

The Mechanism of IP Narrative Background on the Purchasing Behavior of Generation Z Consumers: Taking POP MART as an Example

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Abstract

This study examines POP MART as an example to investigate how IP narratives influence Generation Z purchasing behavior. Building on Identity Theory, characteristics of IP narratives and consumption patterns of Generation Z consumers, we develop a theoretical model that addresses the theoretical gap in Identity Theory regarding subjective consumers' identification. Through case interviews and secondary data collection, combined with three-step coding analysis, this research explores how IP narratives shape consumer purchasing behaviors, promote the formation of purchase intentions, and ultimately guide enterprises in strengthening IP cores while fostering emotional connections between fans and IPs. The findings aim to bridge future IP narrative design with consumer identity recognition.

Keywords: IP narrative background; Generation Z; Consumer purchasing behavior; Identity Theory

1. Introduction

In recent years, IP products, anime products, blind boxes and other products have stimulated a new wave of consumption among Generation Z consumers. POP MART holds a leading position in the market for this type of product through exclusive IP design and blind box sales. What makes Generation Z particularly fond of these products? The key lies in how IP narratives often mirror the aspirations and attitudes of Generation Z consumers, serving as an emotional reflection of their identity. Traditional Identity theory primarily focuses on how consumers' internalize preconceived brand identities, lacking consideration for personal perspectives. By adopting blank or semi-blank narrative frameworks in its IP storytelling, POP MART encourages consumers to actively project their own identities onto these symbolic spaces, effectively addressing the theoretical gap in non-textual IP research. According to the Q1 2024 financial report of POP MART, the lifecycle of IP sales has been reduced to 14.2 months, a year-on-year decrease of 23%. This study can help companies extend the lifecycle of IP products from the perspective of influencing consumer purchasing mechanisms. In addition, according to the mid-term report of POP MART in 2024, strengthening the IP core and enhancing the emotional connection between fans and IP will be the development goals of the enterprise. This study can help the company achieve the connection between future IP design and consumer identity recognition from the perspective of Identity Theory. This article selects individuals who have purchased POP MART products more than 5 times and work at POP MART as interview samples, and uses third-order coding for data analysis. In the first stage, interview data will be collected, tagged, and categorized into idealized design, life attitude, mirror representation, conceptual overlap, hidden elements, scarcity, communication topics, background gaps, and secondary creation. In the second stage, the appeal labels are classified, with idealized design and life attitude attributed to emotional resonance, mirrored expression and conceptual overlap attributed to identity recognition, scarcity and communication topics attributed to social identity, and background blank and secondary creation attributed to background empowerment. In the third stage, the appeal classification will be linked together, where emotional resonance triggers identity recognition, and identity recognition progresses to social recognition, thereby generating purchasing behavior.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1 Identity theory

Identity Theory originated from semiotic interactionism in sociology, emphasizing how an individual's role in society shapes their self-identity. At the same time, "this theory is also a reflective understanding of who I am, where I come from, and where I am going."^[1] This theory originated from semiotic interactionism in sociology,

emphasizing how an individual's role in society shapes self-identity. Currently, Identity Theory has been increasingly applied in consumer behavior research. Some scholars define identity as consumers' psychological perception of their own characteristics (Reed II A, 2004), while others argue that it influences consumer behavior through salience, relevance, validation mechanisms, and conflict resolution (Americus Reed II, 2012). Building on these theories, subsequent researchers proposed that "Identity theory in marketing can be analyzed through four perspectives: identity prominence, identity relevance, identity threat, and identity conflict when examining consumer purchasing behaviors."^[2] However, the Identity Theory currently faces challenges in theoretical integration, lacking a comprehensive framework. Researchers can only extract theoretical insights from previous studies and adapt them to their own research contexts. Moreover, this theory fails to address consumers' subjective identity characteristics. Building upon existing Identity theory research, this study adopts POP MART as a case study to tackle the lack of consumer subjectivity in the theory. By leveraging POP MART's IP design philosophy—particularly its blank or semi-blank concepts—it aims to propose a consumer identity recognition framework for such products.

2.2 IP narrative background

Intellectual Property (IP) refers to content-centric intellectual property rights. The concept of IP can be traced back to the 17th century, and by the 19th century, it had become a widely recognized legal term in the field of intellectual property. "Today, IP has evolved beyond its traditional definition; it incorporates narrative elements into its contextual meaning, giving rise to new concepts for the digital age that carry significant commercial value."^[3] In the process of brand and enterprise development, "IP narrative also serves as a strategic framework for brands to communicate with consumers, helping brands stand out in the diversified competition."^[4] This study will combine the Identity theory to explore the influence of IP narrative background on consumer purchasing behavior. Starting from the psychological and social aspects of consumers, this study addresses the deviation of IP narrative background attributes caused by excessive concern about product economy in commercial applications.

2.3 Consumer purchasing behavior

Consumer behavior is an essential theory in psychology. "Consumer behavior itself has long been a stable form of organizing social life, because it involves almost all social statuses and has become an ideal identity marker."^[5] The factors influencing consumers' purchasing behavior, in descending order of importance, are scene-based image, content-based image and personified image."^[6] Subsequently, some scholars believe that "the greater the price reduction of a product after purchase, the stronger the consumer's regret. Moreover, the stronger this regret, the more likely it is for them to switch to purchasing behavior."^[7] Current research on consumer behavior can be broadly categorized into three approaches: psychological, sociological and economic perspectives. While psychological studies tend to focus on particular factors, often overlooking social group dynamics, sociological analyses lack in-depth exploration of individual behaviors. Economic frameworks, however, tend to be overly idealized, failing to account for consumers' psychological characteristics and social attributes. This study employs Identity Theory, integrating psychological and sociological theories to achieve complementary integration of these disciplinary foundations.

2.4 Generation Z

"Generation Z refers to the group born between 1995 and 2012, who grew up in an era of explosive communication technology and have significant differences in their thoughts and behavioral habits from the older Generation."^[8] Generation Z has a large and active consumer base and is the most socially conscious group."^[9] The upbringing environment of this demographic carries distinct era-specific characteristics, resulting in consumption patterns that combine the common traits of younger Generations with notable uniqueness. In terms of consumption orientation, unlike the previous Generation driven by quality-of-life pursuits, Generation Z demonstrates more diversified interests and exhibits behavioral tendencies that prioritize self-pleasure experiences, social attributes, and value expression in their purchasing decisions."^[10] Subsequently, some scholars defined the characteristics of Generation Z as follows: "self-driven yet caring for others; devoted to their own identity groups; pursuing diversified communities; pursuing authenticity; highly cooperative and social; exploring consensus-based (rather than authority-based) leadership models; and recognizing modular and fluid structures."^[11]

3. Why IP narrative background trigger identity

"The formation of consumer identity behavior can be roughly divided into inheritance identification, induced identification, demonstration identification and resource identification."^[12] Using the formation causes of identity

in appellate, this study explores how IP narrative background leads to the formation of identity among Generation Z consumers.

3.1 Interest inheritance and identity

Inheritance identity, which refers to individuals who value and strongly identify with a specific social group (such as family, race, country.) "through largely unconscious cognitive processes, often exhibit positive traits consistent with that group and exhibit corresponding behaviors."^[13]In the context of IP narrative studies, the formation of inherited identity primarily stems from shared interests. For instance, during Generation Z formative years, older siblings or fathers often developed a strong passion for gaming. This explains why the collaboration between POP MART and *League of Legends* could foster identity recognition among this demographic group.

3.2 Induced identity

"Consumers develop identity when the values of a brand or product are consistent with those of consumers."^[14]Every POP MART IP features a simple narrative framework, including character traits, professions, and appearances. The meticulously crafted character designs naturally resonate with Generation Z consumers through relatable comparisons. Take "Xiao Ye"(an iconic POP MART IP) as an example: it is portrayed as rebellious yet kind-hearted, pursuing freedom while being shackled by societal norms. This narrative design effectively appeals to consumers who share similar personalities and life experiences.

3.3 Demonstrative Identification

In the context of IP narrative research, demonstrative identity is mainly reflected in the positive influence and demonstration effect of some IP narrative background settings on consumers. "When people think of a favorite example, their enthusiasm and sense of identity will be higher."^[15]*Dimmo's Dream Home* series shows the narrative background of the brand's dream home. Its warm narrative background design inspires consumers yearning for a better home life. It plays an exemplary role for consumers, prompting them to pursue their identity recognition with such IP narrative background as the goal.

3.4 Resource-based identification

"There is a reinforcing relationship between resource use and identity, and resources also promote identity."^[16]POP MART's IP narrative features multiple design categories including base editions, hidden editions, and limited editions. The base editions typically appear as blind boxes priced affordably, allowing casual collectors to enjoy collectible experiences at reasonable costs. Hidden and limited editions generally require premium pricing, catering to affluent consumers seeking high-end status symbols. These premium products also provide seasoned enthusiasts with exclusive identity recognition through their distinctive value proposition.

4. The mechanism of IP narrative background on purchase behavior

4.1 The context of the IP narrative inspires emotional resonance

"Emotional resonance refers to the process by which a brand or product resonates with consumers inner emotions, and this connection leads to increased brand loyalty."^[17]The IP narrative background adopts an idealized design, while the current lifestyle of Generation Z consumers creates a gap between their ideals and reality. This idealized narrative background resonates with Generation Z pursuit of "anti-convolution" and "personalized" lifestyles, fostering emotional connection. The brand concept of POP MART is innovation and beauty. When the IP narrative background is consistent with the self-identity of Generation Z consumers, purchasing behavior will become an expression of self-identity. When consumers gradually become addicted to the IP background world, they will exhibit repeat purchasing behavior.

4.2 The context of IP narrative leads to identity

Generation Z consumers live in a special era of information explosion and social change, and each consumer has their own unique experience and characteristics. "The concept of IP narrative background is closely related to the personal identity of consumers, and IP narrative background is often a microcosm of personal identity."^[18]This characteristic primarily enables Generation Z consumers to develop emotional resonance when purchasing products with narrative-driven contexts. *Molly* is the first popular IP of POP MART, set against the backdrop of a young artist girl, showcasing the pursuit of freedom, confidence, and versatility among young women. It is highly sought after by many working women or female consumers who pursue freedom. The narrative

background of the IP can be seen as a mirror representation of the self-awareness of the purchasing group, where consumers who choose *Molly* see themselves as independent women or pursue a desire for a free life.

4.3 The context of IP narrative connects to the attributes of the community

The IP narrative background defines a part of the community through special background design, forming community attributes. For example, the offline fan meeting held by POP MART defines some consumers as "trend enthusiasts", thereby promoting consumption and purchasing. The globally popular *LABUBU* series products, due to the narrative background of product scarcity, attract a large number of Generation Z groups who want to gain community recognition. Owning a *LABUBU* series product has become a trendy identity in this community, satisfying the consumer psychology of Generation Z who crave recognition.

4.4 IP narrative background enables background co-creation

POP MART's IP products predominantly feature blank or semi-empty narrative backgrounds, designed to spark consumers' imagination and creative engagement. *LABUBU*'s storyline revolves around forest-dwelling fairies in Northern Europe, with no explicit Generation or personality traits specified. For example, Generation Z consumers dress *LABUBU* products in specific clothing based on their own associations, dressing them up as princesses, athletes, hip-hop artists. This behavior transforms consumers into participants in narrative background design, promoting consumer behavior.

5. The impact of IP narrative background on purchasing behavior

5.1 Increase the frequency of consumer purchases

According to the official statistics of POP MART, the average purchase frequency of core users in 2024 is 12 times. For these Generation Z consumer groups, the primary factor contributing to their continuous purchasing behavior is their immersion in the narrative background storylines of the IPs. The individual identification evoked by the IP narrative background links the emotions of Generation Z consumers with the IP narrative context. This connection prompts individuals to continuously track the development of the IP storylines, thereby increasing the purchase frequency among consumers.

5.2 Reduce consumer price sensitivity

Narrative contexts like "limited editions" and "hidden editions" have sparked a strong social validation drive among Generation Z consumers. These products often command secondary market prices five to ten times higher than their original retail prices, as Generation Z consumers prioritize community recognition over product value. The emphasis on social proof significantly reduces price sensitivity for such items, making these products more appealing to younger Generation.

5.3 Enhance brand loyalty

Consumer behavior transformation refers to the shift from being mere buyers to active creators of products. POP MART's IP narrative design consistently features user-Generated content, allowing consumers to express their identity and individuality through creative reinterpretations. Compared with other similar brands such as "52TOYS" and "MINISO", most of these brands' IPs adopt the form of collaboration with existing IPs. Their products have deeply rooted and complete narrative backgrounds, leaving little room for consumers' secondary creation. POP MART's distinctive IP storytelling enhances brand loyalty through unique consumer engagement.

6. Conclusion

This study employs Identity Theory with POP MART as a case study. To identify four pathways through which IP narratives influence Generation Z consumers' purchasing behaviors: evoking emotional resonance, fostering identity recognition, strengthening community connections, and empowering co-creation. The theoretical framework demonstrates how IP narratives progressively enhance consumer behavior via emotional alignment, identity validation, social endorsement and behavioral transformation. This mechanism reveals that Generation Z consumption patterns fundamentally stem from identity-driven social validation, ultimately catalyzing essential behavioral changes in product purchases.

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