Influence of Symbolism on Consumer Behavior in Livestreaming

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Abstract: With the improvement of living standards, people's consumption needs have changed greatly (Servidio, 2015). When shopping, they no longer only pay attention to the attributes of the product, such as function and quality, but turn to pursue the symbolic value behind (Prónay & Hetesi, 2016). As a bridge between commodity and its representative meaning, symbolism is widely used to increase sales in the field of consumption. One of the most popular industries in the consumption field at the moment, livestreaming marketing, makes extensive utilization of symbolism as an invisible sales tool. For example, Li Jiaqi labels lipsticks with the symbol of ideal young women images (zhannan, guifu, princess, queen, etc.), which attracts a great many female customers. A question arises here: how does symbolism affect consumer behavior in livestreaming marketing?

1. Introduction

In fact, the research on influences of symbolism on how people purchase goods can be traced back to the 1970s, when Jean Baudrillard first brought forward the symbolic consumption theory. Jean (1976) proposed that in post-modern consumer society, the object of consumption gradually shifted from commodity itself to symbolism. He also reported that symbolic consumption reflected people's self-value and differentiated them from others [2].

Influenced by the above theory, recent related research is mainly carried out in two directions: people's identities (e.g., Belk, 1996; Jiang, 2014; 9; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Sirgy et al., 2008; Sun et al., 2014) and the interaction between people [9, 12].

However, the majority of the previous studies [9] are about traditional industries (clothing, tourism, etc.). Although a few [7] aim at online fields (e-commerce, short video, variety show platforms, etc.), livestreaming marketing, as a new industry, has very little research involved. What's more, symbolism presents new characteristics in livestreaming marketing field, thus the conclusion of previous studies can't be simply applied to it. Therefore, there is a call for more

attention paying to livestreaming marketing.

Table 1. Examples of two directions of related research

Directions of related research	Examples
People's identities	Belk, 1996; Jiang, 2014; Luna-Cortés, 2017; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Sirgy et al., 2008; Sun et al., 2014
Interaction between people	Luna-Cortés, 2017; Prónay & Hetesi, 2016

Taking all above into consideration, this paper focuses on symbolism used in livestreaming marketing and how it interactively influences consumer behaviour. Through this paper, sellers in this field may more easily improve sales and competitiveness to stand out from the market and defeat their competitors when considering operating mechanism of symbolism in promotion.

2. Three Types of Symbols

A complete livestreaming marketing consists of three main sections: anchorman, content and scene. For nonverbal content is included in the part of scene, in this section, symbolism is classified into three main categories: persona, verbal and scene [5]. These three types will be discussed relatively at length as follows.

2.1. Persona Symbols

Persona refers to the image established in front of the public to cater for people's consumption expectations (Zhang, 2021). As the superficial representation of anchorman, it plays a significant role in livestreaming marketing [5]. It is a great assistant for its holder to leave an expected impression on people and better deliver his ideas to reach his goals. Persona symbol is a high generalization of varieties of personas. According to different functions, three major persona symbols are demonstrated in livestreaming marketing[4].

First is star persona. Star in livestreaming marketing is someone whose broadcast is watched by audiences on initiative. To be specific, the ID is clearly known and searched by audiences actively. Stars make full use of clout to expand their influence and appeal, converting more ordinary viewers into fans. Fans, especially teenagers whose mind is not sound yet, are easily affected by their idols and may consume blindly in idol's persuasion [14]. What's more, the carrying capacity (ability to sell advertised goods) of stars is an important indicator for assessing their performance and influence. Fans are unwilling to see their idols lose in competition with their peers, so they scramble to purchase what stars have recommended in livestreaming to support them (Why fans pour milk to support idols, 2020). Ultimately, stars take advantage of fans' purchasing and supporting power in promotion [8].

For example, 57 million fans rushed to Dilireba's live broadcasting and snapped up all the product on her debut in livestreaming marketing, which created six hundred million sales overnight (Dilireba in Xinba's broadcasting room, 2021). Star persona's strength can also be seen in Xiao Zhan's example, who has sold 75000 T-shirts in one live broadcast watched by 6.5 million fans (Xiao Zhan's fans are excited to buy goods in livestreaming, 2020).

However, the viewership may not be transformed into real consumption power for some stars in reality. Audience is unlikely to watch these stars' live broadcast actively, and accordingly, these figures take awfully few advantages of clout in the circumstance. For stars with little clout and practical appeal, they may turn to set up another image—grass-root[15].

Grass-root persona usually has little fan base, so it is more likely to be recommended by computer algorithms randomly in comparison to star. If star is like looking down at the audience

from above, the grass-root is looking at the audience from the ground horizontally. Grass-root uses his own experience as an example to shape himself into a person with the same characteristics as ordinary people to form an identity recognition with audience, creating a feeling of intimacy and emotional resonance. For instance, an ID called Tianjin family mainly records a simple but funny daily life of a family of four, particularly without conflicts between mother and daughter-in-law (a common conflict in traditional Chinese family) in live broadcasting. The portrait of real-life scene reminds people of their families and arouses a deep yearning for such a utopian happy family life. The strength of closeness and emotional interaction helps this ID attract considerable attention and create 24.17 million sales in 30 days (Every one in Tianjin family is Internet celebrity, 2020).

Wei Ya was also a prime example before being accused of tax evasion. She portrayed herself as a generous older sister to earn trust of the audiences. In her heyday, she achieved a sales volume of 31.09 billion in a year [13]. However, recent scandal of tax evasion broke the persona (sister next door) she erected before, causing her to lose fans' trust (China daily, 2021). Similarly, Xin Ba's crisis of selling fake goods in March 2020 greatly dented his credibility [1]. These two cases warn other anchormen that the bottom line in livestreaming marketing is to trade in good faith and serve the public, otherwise, personas established before will collapse in an instant [3].

Another persona is professionals, who have a great deal of professional knowledge and techniques in specific domains. In their performance, they focus more on explaining details of products, which are unknown to ordinary people, for example the basic chemical compositions of cosmetics or the nutritional information of food. At this moment, professionals act as authorities in their areas. People are likely to have faith in authoritative figures when in the ocean of unfamiliar knowledge[12]. Furthermore, customers regard it as a real bargain in their cognition, for they not only obtain high quality products in sale, but also gain new knowledge or learn the products further. Mr. Xiaoguan, a Michelin three-star chef, teaches viewers how to distinguish between raw steak and synthetic steak and how to control the temperature and time to make a good-tasting steak based on his experience while broadcasting. Audiences trust the recommended steak is of high nutritive value through his careful and professional introduction, with more than 180 thousand pieces of steak sold in 2019 "618" carnival (A three-star Michelin chef becoming a TikTok master, 2020).

Table 2. Illustrations for persona symbols

Persona symbols	Characteristics	Examples
Star persona	They have great numbers of fans and influence.	Dilireba; Xiao zhan
Grass-root persona	They use their own experience to get close to the masses.	Weiya; Tianjin family
Professionals	They introduce professional knowledge at livestreaming.	Mr. Xiaoguan

Despite classifying persona symbols into three main types, in reality, cases are more complex. Persona may change with time and sometimes multiple personas appear in an anchorman at the same time. Some professionals and grass-roots gradually gain popularity and turn to become stars to take advantage of the clout, like Mr. Xiaoguan and Tianjin Family. However the core of their success—the authoritative and down-to-earth images relatively—won't change.

2.2. Verbal Symbols

Verbal transmits information in language and intonation. Key words undertake a crucial part in delivering special meanings to viewers, just like signals sent and received through broadcast to lead audience by nose. Li Jiaqi's "OMG" is a typical key word. "OMG" is a modal practice to express exclamation and wonder in its original meaning. Li Jiaqi takes it as a pet phrase to show the

excellent effect of his products implicitly. When hearing his passionate "OMG", people seem to form a conditional reflex to consider the lipstick being promoted is worth buying [10].

Another key word played by Li Jiaqi is 'jingzhi nvhai bibei' (translated as exquisite girl's must-have). According to Curry's (1902) research, people's behavior was rooted in self-identification, which was constructed through others' evaluations and attitudes. When receiving the signal of 'jingzhi nvhai bibei', female audiences have unconsciously strengthened their self-identification and self-congruity to be exquisite girls and believe the commodity is very suitable for them, leading to further consumption (Ding, 2020).

Apart from particular key words, anchormen are also fond of utilizing short sentences. Short sentence indeed creates a nervous atmosphere and stirs people's normal emotions (Ding, 2020). One short sentence they are keen to use before kicking off official sale is countdown. It makes people mired in the extreme anxiety that they will lose the golden chance to purchase inexpensive and fine goods the next second (Ding, 2020). In the end, it successfully pushes consumers to panic purchasing.

Table 3. Illustrations for verbal symbols

Verbal symbols	Functions	Examples
Key words	Signals to strengthen self-identification / form a conditional reflex	"OMG" "jingzhi nvhai bibei"
short sentences	To create a nervous atmosphere and stirs people's emotions	countdown

However, verbal alone does not have any effect and it needs certain occasions [5], which will be talked about in the next part.

2.3. Scene Symbols

Scene basically refers to the background set for a specific activity. Like holding a performance, the first step of a brilliant livestreaming marketing is to choose a stage matched with styles of anchorman's persona and the products' characteristics. Furthermore, the scene and its interaction with the live streaming viewers, rather than the property of symbolism itself, produce the symbolic meaning behind the product [5]. According to diverse working mechanisms, there are three cardinal scenes involved in discussion.

First and foremost is the offline simulation scene, which is adopted by a majority of anchormen. Literally speaking, the scene been discussed is the simulation and imitation of offline shopping. When people go shopping in real shops, they are allowed to try out products in person and make comments based on personal feelings. In general, offline shopping provides people with a strong shopping experience. However, when it comes to online shopping, it's difficult to have intense participation for the segregation of products and customers (Kumar & Dange, 2012). Here, offline simulation scene effectively solves this problem. Anchormen try out and introduce their products for the audiences at the same time, which presents more authentic information and attributes of products (Yan & Li, 2020). A case in point is that Li Jiaqi puts on lipsticks to show different colors and makes his own appraisal of each color so that customers, particularly beginners in cosmetic area, can see the effect immediately and straightforward. At this time, anchormen act both as shopping guides and models. The audiences seem to see themselves in anchormen and feel they are present on the scene [16]. To be sure, certain techniques, such as dynamic filter and PS, alter or exaggerate the authentic effects to a certain degree, but after all, it's undeniable that it's better than pictures in a dormant state.

Another common scene is foreground and background (FAB) scene. Goffman (1959) maintained

that for a successful drama show, its foreground included facilities, decorations, basic layout and so on, where people presented themselves with certain idealization and socialization. While on the backstage, the scene hidden behind the curtain, people were free to show true selves without any external limitations (Goffman, 1959).

It is true of livestreaming marketing. In the foreground, anchormen introduce the function, quality and other properties of the products. All the words, actions, and even expressions are arranged elaborately like followed by a designed script to be presented [16]. While the background, which is usually hidden, is now displayed in front of audiences as a supplementary and complementary part of foreground. Viewers see background (e.g., the production, maintenance process and the service of the products) in a straight way, giving them a sense of on-site participation through the whole production line [16]. Their strong longing to peep will be satisfied and they will be more assured of the commodity recommended. What's more, anchormen may broadcast in a private domain, such as private rooms, or show the other side of their characters to approach customers [16]. Therefore the contrast and counterbalance of foreground and background scenes construct a trust relationship between viewers and products (Fan & Li, 2020) and this kind of trust will be transformed into purchasing power later.

The above two scenes can be adopted by anchormen without external limitations, however, the third one, official scene, is confined to anchorman's social identities. It is generally used on special occasions by governments at all levels and mainstream media. In the traditional sense, official agencies always maintain the side of authority, and to some extent, are distant from people [6]. The situation changes when people see many official figures appear in broadcasting room. Their participation adds the image of being close to people to the original image of authority, therefore receiving the joint functions of closeness and reliability (Ma et al., 2021). It is clear from the case of Tao Guanghong, county magistrate of Tangshan (Dangshan), Anhui. At an event jointly organized by CCTV and Buy together (also known as Pinduoduo), more than 600 thousand viewers interacted with him and approximately 28 thousand orders of local peers were made. Audiences were attracted by the contrast images (humorous, kind, etc., which are contradictory to serious, official) he showed in broadcast (Tao in broadcasting room, 2020) and meanwhile, they had faith in the quality of peers because of the governmental support behind the program. Nevertheless, some officials are so formalistic that they only see sales and heat in sight, rather than offering products of high quality to people, which is a remaining issue to be settled and requires more attention [11].

Table 4. Illustrations for scene symbols

Scene symbols	Functions
Offline simulation scene	To provide people with a strong shopping experience
Foreground and background (FAB) scene	To construct a trust relationship between viewers and products
Official scene	To combine the advantage of being authoritative and close to the masses

To generalize in brief, these scenes coexist with each other and more commonly, anchormen may put several scenes together to establish an all-round web trapping customers.

3. Three Symbols' Interaction

Persona, verbal and scene symbols work together to produce, replace and reproduce the symbolic significance of products [5]. In a successful livestreaming marketing, each one is supposed to fit with the other two.

To begin with, persona symbol is constructed through verbal and scene. Persona is quite abstract for audience to perceive, that is to say, people can't see or touch it directly. To embody this invisible symbol, anchorman and his sales team have to say appropriate words and broadcast in proper scene to maintain his persona. Otherwise, it will devastate the reputation of this ID and the reliability accumulated before will be cut off drastically. Moreover, verbal symbol is influenced by scene and persona. The style and content of speaking change with the object and the situation. When in CCTV's live broadcasting with Zhu Guangquan to support Hubei, Li Jiaqi tended to speak more seriously and formally without many jokes, which was in accord with his temporarily new identity, an official representative [2]. Last but not least, the effect of scene is strengthened by the other two counterparts. For instance, grass-roots in offline simulation scene seem to be more authentic and effective for customers to choose wanted goods for their conditions (including body shape, skin, height, etc.) are close to average. And as the same example of Li Jiaqi mentioned above, serious words made the official occasion more formal in return [2].

4. Conclusion

In order to keep up with the pace of development of the consumption needs, sellers take advantage of symbolism. Three main types of symbols used by anchormen in livestreaming marketing—persona, verbal and scene—play their roles respectively and also cooperate with each other to change consumer behaviour so as to bring in sales. Sellers new or frustrated in livestreaming marketing may be enlightened to draw on the experience of representative anchormen, take symbolism as an invisible promotion strategy and use it flexibly according to its working mechanism. It is also important to note that a certain symbol cannot suit every anchorman, therefore, sellers must choose what matches with their own characteristics and conditions to exert the greatest value of symbolism. Finally, these sellers may occupy a larger market and become the final winner.

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Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Conflict of Interest

The author states that this article has no conflict of interest.

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