

Research on Product Marketing Strategies and Cultural Identity Construction of Restaurant Brands in the Context of Digital Marketing: A Case Study of McDonald's "Hash Brown All-Day Availability" and KFC's "Old Beijing Chicken Wrap" Marketing Campaigns

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Abstract

Under the dual background of digital marketing penetration and the shift in Gen Z's consumption demands, competition among catering brands has evolved from a contest of taste and price into a battle of cultural construction capabilities. However, existing research rarely explores how specific products become carriers of cultural identity. This study selects two classic product cases. McDonald's "Hash Brown All-Day Availability" and KFC's "Old Beijing Chicken Wrap" for a comparative analysis from four dimensions: insight, product, interaction, and fulfillment. The findings reveal that McDonald's follows an emotion-driven path: capturing customer emotions while co-creating with consumers through fan conventions, elevating the hash brown into a symbol of "office workers" and forming the identity of "McDonald's devotees." By contrast, KFC follows a cognition-driven path: capturing demands through a dual-track mechanism, triggering communication via UGC, and solidifying the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap as a cultural symbol, thereby forming the ritual identity of "anticipating Crazy Thursday." This study uncovers the transformation mechanism from product preference to cultural identity, providing transferable paths for catering brands to build culture in the digital era.

Keywords

Digital Marketing; Product Marketing Strategy; Cultural Identity; McDonald's; KFC.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the continuous penetration of digital marketing, the interaction model between catering brands and consumers is undergoing fundamental changes. Social media, membership big data, private domain communities and other tools, once merely supplementary means, have now become core supports for brands' daily operations, enabling them to accurately grasp consumers' behavioral habits, emotional tendencies and values. Meanwhile, Generation Z has gradually become the dominant force in the consumer market. They no longer satisfy themselves with the basic functions of products, but increasingly crave emotional resonance, social interaction and a sense of cultural belonging in consumption. This has quietly shifted the focus of competition in the catering industry: traditional advantages in taste, price and store numbers can hardly create gaps, and brands' digital operation capabilities and cultural shaping capabilities have become key determinants of market competitiveness.

1.2. Phenomenon Introduction and Research Questions

Against the backdrop of this industry transformation, McDonald's Carnival and Crazy Thursday Phenomena have emerged as two highly representative internet cultural phenomena in the fast-food industry in recent years, sparking extensive attention and discussion in both academic and industrial circles. The fan community of "McDonald's Carnival" spontaneously constructs a unique discourse system, endowing McDonald's consumption behavior with a "religious" connotation, interacting as "devotees" on social platforms with the core slogan "McDonald's forever", and forming a segmented subcultural community. Crazy Thursday Literature, characterized by absurd and reversed narratives, triggers viral communication across major social platforms every Thursday, evolving regular brand promotions into a weekly fixed online ritual spontaneously participated in by consumers. These two phenomena are not only successful cases of brand marketing practices but also show the complete process of consumers transforming from functional preference for products to in-depth identification with brand culture, providing a highly representative comparative research perspective for exploring the construction mechanism of catering brands' cultural identity in the digital era.

Existing academic research has laid a solid theoretical foundation and empirical basis for understanding the formation of brand cultural identity from multiple dimensions, including localization strategies of transnational catering brands, digital transformation paths, and communication mechanisms of internet memes. However, critical theoretical gaps remain. On the one hand, most studies conduct descriptive analyses of a single phenomenon of a single brand or focus on the application effects of tools such as mini-programs, member systems and precision marketing, while few systematically compare the construction paths behind McDonald's Carnival and Crazy Thursday Phenomena. More importantly, existing research mostly interprets the communication logic of cultural phenomena themselves, but rarely traces their origins: how do specific products become carriers of brand cultural identity? And how do brands guide consumers to elevate their functional love for products into emotional attachment and identity with brand culture through marketing strategies designed around specific products? This core research question has not been fully addressed, which is exactly the key theoretical gap this study aims to fill.

Based on the above research gaps, this study puts forward the core research question: Against the background of digital marketing, how do McDonald's and KFC drive consumers from "product preference" to "cultural identity" through differentiated product marketing strategies?

1.3. Research Significance and Overview of Research Methods

Therefore, this study selects two classic product cases, McDonald's "Hash Brown All-Day Availability" and KFC's "Old Beijing Chicken Wrap", to systematically compare the strategic differentiation of the two brands from four dimensions, revealing the differences in mechanisms between the two paths, and hoping to provide transferable theoretical implications and practical references for catering brands to build culture in the digital era. This study adopts the dual-case study method, constructs a different dimensional framework, and conducts a systematic comparison using the AIDA Model. The theoretical contribution lies in refining two differentiated paths: the emotion-driven type and the Cognition-driven social communication type and revealing the transformation mechanism from product preference to cultural identity. In terms of practical significance, it provides transferable strategic references for catering brands in the digital era regarding digital insight, product emotionalization and localization.

2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

Scholars have explored catering brand marketing and cultural identity from multiple dimensions. First, regarding localization marketing of transnational enterprises, scholars generally believe that adopting a localization development strategy is an inevitable choice for transnational catering brands to quickly enter the Chinese market [1]. Taking KFC as an example, Kaja (2020) pointed out that issues such as insufficient in-depth understanding of Chinese market customs in product design and failure of marketing advertisements to meet consumer expectations are key factors affecting marketing effectiveness [2]. On this basis, Huang Wenchuan and Han Shenchao (2022) further found that KFC's success in the Chinese market stems from its earlier and deeper localization strategy and open attitude toward franchising [3]. These studies provide an important background for understanding the competitive environment of McDonald's and KFC.

Second, regarding digital transformation, scholars have noted that the dual pressure of technological empowerment and market competition is driving structural changes in fast-food enterprises' marketing strategies. Li Sha (2022) emphasized the importance of integrating online and offline channels and acquiring consumer data [4]; Tang Zhuofei (2025) pointed out that KFC has achieved precise targeting by building its own APP and mini-program member system [5]. McDonald's has also actively promoted its digital strategy, creating personalized customer experiences through technology acquisitions and the layout of future restaurants [6]. Third, regarding internet memes and brand culture, researchers have revealed the cultural construction logic behind McDonald's Carnival and Crazy Thursday Phenomena. Han Moyong (2023) interpreted the viral diffusion mechanism of Crazy Thursday Literature as a dominant meme and its sustainable life cycle from the perspectives of meme communication and ritual experience, respectively [7]. Pan Shujun (2024) introduced the concept of value co-creation into meme marketing research, finding that consumers' perception of meme marketing leads to emotional value and identity [8]. Guo Jing (2023) analyzed McDonald's new media marketing strategy targeting Generation Z from the perspective of the 4I Theory [9], while Jiang Yuxia and Xiao Moyan (2025) revealed the evolution path of "McDonald's Carnival" from an internet meme to a cultural symbol from a semantic perspective [10].

Although the above research has yielded fruitful results, most focus on macro strategic frameworks or the communication mechanisms of cultural phenomena themselves, rarely exploring the starting point of these phenomena—how specific products become carriers of cultural identity, nor systematically comparing the two differentiated paths of McDonald's and KFC. This constitutes the theoretical gap this study seeks to fill.

3. Research Design

This study takes McDonald's and KFC as dual cases, selecting two representative products "Hash Brown All-Day Availability" and "Old Beijing Chicken Wrap" as analysis units. The reasons for selecting these two brands are as follows: both belong to the Western fast-food track, with highly similar product forms, price ranges and store layouts, and their target customers are mainly young people of Generation Z with a highly overlapping audience, ensuring good comparability. Meanwhile, under the background of digital marketing, they have respectively spawned two phenomenal internet cultural events, McDonald's Carnival and Crazy Thursday Phenomena—but with significant differences in formation paths. This feature of "similarities with differences" provides an ideal sample for comparative research.

The reasons for selecting hash browns and the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap as specific cases are as follows: First, both products are highly representative. Hash browns are a star breakfast product of McDonald's, and the anthropomorphic meme of "clocking off at 10:30 a.m." has been

widely circulated among fans, embodying the typical practice of the "Fans' Moments" strategy. The Old Beijing Chicken Wrap, as a landmark product of KFC's localization strategy, carries the brand perception of "better understanding Chinese tastes". Second, both are classic products that play a key role in transforming product functions into cultural symbols in their respective brands, facilitating a comparative analysis under the same analytical framework. Third, data availability: the marketing activities, media reports and UGC content on social media of the two products are abundant with a clear time span, providing sufficient data support for secondary data analysis and netnography observation.

In terms of research methods, secondary data analysis and netnography observation are comprehensively adopted. The former covers official materials, media reports, industry reports and academic literature for multi-source cross-verification; the latter focuses on communities related to "McDonald's Carnival" and "Crazy Thursday" to collect data on users' emotional expressions and interactions.

4. Case Analysis

4.1. McDonald's "Hash Brown All-Day Availability" Case

Hash browns are a star breakfast product of McDonald's, boasting a golden, crispy exterior and glutinous interior, enjoying high recognition and loyalty among fans. However, hash browns have long been plagued by a major complaint: they are only available during breakfast hours and are removed from the menu promptly at 10:30 a.m. every day [11]. For young people who miss breakfast due to commuting, craving hash browns becomes a race against time. Paradoxically, this scarcity of "limited availability" has sparked fans' creative enthusiasm. In terms of insight, this corresponds to the Attention stage of the AIDA Model. McDonald's continuously listens to consumers' voices at the forefront of social media, receiving tens of thousands of UGC posts and over a thousand Xiaohongshu notes across various platforms via official channels [11]. From a large volume of user-generated content, the brand keenly captured the highly frequent emotional expression of "hash browns clock off at 10:30 a.m." Fans not only complained about the limited availability but also anthropomorphized hash browns as "the envy of office workers". This insight did not stem from traditional market research but from the long-term listening and refinement of fans' spontaneous emotional expressions. The unique UGC content attracted more users' attention due to its fun and resonance, transforming hash browns from an ordinary product into a socially symbolic topic. Taking this emotional expression as the starting point of insight, McDonald's did not simply change the product formula or launch new products but chose to redefine hash browns themselves as emotional carriers. Through anthropomorphism, hash browns were endowed with the personality traits of "office workers", which accurately resonated with young professionals' self-deprecating psychology, turning hash browns from a functional breakfast item into a cultural symbol bearing emotions.

In terms of products, this corresponds to the Interest and Desire stages of the AIDA Model. Consumers project emotions onto hash browns, envying their ability to clock off on time. Most young consumers are office workers themselves, naturally projecting strong emotions onto hash browns. Originally only sold during breakfast hours and removed at 10:30 a.m. every day, hash browns were playfully anthropomorphized as "clocking off", a setting that precisely hits the real predicament of contemporary office workers [12]. Leveraging this interesting narrative close to daily life, McDonald's continuously arouses consumers' curiosity and attention, deepens public affection for hash browns, further stimulates the psychological desire for active purchase, and steadily drives consumers from interest perception to consumption demands.

In terms of interaction, this corresponds to the Action stage of the AIDA Model. In December 2024, McDonald's China held its first fan convention in Shenzhen, inviting approximately 150

fan representatives to vote on the proposal for all-day hash brown availability, granting fans decision-making power over products and transforming them from passive "consumers" into active co-creators [13]. This became a typical practice of catering brands empowering consumers with product decision-making power. In February, McDonald's officially confirmed the limited-time all-day availability of crispy hash browns from February 12 to 25. Following the launch of the limited-time availability, fans visited stores to purchase hash browns and shared the Hash Brown Employment Notification on social media, completing secondary communication after purchase. Every share and purchase is a continuation and deepening of the "Action" stage in the AIDA Model.

In terms of fulfillment, this corresponds to the reinforcement of post-purchase behavior in the AIDA Model. McDonald's combined product availability adjustments with anthropomorphic official announcements. Consumers not only obtained product satisfaction after purchase but also gained social recognition by sharing anthropomorphic content. This positive post-purchase emotional experience strengthens consumers' brand connection, driving them from loving the product to becoming McDonald's devotees. At this point, the complete AIDA cycle is integrated with the four-dimensional analysis: insight attracts attention, products arouse interest and desire, interaction drives action, and fulfillment reinforces post-purchase identity, ultimately completing the transformation from "product preference" to "cultural identity". According to a case review by Admen, sales of hash browns increased by 189% year-on-year during the campaign, the total exposure of related topics exceeded 1.639 billion, fan-generated UGC exceeded 1,500 posts with 99.9% positive discussions [14].

4.2. KFC's "Old Beijing Chicken Wrap" Case

Twenty years ago, during the Spring Festival, two Peking opera actors unveiled a new product with a Peking duck flavor at a KFC restaurant in Beijing: the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap. A soft tortilla wrapped around crispy fried chicken strips, refreshing cucumber sticks, and scallion segments, drizzled with rich sweet bean sauce and hamburger sauce. This "East-meets-West" product reinvented the unique way of eating Peking duck in a Western fast-food style, offering a "traditional taste in a new form." [14]. As an early practice of KFC's localization strategy, the birth of the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap was no accident. In terms of insight, as early as 2000, KFC invited more than 40 national food and nutrition experts to formally establish the "China KFC Food Health Advisory Committee." These experts, hailing from the Chinese Nutrition Society, Peking University, and China Agricultural University, regularly introduced the latest developments in food nutrition to senior management and provided professional advice on product R&D directions [15]. Driven by this institutionalized research mechanism, KFC keenly captured the taste memory and emotional value embedded in the Peking duck-eating experience and transformed it into a fast-food product that is both familiar and novel. Over the next 20 years, the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap evolved from a limited-time Spring Festival item into a permanent menu staple. As a landmark symbol of the brand's localization strategy, it spread traditional flavors across the country through KFC restaurants in more than 1,700 Chinese cities. This long process of sedimentation has firmly established the perception in consumers' minds that "KFC understands the Chinese palate better."

The recent "Crazy Thursday" phenomenon represents another path: meme-based communication of promotional activities. Although the two occurred in different periods, together they reflect KFC's diverse explorations in cultural construction. KFC's institutionalized research mechanism, represented by the expert committee, forms the foundation for capturing consumer demands. On the other hand, the brand keenly captured the popularity of online "crazy literature," continuously monitoring online trends and young people's social culture, closely following current fun expression methods, actively absorbing spontaneous online memes and interesting content created by users, and leveraging the

popularity of native UGC to enrich its marketing forms, quickly integrating trending memes such as “Crazy Thursday” and “Send me 50” into its marketing system. This dual-track mechanism enables KFC to both grasp the long-term direction of its localization strategy and seize short-term communication opportunities in a timely manner. When the topic of “Crazy Thursday” frequently appears online and in ubiquitous advertisements, consumers develop a conditioned reflex: “It’s Thursday, time for KFC.”

In terms of products, this corresponds to the Interest and Desire stages of the AIDA Model. The Old Beijing Chicken Wrap’s unique “Chinese and Western fusion” eating style effectively arouses consumers’ interest with its combination of familiarity and novelty. Transforming the traditional flavor of Peking duck into a Western food style lowers the acceptance threshold while satisfying young consumers’ curiosity for novel experiences. This stark difference from traditional hamburgers drives consumers from interest to consumption desire.

In the interaction dimension, corresponding to the “Action” stage of the AIDA model, this is achieved through the cross-temporal superimposition of brand culture. KFC did not deliberately push for this linkage; rather, consumers’ spontaneous content production realized the meaningful grafting of an old product onto a new phenomenon. KFC drives consumers from product preference to identity through a dual pathway. First, the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap evolved from a limited-time Spring Festival product into a permanent menu item, remaining a “classic good taste” for 20 years and fulfilling the brand’s long-term commitment to its localization strategy. Meanwhile, “Crazy Thursday” has formed a periodic post-purchase ritual through its fixed weekly activity rhythm. On the other hand, in the Action stage, consumers’ actions are not limited to purchasing behavior but are also manifested as content co-creation. They spontaneously create “Crazy Thursday Literature,” incorporating classic products such as the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap into their narratives, thereby endowing them with the social meaning of “Thursday carnival.” This UGC behavior is driven endogenously by consumers’ social needs and is no longer confined to the promotional framework set by the brand. It is worth noting that the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap, a localized product launched more than 20 years ago, has been reactivated in this process, gaining new cultural vitality through user-led content co-creation. After enjoying the meal on Thursday, consumers gain interaction and a sense of social achievement by sharing “Crazy Thursday Literature” on social platforms. This positive feedback further reinforces their consumption behavior, shifting them from a sense of participation to a sense of anticipation, ultimately complete the cultural transformation from “product preference” to “ritual identity.”

5. Path Comparison and Mechanism Refinement

5.1. Refinement of the Two Paths

Through the above comparative analysis of the two cases, this study refines two differentiated paths for the formation of cultural identity. McDonald’s is driven by the overflow of consumers’ inner emotions and the brand’s capture and response, exhibits the characteristic of from the inside out. KFC, by contrast, is driven by the brand’s precise insight and systematic construction of the external market, presenting a from the outside in characteristic. Despite their differences, both ultimately achieve consumers’ transformation from the preference of product to cultural identity.

5.2. Underlying Reasons for Path Differences

The differences between the two paths are not accidental but rooted in three underlying factors. First, differences in brand heritage and strategic path dependence. In 1963, the company introduced the national mascot “Ronald McDonald,” specifically targeting children and cultivating cross-generational emotional connections [16]. The 2003 global marketing

campaign “I’m Lovin’ It” further shifted the brand’s personality toward youth culture, encouraging consumers to express their personal relationship with the brand [17]. These strategic decisions shaped McDonald’s long-term organizational capabilities in emotional marketing and fan interaction. In contrast, KFC’s early entry into the Chinese market and its subsequent deep localization efforts forged a different path. Facing a market with distinct culinary traditions, KFC established an “advisory committee” in 2000. This institutionalized research mechanism enabled the brand to systematically adapt its products to local tastes, launching Chinese-style breakfast in 2002 and the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap in 2003 [15]. Over time, KFC developed organizational routines centered on market research, product localization, and supply chain integration, creating a path-dependent advantage in cognition-driven localization.

Second, differences in insight starting points. McDonald’s insights originate from users. The memes stem from fans’ UGC creations, with the brand acting as a listener. This bottom-up insight path ensures that marketing strategies always revolve around fans’ genuine emotions, fostering a strong sense of user participation. In contrast, KFC’s insights are brand-led. The expert committee’s institutionalized research represents a proactive initiative by the brand, and the monitoring of online trends is also an active tracking effort. This top-down insight path enables the brand to systematically grasp market trends.

Third, differences in interaction mechanisms. McDonald’s interaction mechanism is decision-making co-creation. The fan convention grants consumers decision-making power over products, involving users in substantive decisions. This form of interaction transforms users from passive consumers into active co-creators, fostering a strong sense of psychological ownership. KFC’s interaction mechanism is content co-creation. “Crazy Thursday Literature” encourages consumers to engage in secondary creation, turning promotional information into entertaining social content. This low-threshold, high-frequency interaction transforms users into active creators, facilitating viral communication and penetration across social circles. Both interaction mechanisms have their respective advantages: decision-making co-creation strengthens individual identity among core users, while content co-creation amplifies the brand’s communication reach and social circle penetration.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Research Conclusion

McDonald’s “Hash Brown All-Day Availability” case represents an emotion-driven path. This path begins with fans’ spontaneous expressions; McDonald’s captures this emotional resonance, treats the hash brown itself as an emotional carrier, and endows it with the personality traits of “office workers.” Subsequently, by granting consumers product decision-making power, the brand transforms fans from passive consumers into active co-creators. Finally, through an anthropomorphic announcement, McDonald’s fulfills the emotional promise, elevating the hash brown from a limited-time breakfast item into a cultural symbol of “office workers.” This process fully demonstrates the transformation from “product preference” to “McDonald’s devotees” identity, in which the fan convention’s decision-making co-creation mechanism serves as a key link in deepening individual identity.

KFC, by contrast, presents two models from different eras. It should be noted that the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap, launched in 2003, represents an early practice driven by product localization, while the recent “Crazy Thursday” phenomenon is a later outbreak driven by social media communication. This temporal difference precisely reveals the evolution of brand cultural construction across different eras, from a product-driven model, centered on product R&D and market sedimentation, to a communication-driven model which centered on user co-creation and meme transmission. The Old Beijing Chicken Wrap has been solidified as a

symbol of “Chinese taste” through localization strategies, while “Crazy Thursday” has formed the ritual identity of “anticipating Crazy Thursday” through UGC ignition. Together, they constitute KFC’s cognition-driven path.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects. First, it constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework of insight, product, interaction, fulfillment organically integrated with the AIDA Model, providing a practical tool for systematically revealing the complete chain from demand capture to cultural identity. Second, it uncovers two transformation mechanisms from product preference to cultural identity the emotion-driven type and the cognition-driven type, deepening the understanding of the formation process of brand cultural identity. Third, it addresses the gap in existing research regarding specific products as the starting point of cultural carriers, indicating that the key to transforming a product into a cultural symbol lies not in taste or price, but in how brands embed products into consumers’ emotional world and social life through systematic strategies, suggesting that the plasticity of products themselves should be re-examined in the digital era.

6.3. Practical Implications

Based on the above research findings, this study puts forward the following practical implications for transnational catering brands to build culture in the digital era.

First, leverage digital tools to tap into emotional needs. Brands should establish a normalized social media listening mechanism to capture consumers’ emotional expressions and potential demands from massive UGC. McDonald’s “Fans’ Truth” strategy demonstrates that fans’ spontaneous jokes and complaints can serve as starting points for insight.

Second, build products into emotional or cultural carriers. Products are not only tools for functional satisfaction but also carriers for emotional projection and cultural identity. Brands can endow products with personality traits through anthropomorphism or integrate local cultural symbols into product design, making products themselves concrete expressions of brand culture.

Third, integrate user participation into value co-creation. Brands should move beyond one-way promotion and establish two-way interactive communication mechanisms. McDonald’s decision-making co-creation via fan conventions deepens individual identity among core users, while KFC’s content co-creation via Crazy Thursday Literature expands communication reach.

Fourth, transform short-term marketing events into long-term cultural assets. A successful marketing campaign should not stop at short-term sales growth, but precipitate into sustainable brand cultural assets through product consolidation, IP-based operation and periodic rhythms. The permanent placement of the Old Beijing Chicken Wrap and the ritualization of Crazy Thursday are typical practices of this strategy.

6.4. Research Limitations

This study has the following limitations. First, it selects two leading brands, McDonald’s and KFC and the applicability of the conclusions to small and medium-sized or regional brands requires further verification. Second, it mainly relies on secondary data and netnography observation, lacking in-depth primary interview data with brand marketing executives and core consumers, which may affect the understanding of the underlying motives behind strategic decisions. Third, it adopts a qualitative dual-case comparative method without introducing quantitative indicators to verify the effects of the two paths on variables such as consumers’ brand loyalty and purchase intention. Future research can further test the universality and explanatory power of the theoretical model refined in this study through questionnaires or experimental methods.

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