

Exploring How IP Co-Branded Products Influence Word-of-Mouth among Generation Z through Social Identity

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Abstract:

As Generation Z in China becomes the main consumer force, brands have been launching non-limited but uniquely styled IP collaboration products to attract attention. This article focuses on whether IP co-branded products can stimulate the word-of-mouth communication behavior of Generation Z more than ordinary products and further investigates how social identity functions as an intermediary mechanism in this relationship. Drawing upon social identity theory, a theoretical model is constructed with product type as the independent variable, social identity as the mediating variable, and word-of-mouth communication behavior as the dependent variable. By collecting and analyzing 150 valid questionnaires, reliability analysis, variance analysis, and mediating effect analysis were conducted using SPSS. The results show that IP co-branded products significantly enhance the willingness of word-of-mouth communication; Social identity plays a partial mediating role in the path by which IP co-branded products influence word-of-mouth communication behavior. The research further verified the role path of IP co-branded products in promoting consumers' willingness to communicate by stimulating social psychological mechanisms and provided empirical evidence for brands to formulate marketing strategies based on cultural identity.

Keywords: IP co-branding; Social identity; Generation Z.

1. Introduction

In recent years, IP co-branded products, which refer to joint products launched by brands in collaboration with culturally influential IPs such as anime,

games, and film and television characters, have rapidly gained popularity among China's Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010). Especially for design-oriented products that are not limited in quantity but possess high recognizability and symbolic

significance due to the integration of unique IP elements, they have become an important way for brands to attract young consumers with their cultural symbolism and emotional value [1]. Djafarova & Trofimenko pointed out that Generation Z tends to express themselves through social media [2]. Moreover, its consumption behavior is often accompanied by active word-of-mouth promotion, demonstrating a strong need for social identification. Previous studies have pointed out that the brand image and social value perception of IP co-branded products can significantly enhance satisfaction and retention intention [3]. However, discussions on how they influence the word-of-mouth behavior of Generation Z through social psychological mechanisms are still relatively scarce. To fill the gap in this research, this paper introduces social identity as a mediating variable, builds a research model based on the theory of social identity, adopts the questionnaire survey method, and uses SPSS for analysis of variance and mediating effect analysis to conduct an empirical analysis of the sample of Generation Z in China, aiming to reveal how IP co-branded products promote word-of-mouth communication through social identity. This study also aims to provide theoretical support and practical inspiration for brands to formulate IP strategies.

2. Literature Review

IP co-branded products refer to the joint products launched by brands in collaboration with well-known Intellectual Properties (such as anime, games, and film and television characters), aiming to enhance product differentiation and emotional value by leveraging the cultural influence of the IP [4]. Compared with ordinary products, IP co-branded products are more unique, topical, and visually recognizable, further strengthening consumers' emotional connection and brand loyalty [5]. In particular, products that are not limited in quantity but have unique styles are favored by Generation Z due to their sharing attributes and cultural symbolism.

Generation Z, those born between 1995 and 2010, grew up in an Internet and social media environment and have a strong need for self-expression and a tendency towards social interaction [6]. During the consumption process, they are more inclined to share and comment through social media, demonstrating significant word-of-mouth behavior (WOM). Research shows that product uniqueness, brand culture, and consumer identity are closely related and are important prerequisites for stimulating WOM [7].

Social identity refers to the experience of self-worth and meaning that an individual acquires due to group belonging or social roles [8]. When consumers believe that a certain product can enhance their self-image or establish a connection with a certain community, they are more willing to participate in positive word-of-mouth communica-

tion.

Although previous studies have explored the impact of IP co-branded products on purchase intention and satisfaction, few studies have focused on how such products drive the WOM word-of-mouth behavior of Generation Z in China through social identity [3]. This study attempts to fill this theoretical and practical gap.

3. Research Hypothesis

Existing research indicates that IP co-branded products can effectively enhance consumers' perceived value and purchase intention. Particularly, the cultural significance represented by the IP in the co-branded products strengthens consumers' recognition and perceived value of the products [9]. When an IP has a relatively high foundation of cultural recognition, it can not only enhance consumers' purchasing tendency but also drive consumers to actively share and spread, thereby forming spontaneous word-of-mouth communication.

Drawing on the aforementioned reasoning, the following hypotheses are formulated in this study:

H1: Compared with ordinary products, IP co-branded products can better stimulate word-of-mouth promotion behavior among Generation Z.

For Generation Z, this influence mechanism is particularly significant. Generation Z consumers grew up in an environment where the Internet and social media are prevalent, and their consumption behaviors are often accompanied by the need for self-expression and social interaction [6]. They tend to showcase their individuality and sense of community belonging through products with unique designs and cultural symbols. Therefore, IP co-branded products not only meet consumers' emotional values but also become a source of content for Generation Z to share and spread due to their social attributes.

The theory of social identity further provides theoretical support for this mechanism [8]. This theory holds that individuals construct their self-image and sense of belonging through identification with a certain social group, cultural symbol, or brand. When consumers believe that the culture and values conveyed by a certain IP co-branded product are consistent with their own, they will generate a stronger sense of social identity, thereby enhancing their motivation to express and spread on social platforms. Especially for Generation Z, their word-of-mouth promotion behavior is not only feedback on products but also a manifestation of constructing a „social identity“ through the objects of consumption. Therefore, this paper introduces social identity as a mediating variable to explore its mechanism in the influence path of word-of-mouth communication of IP co-branded products on Generation Z.

H2: Social identity mediates the effect of IP co-branded products on the word-of-mouth communication behavior

of Generation Z.

Based on the above research hypotheses and the theory of social identity, the research model framework of this paper is shown in Figure 1. Take the product type as the independent variable; The word-of-mouth communication

behavior of Generation Z as the dependent variable; And introduce social identity as a mediating variable to explore its role path in the influence of product types on word-of-mouth communication.



Figure 1. Theoretical model framework diagram

4. Research Method

4.1 Questionnaire Design

This study collected data on the perception and word-of-mouth communication behavior of Chinese Generation Z consumers towards IP co-branded products through structured questionnaires. The survey subjects were active social media users born from 1995 to 2010. The purpose of the research is to explore whether IP co-branded products are more effective than ordinary products in stimulating word-of-mouth communication among Generation Z and to verify the mediating role of social identity.

To ensure the validity of the measurement, the questionnaire adopts the Likert five-point scale, with 1 to 5 indicating strong agreement to strong disagreement. Social identity adopts the social identity scale proposed by Tajfel & Turner and is applied to consumer scenarios through the revised version of Meal & Ashforth. The word-of-mouth communication behavior adopted the WOM behavior scale specified by Chu & Kim [8,10,11]. The product types are simulated by setting up scenarios: The two types of products maintain the same functions and attributes, with the only difference being whether the packaging design containing IP elements is adopted. This design aims to present the impact of the co-branded logo on consumers' perception with minimal interference and avoid guiding evaluations. Finally, collect information such as the gender, age, and frequency of social media usage of the subjects.

4.2 Questionnaire Survey and Sample

Questionnaires were distributed and data was collected through the Credamo platform, targeting Gen Z consumers who were born between 1995 and 2010 and are active on social media. The survey is conducted anonymously to ensure the authenticity and confidentiality of the data. By setting up product scene simulation and the Likert five-point scale, relevant data on product type perception, social identity, and word-of-mouth communication behavior are collected.

Ultimately, 190 questionnaires were issued, of which 150 were valid and returned, yielding an effective response rate of 78.95%.

5. Empirical Analysis

5.1 Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability measures the ability of a measurement tool to maintain consistency in repeated measurements and is often applied to assess the internal reliability of questionnaires and scales. Higher reliability means that the content measured by the questionnaire has strong stability and consistency and can accurately reflect the subjects' true perception or attitude toward specific variables. This study employed Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability of the measurement scales, including social identity, product type perception, and word-of-mouth communication behavior. An α coefficient greater than 0.8 is generally considered to have high reliability, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Cronbach Reliability Analysis		
Items	Sample Size	Cronbach's Alpha
10	150	0.854

Validity is a measure of the extent to which a measurement tool can accurately reflect the research variable and the accuracy of the questionnaire measurement. High

validity indicates that the measured content is highly consistent with the research objective. In this study, structural validity was assessed using the KMO and Bartlett's tests,

which help determine the appropriateness of conducting factor analysis. As presented in Table 2, the KMO measure reached 0.848, while Bartlett's test yielded a chi-square of

540.921 with $p < 0.001$, confirming sufficient inter-variable correlations. These results support the applicability of factor analysis and reflect strong construct validity.

Table 2. Validity Analysis

KMO Value		0.848	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square		540.921
	df (Degrees of Freedom)	45	
	p-value	0.000	

5.2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Since the product type is a double grouping variable (ordinary product vs IP co-branded product), in this study,

the independent sample t-test method is adopted to test the mean differences of the three core variables. The results are shown in Table 3 as follows:

Table 3. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Variable	Product Type	Mean	SD	T	P
Co-branding Perception	Ordinary	5.788	0.758	-4.909	0.000
	Co-branded	6.285	0.434		
Social Identity	Ordinary	5.306	0.886	-6.195	0.000
	Co-branded	6.022	0.457		
Word-of-Month Behavior	Ordinary	5.294	1.08	-6.186	0.000
	Co-branded	6.138	0.466		

In joint measurement ($t = -4.909$, $p < 0.05$), a notable distinction emerged between the two experimental groups, with the co-branded product group reporting significantly elevated scores.

In the measurement of social identity ($t = -6.195$, $p < 0.05$), the co-branded product group again outperformed its counterpart, indicating a meaningful group-level variation. Word-of-mouth communication behavior ($t = -6.186$, $P < 0.05$), there was a significant difference between the

two groups, among which the joint name score was higher.

5.3 Mediation Effect Analysis

To further explore whether social identity plays a mediating role between product types and word-of-mouth communication behaviors, this paper constructs three sets of regression models (M1-M3), as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression Analysis

Variable		Social Identity	WOM Behavior	
		M1	M2	M3
Independent Variable	Product(0=Ordinary, 1=Co-branded)	0.716***	0.844***	0.253*
Mediator	Social Identity			0.827***
	R ²	0.209	0.209	0.597
	F	38.976	38.977	108.957
	P	0.000	0.000	0.000

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The M1 results show that product type has a significant positive impact on social identity ($B = 0.716$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that co-branded products can significantly enhance consumers' social identity compared with ordinary

products.

In M2, the direct impact of product type on word-of-mouth communication behavior was also significant ($B = 0.844$, $p < 0.001$).

After introducing social identity as a mediating variable, the influence coefficient of product type on word-of-mouth communication behavior decreased to 0.253 ($p < 0.05$), while the influence of social identity on word-of-mouth communication behavior was significant ($B = 0.827$, $p < 0.001$), and the explanatory power of the model was significantly improved ($R^2 = 0.597$).

According to the regression results presented in the table, the independent variable exerts a statistically significant influence on both the mediator and the outcome variable. Additionally, the mediator demonstrates a notable effect on the outcome. When the mediating factor is incorporated into the model, the explanatory power of the independent variable is reduced, suggesting the presence of a

meaningful mediation effect.

The findings indicate that social identity mediates the relationship between product types and consumers' word-of-mouth behavior. Co-branded products not only directly promote word-of-mouth communication but also indirectly promote word-of-mouth behavior by enhancing consumers' social identity. The F-tests for the three models were all significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the model settings were reasonable.

In this study, the 95% confidence interval was used for the Bootstrap method to test the mediating effect analysis. If this interval does not contain 0, it is considered that the mediating effect is statistically significant. The results are shown in Table 5 as follows:

Table 5. Bootstrapping Mediation Analysis

Effect Type	Path	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Indirect Effect	Product Type → Social Identity → WOM Behavior	0.592	0.119	0.369	0.827
Direct Effect	Product Type → WOM Behavior	0.253	0.109	0.038	0.468
Total Effect	Product Type → WOM Behavior	0.844	0.135	0.577	1.112

It can be seen from the table 5 that the 95% confidence interval of the indirect Effect (Effect = 0.592) is [0.369, 0.827], excluding 0, indicating that social identity has a significant partial mediating role in the process of product type influencing word-of-mouth communication behavior. Furthermore, the confidence intervals for both the direct effect and the total effect do not contain 0, further confirming the statistical significance and theoretical rationality of the model.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on Chinese Generation Z consumers to explore whether IP co-branded products more effectively stimulate word-of-mouth communication than ordinary products and further examines the mediating role of social identity. Through structured questionnaires and empirical analysis in SPSS, the research results support the two hypotheses proposed in this paper.

Firstly, the research found that IP co-branded products significantly enhanced the word-of-mouth communication behavior of Generation Z (H1 verification holds true). The results of the analysis of variance and regression analysis showed that the co-branded product group had a significantly higher word-of-mouth communication score than the ordinary product group, and the influence of product type on word-of-mouth communication behavior was statistically highly significant ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that IP collaboration elements can effectively enhance Generation Z's attention to products and their willingness to

spread them spontaneously.

Secondly, social identity plays a partial mediating role between product types and word-of-mouth communication behaviors (H2 verification holds). After introducing the variable of social identity, the direct impact of product type on word-of-mouth communication decreased. Meanwhile, social identity itself had a significant positive impact on word-of-mouth communication ($B = 0.827$, $p < 0.001$). Bootstrap analysis further confirmed that the indirect effect was significant (95% CI: [0.369, 0.827]). This indicates that IP co-branded products not only promote word-of-mouth behavior through direct appeal but also exert an indirect effect by enhancing consumers' social identity.

In conclusion, IP co-branded products play a significant role in stimulating the communication behavior of Generation Z consumers, and social identity is a key mediating variable in this mechanism. When designing IP co-branding strategies, companies should fully recognize the cultural symbolic significance and community value contained in the IP.

Although this study provides certain references for relevant theories and practices, there are still some limitations. Firstly, the data is based on cross-sectional self-filled questionnaires, and there may be common methodological biases and social expectation biases. In the future, longitudinal or experimental designs can be adopted to enhance the robustness of causal inferences. Secondly, the sample is concentrated on Generation Z in China, which limits the external generalizability of the results. Subsequent

research can be extended to consumers from different generations or cultural backgrounds. Thirdly, the study only examined the mediating role of social identity and has not yet covered other potential mechanisms such as emotional attachment and brand attitude. In the future, multiple mediating or moderating variables can be introduced to construct a more complete model. Furthermore, this article generalizes IP co-branded products without subdividing different IP types (such as anime, games, and celebrities) and cooperation methods. The impact of the heterogeneity of IP types on consumer responses can be further explored in the future.

Based on the results of this study, when enterprises carry out IP co-branded marketing, they should not only pay attention to the popularity of visual design and brand co-branding but also deeply explore the cultural connotation and community belonging value represented by the IP. Choosing IPs with high recognizability and cultural symbolic significance helps to stimulate the social identity of target consumers, thereby enhancing their motivation for active communication and brand loyalty.

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