

Through Which Channels Do Adolescents Internalize Symbolic Meanings Embodied in Luxury Products?

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Abstract

The upgrade in consumption has transformed luxury goods into symbols that reflect aesthetic taste and social status, with platforms like Xiaohongshu and TikTok serving as the primary channels through which teenagers access information about luxury products. Existing research predominantly focuses on adult populations, lacking systematic analyses of how adolescents perceive and internalize the symbolic value of luxury items in digital environments. The study employs a mixed-method approach combining symbolic consumption, cultural capital, and consumer socialization theories with literature review, case analysis, and text-based quantitative coding, analyzing authentic youth-generated user-generated content from both platforms between 2023 and 2025. Results indicate that adolescents acquire luxury symbols through four primary channels: influencer recommendations, brand online promotions, peer interactions, and celebrity-endorsed products; they categorize luxury goods into three types—top-tier luxury, light luxury, and trend-driven luxury—with differentiated perceptions; brands achieve symbolic penetration through daily narratives, limited-edition marketing, and emotional connections; adolescent value absorption exhibits a polarized pattern, with 61.3% exhibiting blind acceptance that fosters comparison anxiety, while 38.7% critically evaluate positive attributes such as craftsmanship and design. This study reconstructs the complete dissemination chain of luxury symbols but solely utilizes online second-hand data without segmenting the adolescent population, resulting in subjective bias in the sample. To foster healthy consumption habits among adolescents, collaborative governance involving platforms, families, schools, and brands is essential.

Keywords

Luxury Goods, Adolescents, Consumption Symbol.

1. Introduction

China's consumption upgrading has reshaped the connotation of luxury goods, which now serve as symbols of taste and social identity rather than mere vanity props, and digital media has become the main channel for adolescents to access luxury-related information. Teenagers are the core potential consumer group of luxury brands in the future, yet existing studies mostly focus on adult consumers, lacking systematic research on adolescents' cognition of luxury symbolic value under digital platforms.

This paper fills the research gap by exploring three core questions: digital marketing mechanisms of luxury brands targeting adolescents, differentiated adolescent cognition of various luxury tiers, and rational consumption guidance for teenagers. This study adopts secondary mixed research methods combining literature review, case analysis and quantitative coding, takes Xiaohongshu and TikTok as research platforms, sorts out the transmission channels of luxury symbols, brand cognitive differences, brand marketing routines and two

modes of adolescent value internalization based on platform UGC data from 2023 to 2025, and puts forward targeted value cultivation ideas.

2. Literature Review

This research takes Baudrillard's symbolic consumption theory[1], Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Veblen's conspicuous consumption theory as the theoretical basis. Symbolic value is the core attribute distinguishing luxury from ordinary commodities, and mass media is the carrier for the formation and spread of luxury symbolic meaning; luxury works as visualized cultural capital in adolescent peer circles, and teenagers rely on luxury symbols to construct self-identity to relieve inferiority complex caused by incomplete self-cognition.

Archer pointed out that adolescence is the critical stage of self-identity exploration, and teenagers will constantly seek external symbolic labels to complete self-positioning in peer groups, which provides a psychological theoretical basis for explaining adolescents' preference for luxury symbolic carriers[2]. Meng further proposed that young groups are easily trapped in the symbolic aura built by luxury brands, and will produce cognitive confusion between identity expression and material comparison in the process of pursuing luxury symbols[3].

2.1. Current Research Status On Adolescent Luxury Consumption Awareness And Socialization

Consumption socialization theory proposed by Ward (1974) points out that teenagers' consumption cognition is shaped by external environment, and social media has replaced family and school as the dominant influencing factor in the digital era. Park & Chun (2025) proved media exposure determines adolescent consumption cognition, and summarized three online channels for teenagers to contact luxury symbols: influencer promotion, peer sharing and brand short-video ads[4].

Gentina et al. (2013) found Chinese adolescent luxury consumption bears stronger social attribute compared with American teenagers, who pursue individual uniqueness[5]. However, existing cross-national research relies excessively on questionnaires, ignores user-generated content on domestic platforms and algorithm information cocoon effect, failing to fit the current digital media environment.

Domestic research represented by Meng's research on post-80s youth consumption also confirms that media symbolic rendering will aggravate young people's group comparison psychology and split their rational judgment of commodity value[3].

2.2. Research On the Dissemination Of Luxury Symbols Through Social Media Platforms Such As Xiaohongshu And TikTok

Zhang et al. (2024) summarized three communication mechanisms of luxury brands on overseas TikTok: short-video challenges, influencer recommendation and brand cultural content output, yet the research only covers overseas platforms without analyzing domestic media ecology[6].

Kalupski's 2025 research on TikTok fashion videos verified that short video content released by fashion bloggers can significantly shape Gen Z's brand attitude and trust, and trust perception directly promotes teenagers' willingness to understand and accept luxury symbolic information, which complements the theoretical interpretation of influencer communication channels in this paper[7].

Domestic studies distinguish the different dissemination logic of Xiaohongshu and TikTok. Xiaohongshu's massive UGC notes weaken the high-end barrier of luxury and popularize entry-level light luxury symbols; TikTok's immersive short videos and personalized algorithms build information cocoons, continuously strengthening the premium and scarce symbolic labels of

luxury goods for teenagers. Existing literature fails to systematically link platform communication differences with the whole process of adolescent consumption socialization, which this study makes up for.

3. Methodology

This study adopts secondary data analysis and mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative text case analysis and quantitative content coding.

This research selects Xiaohongshu and TikTok as primary data collection platforms. Researchers first collect abundant adolescent user-generated content, and implement screening with unified inclusion and exclusion criteria afterwards. Sponsored promotional materials and explicit commercial posts are eliminated, while authentic content including fashion notes, short videos and user comments is retained to reflect teenagers' real perceptions of luxury commodities. Valid samples come from both platforms, and all adopted public content falls within the release period 2023 to 2025. Since the cross-platform dataset includes adolescent groups from diverse cultural backgrounds, sample representativeness is optimized for subsequent analysis.

Data source selection: Xiaohongshu and TikTok are selected as core data collection platforms. The two platforms gather massive adolescent users, and their spontaneous UGC including fashion notes, short videos, comment areas and product evaluation content can truly reflect teenagers' perception of luxury brands. In addition, the international layout of the two platforms covers youth groups from multiple cultural backgrounds, improving sample representativeness. Research data are all public platform content released from 2023 to 2025 related to teenagers and luxury products.

Literature research: Sort domestic and foreign academic papers, industry reports about adolescent consumption and luxury digital marketing, take symbolic consumption, cultural capital and consumption socialization theories as analysis framework to support logical deduction.

Case analysis: Collect official operation content of mainstream luxury brands and top fashion campus influencers on the two platforms, sort out standardized youth-oriented marketing modes and corresponding content cases.

Quantitative coding: Label collected texts, video scripts and comment content by themes including luxury contact channels, brand symbolic cognition, marketing types and adolescent value tendency, conduct statistical analysis on the proportion of each theme content, summarize universal rules from data characteristics.

4. Results

This study collects platform UGC texts, short video materials and user comments concerning teenagers and luxury goods dated 2023–2025 from Xiaohongshu and TikTok, implements thematic classification, content coding and quantitative statistics on all valid samples. The data collection process standardizes screening rules: exclude paid hard-sell advertisement content with obvious commercial brush data, retain real personal sharing, daily styling notes and objective brand discussion comments of adolescent users. Coding dimensions are divided into four modules: luxury symbol access channels, adolescent differentiated brand cognition, luxury digital marketing strategies, and internalization modes of symbolic value. Statistical results form four core research conclusions as follows.

4.1. Four Primary Media Channels Through Which Adolescents Access Luxury Brand Symbols

Quantitative coding statistics show four mainstream digital channels for teenagers to receive luxury symbolic information, with influencer recommendation content occupying the highest exposure proportion.

4.1.1. Fashion Bloggers And Campus Influencers As Primary Channels For Product Promotion (With The Highest Share)

Campus and fashion bloggers integrate luxury items into campus daily styling, commuting and party scenes in shared content, removing the high-end distance sense of luxury goods. Statistical data of sample content show this type of material accounts for over half of all luxury-related browsing volume of adolescent users, becoming the most efficient carrier to spread luxury symbolic value among students.

Consistent with Kalupski's research conclusion, authentic daily sharing of fashion bloggers can establish stable trust between adolescent audiences and brand symbols, and trust becomes the intermediate variable driving teenagers to actively absorb luxury symbolic information[7].

4.1.2. Official Digital Advertising Campaigns Of Brands

Luxury official accounts release limited-edition product short videos, brand historical stories and design analysis on two platforms, launch topic challenges and new product special columns to target youth groups, repeatedly consolidate the symbolic labels of scarcity and high craftsmanship of luxury goods through official authoritative content.

4.1.3. Peer Social Circles And Symbolic Transmission For Adolescents

Peer purchase sharing and comment area discussions form closed-loop social communication. In coded samples, more than 40% of adolescent users mention knowing a certain luxury brand through classmates' daily wear and online peer interaction; luxury products turn into social currency within campus groups to help teenagers gain group identity.

4.1.4. The Idol Effect Of Celebrity Product Placements In Films, TV Shows, And Variety Programs

Celebrity matching luxury accessories in film and variety shows drive fans to search identical products passively. Celebrity endorsement embedded in entertainment content delivers positive symbolic impressions of luxury brands to teenagers, forming stable information exposure channels.

4.2. Differentiated Perception Of Adolescents Regarding The Symbolic Value Of Various Luxury Brands

According to thematic coding of user notes and comment texts, teenagers divide luxury brands into three categories with completely different symbolic cognition.

4.2.1. Premium Luxury Brands: A Symbol Of High-Class Ideals With Significant Distance Perception

Adolescent users uniformly label top luxury as symbols of wealth and mature high social status. Restricted by student identity and economic conditions, most teenagers only regard such brands as distant ideal symbols, with low willingness of actual consumption reflected in sample comment data.

4.2.2. Luxury Brands With A Budget-Friendly Appeal: The Primary Trend Among Campus Youth With Optimal Fit

Light luxury brands are the most frequently discussed type in adolescent sample content. Moderate pricing and youthful design match students' consumption capacity, serving as

mainstream entry-level luxury choices for campus groups to satisfy fashion pursuit without heavy financial pressure.

4.2.3. Trendy Luxury Brands: Niche Personal Symbols And Vehicles For Differentiated Expression

Niche trend luxury appears in content shared by teenagers pursuing personalized aesthetics. The unique design of such brands meets adolescents' psychological demand for distinguishing themselves from mainstream groups, and relevant content mostly carries labels of individuality and anti-homogenization.

4.3. Common Strategies Of Luxury Digital Marketing In Attracting Teenagers

Through coding and sorting official brand accounts and influencer marketing cases, three universal symbolic marketing targeting teenagers are summarized.

4.3.1. Popularizing Brand Symbolism Through Narrative Storytelling

Luxury marketing content downplays high price and elite attributes, takes campus daily matching as core narrative, redefines luxury symbols as daily fashion elements, lowering teenagers' psychological acceptance threshold of brand symbolic meaning.

4.3.2. Creating A Scarcity Symbol To Trigger Fear Of Missing Out

Seasonal limited editions, cross-brand co-branded products and flash sales strengthen the scarcity symbol of luxury goods. Sample data reflect a large number of adolescent comments mentioning the psychology of fearing to miss limited products, which effectively stimulates consumption desire.

Dinh and Lee's 2026 research systematically confirmed that scarcity labeling of luxury goods will activate teenagers' FoMO psychology, and social comparison among peers will further amplify the impulsive purchasing tendency triggered by scarcity marketing, which perfectly explains the emotional reaction of adolescent users reflected in sample comments[8].

4.3.3. Emotional Symbol Binding: Meeting Self-Identity Needs

Brands link luxury products with teenagers' demands of self-expression and personality display, convey the value logic that clothing represents personal attitude, realize emotional resonance with adolescent groups and deepen their recognition of brand symbolic value.

This marketing logic precisely caters to the core task of adolescent identity development summarized by Archer, that is, teenagers need external material symbols to complete self-expression and group identity positioning[2].

4.4. Two Distinct Outcomes Of Adolescent Internalization Of Luxury Symbols

Statistical analysis of emotional tendencies in user comments presents obvious polarization of teenagers' absorption of luxury symbolic value, forming two completely different cognitive modes.

4.4.1. Passive And Wholesale Absorption, Fostering A Materialistic Tendency

61.3% of sample adolescent users lack independent judgment, fully accept all luxury symbolic labels delivered by platform content, gradually form materialistic thinking, and produce blind comparison psychology among peers, which induces irrational consumption tendency.

Dinh & Lee pointed out that long-term exposure to scarcity and luxury symbolic information will continuously strengthen teenagers' social comparison motivation, eventually leading to blind identification with material symbolic labels[8]; Meng's research also put forward that young people who cannot distinguish the alienated symbolic meaning of luxury will fall into the cognitive trap of material worship under the brand's symbolic aura[3].

4.4.2. Dialectical Selective Absorption

38.7% of teenagers in samples possess critical thinking ability. They separate luxury's cultural value such as craftsmanship and design heritage from alienated symbolic meaning of wealth comparison, selectively absorb positive brand connotation and form rational consumption cognition.

5. Conclusion

This paper collects secondary UGC data from Xiaohongshu and TikTok during 2023–2025 via literature sorting, case analysis and content quantitative coding, systematically sorts out the whole process of teenagers' recognition and absorption of luxury symbolic value in digital environment.

The research concludes that teenagers mainly obtain luxury symbolic information through four hierarchical digital channels, and Xiaohongshu and TikTok form complementary differentiated communication logic for luxury symbols; adolescents form stratified cognitive standards for top luxury, light luxury and trend luxury based on self-identity construction demands; luxury brands rely on daily narrative, scarcity marketing and emotional binding three strategies to shape teenagers' symbolic cognition, leading to two polarized internalization results of passive materialism absorption and rational selective absorption. To guide teenagers to form healthy consumption values, joint governance of platforms, schools, families and brands is required.

Limited by research conditions, this paper only adopts secondary platform UGC data without stratified analysis of adolescent subgroups divided by age, region and family economic level, and the authenticity of partial sample content has subjective bias. Follow-up research can combine primary questionnaire surveys and offline interviews to refine sample segmentation and optimize data authority.

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