

Research on “MaiMen” Phenomenon: Co-creating with Consumers

Chuxin Lin^{1,a,*}

¹Communication University of China, Beijing, 100024, China

a. hiddenastarlam@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The "MaiMen" phenomenon, a playful internet trend surrounding McDonald's and its products, has captured the imagination of Chinese Generation Z consumers, who have grown up alongside the fast-food brand. This paper explores the co-creative relationship between McDonald's and its devoted customers, often referred to as "Mai Men devotees," who express their loyalty through humor, memes, and social media engagement. The study delves into how this bidirectional interaction not only fosters consumer behavior but also cements McDonald's positive brand image. By examining the multimodal presentation forms of the "MaiMen" culture, including its manifestation on platforms like TikTok and Xiaohongshu, the research highlights the effectiveness of user-generated content in promoting organic brand growth. It is concluded that by integrating consumer voices with brand values and continuously engaging with the audience, McDonald's can maintain a strong, culturally relevant presence. This case study offers valuable insights for other brands seeking to enhance their connection with consumers and build a favorable reputation in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: McDonald's, Co-creation, Brand loyalty, Social media engagement, Group identity.

1. Introduction

"A person who thinks McDonald's tastes good can't be that bad. This is my view on good and evil, Mai Men!" This humorous perspective is part of a larger trend of internet jokes centered around McDonald's and its products, which has sparked a "Mai Men" craze online. This trend includes the "Mai Men Manifesto," secret codes, and even a "Mai Men National Anthem," leading to the emergence of "Mai Men devotees." The term "Mai Men" is derived from the religious term "Amen." When people express their strong affection for a particular event or object, they use exclamations similar to the devotional cries of "followers" and utter phrases like "Mai Men forever" to express their trust and loyalty. "Mai Men devotees" refer to loyal McDonald's consumers, most of whom are from Generation Z. This group is highly active on social media and possesses considerable purchasing power. In China, they have grown up alongside McDonald's. The brand's marketing strategies also keep evolving to meet their changing needs. 'McDonald's Literature' serves as a meme that reinforces McDonald's consumer identity and creates a socially active community that continues to increase brand loyalty.

This paper focuses on the “MaiMen” phenomenon, examining the co-creative actions and outcomes between consumers and McDonald's and how the bidirectional interaction fosters consumer behavior while further solidifying McDonald's positive brand image. By dissecting the “MaiMen” marketing case, the study explores novel forms of co-creation between brands and consumers, offering insights and lessons for other brands to establish connections with their audience and cultivate a favorable brand reputation.

2. Multi-modal Presentation Forms of “MaiMen”

McDonald's has always focused on building and maintaining its brand equity. The globally recognized fast food chain's iconic ‘Golden Arches’ logo and bright yellow color are designed to attract attention and convey fun and deliciousness. Persistent advertising, according to mere exposure, has made the logo highly recognizable, allowing consumers to associate McDonald's with similar colors and shapes [1]. Additionally, McDonald's uses intellectual properties and jingles to reinforce its brand, enhancing consumer awareness through repeated exposure. McDonald's prioritizes the consumer experience, maintaining clean restaurants and hosting various events to ensure a pleasant dining experience. Despite being a fast-food brand for quick meals, McDonald's consistently explores new service methods, creating a positive and advanced schemata in consumers' minds. This commitment has cultivated a loyal customer base and a favorable script [2-3].

2.1. “MaiMen” Literature

McDonald's literature is one of the main forms of expression for McDonald's 'believers.' The rise of McDonald's literature stems from McDonald's customers indicating their status as 'believers' in the order notes when placing an order and asking if they can get a few extra crispy fries to try. If they encounter an employee who understands the 'McDonald's code,' they might be given additional fries. Those McDonald's customers who receive such “McDonald's perks” will then post on social media, using famous quotes from Western literature and film dialogues to praise McDonald's. This form of “textual poaching” links McDonald's with a variety of literary forms, and the cross-over collaboration has made McDonald's literature more acceptable to a wider audience while also enhancing its novelty.

The emergence of McDonald's literature is not entirely spontaneous; the official McDonald's accounts have also responded positively by continuously initiating activities like sentence creation and fill-in-the-blank games on their platforms, encouraging the 'believers' to participate actively. This process continually generates 'golden phrases' that become easily spreadable “memes,” which, like genes, have the capacity to replicate, mutate, and be assimilated, thus spreading widely across the internet.

2.2. “Maimen” Emoticon

Wu and Wang propose that memes, as “mediatized faces,” compensate for the lack of emotional information in mediated communication through visual imagery [4]. McDonald's believers also engage in the creation and dissemination of memes to express their love for McDonald's. By incorporating elements such as McDonald's brand colors, they effectively combine McDonald's food with current popular elements, resulting in a variety of meme images. Visually, the use of brand colors and iconic foods like McNuggets, along with the McDonald's 'M' logo, creates a metaphor. When paired with specific text, these elements together form the meaning of the memes, celebrating the goodness of McDonald's. In various contexts, McDonald's memes attract attention and generate positive interactions with users due to their vibrant colors and humorously exaggerated visuals.

2.3. “MaiMen” Music

The “McDonald's National Anthem” in the hearts of McDonald's believers is Eason Chan's 2003 performance of "McDonald's Is So Good" at a concert with the Soft Hardness Masters. As the then McDonald's spokesperson, Eason Chan, along with the Soft Hardness Masters, improvised an adaptation of the song "Sunset Is So Good" into "McDonald's Is So Good," which became a very popular unofficial theme song for McDonald's. The simple melody, repetitive lyrics, and mentions of iconic McDonald's products made the song well-suited for viral spread in the internet age.

Building on Eason Chan's version of "McDonald's Is So Good," netizens began to create their own adaptations and user-generated content (UGC) on platforms like Bilibili and Weibo. This further catalyzed the spread of the “McDonald's National Anthem,” reinforcing the sense of identity and community among McDonald's believers through auditory means.

Richard Dawkins posited that memes, much like genes, have the capacity to replicate, mutate, and be assimilated. Memes represent concepts, behaviors, languages, and cultural elements that proliferate within society [5]. "Mai Men," a concept directly associated with the McDonald's brand, has emerged as a meme, widely propagated among its consumer bases. Just as the concept of 'God' has been disseminated and perpetuated, 'McDonald's Faith' has developed a comprehensive value system encompassing “MaiMen Literature,” 'MaiMen Memes,’ “MaiMen Code,” and the “MaiMen National Anthem.” This development is largely attributed to McDonald's rich history of brand marketing activities and the accumulated consumer awareness, which have fostered a substantial base of loyal customers. These consumers are willing to actively engage in and propagate these cultural elements, among which the “super users” of McDonald's use catchy melodies and popular rhythms to repeat constantly arouse people's attention, cause people to model [6&7], radiation to young consumers to ‘McDonald's' as the centre of the “meme” medium to communicate and share with each other, thus forming a ‘McDonald's' wave and driving other people to imitate and secondary spread.

3. “Mai Men”'s Impact on New Forms of Virtual Social Interaction

With the evolution of media forms, the rise of the network society has facilitated real-time communication and cross-regional interactions, leading to the emergence of virtual communities defined as "social networks formed through sustained public discourse and emotional engagement among a certain number of users" [8]. The "Mai Men" that has caused a frenzy on social media, centered around a shared and reconstructed identity, is a phenomenon driven by the need for expression among netizens who have a common fondness for the McDonald's brand. It represents the desire to articulate their preference for the fast-food brand within the context of a collective appreciation. On the communication platforms provided by virtual communities, the sense of distance between online and offline, coupled with the anonymity of online social interactions, emboldens young people to express their own viewpoints with greater initiative. Unlike past collisions of ideas, within this community primarily formed by "weak ties," young people primarily articulate their perspectives through the expression of a new form of "McDonald's literature" [9]. On one hand, they exercise their right to free expression and connect with each other as nodes in the social network; on the other hand, they also seek recognition from the community members, obtaining new sources of information through communication, thereby continuously engaging in the process of re-creation.

McDonald's official response has significantly encouraged this recreative process. Beyond encouraging open consumer expression, McDonald's has met consumers' needs for group identity through interactive management of delivery orders and social media engagements. Within this virtual community, McDonald's has integrated multiple channels, utilized different speech styles, and established varied personas on different social media platforms. The "Good Morning, McDonald's" topic provides dual value in emotion and utility; the "McDonald's Literature" tag promotes existing

discussions, multiple creative posters constantly stimulate the user's perceptual threshold, improves the arrival rate of the content in various aspects, and keeps the consumer processing the advertisement information from both the central path and the emotional path [3&10]. The creative and interesting speech style makes the user feel similarity, which constantly pulls the user's 'content cycle,' promotes the formation of positive emotions, and realizes co-creativity with the consumer.

4. "Mai Men" as a Symbol of Group Identity

According to Hall and Jefferson, subcultures form around shared emotional experiences and collective sentiments, which are central to group identity [11]. Entering the "Mai Men" signifies a consumer's loyalty to McDonald's and indicates their inclusion in McDonald's loyal consumer base. This group constitutes both a social and subcultural community. Within this social group, "Mai Men" serves as an identity symbol for consumers [12]. The presence of enthusiasts of other fast-food brands, such as KFC, creates a comparative dynamic. "Mai Men" followers often engage in behaviors like sharing "Mai Men" memes to reinforce positive feelings about their group and tend to develop negative sentiments towards other fast-food brands [13]. This behavior further strengthens their brand loyalty.

"Mai Men" is a shorthand expression for loyal McDonald's consumers. This quick reference not only conveys the user's opinion on an event or object but also helps individuals with similar interests find like-minded groups through "Mai Men" forums and hashtags. This bypasses complex social relationship-building phases, allowing individuals to quickly identify and connect with those who share their preferences, thereby fostering a sense of community more efficiently. Additionally, through the halo effect, group members not only acknowledge each other's food tastes but also establish bonds in various aspects such as learning and daily life, thereby creating a friendly atmosphere [14].

5. "MaiMen" as a newly Subculture

Subcultures frequently embody a form of resistance to the dominant cultural norms [11&15]. Participatory culture, on the other hand, is distinguished by relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for the creation and sharing of one's own works, and an informal system of mentorship through which knowledge and skills are passed from the most experienced members to novices [16]. In the trend of "MaiMen" believers co-creating with McDonald's, they have developed a subculture centred on McDonald's.

Within this subcultural sphere, "McDonald's Literature," "McDonald's Memes," and the "McDonald's Anthem" have emerged as distinctive cultural symbols, embodying a deep affection for McDonald's food and an affirmation of the values of happiness and family associated with the brand. These symbols foster a sense of identity among McDonald's enthusiasts, further facilitating the formation of a community of "MaiMen Believers." In turn, these MaiMen Believers enrich McDonald's corporate culture through various forms of promotion and sharing, thereby enhancing its visibility.

In the cultural community centered around McDonald's, MaiMen Believers celebrate the brand and its products in humorous, exaggerated, and sometimes even absurd ways through online creations, which quickly capture the attention of audiences and spread widely on the internet. The secondary creation of McDonald's-related content by participants often carries a somewhat informal and slightly rebellious undertone. Through their involvement in creating and disseminating such content, young people express their values and also feel that they are part of the brand's narrative. This dynamic not only strengthens the bond between the brand and its consumers but also contributes to the evolving cultural significance of McDonald's in contemporary society.

McDonald's "Mai Men marketing" campaign on TikTok garnered 14.06 million interactions, 9.45 million likes, and 3.16 million shares. On Xiaohongshu, "Mai Men" related notes reached 27.9 thousand, with 10.46 million interactions and 1.25 million collections. 99% of the posts were non-commercial posts, achieving effective "organic" dissemination. Building on its long-standing reputation, McDonald's has consolidated consumer loyalty across multiple channels, creating a virtuous content cycle within the loyal consumer community. In future marketing efforts, McDonald's should continually prime consumers to maintain their attention while consistently improving product quality. At the same time, McDonald's should remain sensitive to consumers, continue to conduct in-depth consumer insights, and combine the voice of consumers with brand values for marketing. Through effective marketing activities, McDonald's can enhance its brand image, fostering positive impressions through both peripheral and central processing routes, ensuring sustained growth.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that McDonald's continuously strengthens and enriches its brand equity through a multimodal approach involving text, emoticons, music, and other media. This process gives rise to memes that are widely imitated and spread. Within the "MaiMen" community, a new form of social interaction has emerged, where McDonald's leverages the characteristic of the new media era—allowing "everyone to have a voice." By ceding content creation rights to McDonald's enthusiasts and encouraging them to generate more McDonald's-related content, the brand's intellectual property remains vibrant, while also demonstrating McDonald's humanistic care.

Furthermore, this co-creation process enhances the sense of belonging among McDonald's fans, solidifying the group identity of "MaiMen devotees" and fostering a positive and friendly cycle of content creation within the community. As a result, McDonald's has developed its own unique "McDonald's culture." In this culture, consumers are no longer passive participants but actively engage in re-creating content around McDonald's intellectual property, forming a virtuous cycle of content with the official brand. This dynamic ensures that the culture remains lively and ever evolving.

Despite these insights, the study has certain limitations. First, the research primarily focuses on consumer-generated content and McDonald's responses, without delving deeply into how other external factors, such as competition or market shifts, might influence consumer-brand interaction. A more comprehensive analysis considering broader market trends could enrich the findings. Additionally, the methodology mainly relies on qualitative observations of social media platforms, limiting the ability to generalize the results to a larger population. Future research could benefit from quantitative analysis, including surveys or metrics to measure the real impact of user-generated content on brand loyalty and sales.

Looking ahead, future studies could explore the evolution of such co-creative consumer behaviors in other fast-food brands or industries. Researchers could also examine how technological advancements, such as AI-driven marketing strategies, might influence the dynamics of brand-consumer relationships, particularly in fostering more personalized interactions.

References

- [1] Zajonc, R.B., 1980. *Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences*. *American Psychologist*, 35(2), pp.151-175.
- [2] Piaget, J. and Cook, M.T., 1952. *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York: International University Press.
- [3] Petty, R.E. and Cacioppo, J.T. 1987. *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [4] Wu, Y. & Wang, X. 2024. *Mediatized Faces: a Practical Study of the Availability of Emojis Modern Communication*, 333(4), pp. 39-49.
- [5] Bandura, A., 1977. *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- [6] Dawkins, R., 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- [7] Nielsen, J., 2006. *Participation inequality: Encouraging more users to contribute*. Nielsen Norman Group. Available at: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/participation-inequality/> [Accessed 1 August 2024].
- [8] Howard, P.N., 1993. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Granovetter, M. 1973. 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), pp. 1360-1380.
- [10] Fechner, G.T. 1986. *Elements of Psychophysics*. Reprint. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- [11] Hall, S. and Jefferson, T., eds., 1976. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson.
- [12] Turner, J.C., Hogg, M.A., Oakes, P.J., Reicher, S.D. and Wetherell, M.S., 1987. *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [13] Tajfel, H., 1982. *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Thorndike, E.L., 1920. A constant error in psychological ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 4(1), pp.25-29.
- [15] Hebdige, D. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- [16] Jenkins, H. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.