

From Symbol to Emotion: Exploring the Consumption Culture of "The First Cup of Milk Tea in Autumn"

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Abstract. The "first cup of milk tea in autumn" phenomenon is a typical case of emotional consumption among young people in the era of social communication. Combining semiotic and consumer culture theories, this paper analyzes the evolution of this phenomenon from a spontaneous social behavior of users to a large-scale consumption practice, and clarifies the logic of its symbolic transformation. With the combination of concrete symbols such as "autumn", "the first cup" and "milk tea" as the carrier, it connects emotional and social meanings, including "the warmth of being cared about", "a signal of social connection" and "a label of young people's lifestyle". Eventually, it completes the mythologization of symbols and becomes an annual consumer culture ritual. The study draws the following key points: Firstly, this phenomenon is a "bottom-up" sample of consumer symbol generation, which supplements the research dimension of non-brand-led consumer symbols. Secondly, it reveals the path for lightweight consumption to carry emotional and social demands, enriching the research framework of emotional consumption. Finally, this local case provides empirical support for understanding the cultural characteristics of domestic young people constructing a sense of life ritual through low-cost methods.

Keywords: Symbolic Consumption, Emotional Community, Identity Recognition, Social Media Marketing, The First Cup of Milk Tea in Autumn.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the era of social communication deeply permeated by mobile internet, the lifestyle and emotional expression logic of contemporary youth are being restructured. The fast-paced urban life has compressed the time and space for offline social interaction, making people rely more on lightweight, low-cost online socializing to maintain emotional connections. Meanwhile, a sense of ritual has become a way for young people to resist the mediocrity of daily life, and the binding of seasonal nodes with daily consumption is forming a new social and cultural paradigm [1].

Since 2020, "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" has rapidly gained traction through platforms like WeChat Moments and Weibo. Users participated in the spread by sharing screenshots of orders or money transfers, and within days, it covered multiple circles and even extended to the social scenarios of middle-aged and elderly groups. This phenomenon transformed the ten-odd-yuan milk tea from a simple beverage into a social currency for emotional transmission.

Existing consumer culture research focuses on symbol construction from a brand marketing perspective and interpretation of consumer behavior from a socio-cultural perspective [2]. However, there remains a gap in the complete transmission mechanism of "internet meme → symbolic consumption → emotional resonance". "The first cup of milk tea in autumn" originated from users' spontaneous emotional expression, and this bottom-up symbol generation path has not been fully analyzed. At the same time, semiotic research on local internet consumer culture is relatively scarce, and Western theories struggle to explain the uniqueness of lightweight emotional consumption in China. This case can just fill this research gap [3].

1.2. Research Significance

Theoretically, analyzing the signifier-signified transformation process of "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" can clarify the core elements of internet memes evolving into emotional consumption symbols, supplement the generation theory of non-brand-led consumption symbols, and expand the research dimensions of consumer semiotics. Revealing how lightweight consumption carries social emotions and clarifying the transmission chain of symbol-emotion-behavior can enrich the research framework of emotional consumption. Explaining the integration mechanism of internet pop culture and daily consumption based on the Chinese social media context can also provide an empirical case for local consumer culture research [4].

Practically, this research can help brands grasp the emotional pain points of young consumers and expand consumption scenarios by binding symbols such as seasonal ritual sense and social emotions. It can also assist in understanding lifestyle changes in the digital age [5]. "The first cup of milk tea in autumn" reflects not only consumer behavior but also contemporary people's desire for emotional connection and demand for low-cost construction of ritual sense. Meanwhile, the communication logic of such emotionally resonant-themed topics can provide a reference for social media platforms to create highly engaging content.

1.3. Research Theme

Taking the internet consumption phenomenon of "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" as the core object, this study combines semiotic and consumer culture theories to systematically analyze its generation process from an internet meme to an emotional consumption symbol [6]. It interprets the connotations of the signifier and the signified behind the symbol, explores the expression mechanism of emotional demands in consumer behavior, and ultimately reveals the characteristics of contemporary youth consumer culture reflected by this phenomenon.

2. Case Study

2.1. Case: Communication and Consumption Practice of "The First Cup of Milk Tea in Autumn"

The communication and consumption of "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" can be divided into three stages. In the autumn of 2020, the phenomenon first originated from a post on WeChat Moments: a user shared a screenshot of "receiving the first cup of milk tea in autumn with a 52-yuan transfer" and captioned it "Autumn is here, it's nice to be remembered". This post quickly triggered imitations among friends as it catered to the need for warmth and care when the temperature drops in autumn. More users began to share milk tea orders or transfer records, with copywriting mostly focusing on being loved, a sense of ritual, and the warmth of autumn. At this time, milk tea was not bound to commercial marketing and was purely a spontaneous, emotional and social behavior of users [7].

With the follow-up of platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, the topic #The First Cup of Milk Tea In Autumn# quickly made it to the hot search list. Douyin users posted vlogs of ordering milk tea for their partners, Weibo bloggers launched topic interactions for sharing milk tea, and Bilibili UP hosts produced autumn milk tea review videos. The content forms on different platforms allowed this topic to penetrate into various circles, such as students, workplace professionals, and mothers. According to 2020 Weibo data, the topic received over 5 billion views and more than 3 million discussions, becoming one of the most influential internet memes that autumn.

Milk tea brands quickly seized this traffic opportunity. HeyTea launched autumn-limited milk tea and autumn-themed packaging, and initiated an activity of giving autumn stickers for sharing orders [8]. Nayuki's Tea collaborated with social media to launch autumn's first cup of milk tea packages, including milk tea and autumn desserts. Budget brands like Mixue Bingcheng launched 5.2-yuan autumn milk tea coupons, catering to the 52-yuan transfer emotional symbol in the topic. According to third-party data, the number of orders in the milk tea industry in the autumn of 2020 increased by

40% compared with the same period in 2019, of which related orders accounted for more than 30%. This internet meme was officially transformed into a large-scale consumption practice, even extending to categories such as coffee and desserts.

2.2. Semiotic Interpretation: Symbolic Transformation from "Milk Tea" to "Emotional Carrier"

In Roland Barthes' structuralist semiotics, a symbol consists of two basic elements: "signifier" and "signified". The "signifier" is the material level of the symbol, i.e., the perceivable form, such as language, image, and sound. The "signified" is the meaning or concept carried by the symbol, which is the abstract connotation endowed to the form in a cultural context. The combination of the two constitutes a complete symbolic system. In this system, the meaning of a symbol is not fixed but constantly constructed and reproduced in a specific socio-cultural context [9].

From this theoretical perspective, "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" is a typical cultural symbol, and its meaning generation process reflects the multiple binding and transformation of signifier and signified. At the signifier level, the phrase is composed of three concrete symbols: Autumn, as a seasonal time symbol, is associated with the physical experience of temperature drop and seasonal change, and also evokes cultural associations of harvest, warmth, and emotional sustenance; "First" as an ordinal symbol endows the behavior with particularity and a sense of ritual, distinguishing it from casual daily consumption behavior and giving it commemorative and marking significance; "Milk tea" is a high-frequency consumer product in the daily life of contemporary youth, with the characteristics of low cost, easy access, and youthfulness. The combination of the three forms a behavioral symbol with a low threshold, strong perception, and easy participation, allowing anyone to participate in this collective social ritual by buying a cup of milk tea.

At the signified level, "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" is endowed with emotional and social meanings far beyond the beverage itself. Emotionally, it symbolizes being remembered and cared for. The physical feeling of temperature drop in autumn, combined with the act of receiving milk tea, is transformed into an emotional experience of being cared for by others; the sweet taste of milk tea is also associated with pleasant and healing emotions. Socially, sharing milk tea orders becomes a signal of emotional connection, conveying social information of "I am cared for" or "I am caring for others", while taking the initiative to order milk tea for others is an act of actively establishing emotional connections [10]. Culturally, this behavior has become a label of the lifestyle of young groups. Participating in the "first cup of milk tea in autumn" ritual means identifying with the youth culture of building a sense of ritual through lightweight consumption, which is an expression of identity recognition.

It can be seen that "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" has transformed from the physical existence of an ordinary beverage into a composite symbol carrying emotional expression, social interaction, and identity recognition. Furthermore, according to Barthes' theory of "myth", this symbol has also undergone a process of "mythologization": what was originally a spontaneous behavior of individuals sharing milk tea on social platforms has gradually evolved into a widely accepted cultural consensus, becoming one of the "must-do" rituals in autumn. People no longer question the source of its meaning but take it for granted as a seasonal custom. This process of mythologization has transformed "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" from a temporary meme into an annual consumer culture phenomenon, completing the leap from symbol to myth.

3. Mechanism

3.1. The Meaning of Symbolic Consumption: Psychological Mechanisms and Consumer Behavior

The phenomenon of the first cup of milk tea in autumn has far exceeded the functional value of milk tea itself and has become a symbol with emotional and social significance. Consumers express their emotional identification with the autumn season by purchasing milk tea, taking photos, and sharing them on social platforms. According to research, consumption behavior is not only about meeting functional needs, but also about expressing personal emotions and social identity through consumption symbols [11].

Consumers share photos of their milk teas, express their emotions, and describe their lifestyles on social media platforms. This not only demonstrates their personal emotions but also helps them establish emotional connections with others. Symbolic consumption reflects consumers' needs for social recognition and self-expression [12]. In the symbolic consumption of the first cup of milk tea in autumn, consumers convey their emotional identification with autumn and their sense of belonging to a social group through this action. Through sharing on social platforms, a virtual emotional community is formed among consumers, which enables the symbol of "the first cup of autumn" to be widely spread.

According to research, brand marketing no longer solely relies on the functionality of the product, but rather maintains the emotional connection with consumers through symbols and emotional value; The brand can make this symbol a continuous and emotionally resonant brand symbol [13].

3.2. Social Impact of Symbolic Consumption and Marketing Implications

Symbolic consumption not only has a profound impact on individual consumption behavior but also has an important influence on brand marketing strategies. In traditional marketing, brands mainly relied on the functional value of products to attract consumers. However, with the changes in consumer demands, symbolic consumption has gradually become an important part of brand marketing. Consumers express their social identities and emotional identifications through symbolic consumption, while brands attract consumers by creating and disseminating symbols.

Through the phenomenon of the first cup of milk tea in autumn, one can observe the profound influence of symbolic consumption on brand marketing. Brands no longer merely rely on the functional value of their products to attract consumers. Instead, they establish long-term connections with consumers through the creation of symbols and the shaping of emotional value. Brands enhance consumers' sense of social status and identity through symbolic consumption [12]. The brand achieves this by means of designing limited edition packaging and autumn advertisements, enabling consumers to obtain emotional satisfaction and social recognition through participating in this symbolic consumption behavior.

This phenomenon indicates that symbolic consumption plays a role in brand marketing not only in attracting consumers' attention but also in strengthening emotional resonance and the establishment of social identity, further promoting the socialization and emotionalization of consumption behavior.

4. Discussion

Combined with the analysis of this study and this case, it can be seen that young people tend to express their emotions and identity through consuming "the first cup of milk tea in autumn", which is highly consistent with the "symbolic self-identity" theory proposed by Tangsupwattana and Liu. Meanwhile, the communication mechanism of social media has amplified this process, making symbolic consumption not only an individual choice but also a cultural behavior with collective participation. In a consumer society, the wealth and consumption of many people are presented in the form of symbols/values. Consumption symbols have become an important way for some people to express their identities and construct social relationships; some people rely on consumption symbols

to gain or maintain social prestige and status, and conduct identity authentication or pretense through the temporal and spatial transformation of symbols [14].

The success of "the first cup of milk tea in autumn" also reveals new trends in contemporary marketing. In today's society with abundant materials, people's consumption concepts have undergone significant changes. They no longer consume merely for the item itself and its use value, but more for the symbolic meaning represented by the item and the spiritual pleasure brought by consumption. Baudrillard's concept of "symbolic consumption" is fully reflected in the present day [15]. However, a single symbol may lead consumers to lose their identity. When almost all milk tea brands launch similar marketing campaigns, consumers' sense of novelty towards such consumption symbols may diminish. In the long run, consumption symbols that became popular due to "emotional resonance" are likely to evolve into tedious "marketing fatigue" [16]. At the same time, continuously linking commodities with emotions and spreading this widely online may have a negative impact on minors with immature mindsets, leading to incorrect consumption views and values [17]. Consumers are no longer passive purchasers, but participants and co-creators in the dissemination of symbols.

In marketing campaigns, efforts should be made to avoid reinforcing moral coercion in the form of consumerism. The content of communication can be more diversified to guide the public to focus on their own emotional needs. Beyond that, to avoid short-sighted marketing, brands can develop a sustainable project based on their own positioning, aiming for long-term development and progress.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the phenomenon of the first cup of milk tea in autumn to explore the manifestations and social-cultural significance of symbolic consumption among contemporary young people. The research found that this phenomenon has transcended simple beverage consumption and transformed into a cultural ritual with emotional expression and social symbolic meanings. Through the dissemination on social media platforms, consumers participating in this consumption behavior not only expressed their emotional identification with the seasonal change but also formed emotional resonance and identity recognition on social networks. Moreover, brands, through interaction with this symbol, successfully transformed it into a marketing symbol with emotional connection, further promoting the emotionalization and socialization of consumption behavior.

Specifically, the study reached the following conclusions. Firstly, the first cup of milk tea in autumn represents the bottom-up generation process of symbolic consumption, supplementing the research dimension of non-brand-dominated consumption symbols. Secondly, this phenomenon reveals the path of lightweight consumption carrying emotional demands, enriching the theory of emotional consumption. Finally, brands, by precisely capturing the emotional connection effect brought by this symbol, not only enhanced consumers' sense of belonging but also promoted consumers' long-term brand loyalty.

Future research can further explore how to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional drivers behind consumer behavior through other social symbols and emotional consumption phenomena, and examine the differences in symbolic consumption manifestations across different cultural backgrounds.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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