persona. Conversely, the "back stage" is a private area where individuals can relax and drop the roles they perform publicly. In the transparent society, the space for back stage is gradually shrunken, and it force peoples incredibly careful about performing their persona. According to panopticon design that allow all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single prison officer, without the inmates knowing whether or not they are being watched. This single prison officer is internet in today, and we're beginning to internalize surveillance, because we can be watched in any time and any where. If you do something out of line with the crowd on the street, such as dancing, someone will definitely take a picture of you and post it on the Internet. These things cannot be eliminated, and they will be repeatedly taken out to watch. You can even see security footage on the Internet.

2.3 Z Generation

Z generation is inner contradiction, they face the high requirement and scarce opportunities, and under these pressure they want to express their individuality and rebellious, but the process for Z generation develop their unique personality is being blocked. According to the theory proposed by the pioneer of identity psychology Erik Erikson, this process dived to two phase which is identity moratorium and identity achievement. In the phase of identity moratorium people need to try new things, even if it will make them feel embarrassed and ashamed. But their online image is always at the back of their mind when out socializing. 76% of UK Gen Zers saying it's important to feel in control at all times. (Chopik, W., Götschi, K., Carrillo, A., Weidmann, R., & Potter, J., 2024). They can not find out their unique identity, so they start to imitate the influencer that haven't been ruffle feathers; therefore, instead of self-exploration to create a unique personality , they divide personality into different groups and find the groups that they want to belong to. The controversial tactic which we afraid to behave is the most magnetic and interesting people are using to protect and develop their personalities in a world that is begging them to bland and beige. So we like to follow these interesting people such as rapper, singer and influencer, and imitate them.

2.4 Evolution of Fashion Brand Marketing

In the past, people bought gorgeous clothes to show their social status and wealth. When the economy upturn and most people are not short of money, people begin to show their spiritual wealth, unique fashion taste, and pay attention to brand philosophy. But in these two stages, people are still admirers of logo and will pay for the brand. When the economy recession and the popularity of social media is high, people begin to learn from fashion bloggers and use affordable clothes and accessories from fast fashion brands.to imitate the way of dressing of Channel, Gucci and Dior runway. It reveal that people more care about how do the clothes can support their persona building. Influencers that include Bella and Kendall let “office siren”and “hot nerd” go viral in 2024 and 2025, but it exactly imitation of Saint Laurent runway style.

3.RESEARCH METHOD

3.1Research Philosophy and Approach

I adopt interpretation and qualitative research approach to understand the meaning and reason behind phenomenon and the dilemma which faced by Z generation.

3.2 Research Design

I analyzed three marketing cases, and these three marketing methods have well met the needs of Generation Z people. Before these new marketing methods came out, most luxury brands, like Givenchy, recruited up-and-coming designers Alexander McQueen to boldly express the design of non-wearable clothes to attract attention on the show, and use practical designs in stores to impact sales.

Gucci can represents a heritage brand that has experience many changes of deign style in its development by recruiting new designers. Recently, this brand has shown how to return from poor sales to the resurgence of Gucci brand sales. Although it is a brand with a long history, the brand positioning is not clear or even contradictory. Looking back on Gucci's designers over the years, Tom Ford's design is modern and sexy, Alessandro Michele is maximalism, and the contradictory style is unified and integrated by Demna with the concept of family, and all kinds of characters are the Gucci family. As one of the members, you can find your own personality or a design style to play.

Miu Miu creates an impressive female persona, and is good at using social media. The "Women's Tales" series of short films and the Miu Miu Literature Club's reading activities with the theme of women's growth revelation have deepened the brand's thinking on women's issues. The brand conveys the concept of "girlish sense regardless of age" by inviting 70-year-old amateur Qin Banlan to the catwalk and 85-year-old actor Wu Yanshu to appear on the camera, etc., broadening the core of "rebellious girl" and making it a free mental state beyond age.

3.3Data Collection Methods

First-hand data: text and visual analysis of brand advertisement, runway, social media content such as official Gucci and Miu Miu Instagram, and public statements of CEOs/creative directors.

Second-hand data: systematically review industry reports such as BoF, VogueBusiness, authoritative media reviews and academic articles.

4.CASES ANALYSIS

4.1 Miu Miu

Positioning

Through Miu Miu's advertisement, invited the spokesperson, and the event held, it can be seen that Miu Miu wants to shape a girl's persona, but Miuccia doesn't want this girl's persona to be too superficial and just stay in the meaning of a rebellious little girl. There was a time when the media criticized her clothes as ugly chic, but in the conversation between Schiaparelli and Miuccia, Miuccia expressed that the ugly chic she designed was to hope that people had the right to choose between beautiful and not. Therefore, Miu Miu girl is a free mental state that transcends age. Miuccia conveys a girl's unrestrained personality to consumers through advertising.

Product

In 2022, low-waisted skirts and open-belly suits are popular, and many influencers share their Miu Miu look on Instagram Gram. These products are highly recognizable and easy to imitate, and are designed for social media dissemination. Miu Miu pursues exposure and internet traffic rather than creating a classic style, so Miu Miu has several hot spots a year and rapid iterations, such as Miu Ballerina shoes and Miu Mary Jane shoes. In fact, looking back on Miu Miu's show in the 1990s, the design elements of low-waisted skirts and underwear have already existed, so the popularity of exposed clothes is inseparable from the changes of the times and consumer groups.

Promotion

In an advertisement of MIU MIU in 2025, actors Zhao Jinmai and Liu Hao laughed in public places and made some sounds with straws, but their sounds were infinitely amplified and been stared at by the people surround them. The camera turned to Miu Miu's handbag, and the people around the two young actors disappeared. They were free to drink beverage with straw and play in the shop. The girl wearing Miu Miu is confident and cheerful and does not care too much about other people's thoughts. Also, "Women's Tales" short film series, Miu Miu literary club, deepen the connotation of brand ideology.

Miu Miu invited many spokespersons to interpret the image of "girl", including old actors, male models and transgender models, to broaden and deepen the image of "girl". The cover of the "i-D" magazine uses this suit to spark a discussion about the body, and the cover of "Dazed" to discuss the masculinity in the new era.

Miu Miu use KOL marketing, which take the initiative to give gifts to the head influencers to stimulate the whole network to "imitate wear", which is a low-cost, high-diffusion growth strategy.

Price

Products from Miu Miu is high price and expensive. Even in the face of the controversy of poor quality and not maintaining value. Miu Miu's public relations team also solved by strengthened the identity label of the rich, therefore, it is said on the Internet that those who buy Miu Miu are the real money.

4.2 Gucci

Product

In "La Famiglia" series, Demna integrates all the styles shown in Gucci's history and presents them as a big family. A court dress with a stand-up collar pays tribute to Gucci's first fashion collection with flora print. In addition, there are also modern-style V-neck shirts, etc. In the La Famiglia series, there are identity labels of garment such as "La Contessa", "Introverso", "Nerd" and "La Dramma Queen", which correspond to the character in the short film. Some of labels considered to be praised, but some of them considered to be pejorative by the general public. And each of us is composed of these identity labels.

Price

The price is high, because consumers pay not only for materials and process costs, but also for "a fascinating character identity" and "an in-depth narrative experience". The high price strengthens the scarcity and sense of value of the purchased identity, making "owning a Gucci identity label" a cultural capital worth showing off.

Place

"La Famiglia" is the debut for Gucci under Demna's stewardship, Gucci held a movie viewing party in Shanghai, New York and Milan. Mariacarla Boscono, Alex Consani and Mia, the models and actors are the audience who have been invited to watch movie, and they are

also the model wearing the "La Famiglia" series performed on the red carpet show. Demna said that there will always be a day that people gets tired of the fashion show, so he brought "Tiger", a narrative short film, which did better show their fashion concept.

Promotion

Barbara Gucci is not only the president of Gucci Group but also the chairman of the California branch. Her complex identity shows her fantasy to surpass her father's achievement. At this birthday party, she invited the famous writer Mr. Whitman, hoping to leave him a perfect image of family harmony, so that he could write it down for the public to see. In the fitting, the model wore the first tiger element. In front of the model, Barbara Gucci mentioned Gucci brand history and his father, but the writer frown. In the middle of this film, he said Barbara was good, so he may not have any negative emotion here, but Barbara notice Whitman frown and really care about it. She showed a panicked look, implying that the tiger was her inner fear. She afraid others comment and think, because every one stared at her seat, she must be a perfect person. At the beginning of the film, a camera was aimed at her, and people who out of the camera were indifferently ready to watch her joke.

Colin appeared to play with bubbles in the garden. As the eldest son, he did not participate in family affairs, but had to find a job by himself. It seemed that he knew that fashion industry was as dreamy as a bubble, also is precarious. When everyone was feeling delirious because of taking drugs mixed with alcohol, he came out of the house and saw a person wearing a red suit, and his sound with some electromagnetic waves, like an alien. During the conversation between he and his sister Monica, he said, "alien is the future we made, and nobody talk about it, because it too big." This implies that the person who wear red suit is Colin himself, who is a higher latitude, or himself from the future. Then Colin go back to the house and asked her mom, "What you do if you are in the room with tiger" "you let it eat you" "don't try To negotiate with it". He is saying that you should not resist your inner worries, and you can be imperfect.

Katie showed a calming medicine, and Monica put this medicine in champagne, which made the whole incident the fuse and pushed the story to a climax.

Twins is fashion editors, and they represent the two sides of capital and creativity in the fashion industry which is inseparable and incompatible. Without creativity, the fashion show will no longer be attractive, and creativity cannot survive without capital; therefore, a talented designer like Alexander McQueen must to work for the capital while making his own brand. "Tiger" The twins in this film abused Mr. Whitman's work as soon as they appeared. Mr. Whitman try to tolerate it, until he walked into the restaurant and found that Barbara Gucci who is the host of party let two guests to be the double masters. He get mad and shouted, "You are too humble." Barbara Gucci was overwhelm and roared, and the twins smiled. All the items on the table being blown to pieces, it is not only like the gunpowder smoke inside the family, but also like the confetti of capital's victory.

For Barbara Gucci, she has been building a successful, elegant, and perfect image all of her life. She has been asking others "how do you see me" twice in the film, which directly shows that she cares about other people's opinions, which is also the source of her fear. "Identity" and "staring at others" are the survival dilemma of each of us who can't completely get rid of socialization. When she asked Monica, "how do you see me", she said "yes I am" after getting the answer, which shows that she has identified herself. I want to be a lot of things", and it also the ideas from the people who have worn Gucci brand clothes for a long time After experiencing various changes in Gucci style, Gucci's loyal users are as changeable as the Gucci brand.

5.DISCUSION

5.1 Effectiveness of Strategies

Miu Miu's revenue increased by 49% to 780 million euros in the first half of 2025. Miu Miu's success lies in shaping "girl" persona, and has continuously extend the depth of the brand's thinking on women's issues from the beginning of the brand. Then use influencer to set off a boom of imitating miumiu look for low-cost marketing. Miu Miu pursues popularity and exposure, provides emotional value for consumer.

Moving the show into the screening hall, the innovation in the form of garment display is enough to attract most people's attention and have been reported by many media, because the form of short film and hot topics such as perfectionism, family pressure, and the contradiction between capital and creativity. This marketing strategy not only satisfies Gen Zer's strong desire for expression, but also their fear of making mistakes. If we only look at the clothes of the La Famiglia series and the identification labels below, we do not have a deep understanding of each role, but watching the performances and lines of the actors in the film are more likely to empathy and trigger consumers to think about the role, and it is also easier to bring ourselves into a certain role. We will be impressed by the charm of these characters and wear clothes with the identity labels of these characters, just like we pursue the magnetic influencer.

5.2 Potential Crisis and Ethical Dilemma

Gucci classifies individuality into various identity labels, it may intensify the blockage of people's self exploration in the future. After labeling themselves with various seemingly interesting identity label, they feel confused and questioned who they really are. If people are encouraged to pretend to be various personas, they may become confused about what they truly like or dislike. They may pay more attention to how others perceive them, treating external attitudes as the sole criterion for their actions. On the other hand, people consume for get individuality, it may bring new problem, for example, people feel disgusting on wear same outfit as someone else.

When I research Miu Miu on social media, I find most of people's impression of this brand persona is just a rich and rebellious girls. Miu Miu's pursuit of traffic can indeed get profits quickly in a short term, but it does not leave a deeper brand philosophy in customer mind, so unable to establish a loyal customer group. If Miu Miu continues to face the controversy of poor quality, consumers will soon find alternatives or turn to stores that sell fake goods.

6.CONCLUSION

6.1Research Summary

Miu Miu quickly launched creative but practical items. The brand then sends the items as gifts to fashion influencers and spokespersons who can represent their brand "persona" and ask them to re-match them with other items. Then trigger the purchase and imitation of other influencers. Gucci has created multiple persona through short film. People are attracted by the personality charm of the character and buy items with the character's identity label in order to have such charm. Consumers should be encouraged to go beyond labels, such as by holding UGC activities that emphasize personal creative expression, or by finally deconstructing perfection in the narrative and embracing imperfection like Gucci short films, which is also a more intelligent and resonant marketing in itself.

6.2 Managerial Implications

For traditional brands seeking growth such as Gucci, you can use the "script model" strategy to revitalize the brand heritage and create new identity points through narratives, but pay attention to maintaining the coherence of the brand core.

For brands seeking popular models such as Miu Miu, it is necessary to find a balance between "manufacturing trends" and "precipitating brand assets". In the short term, they must rely on influencer marketing to draw attention, and in the long run, they must rely on continuous content to deepen the connotation of identity.

Consumers should be encouraged to go beyond labels, for example Gucci short films finally deconstruct perfection in the narrative and embrace imperfection, which in itself is also a more intelligent and resonant marketing.

6.3 Research Limitation and Future Suggestion

The analysis of this study is only limited to two luxury brands from Italy, and they both have a huge customer base. The cases only focus on two brand, and the conclusions of the analysis cannot represent other countries and regions and other emerging brands, so the generalizability is low. Most of the content of this study is interpretation and analysis qualitative data , and didn't compare numerical data directly, so the result have less objective. In the future, we can add some quantitative research and analyze more cases to ensure the research is objective and generalize to wider place.

6.4 Reflection

When Individuality become the item on the shelf, is the true self expressed or is it postponed again?

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APPENDIX

In the recently popular TV series "Love's Ambition", there is a case of a clothing brand called "Yanyifang". The Unique Selling Point of this personal brand is a Intangible Cultural Heritage, pure hand-woven fabric withs. If the marketing strategy in this

study is applied to "Yanyifang", I suggest that the brand make the following adjustments. They show garment in the form of posting short films, and the content of film can be related to the inheritance of ICH. The research on the number of likes and comments came up with two or three popular hot products, and the style and color were slightly changed to get different SKUs. Invite influential Chinese old artists, readers or the icon who have passion on Chinese culture to be spokespersons, for example, Chinese famous actress Rosy. After establishing the brand persona of craftsmen and scholars, they can make some derivative products. For example, you can set up a social area on the first floor of the offline physical shop of clothing, such as a creative milk tea and snacks made of Chinese herbal medicine, so that like-minded people can establish social relationships and join ICH workshop.