



Dancing with Douyin: An Exploration of Content Marketing in Douyin's Fashion Community.

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Glossary of terminologies and abbreviations

Abbreviations	Meaning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ACG	Animation, Comics, and Games
CEB	Customer Engagement Behaviour
CE	Customer Engagement
CM	Content Marketing
CP	Customer participation
DCMLM	Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model
IASI	Individual Agenda-setting Index
IP	Identity Positioning
JK	Jyoshi Koukousei (<i>High School Girls</i>)
KOL	Key Opinion Leader
NFO	Need for Orientation
SNP	Social Network Platform
SMCM	Social Media Content Marketing
UGT	Uses and Gratification Theory
UGC	User-generated Content
WOM	Word of Mouth

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Abstract

Over the past six years, Douyin has become one of China's most popular social media platforms (Zheng, 2023) yet academic work on it is still in its relative infancy. Many fashion brands have started marketing on Douyin, but there is a gap in knowledge on the extent to which traditional content marketing strategies are effective on this platform, not least given its unique content recommendation system (Su & Valdovinos Kaye, 2023). Previous research on content marketing has also lacked a focus on communication effects and customer perspectives. This thesis makes a contribution to the development of content marketing theory for Douyin by examining communication effects and customer motivations and, in the process, develops a new fashion brand content marketing model for Douyin. Using agenda-setting theory, it examines the impact of community content on customer engagement behaviour (CEB) to establish content marketing effectiveness. Thereafter, it employs uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) to analyse the relationship between different levels of CEB and customer needs in the selected community. Finally, it develops a content marketing model for fashion brands on Douyin.

The research contributes to the body of work on content marketing by developing its explanatory features in relation to Douyin as follows. First, the application of agenda-setting and uses and gratifications theories from communication scholarship confirms the effectiveness of content marketing and demonstrates the influence of community content perceptions on CEB. The research finds that different motivations drive different levels of CEB, and branded content can significantly influence user perceptions and brand engagement. Second, the research refines the brand content marketing strategy of De Plessis (2015) to establish the Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) more precisely suited to Douyin's fashion community. Third, in relation to commercial practice on Douyin, the research puts forward three models to assist fashion brands in: understanding Douyin's characteristics as a content marketing platform; devising content strategies for different marketing objectives; and comprehending a holistic content marketing process within the Douyin fashion

community.

The research employs a mixed-method approach, including netnography and an online survey. The netnographic work includes generating observational data (popular video content and field notes) and conducting interviews with 12 Douyin content creation experts and 12 fashion community users. Qualitative data generated was analysed using a netnography-based method (Kozinets, 2019). Online survey data consisted of 607 questionnaire responses from community users and was analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

Keywords: *Douyin, Content Marketing, Agenda Setting, Uses and Gratifications, Customer Engagement*

Chapter One: Introduction

Employing a research framework grounded in uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and agenda-setting theory, this study seeks to bridge a notable gap in content marketing research by examining the effects of user motivation and content perception on the efficacy of brand content marketing for the Douyin fashion community. The goal is to construct a comprehensive model that boosts customer engagement and enhances the effectiveness of brand communication. Marketing is an ever-evolving industry, with content marketing (CM) now at the forefront of innovation. Finally, this study constructs the Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) to provide a standardised guide to content marketing in the Douyin fashion community.

As consumer tolerance for interruptive advertising like online banners and pop-ups wanes, traditional forms of online advertisements are increasingly met with disdain (Kaspar et al., 2019). This shift has prompted more scholars and businesses to focus on utilising brand attributes to enrich branded content and thereby augment brand value (Frost & Sullivan, 2016). As a contemporary marketing tool, CM has attracted substantial attention, prompting marketers to favour CM over intrusive advertisements to capture greater consumer interest (Du Plessis, 2015; Zahay, 2014). While the pivotal role of CM has been explored by some scholars (De Plessis, 2015; Holliman & Rowley, 2014), a significant challenge remains: the absence of a comprehensive content marketing system. Historically, content marketing research has been predominantly brand-centric, lacking substantial theoretical support and neglecting the critical role of consumer motivations and needs. Additionally, variations in the effectiveness of content marketing in different environments have been noted (De Plessis, 2017), which has led to a somewhat narrow interpretation of the concept. Recognising these limitations, this research revisits content marketing strategies specifically within communities engaged with short-video social media. Through this study, a refined content marketing theory emerges, derived from integrating insights from communication media theories—specifically, uses and gratifications theory and

agenda-setting theory. This research not only extends the application scope of content marketing to short-form video social media platforms like Douyin but also enhances the academic understanding of content marketing as a marketing doctrine by grounding it in theories of communication and consumer engagement.

This study initially investigates Douyin's function as a platform for content marketing. It applies agenda-setting theory to confirm the substantial influence of content marketing (specifically, the agenda-setting effects within brand communities) on customer engagement behaviour (CEB) in Douyin's fashion communities. The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) serves as the foundational framework to examine the links between customer needs, fashion community content, and the motivations driving CEB. Ultimately, this research formulates a content marketing strategy model tailored for the Douyin fashion community.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study first assesses the impact of content agenda-setting on CEB and subsequently measures the effectiveness of content marketing within the Douyin fashion community. It provides empirical support rooted in media effects for content marketing strategies. Furthermore, as an application of agenda-setting theory research, this study corroborates the relevance of agenda-setting theory in elucidating brand communication and its potential impact on customer behaviour. Secondly, utilising UGT, the research identifies a correlation between customers' needs and motivations and the agenda-setting of community content, pinpointing the primary drivers of CEB. These findings provide a consumer-centric view of content marketing and highlight the pivotal importance of consumer motivations and needs in content marketing studies. From a practical perspective, this research develops a comprehensive content marketing model that aids fashion brands in crafting and optimising content within the Douyin fashion community to enhance its effectiveness in fostering CEB.

1.1 Research Environment (Douyin)

With the advent of 5G internet, mobile short videos have become increasingly popular as a medium for information and entertainment, appealing more to modern audiences than text, images, and lengthy videos. The essence of short videos lies in their ability to maintain high audience engagement (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Scholars describe short videos as a format ideally suited for casual viewing, typically lasting from a few seconds to a few minutes and designed for frequent sharing across various social media platforms (Abbass & Elliott, 2020). One of the most emblematic short video platforms is Douyin/TikTok. Launched in 2016 by Bytedance, a Beijing-based company, Douyin/TikTok allows users to record and share videos ranging from 3 to 60 seconds (Omar & Dequan, 2020). From its inception, Douyin emerged as a short video sharing community in China and, after merging with Musical.ly in 2018, was rebranded internationally as TikTok, quickly becoming the most popular application globally. By the end of 2019, TikTok had achieved 1.5 billion downloads, surpassing Facebook and Instagram (Hayes et al., 2020). During the COVID lockdown periods, TikTok experienced remarkable growth, adding 12 million users in the United States in March 2020 alone, with a global user increase of 52 million (Weiss, 2020). TikTok/Douyin also became the most downloaded non-game app in the first quarter of 2020 (Leskin, 2020).

Douyin's slogan, "Record a beautiful life," reflects the platform's aim to enable anyone to capture videos and share them with others. In alignment with this vision, the Douyin team has implemented numerous modifications to the platform to distinguish it from other social media networks.

"Record" signifies that the platform is accessible for anyone to document their daily activities. Douyin has significantly simplified the process of video filming and editing (Han & Zhang, 2020). Unlike more professional video platforms like YouTube, Douyin users are not required to master complex filming techniques or editing skills. They only need a smartphone and the Douyin app. Users simply hit the record button to capture moments anytime, anywhere. Douyin also offers streamlined video editing

tools to ensure that anyone can produce videos with ease. Although these videos may be considered “crude”, their non-professional quality often makes them more popular and relatable (Han & Zhang, 2020). For viewers, the process of consuming content on Douyin is straightforward, involving just a simple swipe of the screen to enjoy these short videos. Overall, Douyin can provide a user-friendly and enjoyable experience for both creators and viewers.

“Beautiful” conveys the platform’s desire for users to post enjoyable content and share it with a broader audience. Douyin furnishes users with a variety of beautification tools and templates, such as stickers and filters, enhancing the video creation process. These features not only foster user interaction but also aid in community building on the platform through engaging videos (Hayes et al., 2020). Bresnick (2019) observes that TikTok, Douyin’s international counterpart, functions more as a virtual playground than a typical social media site, emphasizing its role as a creative medium rather than just a social platform.

“Life” signifies that the content on Douyin is as diverse and unique as the lives of its users. Each piece of content generated reflects the individuality of its creator. An analysis by Shutsko (2020) of 1,000 popular videos on Douyin revealed that these could be categorized into 28 major types, with the most popular categories being “Comedy and Jokes,” “Musical Performances,” “DIY Tutorials,” and “Dance.” This content closely relates to users’ personal lives. Users flock to the platform not only to show their own lives but also to discover and engage with the lives of others, thereby enriching their own experiences. The allure of TikTok/Douyin lies in its ability to offer a space for self-expression, fill leisure time, and provide information (Ma & Hu, 2021).

The app’s success is underpinned by its straightforward user interface, an array of video creation aids and templates, and a broad spectrum of content styles. However, at the core of Douyin’s engaging experience is its algorithmic personalisation. The platform employs sophisticated algorithms to develop a unique content recommendation system that delivers personalised content to each user and selects potential customers to each content creator. The scholarly definition of such systems,

termed algorithmic platformisation, involves the use of computer coding to operate the recommendation system that both facilitates and restricts content exposure (Bishop, 2020). Su and Valdovinos Kaye (2023) highlight that from the standpoint of algorithmic platformisation, the content distribution model marks the most notable divergence between Douyin and other social media platforms. Douyin focuses on content oriented strategies, whereas other platforms prioritize community-centric approaches. A fundamental contrast between these models is that most social media companies adopt a decreasing distribution model, while Douyin/TikTok utilises an equal distribution model (Su & Valdovinos Kaye, 2023). The decreasing distribution model prioritizes content from top creators, ensuring their work receives extensive exposure. Conversely, the equal distribution model affords all creators equal opportunities, allowing any high-quality content to achieve significant visibility (Su & Valdovinos Kaye, 2023).

Variations in algorithmic platformisation lead to distinct business models among different social media platforms. In most social media environments, brands depend on communities of fans to promote or share content, often irrespective of its quality. By contrast, brands on Douyin focus on navigating algorithms to secure higher visibility for their content (Brennan, 2020). Specifically, in other media, the brand promotion strategy is centred around sustaining the existing fan base and encouraging these fans to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) activities to attract new users (Wallace, Buil & De Chernatony, 2014). Conversely, Douyin's branding approach is predicated on the consistent creation of high-quality content and leveraging algorithms to increase content visibility, thereby attracting potential customers. This divergence underscores the ineffectiveness of traditional brand content marketing strategies on Douyin compared to other platforms. Consequently, there is a pressing need to explore and develop new academic insights into content marketing and marketing strategies, particularly tailored for Douyin.

Based on a content distribution model that is different from other social media, Su et al. (2020) suggest that Douyin presents a novel opportunity for marketers to strengthen relationships between brands and consumers. Considering Douyin's

increasing prominence, it is crucial for researchers to realise its potential as a tool for bolstering fashion brands and increasing effectiveness of content marketing strategies.

1.2 Research Background (Social media content marketing)

In 1996, Bill Gates published an article titled “Content is King” (Gates, 1996), likening content to a revenue-generating machine on the internet, similar to the broadcast industry. Despite being over two decades old, this phrase continues to be relevant in content marketing, particularly with the rise of social media. The debate about whether content truly reigns supreme persists in numerous articles (e.g., West, 2015; Tobak, 2016; White, 2016).

Academic discussions about content marketing (CM) have critiqued its use of vague terminology. There has been a common misunderstanding that CM is merely the marketing of content or using content for marketing. Although all marketing incorporates the use of content, simply using content in marketing efforts does not fully encompass CM (Ho, Pang & Choy, 2020). Additionally, the distinction between CM, brand journalism, and native advertising remains unclear, as the latter two are often subtle forms of paid media (Du Plessis, 2015). While CM may involve costs, it is distinct from standard advertisements that utilise brand information.

Currently, the most widely accepted definition of content marketing (CM) describes it as a strategic marketing approach that focuses on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience, ultimately driving profitable customer engagement (Content Marketing Institute, 2017). However, many scholars believe this definition should be more precise. Academics like Du Plessis (2015) and Pazeraite and Repoviene (2016) advocate for a careful management of the complexities inherent in content marketing processes. Despite ongoing academic debates, the importance of content in marketing remains undeniable, underscoring the significance of the types of content and how consumers perceive the effects of content dissemination.

As social media has gained prominence, numerous companies have ventured into

content marketing, prompting inquiries into the logic behind content effectiveness and the types of content that gain wider acceptance. Emphasising the understanding of target audiences to pinpoint engaging and relevant content types has not only broadened theoretical frameworks but has also helped marketers select appropriate content for their strategies (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013: 41).

Research in content marketing has explored several dimensions, including corporate strategy (Holliman & Rowley, 2014), company branding (Koljonen, 2016), and foundational principles (Du Plessis, 2015). Du Plessis (2017) investigated the role of content marketing within social media content communities, discovering that non-intrusive content tends to be more beneficial for brand marketing than in branded virtual communities. Furthermore, Ho, Pang, and Choy (2020) develop a conceptual framework for content marketing, emphasising that consumer-shared content can be as valuable as products or services themselves, fostering deeper engagement.

Although scholars have increasingly recognised the significance of content marketing, four academic gaps persist in current research:

Firstly, researchers have highlighted the influence of certain media characteristics on content marketing strategies (Du Plessis, 2015), indicating that different platforms can significantly affect the efficacy of these strategies. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to examine the characteristics of each platform, particularly since discussions on short-form social platforms are still emerging. The scarcity of content marketing research for social media platforms has created a divide between academic theory and practical application, leading to delays in developing content marketing strategies on new platforms. Thus, there is an urgent need to explore how the features of short-form social media impact content marketing.

Secondly, studies have demonstrated the important role of content marketing within social media content communities (Du Plessis, 2017), underscoring the importance of non-intrusive branded content that aligns with the community's style in influencing consumer behaviour. Existing research suggested that branded content should seamlessly integrate into the community agenda to better engage consumers. However, Du Plessis (2017) points out limitations in current content marketing research. Most

research to date has focused on the effectiveness of content marketing in brand communities, with little exploration of its impact in social media content communities. Du Plessis (2017) differentiates between content marketing in content communities and brand communities, noting that while interactions in brand communities are based on branded content among existing followers, interactions in content communities involve natural integration of branded content into the community conversation, engaging the broader audience. Du Plessis (2017) asserts that effectively leveraging content marketing in content communities is crucial for attracting potential customers, thereby calling for deeper academic focus on this area.

Furthermore, current research has yet to explore content marketing from different philosophical perspectives. Most studies on content marketing within content communities rely on non-probability sample types (Du Plessis, 2017), which means that their findings cannot be generalised to the broader context of content marketing research and practice. As a result, diverse research methods are required to validate these perspectives. Moreover, there is a need for more robust theoretical support for content marketing research. Discussions on the effectiveness of content marketing strategies essentially revolve around the success of branded content communication. Previous studies have primarily conceptualised content marketing's effectiveness from a pragmatic marketing standpoint. However, understanding content marketing through media theory, focusing on representation and effects, offers richer insight, which this research project aims to pursue. Additionally, there is a notable gap in media effects research concerning the effectiveness of content marketing communication. Thus, focusing on media effects theory to assess the effectiveness of content marketing is imperative.

Thirdly, Du Plessis (2017) argues that understanding the needs of target audiences is critical for content marketing strategies. However, she provides theoretical propositions without exploring specific consumer needs or how these needs influence content marketing strategies. Notably, there is insufficient discussion regarding the unique needs of fashion audiences on short-video platforms and how these needs affect content marketing strategies. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the specific

demands of audiences in each content community and their impact on content strategies.

Finally, while some studies have proposed conceptual models of content marketing, these models, particularly in the context of social media-based marketing, could benefit from the validation of communication theory and a focus on consumer responses (Du Plessis, 2017; Ho et al., 2020). A comprehensive content marketing model can only be developed if the communication effects of content marketing are validated and if there is a concerted effort to understand the impact of consumer engagement on content marketing strategies.

1.3 Research questions and research objectives

In this study, to address the four knowledge gaps previously identified, the research outlines the rationale for bridging each gap and proposes four research questions.

Firstly, as observed, the research contends that since Douyin differs from other social media platforms, existing content marketing research findings are less applicable for understanding its unique impact. De Plessis (2015) further clarifies that the characteristics of a medium can significantly influence content marketing strategies. There exists a substantial disconnect between theory and practice in existing literature on content marketing communication, particularly regarding short-form video platforms. While scholars have extensively studied the use of established social media marketing on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram within the fashion industry (Grilec et al., 2020; Ratnasingam et al., 2021; Xie and You, 2020), research on Douyin's effectiveness as a content marketing platform remains sparse. This study underscores the necessity for comprehensive research on Douyin. Evidence suggests that a generalised approach to social media marketing is insufficient and that focused research on the specific characteristics of individual social media platforms is imperative (Haenlein et al., 2020). The distinct characteristics of specific platforms directly influence the success of brands' content marketing strategies employed on these platforms. Therefore, the in-depth analysis of the Douyin platform this research

focusses on is essential.

The research proposes research question 1:

As a content marketing platform, what are the features that set Douyin apart from other platforms?

Secondly, this research emphasises the necessity for more robust theoretical backing for content marketing, particularly through the lens of media effects theory. This study employs agenda-setting theory to evaluate the effectiveness of content marketing strategies and to provide theoretical substantiation for content marketing. The selection of agenda-setting theory is due to its explanatory power regarding the homogeneity between the phenomenon it describes and the objectives of content marketing. Specifically, agenda-setting theory elucidates how media can increase the prominence of specific topics within the audience's minds, similar to how content marketing seeks to elevate the prominence of a brand within the customer's mind through strategic content.

Agenda-setting research has shown that as media coverage increases the prominence of a particular topic, the audience's awareness of that topic is also heightened (McCombs & Shaw, 2005). For instance, in the context of an election, continuous media focus on a candidate can improve the public's perception of that candidate, subsequently influencing voter behaviour and participation (Moon, 2013). In the realm of content marketing, the theory translates into the need for consistent creation of relevant, valuable, and pertinent content on digital platforms, which aligns with the communication needs of existing or potential customers. The goal is to fortify the brand's image in the customer's mind and ultimately sway the customer's intentions and behaviour (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

Agenda-setting theory posits that the media's emphasis on an object tends to significantly and positively impacts the audience's perception of that object. The goal of content marketing is for brands to influence customers to perceive, remember, and ultimately connect with the brand by highlighting its image and attributes through content. Consequently, this research infers that the success of content marketing hinges on whether the agenda-setting effect of the brand's content influences the

consumer's perception of the brand and their purchasing behaviour. Therefore, further research in content marketing is only valuable if it demonstrates that agenda-setting effects impact customer engagement. If the content fails to achieve an agenda-setting effect on the customer, this directly indicates the content's ineffectiveness. Essentially, if brand content cannot influence customers, pursuing content marketing research becomes redundant. In other words, verifying the impact of the agenda-setting effect of content on customer engagement is a fundamental requirement for content marketing research. Establishing the presence of such an effect would provide valuable support from communication theory for content marketing research. Consequently, the researcher poses research question 2:

Does the content agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community impact customer engagement?

Thirdly, previous research has underscored the importance of incorporating consumer perspectives into content marketing studies. Content marketing is designed to cultivate customer relationships with brands through engaging content (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). The key medium through which brands can leverage the benefits of content marketing is the content itself. It is through their interaction with this content that customers form connections with the brand. Thus, the effectiveness of content marketing hinges on customer acceptance of this content, which in turn depends on the content's ability to engage and attract customers. Content typically succeeds in this if it can tap into the customer's motivations or needs (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to understand customer needs and motivations to effectively tailor branded content marketing strategies. Hollebeek and Macky (2019) highlight the importance of considering these needs and motivations as precursors to successful content marketing. They also explore the relationship between customer motivation and needs, content marketing, and customer engagement. However, their analysis is theoretical and calls for further empirical validation, testing, and refinement. Additionally, they do not explore in detail how varying motivations and needs influence different levels of customer engagement. To overcome these research shortcomings, this study employs the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) to deepen

the theoretical exploration of content marketing from a customer perspective and introduces research question 3:

Which customer motivations and needs for using media have a substantial impact on content marketing in the Douyin fashion community? To what extent do these motivations influence customer engagement behaviour?

Finally, this study aims to establish a comprehensive content marketing model specifically tailored for the Douyin fashion community. While Du Plessis (2017) has developed a content marketing model for online content communities, this research contends that the model requires further refinement to enhance its general applicability to different media platforms. It also needs to integrate insights from communication theory and incorporate discussions on consumer behaviour. The findings derived from the other three research questions in this study are instrumental in shaping this new content marketing model. This progression sets the stage for introducing the final research question of the study:

How should fashion short video content be created on Douyin to improve customer engagement?

By addressing the research questions outlined above, this study achieves its primary research goal: to provide a deeper understanding of how content marketing strategies can be developed to increase customer engagement by fashion brands on Douyin. Based on its research questions, this study has established four research objectives:

1. To critically analyse the role of Douyin within the realm of content marketing research.
2. To assess the effectiveness of content marketing within Douyin's fashion community, particularly through the lens of agenda-setting effects.
3. To investigate how customers with an interest in fashion engage in creating online content, and to examine how their feedback influences the content creation process within Douyin's fashion community as part of a broader brand content marketing strategy.
4. To develop a content marketing model specifically tailored to the Douyin fashion community.

1.4 Research Contributions

1.4.1 Theoretical Contribution

By achieving these research objectives, this study makes two significant theoretical contributions. The first contribution to content marketing theory lies in confirming the pivotal role of content in the marketing process through the lens of communication studies, emphasising agenda setting. This finding underscores the significance of content marketing in marketing communications and lends theoretical backing to future research in this area. Additionally, the research applies another well-established media theory—uses and gratifications theory (UGT)—to content marketing, offering a deeper understanding of how customer preferences shape, interact with, and ultimately impact content marketing in online commercial customer engagement behaviours (CEB). This research also addresses previous shortcomings by integrating consumer responses, a step not taken in earlier studies. Scholars in the past have not utilised UGT to probe the topic of customer engagement with commercial brands. This study sheds light on how content marketing engages with target audiences by aligning with their needs and preferences, particularly within the Douyin fashion content community.

Regarding agenda-setting theory, this thesis confirms the substantial influence of content marketing (specifically, content agenda-setting effects) on customer engagement behaviour (CEB). It remains underexplored whether customers' perceptions of content/message salience drive their engagement with fashion brands on Douyin. Historically, agenda-setting has primarily served as a theoretical framework for investigating the influence of media on journalism and political communication. It has seen limited application to social media or online community research (Ragas & Roberts, 2009). Therefore, this study delves into the application of agenda-setting theory within content marketing communications, thereby broadening the academic boundaries of agenda-setting. The findings of this study advocate for the extension of agenda-setting theory to business research.

1.4.2 Practical Contribution

The project develops a model for promoting short-video content within the fashion industry, offering substantial practical value that can improve how brands interact with customers on Douyin, improve brand image, and bolster customer loyalty. In doing so, the research deepens the understanding of short-video social media platforms, particularly Douyin. This insight enables brands to quickly grasp the platform's dynamics, facilitating the development of effective content marketing strategies as they launch campaigns. Secondly, the study pinpoints customer motivations and needs within Douyin's fashion community. Brands can leverage these findings to rapidly craft content marketing strategies that resonate with the target customers in this community. Thirdly, the model introduced by this research represents a significant advancement over previous content marketing frameworks. It is suggested that this model could be instrumental for fashion brands in executing content marketing strategies within the Douyin fashion community, encompassing pre-strategy preparation, mid-term content creation, and post-campaign data analysis. In essence, this model innovatively equips fashion brands with a comprehensive content marketing strategy.

1.5 Research Approach

A mixed-method approach is adopted for this research, reflecting the researcher's pragmatism. The study aims to find practical solutions that integrate positivism and constructivism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A qualitative method is employed to gain deeper insights into customer demands within content marketing research. Concurrently, the quantitative method is used to increase the accuracy of the research, specifically targeting the relationship between content dissemination effectiveness and customer engagement behaviour (CEB) to assess the impact of content marketing strategies.

Given the focus on short-video content communities, the research utilises netnography, which is deemed particularly suitable for studying social media and

online communities (Kozinets, 2019). Data is gathered through passive observation of the Douyin fashion community and through in-depth interviews. The researcher spends three months observing popular video themes and customer interactions with brands or influencers within the community, aiming to uncover motivations behind CEB and customer demands. Insights are further enriched through interviews with users, influencers, and staff from Bytedance, the parent company of Douyin and TikTok. Subsequently, thematic content analysis, grounded in uses and gratifications theory (UGT), is conducted to analyse the empirical data collected. Ultimately, this research formulates a model of content provision and customer engagement for fashion brands on Douyin.

Additionally, this study employs a survey method to test the effectiveness of content marketing strategies. An online survey is conducted to explore whether respondents' perceptions of content salience within Douyin's fashion community influence their CEB.

1.6 The Structure of the thesis

The report is structured into eight sections:

Chapter 1 serves as the introduction, detailing the study's background, context, and underlying principles. It outlines the purpose and significant contributions of the research, also providing a concise explanation of the methodologies used to achieve these aims.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review, beginning with an examination of prior research on social media. It then outlines the main characteristics of the Douyin platform, explores its algorithm specifically. Afterwards, the differences between Douyin and other platforms are discussed in detail. The second part of this chapter reviews the research on content marketing in detail. Based on the importance of content for brands, this part discusses the definition and theoretical basis of content marketing. Afterwards, the objectives and results of content marketing are reviewed based on previous research. Finally, the limitations of prior research on Douyin and

content marketing are integrated, and the research value of this study in content marketing is determined.

Chapter 3 systematically reviews the literature on uses and gratifications theory and agenda-setting theory. It identifies gaps in existing research concerning the relationship between content marketing and content dissemination effectiveness. Uses and gratifications theory offers a conceptual framework for discussing how customer motivations and needs influence content marketing. This chapter crystallises the core principles of this study and underscores the significance of key concepts.

Chapter 4 details the methodology employed in the study. It defines the research philosophy that guides the study and introduces the specific research methods, data collection techniques, and analysis procedures. Additionally, it addresses potential ethical issues and proposes solutions.

Chapter 5 discusses the results from netnography, presenting and elaborating on the qualitative data analysis process. This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings from the netnography carried out in the research, emphasising how the research collectively answers the research questions and connecting them to the empirical data results.

Chapter 6 discusses the results from PLS-SEM, presenting an elaboration on the quantitative data analysis process. This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings from path analysis, the second research question is answered logically and connecting it to the research aim.

Chapter 7 concludes the discussion serves as the intellectual cornerstone of the thesis, aiming to critically interpret the research findings within broader scholarly contexts. Its primary objectives encompass to elucidate the significance of empirical results through theoretical lens, and to establish dialectical connections with existing literature by reconciling consistencies and addressing discrepancies. The chapter particularly enhances the thesis' academic value by demonstrating how the methodological innovations and empirical insights advance current understanding, while simultaneously identifying limitations and proposing trajectories for future research. Through systematic synthesis of evidence and conceptual rigor, the

discussion ultimately bridges empirical discoveries with theoretical frameworks, thereby solidifying the study's position within ongoing academic discourse.

Chapter 8 presents the theoretical contributions of the thesis and outlines how these insights can improve the practices of fashion brands in content marketing on Douyin. It specifically highlights enhanced understanding of engagement behaviours on social media and suggests improvements in marketing strategies for fashion brands. Lastly, it acknowledges the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research.

Chapter Two: Content marketing on social media platforms: key concepts and research advances

In this chapter, the research examines pertinent literature on several crucial concepts relevant to this study. Initially, it revisits the development of social media, with a special focus on the emergence and evolution of Douyin. By examining previous research on Douyin, the study gains a deeper understanding of the reasons and motivations for brands and users to engage with the platform. This analysis establishes a solid theoretical foundation for critically discussing Douyin's role in social media content marketing research. Subsequently, the evolution of social media content marketing is reviewed. The chapter particularly focuses on the characteristics and limitations of content marketing strategies for various social media platforms, laying the groundwork for a detailed discussion on Douyin as an important venue for social media content marketing research.

2.1 Social Media

This section reviews the definition of social media in the academic field and its evolution over the past 20 years. By understanding the characteristics of social media, researchers can better apply this knowledge when considering the role and influence of social media in marketing. A critical understanding of social media should also partially focus on the role of user behaviour on these increasingly significant and proliferative communication platforms.

The chapter concludes with a review of the algorithm on Douyin, placing particular emphasis on the differences between Douyin and other social media platforms. This chapter not only provides a background survey for this study, but also determines the necessity of Douyin as the context of this study.

2.1.1 The Definition of Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) argue that when people discuss social media, the first platforms that typically come to mind are social networks such as Facebook and

Myspace. The earliest reference to social media is often attributed to “Open Diary”, a social networking site developed by Bruce and Susan Abelson in the 1980s. “Open Diary” drew many online writers, creating an online community where the term “weblog” was commonly used, encouraging more people to join the Internet and become bloggers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009).

As Internet technology progressed, Myspace and Facebook were launched in 2003 and 2004, respectively, marking the point when the term 'social media' officially entered popular usage (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). In 2004, the concept of “Web 2.0” was introduced at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference. Web 2.0 is now regarded as a foundational element for social media, as it has enhanced interaction among Internet users compared to the earlier Web 1.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Concurrently, user-generated content (UGC) emerged as the most evident expression of social media. In the Web 2.0 era, UGC became the primary feature of social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Thus, while Web 2.0 represents the ideological and technical basis of social media, UGC epitomises the plethora of ways people engage with social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Therefore, the researcher delineates the interrelationships among social media, Web 2.0, and UGC, identifying Web 2.0 as the underpinning of social networks, with UGC as the manifest form of these networks. Consequently, discussions about social media focus on UGC or digital technologies that enhance interaction (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Terry, 2009).

However, scholars from various academic disciplines have not reached a consensus on the definition of social media. In public relations, Kent (2010) broadly defines social media as any interactive communication channel that facilitates two-way interaction and feedback, emphasising its potential for real-time interaction, rapid response times, and transcendence of temporal and spatial limitations. Terry (2009) describes social media as an Internet-based “publishing house” created by users, distinguishing it from traditional media such as television and newspapers. In the field of museum curation, Russo, Watkins, Kelly, and Chan (2008) view social media as a tool for enhancing online communication and collaboration. In advertising, Lewis (2010) characterises social media simply as a digital technology that enables

connectivity, interaction, production, and content sharing. In communication studies, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media similarly as Internet-based applications that are built on the ideology and technology of Web 2.0, enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC). In marketing, Singh and Diamond (2012) consider it as a channel that facilitates user communication and information exchange. While these definitions highlight various fundamental functions and features of social media, they also show its overlap with other communication technologies, such as email, which does not distinctly differentiate social media from other forms of communication (Carr & Hayes, 2015). These interpretations are not incorrect but rather focus on specific aspects of social media within different contexts. The most current definition, proposed by Carr and Hayes (2015, p.8), is: *“Social media are Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content”*. But, given the ongoing social and technological advancements in social media, there is a need to evolve this definition to include the roles of non-human, system-generated, and algorithmic agents, thus reconceptualising the nature of communication. Due to the ambiguity and complexity of defining social media in academic work, its classification remains indistinct and subject to change. It is also crucial to distinguish between the development of social media in China – the primary focus of this research – and social media in other parts of the world, particularly the West.

2.1.2 The Development of Social Media

2.1.2.1 The Development of Western Social Media

The history of social media can be traced back to the creation of Usenet in the 1970s (Brett, 2009), which served as a globally distributed discussion system on computers. Usenet allowed users to read and post messages to various topic categories known as newsgroups, establishing itself as the precursor to Internet forums.

However, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that computers and Internet communication gained widespread popularity, setting the stage for the subsequent evolution of social

media. In 1991, Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web (www), enabling the sharing of resources on the Internet via hyperlinks. At that time, the primary forms of social media included BBS (bulletin board systems), blogs, SNS (social networking sites), and IM (instant messaging tools). The first BBS, the CBBS/Chicago (Computerised Bulletin Board System/Chicago), was developed in Chicago in 1978 and was initially used by commercial website forums to post stock market prices and other information (Lai, 2019). In 1993, the NCSA's "What's New Page" was created, indexing emerging websites of that era. The concept of personal blogging took shape in January 1994 with the launch of Justin Hall's "Justin's Home Page". The instant messaging tool "I seek you" (ICQ) debuted in November 1996 and quickly gained popularity among the public (Lai, 2019).

After 2004, with the rise of Web 2.0, social media began to flourish, leading to the creation of several key platforms globally. Myspace was launched in August 2003, followed by Facebook in February 2004, and Digg in December 2004, a news aggregator that allowed users to select popular news and articles and facilitated content distribution to other platforms like Twitter and Facebook. YouTube made its appearance in February 2005, with Twitter following in March 2006 (Cao, 2011). These platforms varied widely in their specific forms, including blogs and microblogs (Twitter), knowledge sharing (Wiki), photo sharing (Flickr), video sharing (YouTube), online forums (Reddit), and social networking (Facebook) (Cao, 2011).

Although the fundamental structure of social media has remained relatively stable in recent years, advancements in network infrastructure have facilitated the transition of social media platforms to mobile devices. By 2007, Apple and Android began to dominate the mobile device market. Despite communication and personal life sharing still being the most time-consuming activities on social media, users have increasingly migrated from personal computers (PCs) to mobile devices (Shu, 2014). Facebook, the world's largest social platform, solidified its status as a leader in mobile social networking by acquiring Instagram for \$1 billion in 2012 and WhatsApp for \$19 billion in 2014. By 2013, Twitter had already shifted its focus to mobile devices, with 75 percent of its active users and more than 65 percent of its revenue derived from

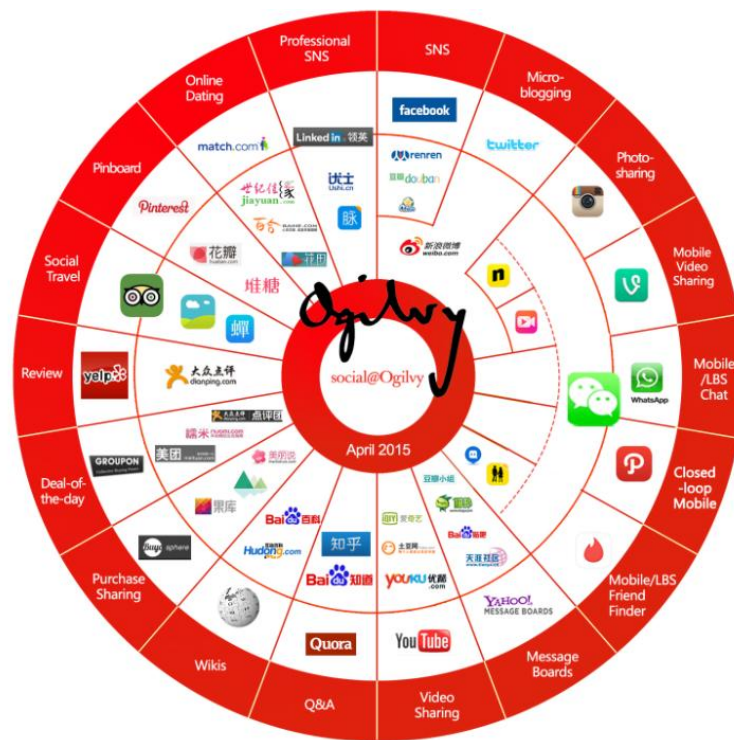
mobile platforms (Shu, 2014). In the realm of video-sharing, YouTube has maintained its influence from the PC era and successfully transitioned to mobile through the development of their app.

The study highlights that mobile devices have spurred the production and dissemination of short video content, creating new opportunities (Lai, 2019). In 2011, Viddy was launched in the United States as the world's first mobile short video app, enabling users to create 15-second video clips. In 2013, the short video-sharing app Vine was released, allowing users to record and share six-second videos. The app featured instant shooting and forwarding functions (Luo & Wang 2022). That same year, Instagram, primarily known for image sharing, introduced a feature for shooting 15-second video clips (Instagram, 2014). Unfortunately, these short video apps did not garner significant attention until the launch of TikTok in 2018, which achieved unprecedented success in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bahiyah & Wang, 2020).

2.1.2.2 The Development Process of Chinese Social Media

Compared to Western countries, the development of social media in China began late. Learning from Western social media and adapting these insights to the Chinese environment has been central to the evolution of social media in China. Since China connected to the Internet in 1994, Chinese social media platforms have been modelled after Western websites and software. The first significant network BBS in China was the Shuguang BBS station, established in 1994 (Zhu, 2016). In 1999, Tencent, a major Chinese internet company, launched QQ, an instant messaging software inspired by ICQ, quickly dominating the Chinese communication app market. Since then, QQ has remained the most actively used social application in China. On 19th August, 2000, Fang Xingdong and others introduced blogging to China, heralding the beginning of the online diary era. After 2005, social networking sites (SNSs) began to emerge in China, following the model of Western SNSs like Friendster and Facebook. Platforms such as Renren and Douban were launched, and later, leveraging the growing number of QQ users, Tencent introduced QQ Space in 2005 and QQ alumni in 2008, rapidly capturing the main SNS market (Chen, 2013).

Thomas Crampton (2015) shares a social media map of China on his blog, summarising the insights of him and his colleagues from Ogilvy & Mather (Picture 1).



Picture.1 A social media map of China

<http://www.thomascrampton.com/china/china-social-media-evolution/>

They categorise social media into 18 categories based on their functions, showcasing representative websites from Western countries and listing key websites with similar functions in China (Crampton, 2015). According to the Chinese social media map, social media in China can be divided into five categories based on their distinct attributes (Cao, 2011): 1. Information published: consisting mainly of blog websites (Blog), forum websites (Message Boards), and microblogs. 2. Resource sharing: comprising photo sharing sites (Photo Sharing), video sharing sites (Video Sharing), music sharing sites (Online Music), and review sites (Review). 3. Co-editing: primarily including wikis (Wikipedia) and social Q&A sites (Q&A). 4. Social services: encompassing social SNSs and instant messaging tools (Instant Message). 5. C2C commercial sites: primarily consisting of online trade sites like Taobao (Online Trade) and group-buying sites (Deal-of-the-day).

Much as the developmental trajectory of the West, with the advancement of mobile internet, Chinese social media has also transitioned to mobile devices (Lai, 2019). The mobile internet era in China began on 19th September, 2000. In the same year, Tencent's "Mobile QQ" surged in popularity with the "Mengwang program". In 2011, Tencent launched WeChat, which has since become the most prevalent instant messaging app in China. Weibo was introduced in 2012, catalysing various discussions around trending topics and content, and facilitating the entry of opinion leaders into open social networking. In the realm of video social networking, major Chinese video websites such as Youku, iQiyi, and Tencent Video have developed a social ecosystem centred around content and the fan economy (Lai, 2019).

Short video social applications began to surface quietly, with 2011 to 2013 marking the embryonic stage of the Chinese short video app industry (Luo & Wan, 2022). "GIF Kwai" was released in 2011 and transitioned from a tool app to a mobile short video app in 2012, being renamed "Kuaishou" in 2013 (Kwai, 2014). In the same year, Tencent launched "Weishi". The period from 2014 to 2015 can be regarded as the primary growth phase of the Chinese short video app industry, during which several new platforms emerged. In 2014, platforms such as Weishi, Meipai, and Miaopai jointly initiated the "Ice Bucket Challenge", which saw wide participation in China and increased visibility for short video applications (Zhang, 2016). From 2016 to 2017, the industry experienced explosive growth, with the emergence of numerous platforms like Douyin and Pear Video becoming well-known among audiences. Concurrently, traditional network platforms also began to incorporate short video functionalities, exemplified by "Taobao" introducing the "micro-tao video" feature. Post-2018, China's mobile short video app landscape has largely stabilised, primarily centring around "Douyin" and "Kwai" (Zhang & Li, 2019). At this stage, as the short video market matures, platforms have intensified their product upgrades and expedited their commercialisation processes (Luo & Wan, 2022).

Reviewing the development of social media globally, it is evident that the evolution of social media in Western developed countries has paved the way for social media development in China. Furthermore, in terms of platform attributes, Chinese social

media are fundamentally similar to their Western counterparts.

In recent years, China's social media development has forged its own path with notable innovations and breakthroughs. Firstly, Chinese social media apps have begun to expand globally, exemplified by Douyin's highly popular overseas counterpart, TikTok. Secondly, China's social media landscape benefits from a competitive market; each platform is diligently exploring the nuanced needs of users and pioneering new social media business models to engage an increasingly discerning audience (Zhang & Liu, 2019).

Social media has evolved from text to pictures to videos, and most recently, to the widely favoured short video format. In terms of devices, there has been a gradual shift from PCs to mobile devices. However, the core functions of social media have remained relatively constant. Early social media platforms provided users with opportunities for self-expression and social convenience (Luo & Wang, 2019), and modern platforms continue to fulfil these needs.

Douyin, as a relatively new entrant in the social media arena, has also endeavoured to meet user demands. However, the researcher posits that the reasons for Douyin's popularity are distinct from other social media platforms, prompting a critical examination of the background in which Douyin have emerged. Among these, the discussion of Douyin's algorithm and content recommendation system has attracted widespread attention in the academic field.

2.1.3 Unique content recommendation system of TikTok/Douyin

The core technology of Douyin is its algorithm, which offers standard products capable of tailoring video recommendations based on user preferences and application usage, representing a distinct advantage (Ma & Hu, 2021)

When users engage with the platform as viewers, Simpson & Semaan (2021) elucidate that the "For You" page (Picture 2) leverages this algorithm to suggest videos. It generates a customised video feed for each user, derived from their viewing habits, likes, and shares.



Picture. 2 the 'For You' page

The 'For You' page demonstrates that users, influencers, and brands do not require a vast following to disseminate viral content, as the videos are displayed to those who show interest in similar content on the application. This page, which users encounter upon entering the platform, features videos that automatically play. Given that the AI recommends video content based on user interest on this page, it becomes challenging for users to resist engaging with the videos. As users continue to swipe and view more videos, the algorithm increasingly refines its understanding of their preferences through interactions with each video (viewing times, likes, comments, shares). Consequently, the algorithm promptly adapts and delivers more content that aligns with the user's interests. Overall, the algorithmic recommendation system subtly encourages users to immerse themselves in the platform.

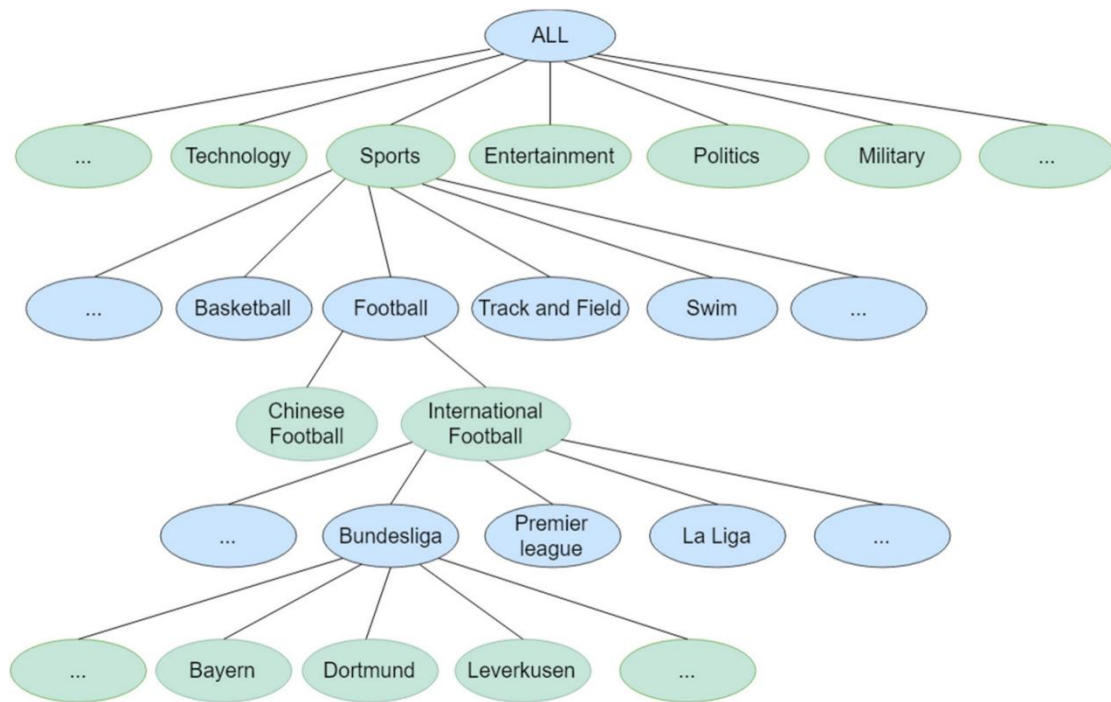
When users transition to creators, they unlock more opportunities for exposure. Douyin/TikTok tailors content delivery based on users' interest levels, a stark contrast to most social media platforms that prioritise content from followed accounts (Simpson & Semaan, 2020). This strategy ensures that creators with premium content gain visibility, regardless of their follower count. The prevailing model in traditional social media is one of diminishing returns, where top creators dominate exposure,

demotivating regular or new creators due to a perceived lack of opportunity, which stifles content innovation on the platform (Su & Valdovinos Kaye, 2023). Conversely, Douyin/TikTok employs an egalitarian distribution model, where the number of followers does not dictate content visibility. Hence, even newcomers can amplify their reach by improving content quality (Su & Valdovinos Kaye, 2023). This approach bolsters creator confidence and encourages active content production.

For the platform, this results in a consistently high volume and variety of content, offering more choices for user distribution. The algorithm tracks user responses to content, boosting the visibility of creators' offerings, which in turn fuels their motivation to continue producing high-quality material. Consequently, the platform maintains a consistently high standard of content.

A pivotal element of the platform's recommendation algorithm is its precision in aligning content with users who will find it most engaging. This capability is crucial for the algorithm's effectiveness and, by extension, the platform's overall success. An immense volume of content is uploaded daily, awaiting accurate alignment with interested users through a sophisticated and logical tagging and classification system. Chen et al. (2019) highlight ByteDance's filing of a patent for an innovative global interest discovery recommendation method and device, titled "A Global Interest Discovery Recommendation Method and Device" (Picture. 3).

The patent outlines how TikTok/Douyin systematically categorises vast amounts of content to align more closely with user interests. According to the patent, ByteDance has developed a global algorithm that constructs a hierarchical interest label based on themed content settings and calculates the relevance of each interest label within the set (Picture 3) (Vázquez et al., 2020). When creators upload content, the platform uses video and text processing systems—akin to AI scanning and interpretation—to determine the video's labels. These algorithms finely categorise each video, with the video classification system functioning as an archivist, swiftly organising each 'file' into its appropriate 'folder'.



Picture.3 The Hierarchical Interest Label Tree.

After a video is categorised, another vital component is facilitating user access to personalised content that interests them without the need for active searching. This strategy aims to increase user satisfaction and foster dependency on TikTok/Douyin. It involves two elements: how the algorithm serves the audience and how it engages them. Thus, the algorithm creates a detailed user profile for each individual, involving the classification and labelling of user information to ensure precise content recommendations (Liang, 2017).

To effectively meet user needs, the algorithm must thoroughly understand them. This involves sorting user information and labelling users for targeted content suggestions (Liang, 2018). As per ByteDance's algorithmic guidelines (2018), the platform gathers data on users' interests, identities, and behavioural patterns. To analyse a user's identity and behaviour, when logging onto Douyin, users may opt to sign in through other social media accounts, allowing the AI to utilise existing information and historical online behaviour to more quickly analyse user habits. However, since not all users choose this login method, understanding is primarily based on their activity patterns. Basic identity factors such as gender, age, location, and occupation can be inferred by the model. Interest characteristics include the types of content,

creators, and specific tags they favour. Users with similar interests are grouped into clusters and share common interest traits. Moreover, the algorithm tracks behavioural trends, such as the times of day users are most active on Douyin and their frequency of use each week (Zhao, 2021).

Armed with detailed user data, the algorithm identifies a user's personalised needs and aligns their content accordingly. However, as human needs are ever-changing, the algorithm also dynamically updates user labels based on their interactions with the platform (Zhao, 2021). It monitors user behaviour across different content categories in real-time. If a user frequently engages with a particular category-through viewing, liking, commenting, or sharing-the algorithm immediately responds by boosting similar content in the user's subsequent feeds. Conversely, if engagement in a category decreases, the algorithm lessens the frequency of that content type and introduces a diverse array of potentially interesting categories. This cycle of adjustment continues, continually increasing the algorithm's understanding of the user's preferences and progressively refining the content relevance (Zhao, 2021). By integrating preference data with real-time dynamic profiles, the algorithm ensures that the user's screen is continually filled with content that resonates with them (Zhao, 2021).

Cao et al. (2021) identifies satisfaction as one of the most critical factors influencing continued usage intentions. Douyin's recommendation algorithm plays a crucial role in retaining users by fully meeting their preferences. This precision in content personalisation not only enriches the user experience but also provides the researcher with insights into Douyin's distinct approach compared to other social media platforms.

2.1.4 The differences between TikTok/Douyin and other platform

Regarding the audience, numerous studies have indicated that Douyin users are predominantly younger, primarily belonging to Generation Z (Hellemans, Willems & Brengman, 2021; Masciantonio et al., 2021; Haenlein et al., 2020). A 2021 report on social media usage reveals that while most Americans use YouTube and Facebook,

platforms like Snapchat and TikTok are particularly popular among adults under 30. A majority of individuals aged 18-29 report using TikTok or Snapchat, with about half using TikTok, and a significant portion of those aged 18 to 24 favouring Snapchat (75%) or TikTok (55%) (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). As of 2021, the video-sharing platform boasts approximately 78.7 million users in the United States alone, with 37.3 million from the Generation Z cohort, projected to increase to 48.8 million by 2025, surpassing their presence on other platforms like Instagram (Statista, 2022n). TikTok's popularity among this demographic is largely due to the platform's strategic focus on these young users as their primary target audience (Weimann & Masri, 2020). Although TikTok is not yet on par with Facebook and Instagram, research by Hellemans, Willems, and Brengman (2021) suggests that it is quickly gaining traction in the adult demographic, achieving a presence comparable to established platforms like Twitter. Drawing from this research, the scholars suggest that as Generation Z matures, they are poised to become key consumers in the fashion industry (Priporas, Stylos & Fotiadis, 2017). Thus, Douyin/TikTok offers a novel opportunity for marketers and advertisers to create cost-effective, high-value content that resonates deeply with their audience (Davis, 2019).

From the interactive perspective, other social media platforms focus more on fostering interactions among close relationships such as friends and family. In contrast, the basis of TikTok is enabling users to discover content from creators they may not know (Weimann and Masri, 2020). In essence, while the primary communities on Facebook and Instagram consist of friends and followers, TikTok's community encompasses all app users worldwide, with the algorithm serving as an intermediary (YOFFIE & FISHER, 2021). Moreover, TikTok/Douyin empowers nearly anyone to become a content creator, thereby attracting a younger audience and competing with other social media applications (Weimann & Masri, 2020). This egalitarian system enhances TikTok's appeal by drawing in more individuals as creators (Davis, 2019). Consequently, by offering equal self-presentation opportunities, TikTok has crafted a platform that appeals to the youth's desire for fame, continually delivering fresh and engaging content, which sets it apart from other platforms (Weimann and Masri,

2020).

TikTok usage can be considered addictive, with some evidence indicating that American users spend approximately an hour daily on the platform, which is double the time spent on Facebook and Snapchat (YOFFIE & FISHER, 2021). Hellemans, Willems & Brengman (2021) highlight the differences in usage duration between Facebook and TikTok, noting that users typically spend an additional 30 minutes on TikTok per session. For users, TikTok/Douyin offers a continuous stream of unpredictable content. This constant discovery process and the platform's ability to meet diverse audience needs keep users highly engaged (Guo, 2019). The unpredictability of short video content often leads to time spent aimlessly, as the full-screen display mode and engaging content can make it difficult for users to manage their time effectively (Guo, 2019). Based on these findings, the researcher assumes a significant opportunity for marketers and brands to capture their target audience's attention and increase brand loyalty. The longer users remain on the platform, the greater the likelihood of brands gaining visibility among potential customers. Thus, users spending extended periods on Douyin creates a strategic advantage for brands in choosing a marketing platform.

In terms of user experience, a distinctive aspect of TikTok is its 'For You' page, where content is curated and personalised based on users' expressed likes and interests. This feature allows the app to cater to a broader and more varied audience than other platforms (Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020). Upon opening the app, users are greeted with the 'For You' page, displaying a video that fills the entire screen. Users can simply swipe down to transition to the next video (YOFFIE & FISHER, 2021). This streamlined, full-screen viewing mode minimises unnecessary interactions, enabling users to focus more on the content. Research indicates that simple, brief videos are particularly engaging for users, and the continuous audio-visual stimulation encourages users to disengage from the external world and concentrate more intently on the content, such as during film viewing (Guo, 2019). Based on these findings, the researcher concluded that Douyin's content delivery system allows users to focus more intensely on the brand content itself, thereby enhancing their perception of the

brand. Consequently, this innovative content experience system positions Douyin favourably for boosting brand recognition and improving brand image.

2.1.5 Summary

This chapter critically reviews the literature on social media, focusing particularly on the unique content recommendation system of TikTok/Douyin. While there is no consensus on a definitive definition of social media, two core concepts consistently emerge as significant: the possibility of participation (Miel & Faris, 2008) and the sharing of user-generated content (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Douyin, as an emergent social media platform, also prioritises these elements but stands out from other platforms by centring its technology on a content-focused recommendation algorithm, signalling a shift in social media trends (Hellemans, Willems & Brengman, 2021). Through literature review, the study emphasises the importance of examining Douyin within the context of content marketing research. It has been noted that different media characteristics influence distinct content marketing strategies (Du Plessis, 2017). Indeed, social media platforms vary significantly in their architecture, audience, and cultural dynamics (Vooreld et al., 2018). Douyin sets itself apart with a unique content recommendation system that originates from its distinctive user demographics, the media formats preferred by its users, the variances in user media experiences, and interaction styles. These differences suggest that findings from previous content marketing studies based on other social media platforms may not be directly applicable to Douyin. To enhance research on content marketing, the researcher underscores the necessity of prioritising the unique features of Douyin in content marketing strategies.

Moreover, the literature emphasises the importance of studying Douyin's impact on content marketing. Douyin exhibits strong user engagement, with users dedicating considerable time to the platform. In the era of the attention economy, a platform's capacity to maintain user engagement for extended periods is indicative of significant market potential. Although Douyin has been operational for eight years, there remains

a notable discrepancy between the scholarly research on Douyin's marketing strategies and the actual marketing practices observed on the platform. While many brands have successfully leveraged the platform, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive research on branded content marketing communications. This study seeks to bridge this gap and enhance the theoretical understanding of Douyin's effectiveness as a content marketing platform within the academic field.

2.2 Social Media Content Marketing (SMCM)

This section is divided into three parts. Firstly, it reviews the literature on brand content and content creation strategies, primarily differentiating between traditional brand content and branded content marketing. The second part examines the concepts and definitions of social media content marketing, establishing these concepts as the theoretical framework for this study. Lastly, the study explores the theoretical background of content marketing, highlighting its ultimate goals and effects, and thereby identifies the primary variables (customer engagement) for measuring the effectiveness of content marketing in this research.

2.2.1 Brand Content and Content Creation

Branded content on social media influences consumers' attitudes towards brands similarly to advertisements and provides material for customers to share on their social network platforms (SNPs), thereby increasing interaction and engagement (Hardley, 2011). Content that offers value can immediately spark audience engagement and improve dissemination. By delivering such content to consumers, who often face information asymmetry, brands can navigate market clutter, potentially securing long-term customer loyalty and increasing the lifetime value of customers. The core of content marketing lies in educating consumers, focusing on communication over direct sales. Marketers must create and distribute high-quality content tailored to the needs of both potential and existing customers, thereby distinguishing themselves from competitors (Rose & Pulizzi, 2011).

Content is deeply intertwined with creative strategies. These strategies encompass the

design and execution of content, incorporating design concepts that increase the likelihood of achieving the desired effects among the target audience (Laskey et al., 1989). Creative strategies have a direct impact on communication outcomes. An effective creative strategy can boost audience motivation and their ability to process advertising information (MacInnis et al., 1991). While a comprehensive review of the literature on creative strategies is beyond the scope of this study, content marketing is fundamentally linked to creativity. Numerous studies have explored consumer psychology and the outcomes of brand marketing that are related to creative appeals (Schmitt, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to provide a concise overview based on this foundation.

Scholars have developed classifications for creative messaging strategies (Frazer, 1983) and execution factors (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). The most straightforward classification distinguishes creative strategies as either emotional/transformational or functional/informational (Aaker & Norris, 1982). In addition to differentiating between rational and emotional information, creative strategies often emphasise the brand's unique value within a product category. They aim to align the brand with consumer desires (image), insights, and experiences (resonance, experiences), as well as emotions (love, desire, fear, guilt, and joy/humour) (Laskey et al., 1989).

Furthermore, scholars have sought to determine when specific strategies are most effective. For example, Johar and Sirgy (1991) find that image appeals are more impactful when the product represents a value expression to the target consumers, whereas functional appeals are better suited for products with utilitarian attributes. Based on the elaboration likelihood model, research suggests that functional messages are preferable for high-involvement consumers, while transformational messages are more effective for low-involvement consumers (Areni, 2003). Involvement refers to an individual's perceived relevance of objects based on internal needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) expand on this by proposing that involvement includes cognitive engagement and orientation reaction, which help explain consumer consumption patterns. Cognitive engagement relates to cognitive and problem-solving scenarios, while orientation reaction is primarily

emotional.

Consequently, creative messages can be classified into functional and transformational categories (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Empirical research on internet creative strategies supports this classification, indicating that functional messages are more suitable for high-involvement consumers, while transformational messages cater better to low-involvement consumers (McMillan et al., 2003). This aligns with the selective attention theory, which posits that consumers allocate cognitive resources based on their needs and attention span.

The most compelling motivations behind human behaviour often revolve around entertainment (escape, pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, and emotional fulfilment), information (the need for resources and valuable information), and stimulation (the desire to avoid distractions, anxiety, and the dilution of human experiences) (Luo, 2002). In a content analysis study of viral online advertisements, Golan and Zaidner (2008) find that the majority of advertising content relies on humour and sexuality. In terms of experiential involvement, brands can invite consumers to engage with branded content in social networks, virtual worlds, or social gaming environments, thereby creating branded entertainment. Research indicates that branded entertainment, especially advergames and other interactive experiences, benefits brands by enhancing consumer engagement through continuous sensory immersion (Nelson et al., 2004). Using Play Theory, Zhang et al. (2010) conducts an exploratory content analysis of branded entertainment content on Facebook and discovered that 70% of brands utilise branded entertainment content, with traditional entertainment themes like sweepstakes and games being common on the platform. Furthermore, Sinha et al. (2011) find that as consumers deepen their understanding of a brand through social media, their emotional attachment to it increases. At this juncture, whether the content of brand social media marketing communication is functional or emotional becomes less pivotal.

In an era where consumers are adept at ignoring traditional marketing messages, providing creative branded content can assist companies in making informed decisions with sufficient information. Overall, various factors, including target

audience characteristics, creative execution, market features, and environmental trends, determine effectiveness of creative strategies. However, there remains no consensus within the academic sphere regarding standards for creative message strategies. At the heart of content marketing is the delivery of high-quality branded content to enhance communication. Yet, the academic field lacks standardised criteria for evaluating "quality branded content", and there is also an ongoing need for greater consensus on the motivations driving social media audiences to engage with and actively participate in content. Thus, it is crucial to focus on the content of the information itself (Stewart & Koslow, 1989) and to further explore the concepts and development of content marketing.

2.2.2 The Definition of Content Marketing (CM)

In practice, CM is not a new idea in the marketing sphere. As early as 1895, the American agricultural machinery manufacturer John Deere introduced the pioneering agricultural information magazine, *The Furrow*, which is now distributed in over 40 countries worldwide (Gradiner, 2013). This company eschewed traditional advertising and door-to-door sales by delivering practical information in the magazine about new cultivation techniques and operational features to farmers. Through the magazine, the company achieved high customer loyalty.

In recent years, there has been a significant uptick in searches related to CM (Du Plessis, 2017). Many scholars and businesses have frequently employed concepts like content marketing and storytelling in brand marketing. Odden (2012) notes that today's consumers expect brands to establish and manage relationships with customers before they make purchasing decisions. Jefferson and Tanton (2013) argue that the modern marketing paradigm must transition from focusing on sales to providing helpful services. Marketing can evolve into profit only after customers develop sufficient organizational commitment and necessary communication. There is a broad consensus among scholars that brands require efficient information communication and that engaging consumers through meaningful content is an essential aspect of contemporary marketing.

However, there remains a lack of consensus within academia concerning CM. Kanttila (2004) is the first to introduce digital content marketing, defining it as marketing products that digitalise both the entity and its delivery. Such digital content has become an increasingly vital part of the commercial landscape. Nevertheless, this study on digital content marketing primarily focused on digitalising the products of traditional media companies (e.g., music, newspapers, and magazines), viewing digital content more as a product for sale than as a marketing strategy. Later, Pulizzi and Barrett (2008) propose a broader definition of CM as creating and disseminating compelling content to attract and retain users. Rose and Pulizzi (2011) further conceptualise CM as a marketing strategy focused on creating valuable experiences. Lieb (2012) differentiates CM from sales information and advertising, emphasising that CM attracts consumers through content rather than merely transmitting information. The study summarises representative academic perspectives on CM (Table 1).

Table 1. The concept of content marketing

Researcher (year)	The Definition of Content Marketing
Pulizzi & Barrett (2008)	The practice of creating and distributing a variety of educational and/or engaging content to attract and/or retain customers.
Pulizzi & Barrett (2009)	This marketing activity targets a specific and well-understood audience, emphasising the creation and distribution of relevant, valuable content to drive profitability.
Handley et al. (2011)	Content marketing, also known as branded content, involves a strategy used by companies to produce and share educational and engaging content in various forms, with the goal of attracting or retaining customers.
Rose & Pulizzi (2011)	Content marketing is a strategic approach that prioritises creating valuable experiences. Through this method, the platforms established by businesses facilitate mutual assistance among individuals, as well as the seeking and sharing of

	valuable product or service information, helping businesses become trendsetters in their communities.
Lorenz (2011)	An integrated marketing strategy that employs a mix of online and offline methods to provide customers with information, aiming to make them more informed.
Rahim& Clemens (2012)	It increases brand exposure through the creation and distribution of original content, including blog posts, graphics, videos, web pages, case studies, and whitepapers.
Lieb (2011)	The delivery of informative and engaging content that captures attention serves as the foundation of content marketing.
Holliman & Rowley (2014)	The content utilises digital content to attract customers to their websites or social media pages, engaging them continuously to participate in the brand's community.
Content Marketing Institute (2017)	A strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience, ultimately fostering profitability.

Source: the researcher

While there may be variations in how different literary sources define content marketing (CM), certain key terms frequently appear: brand/company creation and dissemination, valuable content, target audience engagement, and strategic approach. Consequently, this research adopts the definition from the Content Marketing Institute (2017): Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience, ultimately leading to sales. This definition synthesises the key elements from various interpretations. Particularly in today's information-saturated internet age, capturing the attention of target customers with valuable content is a fundamental marketing necessity. Moreover, it highlights an additional vital

element—continuity. Consistent branded content progressively increases audience knowledge retention and fortifies brand impressions (Fu & Lai, 2016).

As technology progresses, social media has become the principal arena for marketing. Social media is instrumental in shaping brands, offering an interactive and personalised approach to engaging consumers (Du Plessis, 2017). The general definition of social media marketing is the process by which individuals promote products and/or services through social media platforms to reach a broader audience that traditional media might not reach (Weinberg, 2009). Social media marketing encompasses word-of-mouth (WOM), viral content, and digital influencer marketing (Hanna et al., 2011). These commonly employ strategies inherently possess both promotional and disruptive characteristics (Du Plessis, 2017).

Similarly, social media content marketing (SMCM) is one strategy within the broader realm of social media marketing. Unlike other tactics, SMCM places greater emphasis on building customer connections rather than merely announcing new products and promotional activities (Hilebrand, 2014). Although SMCM may aim for marketing outcomes like word-of-mouth (WOM) or viral dissemination, it often inspires customers to engage with and share content because of its inherent value. There is no specific definition for SMCM; most studies refer directly to the broader content marketing definitions (De Plessis, 2017; Ansari et al., 2019; Ahmad et al., 2016). Du Plessis (2017) explores the role of content marketing within social media content communities, highlighting that compared to other social media marketing strategies, CM should interact with the target audience in a manner that reflects the natural attributes of content (Du Plessis, 2017). In other words, SMCM should deliver content that is non-intrusive and non-promotional by nature. This approach is viewed as a foundational principle of SMCM, distinguishing it from other strategies.

Building on the insights from the literature cited, the definition of SMCM in this research is as follows: for the fashion content community on Douyin, social media content marketing involves the creation of valuable, non-intrusive, and continuous content that is relevant to the brand, aiming to attract and retain target consumers. Ultimately, this strategy seeks to enhance customer engagement and drive

profitability. For the purposes of this study, “content” refers to original material produced by the brand or company, starting with the operation of the brand or company's account within the Douyin content community. This study does not consider other content forms utilised within the social media ecosystem by various companies (Hanna et al., 2011).

2.2.3 Theoretical Basis of SMCM

The core of SMCM revolves around providing valuable content that engages and retains customers. In this context, the concept of social currency, which originated during the internet era, plays a pivotal role in shaping SMCM strategies. Initially described by Joachimsthaler et al. (2010) as arising from the interactions between consumers and brands online, social currency represents shared assets between these parties. To effectively merge consumer-brand online interactions with traditional measurements of brand assets, scholars define social currency as sharing of brand-related information in their social lives (Zinnbauer & Honer, 2011). Expanding on this foundation, Berger (2013) delineates the principles of content virality, illustrating how brands and entrepreneurs leverage storytelling to create social currency and capture consumer attention. What renders content compelling is its ability to turn a brand into a prominent online conversation topic. Proponents of social currency gain rewards through their freedom to express and share, achieving satisfaction. People are motivated to share on social media for three primary reasons, according to Berger (2013):

1. The content is valuable and merits sharing.
2. Desire to attract attention to themselves.
3. Faced with constraints in expressing personal views, opting to communicate opinions through the voices of others.

The widespread distribution of social currency largely stems from the surprising, attention-grabbing quality of the content that individuals are eager to verify, ultimately fostering satisfaction through sharing. In this dynamic, brands, as key

issuers of social currency, must not only distinguish themselves but also establish layered consumer group rights and status rewards. This approach makes consumers feel valued, encourages their participation in product development and sales, fosters a sense of belonging, and actively promotes sharing (Fu & Lai, 2016).

The metrics for evaluating the extent of a brand's 'social currency' include: *Affiliation*, which measures the percentage of brand consumers who feel a sense of community; *Conversation*, reflecting the extent of engaging discussions among brand consumers; *Utility*, representing the perceived practical value of interactions among brand consumers; *Advocacy*, showing the level of unconditional support from brand followers; *Information*, measuring the effectiveness of communication between consumers; and *Identity*, gauging the sense of connection brand consumers feel with each other (Lobschat et al., 2013). A higher degree of brand social currency indicates more effective social media content marketing strategies.

In conclusion, the concept of social currency offers vital theoretical backing for SMCM. Generating social currency stands as the foremost strategy of content marketing, and its level signifies the brand's success in achieving objectives through SMCM strategies.

2.2.4 The objectives and outcomes of SMCM

Scholars have diverse perspectives on the objectives of content marketing (CM). Some highlight the importance of storytelling about the brand, rather than merely promoting product information to consumers and potential buyers (He et al., 2021). Meanwhile, others argue that CM primarily aims to drive sales and influence purchasing behaviour (Kilgour et al., 2015). Bloomstein (2012) focuses on the creation, distribution, and management of valuable and usable content as the central goal of CM. Rose and Pullizzi (2011) propose that CM objectives include brand awareness and reinforcement, lead conversion and nurturing, customer conversion, customer service, promotional activities, and attracting passionate fans. Peppers and Rogers (2011) identify four crucial elements for trust-enhancing content marketing

strategies: shared values with customers, interdependence, quality communication, and non-opportunistic behaviour. Jefferson and Tanton (2013) emphasise that content should be tailored to different platforms; for example, content on Facebook should be engaging, charming, or inspirational, whereas content on real-time communication platforms should offer newsworthy value. Scholars also note that successful CM content should transcend basic sales information and should evoke strong positive emotions (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2008), or deliver surprises (Handley & Chapman, 2011). Halvorson and Rach (2012) argue that CM must align with business objectives; otherwise, the content lacks purpose. They suggest that CM should foster active sharing and following of brand information through emotional, informative, or entertaining means, rather than merely filtering or ignoring brand advertisements. Kilgour et al. (2015) indicate that CM promotes consumption by delivering valuable and sustained content to the target audience. The Content Marketing Institute's 2015 report outlines the top three organisational goals for B2B CM as brand awareness (84%), sales conversion (83%), and customer engagement (81%). For B2C companies, the leading goals were customer retention/loyalty (88%), customer engagement (88%), and brand awareness (87%), which align closely with the primary goals of CM proposed by Rose and Pullizzi (2011): brand awareness, nurturing, customer conversion, customer service, customer upsell, and cultivating passionate subscribers. Businesses pursue diverse objectives with content marketing. For example, some organizations target directly boosting sales, while others view CM as a long-term strategy aimed at managing customer relationships, building trust through content, understanding customer needs, and fostering loyalty (Simone, 2012). Brodie et al. (2011) have found that active customer engagement with brands online enhances loyalty, satisfaction, emotional connections, and trust. Consistent exposure through CM has been shown to increase brand awareness and demonstrate expertise, thereby establishing brand recognition as a leader (Brady et al., 2009). Rahim and Clemens (2012) identify that the primary goals of CM for organisations in North America and Europe are to expand business opportunities, increase website traffic, and enhance customer engagement. These brand-centric marketing activities significantly improve

differentiation in the market, helping companies to stand out. Nevertheless, regardless of the specific objectives behind CM for businesses, the content disseminated must captivate the target audience and deliver value to increase interactions with the brand. The impact of CM is evident in generating a return on investment and stimulating purchases (Stewart, 2008). Today's marketing practitioners require precise measurements of marketing activities to maximise company value (Stewart et al., 2009). However, due to the variety of internet data, such as website traffic, sales revenue, customer feedback, search rankings, and customer loyalty, establishing unified evaluation standards for SMCM is challenging (Pulizzi, 2011). Originally, content marketing effectiveness is measured by click-through rates, but this metric focuses only on the quantity of clicks, overlooking actual readership, comprehension, and interaction with the content (Kotler et al., 2009). Effective measurement of content marketing should cover the depth and breadth of content dissemination and the interactions it triggers to evoke emotions in the audience. A study by Ogilvy and Mather (2014), which covered 16 countries and 6500 social media businesses, revealed significant content preferences among audiences across different nations, suggesting that CM should be appropriately localised rather than generalised. Fisher (2009) notes that different companies may have distinct criteria for evaluating the effects of social media-based marketing activities.

Indeed, the essence of understanding marketing activities is its objectives, progress, and methodologies. This study advocates for the use of customer engagement as a metric to evaluate the effectiveness of content marketing within content communities, for two main reasons. Firstly, metrics such as click-through rates and interactions capture various facets of customer engagement. Secondly, specific to the Douyin platform, AI technology identifies all interactions between customers and content, facilitating the ongoing promotion of content to potential customers. Consequently, these metrics of interaction are vital for devising content marketing strategies on Douyin. Thus, observing customer engagement behaviour serves as a crucial indicator of content marketing effectiveness.

2.2.5 Summary

It is clear that CM based on social media has increasingly captured the interest of scholars, emerging as a burgeoning research area in marketing. The existing knowledge is substantial, though not exhaustive. However, despite widespread recognition of CM's importance in academic circles, there remains no definitive definition of CM, nor a consensus on the essential elements and measurable outcomes of social media content marketing (SMCM) (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). There is a notable gap in how to craft an SMCM strategy that maximises its effectiveness. Moreover, the field lacks sufficient evaluation criteria for the elements and impacts associated with corporate SMCM, and there is a shortage of analysis frameworks grounded in established theories. Therefore, investigating how brands can foster theoretical innovation through CM strategies in the Douyin fashion content community carries significant practical implications for businesses engaged in social media marketing, as well as scholarly relevance.

2.3 Summary of this chapter

This chapter delves into the evolution of social media and the significant influence of social media content marketing on contemporary corporate marketing strategies. Social media has endowed companies with a more efficient and cost-effective platform for their marketing efforts. In today's marketing environment, content marketing is an essential facet of social media marketing strategies. However, theoretical research on social media content marketing remains in a nascent stage.

The foundational premise of this research is the idea that corporate social media content can serve as a vital tool for capturing user attention and forging connections with consumers. Nonetheless, content design is subject to variation due to the unique characteristics of different social media platforms. As a relatively new, algorithm-driven short-video platform, Douyin has challenged traditional social media content design paradigms. However, there is a lack of research on brand content marketing dissemination on this platform, and existing studies typically rely on

paradigms from earlier research on other social media platforms to examine TikTok's content marketing strategies. Consequently, this research contends that it is crucial to critically examine this innovative online environment and enhance the academic understanding of Douyin (TikTok) as a marketing platform.

Furthermore, this study aims to assess the efficacy of brand content marketing within Douyin's fashion community and to refine the theoretical framework of content marketing through the lenses of communication effect theory and consumer behavioural motivation theory. The study can provide comprehensive theoretical support for fashion brands' content marketing on Douyin. Therefore, the research reviews three theories separately in the subsequent chapter:

1. Customer engagement as an indicator of content marketing effectiveness
2. Communication effect theory (agenda-setting) as a measure of content marketing communication impacts
3. Behavioural motivation theory (uses and gratifications theory) as a tool to explore the motivations and needs of content marketing consumers.

Chapter Three: Customer Engagement Behaviour in Content Marketing from the Perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory

This chapter is structured into four sections. In the first section, the literature on customer engagement and customer engagement behaviour (CEB) is reviewed as a practical demonstration of content marketing's utility. This study aims to delineate CEB concepts and dimensions. By defining the fundamental concepts of customer involvement, it establishes a metric of CEB to be utilised in this research. The second section examines the definition of and research on agenda-setting theory, a foundational theory that is central to this study. It discusses concepts derived from this theory, including secondary agenda-setting, the need for orientation (NFO), media use, and agenda melding. Here, agenda-setting is not only theoretical support but also enriches our understanding of communication effectiveness in content marketing. A conceptual framework for applying this theory in content marketing research is outlined.

The third section delves into uses and gratifications theory (UGT), focusing on its significance in the research conducted on Douyin. By applying this theory to content marketing, this section sets forth the primary research objective: to explore the relationship between user needs and motivations and customer engagement in Douyin's fashion communities, thereby providing theoretical support for content marketing from the consumer perspective.

Finally, this chapter synthesises the literature review and presents the study's core viewpoints, highlighting the importance of three key theories.

3.1 Customer Engagement

3.1.1 The Definition of Customer Engagement

Gambetti and Graffigna (2010) contend that customer engagement (CE) has become a vital component in successfully developing and sustaining customer-brand

relationships. The continual advancement of the Internet, along with related devices and platforms—especially the prevalent use of social media—has profoundly impacted the ways in which customers and brands interact. Customer engagement is a critical element that brands must focus on and enhance during the interaction process between customers and brands, according to Brodie et al. (2011). Patterson, Yu and De Ruyter (2006) initially introduce the concept of CE, defining it as encompassing the physiological, cognitive, and emotional aspects of customers' interactions with a service organization. Kumar and Pansari (2016) expand on this by noting that when customers feel satisfied with the relationship with a company and establish an emotional connection, they will likely progress to "engagement" with the enterprise. Brodie et al. (2011) suggest a definition of CE that is applicable in many environments, describing it as a psychological state that arises during interactions with other stakeholders and through the creation of customer experiences in specific service relationships. Although there is no universally accepted definition of CE in marketing literature, as noted by Maslowska, Malhouse, and Collinger (2016), research on CE can be summarised from three perspectives: 1. the behavioural perspective, 2. the psychological perspective, and 3. a combination of both behavioural and psychological perspectives. These CE concepts are summarised in Table 2.

Academically, Brodie et al. (2011, p. 260) articulate widely recognise basic principles for understanding customer engagement (CE) as follows:

“a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object of the service relationship. It occurs under a specific set of context dependent conditions generating differing customer engagement levels; and exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that co-create value. Customer engagement plays a central role in a nomological network governing service relationships in which other relational concepts are antecedents and/or consequences in iterative customer engagement processes. It is a multi-dimensional concept subject to a context and/or

stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions.”

Table 2. Comparison of customer engagement concepts

Perspectives	Author	Definitions
Psychological perspective	(Brodie et al., 2011; Chathoth et al., 2014; So, King & Sparks, 2014; Cabiddu, De Carlo & Piccoli, 2014)	The psychological state that emerges from the interactive and co-creative experiences between customers and organizations during the service.
Behaviour perspective	(Kumar et al., 2010)	The interaction between customers and businesses, as well as between customers and potential customers, encompasses both purchasing and non-purchasing activities.
	(Van Doorn et al., 2010; Javornik & Mandelli, 2012; Wei, Miao & Huang, 2013; Jaakola & Alexander, 2014)	Customer behaviour that extends beyond purchasing is often driven by various incentive factors associated with a brand or enterprise.
Psychological behavioural perspectives	(Wang, Yu & Zhang, 2014)	Customer engagement encompasses two perspectives: psychologically, it involves a customer's desire for closeness, dependence, and loyalty to a brand, influenced by their needs, interests, and consumption experiences, among other factors. Behaviourally, it involves customers participating in a series of activities related to the brand.

Source: the researcher

The definition by Brodie et al. (2011) highlight the role of CE in the dynamic between customers and brands. However, there are several concepts akin to customer engagement that warrant further investigation: customer participation, customer involvement, customer commitment, and citizen behaviour. Thus, to gain a clearer understanding of the nuances of customer engagement, it is crucial to differentiate these concepts from CE.

3.1.1.1 Customer Participation and Customer Engagement

The first distinction between customer participation and customer engagement lies in the roles of the customer and the firm. Customer participation (CP) refers to the degree to which customers are involved in a firm's processes of producing and delivering services (Dabholkar, 1990). Various levels of participation reflect the extent to which customers actively engage in making purchases and creating value (Nysveen & Pedersen, 2014). The objective of CP is to involve customers in interactions that benefit both the firm and the customer. Yet, in this scenario, firms often pursue their own objectives, which seldom align with those of their customers (Gillis et al., 2018). Typically, the firm leads the interactive behaviour (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). On the other hand, customer engagement (CE) centres on reciprocal interactions between firms and customers (Gillis et al., 2018). Companies are expected to consistently deliver value in every interaction with their customers such that both the organisation and the customer are considered equals, although the customer may influence the organisation's decisions to some extent (Gillis et al., 2018).

The second difference concerns the foundational premises of customer participation versus customer engagement. CP considers transactions as essential, whereas CE prioritises the customer experience over mere transactions. Such experiences may or may not involve an actual transaction (Brodie et al., 2011). Margolin (2002) explains that a customer's purchase and experience of a firm's product encompass operational and reactive dimensions. The operational dimension pertains to the practical use of the product, whereas the reactive dimension focuses on how the customer perceives the product and assigns meaning to it. CP is exclusively concerned with behavioural

dimension (Gillis et al., 2018). In contrast, CE not only addresses the operational aspects but also emphasises the reflective dimension. Furthermore, CE does not depend on transactions, marking a significant divergence from CP.

3.1.1.2 Customer Involvement and Customer Engagement

Customer involvement is acknowledged as a precursor to customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011), meaning that customer involvement significantly influences customer engagement (France et al., 2016). Muncy and Hunt (1984) describe customer involvement as the degree to which an individual is interested in an object due to their values, goals, and sense of self. This involvement is predicated on the assumption that consumers are rational and actively seek information to make well-informed decisions. The critical factor determining the level of customer involvement is the perceived relevance of the object (firm) to the individual, based on intrinsic needs, values, and interests (France et al., 2016). Customer involvement primarily focuses on the extent to which a customer perceives the relevance of the object to themselves, thus it is considered solely at the cognitive level. It does not address whether customers develop emotional or behavioural responses following their involvement. In contrast, the concept of customer engagement encompasses not only cognitive but also emotional and behavioural dimensions (Hollebeek, 2011; So et al., 2014). Consequently, the scope of customer engagement is broader than that of customer involvement.

3.1.1.3 Customer Commitment and Customer Engagement

Firstly, numerous studies suggest that customer commitment is a prerequisite for customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2011). Vasquez-Parraga and Sahagun (2020) define customer commitment as the degree of customer involvement or a sense of obligation to continue purchasing a product or service from the same company. This definition implies that a company must make its services or products appealing enough that customers feel motivated to return. The extent of an individual's satisfaction with a company's product or service influences the level of customer commitment, which is evident in the customer's willingness to reengage with the firm, such as through repeat purchases (Vasquez-Parraga & Sahagun, 2020).

However, this reconnection with the company is an external manifestation of customer commitment. Fundamentally, customer commitment is cognitive, whereby the customer forms a judgment about the firm after experiencing a service or product (Vasquez-Parraga & Sahagun, 2020). When customers exhibit a high level of commitment, they are inclined to actively seek engagement. Van Doorn et al. (2010) observe that highly committed customers are more likely to participate in brand communities to learn about other users, enhance their understanding of the brand and its applications, and share their knowledge and experiences within the community. Thus, the researcher posits that customer commitment is essential for fostering customer engagement. Although both customer commitment and engagement are cognitive, customer engagement encompasses a broader scope as also includes emotional and behavioural dimensions.

Secondly, customer commitment refers to the bond between the customer and the company (brand) that typically forms after the customer has made a purchase or received a service (Vasquez-Parraga & Sahagun, 2020). This differs from customer engagement, which emphasises establishing a connection with the customer prior to any purchase. According to Vasquez-Parraga and Sahagun's (2020) description, the customer becomes committed only after the transaction or service experience is complete. In contrast, customer engagement does not require a prior purchase; the brand must engage with the customer regardless of whether they have started purchasing.

3.1.1.4 Customer Citizen Behaviour and Customer Engagement

Customer citizenship behaviour is recognised as one of the behavioural manifestations of customer engagement. Groth (2005) categorises customer behaviour into customer cooperative production behaviour and customer citizenship behaviour. The former pertains to the behaviour necessary for service delivery, known as the customer's "in-role behaviour." In contrast, customer citizenship behaviour consists of voluntary actions that go beyond the requirements of service procedures. These behaviours positively impact enterprise performance and facilitate the effective operation of the business, representing the "extra-role behaviour" of customers, which includes

activities such as recommending products and services, providing feedback to enterprises, and assisting other customers.

Therefore, it is evident that customer citizenship behaviour also constitutes a non-purchase behaviour of customers, but it exclusively encompasses behavioural components, whereas customer engagement encompasses a broader scope that includes three components: cognition, emotion, and behaviour. Furthermore, while customer citizenship behaviour is invariably beneficial to the enterprise, customer engagement behaviour can be advantageous but might also potentially harm the interests of the enterprise (Brodie, et al., 2011).

Reviewing the conceptualisation of customer engagement (CE) from Brodie et al. (2011) and its distinctions from related concepts, a core principle of CE can be summarised as follows:

Customer engagement is facilitated through an interactive, co-created experience with the focal agent/object (e.g., brand) (Brodie et al., 2010). Both the subject and the object of customer engagement are continuously engaged in a relationship characterized by equal interaction. Customer engagement does not solely originate from, nor is it concluded by, a customer purchase. It involves cultivating a multi-dimensional relationship between the customer and the brand that extends beyond the mere act of purchasing.

It is important to recognise that this definition portrays customer engagement as a multi-level concept (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a; Maltouss et al., 2013). Maltouss et al. (2013) introduce a continuum, suggesting that CE can range from very low to extremely high intensities. Hollebeek (2011a) asserts that these intensity levels vary based on the customer's investment in the brand.

Another significant aspect of customer engagement is its multidimensionality, a key principle that distinguishes CE from other concepts (Brodie et al., 2011). CE requires consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investments (Hollebeek, 2011a; Hollebeek, 2011b). In their customer engagement model, Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012b) highlight that cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions are

applicable to all individuals' experiences, feelings, and participation, both within and beyond the transactions.

Considering the impact of various contextual factors on the levels and intensities of CE, this study considers it crucial to explore CE within Douyin, thus expanding the theoretical literature on CE. Additionally, given the importance of its multidimensionality, this research aims to discuss specific dimensions of CE relevant to this study.

3.1.2 The Dimensions of CE

France et al. (2016) note that early studies on customer engagement (CE) laid a foundational theoretical groundwork for understanding CE, as well as providing a solid framework for the development of models. Subsequent research in this area has introduced a variety of models and scales that further refine, operationalise, and validate the concept of CE (e.g., Bowden, 2009; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Marbach et al., 2016), as depicted in Table 3.

Researchers have employed various dimensions to analyse CE performance on social media (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Leckie et al., 2016; Sashi, 2012), with most recent studies supporting the notion that CE is inherently multidimensional. Generally, scholars agree that the dimensions of CE form a continuous sequence of cognition, emotion, and behaviour (Alvarez-Milan, 2018; Hollebeek, 2018). Hollebeek (2018) defines cognitive CE as the self-elaboration and personalised understanding of the brand that users develop through interactions. Emotional CE refers to the short-term or long-term emotions that users foster with the brand. Behavioural CE involves the tangible actions and interactions between users and brands.

This study acknowledges the multidimensional nature of CE. Throughout this project, the research adopts the viewpoint of Barger et al. (2016), who argue that the evolution of social media has enabled customers to exhibit many new behaviours related to brands. These behaviours make the concept of customer engagement more intuitive. Additionally, social media facilitates the measurement of behavioural metrics such as

likes, comments, and shares (Barger et al., 2016; Kunz et al., 2017; Pentina et al., 2018).

In the next section, the research comprehensively reviews studies related to customer engagement behaviour (CEB) and introduce the concept of CEB is applied in this study.

Table 3. Research on customer engagement dimensions

Authors	Dimension	Description
(van Doorn et al., 2010; Javornik & Mandelli, 2012; Wei, Miao & Huang, 2013; Jaakola& Alexander, 2014)	One-dimension	Non-purchase behaviour
(Kumar et al., 2010)	Two-dimension	Both purchase and non-purchase behaviours.
(Brodie et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013)	Three-dimension	Cognition, emotion, and behaviour
(Patterson, Yu & de Ruyter, 2006)	Four-dimension	Absorption, dedication, enthusiasm, and interaction
(So, King & Sparks, 2014)	Five-dimension	Passion, attention, absorption, interaction, and identification

Source: the researcher

3.1.3 The Definition of Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB)

CEB has been extensively referenced in academic literature (Malhouse et al., 2016; Solem & Pedersen, 2016). Yet, some studies critique its scope. For instance, Hollebeek et al. (2014) contend that the prevalent definition adopts a firm-centred perspective, overlooking the pivotal role of customers in engagement research. Addressing this gap, Harmelling et al. (2017, p. 316) offer a customer-centric

definition: *“a customer’s voluntary resource contribution to a firm’s marketing function, going beyond financial patronage.”*

Furthermore, Groeger, Moroko, and Hollebeek (2016) challenge the participant selection in Van Doorn et al.’s (2010) study, noting it included only customers who had previously purchased the brand’s products or services. They argue that since customer engagement is not solely dependent on prior purchases, the behaviour of potential customers who have interacted with the brand but have not made a purchase should also be considered. To elaborate, Groeger, Moroko, and Hollebeek (2016, p.192) study non-purchasing customers and redefine CEB as “non-paying consumer’s motivationally driven, positively valanced behavioural manifestations toward a product, brand, or firm, predicated on consumption of free offerings.”

Despite various academic definitions, this research adopts Van Doorn et al.’s (2010) definition, concluding that it primarily encompasses two elements: motivational drivers and behaviour beyond purchases. While different definitions offer varied perspectives, these core elements consistently emerge. Harmelling et al.’s (2017) concept of “beyond financial patronage” aligns with the idea of behaviour extending beyond purchases.

The most common form of financial patronage among customers is the purchase of branded products/services. Meanwhile, “voluntary resource contribution” resonates with “motivational drivers”. Such voluntary contributions are subjectively motivated by the client. Responding to the definition by Groeger, Moroko, and Hollebeek (2016), non-consuming customers are distinguished from purchasing behaviours, similar to Van Doorn et al.’s (2010) view, which also suggests that CEB may exclude purchasing behaviours. Additionally, the terms “motivationally driven” and “motivational drivers” are strikingly consistent.

Overall, the alternative definitions tend to converge around the foundational concepts of Van Doorn et al.’s (2010) definition, affirming its broad acceptance in academic discourse.

3.1.3.1 Classification of CEB

From a practical perspective, Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB) manifests in various ways, including customer ratings, composing brand-related blogs, and engaging in word-of-mouth promotions, participating in brand community events, and collaborating with other customers to co-create new product innovations (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012b). Conceptually, CEB also takes multiple forms. Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) identify four distinct engagement behaviours: enhancement, co-development, influencing, and mobilisation. Additionally, Verleye et al. (2014) classify these behaviours into compliance, collaboration, feedback, assisting other customers, and generating positive word of mouth (WOM).

The lack of academic consensus on CEB classification stems from the influence of specific research contexts on the outcomes. Some researchers have explored CEB in physical (offline) environments (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Groeger et al., 2016), while others have focused on virtual (online) environments (Vivek et al., 2012b; Dolan et al., 2016).

Predominantly, CEB research centres on online settings, which is also the context of this study. The diversity within online environments has enabled scholars to delineate more nuanced categories of CEB, such as online engagement behaviours (Perez-Vega et al., 2021), social media engagement behaviours (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011), and website engagement behaviours (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016). The classification of CEB varies with the research context; thus, this study prioritises selecting an appropriate classification that aligns with its specific online setting.

Therefore, this study employs the classification of CEB in a social media context as delineated by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), which categorises customer engagement behaviours into consumption, contribution, and creation.

This categorisation also aligns with the broader definition of customer engagement (CE), viewed as a multi-level concept. The researcher underscores that CE involves cultivating a multi-layered relationship between the customer and the brand that transcends mere purchases. As the behavioural dimension of CE, CEB should also reflect varying intensity levels. According to Hollebeek (2011b), less engaged

customers display behaviours requiring lower activation levels, while more engaged customers partake in behaviours demanding greater activation and immersion. The classification system by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) presents a spectrum from low engagement behaviours to higher engagement behaviours. The subsequent section delves into these categories, detailing low, medium, and high levels of engagement behaviours.

3.1.3.1.1 Consumption

Muntinga et al. (2011) posit that consumption represents the minimal level of engagement. It is one of the most prevalent forms of customer engagement in brand-related activities, typically characterised by its passive nature (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). Scholars have identified several modes of consumption, including immersive learning (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2016), covert observation through comments and discussions from others (Maslowska, Malthouse & Collinger, 2016), and the acquisition and comprehension of information (Dolan et al., 2016).

Schivinski et al. (2016) further delineate the specific expressions of consumption within social media environments. This manifestation occurs in three stages: 1. Customers browse brand-related content on social media. 2. After browsing brand messages, they proceed to the brand's homepage to explore additional content posted by the brand. 3. Customers engage with the brand by clicking on follow on the brand's homepage.

In the realm of social media, consumer activity offers a deeper experience—yet, these three stages do not foster direct interactions between the customer and the brand. Additionally, Maslowska, Malthouse, and Collinger (2016) observe that beyond these three stages, customers are also inclined to engage with communications and comments from other customers on social media platforms.

3.1.3.1.2 Contribution

Contribution reflects the involvement of customers through direct or indirect interactions with brand-related content (Muntinga et al., 2011). Contribution encapsulates moderate levels of customer engagement (Muntinga, Moorman, and

Smit, 2011), such as liking, sharing, and commenting on brand posts. The advantage of such contributions for the company (brand) lies in customers dedicating their own time, expertise, and insights to shape the perceptions and attitudes of potential customers towards the company (brand) (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Contributory behaviours include customers disseminating information about the company (brand) on the platform (Brodie et al., 2013); customers endorsing specific products and brands to prospective buyers (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas, 2016); and customers sharing their evaluations and experiences with the product or brand with others on the platform (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas, 2016).

3.1.3.1.3 Creation

The creation of engagement represents the most intense form of online brand-related activities. While creation closely resembles contribution because both involve disseminating information on the platform, creation activities delve deeper than contributions. In creating, customers actively assist the brand by using their own resources to initiate brand promotion activities (Groeger, Moroko, and Hollebeek, 2016). Unlike simple contributions, where customers may share their experiences and knowledge, creation involves customers dedicating their own time to help brands develop products and enhance services (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

Creative behaviour exhibits four primary characteristics: 1. Customers aid the company in developing new products, offering advice and support (Brodie et al., 2013; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Maslowska, Malthouse, and Collinger, 2016). 2. Customers proactively generate content for their social media pages (Muntinga et al., 2011; Dolan et al., 2016). 3. Customers disseminate branded content across various media platforms, for instance, posting about the brand on Facebook while simultaneously sharing the content on their Instagram and Twitter pages (Dolan et al., 2016). 4. Beyond online activities, customers also recommend the brand in person (Schivinski et al., 2016).

The three dimensions of customer engagement behaviour (CEB) correspond closely with the aims of this study. Initially, their efficacy in enhancing CEB within social media environments has been validated (Groeger et al., 2016). Furthermore, their

specific expressions on Douyin (TikTok) are pivotal to this research. An examination of the Douyin algorithm reveals that the unique presentation of CEB on this platform not only fosters brand-customer relationships but also aids AI in assessing content quality and facilitating broader distribution. Consequently, this study leverages these three CEB dimensions to investigate the interplay between CEB and brand content within the Douyin fashion community.

A key goal of this research is to assess how the perceived importance of content by customers affects CEB in content marketing. Specifically, it explores how brand content serves as a precursor to CEB in the Douyin fashion community. Although numerous studies have explored precursors to CEB, this research uniquely focuses on the influence of content salience as a precursor to CEB. Therefore, a thorough literature review on CEB precursors is essential to provide insights and empirical support for the influence of brand content as a precursor to CEB in this study.

3.1.4 The Antecedents of CEB

Numerous antecedents have been proposed and empirically validated in the development of customer engagement (CE) and customer engagement behaviour (CEB) concepts, which are considered in the following analysis. Lim and Rasul (2022) examine previous CE research and delineate eight categories of antecedents for CE and CEB: (1) Brand-related, (2) Customer-related, (3) Industry-related, (4) Marketer-related, (5) Message-related, (6) Platform-related, (7) Social-related, and (8) Value-related. Given that this study primarily investigates the impact of brand content on CEB, Lim and Rasul focus predominantly on reviewing brand-related, customer-related, and message-related factors as antecedents influencing CE/CEB.

3.1.4.1 Brand-related antecedents

Brand-related antecedents primarily consider the actions brands undertake to facilitate customer engagement behaviour (CEB). Brands are categorised into three characteristics as antecedents for CEB: providing customer access, offering customer incentives, and showcasing brand features. Providing customer access entails brands enabling engagement in brand-related activities by establishing supportive channels

like websites and social networking platforms (SNPs) (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Customer incentives typically involve online marketing strategies (Harmeling et al., 2017), where brands may reward customers for referrals or provide opportunities for free use (Groeger et al., 2016). The effectiveness of brand incentive measures increases when persuasive language is strategically employed, such as offering discounts, endorsements, and rewards to encourage registration or participation in activities like contests (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Additionally, some scholars suggest that these incentives are not exclusively external; Quach et al. (2017) observe that CE peaks when external rewards are absent, suggesting that CE is likely driven by intrinsic motivation. Another dimension involves brand or organisational characteristics, particularly brand reputation and brand assets (Van Doorn et al., 2010), which serve as significant company-related antecedents. However, since this study does not focus on specific brands, brand features are not a primary factor for this research.

3.1.4.2 Customer-related antecedents

Customer-related antecedents encompass the motivations and influencing factors that affect CE in non-transactional interactions with a brand. These antecedents are divided into three categories: relationship structures, customer personality, and customer self-conceptualisation. Relationship structures entail elements such as brand trust, commitment, customer satisfaction (Hollebeek, 2011b), and community attachment (Jacola & Alexander, 2014). Customer characteristics cover a range of demographic features, emotional responses, and knowledge reservoirs (Sashi, 2012; So et al., 2020). Customer self-conception includes the construction of self-image, the expression of self-image, and the customer's perceptions of their role (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020; Wang & Lee, 2020).

3.1.4.3 Information-related antecedents

Information-related antecedents primarily include the characteristics of content developed by brands and shared with customers. This content falls into two categories: brand content and customer content. Brand content pertains to the attributes of the brand's messages and its style of communication, such as entertainment value,

informativeness, and novelty (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Bai & Yan, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Wu et al. (2019) demonstrate that a friendly communication style can boost engagement metrics like likes and comments. Ashley and Tuten (2015) find that content that is rich, frequent, and focused on facts significantly increases CEB. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2018) suggest that brand content should not be exclusively informative; incorporating emotional or personality-driven elements is more effective in stimulating CEB.

Customer content consists of posts made by customers within a community, including comments that drive engagement and create a “chatroom” atmosphere (Cheung et al., 2020; Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2020) discover that customer engagement is higher with content posted by fellow customers than with content from brand interactions. This study mainly focuses on the impact of brand content, with customer content being addressed only briefly.

In summary, this study identifies three categories of CEB antecedents, each distinct yet interconnected and sequential. Brand-related antecedents involve brands providing channels and incentives to stimulate CEB. Customers assess their relationship with the brand and make decisions about participation based on self-reflection and personal attributes. Between these two sets of antecedents are brand activities that promote CEB, predominantly through the dissemination of brand content. Brand content not only serves as a vehicle for brands to encourage CEB through various channels but also forms the foundation upon which customers build and assess their relationship with the brand. The findings suggest that information-related antecedents frequently trigger customer-related antecedents for CEB, with the resultant CEB acting as the concrete manifestation of brand antecedents.

In this investigation, the research pinpoints a critical issue: the extent of customers’ understanding of brand information. It is well-established that information tends to degrade during transmission (Bar-Hillel, 1955). There can be significant discrepancies between the sender’s and the receiver’s interpretations of the same message. Yet, it remains underexplored how such variations in perception might influence customer engagement behaviours. The study highlights the importance of these discrepancies;

differences in understanding information can lead to its being overlooked or misinterpreted, which could potentially alter audience behaviour. Therefore, a key aim of this research is to examine the effects of content dissemination within the Douyin fashion community, guided by the agenda-setting theory. This objective focuses on the role of online community content in shaping audiences' perceptions of content significance and, subsequently, how these perceptions influence CEB.

Another objective of this study is to delve into the motivations behind customer engagement, specifically the customer-related antecedents of CEB. Although existing literature provides valuable insights, the researcher contends that there is a pressing need for more detailed studies, particularly in the context of the burgeoning platform Douyin. This effort seeks to deepen our understanding of the customer-related antecedents of CEB.

3.1.5 Summary

In this section, the research delves into the literature on customer engagement, synthesising various definitions offered by scholars to outline the characteristics of customer engagement.

Customer engagement is defined as a multifaceted and dynamically evolving interaction between customers and brands, influenced by varying contextual elements. Brands must forge emotional and valued connections with customers on different platforms. Importantly, customer engagement emphasises establishing these bonds with the company (brand) prior to any purchase behaviour. Such non-purchase behaviour connections are deemed robust and reliable. This research project investigates the behavioural dimensions of customer engagement. The research categorises different types of customer engagement behaviour (CEB) and identifies CE/CEB as a marketing concept particularly apt for social media environments. Building on this, the study examines customer engagement behaviour on social media, adopting the measurement criteria of consumption, contribution, and creation as outlined by Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2016). The study also reviews relevant antecedents of CEB-brand-related, customer-related, and content-related-and

explored the interconnections among these categories.

Customer engagement (CE) serves two purposes in this study. Firstly, CE demonstrates the actual impact of content marketing on customers within the Douyin fashion community, validating the effectiveness of content marketing strategies. Secondly, CEB reflects the behavioural responses of customers within the community, shedding light on their motivations and needs. This insight provides a theoretical foundation for understanding consumer perspectives within the content marketing framework of the community.

Addressing the first role, the research aims to determine how customers' perceptions of content within Douyin's fashion community influence their engagement. The findings are expected to establish a direct causal link between the effects of content dissemination on the platform and customer engagement, thereby affirming the success of content marketing. In this context, the study employs agenda-setting theory, which is further discussed in the following paragraph.

3.2 Agenda Setting

This section examines the literature on agenda-setting theory. While the previous section focused on customer engagement as a result of analysing content marketing in Douyin fashion communities, this study employs agenda-setting effects as theoretical support for evaluating the effectiveness of companies' content marketing communication in these communities. Du Plessis (2015) highlights the nature of content marketing as an effective strategy for companies using non-invasive content, underscoring that the effectiveness of community content directly influences the success of content marketing. Historically, the effectiveness of content marketing has not been tested in studies of communication effectiveness. The research stresses that if content communication effects in Douyin's fashion community do not impact customer engagement behaviour, it demonstrates that the content used in these marketing strategies is ineffective. In essence, although customers may view the content, if it fails to influence them or stimulate the desired emotional and behaviour, the content marketing strategy is deemed unsuccessful.

In conclusion, the research utilises agenda-setting-a classic theory of media effects-to examine the impact of content marketing on customer engagement behaviour, thereby validating the effectiveness of content marketing in the Douyin fashion community. This section begins by discussing the conceptual background and evolution of agenda-setting theory. It then methodically reviews the categorisation of different agendas within the theory. Finally, it introduces agenda melding as a novel perspective within the agenda-setting framework, adapted for the contemporary media landscape. After a thorough review of the literature on agenda-setting theory, this section underscores the significant role of the theory as a framework for understanding media effects in this study.

3.2.1 The Development of Agenda Setting

The concept of agenda-setting is rooted in the notion of a "Pseudo-environment", introduced by Lippmann in his 1922 work, "Public Opinion". Lippmann describes the media as a conduit between "the world outside and the picture in our heads", acting like a "beam of searchlight" that highlights issues and topics, shaping what the audience deems important. Four decades later, Cohen (1963) articulates that while the media might not dictate what to think, they significantly influence what the audience thinks about. Integrating these ideas, McCombs and Shaw (1972) formally introduce agenda-setting theory. They demonstrate through their study of election news coverage and its impact on the Chapel Hill community in the United States that the prominence of news subjects in mass media positively correlates with their perceived importance by the audience. They define salience as the level of visibility or prominence given to a topic in news coverage, explaining agenda-setting as a process that transfers the salience of issues from the media to the audience, thereby setting the public agenda. Since its inception, the agenda-setting theory has been bolstered and refined through over 400 studies (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2014), highlighting the pervasive influence of the media on public perception (Rogers et al., 1993).

Theoretically, an agenda represents a "list" of issues arranged by importance, which the mass media use to guide their information dissemination to the public.

Consequently, the public's mental list of important issues becomes nearly identical to that of the mass media (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). As media platforms evolved and research expanded, the field of agenda-setting transcended its original research scope (Lopez Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998; McCombs, 2005, 2014). Studies have primarily examined the influence of two types of agendas on the public agenda: the mass media agenda and the online/social media agenda, recognising the latter as a new medium for media agendas (McCombs, 2005, 2014; Harder et al., 2017; Shaw, 1977). With advancements in research providing deeper insights, the categories of agenda-setting have been delineated into primary agenda-setting, attribute agenda-setting, and agenda melding (McCombs et al., 2018). Following this framework, the research methodically reviews the various agendas and specific branches of agenda-setting theory.

3.2.2 Agenda Classification

This section primarily reviews the various agendas within the agenda-setting process. The rationale behind examining these classifications is to enable the research to determinate the interrelationships among these different agendas and to identify those that are relevant to this study. Ultimately, the review aims to assess the effectiveness of agendas within the Douyin fashion community on setting the agendas of its customers.

3.2.2.1 Media Agenda and Social Media Agenda

A media agenda consists of guidelines that the media use to assess and prioritise the significance of information they receive (West, Turner & Zhao, 2010). The outcomes of the media agenda have a direct impact on shaping the public agenda (West, Turner & Zhao, 2010). Daily, the media is inundated with vast quantities of information, and the role of media involves filtering this information based on its importance and presenting it to the public in a selective manner. Two key characteristics of traditional media agenda-setting are its dynamism and homogeneity.

The distinctive features of the media agenda are characterised by high responsiveness (Boydston et al., 2014). “Journalists can decide on a day-to-day basis (or even much

quicker) to change their topical focus when (unexpected) external events warrant it” (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2019, p. 272). The media agenda is exceptionally sensitive to external signals compared to other agendas. When occasional external events occur, the media can swiftly decide to shift their topics, granting the media agenda a dynamic character (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2019). The sensitivity enhances its dynamism. Several factors contribute to the media agenda's adaptable nature: 1. The media's independent decision-making power to focus on specific topics. Mass media organisations possess the autonomy to select which issues they deem as priorities, free from any direct dependency on other agendas. Each media outlet can independently decide whether to cover a particular event. 2. Market competition among media outlets. Media companies operate in a competitive market, each striving to attract and retain a finite audience base, thereby competing with each other for attention and resources. 3. Prompt feedback systems. Online audience engagement, viewership ratings, newspaper circulation, and other metrics can instantly provide feedback to media organisations. These data helps media outlets decide whether to conclude or further explore selective topics and events. 4. Low costs associated with changing the media agenda. Even traditional newspapers, which are published daily, have relatively low costs when it comes to modifying topics. The speed and efficiency of altering topics in online news are even greater, adding to the agility of the media agenda (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2019).

Another significant characteristic of the media agenda is its homogeneity. This tendency for media agendas to align greatly influences political and public agendas (Walgrave et al., 2017). This uniformity is apparent in inter-media agenda-setting, as described by Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008). Initially, inter-media agenda-setting research primarily focused on traditional media. The early evidence for this came from studies examining the correlation between news agencies and newspapers (Blondheim, 1994; Breed, 1955; Gold & Simmons, 1965; Horvit, Gade, & Lance, 2013; Lim, 2011; Whitney & Becker, 1982). In an analysis of reporting on drug issues, Reese and Danielian (1989) find that traditional elite media outlets similar to The

New York Times and The Washington Post could dictate the agenda for other smaller and medium-sized media outlets in the United States.

The homogeneity of the media agenda results from the pressures of industry competition. Media outlets, eager not to overlook important news, monitor peer reports while gathering their own news, leading to increasingly homogeneous media content. Particularly, small and medium-sized media may give more weight to the viewpoints of authoritative media when deciding on news topics, to ensure the relevance and impact of their reports (Denham, 2014).

Scholars assert that these two characteristics—dynamism and homogeneity—are crucial for mass media agendas to exert their agenda-setting effect on the public agenda (Walgrave et al., 2017). In terms of dynamism, audiences are generally drawn to newsworthy events (West, Turner & Zhao, 2010), and the media's quick adaptation to unexpected events and the prompt dissemination of information tend to heighten audience appreciation of an event's importance. Regarding homogeneity, when media outlets uniformly emphasise an event, audiences intuitively perceive it as more significant (Walgrave et al., 2017), thus improving the media's agenda-setting impact on the public agenda.

However, these studies characterising media agendas have traditionally been confined to mass media. In mass communication, the pathway for disseminating information runs unidirectionally from the media agenda to the public agenda. The reception of unidirectional information tends to amplify the agenda-setting effect (Kim & Li, 2006). However, the advent of social media has prompted questions about the enduring influence of traditional media's agenda-setting power (Meraz, 2009).

With the rise of social platforms, information flows have become more diverse and intricate (Kim & Li, 2006; Jiang, 2014). Since the advent of social media, the primary focus in agenda-setting research has been the shifting power dynamics between the public and traditional media (Rosen, 2006). Some researchers argue that social media restores a balance of power between audiences and traditional media in the formation of civic issues (Armstrong & Moutlisas Zuniga, 2006). Meraz (2009) notes that traditional media has lost its capacity to set the agenda of political blogs—an early

form of social media—suggesting that these platforms redistribute power between traditional and citizen media. In this context, the agenda-setting power of traditional media acts more as a condition rather than a sole influencer of the public agenda. Specifically, Wang (2016) find that on Weibo (Chinese Twitter), opinion leaders—particularly business elites—emerge as the primary agenda setters.

Numerous studies underscore the significant impact of social media on the public agenda, pointing to a reciprocal relationship between public agendas on social media and traditional media agendas (Luo, 2014; King et al., 2017; Feezell, 2018; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017; Fazekas et al., 2021). While some scholars assert that social media agendas replicate power relations between mass media and audiences, Donald Shaw, one of the original proponents of the agenda-setting theory, believes that traditional media still predominantly influences the primary agenda, with reverse agenda-setting phenomena being rare (Zhao, 2018). Gilardi et al. (2022) compare the effects of traditional media agendas, election candidates' social media agendas, and politicians' social media agendas on audiences' perceived agendas, identifying a dynamic interplay between traditional and social media agendas. They emphasise a continuous and reciprocal exchange of agendas between these media types (Gilardi et al., 2022). From the audience's perspective, they underscore the significant role of the social media agenda in shaping audience perceptions. Nonetheless, the influence of the traditional media agenda has not been completely supplanted by social media; the traditional media agenda retains its power, even as social media agendas also significantly affect the public agenda through their rich content and diverse engagement opportunities (Chadwick, 2011). Both traditional and social media continue to have a substantial impact on the public agenda.

3.2.2.2 Public Agenda

The public agenda often represents the issues of most significant concern to society. When an issue enters the public agenda, it potentially becomes part of the political agenda (Shaun & Grossman, 2019). Early research categorised the public agenda into systematic and institutional categories (Cobb & Elder, 1972). The top-down systematic agenda primarily involves issues identified by political elites or

organisations that command public attention. The public becomes aware of these issues through the media and reaches a consensus for action. Conversely, the institutional agenda is bottom-up, triggered when government or judicial entities recognise a significant social response or the potential impact of an issue, necessitating serious consideration by authoritative decision-makers. Therefore, the public agenda is typically formed for two reasons: either the media or political elites feel a need to raise public awareness of an event, or they believe the public should prioritise a specific issue (Jones, 1994).

Building on an understanding of how the public agenda forms, scholars began to explore the factors shaping it. Seminal agenda-setting studies, such as those by McCombs & Shaw (1972), emphasise the significant role of mass media in shaping the public agenda. The content of mass media influences public priorities and directs attention toward specific events. Additionally, the audience's perceptions of the social environment or the state of issues shape the public agenda (Wlezien, 2005; John et al., 2017). For instance, public concern about inflation may arise due to its impact on our daily lives. Some issues of public concern attract the attention of the media, which in turn amplifies the issue's impact, reaching a wider audience and ultimately creating a public agenda (Downs, 1972). Lastly, the public agenda is influenced by elite mobilization. Political elites attract public attention to specific events (Cohen, 1995). Indeed, political decision-makers also aim to shape the public agenda by communicating their messages to their audiences through the mass media. As can be seen, the public news agenda is consistently dominated by the media, elites, and authoritative decision-makers, who appear to have the power to set it.

However, with the advent of social media, scholars have observed that public agendas (topics of significant concern to users) on social media can exert a bottom-up influence on both social media and traditional media agendas (Wang et al., 2021; Barberá et al., 2019). This influence, however, necessitates a substantial audience base; the public agenda can sway media and social media agendas only if a significant number of users engage with and comment on the event. Then, the public agenda influences the media and the social media agendas (Salman et al., 2016). This

phenomenon mirrors the public agenda formation factors described by John et al. (2017), who note that when a majority of the audience pays close attention to an event, the media then incorporates the event into their agenda, publishes it, and informs a wider audience, thereby establishing a public agenda.

Considering the findings of Salman et al. (2016) and John et al. (2017), it is evident that media and social media agendas continue to impact the public agenda. The research posits that the public agenda on social media can influence media agendas due to the vast user base of social media, which allows real-time participation by each user.

Compared to traditional media, a high level of interest in an event by a segment of the social media audience can quickly gain traction and be swiftly acknowledged by traditional mass media, including traditional media accounts established on social media platforms. Leveraging the dynamic nature of their platform features, these media quickly respond to redefine the media agenda, and eventually, these media and social media accounts broadcast the event to further expand its impact. In this process, the media agenda acts as a megaphone, shaping public perception.

However, Zhou and Zheng (2022) explore the interaction between social media agendas, media agendas, and public agendas regarding Covid-19 outbreaks on Chinese social media (Weibo) during the pandemic. They find that both social media and mainstream mass media agendas are influenced by public agendas when the event is an emergency and has widespread impact. Conversely, Yun et al. (2016) analyse the relationship between media, public, and personal agendas on Twitter concerning influenza. They observe that content remains active when media and organisations' accounts effectively disseminate flu-related information, suggesting that when there is a high level of interest in an event, the audience tends to rely on authoritative media to verify the reliability of information. The content posted by these media accounts on social media continues to be active and evolves into social media agendas that influence the public agenda. Ultimately, most public agendas are shaped by both mainstream mass media and social media agendas.

In conclusion, the purpose of reviewing the literature on media agendas, social media

agendas, and public agendas is to affirm the effectiveness of social media agendas in impacting public agendas by summarising past research. Gilardi et al.'s (2022) study underscores the significant role of social media in shaping audience perceptions of agenda-setting. Although social media empowers users to participate and post messages, the public agenda is still largely influenced by the media and social media agendas.

This research argues that Douyin, as a social media platform, plays a pivotal agenda-setting role for its users. Based on this argument, the research seeks to elucidate the nature of agenda-setting by Douyin's fashion community and determine whether this condition influences the audience in a manner that directly impacts customer engagement.

3.2.3 The Classification of Agenda-Setting

After nearly half a century since the initial research at Chapel Hill, the concept of agenda-setting, also referred to as first-level agenda-setting, has both evolved and matured. It now encompasses a more developed set of concepts including second-level agenda-setting, agenda melding, and need for orientation (NFO), among others.

3.2.3.1 The First Level of Agenda Setting

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study is among the earliest to explore agenda-setting, introducing what has come to be known as first-level agenda-setting. The fundamental proposition of first-level agenda setting is the significance of the "object", which transitions from the media to the public (Dearing & Roger, 1996). McCombs and Shaw (1972) test the agenda-setting process during the 1968 United States presidential election. They compare the data with the results of a random survey of 100 citizens in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, North Carolina. McCombs and Shaw rank the issues mentioned by the subjects by their frequency and performed Spearman correlation, reporting a strong correlation between the media topics and participant topics. Building on the foundation of first-level agenda-setting, scholars have further explored the theory, introducing the concept of second-level agenda-setting.

3.2.3.2 The Second Level of Agenda Setting

The second level of agenda setting, also known as attribute agenda setting, addresses the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of content attributes. This concept is first validated during the primary election in 1976 (Becker & McCombs, 1978). Attributes are the characteristics, features, viewpoints, or frames of objects that shape how journalists and the public think (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). In 1993, McCombs and Shaw revise their initial assessment of agenda-setting. New research reveal that the media not only tells audiences what to think about but also how to think. Moreover, Wanta and Hu (1993) find that the media's agenda-setting effect on public opinion largely depended on the sub-issues, attributes, and the news framework. The attribute agenda setting underscores the significant degree of media influence on public perceptions. Scholars have identified four types of attributes as influential: "Sub-topics", which are independent attributes in specific problems; "framework mechanisms", which detail how the media emphasises issues through photos, quotes, and subtitles; and "emotional" and "cognitive" attributes, which McCombs and colleagues termed substantive attributes (Ghanem, 1997; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kioussis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999). McCombs et al. (2000) distinguish between two primary types of attributes: "substantive" and "emotional". Emotional attributes pertain to the valence characteristics of an object in media content (i.e., positive, neutral, or negative) that provoke the audience's emotional responses (Kioussis et al., 1999; Kioussis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; McCombs et al., 2000). Substantive attributes refer to cognitive characteristics (e.g., a candidate's age or association with a former president), which aid in constructing news and differentiating topics (Kioussis et al., 1999, 2007; McCombs et al., 2000).

In the study of attribute agenda setting, some scholars have noted its similarity to framework theory. In cognitive psychology, a framework is defined as "a function that specifies the relations among the arguments comprising a particular conceptual bundle at a particular level of abstraction" (Friedman, 1979, p.321). Weaver (2007, p.143) adopts a wide range of framing definitions, including problem definitions,

causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations, as well as key themes, phrases, and words. However, some scholars believe there are differences between the two theories. The primary distinction is that framework theory focuses more on constructing meaning in news reporting and influencing various relationships in news presentation. Attribute agenda-setting, on the other hand, focuses on the communication effect of the media, which is reflected in the impact on the focus of public opinion (McCombs, 1997).

With the development of agenda setting, scholars have observed that traditional agenda setting focuses more on the influence of media on the audience but less on the audience's motivation and ability to choose media subjectively. Consequently, Shaw (1999) proposes agenda melding, which emphasises the audience's influence in the agenda-setting process. The subsequent part of the research primarily reviews the literature on agenda melding.

3.2.4 Agenda Melding

Agenda melding is an audience-centric approach that investigates the cumulative effects of diverse media use by audiences, prompting their participation in agenda communities (Shaw et al., 1999). Unlike traditional agenda setting, agenda melding focuses on the media audience and their reasons for selecting specific information, embracing an agenda, and engaging in communication with others (Weaver, McKeever, & Shaw, 2010). Individuals integrate the civic agendas of the media and their significant reference communities with their personal views and experiences to forge a vibrant community for themselves (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014). Shaw et al. (1999) delineate six phases of agenda melding: 1. A decision to belong; 2. Information on hand; 3. Need for orientation; 4. Medium of communication; 5. First-level agenda-setting; 6. Second-level agenda-setting.

3.2.4.1 A decision to belong and information on hand

Shaw et al. (1999) explore the antecedents of agenda melding through the lens of the “theory of social dissonance” (Festinger, 1957), where individuals seek information that aligns with their opinions and avoid messages that conflict with their views.

Similarly, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1908) and Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence (1974) suggest that people strive to be part of a group to avoid feelings of isolation. To circumvent social dissonance and isolation, individuals engage with groups via media, connecting with others to reconcile their cognitive dissonance. Throughout this process, they gradually adopt the group's agenda (Shaw et al., 1999). Social psychologists posit that by seeking to mitigate uncertainties about themselves and their surroundings, individuals join groups (Hogg et al., 1995; Hogg & Terry, 2014).

Shaw et al. (1999) posit that audiences either consciously or incidentally (due to their native environment) affiliate with groups. This affiliation serves to resolve their cognitive dissonance, necessitating the acquisition of agenda information or agendas from the group. They assess this information, and based on their evaluation of the perceived group norms, they determine their next actions in accordance with their need for orientation (NFO).

3.2.4.2 NFO, Media Use, and Agenda-Setting

The underlying logic of these three concepts is that the audience's need for orientation (NFO) acts as a psychological motivator, driving the extent of their media use and ultimately predicting varying levels of media attribute agenda-setting effects (Weaver et al., 2010; Camaj & Weaver, 2014). This rationale is well-established in mass media research, especially in studies concerning political and news media (Weaver, 1980; Camaj & Weaver, 2014; Matthes, 2006, 2008).

Based on the cognitive utilitarian theory, McCombs and Weaver (1973) initially identify the NFO as the necessity for individuals to acquaint themselves with their environment through mass media. NFO is defined as the relevance or importance of information on a particular subject, or the uncertainty or degree of lack of sufficient knowledge about the subject (McCombs and Weaver, 1973, 1985; Weaver, 1977, 1980), which drives the audience's exposure to and influence by the media. Earlier studies indicate that individuals with high NFO levels were more inclined to access media (Matthes, 2008; McCombs and Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1977) and adopt the media's agenda (Matthes, 2008; McCombs and Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1977). Their

research confirmed that NFO had a stronger effect in first-level agenda setting. Matthes (2008) discovers that NFO led to significant media focus on unemployment issues. Chernov, Valenzuela, and McCombs (2011) find that NFO predict the agenda-setting impact on substance abuse issues. Camaj (2014) examines the influence of NFO on audiences' perceptions of the media and partisan political attributes.

McCombs and Weaver (1973) utilise two variables, relevance and uncertainty, to gauge the intensity of the NFO. In their earlier research, relevance is prioritised in the measurement order of NFO, leading to three levels of NFO (high, medium, and low) based on their high correlation. Their research also determines that audiences with high NFO are more likely to be influenced by the media. However, McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) discover that voters with lower interest and higher uncertainty exhibited the strongest agenda-setting effects, suggesting that those with moderate NFO (low interest and high uncertainty) are most affected. Consequently, Weaver (1980) acknowledges uncertainty as a significant influencing factor, revised the measurement order of NFO, and recognised equal importance of uncertainty and relevance, thereby creating four levels of NFO (low NFO, medium NFO with low relevance and high uncertainty, medium NFO with high relevance and low uncertainty, and high NFO). Schoenbach and Weaver (1985), in their study of the 1979 European Parliament campaign, find that German voters with low interest and high uncertainty are most susceptible to media influence on the prominence of European issues, confirming that NFO is not a linear influence process and that uncertainty does not equate to relevance for each demographic. In 2014, Camaj adapts this model to classify four NFO criteria according to audience type (high NFO, active involvement NFO, passive involvement NFO, low NFO) based on Weaver's 1980 model, and observes a positive relationship between NFO and the attribute agenda-setting effect (second-level agenda-setting). While scholars continue to refine the NFO model, their experiments demonstrate that regardless of the model, NFO can reliably predict agenda-setting effects, and there exists a strong connection between the two. Under the agenda melding hypothesis, once audiences establish their NFO

levels, they interact with different media based on these levels, making media exposure a critical precursor in agenda setting.

Shaw et al. (1999) propose that when audiences decide to seek information, those with a limited understanding of an event or issue often turn to others, including news media, for insights. The primary factor influencing audience information-seeking and media exposure is the audience's perceived NFO concerning the issue. Studies have shown that individuals with higher NFO levels are more likely to engage with media for information (Weaver, 1980; Matthes, 2008). The level of media exposure, assessed through how much media an audience consumes and how much attention they pay to it (Drew & Weaver, 1990), acts as a crucial mediator between NFO and the media's agenda-setting effects (Lee & Oh, 2013; Camaj & Weaver, 2014; Camaj, 2018). Ultimately, audiences are influenced by the agendas set by the media or groups they select, based on their NFO and the frequency of their media use. The concept of agenda setting has been previously discussed, and it is only briefly explored in this section.

3.2.5 Summary

This study delves into the Douyin fashion community, utilising the concept of agenda setting as theoretical support to comprehend the nature of content dissemination in content marketing. This notion serves as a critical theoretical foundation for subsequent research on content marketing strategies and the development of content marketing models within the Douyin fashion community.

According to the literature review, the study establishes that the social media agenda can influence the public agenda. Specifically, the community agenda within the Douyin fashion community can impact user agendas. However, the research contends that just demonstrating the existence of a community agenda in the Douyin fashion community does not allow for assertions about its impact on customer engagement behaviour (CEB). Consequently, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of content marketing by testing the causal relationship between users' perceptions of

community agendas and their engagement behaviour to address research question 2. A pivotal concept of agenda setting, “agenda melding”, is selected as the focal point for this study to tackle this research objective. Agenda melding integrates traditional agenda-setting theory and examines it from a perceptual perspective, hypothesising about the factors that influence agenda setting. For this research, the theory of agenda melding is instrumental in framing the study. Initially, the theory of cognitive dissonance highlights the underlying principles that drive user engagement in the fashion community on Douyin. The study then seeks to verify whether the need for orientation (NFO) influences the level of fashion information users receive within the content community, thereby affecting the salience of community issues perceived by users. In the third step, the research also aims to determine whether media use influences the effectiveness of the users’ perceived community agenda. Assessing the impact of users’ perceived salience of the community agenda on CEB seeks to validate the effectiveness of content marketing strategies within the community. The empirical evidence from this research framework ultimately aims to confirm the effectiveness of content marketing within the Douyin fashion community. In response to the framework, the research presents further detailed conceptual relationships and hypotheses in next section.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

Sukamolson (2007) suggests that hypothesis testing is an effective method for supporting research that aims to explain relationships between phenomena or factors. Following this recommendation, the research initially explores the relationships among variables within research question 2. Subsequently, it formulates a series of hypotheses for this research question and constructs a conceptual model based on these hypotheses.

3.3.1 Media use and agenda-setting

Early agenda-setting studies, such as those by McCombs & Shaw (1972), have investigated the relationship between media use and agenda setting. Subsequent

research, including Camaj & Weaver (2013), has identified the intensity of an audience's media use as a crucial predictor of agenda setting effectiveness. Specifically, they find that media use intensity determines how significantly mass media can set an audience's agenda. The degree of media use is typically assessed by evaluating audience media exposure and attention (Drew & Weaver, 1990), both of which directly corroborate the media's agenda-setting influence (Camaj & Weaver, 2013). The higher the media use intensity, the more pronounced the agenda-setting effect on the audience. In the context of social media, Feezell (2018) discovers that the more frequently audiences use social media to obtain information, the greater the agenda-setting impact they experience.

Although Camaj and Weaver (2013) and Feezell (2018) have confirmed the influence of media use on agenda-setting effects in political communication, the impact of media use on agenda-setting effects within the fashion community has not yet been thoroughly explored.

To clarify the dynamics of how agenda-setting effects relate to customer engagement (CE), it is essential to understand how media use influences customer agenda-setting effects in the realm of social media brand communication. Building on previous studies in political and communication fields that examine this link, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: The higher the media use by customers in the community, the more significantly they are influenced by the community's agenda-setting.

3.3.2 Media use and CEB

In studies concerning agenda-setting, media use denotes the extent to which audiences interact with media platforms and how intensively they focus on specific thematic content (Drew & Weaver, 1990; Camaj & Weaver, 2013). Predictive analyses in agenda-setting frequently concentrate on the regularity of audience engagement with mainstream media and their perceptions of attentiveness towards issues. Despite these insights, there remains a lack of discussion on how audience media exposure and attention function as precursors that influence CEB.

Within CEB research, media use is typically defined by the active participation of customers in social media messaging, exemplified by actions like quoting, liking, sharing, or commenting (van Krieken, 2019). Such online interactions are also pivotal predictive markers in CE studies (Schivinski et al., 2016). These markers are viewed by scholars as reflective of consumer media exposure and attentiveness. Oh et al. (2020) suggest that the number of likes on Twitter can reflect not only consumer media exposure but also their deliberate focus on specific content, thereby positioning media use as a behavioural manifestation of CEB.

Nevertheless, the research contends that such manifestations are behaviours that emerge following audience media exposure and attention. To date, no research has explored the influence of media use on CEB. Considering the established positive correlation between media use and political engagement in prior agenda-setting studies (Moon, 2013) - where increased media interaction correlates with enhanced political engagement - the researcher anticipates a similar positive effect of media use on CE and proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: The more frequent the media use the stronger the intention of consumers to (a) make purchases, (b) contribute and (c) create content.

3.3.3 Agenda-setting and CEB

No scholars have yet explored the connection between agenda-setting and CE, but this study aims to characterise their relationship given their mutual importance in advertising research. Golan, Kiouisis, and McDaniel (2007) establish a link between the prominence of attributes in political advertisements and those perceived by audiences. Political ads strive to highlight specific candidate issues over others (Golan, Kiouisis and McDaniel, 2005). Following this, numerous researchers have acknowledged significant agenda-setting effects on audience political participation (Kiouisis and McDevitt, 2008; Kamay, 2013; Moon, 2013).

Similarly, there appears to be a corresponding demand for community-oriented content, where the true intent of agenda-setting is to direct consumer attention toward such content. Various scholars have highlighted the importance of brand communities

in shaping consumers' perceptions of brand images, subsequently influencing their responses and behaviours. Vinhas Da Silva and Faridah Syed Alwi (2006) discover an empirical link between brand communities and customers' perceptions of a brand's corporate image. Anatolevna Anisimova (2007) noted that a company's focus on a specific brand facilitated easier consumer identification with the brand and significantly influenced their attitudes and loyalty within the communities.

However, a review of pertinent literature indicates that while the prominence of a specific brand in content communities significantly impacts customer perceptions and behaviours, studies on the agenda-setting effect of communities on CE are relatively scarce. Given these observations, the researcher anticipates that CE is positively influenced when customers internalise the effects of community agenda-setting, leading to the formulation of the following hypothesis

H3: The more significant customers perceive the community's agenda-setting activity to be, the more willing they are to engage in three kinds of behaviour: (a) purchasing, (b) contribution, and (c) creation.

3.3.4 Need for orientation (NFO) and agenda-setting

NFO represents an audience's psychological inclination towards information, influencing the impact of agenda-setting effects (McCombs & Shaw, 2018). Originally introduced by McCombs and Weaver (1973), NFO underscores the public's active information-seeking behaviour, which affects their vulnerability to agenda-setting effects (Matthes, 2006).

NFO, initially composed of relevance and uncertainty dimensions (McCombs & Weaver, 1973), defines the concepts of interest and the need for information. High interest coupled with scarce information results in elevated NFO, creating four levels: high involvement, active involvement (high relevance, low uncertainty), passive involvement (low relevance, high uncertainty), and low involvement (Camaj, 2014, p691).

High NFO is strongly associated with the adoption of media agendas (McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1980), influencing media consumption and the anticipated

impacts of attribute agenda-setting. Although this has been extensively researched in mass media, particularly in politics and news (Weaver, 1980; Camaj & Weaver, 2013; Matthes, 2006, 2008), its application as an intrinsic motivator in social media commercial communication is still not well understood, prompting this study to investigate the matter.

Despite NFO not being previously explored in commercial communication research, it can be regarded as a precursor to information-seeking behaviour in brand communication. Information-seeking acts as a critical intrinsic motivator that shapes consumer perceptions of a brand (Qin, 2020). Einwiller et al. (2010) highlight that individuals' degrees of relevance or uncertainty can independently forecast their information-seeking concerning company behaviour or issue positions, representing key elements of NFO. Logically, the higher the NFO, the stronger the motivation for seeking information, the greater the media use, and thus, the more pronounced the influence of agenda-setting (Camaj & Weaver, 2013). Matthes (2008) observes that NFO can explain the extent of information-seeking, illustrating that higher NFO among groups correlates with more robust media use and, consequently, a more potent information-seeking drive. Ultimately, groups with higher NFO are more susceptible to media agenda-setting.

While this perspective has been validated in political communication research, its presence in commercial communication remains to be conclusively established.

Therefore, based on findings from previous political communications, this research hypothesises that groups with high NFO differ from others in their media use due to their greater motivation to seek information. Moreover, variations in media use between high NFO groups and others likely lead to observable differences in agenda-setting effects among these groups. This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H4: The level of media use impacts customers' perception of community agenda-setting in both high NFO and other NFO groups.

3.3.5 NFO and CEB

NFO is recognised as a psychological factor that influences audience information-seeking behaviour (Camaj, 2019). Elevated NFO levels increase information-seeking motivations, which in turn lead to heightened media consumption and a greater responsiveness to media agenda-setting (Weaver, 1980).

In the realm of commercial communication, various studies have shown that information seeking acts as a primary motivator and effectively stimulates consumer engagement behaviours (CEB) (Qin, 2020; Silaban et al., 2022; Cornelissen, Effing & Spil, 2019). Specifically, the pursuit of advice and the acquisition of brand knowledge have been pinpointed as key drivers of CEB (Wang & Lee, 2020; Carlson et al., 2019).

Audiences with high NFO, driven by a strong desire to access media and seek information (Camaj, 2019), are likely to be more responsive to brand-related information, which leads to heightened customer engagement. In essence, individuals with high NFO tend to engage with media more frequently and are more vulnerable to the influences of community agenda-setting, thereby increasing their CEB. The observation leads to the formulation of the following two hypotheses:

H5: The level of media use has a significantly different impact on customer engagement behaviours (a. purchasing; b. contribution; c. creation) between the high NFO group and other NFO groups.

H6: The impact of the community's agenda-setting effects on customer engagement behaviours (a. purchasing; b. contribution; c. creation) differs significantly between the high NFO group and other NFO groups.

Reflecting on the outlined research, the study proposes the research model (Figure 1).

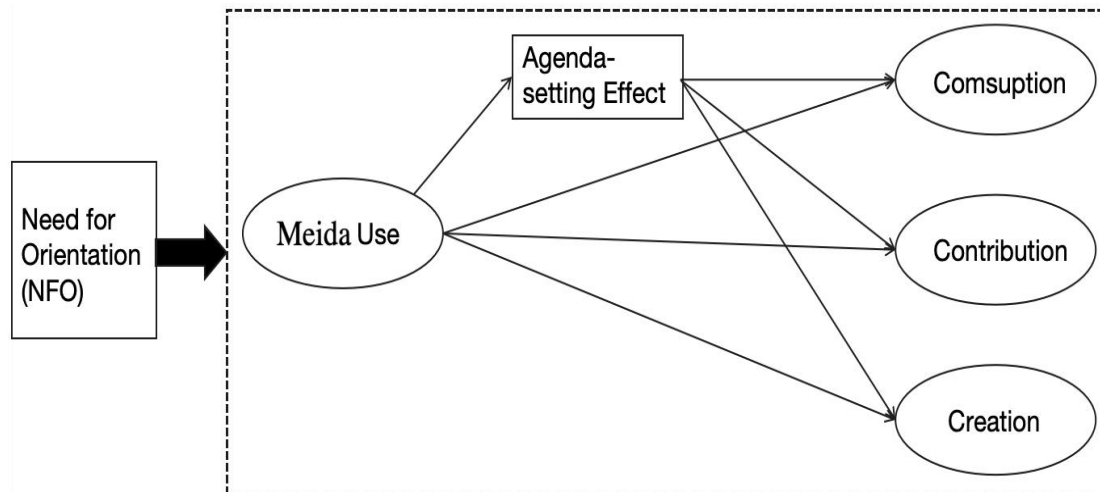


Figure 1. the conceptual model

Source: researcher

3.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

One of the objectives of this research is to explore theories and models to refine content marketing strategies within Douyin's fashion community from a consumer perspective. The study employs the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) as its theoretical framework to investigate the motivations and needs of customers within Douyin fashion community. This approach aids in understanding customer engagement behaviour (CEB) within the community.

3.4.1 The Definition of UGT

The UGT, developed by Katz et al. (1973), is employed to explain individual media use motivations and the satisfaction of needs. An important distinction between UGT and traditional motivation theories, which is particularly relevant for this research project, is that the theory shifts the research focus from media content creators to audiences, analysed through the lens of consumer behaviour (Palmgreen, 1984). In the 1970s, while other researchers concentrate on media effects theories, Elihu Katz (1974) investigate the active role audiences play in selecting specific media. According to Katz et al. (1974), individuals are conscious of their choices and the reasons behind selecting specific media. Leung and Wei (2000) suggest that social

and psychological motivations drive individuals to use particular types of media, focusing on why individuals choose different media to fulfil their needs.

The core premise of the theory is that individuals' inner needs drive their expectations of the media, and to satisfy these inner psychological and social needs, they interact with the media (Ko et al., 2005). Specifically, audiences can actively link their needs with the chosen media, and the media must compete with other media to satisfy audience needs. Audiences engaging with these media, they are self-aware, thus the choice of media content and the value of media content must be actively evaluated by the audience (Katz et al. 1974; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 2000; West & Turner, 2010). Needs are defined as something important or desirable that a person lacks at a specific time, essentially a fundamental element that initiates the process of generating consumer responses (Rauschnabel, 2018).

UGT posits that the motivation to satisfy unmet needs is a key factor in the use of specific types of media. Thus, motivation is the reason that influences individuals to act in certain ways to meet these needs. These motivations and needs determine individuals' choice of media, based on their evaluation of how satisfactorily the media meets these needs. Personal motivation to use media also implies expectations of fulfilling outcomes. The satisfaction sought by media users constitutes the benefits users expect to derive from their social media use, while the satisfaction obtained refers to the actual benefits users gain from their media use (Palmgreen, Wenner, Rayburn, 1980). UGT emphasises the motivations of social media users and their self-perceived needs. Different individuals may use the same media for different purposes. For instance, while some might watch a video and feel relaxed, others might feel nervous or agitated. Thus, the same media content can meet the needs of different users in various ways (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Users' needs may influence their expectations for social media platforms and which media is likely to satisfy their needs.

3.4.2 The Individual Primary Needs

According to their research, Katz et al. (1974) identify that individuals have five primary types of needs that are fulfilled through media use: affective needs, cognitive needs, tension-release needs, personal integrative needs, and social integrative needs.

3.4.2.1 Cognitive needs

Cognitive needs refer to the acquisition of knowledge, information, facts, and similar resources by individuals through media platforms (Rauschnabel, 2018; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Users have varying informational requirements; for instance, some seek intellectual and academic knowledge. It can include information shared by other members of a virtual community, which provides factual knowledge or trends that people read or watch from content posted by other users. Additionally, they can utilise search engines like Google, Bing, and other popular sources to search for any topic at any time. Similar to the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and other theories on human technology acceptance (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012), which suggest that media consumers are goal-oriented, UGT posits that a social media user with a cognitive need, particularly a lack of information, is likely to choose a media that helps them meet their needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Rubin, 2009).

3.4.2.2 Affective needs

According to Katz et al. (1973), affective needs encompass aesthetic and emotional experiences, pleasure, and other moods experienced by people. These needs involve the emotional fulfilment and pleasure derived from engaging with content such as soap operas, television series, and movies. Audiences emotionally connect with characters, feeling joy or sadness as the characters do, which deepens their engagement. With the evolution of new media, this dynamic has been significantly amplified (Ruggiero, 2000). Social media in particular plays a crucial role in satisfying these emotional needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974). For instance, users may be emotionally moved by a post from another user, whether it is in text, audio, or video format.

3.4.2.3 Personal integrative needs

Personal integrative needs encompass the self-esteem aspects of individuals. In this context, social media is often utilised to enhance one's social value (Rauschnabel, 2018). For example, people use social media to maintain or elevate their status within society. Another common practice is viewing or reading online advertisements for products such as home furniture or jewellery, which individuals may purchase to align with prevailing social trends. Previous studies have shown that people use social media and technologies to reaffirm their social status and power and to gain credibility among their peers (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). For instance, individuals may follow brands on Facebook for impression management purposes (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012) or join virtual community platforms to enhance their public image (Luarn, Yang & Chiu, 2015).

3.4.2.4 Social integrative needs

Social integrative needs encompass the desire to interact and socialise with family, friends, and acquaintances within society. With the rise of digital platforms, there has been a noticeable shift from physical gatherings during weekends to virtual meetings on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo. Existing research has shown that individuals use social media and related technologies to be well-regarded in society and to gain credibility among their peers (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). For instance, a person may follow a particular brand on Weibo or Facebook not out of genuine interest but because it provides a common topic of conversation with their peers (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

3.4.2.5 Tension release needs

Tension release needs arise when individuals seek relief from daily stress and tension. Social media is often utilised as a means of escapism from the real world, allowing users to disengage from daily pressures (McGuire & Kouri, 1974). Therefore, they select social media platforms that offer high hedonic value (Blumler, 1979; McGuire & Kouri, 1974). For example, browsing moments on WeChat (akin to the timeline on Facebook), reading posts on friends' Facebook profiles, watching videos on YouTube, or simply surfing the internet can serve as methods of escapism, helping individuals

relieve tension and stress. Social media retains audience attention by making users feel as though they are participants in the situation or emotionally connected to the characters.

The UGT is extensively employed in research during the 1970s, with a focus on the gratifications that audiences seek. Researchers' interest during this period was centred on the psychological needs of the audience with the objective of categorising media gratifications into specific groups. The theory has significantly evolved since then.

3.4.3 The Development of UGT

3.4.3.1 The 1980s to 1990s Research

This period marked a clear distinction between media effect theory and uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Liu, 2015). Researchers focusing on gratifications began to actively address criticisms by making enhancements and expanding the theory (Rubin, 1983). Windahl (1983), in his pivotal work “UGT at the Crossroads”, asserts that the primary distinction between UGT and mass media theory lies in the approach: While media effect theory researchers study mass communication from the media’s perspective, UGT researchers approach it from the audience’s viewpoint (Ruggiero, 2000). Ruggiero (2000) advocates for a more integrated approach, suggesting that researchers should emphasise the similarities between these theories rather than their differences, and work towards combining them (Windahl, 1981). He proposes that a more beneficial perspective would be to integrate insights from both the media’s output and its actual use by audiences. Throughout that era, researchers continue to develop, refine, and test the theory. Despite the rising dominance of other communication theories in the field, the UGT remains a vital tool for exploring why people adopt new media.

3.4.3.2 New Media and the Revival of UGT

For decades, UGT is relatively obscure within the field of mass media research. However, the advent of Internet technologies and smart devices has led to a resurgence in the relevance of UGT. These innovations have transformed the communication industry and altered the consumption patterns of media users.

Advanced technologies now provide users with an array of media choices, making motivation and gratifications some of the most crucial factors in analysing media consumer behaviour. The concept of an active user emerged, significantly reinforcing the theoretical foundation of UGT. According to Ruggiero (2000), the differences between new media and traditional media are stark. Similarly, Singer (1998) argues that new media are interactive, thereby dissolving the traditional boundaries between the sender and the receiver. Singer (1998) concludes that the internet is characterised by three attributes absent in traditional media: demassification, interactivity, and asynchronicity.

Interactivity is defined as the degree to which the boundaries between the sender and receiver of a message blur during the communication process, and how the roles of the participants shift, making the discourse more interactive (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1998). Essentially, the original message receiver can voice their opinions about the message, thus actively participating in the dissemination of information. Ha and James (1998) describe five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, selectivity, connectedness, information gathering, and reciprocal exchange. The playfulness and selectivity of interaction meet users' needs for social recognition and entertainment, while information gathering, reciprocal exchange, and connectedness cater to users' informational needs. The interactivity of new media is intrinsically linked to the UGT. Demassification refers to the extent of control that the audience has over the medium (Williams, 1988). In the realm of new media, users have a plethora of content to choose from and can select their preferences from a vast array of media options. This increase in control allows users to select media based on their specific needs and motivations.

Asynchronicity implies that the audience is no longer constrained by time and space when accessing information. Users can receive, send, save, and retrieve information whenever and wherever it is convenient for them. Compared to traditional media, new media offers users greater flexibility and control over how much, when, and where they access information. The extent of control over information consumption is determined solely by the user's needs and preferences.

3.4.3.3 UGT and Social Network Platforms (SNP)

The UGT has been extensively employed by information system researchers to examine various user behaviour on social networking platforms (SNPs) such as Weibo (Gogan, Zhang & Matemba, 2018), Facebook (Hu et al., 2015), and Twitter (Coursaris et al., 2013). Previous studies have pinpointed different types of gratifications as key factors influencing the adoption and use of various social media platforms. Conducting research in this area of social media use represents a valuable and significant addition to scientific knowledge. Whiting & Williams (2013) identify ten motivations for using social media: social interaction, information seeking, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, expression of opinions, convenience utility, information sharing, and the surveillance and observation of others.

3.4.3.4 Classification of Gratifications in SNP

In the framework of UGT, gratification refers to the tangible benefits that individuals gain from using media (Palmgreen, Wenner & Rayburn, 1980). Over the past two decades, social media researchers have uncovered several types of gratification derived from using various media platforms (Foregger, 2008; Gan, 2017). More recent studies have delineated several more types of gratifications. Gan and Li (2018) categorise five types of gratifications associated with the use of social networking platforms (SNP), including hedonic gratification (perceived enjoyment, passing time), social gratification (social interaction, social presence), utilitarian gratification (self-presentation, information documentation, information sharing), and technology gratification (media appeal). Gan (2017) identifies three categories of gratification related to SNP use, namely hedonic gratification (passing time, enjoyment), social gratification (social support), and utilitarian gratification (information seeking, self-presentation). Li et al. (2015), in their study on the continuance use of online gaming, propose categories of gratifications such as utilitarian gratification (achievement), social gratification (social presence and social interaction), and hedonic gratification (fantasy, escapism, and enjoyment). Additionally, Liu, Cheung, and Lee (2010) identify four categories of gratifications related to Twitter use, namely

content gratification, social gratification, process gratification, and technology gratification.

3.4.3.5 UGT in Douyin/TikTok

Recent scholarly work has applied the UGT to examine user behaviour on TikTok/Douyin (Ahlse et al., 2020; Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Ahlse et al. (2020) identify primary motivations for users engaging in challenges on TikTok, including entertainment, socialising, information seeking, convenience, status, personal identity, and having structure. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) analyse the motivations and needs of teenage TikTok users through the lens of UGT, discovering that emotion and entertainment predominantly drive all behaviour. These adolescents primarily engage on the platform to broaden social networks, seek fame, express themselves, and forge their identities. Vaterlaus and Winter (2021) explore the motivations of young adults on TikTok, highlighting their satisfaction derived from realism, coolness, community engagement, trend participation, interaction, variety seeking, and entertainment. Falgoust et al. (2020) identify several motivations for young people's participation in TikTok challenges: 1. entertainment, 2. the convenience and practicality of broad communication, 3. enhanced social interaction, 4. seeking social support, 5. information seeking and sharing, and 6. escaping daily life. Omar and Dequan (2020) find that the primary motivation for TikTok users in consuming content was escapism, while self-expression motivated their engagement and content creation. Wang et al. (2019) underscore the significance of the UGT in understanding TikTok use, introducing variables related to learning, cognitive and emotional aspects, as well as individual/social integration and stress relief.

Significant research employing the UGT regarding TikTok/Douyin focuses on the motivations and needs of the entire platform or specific user groups. However, there has been a lack of in-depth analysis concerning users' needs and motivations within Douyin's fashion brand communities. Additionally, while previous studies have investigated how specific motivations and needs drive user attention, content consumption, participation, and content creation, they have not thoroughly examined the specific motivations and needs satisfaction behind CEB.

To circumvent “one-size-fits-all” generalisations about audience needs and motivations in different media, this study delves deeply into the motivations and needs satisfaction within Douyin's fashion communities. By doing so, it aims to enhance understanding of consumer responses to community-based content marketing on Douyin. The subsequent section reviews the literature on content marketing in relation to UGT.

3.4.4 UGT and Content Marketing

Social currency theory, serving as a theoretical foundation in content marketing, shares considerable commonalities with the UGT, though their frameworks diverge in their approaches. As outlined in Table 4, the primary distinctions are evident in the following areas:

- (1) Social currency theory places a greater emphasis on social interactions, underlining the vibrant discussions among consumers about brands, the unwavering support from brand loyalists, and the role of consumers with a strong brand community identity in generating brand social currency. In contrast, UGT simplifies social interactions into two categories: “Brand interaction” and “social interaction”.
- (2) Social currency theory does not distinguish between specific information characteristics, focusing instead on the general utility and effectiveness of information. UGT, on the other hand, specifically divides information characteristics into functional and entertainment categories, offering a more nuanced classification.
- (3) The “identity recognition” concept in Social currency theory is encompassed within the broader “self-concept” component in UGT.

UGT, having undergone extensive development, covers a broader spectrum of elements and is more adept at explaining the motivations and demands that drive consumer behaviour in social media and brand communications. Meanwhile, Social currency theory, emerging from the digital age, primarily assesses the effectiveness of brand communication through social media, aiming to bolster the shared brand assets between consumers and businesses.

Table 4. A Comparison of Elements between Social Currency Theory and UGT

Consumer Perspective		
Theory	Social Currency Theory	UGT
Elements	Information	Information Seeking
	Utility	
	Affiliation	Social Interaction
	Conversation	
	Advocacy	
	Recognition	Self-conceptualisation

Source: the researcher

Although distinct, both theories focus on consumers' perspectives, clarifying their needs and motivations for engaging with content, which directly influence the types of content they prefer. Research in content marketing and social media content often classifies content into three main categories: informational, emotional, and transactional (De Vries et al., 2012; Meire et al., 2019; Taleizadeh et al., 2019; Wahid et al., 2023). Informational content is non-promotional and delivers organisational messages (Wahid et al., 2023), fulfilling the audience's needs for tracking and acquiring information. Emotional content includes organisation-related information enriched with emotional elements, designed to evoke emotional or sensory responses (Meire et al., 2019). This category encompasses entertainment, charity, and humour (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Wahid & Gunato, 2022), addressing audiences' entertainment and social needs while alleviating stress, anxiety, and loneliness (Leung, 2009). Transactional content, meanwhile, is characterised by messages aimed at transactions, such as giveaways, donations, and promotions (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Wahid et al., 2022b), catering to the audience's desires for monetary and other rewards (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). In essence, each type of content in content marketing is driven by specific underlying motivations and needs.

3.4.5 Summary

The research outlines the definition, elements, and developmental trajectory of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). According to research objective 3, this study aims to investigate the motivations and needs of consumers within the Douyin fashion community in content selection, thereby laying a theoretical foundation for content marketing from a consumer perspective. A recent conceptual model by Hollebeek and Macky (2019) illustrate the relationship between content marketing and customer engagement behaviours, utilising functional, hedonic, and authenticity motives from UGT as antecedents to customer engagement behaviour. This model demonstrates the influence of UGT on customer engagement behaviour, thereby validating the effectiveness of content marketing. However, there are notable limitations to their study. Primarily, it is theoretical and lacks empirical evidence to substantiate claims about how customer motivations and needs influence engagement. Additionally, while it addresses the impact of UGT broadly, it fails to specify how this impact varies across different levels of customer engagement and divergent motivations and needs.

The existing literature on content marketing often overlooks the specific motivations and needs of the audience (De Plssis, 2017), underscoring the necessity for theoretical models that more accurately reflect consumer responses. In addressing this gap and building on previous findings, this research employs UGT to more precisely delineate the relationship between varying levels of customer engagement behaviour and the actual utility of content marketing, alongside the needs and motivations of audiences within Douyin's fashionable content community, grounded in empirical data (Pulizzi, 2012).

3.4 Summary of Literature Review and Derivation of the Research

Firstly, it is essential to restate the central argument of this study: By focusing on the Douyin fashion community, this research seeks to enhance content marketing theory, addressing significant gaps in traditional studies. It employs both the agenda-setting theory and the uses and gratifications theory to examine how user motivations and perceptions shape customer engagement behaviour. The objective is to develop an inclusive content marketing model that not only incorporates consumer perspectives but also assesses the effectiveness of content dissemination.

This study synthesises key concepts through a comprehensive literature review. This part consolidates these ideas, detailing how they have been applied in this research.

Firstly, the research emphasises that the research context significantly influences content marketing studies, with findings varying among different contexts. Douyin, as a short-video social media platform, demands attention from content marketing scholars. Moreover, the literature review highlights that Douyin's content recommendation system differs from other social media platforms, suggesting that content marketing strategies may need to be adjusted accordingly. Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of research on Douyin within the broader field of marketing communications, particularly regarding content marketing in the Douyin fashion community. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the unique aspects of Douyin to better understand its role and impact in content marketing. It focuses on analysing the characteristics of Douyin's fashion community as a content marketing platform to bridge the existing research gap.

Second, the literature review identifies a significant gap in current content marketing research concerning content communities. While most studies focus on brand communities, research is scarce on content marketing within content communities. There is a distinct difference in content marketing strategies between content and brand communities (Du Plessis, 2017). In brand communities, content typically revolves around the brand itself, with interactions occurring among existing followers.

Conversely, in content communities, branded content seamlessly integrates into social media dialogues, facilitating interactions among community members (Du Plessis, 2017). Additionally, content marketing in brand communities primarily aims at customer retention, enhancing brand awareness, and expanding the customer base through followers' word of mouth (WOM). The primary strategy for acquiring new customers in brand communities involves leveraging existing customers (Bu, Parkinson & Thaichon, 2021). In contrast, the main goal of content marketing in content communities is for brands to meld into community conversations as non-intrusive, ordinary users, thereby connecting with potential customers and achieving desired outcomes such as customer acquisition and increased brand awareness.

In content communities, a pivotal issue arises: How content and interactions typically centred around brand-related topics can adapt to the diverse nature of content communities. For example, the fashion community is rich with varied information about fashion, a broad topic. When a brand enters a densely populated information community, it must strategise on capturing the attention of potential customers. According to Du Plessis (2017), the solution lies in engaging users with non-intrusive content and attracting potential customers by positioning the brand as a "friend".

However, based on the insights from Du Plessis (2017), this research identifies two issues. Firstly, while non-invasive content enables brands to better integrate into the content community, there is a concern that such content, once integrated, may not be effective due to the diversity of content within the community. Drawing on the literature review of agenda-setting theory, this study proposes that community content can impact users. Yet, it remains unclear whether this impact translates into the marketing outcomes desired by brands. In other words, even if community content influences users' perceptions, if it does not elicit tangible feedback from users, then the brand's content marketing efforts are ineffective.

Accordingly, it becomes essential to investigate whether the agenda-setting effect of community content influences customer engagement behaviour (CEB). CEB is considered an outcome measure of content marketing effectiveness in this study.

When CEB is positively affected, it indicates that content marketing is successful. Its significance lies in validating the effectiveness of content marketing in content communities from a communications perspective and supporting content marketing theory.

Moreover, this study also extends the application of the agenda-setting theory to the realm of marketing communication, an expansion from its traditional focus. Most conventional agenda-setting research has concentrated on the effectiveness of political communication and mass media communication, with few studies bridging the gap to commercial communication effectiveness. However, McCombs's (2005) work highlights the applicability of agenda-setting theory in commercial contexts and encourages further exploration into expanding the theory's reach. Thus, this study broadens the scope of agenda-setting theory research by applying it to commercial communication.

Previous research on content marketing has predominantly examined its importance from a brand-centric perspective. Scholars such as Jacob & Johnson (2021) have acknowledged that content marketing can boost customer engagement, while Liu & Kong (2022) suggest it enhances brand loyalty, and Lou et al. (2019) argue that it contributes to building brand equity. However, there has been limited discussion on how customer motivations and needs affect the efficacy of content marketing. Recent studies, including that by Hollebeek & Macky (2019), have begun to explore these conceptual relationships. Yet, further investigation is needed into how customer motivations and needs specifically interact with content marketing strategies. Hollebeek and Macky's (2019) approach is largely theoretical, lacking in empirical support, and does not consider how varying motivations and needs might affect the level of customer engagement differently. Given these academic gaps, there is a compelling need to delve deeper into the relationship between customer motivations, needs, and content marketing to refine the theoretical framework of content marketing. Additionally, the limitations of Hollebeek & Macky's (2019) work underscore the importance of investigating the real-world implications of customer motivations and engagement levels as content marketing goals, to enrich the theoretical underpinnings

of content marketing from a consumer perspective. This study also aims to expand content marketing theory by examining the correlation between user motivations and engagement behaviour within Douyin's fashion community, thus broadening the scope of uses and gratification theory (UGT) in relation to the topic.

Although conventional content marketing research has advanced, developing models that consider content formats and distribution channels, it has primarily focused on traditional social media platforms (Du Plessis, 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Research on short-video platforms like Douyin is still nascent, particularly concerning brand content marketing models. This study seeks to augment and support content marketing theory at a theoretical level by integrating agenda-setting and uses and gratification theories. Moreover, existing research has not adequately addressed user behaviour, content dissemination systems, and the distinctive effects of platform characteristics. This study aims to bridge these gaps by proposing a new branded content marketing framework for the Douyin community, offering fresh insights for the ongoing evolution of content marketing models.

In summary, through a comprehensive literature review, this study has identified significant research gaps and has chosen appropriate theoretical frameworks to explore and potentially narrow these gaps. The subsequent chapter details the research methodology employed in this study.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The selection of methodology has long been regarded as a crucial element of both pure and applied research (Burgoyne & Cooper, 1975). Its importance stems from the necessity for research to address practical, technical, and conceptual questions, compelling researchers to clearly define the frameworks they employ. This also helps ensure that data collection, analysis, and reporting are conducted ethically (Burgoyne & Cooper, 1975). Based on these considerations, this chapter delineates the research methods utilised in this project and provides an explanation of how these methods effectively address the research questions.

This chapter commences with an exploration of research theory, essential for the researcher to understand in order to articulate the study's philosophical stance and methodology. After articulating a philosophical position of pragmatism, the chapter proceeds to detail both deductive and inductive reasoning processes, culminating in the establishment of a research methodology tailored to the research questions. As Kuhn (1970) suggests, the researcher must select the most suitable methodology for each question. A mixed-methods approach is defined here, with responses to research questions 1, 3, and 4 focusing on summarising content marketing elements and consumer behavioural drivers on the platform using a qualitative strategy. Research question 2 examines the influence of content agenda-setting effects on customer engagement within Douyin's fashion community, employing a quantitative method to test causal relationships between these elements.

Subsequent to delineating the research methodologies, this chapter elaborates on the research design, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods.

The qualitative segment details the adoption of netnography as the primary method, involving passive community observation, semi-structured interviews, and sampling techniques. For qualitative data analysis, the chapter introduces Kozinets's (2019) methodologies, which involve collating, coding, combining, counting, and charting

data, along with strategies to ensure data credibility. In the quantitative part, the research clarifies the interrelationships among variables, formulates hypotheses, and constructs a conceptual model accordingly. This is followed by descriptions of the methods for collecting and analysing quantitative data. Figure 2 describes the overall process of the research methodology. For specific research methods (data collection and data analysis), the research provides more figures to explain in detail in other sections of this chapter.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a thorough discussion on the research ethics pertinent to this study, emphasising the commitment to conduct the research with the highest standards of integrity and respect for all participants.

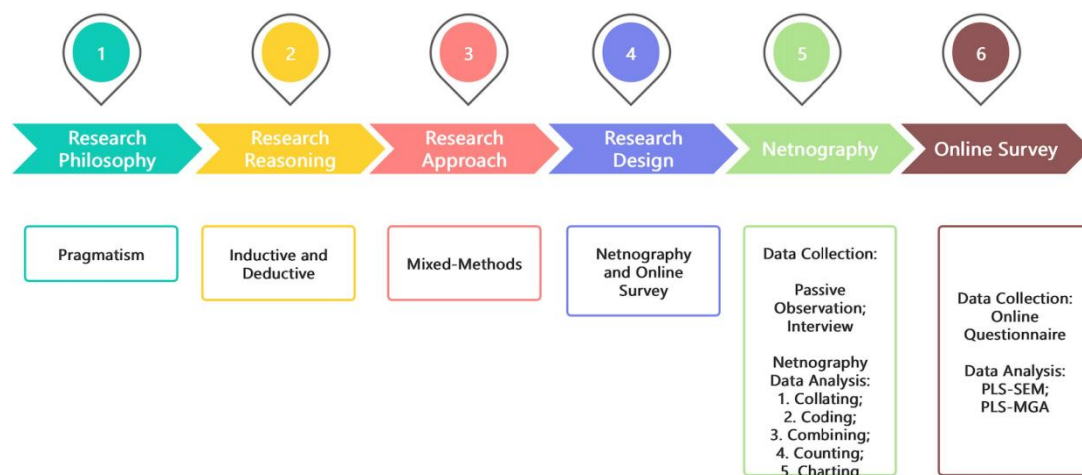


Figure 2. The process of the research methodology

Source: researcher

4.2 Research Philosophy

4.2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research philosophy. Initially, it discusses the significance of philosophical underpinnings in research. The research compiles key philosophical concepts such as ontology, epistemology, and axiology, and articulates the philosophical stance of this study. Subsequently, four primary research paradigms—positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and pragmatism—are outlined. The chapter concludes by detailing the specific research paradigm adopted by this

study and how it shaped the research approach.

Easterby-Smith, et al. (2008) contend that research philosophy is a pivotal component of the methodology, essential for embarking on the research journey. Researchers hold specific beliefs and assumptions that shape their perception of what constitutes valid knowledge. Research philosophy aids scholars in articulating how they view the world. Given that research is a multifaceted and intricate endeavour, researchers must amass extensive data from numerous participants and analyse this data to fulfil their research objectives. It is therefore crucial for researchers to meticulously design their methodology by classifying the type of research philosophy they will employ.

Research philosophy is vital not only in the natural sciences but also in the social sciences (Bahari, 2010). Easterby-Smith et al. (1997) identify three reasons why delving into philosophical aspects is crucial for research methodology:

1. It can enhance the refinement and specificity of the research methods used, including data collection, data analysis, and the approaches to addressing research questions.
2. It assists researchers in discerning the differences between various methods and methodologies, enabling the selection of the most suitable methods for the study after considering the constraints of certain approaches early in the process.
3. It fosters creativity and innovation in selecting or adapting methods previously beyond the experience of researchers.

Neglecting philosophical considerations can significantly compromise the quality of research (Easterby-Smith et al., 1997). Aliyu (2015, p12) notes: “These philosophical knowledge claims represent a set of fundamental assumptions by researchers about the world”. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that the assumptions underpinning research philosophy involve being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and acting (axiology). Understanding the ontological, epistemological, and axiological orientations within the research paradigm is crucial, as it shapes the entire trajectory of the research project (Hussey and Hussey, 1997).

4.2.2 Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology

Different research philosophies embrace distinct ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives. Ontology, as Crotty (1998) defines it, is the study of being. Alternatively, Scotland (2012) describes it as how researchers perceive the world. Gibson and Morgan (1979) pose a fundamental ontological question for all researchers to consider: Is “reality” an external environment or object, or is it the individual's consciousness? Specifically, Saunders et al. (2009) identify two primary ontological orientations: Whether researchers view the world as subjective or objective. Objectivism posits that social phenomena and their meanings exist independently of individuals. Bahari (2010) notes that objectivism is commonly linked with quantitative methodologies. In contrast, subjectivism views individuals as active creators of social phenomena and their meanings. Meaning is perceived as a construct emerging through participation, experience, or interaction with the world, and it is also considered a thought process shaped by the interaction between researchers and their subject matter. Subjectivism is closely associated with interpretivism (Bahari, 2010) and is predominantly utilised in qualitative research approaches (Guba & Linken, 1994; Irving, 2014).

Epistemology concerns how researchers perceive the relationship between reality and accepted knowledge (Saunders et al., 2009). It also pertains to theories on how researchers can acquire knowledge about the world (O'Reilly, 2012). There are two prevalent epistemological stances: Positivism and Interpretivism (Bahari, 2010), which guide researchers in selecting methodologies and perspectives for investigating phenomena in both natural and social sciences.

Positivism advocate the view that science is the basis of true knowledge. This perspective seeks to explore, verify, and predict patterns of behaviour to test theories, predominantly in the natural, physical, and social sciences (Taylor & Medina, 2013), and is typically aligned with quantitative research (Yilmaz, 2013).

Interpretivism offers a critical perspective to researchers, influenced by social factors such as community, people, and social activities (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Interpretivists aim to understand social phenomena through the meanings that individuals attribute to them (Stahl, 2014) and the interactions between researchers and participants (Mingers, 2001). Moreover, interpretivists are often described as “feeling” researchers because they seek to grasp and interpret individuals’ social roles (Bahari, 2010) and typically employ qualitative research methods (Given, 2008).

Axiology addresses the role of values and ethics in research (Mertens, 2010). It is a branch of philosophy concerned with judgments about values, ethics, and social inquiry (Saunders et al., 2012). Scholars each maintain their own axiological perspectives, which may align with or diverge from prevailing views (Blaikie, 2013). The significance of axiology in research is that it prompts researchers to consider how they manage their own values and the impact of these values on their studies (Crotty, 1998). Cerswell (2013) emphasises that all researchers should contribute value to each study, but qualitative researchers particularly express their values within their research.

Researchers hold unique views and attitudes towards ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Mertens (2010) identifies four philosophical domains: Ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. Scholars’ distinct attitudes towards these domains shape various research paradigms. The subsequent section differentiates between several mainstream research paradigms based on these four philosophical frameworks (Table 5).

Ontology (nature of reality or being)	Epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge)	Axiology (role of values)	Typical methods
Positivism			
Real, external, independent One true reality (universalism) Granular (things) Ordered	Scientific method Observable and measurable facts Law-like generalisations Numbers Causal explanation and prediction as contribution	Value-free research Researcher is detached, neutral and independent of what is researched Researcher maintains objective stance	Typically deductive, highly structured, large samples, measurement, typically quantitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be analysed
Critical realism			
Stratified/layered (the empirical, the actual and the real) External, independent Intransient Objective structures Causal mechanisms	Epistemological relativism Knowledge historically situated and transient Facts are social constructions Historical causal explanation as contribution	Value-laden research Researcher acknowledges bias by world views, cultural experience and upbringing Researcher tries to minimise bias and errors Researcher is as objective as possible	Retroductive, in-depth historically situated analysis of pre-existing structures and emerging agency Range of methods and data types to fit subject matter
Interpretivism			
Complex, rich Socially constructed through culture and language Multiple meanings, interpretations, realities Flux of processes, experiences, practices	Theories and concepts too simplistic Focus on narratives, stories, perceptions and interpretations New understandings and worldviews as contribution	Value-bound research Researchers are part of what is researched, subjective Researcher interpretations key to contribution Researcher reflexive	Typically inductive. Small samples, in-depth investigations, qualitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be interpreted
Postmodernism			
Nominal Complex, rich Socially constructed through power relations Some meanings, interpretations, realities are dominated and silenced by others Flux of processes, experiences, practices	What counts as 'truth' and 'knowledge' is decided by dominant ideologies Focus on absences, silences and oppressed/repressed meanings, interpretations and voices Exposure of power relations and challenge of dominant views as contribution	Value-constituted research Researcher and research embedded in power relations Some research narratives are repressed and silenced at the expense of others Researcher radically reflexive	Typically deconstructive – reading texts and realities against themselves In-depth investigations of anomalies, silences and absences Range of data types, typically qualitative methods of analysis
Pragmatism			
Complex, rich, external 'Reality' is the practical consequences of ideas Flux of processes, experiences and practices	Practical meaning of knowledge in specific contexts 'True' theories and knowledge are those that enable successful action Focus on problems, practices and relevance Problem solving and informed future practice as contribution	Value-driven research Research initiated and sustained by researcher's doubts and beliefs Researcher reflexive	Following research problem and research question Range of methods: mixed, multiple, qualitative, quantitative, action research Emphasis on practical solutions and outcomes

Table 5. Four research philosophies and paradigms (Saunders et al., 2019)

4.2.3 Positivism

There is considerable debate regarding the precise era when positivism became a recognized research paradigm. Oates (2006) posits that positivism is among the oldest and most mature paradigms, evolving from the times of Bacon and Newton to the present day. The terms “positive philosophy” and “positive science” first appeared in the writings of Francis Bacon in the 14th century. Additionally, some scholars argue that positivism can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries (the Age of Enlightenment), drawing inspiration from philosophers such as René Descartes and John Locke (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020). During this period, there was a significant movement against the totalitarianism of royal decrees. Enlightenment philosophers and scholars placed high value on personal thought and objective knowledge in shaping world views.

The evolution of positivism mirrors this history, characterised by a shift away from social elites, such as royalty defined by decree, towards scholars pursuing objective,

well-documented experimental truths based on evidence (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020). However, most scholars agree that the widespread acceptance of positivism is often credited to Comte's publication of "The Course in Positive Philosophy" in 1830 (Crotty, 1998; Bourdeau, 2008; Whewell, 2017). As researchers engage in ongoing critical examination, numerous propositions and schools of thought have emerged, suggesting that the form of positivism introduced by Comte may have limitations in contemporary research.

Nevertheless, scholars generally hold that positivism embodies a form of thorough objectivism (Crotty, 1998; Saunders, 2012; Collis & Hussey, 2013). Positivism relies on the hypothetico-deductive method to verify prior assumptions, typically expressed in quantitative terms, establishing causal and functional relationships between explanatory factors (independent variables) and outcomes (dependent variables) (Ponterotto, 2005). Positivism emphasises the importance of generally accepted observations, with a rigorous focus on pure data and facts, independent of human bias in interpretation (Scotland, 2012; Saunders et al., 2012). If researchers adopt an extreme positivist stance, this leads to the following:

1. Researchers perceive an organisation or other social entity as real, akin to physical objects and natural phenomena.
2. Epistemologically, research focuses on discovering observable and measurable facts or laws.
3. The phenomena observed and measured should contribute to the development of the credibility and significance of the data.

A primary objective of positivism is to establish explanatory associations or causal relationships that enable the prediction and control of related phenomena (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999; Gergen, 2001). Oates (2006) identifies several key features of positivism:

- Measurement and modelling
- Objectivity
- Hypothesis testing
- Quantitative data analysis

-Universal rules

Grounded in these principles, positivism aims to uncover natural laws and articulate them through theoretical descriptions. Researchers endeavour to identify causal relationships among collected data to increase the generalization of laws and concepts. Moreover, researchers apply universal rules and concepts to support and interpret research behaviour or events within an organisation (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020).

However, positivism, while useful in understanding the natural world, may not always apply seamlessly to the social world. Thus, it can be argued that positivism has inherent limitations. Several scholars have highlighted the issues and challenges of employing positivism in research (Saunders et al., 2012; Scotland, 2012; Collins, 2010; Wilson, 2010; Ramanathan, 2008):

1. Statistical tests may be misused by selecting inappropriate tests, leading to misinterpretations in the study. Moreover, the outcomes and significance of these tests are largely dependent on the sample size.
2. Generalisations in research might overlook individual intentions, where the behaviour of subjects may not be thoroughly explored or understood. This necessitates deeper inquiries into the main questions of studies from the perspectives of participants.
3. Positivism tends to emphasise numerical data, and often findings are merely descriptive. This approach may prevent researchers from delving deeper into the research questions.

The ongoing debate between the positivist (hard science) philosophy and the interpretative (soft science) philosophy holds significant implications for research methodologies (Oates, 2006). While positivism strives to establish universally applicable laws, proponents of interpretivism argue that such studies are incomplete due to the dynamic and complex nature of human culture (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Positivism and interpretivism represent two polar approaches in research philosophy. Positivists assert that positivist science yields the most clear and optimal knowledge (Cohen, 2007). However, interpretivists challenge the suitability of positivism for studying human societies (Mack, 2010). Given the complexities of human interactions,

some researchers advocate for interpretivism as a more appropriate methodology (Klein & Myers, 1999).

4.2.4 Interpretivism

Interpretivism has emerged from a critique of positivism (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019). It is an approach specifically devised to comprehend the nuances of human and social sciences. This differs from the physical sciences because human social behaviour are based on their interpretations of the world (Hammersley, 2013). In other words, some social behaviour are subjective and not governed by objective laws. Interpretivism prioritizes in-depth examination of variables and contextual factors, positing that human behaviour differs from physical phenomena as it involves deeper meanings, and posits that humans cannot be studied in the same way as physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019). Hence, social science research necessitates this distinction and should differ from natural science research. A single phenomenon may have multiple explanations, not absolute truths defined by measurement, due to varying developments in social realities, cultures, environments, and historical periods (Myers, 2008; Saunders et al., 2012; Bhattacharjee, 2012). From the interpretivist perspective, researchers aim to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon within its unique context rather than seeking to generalise laws and uniformities to the entire population (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the principles of interpretivism are as follows:

1. Relativist ontology: Reality is perceived through intersubjectivity, which involves the consideration of both social and empirical aspects, aiming to deepen understanding and meaning (Saunders et al., 2012).
2. Subjective epistemology: This perspective establishes a direct connection between researchers and their subjects, asserting that humans cannot be detached from their own knowledge (Saunders et al., 2012).

The advantages of this paradigm are underscored in the following discussions:

Firstly, interpretivists have the ability to analyse the diverse perspectives of phenomena, which not only allows them to describe objects, humans, or events, but also to deeply understand these elements within their social environments. This

approach is particularly effective in cross-cultural studies where qualitative data is collected and interpreted, identifying specific developmental factors, and yielding insights and conclusions that may vary from mainstream views (Myers, 2008).

Additionally, researchers can conduct studies in natural settings using foundational theories through methods such as ethnography, case studies, or life histories. This enables them to gain insider insights into the subjects (Tuli, 2010), thereby providing more authentic information related to them. Meanwhile, the data collected by researchers is highly valid because it reflects contributions from diverse individuals and takes several variables into account (Myers, 2008).

Thirdly, the use of interactive interviews as a key method allows researchers to probe aspects that positivists might overlook, including respondents' thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, opinions, and feelings (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). The valuable data thus collected offers deeper insights, facilitating more informed research actions. This approach also enables researchers to concentrate more on specific topics, thus avoiding the broader generalisations common in the positivist paradigm (Moustakas, 1994; Remenyi et al., 1998).

However, this paradigm is not without its challenges:

1. Interpretivism posits that reality is subjective and can vary among individuals. As a result, researchers may not achieve a universal explanation, and the validity and credibility of their studies may be called into question (Scotland, 2012; Collins, 2010).
2. Data is gathered within specific contexts, perspectives, and values, making it difficult to summarise (Saunders et al., 2012). In essence, researchers strive to gain a profound understanding of phenomena in specific contexts, as opposed to generalizing these findings to other situations (Cohen, Manion & Marison, 2011).
3. Interpretivism does not adequately address the political and ideological influences on knowledge and social reality. The primary goal of this paradigm is to understand current phenomena, rather than to address issues concerning personal and social empowerment (Mack, 2010).

By adopting the interpretivism paradigm, several common qualities emerge

(Moustaka, 1994):

1. The study focuses on the entire experience, seeking to understand participants' complete lived experiences, environments, and situations.
2. The formulation of research questions and the development of studies are heavily influenced by the researchers' interest, participation, and commitment.
3. Researchers can delve deeper into personal experiences through formal discussions and interviews.
4. Researchers employ qualitative methods to thoroughly explore human experiences.
5. This paradigm recognises experience as a vital component of contribution to scientific research.
6. It allows researchers to gain deeper insights into the entire personal experience, moving away from the generalisable measurements or expectations typical of the positivist paradigm.
7. Experiences are extensively integrated into both subjects and objects, yielding valuable findings and insights.

Thus, according to interpretivism, qualitative methods are best suited for obtaining insights based on specific backgrounds. In contrast, while positivism may not achieve the same depth and insight, its use of quantitative methods enables researchers to generalize more effectively and describe phenomena in terms of numbers and measurements rather than in-depth qualitative descriptions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

4.2.5 Pragmatism

Pragmatism, as a philosophical movement, originated in America in the late 19th century (Maxcy, 2003). This movement emerged from a fundamental agreement among scholars to reject traditional assumptions regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, and inquiry. Pragmatic scholars fundamentally opposed the notion that social science inquiry should adhere to a singular scientific approach (Maxcy, 2003). This philosophy traces back to an early 1870s discussion group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which included founding figures such as philosopher Charles Sanders

Peirce, psychologist William James, philosopher and mathematician Chauncey Wright, jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, educator and social reformer John Dewey, and philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist George Herbert Mead, among numerous other scholars and thinkers who have further developed it over the past century (Maxcy, 2003; Morgan, 2014a; Pansiri, 2005; Ormerod, 2006).

Classical pragmatism itself is not a methodology but a doctrine of meaning and a theory of truth. It is based on the premise that the meaning of an event cannot be predetermined before experiencing it. The focus is on the consequences and meanings of actions or events, transcending any specific method or problem-solving activity (Denzin, 2012). Much of Dewey's philosophical work is highly pertinent to contemporary social studies as it seeks to dismantle the dualism between realism and idealism. This dichotomy closely parallels the distinction between post-positivism and interpretivism, applying philosophical principles of knowledge to the core of social research (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this philosophical framework, post-positivists maintain that the external world exists independently of our perceptions, whereas interpretivists argue that our concepts shape the world. However, Dewey's pragmatism continuously highlights empiricism, suggesting that debates about the ontology of the external world versus our conceptualisation represent two sides of the same coin (1925a/2008). On one side, our experience in this world is inevitably shaped by the world's nature; on the other, our understanding of the world is fundamentally limited by our interpretations of our experiences. Pragmatists introduce a unique perspective that an objective reality exists beyond human experience, yet this reality is constructed within the environment and can only be accessed through human experience (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000; Morgan, 2014a; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008).

Pragmatism, as a research paradigm, refrains from engaging with the contentious concepts of metaphysics (Cresswell and Clark, 2011). Dewey and other seminal pragmatists contend that the protracted debate in traditional metaphysics has been profoundly misguided. By neglecting the pivotal role of human experience, these debates inadvertently pose the incorrect questions. Instead, this paradigm discerns the

significance of both post-positivism and interpretivism, while avoiding reliance on metaphysical presuppositions concerning ontology and epistemology (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism renounces the conventional philosophical dichotomy (Biesta, 2010) of objectivity and subjectivity, permitting researchers to reject the rigid dichotomy of post-positivism and interpretivism (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). In pragmatism, a preference for empiricism supersedes idealistic or rationalist approaches (Frega, 2011). Rather than bifurcating post-positivism and interpretivism into distinct ontological and epistemological realms, pragmatism compels researchers to focus on differing inquiry methods (Morgan, 2014b). Indeed, this disregard for metaphysical considerations has also sparked critiques by some scholars (Morgan, 2014). Lincoln (2010) laments that pragmatists employing mixed methods in their research seldom disclose their ontological and epistemological stances. Yet, Kuhn (1996) asserts that Dewey's perspective, that pragmatists need not resolve traditional philosophical issues but rather transcend them, is vital.

The positivist discerns objective knowledge by analysing empirical evidence and testing hypotheses. In contrast, interpretivists argue that knowledge is subjective and inherently complex. Pragmatists, however, view the pursuit of knowledge as a continuous process, eschewing the binary conception of objectivity and subjectivity as opposing and mutually exclusive entities (Goles and Hirschheim 2000). Consequently, while positivism generally favours quantitative methods and deductive reasoning, interpretivism prioritises qualitative methods and inductive reasoning. Pragmatism, on the other hand, amalgamates the two research methodologies, offering a versatile approach to research design (Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2007; Pansiri, 2005). Pragmatists select the most suitable research design and methods to address specific research queries. Typically, pragmatism oscillates between deductive and inductive reasoning, allowing researchers to actively engage in the generation of data and theories (Goldkuhl, 2012; Morgan, 2007). Nevertheless, a significant challenge for pragmatists is articulated by Kuhn (1970), who posits that not all research questions warrant attention, and that methods are not invariably suitable. The challenge lies in the necessity for researchers to make judicious choices about which questions merit

investigation and which methods are appropriate, influenced by their social backgrounds, personal histories, and belief systems (Morgan, 2007). Thus, throughout the decision-making process, researchers must base their choices not only on their own beliefs, prevalent views in the research field, and personal experiences but also on an understanding of others' experiences and beliefs (Morgan, 2014).

4.2.6 Research Paradigm Employed

This study adopts pragmatism as its philosophical stance. Following Kuhn's 1970 recommendation to pragmatists, it asserts that researchers must not be confined to traditional dichotomous philosophical frameworks to determine their research approach. Instead, they should pragmatically assess the questions posed by the research and choose appropriate methods tailored to each scenario. Pragmatism here represents a synthesis of positivism and interpretivism aimed at addressing practical social issues.

The focus of this study is on the practical application of content marketing within the Douyin fashion community. By combining empirical research with interpretive analysis, the study seeks to uncover the effects of community content dissemination on customer engagement and to understand customers' motivations and needs concerning content marketing. The objective is to refine content marketing strategies within the Douyin fashion community, reflecting pragmatism's goal of resolving practical challenges.

Furthermore, a central tenet of pragmatism is its commitment to addressing practical issues. This study validates and assesses the utility of theories through empirical research and the accumulation of experience, as well as through interpretive research aimed at deeply understanding and explaining the meanings of phenomena and behaviour and their underlying motives. By examining the causal relationships between agenda-setting theory and customer engagement behaviour, this study aligns with the pragmatistic emphasis on empirical validation. Additionally, using the uses and gratifications theory, it also elucidates customer motivations behind content

marketing, thereby enhancing the theoretical framework of content marketing in line with pragmatism's focus on explaining phenomena.

Thirdly, this study aims to explore potential content marketing models within the Douyin fashion community, essential for the practical implementation of content marketing theory. Pragmatism underscores the practical contributions and impacts of research, and this study actively contributes to the enhancement and optimization of content marketing practices.

In summary, this study, grounded in pragmatism, prioritises the practicality and applicability of exploring and developing content marketing theories. It is devoted to solving real-world problems and improving outcomes, making it highly pertinent to the fields of marketing and communication.

4.3 Research Approach

4.3.1 Inductive and Deductive Reasoning

Inductive reasoning is defined as a methodology for acquiring knowledge that begins with detailed observations by researchers to generate theories through a bottom-up, data-driven process (McAbee et al., 2017). This type of reasoning is primarily associated with qualitative research aimed at exploring specific phenomena within the social environment (Rocco et al., 2003). The fundamental steps of inductive reasoning include observation, identification, theory formulation based on these observations, and the interpretation of the resultant theory (Khaldi, 2017).

Deductive reasoning entails researchers forming assumptions and utilising statistical tests to confirm or refute these hypotheses (Rahi, 2017). In employing a deductive approach, researchers develop a theory or hypothesis at the outset. Subsequently, they select an appropriate method to test this theory or hypothesis (Saunders, 2012). Deductive reasoning is typically used in projects that utilise quantitative research methods (Antwi and Hamza, 2015) and is favoured by positivists (Malhotra et al., 2017).

4.3.2 Quantitative and Qualitative

Creswell (2013) and Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) delineate two primary modes of scientific inquiry: Quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative method emphasises objective measurements and statistical analysis based on mathematics (Gelo et al., 2008). It aims to measure phenomena by establishing relationships between “objects” (Yilmaz, 2013). A key benefit of the quantitative approach is its ability to gauge respondents’ feedback through a limited number of specific questions, facilitating data analysis and enabling generalizations (Yilmaz, 2013). Additionally, quantitative data collection is typically rapid, conserving research time (Choy, 2014). Another significant advantage is its academic recognition for yielding more objective results through straightforward numerical analysis, commonly used to ascertain and generalize natural laws (Yilmaz, 2013). However, quantitative analysis often demands advanced mathematical skills, which may not be present among all sociological researchers (Quieros et al., 2017). Generally, quantitative methods are deductive, and are favoured by positivists for practical applications (Yin, 2016).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) characterise qualitative methods as those based on non-numerical data. Marshall and Rossman (2015) describe the qualitative approach as exploring individuals’ perceptions and thoughts in real life. This involves qualitative researchers delving deeply into the experiences of the subjects to develop a profound understanding of their lives. With a focus on human behaviour, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) observe that qualitative methodologies aim to explain events through acquired insights and are often employed to analyse the underlying phenomena and causes of issues (Berg & Lune, 2011). Consequently, qualitative research entails a thorough exploration of human behaviour. Its strength lies in generating detailed and comprehensive explanations of participants’ perspectives, experiences, or emotions (Yilmaz, 2013). However, the typically small sample sizes in qualitative studies may limit the generalisability of the findings (Jansen, 2010). Additionally, the subjective nature of researchers’ beliefs and backgrounds can influence their interpretation of the complex descriptive data generated through qualitative methods.

4.3.3 Mixed-Methods

Creswell and Clark (2007) maintain that there is a strong connection between pragmatism and mixed methods. They describe mixed methods as a research strategy that integrates both qualitative and quantitative elements within a single project. Mixed-methods research with a synchronous design—that is, gathering qualitative and quantitative data concurrently—can adopt pragmatism as its guiding research paradigm. Furthermore, Creswell and Clark (2007) suggest that in a study where quantitative methods precede qualitative methods, a researcher may start with a positivist approach and later shift to an interpretivist stance. However, this perspective is not universally accepted (Morse, 2013). The emphasis in mixed method research design is primarily on three aspects: 1. the balance between qualitative and quantitative methods in a study; 2. the sequence of implementing qualitative and quantitative methods; 3. the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The balance between qualitative and quantitative methods in mixed methods research has sparked considerable debate. Scholars, led by Morse (2003), argue that research fundamentally revolves around either induction or deduction. Even in studies primarily governed by induction, deductive elements can exist, though they should not alter the overall inductive approach. Specifically, in mixed methods research where induction is dominant, qualitative research should take precedence; conversely, when deduction dominates, quantitative methods should be predominant. Morse (2003) asserts that in mixed methods research, there must be a primary, core method, which is either qualitative or quantitative, arguing that true equivalence between qualitative and quantitative research within the same study is unattainable. However, this position has faced criticism. Studies by scholars such as Creswell (2003) and Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004) have demonstrated instances where qualitative and quantitative methods are employed in roughly equal proportions.

Secondly, the types of mixed methods designs are primarily distinguished by the sequence in which qualitative and quantitative data are collected. These can be categorised into synchronous designs, where qualitative and quantitative data

collection occur simultaneously, and sequential designs, where data is gathered in stages (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Quinla & Quinla, 2010).

Thirdly, the integration of qualitative and quantitative research in mixed methods can take place at virtually every significant stage of the research process, including the formulation of research questions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages (Creswell & Clark, 2007). A novel trend in mixed-method research design, as articulated by Hall and Howard in 2008, regards the mixed methods research process as a synergy of qualitative and quantitative research, asserting that both should be equally pivotal. This perspective challenges the traditional approach of assigning primary and secondary roles to qualitative and quantitative methods in mixed method research, instead advocating for a balanced emphasis on both research methodologies.

4.3.4 Research Approach Employed

In this study, the research has adopted mixed methods as the research approach. Initially, pragmatism is employed as the research paradigm, closely aligned with the mixed-methods research paradigm as highlighted by Creswell & Clark (2007). Furthermore, Creswell and Clark (2007) note that mixed-method research inherently integrates inductive and deductive reasoning, which aligns well with the goals of this study. Given the complexity of analysing content structures on Douyin, inductive reasoning allows the researcher to explore diverse perspectives. The data consists predominantly of video content, encompassing text, images, sound, and music, which are not numerically based but are interlinked, embodying distinct societal meanings. These deeper meanings are decipherable only through inductive reasoning. Conversely, deductive reasoning enhances the study by clarifying the causal relationships between the agenda-setting effects of the content and content marketing strategies, specifically regarding customer engagement behaviour. Through deductive reasoning, the research elucidates general objective relationships, providing a theoretical foundation to refine content marketing strategies for the Douyin fashion community.

4.4 Research Design

Hartley (2004) asserts that a research design must follow logical steps to create a coherent link between research questions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Research philosophy plays a pivotal role in helping researchers select an appropriate research design, as highlighted by Ericksson & Kovalainen (2015). Different research philosophies lead to the adoption of varied approaches in research reasoning and methods, which in turn dictate the specific research design for each study.

In the realm of qualitative research, four research designs are predominantly utilised by scholars: Phenomenological, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography.

The phenomenological design delves into the meanings of social life experiences and individuals' perceptions of these meanings, as explained by Langdrigde (2008). This design is employed by researchers to uncover the essence of human perception, devoid of any preconceived notions about the subject, according to Bentz & Shapiro (1998). Interviews are the primary data source in this design, enabling scholars to thoroughly investigate pivotal situations and details, as noted by Groenewald (2004).

At the core of grounded theory lies the concept that theory should emerge from systematic observation and discovery, as Petty et al. (2012) articulate. This design is fundamentally inductive, per Mills, Birke, and Hoare (2014). Through a process of continuous analysis and comparison of data gathered from numerous study participants, researchers develop theories independently of pre-existing theories and ideas from related studies, according to Charmaz & Belgrave (2012). Grounded theory is characterised by a rich variety of data sources, including interviews, field observations, and group discussions. It may even integrate quantitative data to enhance the theoretical insights of the study, as suggested by Glaser & Strauss (1967).

Case studies are defined by their detailed examination of a single subject—whether an individual or a group—within a specific context or setting to deeply understand their experiences and behaviours, as Flyvbjerg (2011) notes. The data sources for case studies can be diverse, encompassing interviews with subjects, surveys of documents, and conversations with individuals connected to the subjects (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Central to ethnographic design is the detailed study of cultural groups' collective behaviours, beliefs, and values within a non-intrusive setting, as described by Petty et al. (2012). Ethnography is dedicated to the researcher's active participation in the environment, observing and collecting data without disrupting the natural dynamics of the group's daily activities. This involves extensive field notes and, when necessary, interviews with specific individuals to enrich understanding of the group under study (Reeves et al., 2008). The primary data sources for ethnography are participant observation notes and interviews (Petty et al., 2012). With the expansion of the internet, new groups and communities have emerged online, leading scholars like Kozinets (2019) to adapt ethnographic methods to study these virtual communities, an approach now known as netnography.

Among the quantitative research designs commonly employed are descriptive research design, correlational research design, and causal research design.

Descriptive research designs are utilised to delineate existing conditions, behaviours, or characteristics by systematically gathering information without altering variables (Dulock, 1993). The researcher's role is solely to collect data, as this design does not examine the underlying connections between variables or their underlying causes. Typically, in general research, descriptive research serves as an initial step before other quantitative processes. It is used to identify the characteristics of a research problem, thereby enhancing our understanding of the issue (Siedlecki, 2020).

Correlational research primarily aims to assess the relationships between two or more variables. This design does not involve variable manipulation and, while it cannot establish causality, it proves valuable in formulating predictions (Seeram, 2019).

Causal research designs are intended to ascertain the causal relationships between two or more variables. In this design, the researcher manipulates one variable while controlling others to observe the effects on the dependent variables (Rogers & Revesz, 2019). Causal research encompasses various methodologies, including experimental, quasi-experimental, and observational research designs (Rogers & Revesz, 2019). This form of research is highly structured, with descriptive and correlational studies often preceding it as preparatory phases (Zikmund et al., 2012).

4.4.1 Research Design Employed

The research philosophy guiding this study is pragmatism, leading to the adoption of a mixed methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative elements (Walliman, 2010).

This study aims to advance content marketing theory by exploring user motivation and the impact of content dissemination within the Douyin fashion community. To authentically capture Douyin's distinctiveness as a content marketing platform, the researcher must immerse themselves in the platform and experience it from the user's viewpoint. Additionally, gaining a deeper understanding of the community's customer motivations and needs necessitates active engagement with the community. This includes both observing and participating in customer activities, as well as analysing their consequences. Lastly, to develop a content marketing model specific to the Douyin fashion community, it is crucial for the researcher to document, analyse, and interpret the community's content.

The three research objectives outlined share a common methodology in their design process: Namely, the necessity for the researcher to immerse themselves within the community to observe and document various aspects. These aspects include the researcher's experiential records, the interactions of community members, and the underlying elements of community content. Consequently, this study employs netnography to tackle these issues. Opting for a netnographic approach facilitates the identification of qualitative data collection methods as particularly suitable. These methods encompass observing and documenting trending topics within Douyin fashion communities, customer feedback, and the researcher's field notes. By utilising netnography, this study is poised to yield insightful and dependable results through the analytical procedures of netnographic data analysis, as outlined by Kozinets in 2019. Furthermore, it is imperative to conduct semi-structured interviews with both Douyin experts and users. The data derives from these interviews, which captured the experiences and perspectives of experts and community members, provided deep insights pertinent to the research questions. This approach increases the

trustworthiness of the qualitative results by integrating them with data from community observations.

In addition to the qualitative research design outlined previously, this study pursues the additional goal of evaluating the effectiveness of content marketing communication within the community, thereby supporting theories related to communication effects in content marketing. To achieve this, it is necessary to test and predict the causal links between the effectiveness of community content in setting agendas and the engagement behaviour of customers, fulfilling the second research objective 2. The study employs causal research strategy within a quantitative framework. Preliminary descriptive and correlational research methods are utilised to thoroughly assess the impact of community content on customer engagement. Initially, the study explores relationships between variables and generated hypotheses. This is followed by the development of a conceptual model based on these hypotheses. Subsequently, questionnaires are distributed among community members to gather feedback and assess the validity of the proposed model. Owing to the rigorously structured nature of this causality study, reliability and validity are ensured through the use of standardised data analysis techniques, culminating in the application of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) for path analysis to establish causal relationships among the variables.

4.5 Netnography

4.5.1 Introduction

To explore the dynamics between consumers and brands, the research strategically chooses to immerse itself within the Douyin community to observe interactions and activities, as suggested by Elliott & Jankel-Elliott (2003). Netnography, as defined by Kozinets in 2002, a method well-suited for ethnographic research on Internet communities, is employed for the purpose. Netnography, a subset of qualitative research approaches, focuses on cultural and community studies and adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the realm of online communities and computer-mediated

communication (Kozinets, 2010). With the increase in Internet use and the evolution of online communication tools, netnography allows researchers to tap into the rich tapestry of user-generated content (UGC) as these communities mimic social structures in a virtual space. Notably less obtrusive than focus groups and interviews, netnography offers a more natural way to gather data (Kozinets, 2002).

In practice, the research engages with the Douyin fashion community, concentrating on popular short videos and closely monitoring user behaviour and the interactions between brands and users to gather valuable data. Utilising netnography facilitates a deeper understanding of engagement behaviour, as noted by Arnould in 1998.

The research methodology adheres to the six procedural stages of netnography outlined by Kozinets in 2019: **1. initiation, 2. investigation, 3. immersion, 4. interaction, 5. integration, 6. incarnation.** Kozinets (2019) calls the procedure as “recipe” of netnography.

Figure 2 shows how the research in this study applied the “recipe” to complete the qualitative data collection and analysis process. **Initiation** means that the research needs first to propose research questions and objectives. After the research objectives have been determined, **investigation** means that the researcher needs to explore and confirm the scope suitable for the research, usually interpreted as the online objects (communities, groups or users). After the scope of the research has been determined, the researcher needs to immerse himself in the context and collect the appropriate data. **Immersion** is one of the most critical data collection steps because the observational data for the research is collected at this stage. During this stage, the researcher must first determine his role. Kozinets (2019) believes that the immersion process is flexible and that the researcher can either passively observe the community dynamics or actively participate in the community interactions as an active participant. In this study, the researcher entered the community as a passive observer to collect authentic and natural community data. Later, due to the large amount of data in online communities, Kozinets (2019) suggest that netnographers screen the data selectively. He provides three forms of data (investigation, interaction, and immersion) to ensure that researchers can collect data efficiently. Investigation data is objective data that

exists in the community. The investigation data in this study included popular video data from the community and data from the Feigua database (Douyin's official video data platform). Interaction data is the content of interactions between users in the community. The interactive data of this study is presented in the form of screenshots of video content and comment sections. Immersion data is a subjective reflection recorded by the researcher. The immersion data in this study are reflective notes which were recorded in a table together with the investigation data (Appendix 1, Figure 12). The three combined forms of data form the observational data of the study. Afterwards, to enrich and improve the credibility of the data, Kozinets (2019) suggests that researchers interact with community members based on observational data to provide in-depth insights. **Interaction** can be done through focus groups, interviews, or community interaction methods. For this study, interviews were chosen to provide reliable data. **Integration** can be seen as the data analysis stage of netnography, where researchers analyse all the qualitative data collected. Kozinets (2019) provides the steps of integration: collating, coding, combining, counting (condensing), and charting, to guide the researcher through the data analysis process of netnography. Finally, **incarnation** refers to the research results. The result of this study is presented in the doctoral thesis. These steps structured the application of qualitative methods in the study (Figure 3), which is elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

The “ Recipe” of Netnography employed (the Procedure of Netnography)

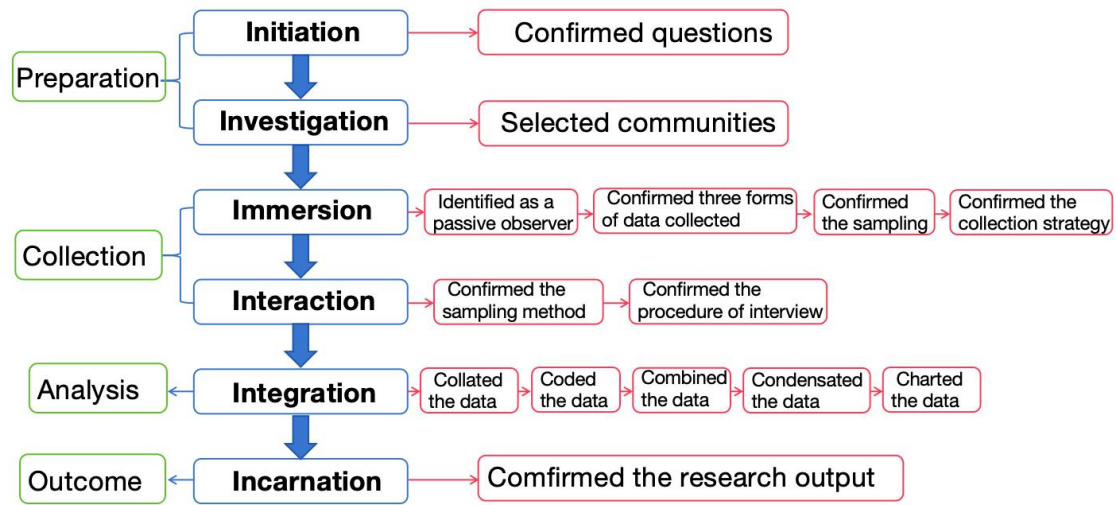


Figure 3. The procedure of Netnography

Source: the researcher

4.5.2 Initiation (confirmed questions)

Kozinets (2019) elucidates the importance of evaluating the relevance of research. Researchers must thoughtfully contemplate the research questions prior to conducting their investigation.

The research design section elaborates on the rationale and significance of employing netnography in this study.

4.5.3 Investigation (selected communities)

Kozinets (2019) observes that the vastness of the Internet necessitates that researchers identify a specific scope for their study. This scope should meet four criteria: 1. active participation on social media; 2. posting content relevant to the research; 3. frequent user interactions; and 4. a substantial volume of data (Kozinets, 2010).

In previous netnography studies focusing on social media fashion brands and communities, scholars typically select two or more brands on the platform for observation (Loureiro, Serra & Guerreiro, 2019). A brand is often regarded as a compact community where users engage through the comments section of the brand’s posts. The active engagement and frequent interactions between the brand and its

users furnish scholars with an abundance of content pertinent to their research. Ultimately, interactions both from brand to user and among users within these brand communities offer scholars essential insights into how fashion brands integrate into social media fashion communities (Loureiro, Serra & Guerreiro, 2019). But, this study does not focus on specific brands or influencers within the Douyin fashion community for its investigation. Instead, it encompasses the entire fashion community as the research object.

The primary reason is that this study emphasises content marketing theory, which, according to Du Plessis (2017), involves engaging community users with non-invasive content. Non-invasive content aligns the form and style of branded content with that of the community, making the analysis of broadly popular content more representative than focusing solely on specific branded content.

Additionally, Douyin's content recommendation system differs significantly from other platforms. Research indicates that most Douyin users prefer watching short videos on the "For You" page (Lurello, Sierra & Guerrero, 2019), where the system curates video content based on user preferences analysis, creating a unique user experience compared to other social media platforms. Users do not initially watch content from followed brands; instead, brand content is randomly displayed on their screens. Consequently, Douyin users tend not to engage with specific brand communities as intensely. More user interactions arise from the branded content that the algorithm delivers. Hence, traditional data collection methods that focus on two or more specific brands are unsuitable for researching the whole Douyin community.

Therefore, this study argues that analysing the content forms and user interactions in popular videos within the Douyin fashion community provides more precise insights into content marketing dynamics within the community.

4.5.4 Immersion (observational data collection)

After investigation, the study formally transitioned to data collection, a critical phase for netnographers. One of the most essential elements of netnography is the field data

gathered by researchers who immerse themselves in the community to both observe and participate (Kozinets, 2019). According to Kozinets (2019), immersion requires researchers to enter the research space and explore the community with a cultural focus. Researchers might need to learn new languages or rituals and can discover and embody new identities, values, narratives, and social forms. Additionally, scholars are expected to maintain research notes throughout their immersion, known as the immersion journal, with an emphasis on quality over quantity.

Adhering to Kozinets's (2019) guidelines, the study established field data collection methods and strategies tailored to the research questions, as follows: 1. Ascertain the researcher's role within the community; 2. Identify the sample of data to be collected during the observation phase; 3. Determine the observational data collection method; and 4. Formulate a strategy for collecting observational data that suits this study.

4.5.4.1 Identifying the role of the researcher

Observation and field trips are crucial aspects of ethnography (Saunders et al., 2009; Van Maanen, 2011). Participant observation necessitates researchers immersing themselves in the daily lives of the subjects (Creswell, 2013). Researchers should acknowledge the significance of their engagement in community observations. Saunders (2012, p.344) identifies four types of participant observation:

1. Complete participant – in this role, the researcher becomes a member of the group being studied for the project's duration and conceals their identity as a researcher.
2. Complete observer – in this capacity, the researcher also hides their identity, but does not engage in the group's activities.
3. Observer as participant – here, the primary role is that of an observer, and the individuals being studied are aware of the researcher's purpose. This approach is less problematic and more ethical, though it somewhat diminishes the emotional depth that full participation might offer.
4. Participant as observer – this role involves disclosing the researcher's identity and actively participating in the group. Participation may be feasible without fully adopting all member attributes.

In this study, the researcher assumed the role of a complete observer. He entered the

community as a regular user, refraining from participating in community interactions and merely observing natural occurrences. While this role limited the acquisition of interaction data, the study compensated for this limitation through in-depth interviews that provided extensive interaction data.

The researcher prepared to enter the community from November 12th to 14th, 2021. Given Douyin's unique content recommendation system and the fact that most users frequently linger on the "For You" page, the researcher required a specific strategy to engage with the fashion community. To ensure that the algorithm recognised the researcher as a user deeply interested in fashion content, the researcher manipulated it by providing specific cues. Initially, the researcher created a new Douyin account and selected "fashion", "clothes", and "outfits" as keywords in the preferences. Upon entering the platform, the researcher focused on browsing content on the "For You" page. When non-fashion-related content surfaced, it was quickly bypassed; however, when fashion-related content appeared, the researcher engaged with it extensively by repeatedly watching and liking the videos. This process taught the AI to identify the researcher as a user with a strong interest in fashion, prompting it to deliver more fashion-related content.

After this method was implemented for three days, the researcher noted that four to six out of every ten videos featured on the "For You" page were related to fashion. This not only tailored the viewing experience to resemble that of users with fashion preferences but also increased the authenticity of the research environment.

After this adjustment period, when the researcher logged into Douyin, the proportion of fashion-related videos remained consistent. This mimicry of the typical user experience of fashion enthusiasts was maintained throughout the subsequent community observation, which lasted three months, from 15th November, 2021 to 15th February, 2022.

4.5.4.2 Three types of observational data

Kozinets (2019) identifies three forms of data: 1. investigation data, 2. interaction data, and 3. immersion data. Aligned with the research questions, this study requires three types of observational data: Community content elements, user interaction data, and

field notes. These categories correspond to the three types of data outlined by Kozinets, respectively.

Investigation data

Investigation data is intended to aid the researcher in sourcing more accurate and valuable data (Kozinets, 2019). The methodology for collecting investigation data includes five steps: 1. simplification, 2. searching, 3. scouting, 4. selection, and 5. saving (Kozinets, 2019).

The first step, simplification, involves distilling the research question into simpler elements. In this study, the research question was broken down into fashion-related keywords such as fashion, trends, men's outfits, women's outfits, and the names of prominent fashion brands, reflecting the focus on content within the fashion user community on Douyin.

The second step, searching, entails using the simplified keywords to locate relevant data on the research platform (Kozinets, 2019). For this study, the researcher used these keywords, tags, and trends to conduct searches on Douyin, enabling the identification of data that effectively addresses the research question.

The third step, scouting, involves continuous observation and participation in relevant community content and activities (Kozinets, 2019). In this case, the researcher immersed themselves in the platform for three months, dedicating an hour each day to browsing videos as a regular user would.

The fourth step, selection, requires researchers to choose representative data that answers the research questions from the plethora of community data available (Kozinets, 2019). Accordingly, the researcher daily collected the most viewed videos and user interactions related to these videos. These videos were downloaded and considered potential data.

The final step, saving, ensures the data is stored properly (Kozinets, 2019). The researcher preserved the videos on their personal computer.

Interaction data

Since the researcher serves as a complete observer, the interaction data collected during the observation phase of the study consist solely of user discussions and

comments found in the comment sections of the video content. There is no data regarding the researcher's interactions with users or brands. The interaction data primarily comprised user comments, from which the investigation data was extracted. Daily, the researcher compiled and saved the content from the comment section of each video while also saving the videos.

Immersion data

The final step involves collecting immersive data, which is recorded in the researcher's daily field notes. The process for gathering immersive data includes four steps: 1. reconnoitring, 2. recording, 3. researching, and 4. reflecting.

Kozinets (2019) describes reconnoitring as the initial screening process to identify appropriate data within a community. He advises researchers to focus on several types of data during this phase: Resonance data (views commonly held by users), bootstrapped user data (perspectives of community opinion leaders), and accidental data (unexpected findings, often referred to as "black swans").

The second step, recording, involves the researchers documenting specific dates, activities, data, and their feelings or decisions. What encounters did the researcher have? How were these evaluated? Decisions about what data should be collected and which specific data to gather are made at this stage. It is beneficial to record social experiences, including platform interactions, searches, memes, and events (Kozinets, 2019).

Subsequently, "researching" entails integrating the recorded information with the prepared research questions. During this step, researchers need to align the gathered data with relevant theories, considering why and which theoretical frameworks could aid in understanding the collected information (Kozinets, 2019).

Finally, reflection is crucial. Researchers are expected to reflect on their compiled notes, setting aside their preconceived notions and perceptions, and considering the issues from a dialectical perspective (Kozinets, 2019).

Data was meticulously recorded and compiled into immersive notes following these steps.

4.5.4.3 Sampling of observational data

Selecting appropriate samples is crucial for research to achieve significant results and insights (Acharya et al., 2013). This study requires three types of observational data based on the research questions: field notes, user interaction, and popular content within the community. Both user interaction and popular content must be collected by the research from the platform's content samples. The sampling method employed is purposive sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), which targets representative videos on the platform as samples. The study focuses exclusively on high-exposure community content, essential for content marketing (non-invasive content in the community). According to Douyin's content recommendation system, high-exposure content generally gains popularity among community users, making it a valuable resource for validating content marketing theories. Moreover, this high-exposure content often features extensive user interactions, and comments on this content are also documented in this study. Initially, the research verifies that all collected data is related to fashion content. Since fashion is a component in nearly every video, careful consideration is given to the types of videos collected as potential data. For the purposes of this research, "fashion content" is defined by three criteria:

1. The video provides an explanation of fashion-related information.
2. The video exclusively displays fashion items or outfits, with no additional information discernible to the researcher.
3. In the comments section, user comments pertain specifically to the fashion content of the video.

When the collected video satisfies at least two out of the three criteria, it can be considered as promoting fashion content.

However, the vast array of short fashion videos on Douyin has made it challenging for the research to accurately identify the most popular fashion video content daily. To ensure the data collected is representative and rich in interaction data, this study proposes two solutions to increase the reliability of the sample.

First, some scholars assert that data metrics like likes, comments, and shares can aid researchers in selecting the necessary data (Xu & Zhao, 2018; Omar & Dequan, 2020;

Hasena & Sakapurnama, 2021). Initially, the research recorded all fashion-related videos daily during the observation period. Subsequently, the six videos with the most likes, comments, and shares were chosen as representative samples of content within the fashion content community.

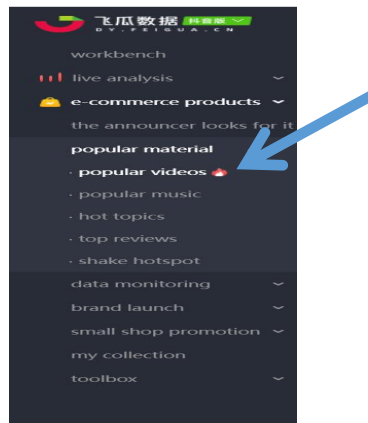
Second, to resolve this dilemma, the researcher consulted with an industry insider, a ByteDance employee, who recommended using Douyin's official data analysis website, Feigua, to support the research in collecting more accurate data.

Feigua is a professional database for analysing Douyin data. It is a paid database and the researcher paid 150 yuan (approximately 17 pounds) monthly to access the database. This subscription provided the researcher with access to the official selection of the most popular fashion-related videos of the day on the platform. The official data was then compared with the researcher's daily downloads of high-exposure videos, and the overlapping content was deemed representative of the community, forming the final data sample for this study. The next section describes the functions and importance of the Feigua database for this study.

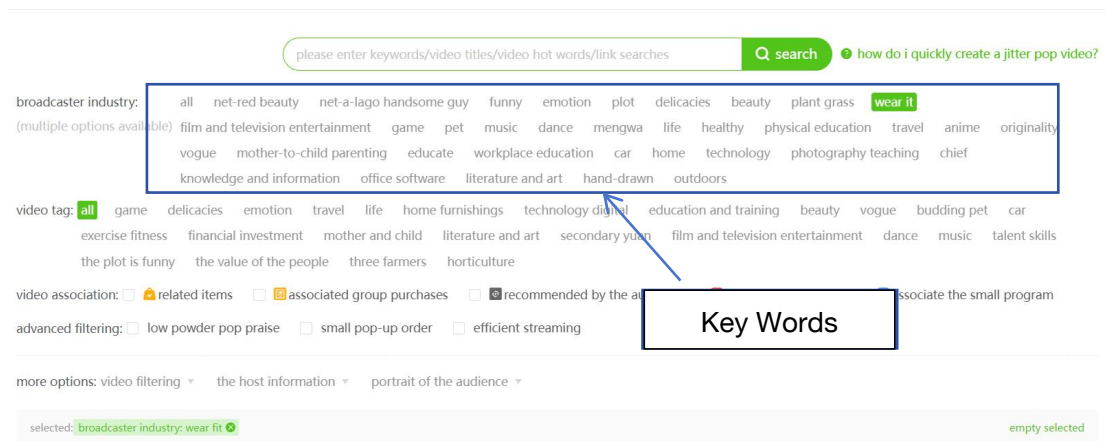
4.5.4.4 Introduction to Feigua and its role in this study

FeiguaData (www.feigua.cn) is a professional and official platform for analysing data related to short videos and live e-commerce. The data on this platform are updated in real-time, mirroring the content on Douyin. The image below shows the toolbar of Feigua (Picture 4), which offers a variety of options. Most options in this toolbar can be temporarily disregarded, as the research did not utilise them during the data collection process. The most critical feature is the section on popular videos, where the research can track the most popular videos daily.

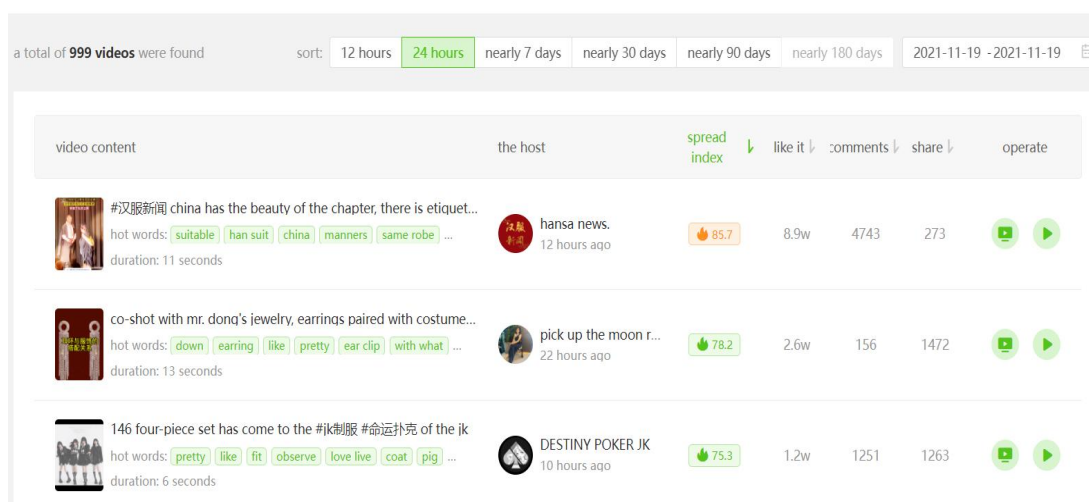
After clicking on the "popular videos" link and navigating to the page (Picture 5), numerous categories are available, such as beauty, handsome guy, and funny. Additionally, the researcher had the option to search for keywords that better align with the research objectives. The researcher preferred to choose the "wear it" to view popular videos. Subsequently, the researcher searched for keywords like "clothing", "fashion", "men's wear", and "women's outfit". Following this, the page displays the most popular video on Douyin over the past 24 hours, which is quite convenient.



Picture 4. the Feigua toolbar



Picture 5. the search page of Feigua



Picture 6. the rank list of popular videos



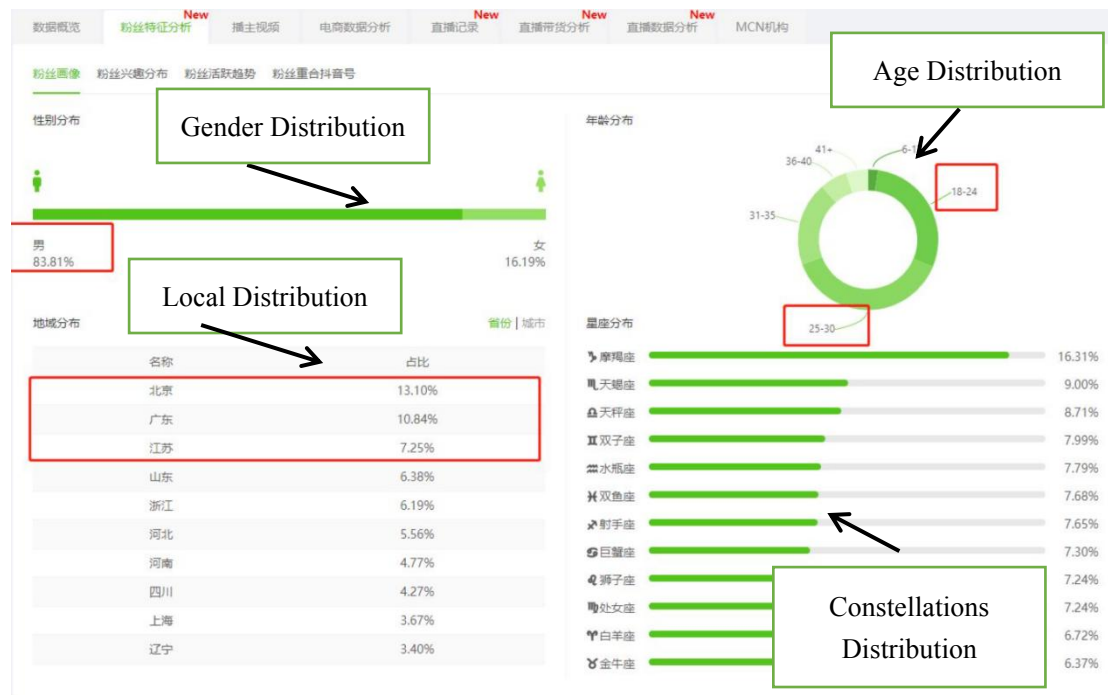
Picture7. the description of spread index

After the research selected the keywords, the page displayed the rankings of popular videos over the past 24 hours (Picture 6). Additionally, some profiles about the videos were shown. One metric, the spread index, is particularly important. The higher this indicator, the more popular the video is. This metric has also become one of the main supporting data points to measure the popularity of content (Picture 7). According to the official explanation, a video with a spread index over 80 is identified as potentially popular. This process helps the researcher identify daily popular videos for analysis purposes.

The first advantage of Feigua is its ability to quickly help the research collect popular videos daily using official data, which enhances the credibility and representativeness of the collected data. Secondly, the platform offers extensive professional data analysis, providing the research with a deeper understanding of why certain videos are categorised as popular. Thirdly, it provides detailed audience information for each piece of content (Picture 8), aiding the research in understanding how different users establish their own community agendas on Douyin.

However, excessive reliance on this platform could potentially alter the observational component of the research method, possibly preventing the researcher from witnessing the users' actual interactions within the community. To address this issue, the researcher should immerse themselves in the community daily and view videos on the "For You" page, then log into the website to collect the official popular videos.

Ultimately, the researcher should consider all the data collected as a whole, and only data gathered through both these two methods should be recorded as valid. Based on the double verification of immersion and the database for valid data, the study finally collected 374 valid videos.



Picture 8. User Persona of a video shown via Feigua

4.5.4.5 Observational data collection strategy

Kozinets (2019) advises that as netnographers, researchers must determine the data and content to be collected, based on their specific research objectives. In this study, the data collected during the observation phase included investigation data (trendy videos), interaction data (users' attitudes and reflections on these videos), and immersion data (the researcher's field notes). Field notes are recorded based on the researcher's perceptions as they immerse in the community. User feedback is collected objectively as the researcher joins the community. However, trendy videos contain too much information, so for this type of data, Kozinets (2019) emphasises that information can be selected by developing a data collection strategy that serves the research objectives.

Therefore, the study established a strategy for the content and form of the target data to be collected, enabling a more purposeful selection of data needed for the research from the plethora of data available within the community. The researcher identified the factors that needed to be observed during the netnography process by reviewing how previous scholars assessed Douyin content. Additionally, the researcher developed some factors based on the objectives of the study.

The researcher identified eleven factors, including five objective aspects of the video content: Creators, video duration, background music (BGM), captions, and scenes in the video. There were also three factors subjectively summarised by the researcher: Content type, the theme of the content (objects of agenda setting in the community), and a fans distribution report obtained from the Feigua database. Finally, there were three variables related to user feedback: Likes, comments, and shares. These three metrics have been commonly used as supporting data in previous social media research (Tuten, 2020; Adedoyin-Olowe et al., 2013; Lunando & Purwarianti, 2013). The research described each factor in detail (Table 5). Initially, the research categorised creators into two types: Individuals and enterprises. On Douyin, if the creator is an enterprise, its name is followed by a blue checkmark (Picture 9).



Picture 9. the blue mark of enterprise creator

If the creator of the sample video features a blue mark, it indicates a business entity; otherwise, it is classified as an individual creator. Video duration is recorded in two categories: Those that are equal to or less than 15 seconds, and those longer than 15 seconds. Guinaudeau, Munger, and Votta (2022) find that 15 seconds represents the optimal video length on TikTok/Douyin, with durations of 18-55 seconds being rare.

Moreover, 15-second videos are highlighted as a defining feature of Douyin/TikTok in existing studies (e.g., Su, Baker & Doyle, 2020; Aloui, 2021). Thus, the research adopted 15 seconds as the threshold for video duration classification. The classification of background music (BGM) follows Ma et al. (2020), distinguishing between videos with BGM and those without. Captions are categorised based on Martin Joss's (1976) study, which classifies captions into five styles as detailed in Table 5. Video scenes are categorised based on Ma et al.'s (2020) classification of Douyin video scenes into outdoor and indoor. Furthermore, for content style classification, the research drew on Chen et al.'s (2021) model. Finally, the study identified a coding scheme for content themes (issues), a feature that has not yet been extensively developed in academic research on Douyin but has been recognised as crucial in other social media studies (e.g., Waqas, Hamzah & Salleh, 2020). As a result, from November 12th to 14th, 2021, the research aggregated various content themes within the community, summarised in Table 6. by category. Ultimately, all factors were meticulously recorded for each video (see Appendix 1, Figure 11). The final statistics for video elements compiled are presented in Table 7. In addition, the research added field notes to the Figure (see Appendix 1, Figure 11) so that investigation and immersion data could be integrated. Interaction data were recorded by taking screenshots (see Appendix 1, Picture 50). All data was finally summarised as the observational data.

Table 6. The factors collected during observation

Factors	Categorisation	Descriptions
Content creator	Individual	There is no blue VIP logo next to the creator's name in picture 9. The theme is coded as 1 if the video was created by individuals.
	Enterprise	There is a blue VIP logo next to the creator's name. The theme is coded as 2 if the video was created by enterprises.
Video duration (Ma et al., 2020)	<15 seconds	The theme is coded as 1 if the video duration is less than 15 seconds.
	>15 seconds	The theme is coded as 2 if the video duration is more than 15 seconds.
Background music (BGM) (Ma et al., 2020)	With BGM	The theme is coded as 1 if the video includes background music (BGM).
	Without BGM	The theme is coded as 2 if the video lacks BGM and contains only spoken content by the creator.
Scene of video (Ma et al., 2020)	Indoor	The theme is coded as 1 if the video was shot indoors.
	Outdoor	The theme is coded as 2 if the video was shot outdoors.
Caption (Martin Joss, 1976, p153-155)	Frozen Style	The language style resembles that found in official documents, which are not typically meant for casual communication but rather to inform the audience. In this study, such titles pertain to content that conveys specific information, such as product descriptions and pricing.
	Formal Style	The language style is akin to a formal speech, generally more formal but not entirely discreet, similar to delivering information to an audience. In this study, the titles are used for sharing knowledge,

		making assertions, or expressing emotions.
	Consultative Style	Ordinary forms of communication, which are more conversational and can typically be answered with "Yes" or "No". In this study, the titles involve posing or responding to questions from the audience. The language used is informal and casual, suitable for everyday conversations with acquaintances.
	Casual style	In this study, the title features colloquial or true-to-life expressions.
	Intimate style	Entirely private language, unique to family members, lovers, and close friends, is characterized by abbreviations, omissions, and rapid, ambiguous dialogue that may be unclear to outsiders. In this study, the title includes intimate names and brief content, with phrases and words understandable only by a specific group.
	Oral speech	Videos featuring speakers delivering information formally to an audience.
Types of content (Drawing on Chen et al., 2021)	Douyin Dance	A video showcasing a popular dance challenge from Shakeology.
	Lip syncing	The character in the video synchronizes lip movements with the audio vocals.

Themes of content (issues)	Street fashion	The videos are styled as video portraits, primarily featuring models displaying outfits outdoors.
	Outfit transitions	The characters in the video switch outfits in time with the music.
	Pictorial slideshow	A video that presents a sequence of still images arranged deliberately.
	Acting	Videos that disseminate information through role-playing by individuals or groups.
	Advertisement	The video predominantly displays product or brand information, akin to traditional advertising.
	Tutorial	The video offers instructions to the viewer, often through a combination of body language and verbal guidance, imparting knowledge.
	Entertainment	The content does not promote or detail any specific product; it merely entertains the audience with its material.
	Casual fashion showcase	The content lacks explicit advice or guidance; instead, it presents a general fashion overview within the scene.
	Outfit ideas	The content delivers explicit advice or guidance, informing the audience about outfit ideas and product details.
	Cultural attire	The content emphasises cultural diversity and inclusiveness, showcasing fashion items that reflect cultural integration.

Quality and value	Content provides details about product quality and pricing.
Personal image construction	While not directly linked to fashion, the content offers advice on personal image refinement, covering aspects like hairstyles, accessories, and posture.

Source: Researcher

Table 7. The content factors of videos (N=374)

Creator	N	BGM	N	Scene	N	Duration	N	Content type	N	Caption	N
Individual	242	With BGM	303	Indoor	204	5s-15s	303	Acting	29	Formal Style	109
Enterprise	132	No BGM	71	Outdoor	170	>15s	71	Douyin Dance	25	Intimate style	91
								Lip syncing	10	Casual style	65
								Street fashion	74	Conservative style	62
								Outfit transitions	61	Frozen style	31
								Tutorial	32	Null	16
								Oral speech	38		
								Pictorial slideshow	66		
								Advertisement	39		

Source: Researcher

4.5.5 Interaction (Interview)

After immersion, if researchers need more useful information, they should interact with people in the community. They can employ various interactive methods, such as interviews and comments (Kozinets, 2019). Since observational data cannot fully answer the research questions, it is necessary to interact with community members to obtain more useful data. These data not only improve the reliability of observational data, but also provides the study with more insightful data. Therefore, this study chose interview as the interaction method to provide the study with more data. Interviews are an essential part of ethnographers' field investigations, as stated by Moisander et al. (2020). Echoing Kozinets (2019), interviews also help researchers gather interactive data. According to Kvalle & Brinkmann (2009), interviews provide reliable, comparable qualitative data and are among the most effective and convenient means of data collection. Furthermore, they allow researchers to acquire a wealth of data, details, and new insights from respondents who can share their views, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviours, and predictions related to research topics (Rowley, 2012). Conducting interviews also fosters personal interactions with respondents, enabling researchers to listen attentively to their contributions and making them feel valued as important sources of information on the research topic (Seidman, 2013).

This study employed semi-structured interviews, which offer the flexibility to delve into topics that may prove significant (Longhurst, 2003). These interviews were facilitated using Tencent Meeting, a Chinese online meeting platform. This technology simplifies access to the interview location, as participants and the researcher only require a single interactive device (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). Online meeting applications offer several advantages as a medium for conducting interviews, such as the flexibility they provide both interviewers and respondents in terms of time and location (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Interviews can be conducted post-work in the evening and from any location with an internet connection. However, there are challenges as well; for instance, some respondents may be hesitant to show their faces, making it difficult for the researcher to gauge body language. Due to COVID-19

restrictions, it was not feasible to conduct in-person interviews. Online interviews became the only option available, and while participants were encouraged to enable their cameras during the sessions, it was not mandatory. If participants chose not to use their cameras, the researcher respected their decision.

4.5.5.1 Sampling employed for Interview

Firstly, it is important to specify the number of interviews conducted. Sampling continues until the researcher feels that saturation has been reached (Morse, 1995). However, Mason (2010) suggests that for PhD projects using qualitative interviews, sampling should ideally cease when the number of interviews is a multiple of ten, rather than at the point of saturation. Guest et al. (2006) have demonstrated that conducting 12 interviews within a homogenous group is typically sufficient to achieve saturation. Based on previous experience, 12 followers and 12 influencers or staff members were chosen accordingly. This selection was anticipated to enhance the credibility of the study's findings. The basic information about all respondents is detailed in Appendix 2, Table 19.

For the sampling method of the interview, the research employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The primary rationale for choosing purposive sampling over random or convenience sampling is grounded in the strategies outlined by Marshall (1996) for qualitative research, specifically for conducting in-depth interviews):

1. The number of samples in qualitative studies is typically small. Using probability sampling could result in significant errors.
2. Should researchers opt for probability sampling, they must be thoroughly acquainted with the characteristics of a specific group, which should be uniform. However, achieving this uniformity is nearly impossible in the complex environment of qualitative studies.
3. Probability sampling is commonly utilised in quantitative studies because these studies aim to generalize objective results. The outcomes of quantitative research differ significantly from those of qualitative research, which seeks to understand values, beliefs, and attitudes.

4. Not everyone possesses the ability to clearly describe, understand, or observe their own actions or those of others. Qualitative research often depends on respondents who can provide relatively rich insights, offering researchers a greater depth and abundance of data.

The research opted for purposive sampling as the method for selecting interview subjects. Johnson and Weller (2002) suggest that individuals with professional experience lend credibility to qualitative research, as they can offer deeper insights and a broader understanding of the data. Consequently, the knowledge and expertise in Douyin were crucial criteria for selecting experts for the interviews. As Gummesson (2003) notes, there is a wealth of information in the minds of those who have experienced significant events. With this perspective, the research was meticulous in choosing respondents and defined specific criteria for identifying “experts”. The aim of conducting key informant interviews was to collect diverse perspectives from individuals like industry leaders and professionals who possess direct experience for study (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The research selected two distinct groups for the interviews: the first group required candidates to have working experience at relevant companies (selection criteria included ByteDance, the parent company of Douyin, or a Douyin multi-channel network (MCN) company); the second group consisted of fashion influencers on Douyin with more than 100,000 followers. The expertise and insights from these two groups were deemed highly valuable for this study. However, encountering a shortage of “experts”, the research resorted to the snowball sampling method. The initial interview is with a Douyin influencer friend who has 657,000 followers. Following this interview, the research was able to gather eleven more relevant “experts” through introductions from him and his friends. For consumer interview sampling, the research opted for purposive sampling. Given that each consumer’s fashion preferences vary, their perceptions of Douyin content also differ. To gather more effective information, the research meticulously selected interview samples from consumers based on three criteria: A penchant for fashion, frequent use of Douyin, and active engagement with brands and influencers on the platform. Only consumers meeting all three criteria were chosen for the interviews.

4.5.6 Integration (Data analysis)

Integration involves the sorting, coding, and classifying of data. Unlike other methods, netnography transitions from netnography into cultural immersion, engaging in these three processes (immersion, interaction, integration) simultaneously. Hatch (2002) argues that:

“Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and using data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. It always involves what Wolcott calls “mindwork” . . . Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data”. (pp. 148)

Hilal and Alabri (2013) describe qualitative analysis as a chaotic, challenging, and time-consuming process. They recommend that researchers remain vigilant, adaptable, and thoroughly acquainted with the data collected. They assert that only through meticulous organization and line-by-line review of the data can researchers uncover its deeper meanings (Chenail, 2012).

Kozinets (2019) outlines the steps for analysing online community netnography data as: 1. collating; 2. coding; 3. combining; 4. counting; and 5. charting. The research provides a detailed description of these data analysis steps in Table 8.

The research deviated from the standard netnography data analysis steps by replacing “counting” with “condensing” based on the actual data of this study. This modification is further explained in the subsequent section. The research concludes with a summary of the steps of qualitative data analysis for this study, as depicted in Figure 4.

Table 8. The process of data analysis operations in netnography

Operations	Descriptions
Collating	The process begins with the preparation of data before coding. Given the diverse nature of data in netnography, researchers must transform all data into a format amenable to coding. The initial step involves filtering, where researchers determine which data should be included for coding. Next, formatting takes place, specifically standardising data formats and converting non-text elements into text. The final preparatory step is archiving, which involves categorising the data to meet the specific needs of the researcher.
Coding	Like all qualitative analysis methods, the researcher begins by thoroughly familiarising themselves with the data before coding it.
Combining	Depending on theoretical and contextual considerations, the researcher amalgamates multiple codes with similar backgrounds or characteristics to create an advanced code.
Counting	The focus is primarily on assessing the proportion and frequency of various variables or codes. This analysis helps identify the most frequently used codes and pinpoints the key concepts critical to the study.
Charting	The researcher organises the content of all data into a chart, facilitating easier observation. This chart could manifest as a text map, text cloud, or text table.

Source: the researcher

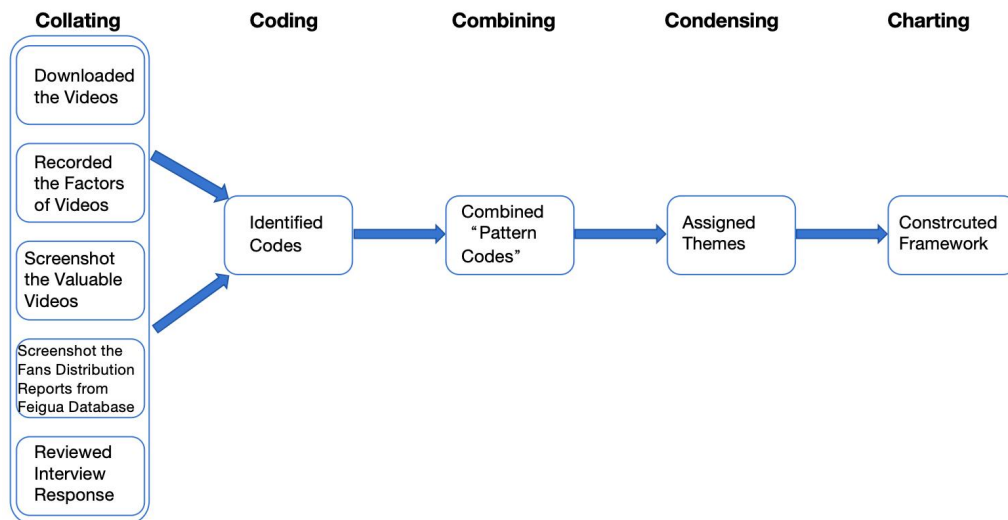


Figure 4. The process of Netnography data analysis (source: Refined from Kozinets(2019))

Initially, the research compiled all the data. The qualitative data for this study were categorised into four groups: Representative videos, the Feigua database, field notes, and interview records. The non-text data comprised videos and information from the Feigua database. The research then filtered and formatted the content elements in accordance with the previously described data collection strategy for observational data. However, the researcher recognised that text alone could not provide an intuitive understanding of the data results. Consequently, screenshots of the videos were taken, capturing most of the content elements and audience engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) as shown in Picture 10. These visual aids were synthesised into text to serve as supporting materials, increasing the reliability and transparency of the data analysis results.



Picture 10 Sample of video screenshots

After preparing all the data, the researcher commenced the coding of textual data. Kozinets (2019) discusses the use of either “deductive coding” or “inductive coding” in weblog coding. Deductive coding involves creating codes based on existing theories or concepts before collecting data, or organising the data with these theories or concepts as a framework during the coding process. Conversely, inductive coding allows researcher to develop codes directly from the data. While deductive coding enhances the reliability of the analytical framework, it can confine researchers within the bounds of pre-existing theories, potentially overlooking crucial findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive coding provides flexibility but depends heavily on the researcher's personal skills and is susceptible to their personal biases. Moreover, maintaining, evaluating, and validating the rigor of the data analysis can be challenging (Anderson, 2010). Considering the research question and both coding methods, the researcher, after thorough deliberation, opted for a combined deductive-inductive approach. This method has already been established in various qualitative studies (i.e., Yang & Fang, 2004; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Chew et al., 2019; Heathcote et al., 2021). Deductive-inductive coding merges the advantages of both approaches. The research began with deductive coding, using a

pre-established theoretical framework for initial coding. Simultaneously, the researcher remained receptive to discovering new themes and patterns that might not fit within the existing framework. This method facilitates the emergence of new insights while still validating established theories (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022).

In the study, the researcher initially generated codes deductively from the factors of audience media motivation in uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1974), which include cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integration needs, and social integration needs. This was done to identify the motivations behind consumers' acceptance of the community agenda.

Subsequently, the research deductively generated codes based on the elements of content marketing strategies (after De Plessis, 2015) to determine the content strategy model of fashion brands on Douyin. Additionally, the research developed codes inductively, basing them on the content of the data in an open manner. Given the large volume of original materials analysed, the thesis provides an example of the data used to illustrate the coding extraction process (see Appendix 2, Table 20).

Third, the research integrated all the codes. The consistency and differences among the codes were critical for categorising them. The integrated codes, referred to as "pattern codes" (Kozinets, 2019, p.465), were identified based on the deductive-inductive coding approach and aligned with the objectives of this study. In total, 57 pattern codes were identified: 41 could be categorised deductively as factors within the conceptual framework, and 16 were derived inductively based on the content of the data. The research listed all the pattern codes alongside the initial codes in Appendix 2, Table 21 .

The fourth step in netnography involves analysing the frequency of codes. In this research, the traditional method of counting has been replaced with a process of condensation. Kozinets (2019) suggests that employing quantitative statistics to measure code frequency can enhance the reliability of the analytical outcomes. More precisely, the main objective of this stage is to identify and select the most prevalent codes among all pattern codes, thereby isolating key concepts critical for interpreting the data results. Rather than counting, the research opts for a method of intense

thematic conceptualisation in their thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Kozinets (2019) emphasises that this step is not obligatory, reflecting the inherent flexibility of netnography as a qualitative research approach. In essence, netnography can incorporate various other qualitative research techniques. This counting phase serves to bolster the credibility of the findings through “quantitative” content analysis. Concurrently, Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that focusing on conceptually dense themes enables researchers to derive more persuasive explanations of the data and the themes associated with it. Consequently, the researcher consolidated all pattern codes into the principal dimensions of UGT and content marketing strategies, as previously outlined in Appendix 2, Table 22.

Finally, the research executed a meticulous charting operation for all the conceptualised themes. The researcher organised various conceptual models tailored to different research objectives. The subsequent chapter details these conceptual models within the results of each research question.

4.5.7 Incarnation

Incarnation represents a crucial element of Kozinets’s methodology, denoting the culmination of the research output that arises from the research process (Kozinets, 2019). In this research, the output is the doctoral thesis that articulates the research and meticulously documents its principal evidence and arguments.

4.6 Qualitative Research Credibility

Research credibility is essential, with effectiveness and reliability ensuring trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). Effectiveness relates to the precision of research data (Yilmaz, 2013), while reliability concerns the consistency of measuring specific variables using research techniques under similar conditions with the same participants (Yilmaz, 2013).

Tracy (2010) suggests criteria for evaluating the credibility of qualitative research, including:

Credibility The credibility of qualitative data can be ensured by considering diverse perspectives throughout the data collection process to guarantee data appropriateness (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend techniques to enhance credibility, such as prolonged engagement, continuous observation, data triangulation, and researcher triangulation.

Transferability The transferability of qualitative data can be facilitated by providing a detailed description of the results obtained through various data collection methods (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Additionally, presenting a spectrum of experiences helps ensure that readers understand and can evaluate whether the research is applicable to their practice (Thomas & Magilvy, 2010).

Dependability Dependability requires meticulous documentation of data collection techniques, procedures, and analyses. It involves a detailed account of research methods, systematically replicating the study to confirm result consistency, and reinforcing findings to assure reliability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2010).

Confirmability Once credibility, transferability, and dependability are established, confirmability follows. Qualitative research must be reflective, maintaining awareness and openness toward the study and its outcomes. Researchers need a self-critical stance, considering how their biases might influence the study. Confirmability can be achieved by promptly documenting personal feelings, biases, and insights after interviews, and by researchers acknowledging the changes brought about by awareness of potential biases (Thomas & Magilvy, 2010).

In the qualitative research phase of this study, the research utilised triangulation by employing various techniques throughout the different stages of data collection, achieving data saturation, and employing reflective methods to enhance the credibility of the research. Following the guidance of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion, the researcher consistently observed content and customer engagement within the fashion community, meticulously recording field notes. The researcher then collected insights from both experts and community users through interviews, ultimately integrating existing theories to establish triangulation among the researcher's field notes, the data from interviews, and theoretical frameworks, thus ensuring the study's credibility.

Similarly, this study implemented two specific netnography techniques—complete observation and semi-structured interviews—to capture rich data and reduce biases (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Additionally, analysing results from various types of data helped ensure the transferability of the research findings.

Moreover, this study adopted multi-stage data collection methods, systematically collecting data in sequential steps. Employing a diverse array of methods enriches the construction of the big picture, thereby enhancing the reliability and diversity of the findings (Golafshani, 2003).

Another approach to confirming the credibility of qualitative research involves achieving data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) suggest that data saturation confirms the effectiveness of the research. For example, the researcher noted that data saturation began to emerge by the 10th interview and was fully achieved by the 12th interview, indicating that no further data collection was necessary.

Finally, the researcher applied reflective methods, consulting journals and articles, among other reference materials, to remain vigilant against incorporating personal biases into the research.

4.7 Quantitative Method

After detailing the qualitative methodological steps in this study, this section outlines the quantitative methodological steps. Given the study's pragmatic philosophical stance, quantitative methods are also applicable, provided they contribute to addressing the research questions. Research question 2 in this study asks: Does the content agenda-setting effect in the community influence customer engagement behaviour? The question requires an exploration of the causal link between the efficacy of content dissemination within the community and customer engagement behaviours, thereby assessing the impact of content marketing and offering theoretical support for the content marketing theory in terms of dissemination efficacy.

4.7.1 Online survey

Wenjuanxing (the Chinese online survey website) was used in the research process. It rewards participants for their involvement in research tasks, which facilitated the recruitment of a representative group of users from the Douyin fashion community in this project.

Wenjuanxing.com, akin to platforms like Qualtrics and SurveyMonkey (Wang, et al., 2020; Sanghera, et al. 2020), maintains a sample database exceeding 6 million respondents. This database guarantees access to genuine, diverse, and representative samples through the verification of personal information. Numerous studies have consistently found that Wenjuanxing.com delivers reliable and high-quality data that meet established measures, maintaining a high standard of reliability comparable to offline research methods (Wang et al., 2020). The survey was conducted online between March 15th and March 20th, 2022. Before initiating the survey, participants were screened for their interest in fashion on Douyin and their engagement with the Douyin fashion community's content.

4.7.2 Sampling

The research initially used G*Power to determine the sample size, ensuring the reliability of the results. G*Power is a free software program that calculates sample sizes for research studies, capable of determining the necessary sample sizes for a variety of statistical tests including t-tests, F-tests, and chi-square tests (Faul et al., 2009). The sample size is typically dependent on three key indicators: Effect size, α (error probability), and Power ($1-\beta$ error probability). α represents the probability of incorrectly rejecting the null hypothesis (H_0) when it is actually true, and $1-\beta$ indicates the power of the test (Paul et al., 2007). In sociological research, Paul et al. (2007) generally recommend an α of no more than 0.05 and a test power exceeding 0.8. However, selecting an appropriate effect size is often a point of debate when determining sample sizes. Effect size quantifies the strength of the relationship between two variables in the population, or it estimates this strength based on the

sample (Kelley & Preacher, 2012). There is no standardised criterion for effect size; it varies depending on the method of data analysis (Lovric, 2011). In this study, data analysis employed PLS-SEM to construct a structural equation and test path coefficients, utilising PLS-MGA to assess path differences between the high NFO and other NFO groups. Following recommendations by Hair et al. (2014), f^2 is a standard measure of effect size in PLS. The effect size conventions for f^2 are as follows: Small effect size = .02, medium effect size = .15, and large effect size = .35 (Hair et al., 2014). The researcher chose a medium effect size of $f^2=.15$, aiming for a reasonably reliable sample size with 95% confidence interval and $p<.05$; a sample of 107 respondents was deemed sufficient to detect the effect of media use on agenda-setting (H1). The sample sizes for the subsequent two hypotheses matched that of H1. For hypotheses H4, H5, and H6, which explore differences among various NFO groups, the appropriate measure of effect size is “ f ”, with effect size conventions for “ f ” values being small effect = .1, medium effect = .25, large effect = .4. The study also chose a medium effect size ($f=.25$) for these hypotheses, with 95% confidence interval, $p<.05$, and 4 groups; thus, a sample of 280 respondents was sufficient to detect the differences between the high NFO group and the other three NFO groups (H4, H5, H6). Consequently, the total sample required for this study amounted to $107*3+280=601$. In total, 1010 responses were submitted, but 403 were disqualified for not passing the screening questions, leaving 607 valid questionnaires collected for the research.

The demographic characteristics are detailed in Appendix 2, Table 23. Among the 607 participants, 462 were female, which is approximately three times the number of males. This distribution aligns with the previously noted predominance of female audience within the fashion community, reflecting a firm majority of female users in this demographic profile. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 40 years, representing 55.7% of the total, with the highest concentration in the 26-32 age group (23.9%). Other age groups were evenly spread, each constituting between 10% to 15% of respondents, indicating a relatively uniform age distribution among the participants.

In terms of educational attainment, the majority held level 6 qualifications (Bachelor's degree) (N=204), followed by level 5 (Foundation degree) (N=158). The subsequent distribution was as follows: Level 3 (N=65), level 4 (N=61), below level 3 (N=59), level 7 (N=46), and level 8 (N=14).

Lastly, the questionnaire also gathered data on participants' monthly income, revealing that 75.3% earned monthly incomes equal to or less than 9000 CNY (approximately 1000 GBP). The most common income bracket was between 3,000-7,000 CNY (335-780 GBP), accounting for 44.8% of the respondents.

4.7.3 Development of Measurement

To ensure the validity of the content, adjustments and modifications were applied to all existing construct measures in the literature to tailor them specifically for this study. The questionnaire is comprised of four components, excluding demographics.

4.7.3.1 Individual attribute agenda-setting index

A seven-point Likert scale was used to gauge respondents' perceptions of the prominence of fashion community objects on Douyin. According to agenda-setting theory, objects that are more frequently mentioned in content should be deemed more salient than those mentioned less often. The perceived salience of each object was quantified by multiplying its intensity by a weight, which represents the trait's portion of the total sample. These responses aid the research in calculating each respondent's individual agenda-setting index (IASI) (Moon, 2013). The index measures the extremity of brand attributes, analysing whether the frequency of brand promotion corresponds with customer perceptions of these attributes. The sum of the weights assigned to each object contributes to an individual agenda-setting index (IASI). Therefore, at the initial stage, the research needs to count the frequency of each object being mentioned and convert it into a percentage to determine the salience of different agendas in the community.

4.7.3.1.1 Identify community agendas

Prior to assessing the impact of agenda-setting on customer engagement, the researcher needed to identify the prevailing agenda within the fashion community.

This involved monitoring video content trends, enabling the summarising of the community agenda. Social media platforms typically identify trends (agendas) based on the frequency count of thematic tags (Sapul et al., 2017). Similarly, Facebook employs an algorithm that gauges trends by counting the number of content creators discussing the same topic and the engagement surrounding that theme (Cathcart, 2017). Emulating prior research methodologies, the researcher engaged with the Douyin fashion community for three months and gathered 453 popular community videos. Alongside Feigua's daily trend rankings, this effort yielded 374 popular videos. Feigua's trend report ranks daily community content by engagement levels, in the manner of Cathcart's (2017) approach. Characteristics of videos that rank highly in Feigua trends are marked by significant customer engagement, indicative of broad dissemination and user endorsement within the community. These video contents were then analysed to explore the community's agenda-setting effects on customers.

The study developed a codebook for analysing short videos within the Douyin fashion community. Initially, the research identified six primary content themes: entertainment (ENT); casual fashion showcase (CFS); outfit ideas (OI); cultural attire (CA); quality and value (QV); personal image construction (PIC). Each content theme was defined according to six classification criteria:

ENT: Videos that do not provide explicit information about fashion apparel.

CFS: Videos that display a range of clothing ensembles, offering users additional inspiration for outfits.

OI: Videos that give advice on outfit coordination and help users develop their own fashion styles.

CA: Videos that focus on diversity and inclusivity, aimed at presenting multicultural clothing styles, such as Chinese traditional attire and JK clothing.

QV: Videos that provide detailed information about product quality and pricing.

PIC: Videos that encourage users to focus on personal image and self-expression, often involving clothing-related content such as posing, hairstyles, and accessories).

To ensure coding accuracy, the research involved training two coders, who were undergraduate communication students at a university in China. The research

provided them with the videos and a coding sheet, and conducted a two-hour online training session via video conferencing. This training was dedicated to explaining the six video classification criteria and instructing the coders on how to categorise the video content appropriately. During the viewing process, the coders independently assessed each video and assigned a code to each content theme, marking it as present (1) or absent (0). For example, if they identified a video as pertaining to the Personal Image Construction (PIC) theme, they would mark 1 under PIC and 0 for the other categories.

Before the official coding began, 30% of the videos were randomly selected by the researcher and independently coded by the two coders. Krippendorff's Alpha was used to measure inter-coder agreement, with values equal to or greater than 0.8 indicating high agreement and values between 0.667 and 0.8 indicating moderate agreement (De Swert, 2012). High alpha values suggest that the coding is reliable and that discrepancies between coders are minimal. In this study, the Krippendorff's Alpha values for the objects were: ENT(0.85); CFS(0.82); OI(0.92); CA(0.76); QV(0.81); PIC(0.82), indicating robust intercoder reliability and affirming the accuracy of the community content theme classification. Subsequently, from 25th February to 30th February, 2022, the videos were evenly and randomly distributed to the two coders for independent coding. The coding results were then collected by the researcher. Table 9 presents the final content classification results, which were determined after a discussion between the researcher and the coders.

Table 9. Objects of community shown (N=374)

Objects (content themes)	N	%
ENT	48	12.8%
CFS	82	21.9%
OI	125	33.4%
CA	21	5.7%
QV	65	17.4%
PIC	33	8.8%

Source: the researcher

After obtaining the proportion of each object in the community, the IASI of each respondent is calculated based on Formula 1 (Camaj, 2014).

$$\text{Individual attribute agenda-setting index} = \sum_{i=1}^n (X * Y_i)$$

Formula 1. Calculating of IASI

4.7.3.2 Media use and Customer engagement

The study's concept of media use expands on previous agenda-setting research, integrating questions adapted from established studies on media use (Drew & Weaver, 1990; Camaj, 2014; Moon, 2013) as detailed in Table 11. A 7-point Likert scale was employed to assess respondents' frequency of media exposure, ranging from 1 (less than once a week) to 7 (more than six days a week). A corresponding scale measured respondents' level of media attention, from 1 (not paying attention at all) to 7 (paying constant attention). The results from these scales provided an evaluation of respondents' media use levels.

Adapted from Schivinski et al. (2016), a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (All the Time) was established to measure customer engagement among respondents on social media, as detailed in Table 10.

4.7.3.3 Need for orientation (NFO)

The concept of Need for Orientation (NFO) is a construct that includes relevance and uncertainty (McCombs & Weaver, 1973). Originally, these two variables were developed as separate measures but were later merged into a single measurement. Following Camaj's (2014) research, two questions were used to assess respondents' NFO levels. First, respondents are asked, "How interested are you in fashion videos on Douyin?" to gauge their community relevance. Those who respond with "extremely interested" or "very interested" are classified as having high relevance. Alternatively, responses of "moderately interested", "slightly interested", or "not interested" categorise them as having low relevance. The second question queries, "To what extent do you prefer the fashion community on Douyin?" Respondents indicating "moderately like", "slightly like", or "no preference" are considered to

have high uncertainty. Conversely, those who answer “extremely like” or “very like” are deemed to have low uncertainty.

Finally, the two sub-measures were amalgamated into four distinct values to formulate the NFO measure, as per Camaj (2014): high NFO (high relevance, high uncertainty), medium active involvement NFO (high relevance, low uncertainty), medium passive involvement NFO (low relevance, high uncertainty), and low NFO (low relevance, low uncertainty). This four-group typology is depicted in Table 11.

Table 10. The measurement of constructs

Constructs and items	
Media use	
Mu1	How many days a week do you watch content related to fashion on Douyin?
Mu2	How many days a week do you watch content related to fashion on other platforms?
Mu3	How much attention do you pay to fashion content on Douyin?
Mu4	How much attention do you pay to fashion content on other media?
Customer engagement	
Consumption	
Cons1	I watched content related to fashion on Douyin.
Cons2	I followed fashion brands or influencers on Douyin
Cons3	I read fan pages related to fashion brands or influencers on Douyin.
Contribution	
Cont1	I will comment on video content related to fashion on Douyin.
Cont2	I will engage in discussions with others in the comment section of videos related to fashion.
Cont3	I will click the “heart” button on video content related to fashion.
Cont4	I will click the “heart” button on comments of videos related to fashion.
Creation	
Crea1	I will post content about fashion on other platforms.
Crea2	I will upload videos about fashion on Douyin.
Crea3	I will share video content about fashion on Douyin.
Crea4	I will share fashion videos on other platforms.
Crea5	I will recommend fashions to people around me.

Source: the researcher

Table 11. Conceptualisation of need for orientation (NFO)

Relevance	Uncertainty	
	High	Low
High	HighNFO (n=119)	Moderate-activeNFO (n=236)
Low	Moderate-passiveNFO (n=158)	LowNFO (n=94)

Source: the researcher

4.7.4 Analytic procedures

A key goal of this research is to explore the value of agenda-setting theory to social media business communication and to predict the impact of agenda effects on customer engagement. Hair et al. (2019) contend that when research seeks to broaden established theories (exploratory research in theory development), researchers should utilise Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Furthermore, PLS-SEM serves as a causal predictive method within SEM, focusing on the estimation of predictions in statistical models, and is designed to provide causal explanations (Sarstedt et al., 2017a). Therefore, this study employs PLS-SEM to evaluate the specified hypotheses. Media use was employed as the independent variable, the effect of agenda-setting as the mediating variable, and customer engagement as the dependent variable.

The need for orientation (NFO) functioned as an exogenous variable, providing grouping criteria for the structural model, while partial least squares multi-group analysis (PLS-MGA) was utilised to investigate differences between consumers with high NFO and those at other NFO levels. When research requires examining heterogeneity among various groups, PLS-MGA is particularly useful (Cheah et al., 2020). Ignoring heterogeneity among different groups could adversely affect the estimation of the research model (Cheah et al., 2020). Given that NFO is a precursor to agenda-setting effects, the study should consider the importance of model differences across various NFO groups, thus improving the accuracy of model estimations.

Prior to testing the model, the researcher applied a weighted treatment to the respondents' perceived content themes. These weights were derived from the study's content analysis, reflecting the distribution of various attributes. After this weighting, the aggregate of the six content themes constitutes the respondents' IASI.

The measurement model and hypothesized relationships were then evaluated using the Smart-PLS 4.0 software package. Consistent with the guidance from Hair et al. (2019), the measurement model was initially assessed, followed by testing the structural model, the results of which are detailed in the subsequent chapter.

4.8 Ethical Issues

James et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of ethics in regulating human behaviour. According to the Code of Human Research Ethics (2011), there are four principal ethical guidelines that should be adhered to: respect for the autonomy and dignity of individuals, scientific value, social responsibility, and the maximisation of benefits while minimising harm. Consequently, researchers are required to follow these principles to conduct their investigations ethically and responsibly. To proactively mitigate ethical concerns in the research process, the research must obtain ethical approval for empirical work involving human subjects through the University of Salford. The primary ethical considerations in this project include ensuring informed consent from participants, securely storing data, maintaining the anonymity of informants, and allowing informants the option to withdraw from the project at any time. To tackle these issues, participants are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality through the signing of consent forms before data collection. Furthermore, a coding system is implemented to preserve anonymity and confidentiality, such that a personal name is represented with a single letter or a sequence of characters.

Kozinets (2019) builds upon Morris's (2016) five proposed principles of network research ethics, which include:

Autonomy: The research participant should be as aware as possible of the purpose of the research; participants should be free to agree or decline to take part in the research, or to withdraw at any time without coercion, threat, or penalty.

Beneficence: The research should be beneficial, rigorously designed and conducted, and have positive effects.

Non-maleficence: The researcher must make diligent efforts to avoid possible harm to participants and mitigate any unavoidable harm through precautionary measures.

Confidentiality: Participants' personal data must be kept private from everyone except those with a strict need to know.

Integrity: The researcher must disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest and conduct every aspect of the research using applicable and legitimate standards of research integrity. (P.169)

Kozinet (2010) examines Instagram and subsequently outlines the guidelines that netnographers should adhere to:

1. During any study, investigators should fully disclose their presence, any affiliations, or intentions to members of the online community.
2. Researchers should seek and incorporate feedback from the members of the online community under study.
3. All samples in this study will be voluntary, with a consent form released to respondents before participation. Data collection will only proceed after respondents have signed the consent form.
4. Investigators must ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants.

Based on these ethical guidelines for research utilising netnography, the research considered all potential ethical challenges that may arise during the process.

Kozinets, in 2019, recommends that as a community participant, researchers should disclose their identity. Concurrently, the research meticulously adheres to all community policies throughout the three months of participation. Because the researcher was a complete observer during the observation phase, there was no interaction with the community participants during the observational data collection phase of this study. All data collected by the researcher was public content in the community, so there was no potential threat of ethical risks to participants in this study during the observation phase. However, as there is a risk to the intellectual property rights of the content, the research avoided the potential risks associated with

this through effective methods by carefully storing all data. All field notes and interactive data are stored in an encrypted folder on the researcher's personal computer. Additionally, the researcher disables cloud services to prevent data from being uploaded to the cloud.

In the interview phase, the researcher followed the ethical guidelines for netnography highlighted by Kozinets (2019). First, to ensure autonomy, the researcher invited respondents to participate voluntarily. It is crucial that the researcher informs respondents about their role change (disclose the identity): Once interviews commence, the individual is no longer a community member but a PhD researcher. Second, to ensure proper procedure, the research thoroughly explained to the participants the background, purpose, and value of the interview data for this study. The interview was only conducted after the interviewee confirmed that they understood the purpose of the interview, agreed to participate in it and signed an interview consent form. For online interviews, consent forms are sent to respondents via email. They understood the potential risks they might encounter. At the same time, the interviewer informed the participants that they were allowed to refuse to answer and could quit the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. All respondents were adults, and the interviewer ensured that the interview was conducted in a state where they felt comfortable. Fourthly, to ensure confidentiality, interviews are categorised into Teams video interviews and face-to-face interactions. Interview data are recorded on the researcher's private mobile phone, with iCloud services disabled to prevent automatic uploads. All interview data are stored in an encrypted folder on the investigator's PC, and cloud services are disabled to ensure no data is uploaded to the cloud. Meanwhile, the researcher promised to delete all data and erase all recordings/videos as promptly as possible after the study concludes. Finally, to ensure integrity, the research clarified to the interviewees the purpose of gathering all data and informed them that it would not be used for commercial activities. As this study involves potential conflicts of interest, competitors may know their business strategies if the data is leaked. Therefore, although avoiding conflicts of interest is mentioned as a term in the consent form before the interview officially begins, the researcher once

again emphasised to the interviewee the purpose of the data collection and how it would be stored. With the full acceptance of the interviewee, the research then began the formal interview.

Responding to the online survey's ethical issues, the research minimised research ethics risks by advising in the Code of Human Research Ethics (2011).

First, a potential ethical risk of the online survey is privacy protection. The demographic questions in the questionnaire only include gender, age, education level, and income, but the respondents' names, contact information, and IP addresses are not required. Additionally, if the respondents do not want to answer any demographic questions, the researcher provides a "skip button" to fully guarantee the respondents' rights. Then, the study chose wenjuanxing.com as the data collection platform, and the platform's policy clearly states that no one can access the privacy information of any respondents. Therefore, the platform helped this study eliminate the possibility of privacy exposure from the source. Third, to ensure the confidentiality of the questionnaire, after the questionnaire collection process was completed, the researcher turned off the cloud function of the computer and, downloaded all the questionnaires to a private computer and stored them in an encrypted folder. Fourth, the study used PLS 4.0 as the data analysis software, and the computer was offline throughout the data analysis process. Finally, after completing the study, the researcher immediately deleted all the data.

Secondly, to ensure that all respondents understand the purpose of the study and the context of the research data application, the platform requires that informed consent be submitted before the questionnaire is released. After the informed consent is confirmed, the platform provides the consent to the respondents before releasing the questionnaire, and only after the respondents click to agree can they enter the questionnaire. Therefore, it can be determined that all participation is voluntary. In order to reduce respondents' concerns about the risks and benefits, the researcher clearly stated in the consent form that all data would only be used for academic research and would not be used in any commercial activities.

Third, an arbitrary withdrawal mechanism was mentioned in the consent to avoid any

discomfort that the questionnaire may cause the respondents. When designing the online questionnaire, the researcher ensured the respondents' right to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable by providing an exit option after each question. If the respondents were willing to participate in the survey but refused to answer some questions, the researcher also provided a "skip button" to ensure they would not be coerced into answering questions they did not want to answer.

4.9 Summary

This chapter describes the methods of data collection and analysis used to fulfil the research aims and objectives, grounded in the researcher's philosophical assumptions. It is now evident that the researcher has adopted a pragmatist philosophical stance. From this perspective, the study aims to explore how the interplay of customers' needs and agenda-setting influences customer engagement behaviour in the social media environment.

The study employed a mixed research method design, integrating netnography and online surveys to meet the research objectives consistent with the adopted philosophical stance. The research design encompassed three phases of data collection: Three months of participant observation within the Douyin fashion community, 607 online survey responses, and 24 semi-structured interviews. The first and third phases focused on research objectives 1, 3, and 4, allowing the researcher to assess the value of Douyin in social media marketing, investigate the motivational factors that drive customer engagement with community content, and examine how community agenda-setting relates to these motivations, affecting community content design. The ultimate goal was to refine a Douyin fashion community content model to boost customer engagement for fashion brands. Qualitative research findings were derived through coding and thematic analysis.

The second phase of data collection enabled the researcher to explore the relationship between the agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community and customer engagement behaviours, thus fulfilling research objective 2. Customer feedback was

collected via online surveys. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was applied to derive research findings. The following chapter presents the results of data analysis and discussions, with particular focus on the methodologies used.

Chapter Five: An Algorithm-driven Maze of Desires: the Traffic Code and User Behaviour Decoding of the Douyin Fashion Community

5.1 Introduction

The chapter examines the data findings from the qualitative techniques deployed to explore the outcomes of content marketing strategies in the fashion content community. After qualitative data analysis, the results provide insight into the characteristics of the Douyin fashion content community, the impact of community users' motivations on customer engagement, and a content marketing strategy model for integrating Douyin fashion content communities. It specifically addresses the following research questions and objectives of the research.

1. As a social media content marketing platform, what are the features that set Douyin apart from other platforms?

To analyse critically work on the emergence of Douyin in the broad field of social network marketing studies

2. Which customer motivations and needs for using media have an impact on content agenda setting in the Douyin fashion community? To what extent do these motivations influence customer engagement behaviour?

To explore how and to what extent customers interested in fashion participate in creating online content and how their feedback influences content creators for Douyin Fashion Community Content Marketing Strategy.

3. How should fashion short video content be created on Douyin to improve customer engagement?

To build a Douyin-based online social video promotion model.

The qualitative technique is netnography which involved two types of data: observational data (content in the community, collected content comments and field notes) and 24 semi-structured interviews with Douyin experts and Douyin fashion

community users who are mentioned in the chapter of methodology. These two data sets amalgamation utilised open coding and thematic analysis to derive outcomes.

The data analysis revealed a spectrum of perspectives from respondents (derived from semi-structured interviews, such as expert respondents (abbreviated names) and user respondents (R+number)), users from online posts - pseudonyms with asterisks, e.g., ahs*), and the researcher's field notes, respectively.

Each research question is answered through different sets of data analysis results:

- RQ 1 attained through qualitative data analysis outcomes (expert interviews).
- RQ3 achieved via three qualitative data analysis results (observational data, expert interviews, and user interviews).
- RQ4 realised through three qualitative data analysis results (observational data, expert interviews, and user interviews).

Given Denzin's (2012) proposition of methodological triangulation, which suggests employing different methodologies to study a situation or phenomenon, compensating for deficiencies and biases in one method, and ensuring the credibility and authenticity of research, the researcher applied three distinct ways to analyse and interpret each qualitative research question. In the following paragraphs, the research elaborates on each research questions data analysis and findings separately.

5.2 Analysing critically work on the emergence of Douyin in the broad field of social network marketing studies

The research initially explores the characteristics of Douyin about social media content marketing. Twenty-six codes related to the platform characteristics are extracted and merged according to the codes of relevance and similarity. The research then consolidates all the codes, organising ten pattern codes. After condensing, four themes are concluded (see Appendix 2, Table 24).

5.2.1 Traffic distribution mechanism

As a central theme, traffic distribution mechanism leads to the derivation of four pattern codes: huge traffic support, addictive, strong relationship building, and fair recommending mechanism. The distribution of traffic on Douyin is primarily reliant on algorithmic mechanisms, but through interviews with ByteDance employees and influencers, the research learns that the Douyin algorithm is confidential, and that none of even the internal Douyin employees really understood the rules of the algorithm. The confidentiality ensures the uniqueness and exclusivity of Douyin, and this feature also guarantees the irreplaceable nature of Douyin. Therefore, the pattern codes related to traffic distribution are based on the experiences and intuitions of industry professionals.

5.2.1.1 Huge traffic support

When interviewees (experts) were asked why they chose to conduct marketing activities on Douyin, the most frequently mentioned vital point was the enormous traffic. In the context of online marketing, scholars explain that traffic reflects the public's overall interest in a business. With a constant conversion rate, higher traffic leads to higher revenue (Volle et al., 2015). Unlike previous research interpretations of traffic, the interviewees referred to traffic as the population of users on Douyin, with each user representing one traffic unit.

According to the official statistics, Douyin in the third quarter of 2021, the amount of daily active users (DAU) has reached 800 million (Douyin statistic, 2022), and Douyin is only running in Chinese mainland, and Chinese mainland population is 1.4 billion in 2021. For brand content marketing strategies, gaining traffic on social media platforms is a primary and most challenging goal (Pulizzi & Handley, 2016), which means that a platform with a vast user base attracts many businesses to enter and conduct marketing activities on the platform. In this context, respondents point out that:

CH: *"The traffic is huge, and I created a video that has hundreds of millions of views on Douyin before. This exceeds far more than YouTube. A good video on YouTube can get*

millions of views, but you can get hundreds of millions of views on Douyin, that is exaggerated. DAU has been 800 million right? That's so sexy."

GA: "There is money where the huge traffic is available, because the DAU of Douyin has reached 800 million, and it should have the largest traffic compared with other platforms in China."

GU: "You must sell goods at place where have the most people, so you must go to Douyin, [...]"

LA: "The advantage of Douyin is that there has so much traffic, which everyone knows."

LU: "Now basically everyone has Douyin on their phones, and Douyin's DAU is really high, [...]"

All respondents consider Douyin has more traffic so there are more opportunities for companies (brands). Although the vast traffic is not a unique feature of Douyin, and the audience is not exclusive to Douyin, the research tends to view the huge population of users as a macro reason for businesses to join Douyin. Because Douyin has a large user group, brands can gain significant exposure, increase brand awareness, and stand out in a competitive market. Therefore, although base support is not the absolute factor for businesses to enter Douyin, it is an irreplaceable key element. On this basis, the subsequent vital factors provide more micro support for businesses entering the platform.

5.2.1.2 Addictiveness

The distribution of traffic based on Douyin's recommendation algorithm has led to users gaining addictiveness. For this study, addictiveness is understood as a user's prolonged online behaviour that drives businesses' determination to implement marketing strategies on the platform. Specifically, the platform's addictiveness is due to the algorithm providing users with content that aligns with their interests. Content created by creators is distributed accurately to the relevant audience, and due to long-term dependence on the platform, the traffic distribution model provides businesses with more opportunities to connect with potential consumers.

Past studies on TikTok/Douyin have discussed the issue of addiction to the platform

(Qin et al., 2022; Meral, 2021), with most scholars expressing concern. It is undeniable that the phenomenon of Douyin addictiveness is growing (Zhang et al., 2019), and excessive immersion in Douyin can affect user' mental health (Cao et al., 2020).

LA: *"[...] you will constantly watch what you like without your control, which makes you get immersed in this repeated stimulation of dopamine and finally become addicted to the Douyin."*

LI: *"[...]may see two or three hours, three or four hours, a waste of time,[...] Yeah, and it is hard to pull out from the software."*

Although this problem brings some problems to users' health or life, some respondents believe that "addiction" is lucky for brands/creators. The longer users stay on the platform, the easier the creators could be recognised .

HR: *"I admit that I cannot stop watching Douyin in my spare time, but as a practitioner in the platform, I see it more as an opportunity. The platform helps us retain customers [...]"*

JJ: *"The longer they stay on the platform, the more likely we are to meet them [...]"*

Users' addictiveness increases the opportunities for businesses and brands to interact with them. Brands can gain more exposure by creating content for users who frequently use Douyin. However, addictiveness might also lead to users spending too much time on the platform, potentially consuming and impacting their time and attention.

5.2.1.3 Strong relationship building

Strong relationality is a critical concept in relationship marketing, and establishing strong relationships is one of the primary objectives of brand social media marketing (Achen, 2016). Building strong relationships means a brand can gain more trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Clark et al., 2017; Hajli, 2014). Numerous studies have confirmed that activities on brand social media significantly impact the construction of strong relationships (Abid et al., 2019; Achen, 2016). However, Wright (2021) questions Douyin's status, considering that Douyin can only foster weak relationships.

The condition is because the content on Douyin is randomly pushed based on user preferences, and even if a user follows a brand, that brand's content only sometimes appears on the user's screen. Therefore, compared to other social media platforms prioritising pushing information from followed accounts, the relationship between users and content creators on Douyin needs to be stronger. However, some interviewees contradict this view. They mention a "tiefen mechanism", where "tiefen" directly translates to "die-hard fan" in English. Regarding the "die-hard mechanism", interviewees point out:

HR: *"Douyin now has a die-hard fan mechanism. If you follow a creator, they will regularly appear on your screen. [...] On the contrary, I think it is better because the user does not search for you actively, but you still appear on their screen, giving users a sense of novelty. I think it is quite good, [...]"*

LU: *"For example, after you followed an account, the likelihood that it recommends content to you could be ten times or even twenty times more than other accounts, [...]"*

YC: *"[...] but in terms of content, because now Douyin has a die-hard fan mechanism, right? Your die-hard fans are very important, so even though Douyin randomly pushes content, the accounts you followed will appear more often."*

The same situation has occurred during the observation: brands/creators the researcher followed appeared frequently on the screen for a period after the follow. Moreover, the researcher observed after watching a creator's content or repeatedly viewing his/her video, even without any action like following, the researcher would still see more content from the creator in the following days. Combining this with the algorithm, the research considers that Douyin uses AI to recognise user behaviour and determine content preferences. It is not just about following, liking, commenting, or sharing; even the duration of watching a single video affects the AI's recognition of user preferences. The AI relies the data to help brands/creators establish a strong relationship with users. Besides that, this strong relationship continuously stimulates users' ongoing attention to the brand/creator. Simultaneously, by randomly encountering content, it also stimulates users' sense of novelty.

In light of the evidence of this research, Wright's (2021) concerns about relationship

quality on the platform are questioned. The die-hard fan mechanism, as an algorithmic approach to traffic distribution, plays a significant role in building strong relationships. This mechanism improves user retention and activity levels. Following the themes, the platform is likely to recommend more content that aligns with the preferences of active users, thereby enhancing user satisfaction and loyalty towards the platform. This also strengthens the connection between customers and businesses.

5.2.1.4 Fair recommending mechanism

Fairness has been addressed in previous research. Davis (2019) argues that Douyin/TikTok's algorithm-based traffic distribution provides everyone with the opportunity to create viral videos. During the interview process, creators also expressed this view, confirming that the fairness of traffic distribution is a distinguishing factor of Douyin compared to other platforms in content marketing.

GU: *"[...]compared with Taobao (Chinese Amazon) and other platforms, Douyin's traffic distribution is relatively fair. Some tens of millions of influencers of Taobao have basically occupied most of the majority of the platform's traffic, but Douyin has raised the traffic anti-monopoly on this issue [...].the allocation of traffic on Douyin is determined based on the quality of the content."*

Compared to other platforms, the continuous exposure of companies (brands) requires a huge time cost and money cost. But as long as the content they posted on Douyin has high quality, they can get more attention. As LE as an influencer says that he gained 100,000 followers from just one video. The fair traffic distribution gives enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, a huge opportunity to extend their business.

GA: *"If you have fans, it's easier to make money on any platforms[...]. But if you are a new brand/company, you should choose Douyin. More public traffic means more potential customers."*

Public traffic means that companies have more opportunities to reach potential consumers. The cost of customer acquisition is lower compared to other platforms. All companies needs to get the video content well and attract their potential users.

5.2.2 Interest-based e-commerce

Another key theme is interest-based e-commerce, a phenomenon that emerges from collaborative filtering algorithms. This process involves analysing a user group based on their profiles and identifying similarities and differences among the members. Attempts are made to use the diversity within the group to test members' perceptions and reactions to these differences. For instance, AI identifies a user group of women aged 20 to 25 living in Beijing/Shanghai with a higher spending capacity. Some in the group like fashion content, while others prefer fitness. The AI recognises the similarities and differences in their basic information and then experimentally pushes fitness-related content to those interested in fashion. This algorithmic testing is not random but based on specific cues, significantly enhancing the likelihood of addressing users' subconscious needs. The two sub-themes of interest-based e-commerce are collaborative filtering and simplifying the consumer path.

5.2.2.1 Collaborative filtering

Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (1961) propose the "Johari Window" theory, suggesting that human cognition has four aspects, one of which is the unknown aspect that neither oneself nor others can perceive. Collaborative filtering helps users discover their potential interests unconsciously. Based on the filtering of users and content, respectively, the algorithm organises user-profiles and content tags from the data, identifies similarities, and expands based on specific similar characteristics. For example, a user is male and likes football. Data mining may find that similar males are very interested in baking. Although there is no apparent connection between the two, based on the algorithm's identification of similarities, videos about baking might appear on this male user's screen. The researcher observed this phenomenon quite clearly during interviews and field observations.

While observing the community, the research disguised himself as a young woman interested in fashion. Surprisingly, besides clothing content, the platform mainly pushed videos about snacks. The researcher speculates that this might be due to the algorithm identifying that users similar to this persona liked clothes and had a strong

interest in food. During the interviews, the researcher also comes across an interesting phenomenon of “encounter-based consumption”:

GU: *“Users do not know what they like; often, it is a kind of encounter-based consumption[...] This type of impulsive ordering accounts for a huge volume of daily transactions[...] For most of us born after 1990, even after 1985, most of our consumption is encounter-based. It is not targeted. Our needs must be excavated; we do not know what we want[...] Because Douyin e-commerce is called interest e-commerce, normally, user is interested in the product when they see the video content. At this point, the user's buying decision is impulsive behaviour, so you must not give them too much time to think about [...]”*

JA: *“First, I think this is where Douyin is more powerful. It creates users’ needs... Users might not even know they need something, but big data pushes it to them, and then they realise it... It creates a desire to buy, and you buy many things, even if they might be unnecessary...compared to active search for products, Douyin is equivalent to passive planting seeds, equivalent to saying that we recommend the “seed” to users, so that users can find some better things in life, which they may be interested in but don’t know before[...]”*

JL: *“When users intend to purchase a product, they go directly to shopping websites like Taobao (an e-commerce website like Amazon) to search; however, most of the time, Douyin assumes that consumers do not know what they need. So it would help if you stimulated their unconscious interests, generating a desire to buy. [...] the algorithm constantly tries to push content that might interest users, increasing their likelihood of being attracted.[...]”*

YC: *“They do not have much autonomy. It is not like when I go to a mall knowing exactly what I want to buy; I go straight for it [...]. More needs are excavated on Douyin,[...]”*

Some users’ responses confirm the impact of collaborative filtering algorithms on them, even if they were unaware of the technology:

R12: *“It is no different from previous online shopping platforms, except that the prices are much cheaper. Moreover, there is no need to search for things,[...]”*

R3: *“I can keep looking at things on Douyin or choosing things. I spend more time on it because it is accompanied by watching other things. It is like an extra gain during leisure time,[...]”*

R9: *“I have tried it and think it is perfect. The overall consumption experience is good. However, for me, Douyin is a platform where I might see some things[...].”*

Summarily, collaborative filtering stimulates users' unconscious needs. The mechanism of identifying similarities and cross-recommending helps people make choices. Additionally, there is a common concern in academia that algorithmic recommendations might increase ideological isolation (Pariser, 2011), but the logic of Douyin's algorithm mitigates this. Collaborative filtering does not just filter information for users; it inadvertently expands the range of content they access. Users feel surprised and adapt to the recommended content through collaborative filtering because it might be something they have not noticed before, making them curious about whether the following video will be even more appealing.

5.2.2.2 Simplified consumer pathways

Since its launch in 2016, Douyin only began offering e-commerce services in 2018. Over two years, Douyin cultivated many highly engaged users through quality video content. On the foundation of continuously outputting quality content, Douyin began to expand into e-commerce, aiming to optimise interest-based e-commerce by combining high-quality video content with products. In the optimisation of the e-commerce environment, interviewees from business frequently mentioned the simplification of the consumer path:

HR: *"[...]Short videos combined with a short consumer path can form a complete e-commerce journey. Think about it, users spend 10 seconds watching a video, discover a good product in the video, click on your link, but then find out it is so complicated, so many steps. Do you think they will still buy?"*

YY: *"[...]Actually, the consumer path is a basic discussion point for all of us in e-commerce. Our conclusion is not to give users time to think. Take the simplest example; you know Douyin was not originally an e-commerce platform; it is an entertainment platform[...] Let us not talk about others; we all use Taobao. Taobao's shopping operation is too simple, just three steps. As a platform not primarily for e-commerce, do not you need to do better than Taobao?"*

GU: *"We always say, do not let users think too much, including simplifying the purchase channels to the most convenient[...] Originally, users were impulsive buyers; if you make it more complicated, they will not buy [...]"*

During the passive observation study, the research practically tested the consumer path on Douyin. Douyin offers “yellow trolley” for every creator who has over 10000 followers. This is an icon called yellow trolley (Picture 11) in the lower left corner of the video. The influencer/brand usually introduces the product in the video. The researcher tries to click the icon and there are only three steps from click the ‘yellow trolley’ to complete purchase (Picture 11,12): 1. Clicking on the “yellow trolley”; 2. Choosing the style of goods; 3. Filling in the address and payment method. The point is during the process, the video is not stop. This means the content is washing the user’s brain during the whole purchasing process and users do not have time to think about the good independently. This simple purchase process promotes the impulse consumption of users and helps to increase the enterprise (brand) sales.



Picture 11. Yellow Trolley

Picture 12. Purchasing Link

Despite the unique advantages Douyin offers for businesses in content marketing strategies, as previously mentioned by the researcher, brands still face challenges when implementing their marketing strategies on the platform. First, Douyin's inherent characteristics pose challenges to content marketing strategies. Secondly, with the continuous increase of users and businesses on the platform, the effort required for marketing on Douyin has significantly increased, both in terms of financial and energy investment.

5.2.3 Single attribute

From the perspective of the platform characteristics, some respondents think that Douyin, as an entertaining social media platform, has a singular attribute. Given users' perception of the platform as primarily for entertainment, overly promotional content could expand users' aversion.

HR: *"[...] It is also about its attribute because its attribute is entertainment. As I just said, commercial content might deviate from the purpose for which users come to the platform. Users might need a long time to be educated to accept this consumption mode, [...]"*

LI: *"You would go to Xiaohongshu (a Chinese social media platform) or Baidu(a Chinese search engine, like Google) to search; searching is the first impression users have of these platforms[...] but for Douyin, the majority would first think of entertainment[...]besides this, what we are also trying to do now is to cultivate a habit in users to consume on this platform[...] This is also something we are thinking about, [...]"*

CH: *"[...]it can be understood that its properties are vague, so some brands or companies are not accurate in the platform positioning, and the company is actually relatively blind when the company comes in it[...]You ask them to create entertainment content, which is not the reason they joined the platform, but if you have them start with marketing right away, users don' t like it. So, they need to think more about this issue."*

From the respondents' answers, the research argues that the platform's nature does impact businesses' marketing activities. On Douyin, users prefer to watch content that is fun and creative. Marketing content on the platform can cause user aversion, leading to a decline in their overall platform experience(Anderson & Gans,2011). This condition can affect the platform's user retention rate and the brand's image.

Furthermore, an excess of marketing content may crowd out space for other more creative and exciting content creators, leading to a reduction in the platform's quality content. This condition could decrease the platform's overall content quality and attractiveness, ultimately impacting the brands' marketing activities.

In other words, while there is still a lot of marketing content on Douyin, this study found that the content that gets high exposure is usually non-invasive. Compared to other platforms, the particular recommendation system has forced brands to think about how to design content and display themselves in front of their customers with non-invasive content when implementing a content marketing strategy.

5.2.4 High consumption

Another challenge that interviewees mentioned for Douyin's marketing strategy is high consumption. Expenditure can be classified into three categories: economic expenditure, cyclical consumption, and energy expenditure. The main reason for economic expenditure is that brands must provide more commissions to the platform for more exposure. The main reason for cyclical consumption is that brands generally lack the patience to operate their accounts and exchange benefits through long-term content output. The main reason for the energy expenditure is that although some brands on TikTok recognise a significant positive relationship between content quality and the benefits they obtain, they lack the professional personnel to create high-quality content. Considering the three consumptions, the content marketing model emphasised in this study is necessary to address the high consumption.

5.2.4.1 Economic expenditure

Some interviewees mention that as the number of users and businesses on the platform increases, Douyin, in pursuit of profit, provides services to businesses to help enhance their brand exposure. Although Douyin is a relatively new social media platform, it must maintain the traditional profit model (charging commissions). The interviewees point out:

JA: “[...]I think right now, as far as I know, one of the biggest disadvantages of Douyin is that the platform will charge higher and higher commissions from companies.”

LA: *“[...]I admit that the cost is getting bigger, because indeed more and more companies come in, the competition will be bigger, and spending money is definitely a way to solve it.”*

With the increasing number of platform users, the number of business opportunities for companies is also increasing. Businesses are more willing to come to the platform to market themselves. Relying on the massive number of users and strong user stickiness, Douyin also charges commissions like other platforms to get more business exposure. This service is no different from other platform advertising profit models (Dwivedi, Kapoor & Chen, 2015). However, unlike other platforms, the unique content recommendation system allows businesses to improve the quality of their content so that the algorithm can increase their content exposure.

5.2.4.2 Cyclical consumption

During the interview process, the interviewees mentioned that to reduce the platform's charging of higher commissions, some brands reasonably rely on the recommendation algorithm to increase brand exposure by creating high-quality content. Although this platform allows every creator to be treated fairly, the brands' problems have been revealed. Some experts mentioned dilemmas businesses face during this opportunity.

GA: *“[...]there will be a lot of marketing accounts on Douyin, but they won't exist for a long time, and the marketing effect is certainly limited[...] Many people believe that the time cost is too high. Creating videos, after all, is slower than producing images and text. Moreover, businesses often lack expertise in this area, leading to inefficient and ineffective efforts, which ultimately fail [...].”*

LI: *“Enterprises are very utilitarian. Many of our clients feel that our suggestions for their accounts lead to slow sales because the cycle is too long[...] They want the content to convert quickly into sales. About seventy to eighty per cent of our clients are small and medium-sized businesses. They do not care much about how the content performs data-wise or how many followers they have. Their only concern is selling their products as quickly as possible, which is quite a headache for us[...] As you know, we need time to cultivate user interest and increase engagement through attractive videos, but many businesses are too impatient to wait for this process[...]”*

Based on the responses, a portion of the brands have realised the importance of content and acknowledged their shortcomings in content creation. However, most brands cannot accept long-term engagement in the community. The cost-benefit ratio of content creation is not considered to be balanced. The key question is, therefore, how to minimise the cost of content creation and thus make the cost-benefit ratio acceptable to brands.

5.2.4.3 Expenditure of energy

The third consumption is that brand managers need to devote more energy to participating in content creation, so they have to complete their original tasks and create content at the same time. Some businesses hire professional teams to improve content quality, but this strategy still incurs high marketing costs. Moreover, once some teams gain more followers, they often breach contracts to go independent, as many teams have service contracts rather than labour contracts with companies. Under Chinese law, this significantly reduces the companies' control over them.

LA: *“Enterprises fundamentally cannot control these creative teams. Once the team is successful, they demand more money from the enterprise. If the enterprise does not pay up, they immediately leave[...] because they already have a fan base. They can create their accounts and make money[...] You give money to the team, and the enterprise might find that all the profits go to these teams, and they end up with nothing[...] This is always a problem,”*

JA: *“If influencers gain some fame, they generally break away from the enterprise and create their accounts because they have a fan base... Contracts cannot restrain them. You know, the influencer is a new trend, and there are many loopholes in the country's laws. They only sign service contracts, not labour contracts. It is a very complex issue; I cannot say much more[...].”*

To avoid such situations, businesses have developed strategies. Industry insiders call this “enterprise self-operation”, which means training employees to help create influencers belonging to the enterprise itself, and often, this influencer is the boss themselves. However, the solution still has its problems. After all, they are not professional teams and need an understanding of the platform and a grasp of key contemporary trends. However, some have found a convenient method - they start to copy popular videos, which leads to another problem: severe content homogenisation

among businesses.

JJ: *“Now, the video style in each industry seems like it is produced on an assembly line. Take the catering industry, for example; almost all the video content is about exploring eateries, which is very boring,”*

LI: *“[...]Our current problem[...] I am mostly working on content where influencers help brands with marketing[...] For instance, our company’s influencer goes to a restaurant to shoot. However, you will find that influencers from different MCN companies (social media advertising companies that help businesses with promotion) go to the same place. The content they produce after shooting is surprisingly uniform, with severe homogenization[...] So, we need innovative content, but innovative content requires human resources costs, which businesses may not be willing to pay. We are forced to choose homogeneous content because it exists; it is a vicious cycle[...] If homogeneous content fails, businesses will think our promotion ability is weak. They are less willing to spend more money on us, we do not get paid, and we cannot pay the creators, so we can only maintain the original content design. Over time, we lose revenue, businesses do not get effective promotion, and it ends up a lose-lose situation[...].”*

LA: *“[...]The problem of content homogenization is too severe. People in an industry keep copying; once one piece of content becomes popular, all the others rush to replicate it. The Chinese are incredibly skilled and quick at copying (laughs). So, for bloggers, the main pressure is on positioning and innovating content, which requires time and financial support[...] Content homogenization leads to fatigue for users, which is not conducive to our product promotion and sales[...].”*

While the platform provides a fair, competitive environment, companies face numerous challenges. The algorithmic mechanism necessitates that businesses must improve the quality of their content. Although some scholars believe that Douyin/TikTok videos are simple because they do not require professional equipment and shooting skills (Fiallos et al., 2021), the research argues that filming techniques and equipment are not the core of content quality. While there may be low demands for content production, more effort is needed in content design. Therefore, given these challenges, this study finds it necessary to develop a content marketing strategy model for businesses on Douyin.

5.2.5 Summary

Four themes emerge from the interview data gathered in this project. The platform's advanced algorithmic mechanism supports two of the positive attributes (traffic distribution mechanism and interest e-commerce). In contrast, Douyin also has its weakness. Firstly, Douyin's entertainment attribute is strong compared to other social media, which leads to a higher level of audience aversion to the marketing message when it appears on the platform, which leads to the failure of the marketing strategy.

Another negative feature is high consumption, mainly due to the increasing competition caused by the saturation of brands in various categories on the platform. There is also a high standard of content quality in the algorithmic mechanism. However, it is precisely because brands struggle with creating high-quality content that the research implications of this study are amplified, i.e., how to improve the quality of content in the community to differentiate themselves from other brands and leave a more profound impression in the minds of their customers. Thus, these four themes not only answer question 1 but also provide a basis for the value of the subsequent findings of this study.

5.3 Exploring how and to what extent customers interested in fashion participate in creating online content and how their feedback influences content creators for Douyin Fashion Community Content Marketing Strategy.

The qualitative data has further explored customers' specific motivations and needs in the Douyin fashion content community, which leads customers to accept the content community agenda and engage in the community.

The research bases on three types of qualitative data (interviews, observational data, and visualised data from the Feigua database). Passive observational data includes the researcher's field notes, video screenshots, and video element statistics.

Firstly, the research summarises the main motivations behind customer engagement

behavior (CEB). The research compiles written materials from interviews and observational data, conducting a word-by-word analysis to extract themes. Thirty-four codes related to audience needs are extracted and then combined based on relevance and similarity principles. The research further increased the density of categories for all codes, clarified the differences between various categories, and organised 13 pattern codes. These pattern codes are reclassified and integrated with audience motivation elements mentioned in uses and gratification theory (UGT). Finally, six major categories were integrated to explain the customer motivations for CEB in the content community: hedonic needs, cognitive needs, affective needs, social integration needs, self-expression, and incentive-driven (see Appendix 2, Table 25).

5.3.1 Hedonic needs

Hedonic needs encompass three secondary themes: the pursuit of happiness, “brainwashing” content, and expert/brand attachment. Hedonic needs, as a motivation, primarily stimulate customers’ consumption towards brand content.

5.3.1.1 Pursuit of happiness

Firstly, data analysis results indicate that pursuing happiness is a significant customer motive in the fashion content community. The data reveals that most users visit the Douyin platform primarily to seek pleasure and pass the time, whether consuming content from the fashion content community or other types of content.

LA: “[...], they can see many interesting things on Douyin, which is a significant motive for them [...]”

R11: “I watch some interesting videos on it, which are attractive to me [...]”

GA: “As a user, I use Douyin to pass the time when I am bored[...]”

R2: “Douyin is an app for everyone’s leisure now. Anyway, I go on Douyin when I have nothing else to do[...]”

HR: “I think it is just a leisure platform; basically, no one does not use Douyin, [...]Ultimately, Douyin is an entertainment platform,[...] users come to the platform for leisure [...]”

As a secondary community on the Douyin, the user needs of the fashion content community are consistent with the overall user needs and motivations of Douyin. This motivation is the primary reason consumers consume content within the community.

5.3.1.2 “Brainwashing” Content

Secondly, brainwashing content is a significant driving force that compels users to consume content continuously. Brainwashing content can be understood as addictive or inescapable content, often attracting users by triggering strong emotional responses through music, visual effects, or message delivery. It has been found in respondents’ answers that such content may pique user interest and stimulate immersion in the joy of content consumption through simple and memorable phrases, repetitive rhythms, or entertaining visual content. These videos leads them to consume content repeatedly.

YY: *“I create content to brainwash. Have you seen brainwashing advertisements? They are very similar, featuring enchanting music and simple language, like oh my god, buy it, buy it, buy it (a famous Chinese beauty influencer’s catchphrase)[...] People do not want to overthink, so you brainwash them, and they are willing to watch, [...]”*

JJ: *“The music from Fight the Landlord (a popular Chinese online poker game) is quite popular, right? We use it as our BGM because it feels familiar to the user. Even if they listen to the music, they watch the entire video without realising it [...]”*

GA: *“If you just shoot this piece of clothing alone, not many people would be interested in watching. But if your music is popular, people listen to the song, not necessarily to see your clothing. However, while listening to the song, they end up watching your clothing and your entire video.”*

JJ: *“Find popular music; it is a principle of repetition. When you keep scrolling through short videos, you keep hearing background music, creating a brief memory. So, the next time I make a video with that music, you might stop to watch.”*

LL: *“The platform has already helped us cultivate a part of the users’ mindset. For example, a song, if a user watches 100 videos a day and 10 of them are with the same song, it is very brainwashing. Then, when they hear this song, they will stop; sometimes, they may just be there to listen to the song. But whether they are listening to the song or watching the video, my goal is achieved as long as they finish watching my content. So, many things on the platform inherently bring traffic, and we need to design them into our content.”*

LU: “[...] *Brainwashing content makes it easier for users to stay, including brainwashing music, brainwashing content,... Brainwashing content could be, for example, repeating a funny action in a video. The core of this content is humour, [...]*”

From the descriptions of the interviewees, they often use music as a tool to achieve a so-called brainwashing effect. Douyin initially started as a music-based entertainment short video social platform; Douyin’s ‘Yin’ means music in Chinese. Thus, it is evident that popular music plays an important role in user content consumption. Additionally, Douyin regularly summarises popular music on the platform for a certain period, which usually has a strong rhythm or is well-known by the masses. Also, there is some Douyin-specific content, such as the transition challenge and lips sync. Users are also very addicted to this content (Shutsko, 2020). Users are more willing to consume these contents, which is one of the main reasons they come to this platform.

5.3.1.3 Influencer/brand attachment

Thirdly, some respondents mentioned that the personal charm of content creators is a significant motive influencing their content consumption. Consumers actively seek out their content when they align with creators to a certain degree. After this attachment relationship is formed, users’ trust in the creators increases.

R10: *“I first see if the blogger’s aesthetics match mine. If they immediately capture my interest, I will watch more of their content.[..]”*

R3: *“If the influencer has a style I like, I will follow them and watch their videos when I have time,”*

R2: *“I enjoy watching influencers’ content; they help me filter out things I like. I follow them because their aesthetics align with mine, so I trust them,”*

The establishment of this attachment relationship is due to various reasons. Some respondents believe it is because of the personal charm of the creators, such as personality, voice, and appearance.

GA: *“Sometimes I ask my fans why they follow me, and they say they just like to hear me talk, like my personality [...]*”

JJ: *“The influencer must be likeable for me to follow them. I might like their speaking voice and personality; I like something about them that I want to keep watching,”*

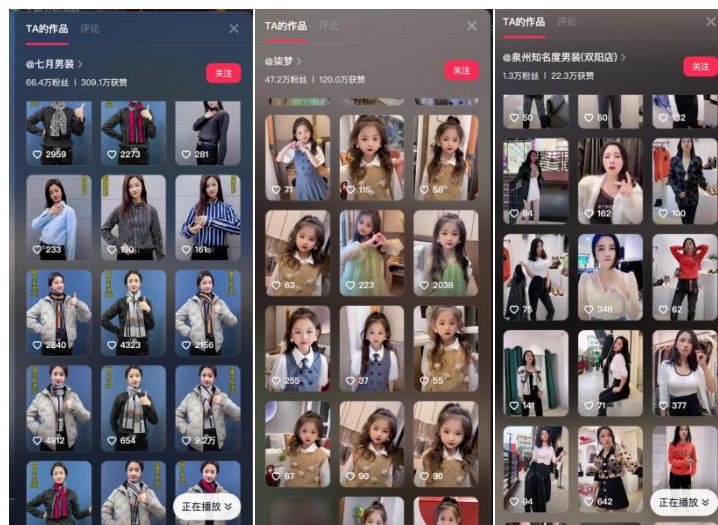
LL: *“Some people think my speaking voice is pleasant and find my smile attractive. Also, I have noticed that many people watch me because they think I am good-looking (laughs). It is not vanity; some people say I am pretty and look good in anything. First impressions are quite important between people. It is being moved by appearance. Attracted by looks, loyal to character, [laughing]”*

HR: *“Personal charm is very important. Whether you are sharing knowledge or being funny, they must like you first, which is quite interesting. People often follow based on whether they feel a connection; much following is based on this connection,”*

Others think it is due to professional expertise in a particular field.

LU: *“My professional knowledge sometimes acts as a bridge. Even if I am selling clothes or improving people’s aesthetic standards, I think it is a good thing! [...] To get more people to know and recognize me, buy my stuff. So, it would help if you made them like you first,”*

In the community, each brand/influencer’s content should maintain the same video character (Picture 13). This phenomenon is because brands/influencers need to attract users to consume content through the character setting of the video role. The long-term appearance of a single video character cultivates a habit in users to consume content and gradually builds trust, thereby triggering deeper CEBs.



Picture 13. The image shows the homepages of three accounts, and it is evident that the model featured in the videos on each homepage is the same person.

People often choose and consume content that brings pleasure, fun, or a sense of satisfaction. This type of content, characterised by its entertainment, light-heartedness, or excitement, can make people feel happy, relaxed, or exhilarated. Such content may attract people in various ways, such as through humour, thrill, innovation, etc., thereby sparking their interest and sense of enjoyment. In marketing and content creation, considering the enhancement of customer engagement, especially consumer behaviour, the hedonic needs of consumers are essential.

HR: *“Creators should attract users through content, not products. There is a variety of content on Douyin,[...]the first thing creators need to do is use content to engage users to watch their videos[...]they will have the opportunity to learn about your products.”*

Jl mentioned a viewpoint: happiness is the core. Users come to Douyin for joy, so creators must first make users happy. Then, they can accept the creator and start thinking about their products. Therefore, creating content that can elicit consumer pleasure and excitement helps increase attractiveness and influence, thereby better meeting consumer needs and increasing content popularity. Although, some interviewees also pointed out that too much entertainment content can affect the marketing effectiveness of creators, but indisputably, entertainment content brings more potential customers to creators.

JJ: *“If your content is only entertaining, even if many people like your videos, few will be your consumers[...] In an entertaining situation, you would not make an impulsive purchase, right?”*

YC: *“I usually attract more people to the influencers I manage by posting entertaining videos, and then I post more marketing-oriented content [...] Entertaining videos are like casting a big net in the sea; countless fish are in this net. You first haul them up; then, you can choose which fish you can sell and which you need to throw away[...] The influencer I manage has 8 million followers, but less than 10,000 have real purchasing power, but that is enough[...].”*

Meeting consumers' hedonic needs can help brands gain more attention. This viewpoint reiterates that hedonic needs are the primary motive for consumers consuming content, but its contribution to creating influence is limited.

5.3.2 Cognitive Needs

Cognitive needs have three principal pattern codes: knowledge acquisition, novelty, and personalised information acquisition. The driving force of customers' cognitive needs on customer engagement behaviour is primarily reflected in the consumption and contribution of customers towards community content. Specifically, the research found that knowledge acquisition is a significant motivation for customers' consumption and contribution to community content. Novelty can also stimulate users to contribute to community content. Personalised information acquisition also drives customers to consume and contribute to community content.

5.3.2.1 Knowledge acquisition

Firstly, knowledge acquisition is one of the most common audience needs in UGT, and many studies have confirmed that consumers enter virtual communities to acquire more knowledge and information to increase their understanding and avoid the risk of lacking relevant information (Rauschnabel, 2018; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). This need is still essential in the Douyin fashion content community. Knowledge acquisition mainly examines the value assessment audiences make of the knowledge or information provided by videos. Audiences may respond positively to content that offers valuable knowledge or new information. For example, if a video shows new clothing-matching tips, audiences might like it because they gained valuable knowledge. The knowledge utility can enhance their knowledge reserve, help them make better decisions, or improve their quality of life. Data shows that the need for knowledge acquisition promotes consumers' consumption and contribution to brand content. Firstly, consumers consume valuable content and obtain helpful information from it.

R10: *"You tell me how good this thing is, its quality, its price. Only then can I know if I want to buy it[...]"*

Additionally, valuable information promotes users' contribution to content, mainly manifested in liking. R3, R4, R2, R9, and YC mention that when content is helpful, they will thumb up the video to save it for easy retrieval later.

YC: *"I usually like something if I think I might use it later. I rarely like other things."*

Content is randomly pushed based on user preferences on Douyin. If audiences do not interact, their viewing content may be skipped and never appear on their screen again. Therefore, if they find it useful, they will like the video, similar to bookmarking it for future review.

Another manifestation of information acquisition is consumer questions. When consumers are satisfied with the content information but still need more details, they usually ask the creator questions to obtain more information or satisfy their information acquisition needs to reduce their doubts about the product. This behaviour is another form of consumer contribution to content.

R11: *"Of course, I have to ask questions when buying things, right? Her video is about selling things, and if I need it, but you know, videos are usually too short. The product introduction is not comprehensive, so I must ask her[...]"*

R2: *"I generally only comment when I have questions, not usually. I am not someone who loves to talk [...] However, I will communicate when I have questions."*

R7: *"I comment on their stuff like I said before, I just have some questions about the product. I will read the comments, and if there is an answer, I will not ask [...]"*

R4: *"I usually only comment when I have questions, but sometimes the creators do not reply to me quickly, so I generally first look at other people's comments and ask others for their opinions or to answer my questions."*

The research only lists a few respondents' answers, but almost all are highly consistent. Meanwhile, the research observes that consumers ask questions and obtain information in the comment section during observation (Picture 14).

Summarily, questions promote the previous communication between creators and customers, shorten the distance between them, and let customers have a sense of participation, which is an important performance of customer engagement.



Picture 14. The screenshot of knowledge acquisition

5.3.2.2 Novelty

Secondly, novelty refers to users being attracted by novel, unknown, or unexpected content. They seek content with unique or surprising elements. Unique content may include elements that differ from the norm, defy expectations, or stimulate imagination, providing a novel sensory experience. Random and unexpected content brings audiences a sense of uncertainty and surprise, making them willing to continue exploring and discovering more unknown content. Novelty and uncertainty satisfy audience' need for stimulation and curiosity, further driving their consumption and contribution to content.

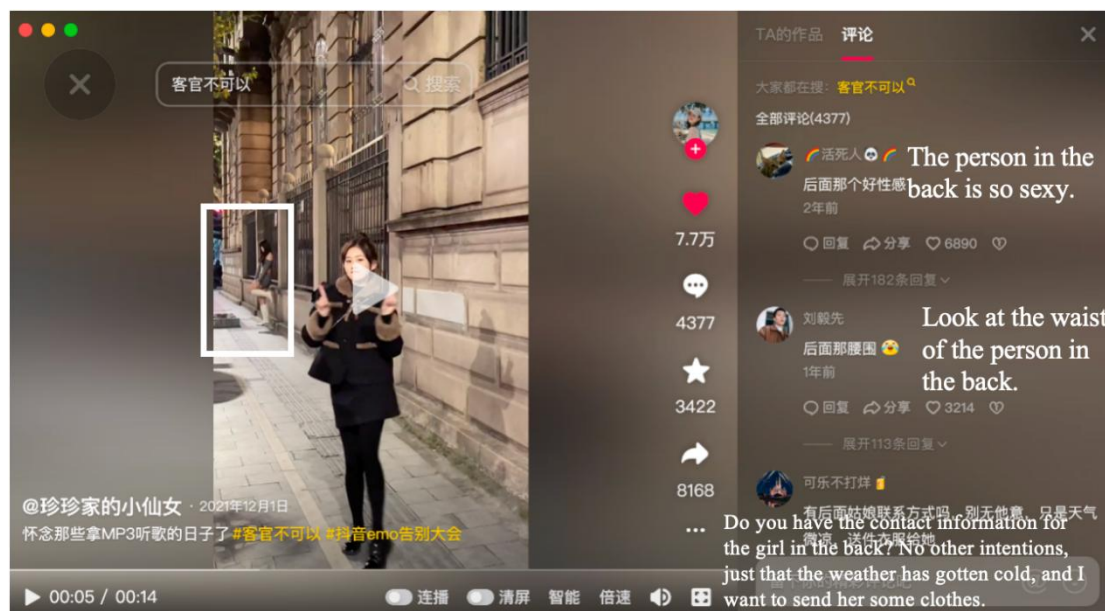
LL: *"Sometimes I go outside to shoot, and occasionally a passerby with a distinctive look comes along, and fans will comment, 'Hey, look at the person behind you, he is interesting' [...] Sometimes, a video goes viral unexpectedly, and we are still trying to figure out why. Some of it is not planned; it is unintentional that often attracts these users,"*

YC: *"You introduce a piece of clothing, maybe 1,000 people on the platform are introducing it [...] So through quirky means, or by differentiating from others, you get users to stop on your content,"*

Jl: *"Then others will want to check your homepage. It is just curiosity; I want to see what other content this vlogger has. Are they also interesting?"*

In the observational process, the research discovered a work where a girl dances in the video. However, in the comment section, most consumers were attracted by another girl taking photos in the background and commented on this unexpected event (Picture 15). Due to the vast amount of content on the platform, creators must think about how to differentiate their content, and randomness and unexpectedness are good choices to promote customer engagement. Some creators even design surprises as consumers are susceptible to this type of information.

GA: “Sometimes we have all the influencers in the company shoot videos in the same place, then let these people appear more or less in each other’s cameras. You will find many people asking about the person in the background. It is all designed,”



Picture 15 The sample of novelty

5.3.2.3 Personalised information acquisition

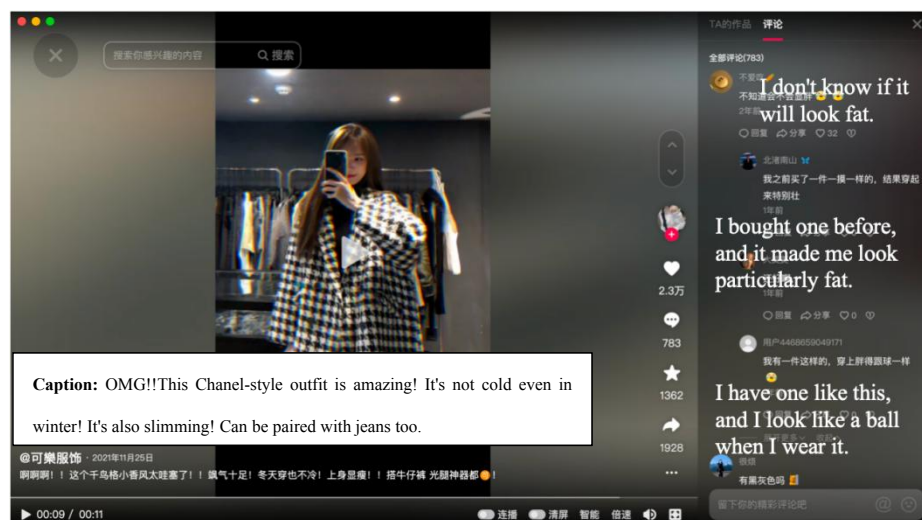
Personalised information acquisition in the Douyin fashion content community mainly offers outfit inspiration suitable for specific groups: significantly overweight and short people. This type of content creates a strong sense of identification for consumers, leading them to consume content and contribute. Some content focuses on guiding and advising users on achieving practical effects and solutions through dressing. In China, girls generally prefer to be slim and taller, and some studies have shown that the pursuit of a slender figure is common among Chinese women (Lee &

Lee, 2000; Lu & Qi, 2004; Wang, 2003). This type of content typically shows models with their original body shape, which may be overweight or short. Then, accompanied by music, they dress in the showcased outfits, ultimately showing how the clothing masks these issues. This content has a strong visual and auditory impact, and the contrast before and after makes users more surprised and acknowledge the suggestions of the brand/influencer. The titles of this type of content are usually casual, introducing the functions and advantages of these clothes in a relaxed tone (Picture 16). Another type is intimate titles, which encourage audiences to try and address their anxieties while bridging the relationship between brand/influencer and audiences. This content appeals to consumers who need more confidence about their body shape.

R3: "I generally buy clothes that make me look more spirited, better looking, preferably covering my belly[...]"

JJ: "[...]I watch some short-person outfit videos because I am short; I need their advice,"

LU: "[...]You know those transformation videos, right? Whether it is an outfit or makeup transformation, the main thing is to catch the user's eye,[...] This content surprises users and also gives them confidence. Do you think such a fat person can look so good in a piece of clothing? I am also fat so that I can be like them,"



Picture 16. The screenshot of personalised information acquisition

5.3.3 Affective Needs

Data analysis results show that consumers' emotional needs mainly manifest in positive emotional sharing and negative emotional venting. Consumers are more inclined to contribute to and create content when emotional needs are activated.

5.3.3.1 Emotional sharing

Emotional sharing primarily includes emotional resonance and emotional sharing. The former is the emotional relationship between the consumer and the creator that arises when consumers perceive the emotions in the content and resonate with these emotions. The latter occurs when consumers perceive emotions in the content and are eager to share these emotions and insights with close relations, usually within the consumer's social circle.

Emotional resonance encompasses two factors: emotional identification and sympathy. Emotional resonance refers to the consumer's emotional response to the content of the video, which may be due to resonance with the emotional tone or theme of the video. For example, if a video conveys positive emotions or concepts, consumers might like it due to emotional identification. Conversely, if a video highlights an issue that needs more attention or tells a sad story, users might like it out of sympathy. This emotional resonance can strengthen the connection between users and the video content and enhance consumers' contribution to the community.

R3: *"I generally like videos that I find enjoyable, and if their views make me feel understood, I give a like to show my support,"*

R11: *"I like videos that I think make sense and that I can empathise with, as well as some that are pitiable, hoping to give them a like or something,"*

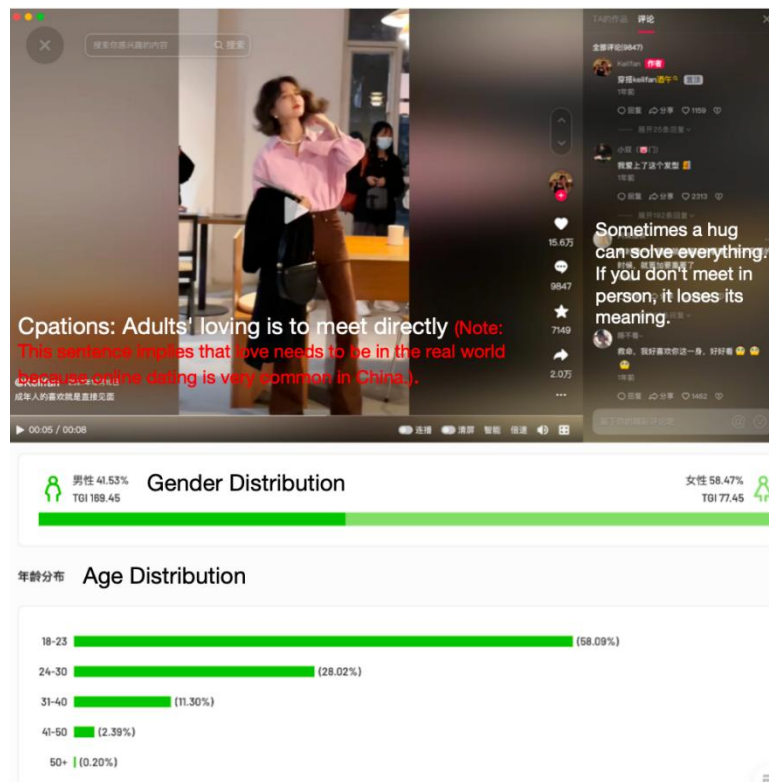
R8: *"I give likes to those that I think are reasonable, like some life philosophy content, and those that can strongly move me emotionally[...]"*

R7: *"[...] It is those I sympathise with, like videos made by cancer fighters or people with disabilities. Life is hard for everyone. I also like those I find correct or agree with,"*

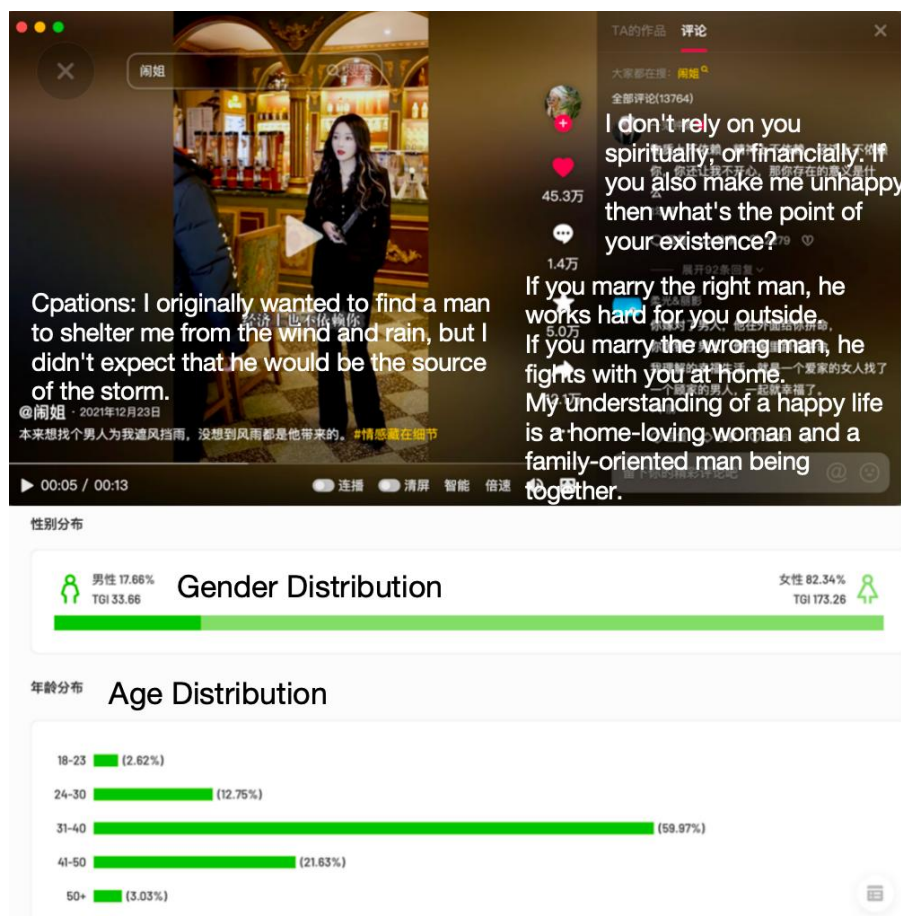
R6: *"I usually like content that makes sense or that I agree with, something genuine. Even though I know there are many deceivers on the internet is profit-driven, but some of them is*

not everyone profit-driven. At least I can see myself in their videos and feel like I belong to the same kind, so I must like and support them,”

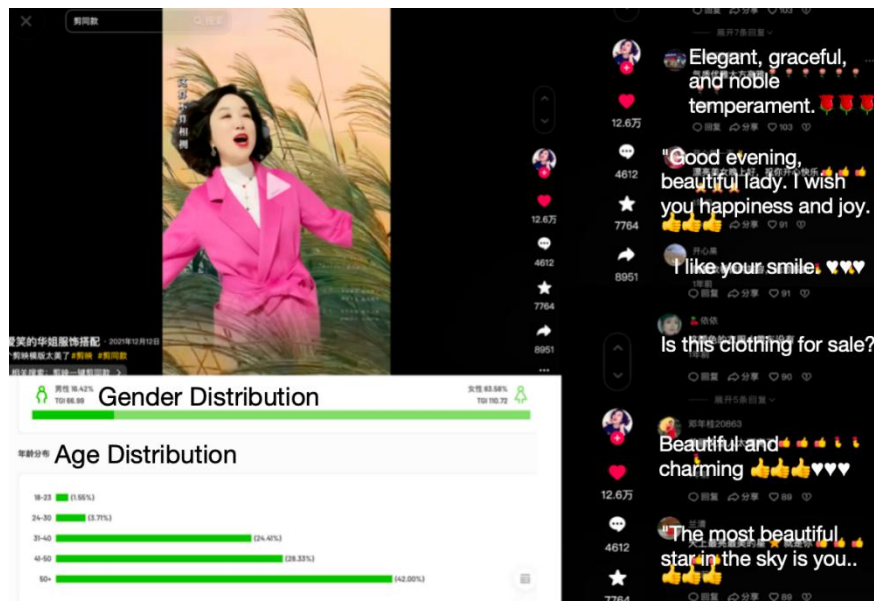
R3 is a young person, R11 is a 60-year-old, and R7 and R8 are middle-aged people in their 40s. From these evidence, the research finds that young people are more interested in emotional identification, while middle-aged and older adults base their likes on emotional identification and tend to express sympathy. The research believes that middle-aged and older adults have a stronger sense of social responsibility than young people. Young people are more focused on whether the emotional expression in the content can align with their emotions or current situation. Young people are more eager to obtain a universal value of emotional identification through video content. Additionally, the research observes from the data that emotional resonance is the most common style in the caption of the Douyin fashion community, previously categorized by the research as a “formal style”, expressing emotions in a manner akin to a formal tone. The research also finds that these titles often do not directly relate to the video content and that the expression of emotions varies according to the different age demographics of the video audience. Konzinets (2019) states that researchers can be an object to record his/her own feel during the data collection. Because emotion is complex variable, the researcher recorded his own feelings about each title and categorized these emotions via the users’ ages data from Feigua. For users aged 18-30, the emotional expression were mainly personality, unruly, and love (Picture 17). For users aged 31-40, the title mainly expressed family feelings, child feelings, marriage feelings, and female independence (Picture 18). For users aged over 41 were mainly the love of life, positive life (Picture 19). It can be seen that these emotions also correspond to what people of different ages value at different times. These emotions can easily resonate with the different aged of users. These emotional resonances promote users interact with influencers or brands.



Picture 17. The sample of young people emotional expression



Picture 18. The sample of middle-aged people emotional expression



Picture 19. The sample of people over 40 emotional expression

Emotional sharing emphasises the user's desire to convey positive emotions or feelings of happiness through sharing content. In the context of this study, such emotions arise from seeing innovative outfits, humorous content, or inspiring fashion content. The motivation behind emotional sharing is for users to hope that their positive emotions can affect others, allowing them to feel this happiness. This transmission of emotion may stem from humans' natural empathy.

R1: "Some interesting things I will forward to my brother or things related to him, I always send them to him. Funny stuff makes me want to share it with my friends,"

R2: "Some clothes or shoes I like, I might send to my friends. One, to get their advice, and two, to share the joy of seeing something I like,"

R3: "A few days ago, I saw a funny video of a guy doing a sexy dance, and I forwarded it to my friends, and we all had a great time,"

R4: "I usually ask them for ideas, and if I see some interesting videos, I show them to share some happiness; life is already so hard [laughing][...]"

5.3.3.2 Emotional venting

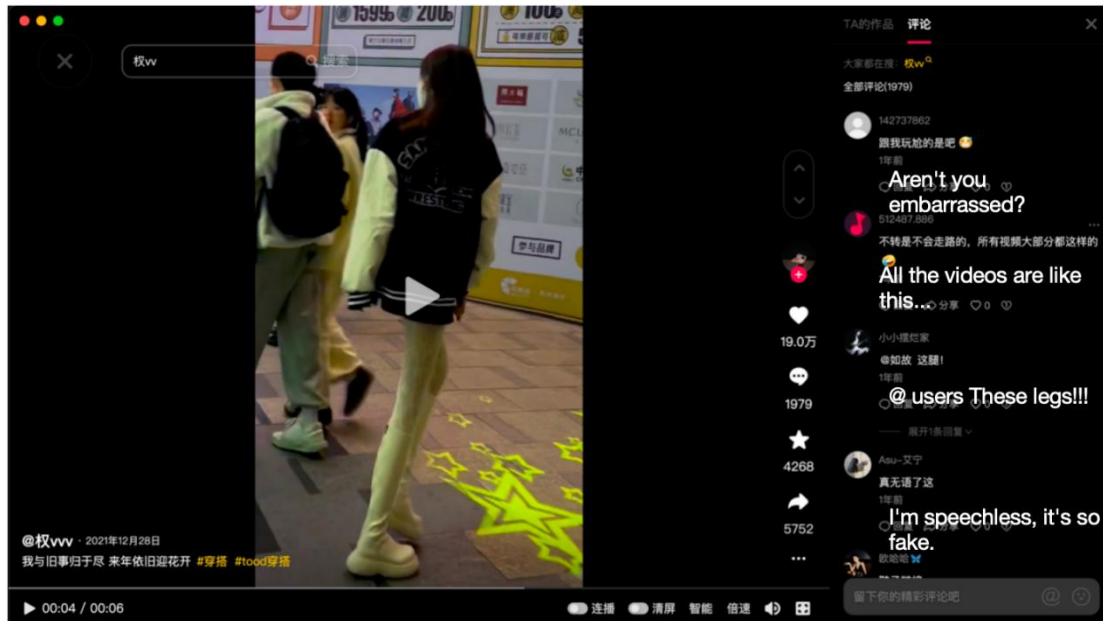
Evidence from the data suggests that the need for negative emotional venting is an emotional need of consumers and promotes customer contribution behaviour to content. This need is commonly present in any content within the community. The research found that users are more likely to look for elements in the content and vent their emotions in the comments section. This emotional venting usually takes two forms: first, mockery of the content, and second, self-deprecating humour.

Firstly, Douyin has filters and makeup functions, also known as Digital Surgical Cosmetic Technology, these functions can make ordinary people more beautiful, slimmer and taller. The AR technology recognizes the outline of the face, the face of the person in the video becomes more beautiful (thinner; eyes become larger; skin color becomes whiter, etc.). This technology is deeply loved by Chinese women (Ma, 2014; Lin, 2018; Qiu & An, 2022), but this technology is seriously deceptive (Picture. 20).



Picture 20. The example of digital surgical cosmetics

Although this feature allows the product/model to be displayed almost perfectly on the user's screen, there are some content that overuse this feature. For example: researcher finds a street show video. In order to show the beauty of the clothes, the model uses the beauty function to lengthen their legs, which is very unnatural (Picture 21). In the comment section, many people express exaggerated emotions about the content.



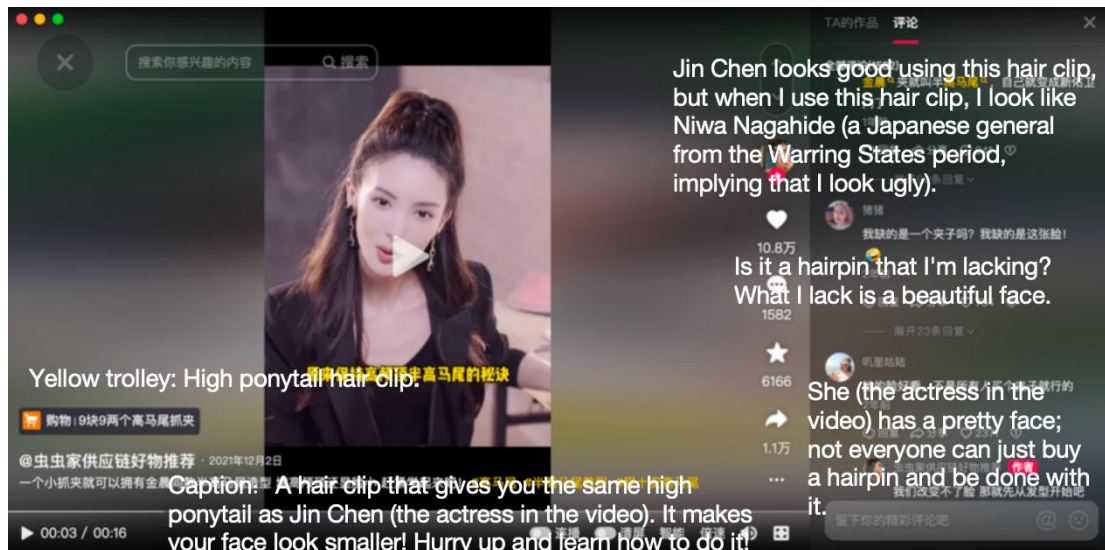
Picture 21. The example of emotional venting

LE: “[...]Some people are just there to criticize you, whatever you say, they will contradict you. At first, you might try to respond. I leave a comment below for everyone, but nobody replies; they do not come back,”

This behaviour hurts creators, but for users, it satisfies their needs. However, some believe this negative emotional venting is not necessarily inadequate.

YY: “You have to understand that notoriety is also a form of fame. As long as someone notices you, you are successful [...] If some people like you, there will be people who hate you. However, these haters commenting on your content are helping promote your video in the algorithm,”

The research also observes that many consumers use the comment section to make self-deprecating jokes about themselves, as seen in (Picture 22), where the creator mentioned a hairstyle that could make the face look smaller. Many users jokingly lamented their lack of celebrity-like looks, saying what they are missing is not a hair accessory but the face itself. They express their disagreement with the content through self-mockery.



Picture 22. The example of self-deprecating

In summary, whether it is emotional resonance or emotional venting, emotional needs are a key motivator driving consumers in the Douyin fashion community to contribute to and create content, encouraging active commenting and sharing within the community.

5.3.4 Incentive-driven

The incentive-driven criterion refers to the audience's motivation to create user-generated content (UGC) due to specific incentive measures. These incentives include, but are not limited to, praise, rewards, and points from brands or communities. However, evidence from the data suggests that a combination of praise and benefit-type incentives in the fashion community is more important. Incentive-driven might encourage audiences to create content more actively, as these incentives allow audiences to be recognised and rewarded for their efforts.

R4: *"I do not post videos often. I had posted before because I was helping them (brands/influencers) with content, and then I could get a lucky bag (a kind of online reward mechanism in China which provides digital currency to customers that can be used to purchase goods on Douyin),"*

R7: *"Think about it: just shoot a video casually, and they give you a discount; why not do it? Sometimes, when we go to restaurants, we will see that some restaurants ask us to shoot a*

video, and then if the video gets a certain number of likes, they give you a discount; the more likes, the bigger the discount, of course, you have to try[...]"

HR: *"We sometimes proactively suggest ideas to encourage users to post videos on their profiles. First, we offer specific incentives: 'Get socks for only 0.99 RMB (approximately 10 pence). This approach is necessary. As you know, sometimes free offers are less effective than making them spend a little money. It gives them a sense of quality assurance and better value for the incentive[...]' Indeed, most of the content they post does not go viral, but our goal is not to make the content popular. We have two objectives: firstly, through our 1-yuan deals, these users will appreciate us, enhancing their loyalty. Secondly, there is the algorithm mechanism of Douyin. You are aware of the traffic pool mechanism. Regardless of the video content's quality, the AI assigns an initial exposure of 200-500 views to each video. This means 200-500 people will see each user's video. For example, if 100 people post videos, conservatively estimating, the exposure for my product/brand would be around 20,000 times[...]' these users have friends, relatives, and other close connections who, upon seeing these videos, are likely to perceive my product/brand as more credible because the content is from someone they know personally[...]' It is a matter of probability. You need a more extensive base to increase the 'numerator',"*

GU: *"You are talking about having fans post videos about you[...]' What is your purpose?[...]' Ah, I see; it is about UGC, which is still quite challenging. Unless they are your hardcore fans, few people will do it. Another thing is to offer them some perks... Not just money, you also need to make them feel they have a special status. For instance, this benefit is prepared for newbies or loyal fans. Usually, they will post some videos. Then, our back-end team will count and distribute the prizes [...]' Just take a screenshot. After they post, they take a screenshot and send a private message to my account, and someone will give them their prize,"*

Evidence from the data suggest that direct reward structures predominantly drive user motivation in the Douyin fashion community. These structures may include tangible rewards provided by brands on Douyin, such as cash, coupons, sponsorship, or free samples. Such rewards incentivise customers to dedicate time and effort to create and share UGC as they see a clear, proportional return for their efforts. These direct rewards create a strong motivation for customers to produce more content. However, it is essential to note that managing and designing these external incentives is a complex balancing act. Excessive external incentives may lead to a gamification mindset among customers, where they focus solely on rewards and overlook the quality of the content. Although interviewees in this research believe that reaching a large fan base may satisfy their promotional needs, the research argues that paying

attention to the quality of content could positively impact the brand/influencer. Therefore, the research suggests that when considering the impact of these external incentives on UGC creation in the Douyin fashion community, brands/influencers should pay attention to a range of dynamic factors. These factors include the structure of the external rewards and their potential impact, from direct and indirect rewards to strategies for encouraging the production of high-quality content.

5.3.5 Social integration needs

The need for social integration is a critical driving force behind CEBs within the Douyin fashion community, encompassing various stages of these behaviours. In analysing the data, this was evident from three secondary pattern codes: social needs, social identity, and altruism. The requirement for social integration influences every level of CEBs. The social needs of the audience primarily stimulate contributions, while social identity is the primary motivator behind consumption and contribution. Additionally, altruism has a prominent impact on creation.

5.3.5.1 Social needs

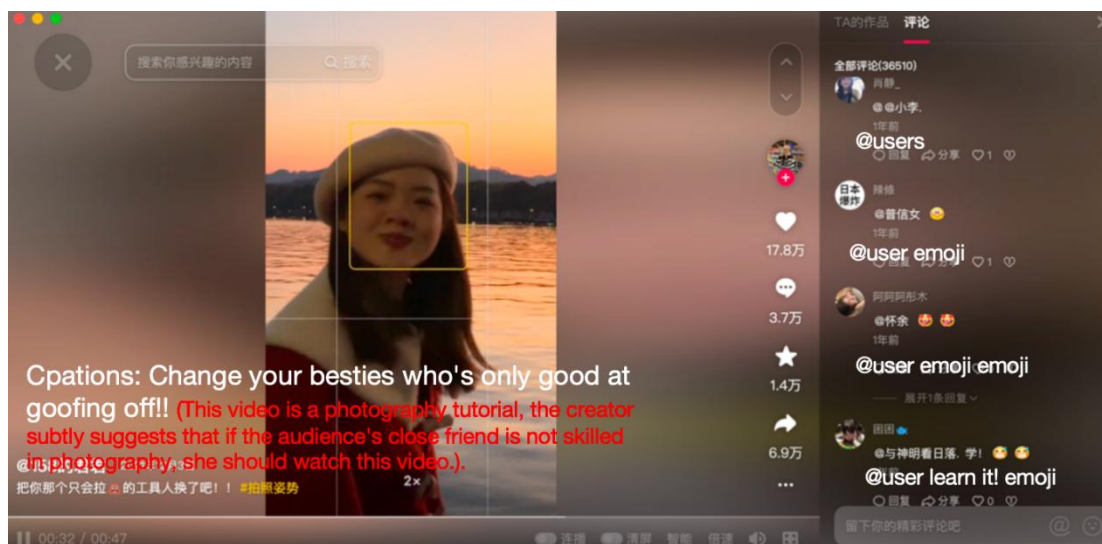
Audiences engage with video content by tagging their real-world friends in the comments section. They view video as a social currency to maintain their status in real-world social circles. Such interactions not only fulfil audiences' social needs but may also ignite the desire to maintain social status, as these interactions provide opportunities for self-expression and establishing social connections.

R1: "Sometimes, when I see an exciting video or comment, I @ my close friends to watch it, so we have more topics to discuss,"

R4: "I always find content on Douyin, like places to travel with good friends or restaurants visited with them. I usually comment by @ them in the comment section"

GU: "In content design, I create elements that encourage user interaction with their friends. For example, I might say, 'Get your friend who only knows how to waste time to watch this video' to prompt users to @ their friends in the comments. Such content is often amusing or might touch upon topics I usually discuss with my friends, resonating with the users[...]"

During the observation process, the research noted that a considerable amount of content within the community frequently included the bestie (Picture 23), which usually stimulates audiences @ their friends. “Bestie” is a relationship with Chinese characteristics, because China once implemented the one-child birth plan, almost all young people have no brothers and sisters. As a result, friends become so important that they even consider their best friends as their own brothers and sisters. Therefore, this kind of social appeal is generally expressed on Chinese social media. It is very important for young people to discuss with their friends whether a piece of clothing looks good or not, and whether a pose picture is beautiful, because to a certain extent, best friends can also be regarded as family members of Chinese.



Picture 23. The screenshot of @ “besties”

5.3.5.2 Social identity

Social identity is a primary motive influencing consumption and contribution. In the Douyin fashion content community, evidence in the data suggests that consumers have two kinds of social identity: social role identity and ethnic or specific cultural identity.

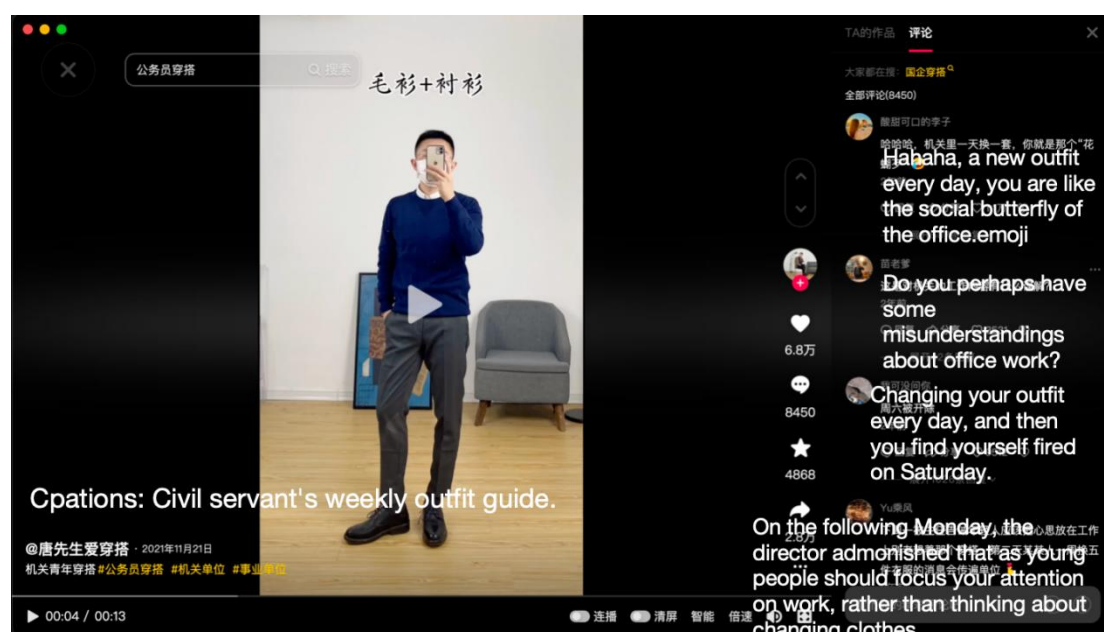
First, the social role identity is mainly reflected in how creators produce content showcasing outfits in specific contexts to attract audiences, such as 'outfits for a civil

servant's week (Picture 24). This content attracts many civil servants to comment. They initially feel connected with their social identity but may find the outfits differ from those mentioned in the content. Consequently, they express their views in the comments section. In other words, consumers are drawn into the identity of a civil servant, discussing how they should style their clothing. Typically, creators use a specific scene to make content accessible for consumers to relate to their experiences.

JJ: “You need to create content that makes consumers feel they need this thing, so you must create a context for them. This context is common, like the office, the street, the park[...] You can even create a more special context, like in one of my viral videos, What to wear when meeting your boyfriend's parents for the first time?”

YY: “As an entry point, it brings users into our video content,”

The example of a video related street outfit show perfectly meets this need for creating contexts, using different settings to stimulate consumer associations and increase the topic’s salience.



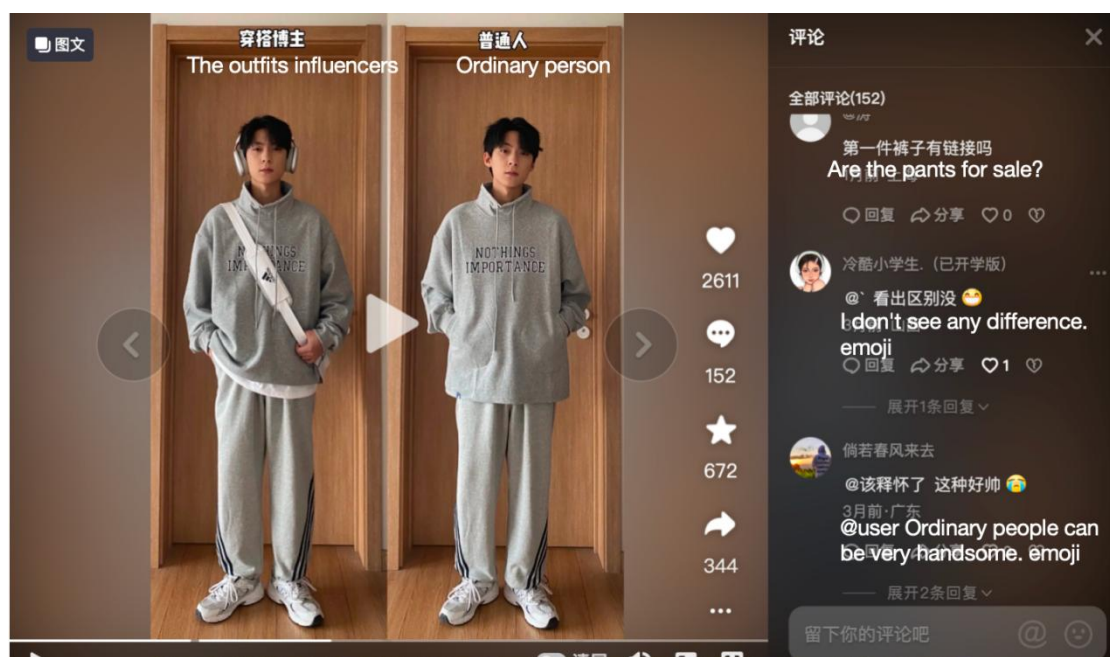
Picture 24. The outfits for a civil servant's week

Additionally, some videos emphasise the “ordinary person” social identity (Picture 25). The research believes that because many outfits in the community are modelled, consumer confidence often needs to be improved, as they attribute the outfit’s appeal

to the model. Featuring “ordinary people” better authenticates the context, making users relate to it and believe that the outfit can suit them, boosting their confidence.

GU: *“I now mostly choose ordinary people as KOLs. If you are good-looking and have a great body, it is pointless for me... Consumers may think the outfit looks good mainly because of the model, creating anxiety [...] So, I now look for those who are average in appearance and have a regular body, bridging the gap between influencers and users[...].”*

This meets consumers’ need to identify with social roles and gain social acceptance, offering outfit information more relevant to their everyday lives.



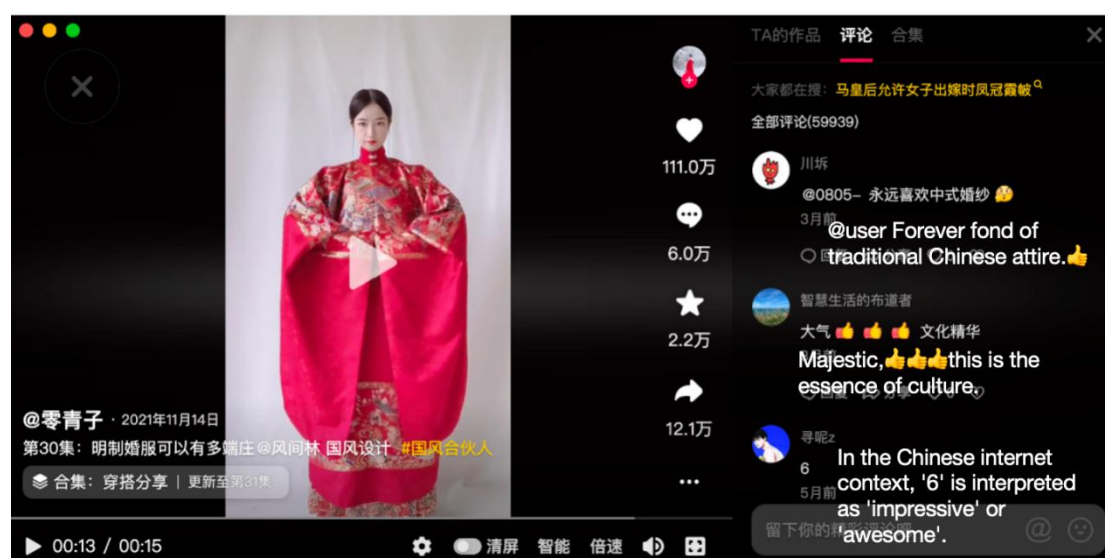
Picture 25. The example of the ‘ordinary person’ social identity

Additionally, ethnic or other issue identification in the fashion content community primarily exists in the context of cultural attire. The research observes that although such topics are rare, the related videos perform exceptionally well, with a Hanfu (the traditional styles of clothing worn by the Han Chinese) video exceeding one million likes, fifty thousand comments, and one hundred thousand shares (Picture 26). The data also indicates that consumer evaluations of this content are overwhelmingly positive. The research attributes this primarily to a unique sense of ethnic identity in China.

CH: “For example, patriotism, nationalisation, and national sentiment are things that are more easily accepted by the masses,”

HR: “We sometimes joke, ‘Do you know the easiest way to go viral? Get a foreigner to say ‘I love China’ in Chinese [laughing][...] It works and has succeeded [...] The Chinese people are in great need of national confidence,”

China’s thousands of years of history include periods of great strength, but modern China has been relatively backward. In recent years, Chinese people have been more culturally confident despite economic growth. Thus, content related to Hanfu stimulates the audience’s ethnic confidence and cultural pride, providing more opportunities for cultural participation through traditional Chinese attire.



Picture 26. The example of the Hanfu in the community

Other cultural identifications are also mainly present in the ACG (Animation, Comic, and Game) subculture community. The primary elements of China’s ACG culture community are derived from Japan, with the most frequently appearing fashion content being the Japanese high school uniform, the jyoshi koukousei (JK) uniform (Picture 27), a more everyday attire in this subculture. Consumers interested in this theme are often deeply immersed in ACG culture, participating in cosplay events to dress as their favourite comic characters. Many comics feature the JK uniform, which,

compared to other cosplay outfits, is more integrated into everyday life and thus favoured by users in this cultural community. Unlike the Hanfu users' ethnic confidence and cultural pride, these consumers are more interested in bridging the virtual and real worlds. Such content gives them more ideas and suggestions when they wish to engage and display their identification with this subculture.



Picture 27. The example of JK uniform in the community

It is widely recognised that one of the functions of clothing is its potential to serve as a symbolic representation of specific cultures. Cultural symbols can ignite cultural identification among audiences, leading users within the community to pay special attention and offer support to specific cultural topics. Content based on such cultural elements often possesses a strong customer stickiness.

5.3.5.3 Altruism

Altruism, the act of selflessly performing actions for the benefit of others rather than for self-interest, also serves as an essential motivator influencing users to share content. In the Douyin fashion community, consumers share content they deem helpful or valuable to other users, such as outfit suggestions, trend forecasts, or shopping discounts. They might not expect a direct return from their sharing activities

but aim to assist others by disseminating valuable content. Altruism may drive users to share content of higher value and quality, as their goal is to aid other members of the social community.

R7: *“Recently, I have been sharing more content related to parenting[...] For fashion, I tend to share tips to avoid pitfalls; as you know, the quality of online products can be questionable. I share things that could be useful to others or serve as a warning,”*

R8: *“I usually share with my husband or friends[...] Mostly it is practical stuff, like discounts[...] generally, it is about men’s wear or children’s clothes,”*

R11: *“When it comes to clothes, it might be something I buy for my husband or kids, then I send it to them to see if they like it, so I can decide whether to buy it or not,”*

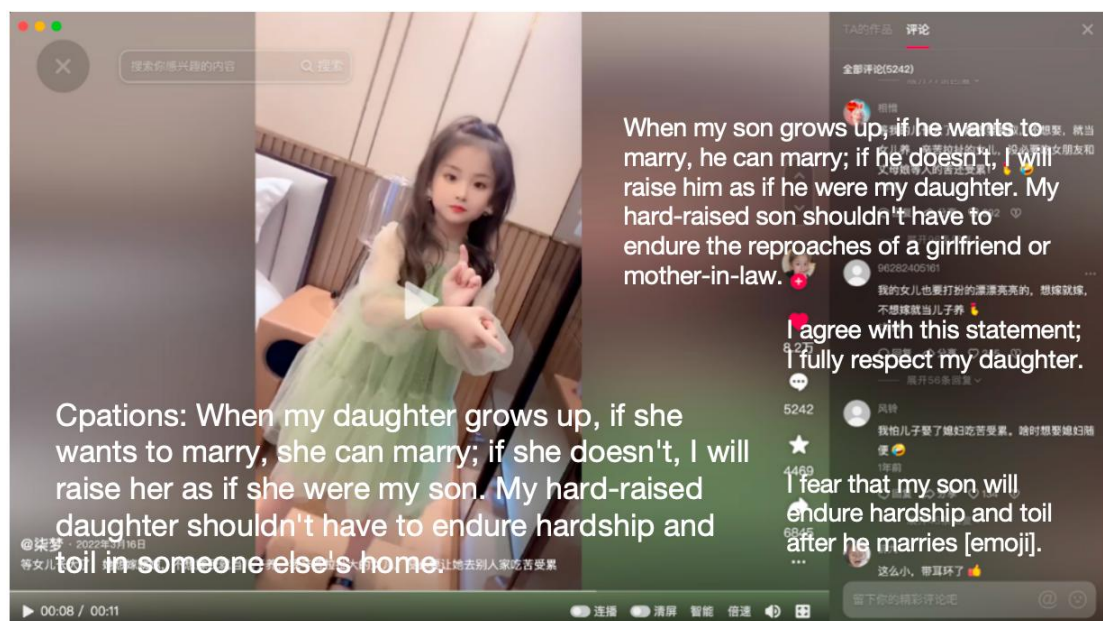
R2: *“Also, if I think something could be useful for a friend, I will share it with them,”*

R6: *“When I forward something, it is usually to friends, mostly about health tips or clever tricks to share with everyone,”*

Altruism is a fundamental motive in social interaction, involving selfless actions or contributions for others, and is particularly evident in user behaviours on online platforms like the Douyin fashion community. Firstly, altruistic behaviour can bring a sense of inner satisfaction and happiness. In the Douyin fashion community, consumers share helpful outfit tips, discount information, or other relevant knowledge to help solve problems or inspire other users. Such sharing not only assists others but also brings inner satisfaction and happiness to the sharer. Additionally, altruistic behaviour is crucial to establishing and maintaining social relationships. In the Douyin fashion community, evidence suggests that users may have various relationships based on shared interests, such as friends, colleagues, family, or strangers. Regardless of the relationship type, altruistic behaviour can help users build and maintain these relationships. For instance, a user might share outfit tips with a friend, which helps the friend and strengthens their friendship.

5.3.6 Self-expression

Self-expression primarily focuses on consumers' expressions of identification with, or opposition to, specific values and comments on topical content. When audiences encounter content that aligns with their values, they may express agreement and support through comments; conversely, if they encounter content conflicting with their values, they might express dissent or criticism in the comments. This form of self-expression is a significant motivator for user engagement in commenting, as it allows them to express themselves, engage in community discussions, and influence the community's atmosphere and values. This motivation is a critical factor in stimulating audiences' contribution. In Picture 28, the creator presents a viewpoint in the title, prompting many in the comment section to express their opinions and perspectives.



Picture 28. the example of self of expression in comment section

R1: "I generally comment on content that involves principles or viewpoints I disagree with to express my perspective,"

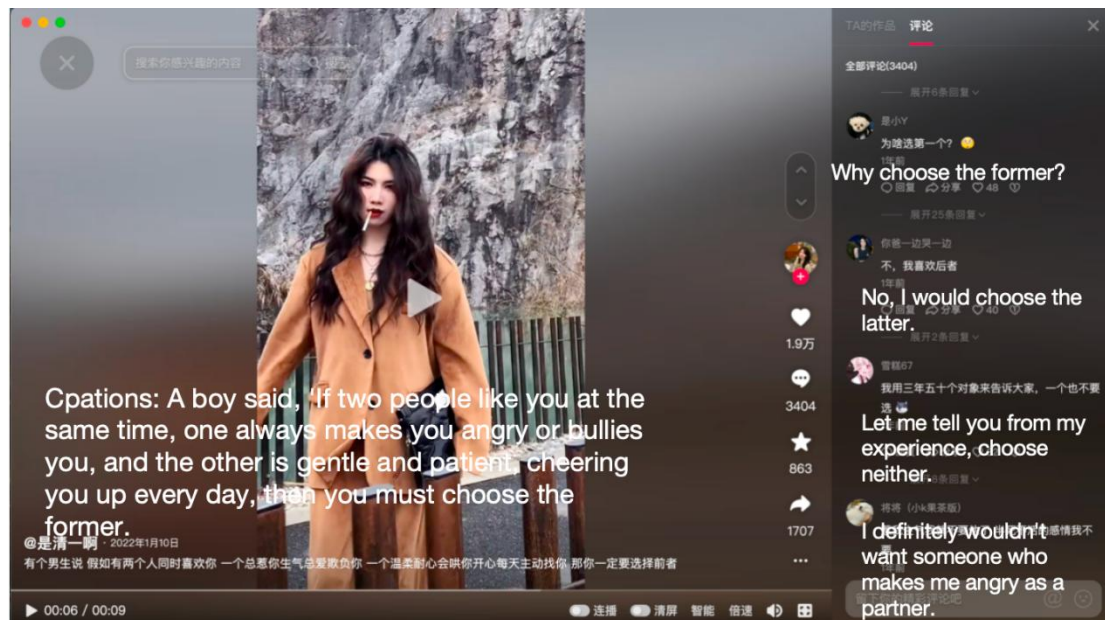
R5: "If I think something is wrong, I will express my opinion. You need to express your views boldly; the platform gives you the opportunity, and you should seize it. Also, I have noticed that the platform could be more friendly, with some ideas being too extreme. You must uphold justice, even if it is a justice you believe in,"

R11: “When video content speaks my mind, I usually show my support and offer encouragement,”

R2: “You know, there is a term now called ‘Internet Zuiti’ (take the words right out of one’s mouth) Some bloggers say what I want but still need to do so. They speak for me in their content, and I appreciate that. I say they are my Internet mouthpiece,”

HR: “As I mentioned, if you want to attract precise followers, you need to understand their values and incorporate them into your content. The alignment of these values is essential[...] You also have to ensure that the opinions you express are controversial, as this can attract different voices, which also help you go viral,”

Furthermore, participation in specific topics (especially gender issues) is a form of self-expression. During the screenshot observation phase, the research collected content (Picture 29) showing users expressing their views in this way while also gaining new perspectives and information from others’ opinions. In such opinion hubs, people instinctively try to persuade others, leading to debates that may not directly relate to the video content but are directly related to the brand/influencer’s stance on a specific topic.



Picture 29. The example of self-expression in the community

Through the respondents' answers, the research found that the stance of brands/influencers on topics must be polarising, whether positive or negative, to provoke user comments. Some people will agree with them; others will refute them, eventually leading to a large-scale debate. Based on the recommendation algorithm, brands/influencers gain opportunities for interaction with users and more exposure on Douyin.

YC: *“Anything related to gender or money triggers comments. Especially when selling women’s products. I do not know if you have noticed, but there is a strong feminist movement on Douyin. Like me, I might not support them, but my content has to lean in that direction. I need to create opportunities for interaction with consumers; I have to cater to them.. Honestly, I am not a feminist myself; I am indifferent to gender conflicts, but to sell my products, I must blend in with them[...].”*

JJ: *“The products I promote are mainly beauty and fashion, and they might be linked to couples, like, for instance, ‘My boyfriend is a typical man and does not know how to gift for Christmas.’ It resonates with them, and then I introduce the product I want to sell. You should see the response in the comment section; everyone’s like, ‘Sister, you have hit my point exactly; I wish my boyfriend saw this’.”*

LI: *“[...]You need someone specifically to maintain this aspect, which is community management. It would help if you used topics to stimulate your followers to participate in your comments or other platform communities. [...]Some communities are very active. I once served an account that was about beauty. At that time, we were helping this client, and his fan group and comment section were particularly active because his main topic was to reject appearance anxiety, and they sold beauty products by posting content without makeup. There was much interaction, much attention[...].”*

R3: *“I would comment and argue with people in the comments. For example, I will comment if a man says something extreme about what men should do. Ah, and another kind, like when a woman says she understands men very well; I do not know if you have seen that. Then I will comment because, you know, it is impossible to achieve; although I empathise, I do not believe it.”*

In summary, evidence from the data gathered in this project suggests that users use the comment feature to publicly express their opinions, feelings, or viewpoints on a particular topic, whether in support or opposition. The motivation of opinion expression plays a key role in driving user participation in commenting. First,

comments provide a platform for expressing opinions. Users can freely articulate their thoughts in the comment area, interpret video content, or discuss a topic. For some users, this is a way of self-expression, helping them better understand themselves and feel heard and understood. For others, it is an opportunity to understand different perspectives, broaden their horizons, and even challenge their existing cognition. Second, self-expression helps users build and maintain their social identity and online image. Users can showcase their attitudes, values, or expertise by posting comments. This helps them establish influence in the community and shapes their online image, thereby gaining recognition or respect in the community.

Moreover, self-expression facilitates community discussion and interaction. Users' comments can provoke reactions from other users, thereby sparking deeper discussions and exchanges. These interactions increase community activity and help users establish connections and build a sense of community. Self-expression is significant in driving customer engagement in commenting on videos. Whether as a form of self-expression, a tool for building and maintaining social identity, a medium to promote community discussion, or a way to influence video content, opinion expression provides value and motivation for CEB in commenting.

5.3.7 Summary

In this section, based on UGT and CEB, the research found that the motivations behind different levels of CEB in the Douyin fashion community tend to vary. To summarise, hedonic needs are the primary motivation for customers to consume content, and cognitive needs stimulate customers to consume content and promote them to contribute to the content. Social integration needs impact all levels of CEB. However, for different purposes, CEB differs; for example, customers are more willing to participate in the co-creation of content only if there are altruistic attributes to the content. Emotional needs stimulate deeper CEB (contribution and creation). Finally, there are two separate needs: self-expression stimulates customers to contribute to content, while reward mechanisms are the primary motivation for customers to engage in content creation.

5.4 How should fashion short video content be created on Douyin to improve customer engagement?

The six content marketing (CM) elements proposed by Du Plessis (2015) are used to undertake the thematic coding of the interview and observational data. Through continuous comparison of these data, codes, pattern codes, and themes were derived (Table 15). The medium element in Du Plessis's work (2015) is not categorised in the results of this segment. Du Plessis (2015) emphasises that the primary purpose of the medium element is to highlight the need to consider platform availability (interactivity and collaboration) and the nature of the platform, in the consideration of possible alteration to content marketing strategies. However, the research context of this study is limited to only Douyin, and the platform's features had already been discussed in previous sections. The research categorised 35 pattern codes, concluding them respectively to the 14 themes (see Appendix 2, Table 26). And then based on the five elements (the strategic elements, the formation elements, the intrinsic elements, the communication elements, and the corollary elements) (Du Plessis, 2015), the 14 themes are categorised.

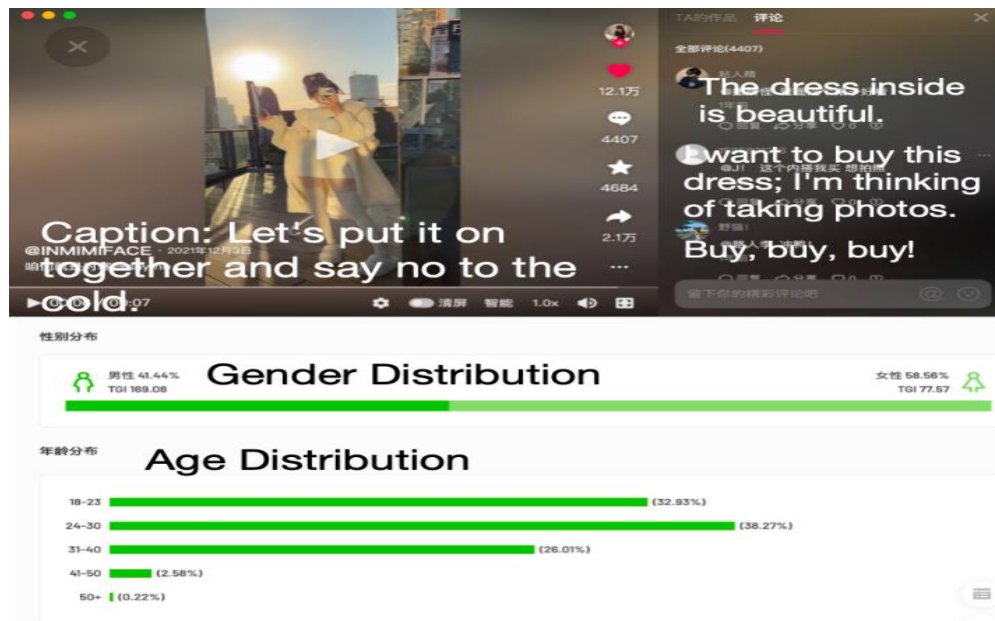
5.4.1 Strategic elements

Du Plessis (2015) argues that strategic elements indicate that content should be purposeful and create opportunities for the brand through consistency. In the Douyin content community, brands need to determine their positioning within the community, which the research considers it is the initial purpose brands should establish. Subsequently, this is combined with the brand's positioning and consumers' understanding of the brand to form consistency. Moreover, the evidence from the data suggests that in Douyin, a social media platform based on algorithms, brands also need to consider strategically how to make themselves recognisable by the algorithm. Only in this way will AI be able to pass their information on to potential consumers. Therefore, strategic elements in content marketing strategy within the Douyin fashion content community include

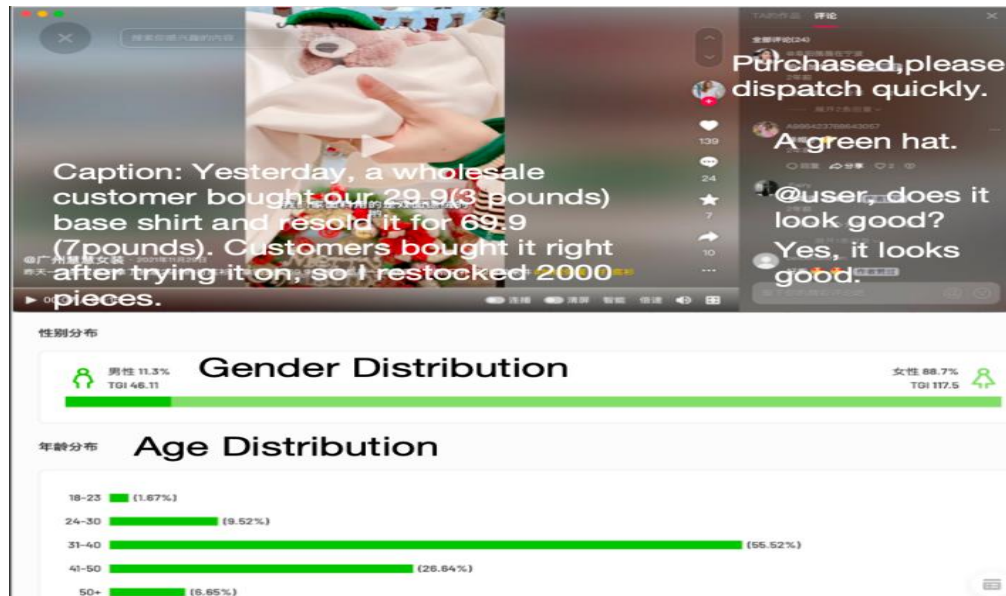
- Audience positioning (who are the consumers),
- Identity positioning (who consumers think I am),
- Tag positioning (who the platform/AI thinks I am).

5.4.1.1 Audience/consumer positioning

The evidence from the data suggests that audience positioning is a crucial strategic factor that brands determine before entering the community, as it directly affects the type and style of content the brand will present. The study finds that preferences for content types vary among different age groups. Younger customers tend to favour recommendation content (Picture 30), are more inclined to trust recommendations from quality influencers, and care more about products' aesthetic appeal and self-presentation functionality. In contrast, middle-aged users focus more on the practical value and quality of products (Picture 31).



Picture 30. The example of recommendation content



Picture 31. The example of the practical value and quality of products

Some interviewees mention their views on the impact of audience positioning on content style.

YC: “You need to determine who your target customers are to define the content of your account. For example, your followers are likely young girls if you were a beauty blogger. Then you can understand what content girls of this age group generally like, such as recommendation videos or funny videos,”

JJ also mentions that the audience is a premise for her content design, because her potential audiences are young girls, her content always is generally good product recommendation types which is a faster type to gain more followers.

YY notes that audience positioning is directly related to the final customers. Based on the product that will ultimately be profitable, he will first consider which specific group of audience the content should appeal to.

Some interviewees believe that audience positioning affects the design of the content style and directly impacts the expected effect of content marketing.

LI: “[...]I have a colleague with 700,000 to 800,000 followers, but the conversion rate is meagre when he wants to sell products. Because he did not carefully consider the target customers at the beginning of the account, even if you have millions of followers, it is useless because they are not your potential customers[...].”

Furthermore, some interviewees mention user personas and explain that user personas are the best solution for accurately identifying the audience. To better match content with customers, algorithms need to understand customers, that is, to create user personas. According to the algorithm principles published by ByteDance, they use customers' interests, identities, and behavioural characteristics to describe customers. Based on this algorithm, practitioners can also prioritise understanding customers' needs from the top down and create more attractive content.

JJ: *"You need first to determine your fans' persona, age, location, and even the type of mobile phone they use, their interests and hobbies[...]"*

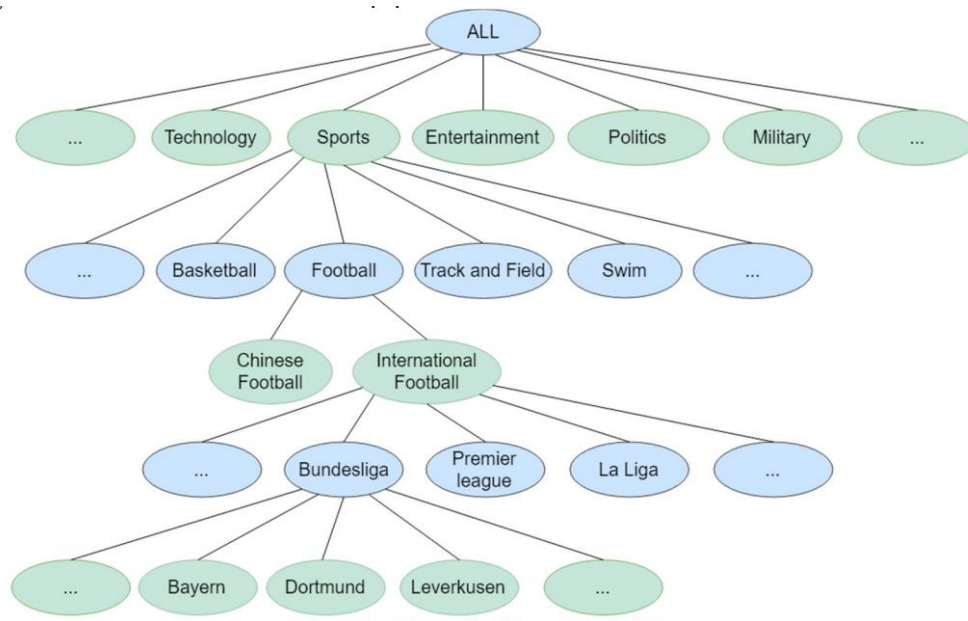
JA: *"My fans are very specifically positioned, roughly females between 20 to 25 years old, from third or fourth-tier small cities, who have just started working, do not have a high spending ability but still aspire for quality in life."*

User personas are more like consumer manuals, with practitioners determining the different needs of different types of users by analysing user personas and creating content that attracts different types of consumers through these needs. In other words, the user persona is the starting point of all work. Based on the organic combination of content and user groups and precise and intelligent matching, users are consistently immersed in the positive emotions of meeting their needs.

5.4.1.2 Tag positioning

Interviewees also discuss the importance of AI tag recognition. AI tag recognition can be understood as a way for brands to "inform" the AI which category their account should be classified under by browsing and creating videos related to their brand's category when entering the community. This positioning strategy is a strategic method based on Douyin's algorithm.

ByteDance (TikTok and Douyin's parent company) applied for a patent titled A Global Interest Discovery Recommendation Method and Device (Xu & Cao, 2019). According to this patent, they have constructed a global algorithm, "building a hierarchical interest tag based on the content's themes and calculating the relevance of each interest tag in the set" (Picture 32).



Picture 32. The Hierarchical Interest Label Tree of the Patent

Source: Zhao (2021)

A tree diagram clearly shows the inclusion and hierarchical relationships between the data. In this hierarchical classification tree of tags, the root node represents all content on Douyin. The first layer of meta-classifiers underneath are general categories, with each root node having multiple sub-nodes indicating more detailed classifications in different fields, and each branch can be further refined into narrower and more specific areas. Douyin encourages creators to focus on a single field so that content can be more accurately pushed to interested users, increasing effective user engagement.

During interviews with industry experts conducted in the research, while they are unaware of this patent, they summarise a method through experience related to the core of this technology, which they call ‘growing an account’.

J1: “Growing an account is important[...] it is a well-established routine now. In the early stages[...] a new account is very clean. You have to think about what you want to do. For example, if you want to join the beauty field, you must cultivate your account’s learning habit,[...] you have to swipe through famous beauty bloggers every day. This way, the algorithm will know you are interested in beauty, and your account will be tagged. After about half a month, you can start posting content, and the algorithm will push it accurately,”

YY: *“You can consider growing an account as a process of educating the algorithm[...] letting Douyin know what you will do, and then Douyin will push you to users interested in your videos[...] This will increase user stickiness[...] In the early stages of establishing an account, we need to raise the video weight of the account, which means tagging your videos accurately so people will watch them. If people watch your videos, the algorithm will give you more traffic, and your account’s weight will be very high[...] This way, the future performance of your videos will be very stable,”*

LU: *“When setting up an account, especially when starting, we need to go through a process called growing an account[...] Ensure your video content and account tags are accurate[...] This accuracy is about letting AI know who you are, what you like, who might like you[...]”*

It is evident that this technology has guided influencers/brands in the practice of ‘growing an account’. Seemingly casual operations are used to “educate” the algorithm, allowing the algorithm to confirm the content preferences of the account. The account then obtains a unique tag within the algorithm. When the brand posts short videos on the account later, the algorithm prioritises pushing content to other users with the same tag, thus ensuring effective customer engagement. However, some question this practice. YC believes that although they follow the process of growing an account in their work, some accounts need to gain more weight and are eventually abandoned. The research considers growing an account akin to a “metaphysical practice”, as people cannot confirm that the success of each account is due to growing, given that an account’s success depends on many conditions. The results of “growing” cannot be proven in any way. Nonetheless, the research cannot deny the similarities between this patented invention, Douyin’s official encouragement, and the practice of growing an account. Since this method is widely applied, there is reason to believe it is effective.

5.4.1.3 Identity positioning (IP)

Determining the target audience is crucial for producing content that resonates with the intended customers. Identifying tag positioning is essential for allowing AI to accurately recognise the brand identity, helping brands identify potential consumers and thereby enabling more precise targeting of potential customers. Subsequently, brands also need to undertake IP to ensure their content stands out amidst the

platform's vast array of content. In this context, 'IP' does not refer to 'intellectual property' but rather 'identity positioning' in the Chinese internet lexicon. It typically denotes creating, shaping, and positioning an individual's identity or image (such as celebrities, internet celebrities, and KOLs) to gain more attention and influence. The formation and positioning of an identity or image are critical to the success of content marketing and promotional activities. Kotler (1970) notes the importance of positioning theory (AI and Trout, 1969). Identity positioning is similar to this since the more accurate the IP is positioned, the more people it attracts and eventually the higher possibility that the company (brand) can reach potential consumers. To put it another way, the research considers Douyin's algorithm as a positioning method. The algorithm analyses the user's preferences and tweets the content they are interested in. Thus the research argues that the content is a product, and the algorithm helps users find the product they like. This is because that the algorithm has already positioned the user before tweeting the "product". Therefore, after confirming target clients, companies (brands) should think about their IP carefully.

The 'uniqueness' of an IP is a crucial factor. 'Unique' means the distinction of an IP from others in the same category. Although the interviewees all acknowledge the importance of a unique IP, they also believe that creating a unique IP on the platform is challenging.

JA: *"You have to be very clear about the content and the product, which users are you trying to attract, and which users are you selling your product to? [...] Afterwards, based on these users, you determine your IP positioning [...] How can you differentiate yourself from others with hundreds or thousands of brands or influencers in each category? This is a problem that most people need to rack their brains over."*

Even if creators have established the uniqueness of their IP, they still need help with another problem: the abundance of similar content. Besides that, several points are mentioned by interviewees which were confirmed in the research's fieldwork observation notebook, which are the personal characteristics of the creator and content unique feature.

LL: *“I no longer recommend newcomers to start on the Douyin platform. It is too difficult to establish an IP[...] There are too many people[...]everyone wants to make money on Douyin. The ideas you come up with might already be implemented by someone else. Then it would help if you thought again, which is problematic. Moreover, even if your IP or content becomes popular, someone will immediately imitate you, effectively dividing your customer base. Then you have to think again about how to differentiate yourself from others[...] This is where it becomes necessary for companies to think about how to make themselves look different from others in the same category after positioning their own IP.”*

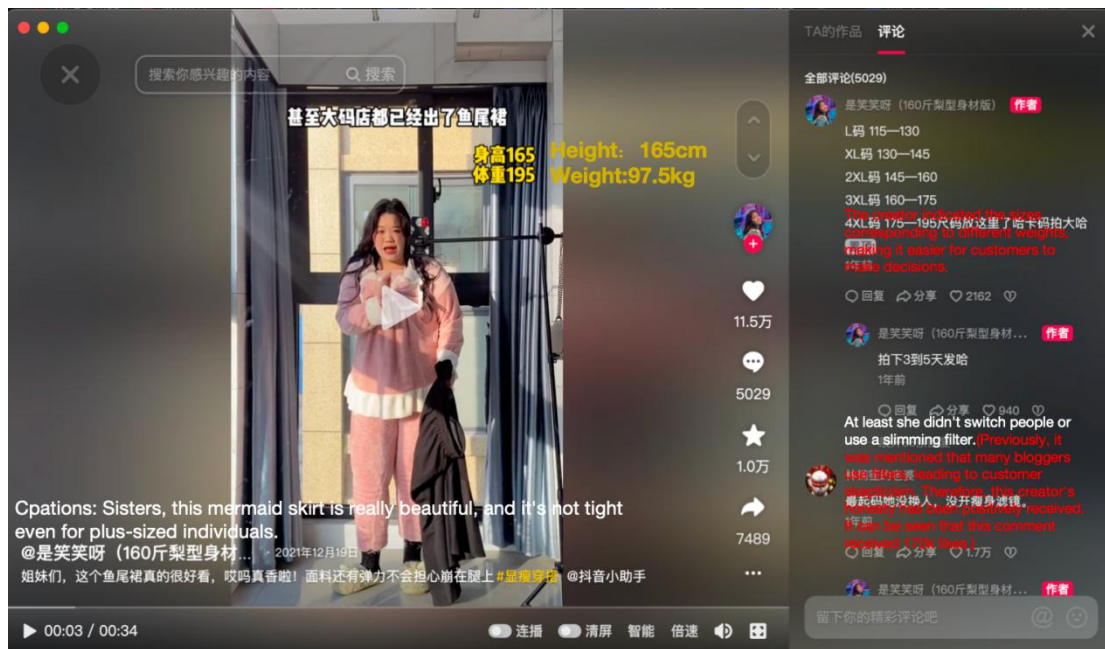
GA: *“[...]my fans like to listen to me talk, they like my personality,”*

GU: *“...you will find that the main influence of user stickiness, in addition to the power of the product, is the charisma of the personality, it is these two points!”*

LA: *“[...]some of them think my voice is very nice, and they think I look good when I smile[...]”*

JA: *“I’ve seen an account that sells shoes before, and one of his features is that in every video he would step in a mud pit[...]”*

The research considers this is a symbolic approach. Nandan (2005) mentions that symbols have a representational nature towards a brand. In other words, a brand will be more likely to establish its brand image in the minds of its customers. Creators in the community are also using this way to differentiate themselves from other creators and create a unique identity in the minds of their customers. The research also finds during the observations that some influencers would include a distinctive behaviour or say a sentence that only belongs to them in each video content (Picture 33). From the picture, it can be seen that the creator has marked her height and weight is 165cm and her weight is 195 jin (Chinese unit of weight measurement, 195jin=97.5kg). The research states that this kind of sentence serves two purposes: 1. highlighting her characteristics and clarifies her customer groups. 2. improving her recognition in the minds of customers, and when people mention ‘large girl outfit’ they think of this creator.



Picture 33. The example of identity positioning

Moreover, different IP have some distinctions. Data summaries reveal that brands typically have two choices for IP. The first type is personal IP, which involves a brand nurturing an influencer exclusive to the brand or transforming the brand's spokesperson into an influencer. Personal IP usually have significant influence or expertise in a particular field. Their influence comes from their image, taste, lifestyle, and values. Their followers often trust their recommendations, so the products they endorse usually receive a positive response. In this case, their personal image, reputation, and expertise are crucial for the success of product promotion. The second type is commercial IP based on the brand. Under this IP, content is usually more direct and sales-oriented, often employing more promotional and marketing techniques. The commercial reputation and product quality are vital in this type of IP. The research finds that respondents believe personal IP aligns better with this platform's content requirements and is more appealing to consumers compared to commercial IP.

YC: *“Influencers’ fans have higher stickiness, and the products they recommend are more likely to be embraced by their fans, much better than a cold, official account,”*

CH: *“With personal IP[...] As long as the content is well-produced, it is sufficiently attractive. Corporate IP is more complicated because the content logic for corporate IP certification is constrained. Many things cannot be said in the content, which might affect the company’s reputation. Such constraints imply boredom or make creating content on the platform difficult,”*

Jl: *“Personal IP is just about one person, and all videos revolve around this person’s creation, which is relatively simple. However, as a corporate IP, it is different. It has many objective factors and limitations. For instance, as a video creator or director, if a company hires me to make a video for them, the persona I create must align with the company’s brand image. This requires considering many more factors,”*

However, some interviewees believe that commercial IP has advantages compared to personal IP:

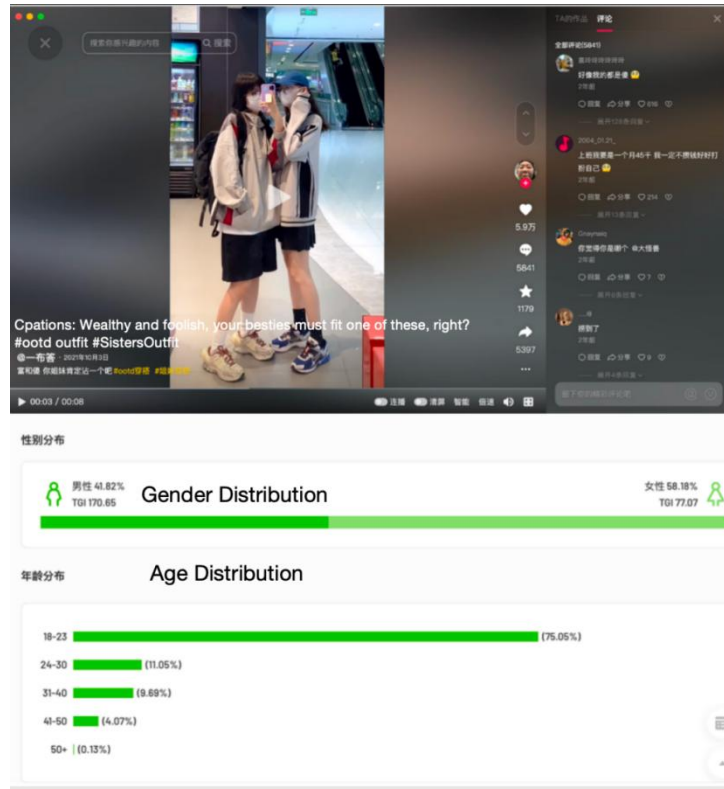
GA: *“Of course, corporate IP also has its benefits. People will feel that this is a brand and that their products are guaranteed. Unlike personal IP, where the person might disappear from the internet one day, you will not know where to seek redress if there is a problem with the product you bought. A company gives consumers a sense of security,”*

Some respondents mention that some corporate IP is disguised as personal IP to fit the platform’s characteristics better.

GA: *“You know, a lot of clothes sellers now themselves are boss who shoot their own videos and turn themselves into influencers and then sell their own stuff,”*

JA: *“Although it is a corporate account, but you cope with it with the method of a personal account. You can see other accounts which also have this kind of drama, like the office romance that someone fell in love with another colleague working with him, and it meets the curiosity of everyone.”*

In the Douyin community, evidence suggests that younger respondents prefer personal IP (Picture 34). The data shows that the audience for personal IP primarily consists of individuals aged 18-25 who are more inclined towards the aesthetics and personalities of creators.



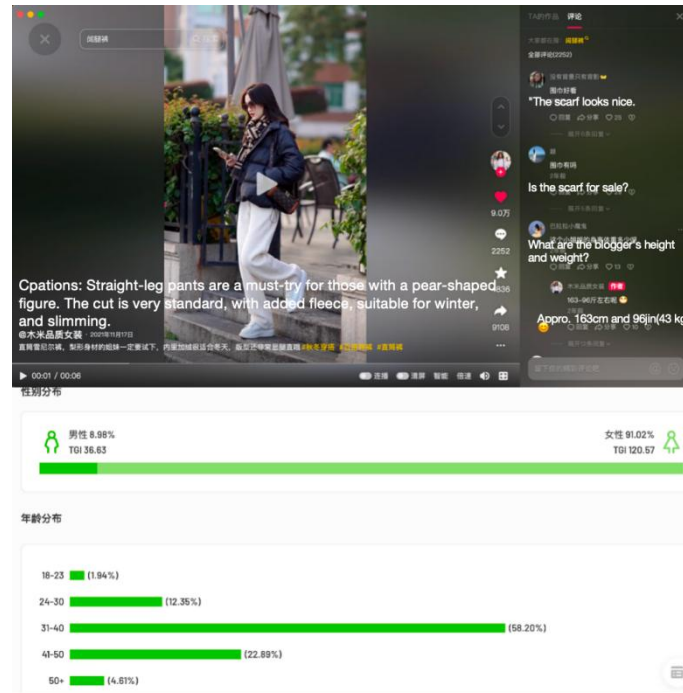
Picture 34. The example of fans distribution of the personal IP

Conversely, middle-aged and older individuals tend to favour corporate IPs due to their reliability (Picture 35), and they are keen on inquiring about specific product information from brands.

Additionally, some middle-aged and older respondents mentioned their willingness to engage with established brands and expressed scepticism towards products from personal IPs.

R11: *“I usually buy things from brand live stream rooms[...] they are guaranteed, and the products brands sell are good. Nowadays, there are too many unbranded products, so definitely, the products sold by brands are more reliable,”*

R12: *“I generally trust brands more[...] Indeed, branded products are more expensive, but I prefer to buy branded items. The quality, after-sales service, and procedures are guaranteed; otherwise, buying rubbish products is very upsetting,”*



Picture 35. The example of fans distribution of corporate IP

In summary, IP is an essential step after determining the target audience, and the main goal during IP is to establish the uniqueness of the IP. A unique and robust IP can make a brand stand out in a competitive market, allowing consumers to immediately recognise the brand, thereby increasing brand visibility and influence. Additionally, it can help brands establish deep emotional connections with the target audience, thereby increasing their loyalty. When people feel deeply connected with a brand, they are more likely to become long-term customers. Thirdly, a unique IP can make the product or service more valuable. People usually pay more for brands or products that align with their identity or values. Lastly, a unique IP can help brands resist encroachment by competitors. If IP is unique and challenging to replicate, it is harder for competitors to threaten their market position.

5.4.2 Formation Elements

After determining the strategic elements of the brand, the formation strategy needs to be considered. De Plessis (2015) interprets formation strategy as how to produce and create content. Ho, Pang, and Choy (2020) analyse the types of content companies might produce from a macro perspective. By contrast, this research project proposes

micro-level criteria for various elements in the content production process. The formation strategy involves identifying which factors in content design can most effectively attract and retain the target audience's attention, thereby achieving the brand's marketing goals. Combining data from the observation and interview phases of the project, the research proposes two themes which are explored (Overall content strategies and content factor strategies).

5.4.2.1 Overall Content Strategies

The overall content strategy has three sub-themes: the race mechanism, re-creation, and the golden three seconds. These are macro-level content strategies summarised by expert interviewees from their past experiences. The race mechanism emphasises testing potential customers' preferences through different content styles. Re-creation represents a method to create high-quality video content quickly. The golden three seconds emphasises that the first three seconds are the most crucial part of the video.

Race mechanism

Firstly, the race mechanism is a strategy interviewees propose to ensure content quality. It can be understood as a competitive evaluation, often used to compare and choose among multiple contents. In this mechanism, multiple pieces of content are placed on an equal footing and compete to determine the final 'winner.' The content's performance data are evaluated, and the overall content strategy of the account is decided based on these data outcomes. Interviewee JI detailed the practical application of the race mechanism.

JI: *"For example, if I post five videos today, after two or three hours, I will see which two to three videos have better data (views, likes, comments, shares). If they exceed 500 or 1000 views, it indicates good performance, and then at least 100 CNY (£11) of Dou+ (a paid promotion scheme on Douyin to help the content gain more exposure) is spent on these two to three videos to 'heat them' (This usually refers to helping the video gain more views). The next day, I will see which videos I bought Dou+ for have the best view counts and continue to invest Dou+ in the best-performing video. By the third day, there might be only one video left, and then I will give the last video a Dou+ to boost its performance as much as possible. Finally, a viral video is obtained. This is usually a three or four-day cycle. On the fifth day, you prepare five new videos to repeat the cycle. This ensures that there is a viral video over some time. Through long-term experience, you will find out what kind of videos your followers and customers prefer, making it easier to design your content. [...] But one thing to*

note: those videos that do not perform well should not be deleted; you should hide them, making them only visible to yourself. Deleting videos can affect the weight of your account.”

From the experience of the practitioner, JI believes that when a video is deleted from an account, it affects the AI's assessment of the content quality of the entire account. Interestingly, this content strategy is not only proposed by one person. Another interviewee also mentions a content strategy similar to the race mechanism.

HR: “*We have a 5-3-2 method to test the strength of content promotion. We post five videos to see which ones perform best, then buy Dou+ for these videos, and then observe the final data performance of the videos. We select the video with the best performance and then create three similar videos based on this one, repeating the previous operation and purchasing Dou+ for the well-performing content. Finally, we post two similar videos to see which performs best and determine which style suits this account's followers and potential users. We continue to create videos in this style for a period until we see that the data performance has reached a bottleneck, which will inevitably happen because audiences' tastes are always changing. Then, we repeat this 5-3-2 pattern to determine a new round of content style.*”

The race mechanism is a commonly used content strategy in practice by practitioners. From the research's perspective, this strategy allows brands to find their precise position in the content community, testing which type of content aligns more with the community agenda through different content forms. Indeed, this strategy requires strong content creation capabilities, which could be a significant challenge for brands.

Re-creation

Secondly, Re-creation is a technique used to make videos popular. It refers to activity to modify or even imitate the already popular videos to complete your own video. This type of video is a common on Douyin, because one of the first popular video types in Douyin was lip-synching and imitation shows. This content style has been continued to this day. Some scholars previously have considered this to be a form of plagiarism and illustrative of a lack of innovation (eg: Clare Haye et al. 2020; Aliaksandra Shutsko 2020). However, LI notes that re-creation is not what others created, the creators designed a same one. The platform does not allow any creator copies others' videos totally. She considers re-creation can be understand that creators

are writing the same composition with an assigned topic, the video of everyone may have the same point, but not exactly the same.

Many interviewees mention that they prioritise re-creation due to the need to maintain a consistent posting frequency and for inspiration in content creation. Interviewees note that ensuring continuous updates with high-quality content is challenging but necessary, so they choose re-creation as a content strategy to maintain their posting frequency. Other interviewees mention that content which has already gone viral can provide them with more creative inspiration. They believe re-creating already viral content can ensure user attention, as such content has already tested recent user preferences, allowing them to draw inspiration from it directly.

GU: “ [...]you know that you have to keep your content posted continuously in your page to get more attention. Some accounts even post a few videos a day. How can they have so many ideas. There are really not many good creators [with] immeasurable ideas, so most people still follow the content of these good creators for the content adaptation, which is a relatively quick and simple way to get attention on Douyin.”

GA: “[...]lots of people don't have good continuous creative skills, so they also have to have at least one video coming out every day, which requires them to imitate videos which have millions of thumbs up. Because popular videos must have the reason why they are popular, that everyone to imitate, so we are more willing to choose to stand on the shoulders of giants to create it.”

JJ: “ for example, I want to sell T-shirt today, I will login the feigua to find related video, confirm which video to get more attention, I will imitate the video, this is the fastest way to go viral, because these videos have helped you to test what people like recent days, you just need to fix a little[...]”

JA: “[...]For example, when a dance becomes popular on Douyin, then you will see fat people dancing, thin people dancing, funny, beautiful, and so on, and you will see a dance being turned into thousands of forms, do you think this is imitation, [...]I think yes, but do you consider they have their own creation, I think there are also. You need to imagine Douyin as an amusement park, everyone is playing in it. ALL things are actually similar, so you imitate other people's popular content, will also attract a lot of people to watch.”

It can be seen that most respondents believe that re-creation is a simple and effective way to gain attention and content design. However, they think that re-creation does not mean that creators completely copy other people's content, their idea is to screen

popular videos, based on videos' types, and then, to create their own videos. Re-created content based on ideas in popular videos can fully leverage the original video's popularity and audience base, making it easier to attract viewers' attention. This approach also helps to initiate new discussions and interactions, making these secondary creations more likely to be recommended to a broader audience. Additionally, for some creators, secondary creation inspires and directs their work. They can add their viewpoints and creativity to existing content rather than starting from scratch, thus reducing the difficulty of content creation.

The golden three seconds

Thirdly, most of the interviewees noted that the beginning of a video is important for the video to be popular.

GA: *“You can see that in the very beginning of those makeup videos, there must be the most beautiful page, even if it lasts only a second,[...]”*

The research argues that only if the beginning attracts people can it stimulate users' desire to watch. Brands have to think of ways to entice users to stay in the first few seconds of the video. The interviewees all suggested a name that Douyin practitioners have learned through experience: “The Golden Three Seconds”. The golden three seconds means that the first three seconds of the video must be used in a way to retain the user.

LU: *“The first three seconds are especially important, it determines whether your content can capture the user.”*

After that, there is “the sliver 10 seconds”. The sliver ten seconds means that when the video reaches about the thirteenth second, there must be a way to stimulate the user to continue watching. After that, if the video lasts a minute, then every 10 to 20 seconds the user has to be stimulated to continue watching in one way or another. The AI will then evaluate the content as quality content and the content will be seen by more people as well as go viral. So the beginning three seconds are very important.

To summarise, evidence generated in this research suggests that the beginning of a

video is about “luring” the users to continue watching through stimulation of a variety of emotions, curiosities, desires and needs. The ultimate goal of these practices is to get users to completely watch the video and increase the AI weighting of the content, which in turn makes the video popular and increases followers and enhances customer engagement and interaction.

5.4.2.2 Content Factor Strategies

Content factor strategy refers to specific content elements that brands need to consider during content creation, including duration, scene, caption, and background music (BGM). The results indicate that duration should be manageable within the Douyin community. The scene choice should match or contrast the product or brand’s attributes. Captions should vary according to the content, with each caption style having a different impact on consumers. Finally, the choice of music directly influences the performance of the content.

Duration

Firstly, the research collected 374 videos, of which 282 had a duration of 5 to 15 seconds (75.4%) (see Table 7). From this trend, we can see that most of the content is quite short, mainly because short video platforms just need short videos. According to Douyin’s recommendation mechanism, completion rate is an important indicator for dissemination of content. This condition can be interpreted that getting users to watch the video ensures that it gets a higher completion rate, and AI determines the content has high quality. Because AI recognises that the video has been watched by users completely, it determines that the video is liked by this group of audience and it probably will be liked by other users as well. The algorithm then continues to spread the content to more users, and finally increases the salience of the video. So, generally, the optimal length of a video is no longer than 15s. However, this condition does not mean the video must be within 15 seconds. The research found that although the video duration is longer than 15 seconds, the videos feature a speedy slide transitions, and in some oral content, influencers speak quickly. Moreover, these videos are usually exciting and capable of immersing the audience. The observations are consistent with the responses of the interviewees.

JJ: “[...]the duration of our videos is designed. You cannot go over one minute; 30 seconds is optimal. If it is a simple video without much narration or introduction, the shorter, the better[...] Content condensed to a few seconds keeps the user's attention, leading to better data performance,”

GA: “Duration involves a completion rate (one of the index AI records to evaluate the quality of the video). If the time is too long and the content is not coherent or of high quality, users may swipe away in a few seconds, leading to a low completion rate and poor data, which means AI will stop promoting your content,”

JJ: “The completion rate also affects your video weight (weight means how much traffic AI can distribute to the video). For example, with beauty, clothing, or other display-type videos, about ten seconds is enough[...] with a high completion rate. [...]When I start a new account, the new content is at most 30 seconds. As a director, I also enjoy making such content because it is simple [laughing],”

HR: “Let me tell you why completion rate is important on Douyin. First, you need to understand that AI cannot detect how long you look at articles or images, but video has a definite length, making this index easy to measure. If users like your video, they will watch it longer or repeatedly. Thus, AI determines the video's quality and spreads it to more users. This is how Douyin continually outputs quality content to increase user stickiness,”

While most videos observed by the research are relatively short, duration affects the completion rate, an index that can help content go viral. However, if a brand has a substantial fan base, it is feasible to consider slightly increasing the duration to convey more information. A shorter duration responds well to the platform, thus gaining more traffic.

LL: “But this year, I have found that longer videos also get watched, maybe because I have a certain fan base now,”

Nevertheless, in the clothing community, since the amount of information in videos can be limited, creators still need to minimize duration to increase the efficiency of information dissemination. Short videos allow creators to efficiently condense and convey essential information, especially in clothing videos where the primary purpose is to showcase styles and combinations, and 5-15 seconds is sufficient to display this information.

The Scene of a Video

Evidence from the research suggests that a lot of creators choose a scene directly related to the product. The scene here not only refers to the scene in space, but also represents the scene in time. The most common form of content for spatial scenes is street photography. Models are captured for videos in different scenes, and the video shooting location will be selected according to the attributes of the clothing itself. For an example, if a video shows the products of daily work clothes, the office is a shooting scene; another video shows student clothes, and the school is the shooting scene. Users can easily be brought into this scene by capturing video in the same scene as the product to attract users in this scene to watch the content, and then evaluate the product value in combination with their own scene (Wang, Liang, & Wang, 2020). The scene in time can be understood as some specific time nodes, such as: Christmas Day, New Year, Spring Festival, winter outfits. The main example of scenes in time is: a video creates a Christmas atmosphere, and some Christmas elements are added to the shooting, Christmas tree, Santa Claus. This kinds of videos allow users to associate products in fixed scenarios, which can be converted into purchasing decisions. This condition is similar to scenario-based marketing. Scenario-based marketing assumes users' consumption behaviours are all carried out in specific scenarios, and users also recognise products through those scenarios, and have different needs in different scenarios. They connect product selling points with users' needs, effectively touch customers' pain points (Naredla, et al., 2018), in order to arouse consumer identity, then stimulate users' purchase desire, establish a good interactive relationship, and improve consumer's stickiness and loyalty.

Similarly, some interviewees also mention the scene's importance in content strategy, agreeing that unity between scene, product, and content is necessary. Notably, some interviewees believe a mismatch between the scene and product can be more captivating and leave a more profound impression on customers.

J1: "Either you create a novel background, or you have a scene that matches your content, like an immersive one. [...]A bizarre scene is unexpected for the user, like wearing a fancy dress in a pigsty, which can go viral. The key is to be unexpected,"

YC: *“It is about building a scene based on your account's positioning style, content, and persona. It is there to support your account content, and you must ensure they are in harmony,”*

JJ: *“Choose scenes according to the brand's tone. The most important thing is still the brand tone. For instance, when I endorsed La Mer, a high-end brand, I chose a luxurious photography studio to emphasise the brand's expensive image and status,”*

Additionally, some interviewees mentioned a ‘special’ kind of scene, known as the ‘mental scene’ of the user, which is not presented visually but created in the user’s mind through descriptive language.

JJ: *“Yes, you need to give them a scene to encourage a purchase, right? Under what circumstances would I buy this item? If my boyfriend is giving me gifts, or if it is my first sleepover with my boyfriend or if I need some private essentials for a date, I could buy these items. Give them a scene, and they might be more inclined to buy,”*

HR: *“Scenes are crucial. Sometimes, you may not create a scene based on content, so you bring out the scene in the narration. For instance, imagine you and your best friend shopping, wearing this outfit and dazzling everyone. This creates a mental scene, which is very right because you generate a need by creating a scene. So any form of scene is essential,”*

LL: *“This triggers many associations in the user. However, combining language and scene is often necessary. Frankly, it would help if you assumed users do not think for themselves; you must tell them you can wear this outfit for Valentine's Day or when shopping with your best friend. Just having a scene is not enough. It would help if you still used language to create a scene in the user's mind,”*

Title of a Video

The research, referencing Martin Joss (1976), categorises captions into five types: Freezing (31), Formal (109), Consultative (62), Casual (65), and Intimate (91) (see Table 7). Some interviewees considered captions a crucial means to promote customer engagement. In combination with content, captions stimulate customer interaction needs in various forms of content, enhancing video performance. Moreover, to better achieve this goal, creators also need to determine their title style and content creation based on audience positioning in the positioning strategy.

LL: *“Sometimes, a good caption attracts more user interaction than a good video. It is usually either a question, prompting users to respond, or an exclamation, like ‘This piece of clothing is absolutely amazing’ or it could be emotional or philosophical. [...] But all these types can improve interaction. [...] I find questions and emotional content effective as they promote comments,”*

HR: *“The role of captions is to enhance interaction, pose some questions, and provide viewers with emotional value. The main purpose of enhancing interaction is to make AI consider your content high-quality and worthy of being seen by more people. Then your content has the chance to reach more potential customers, and at the same time, it also enhances your user stickiness with your fans,”*

LU: *“A good title achieves 50 percent of success.”*

CH: *“It’s human nature to fall for click-bait every time, even though everyone hates it. [laughing]”*

The research summarises several forms of captions that tend to attract people through interviews and observation data. Firstly, regarding videos with “Frozen style” (Picture 36), it is observed that most users do not express any attitude towards these titles. Additionally, the primary function of frozen style is to provide a textual description of the video content without much other utility. Some interviewees, although unaware of the Freezing style as a form of title, did discuss titles of this nature. They referred to this style as descriptive titles, which typically describe the video content and use the title to highlight the video’s key points to guide user attention. However, this caption style was rarely mentioned in the interviews conducted in this research, and even when it is, it is not particularly favoured.

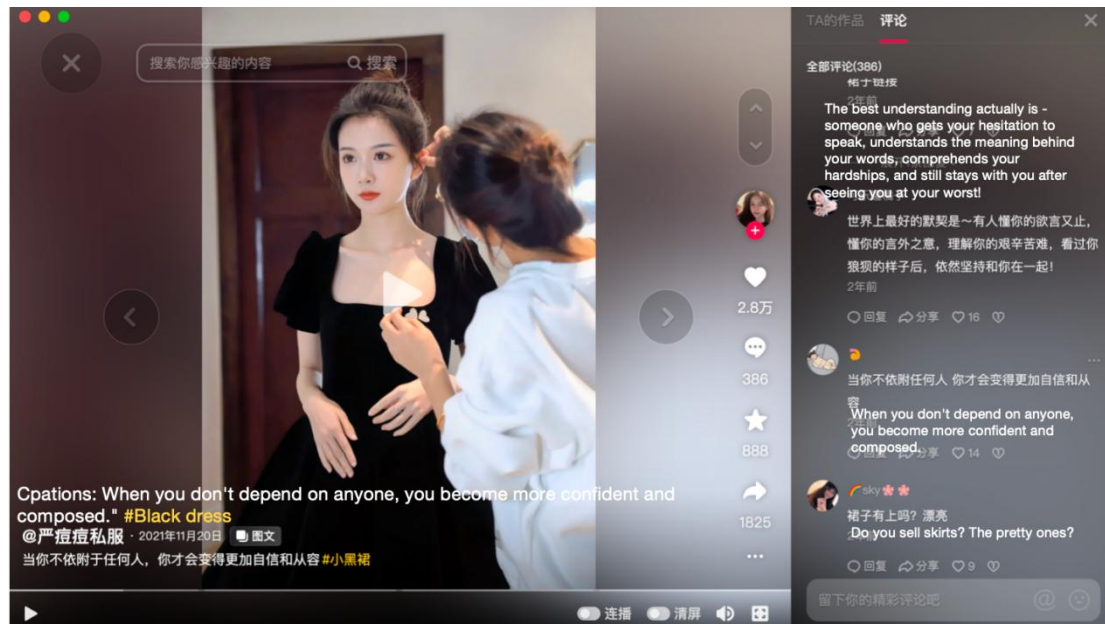
GA: *“The simplest titles are descriptive titles, like writing an explanatory text, explaining what the video is about, and indicating to the audience the focus of my video. Such titles are generally straightforward and dull[...] I don’t think they are instrumental”*



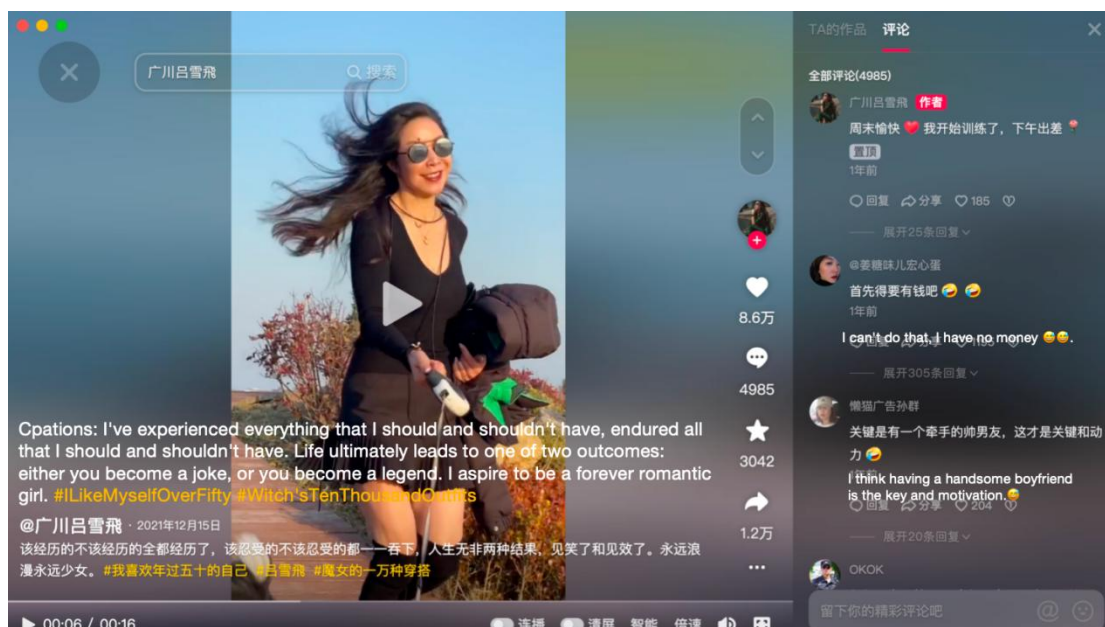
Picture 36. The example of frozen style caption

Secondly, formal style captions, the most frequently appearing title style in the community (see Table 7), primarily manifest as emotional output. Martin Joss (1976) explains formal style as an important or serious style of language, more often found in speeches or situations with a large audience. Pohan and Pohan (2021), in a study analysing linguistic styles in Instagram, express formal style in social media also as an emotional appeal from the creator to the user to provide a deep emotion or perception to the user in more formal or bookish language to provide a deep emotion or perception to the user. The research's observation of community video captions finds emotional output a key characteristic. The form in emotional production is often quite extreme, attracting customers to resonate with the creator or provoking opposing emotions, stimulating customers to engage (agreeing or disputing in the comment section). Establishing emotional resonance helps creators attract audiences with similar values and emotional needs (Picture 37). On the other hand, showing opposing emotions can stimulate customers to discuss in the comment section (Picture 38), enhancing customer engagement and increasing content weight based on algorithms

to make videos go viral. In picture 37, the creator presents a caption that resonates with consumers, and users in the comment section respond emotionally. Still, the caption in picture 38 provokes consumers to dispute the creator viewpoint.



Picture 37. An example of customers' interaction with a formal caption



Picture 38. The example of customers disputed the caption

Interviewees' responses align with the research's observations.

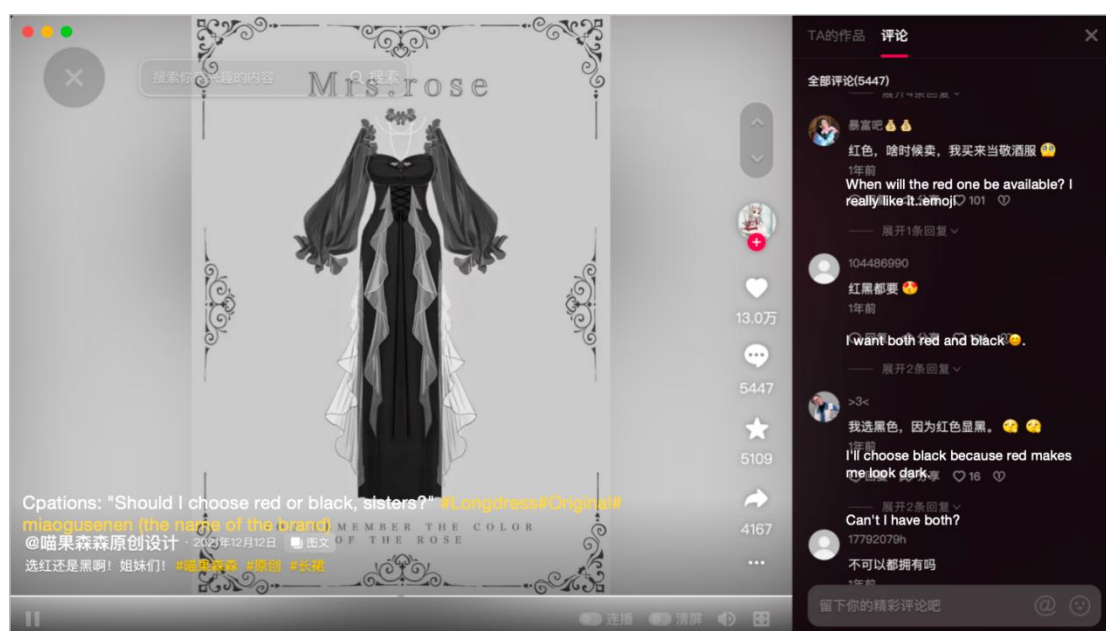
GA: *"This writing is very empathetic. Right? People who have just fallen out of love may also give you a like when they see that your title is quite well written. It may not be that someone gives you a like because your clothes is good, it may be that your title is good, it's all possible."*

JA: *"A great title will make you want to tease, or make you resonate, and you'll just go to the comments section to get a little presence. Often most of the teases are friendly and don't give you a lot of negative effects unless you are really saying a lot of obnoxious things."*

J1: *"Sometimes, when you see a title, you either want to criticize it or feel strongly resonance with it[...] what would you do? Normally, people will, for instance, go to the comment section to argue a bit or find a sense of presence if it resonates with you[...] It's a secondary attraction process that can also relatively increase the completion rate, right?"*

J2: *"A fashion or beauty blogger, especially those whose main audience is women, might put a sentence underneath that resembles something a half-emotional blogger would post, something that resonates with you. It's sometimes completely unrelated, but it can hit that spot for you, and you'll stop and stay."*

The third technique is the consultative style, also frequently mentioned by interviewees. This style of caption mainly prompts customer comments through questions. Compared to emotional output, this style is more direct. Consumers can respond to the caption in the comment section (Picture 39).



Picture 39. The example of consultative style caption and customers interaction

Interviewees believe this style of caption paired with trending topics can effectively engage customers.

LI: *“The caption has few restrictions, usually a sentence plus a topic. That sentence, we suggest, should be a current Douyin trend or include some interactive techniques like questions. Then add a trending topic, basically following this template.”*

LE: *“You can ask a question in the title and someone will come and interact with you afterwards, which increases the weight of your content.”*

YC: *“Titles are designed to attract everyone, usually in a questioning style. This also draws people to stay and comment,”*

The fourth technique is the casual style. Evidence from the research suggests that casual style captions often have a suggestive nature, for example: *‘Look at this outfit, just saying, losing 10 pounds isn't a dream, get it now!!’* The language seems casual but is strategically designed. JI mentioned a concept called Y-style captions, in contrast to X-style captions. This concept was posted about by Professor Li on his blog in 2014 who argues that X-styles are mainly created by linguists, rhetoricians, and poets, focusing on creativity, conception, rhetoric, and lavishly expressing ideas. Y-style texts are primarily created by psychologists, marketing experts, and strategists to understand user feelings, find trigger scenes, and describe images in the user's mind. Practitioners usually use a casual way to trigger users' mental photos and make suggestions to drive user interest and possibly lead them to purchase intent.

JI: *“But you must be careful with the caption... it must be written in Y-style[...] X-style and Y-style captions are important to understand. It directly affects the process of creating the caption, whether the embedded text in video content or the caption in the bottom left corner[...] Understand what users like, grab their needs in a seemingly casual way, lower their guard, which is an important condition for establishing a connection with them,”*

LE: *“I will use some titles to suggest the user, for example: Get your bestie to take a picture with you. Titles like this will get users to @ their friends to come see your video. The tone is light and stimulates them to share, then they will discuss with friends or besties in the comment section, killing two birds with one stone,”*

The final technique is the intimate style. This style uses a personal tone to bring users into a familiar scene, where the creator plays a person close to the audience. This style

usually establishes strong relationships, for example: *‘Such a beautiful outfit. I wouldn’t tell you about it if you were not my sister.’* Interviewees noted that captions are the primary means to promote user interaction, and captions can also strengthen relationships, providing exceptional social value to users. Based on interview evidence, this style is generally used to maintain fans and enhance customer stickiness. However, even without a fan base, trying this style is still possible and relates to the creator’s IP.

GA: *“When I post content, I differentiate. [...] some content is to attract new followers, some to maintain old fans. The content is completely different. For old fans, I might write, ‘Baby, this is an exclusive gift pack just for you. I love you. For new fans, I might write, ‘Join my fan club, become my baby.’ The essence is to attract customers, but the content must differ. Old fans need your emotional value, but new fans want tangible benefits and incentives,”*

JJ: *“Intimate content requires a certain fan base, or else others will think you are crazy, calling everyone baby, dear. Of course, this also relates to your IP. If you are a people-pleasing personality influencer, then go for it. Maybe initially, some will think you’re abnormal, but that is your IP, and there will always be people looking for a presence in your space,”*

In summary, evidence suggests that the title, originally assumed by the researcher as an auxiliary feature used to describe the video content, is in fact a significant factor to attract users and reach a point of interaction with them.

Background music (BGM)

Discussions about BGM effects were significant points in the data collection process. ‘Yin’ of Douyin means ‘music’ in Chinese and is a crucial element in Douyin. The platform has acquired many music rights for users to incorporate into their videos freely. However, creators must follow specific unwritten rules when selecting music. Following these rules increases the likelihood of their videos going viral, thus serving their purpose of promoting brands/products. The main functions of background music include increasing video exposure, establishing a uniform mood and atmosphere, and creating signature recognition. The research discusses evidence related to the specific roles and selection methods of BGM below.

Firstly, interviewees acknowledged the role of BGM in video content, emphasising

the importance of choosing music via a ‘music meme trend’ on Douyin. Similar to ‘Newsjacking’, which refers to creating content related to a trending topic or event to attract public attention and media coverage, music meme trend involves using popular or trending musical elements on the platform, like popular songs or music styles related to trending events or topics, to draw public attention or promote a product or brand. Leveraging the music meme trend can increase video exposure and expand the audience base.

JJ: *“Music is quite important. We often use trending music. You can find recent popular songs on Douyin’s music charts and use them[...] Sometimes, users stay on your video because they hear familiar music, increasing your video’s completion rate. They might even comment because of the specific music used. All this helps your video get pushed by AI to the trending list,”*

GA: *“You want to ride the wave of this popular music, like a recently viral song on Douyin, right? This song might attract more people to stay on your video[...] Your content is average, but if the music is good, people will watch your video to the end.”*

GU: *“You must consider the choice of music, like checking hot charts, hit songs, like the recent ‘Learn to Meow’ song[...] If a song is trending, you must choose it, no matter what, to catch onto the trend,”*

YY: *“Look at the music soaring chart, see what's there. Also, search for accounts in the same industry and category; what music are they using? We take inspiration from them,”*

JJ: *“Why find popular music? It's a principle of repetition. You hear a song when scrolling through short videos, creating a brief memory. So next time I make a video with that song, you might stop to watch,”*

While most interviewees regard the music meme trend as crucial, some believe that music selection should follow this trend and find music that suits their content and IP. Selecting music that aligns with one's content and IP can establish a harmonious mood and atmosphere, enhancing content coherence. Music itself is a powerful means of emotional expression. In videos, background music can serve as a solid emotional cue, guiding the audience to perceive and understand the emotions and messages the video conveys.

LI: *“I recommend considering popular music. Try to incorporate it as much as possible, as it's a practical approach. However, when I empower influencers or clients through teaching, I sometimes emphasise that popular music is just the icing on the cake. You can only rely on popular music for the success of your video views. Popular music is just one aspect; the main thing is whether your content matches the popular music rather than using it to leverage its popularity. The music must be in harmony with your content and its mood. You need to prioritise the integrity of the video, which means ensuring that the music and the content's atmosphere are unified. Many people ask why others gain massive traffic with the same popular music but don't. I want to counter by asking, do you think this popular music matches your content?”*

YY: *“If we create a personal IP, we might choose music based on the content and emotional tone. For example, in an initial podcast-style video, we would use classical or other atmospheric music to attract users,”*

YC: *“It's about using precise music to convey different emotions you want to express;... Music can become a medium for emotional expression and resonance,”*

BGM, as a form of non-verbal expression, can elicit an internal emotional response from the audience, making it a crucial tool in building emotion. Music touches our feelings and evokes resonance due to its dynamic attributes. Atmosphere is a perceived state, the overall feeling an individual gets from the content. In videos, creating an atmosphere typically depends on the interaction between visual and musical elements. We can develop a sense of time and space through music, immersing the audience in a particular atmosphere.

Beyond increasing video exposure and establishing a unified mood and atmosphere, the third primary function of music is as a signature identifier, enhancing audience perception of brands or influencers. The iconic recognition role of BGM in videos is a significant function. Iconic recognition is achieved through unique musical elements or themes, triggering audience memory and cognition of a specific brand, person, or story. This function is essential in contemporary information-saturated communicative environments, as it helps videos stand out among very many others, enabling viewers to recognise and remember their characteristics quickly. However, the key potential role of music often requires brands or influencers to have a fan base and social influence and to use specific music in their content consistently.

LU: *“For example, if I travel to Xinjiang and cover its culture and cuisine, I need to incorporate local characteristic music. This is also a consideration. If you go to Tibet, you naturally use Tibetan songs, and in Xinjiang, you use Xinjiang songs. The audience immediately knows where you are just by hearing the music,”*

HR: *“I’ll give you an example with the song ‘Sexy Lady’ (DJ music by Javi Mula). Who comes to your mind first? [...] It’s an instinctive reaction. When I mention this song, you think of Zhang Yixing (a Chinese male celebrity). This is how music works; it becomes iconic. In other words, this BGM becomes your slogan, like Nike’s ‘Just do it.’ [...] Of course, this is very difficult for ordinary people; you need a certain level of influence to achieve this. But if you think you can become popular, use the same music from your first video and see,”*

JJ: *“Sometimes we joke, ‘This is your exclusive BGM.’ It means that when you have your exclusive BGM, you’re popular. [laughing] [...] When you have an exclusive BGM, no matter who uses this music on the platform, there will always be users in the comments section tagging you, and your exposure will be very high. [...] Of course, this is very difficult; those who have exclusive BGMS are either celebrities or major influencers. Sometimes, even with a million followers, you may still need to get your BGM,”*

YC: *“You must realise everyone wants an exclusive BGM, but few have it. It would help if you had the entire network remember you for this specific point[...] only then can it be considered your BGM, which is very difficult. [...] Lao Chang has 8 million followers. Even if he doesn’t have an exclusive BGM, he doesn’t need one[...] An exclusive BGM is meant to signal the audience to remember you, but it’s not the only condition. Others can also work, like an exclusive slogan or an exaggerated signature move in every video. Lao Chang, for example, has his slogan,”*

YY: *“You’re also a Douyin user; have you noticed that some specific content has its specific music? Like disaster news and robbery news, they all use the same music. Similarly, some charity videos asking for donations use the same music. Different music carries different emotions, and different emotions represent different content tones. In other words, without language, when you hear this music, you know what these videos are about, what they are related to,”*

From a psychological perspective, music is compelling in enhancing memory. Studies have found that human memory of music far exceeds that of language and images (Wallace, 1995). Music’s melody, rhythm, and harmony can directly stimulate the sensory system, deeply imprinting information through various sensory channels in people’s memory (TITUS, 2021). Thus, a unique music or melody can serve as a video’s musical identifier, helping audiences quickly recognise and remember the video. Additionally, the iconic role of music lies in its emotional expressiveness.

Music is a powerful language of emotion, expressing complex and subtle feelings that cannot be conveyed through words. When audiences hear music associated with a particular brand or person, they remember the music and the emotions linked to it. The emotional memory makes music a potent tool for memory and cognition, enabling audiences to identify quickly and recognise the brand or person associated with the music.

Moreover, the iconic role of music is also reflected in its unique cultural attributes. Music is a carrier of culture, conveying specific cultural atmospheres and values. Hence, choosing music closely aligned with a brand's culture, a character's personality, or a story's plot helps audiences better understand and accept the content of the video, thereby enhancing their memory and identification with it.

Background music's multifaceted impact and profound significance in audiovisual media have become a focus of academic research in recent years (eg. Mou, 2021; Salasbila & Ramdhan, 2022). In video content, background music can enhance exposure, create a specific emotional atmosphere, and provide iconic recognition. The primary function of background music is to increase the video's exposure. In the digital, highly competitive media environment, where a multitude of different kinds of content compete to capture people's attention, background music has the potential to significantly enhance the appeal of video content. It directs the audience's attention, increasing the video's exposure and viewership. Music's melody, rhythm, and harmony resonate with the audience, enhancing their audiovisual experience and making them more likely to be attracted to the content and willing to share and promote it, thereby significantly increasing the video's exposure.

Secondly, background music plays a crucial role in establishing emotion and atmosphere (Faat et al. 2019). People's responses to music are often emotional, with different music styles, melodies, rhythms, and tones triggering various emotional reactions like happiness, sadness, tension, or calmness (Hunter & Schellenberg, 2010). By selecting music that matches the video content, creators can create a vibrant atmosphere suitable for the video's theme, guiding the audience's emotional response and allowing them to immerse more deeply in the content. To some extent,

background music acts like an invisible director, leading the audience to understand better and feel the messages and emotions conveyed by the video (Holt, 2011).

Finally, background music also plays a role in recognition in videos. Among numerous similar video content, a unique piece of music closely related to the video content can leave a deep impression in the audience's minds, becoming a signature of the video. This allows audiences to recognise and remember the video in a short time. The 'iconic recognition function' of music is significant for establishing a brand image and enhancing brand awareness.

In summary, the role of background music in videos is more than merely decorative. It can enhance exposure, create emotional atmospheres, and provide iconic recognition become an essential part of video communication. Therefore, a deep understanding and proper utilisation of music in video communication can enhance the effectiveness of video content dissemination.

In conclusion, the content strategies explored in this study are not only about the overall brand content creation strategy but also include specific elements that brands need to consider during the content creation. These elements form the foundation of complete video content, and the interaction and integration of each component are crucial to achieving promotional goals. Positioning strategies are used to position a brand to attract potential consumers and define the brand's role in the platform community. Then, content strategies continuously improve content quality in the micro-environment, thus preparing the ground for promotional objectives.

5.4.3 Intrinsic elements

De Plessis (2015) argues that when discussing intrinsic strategies, the content should seamlessly integrate into consumers' lives without drawing too much attention to itself. Brand content should become a part of consumers' daily lives within the community, and customers should decide to engage in the conversation based on its relevance to their lives and interests. This condition distinguishes social media information from traditional intrusive push messaging. De Plessis (2017) conceptually

confirms the intrinsic content strategy, and this research project explores intrinsic elements in more detail. It considers how brand content within the community should become a part of consumers' lives without being intrusive. Specifically, the researcher examines several critical intrinsic factors that stimulate consumers' perceptions and interactions with the brand based on content. The research combines online observation and interview data to elaborate on three themes: emotional value, continuity, and timeliness.

5.4.3.1 Emotional Value

Evidence suggests that content creation in the Douyin fashion community effectively leverages emotional value to set the user agenda, attracting and maintaining consumer attention. Emotional value refers to how content touches consumers' emotions, leading to deep engagement and a strong connection.

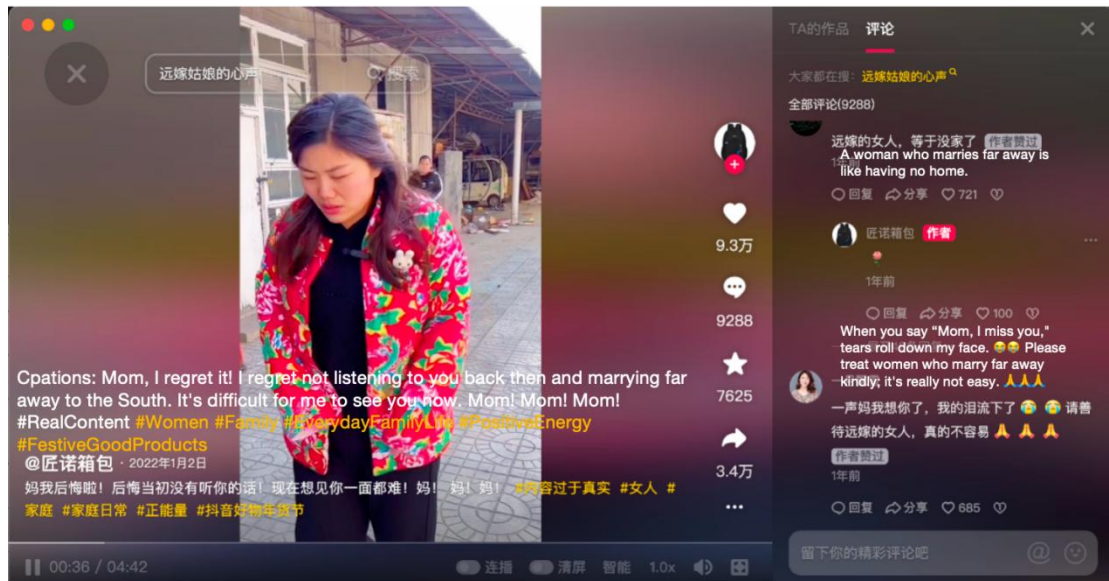
Eliciting resonance is also an effective strategy. Creators analyse the everyday emotional situations of their target consumers or address emotional ambiguities to generate empathy among consumers. This emotional resonance can help consumers better understand and accept the brand/creator's value, increasing their loyalty and engagement. The research observed that some content presents emotional information through storytelling as a content type. The comment section often reveals that many consumers with similar experiences resonate with the content (Picture 40).

Similarly, interviewee evidence suggests that emotional resonance is an effective means to stimulate consumers to connect with creators proactively, and this connection is durable.

CH: *“Do not focus on rational things[...] consumption itself is emotional[...] this platform or short video platform is a very, very emotional place. If you capture your users' emotional needs and provide emotional value, they will follow you[...] the audience's consumption of content is emotional. Even in our topic selection, we felt that data related to emotionally charged topics performed better[...] It is an experience where I can initially provide you with an emotional or emotional experience[...] Only when you satisfy their emotional values on a psychological level will they establish a certain connection with you, and it is through this connection that you become more popular.”*

JJ: “I post some daily emotional issues with my boyfriend, and they will discuss with me[...] express some of their inner feelings,”

GA: “Emotional reach[...] When you create video content, including in live broadcasts, if you want users to believe in you or if you want better interaction with users, it all comes down to your ability to provide users with emotional value[...] it could be sadness, it could be humour, it could be happiness. But you must have this emotional value, from which you derive more tangible actions,”



Picture 40. the example of the emotional interaction in the community

Emotional value is a critical strategy for setting consumer agendas in the Douyin fashion community. Emotional value content allows customers to develop recognition and affinity for a brand unconsciously. This process is spontaneous for customers and, compared to traditional intrusive information, can attract their attention and stimulate their enthusiasm for participation through emotional resonance. This strategy is essential for establishing profound customer relationships, enhancing brand loyalty, and shaping a solid brand image.

5.4.3.2 Simplification

In the Douyin fashion community, creators frequently employ simplification strategies to set the community agenda and capture the audience's attention. Simplification refers to conveying complex information in an easily understandable and digestible way, thus increasing consumer engagement with the content.

Firstly, Table 7 shows that less than 15 seconds of content is the most common. Since there are limitations to what can be expressed or demonstrated within 15 seconds, creators need to condense their content. Since users typically browse content in a fast-paced environment, creators strive to deliver information concisely and rapidly.

CH: *“The simpler and faster, the better[...] because people lack patience, you see. Nowadays, not many have the patience to watch a video to the end,”*

GU: *“It is best to make your content as simple as possible,”*

JL: *“Most people want to understand the most in the shortest time[...] Regarding the psychology of users on short video platforms, they lack patience, you know? They engage in fragmented learning; they do not have the patience; you have to grab their attention in a few seconds.”*

Additionally, creators may use slogans, symbols, or images to replace lengthy explanations or employ understandable analogies and elements to explain complex concepts.

LL: *“Users essentially watch videos without thinking; they will not ponder. So, you need to tell and guide them the simplest way possible[...] For example, I will not tell them what material my clothes are made of[...] I will tell them the material is as comfortable as wearing pyjamas when going out. We will not use a professional and rational approach because they do not have brains [laughing][...] Just tell them most of the kind of words a three-year-old can understand. That is how you can attract them. If you make them think, they will immediately skip your video.”*

This approach ensures that consumers receive essential information quickly and avoid becoming confused or losing interest due to overly complex information. Some respondents referred to this crucial information as “pain points” or “itch points.” Pain points can be understood as problems or anxieties consumers face daily. Itch points mean that some items pique consumer interest and make them unable to resist “scratching.”

YC: *“I simply present the pain points and then provide a quick solution and prove that it works[...] It is like sticking a knife in them and then telling them how to treat it,”*

LI: *“When it comes to conversion, we tend to focus more on adding selling points in the video content, which are the pain points or itch points of fans... Pain points might be the most important, very straightforward.”*

Secondly, creators break down a series of content into individual themes or steps, making it easier for consumers to follow and understand. For example, they may create a series of short videos, with each video focusing solely on a specific clothing element or styling technique. This approach makes the content more digestible. Moreover, creators opt for a concise and visually appealing style to avoid visual clutter and distraction. They may choose eye-catching colours, clear fonts, and simple layouts to ensure users capture essential information and elements at first glance.

Jl: *“The content must be straightforward and concrete, without the need for too many descriptive adjectives. Straightforward[...].”*

LU: *“When writing a script, I particularly like to edit it after it is done. It is good when I have deleted everything when there is not a single sentence of nonsense or any redundant information,”*

In summary, simplification is a crucial strategy for creators in the Douyin fashion community to set the public agenda. Streamlining information, condensing content, and emphasising pain points can quickly capture consumers’ attention, enhance their understanding and engagement, and effectively convey their brand messages. This strategy holds significant value in standing out in the fast-paced world of social media and building a solid brand presence.

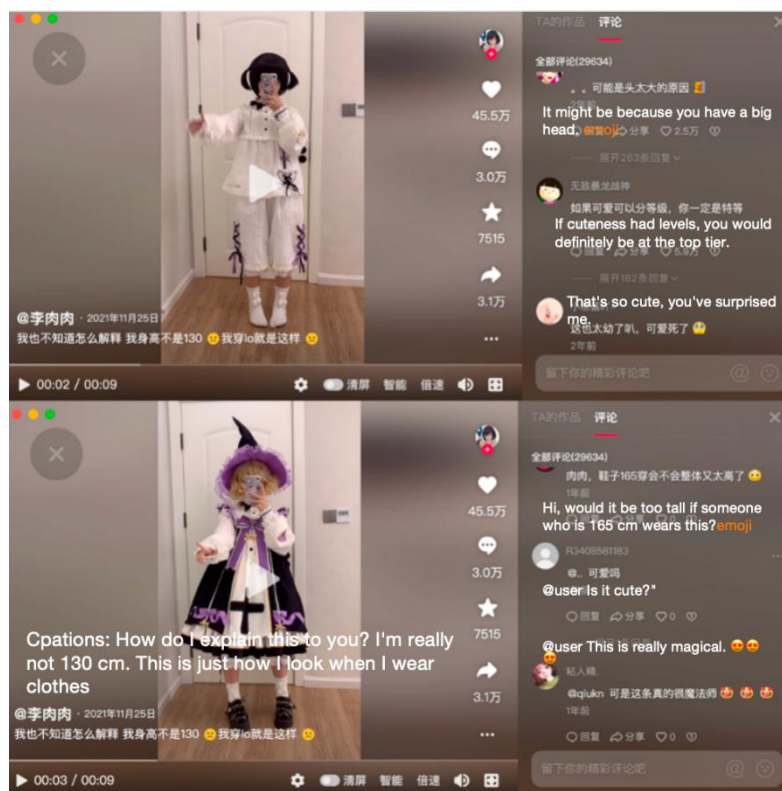
5.5.3.3 Cognitive Disruption

Cognitive disruption refers to breaking the audience’s expectations and conventional thinking through innovative means to provide them with surprising and novel experiences.

Firstly, “plot twist” is a common technique employed in cognitive disruption. Creators intentionally introduce unexpected content effects in their videos. LU believes that the core of quality content must contain a “plot twist”, ensuring that viewers cannot anticipate the creator’s thoughts. For instance, they might initially display an ordinary-looking outfit and then suddenly transform it. Such videos often

fall into the ‘outfit transaction’ (Picture 41) category, where the model’s visual impact through outfit changes engages the audience and prompts their engagement. Twists can effectively stimulate customer engagement with the content.

HR: “*Designing two or three twists will make users linger, and that is when your data looks good... This kind of twist is about showcasing unexpected content to the audience... Adding something different because there are too many bloggers and brands in one category, you must have something that makes people feel you are different from others,*”



Picture 41. The example of plot twist content in the community

Secondly, breaking cognitive boundaries is another essential method of cognitive disruption. Breaking cognitive boundaries is usually achieved through unconventional content to keep users engaged for extended periods, thereby improving the content’s performance metrics. Some interviewees consider practical cognitive breakthroughs as disruptions to people’s cognitive needs.

YY: “*You can understand user needs as laziness, greed, showing off, and fear. That is human nature. For example, for lazy users, let me give you an example: take clothing, ‘Wear this and instantly look 20kg slimmer.’ [...] There are examples of greedy users, too: ‘I usually would not tell everyone, but listen to me and earning 100,000 a month selling clothes is not a*

dream.’ Showing off is simpler, ‘Own this outfit, and outshine those luxury brands when you step out.’ For fear, ‘If you do not listen to me, even the most expensive clothes will look cheap on you.’”

Another interviewee mentioned breaking through class perceptions.

Jl: *“To put it nicely, it is breaking class barriers. For instance, when managing an account, we used a common phrase: ‘Why can I, with a monthly salary of 3000, afford luxury items worth tens of thousands?’ ‘Own a Porsche at 18.’ things like that.”*

Lastly, revealing secrets is another strategy for cognitive disruption. Creators arouse curiosity and excitement in users by unveiling industry secrets. This stimulation of curiosity can attract the audience to explore more content, increasing their engagement and satisfaction.

GA: *“[...]like, ‘Do not be fooled at beauty salons anymore.’ I would say my mom was scammed for thousands at a beauty salon, and today, at the risk of being complained about and blacklisted by peers, I must share this secret with everyone. This kind of content is very popular, you know?”*

Cognitive disruption is primarily about stimulating the audience’s curiosity with novel content. An interviewee (YY) noted that creators need to constantly update their ‘content repository’ and break users’ perceptions by designing novel ideas in different content. YC also noted that quirky content is a relatively advantageous and clever approach for new accounts. It can quickly help you build a user base. Breaking expectations and conventions stimulates the consumer’s thought process.

5.4.4 Communication elements

De Plessis (2015) emphasises the notion that brand content should be crafted in a way that not only attracts the target audience but also provides them with valuable information, aligning with the views of Rayne et al. (2008) and Horrigan (2009). Interviewees in this research project reiterate this point, suggesting that brand content should always add value to the target audience, either by bringing a smile to their faces or creating a sense of urgency. Given that “social media is filled with noise,” it

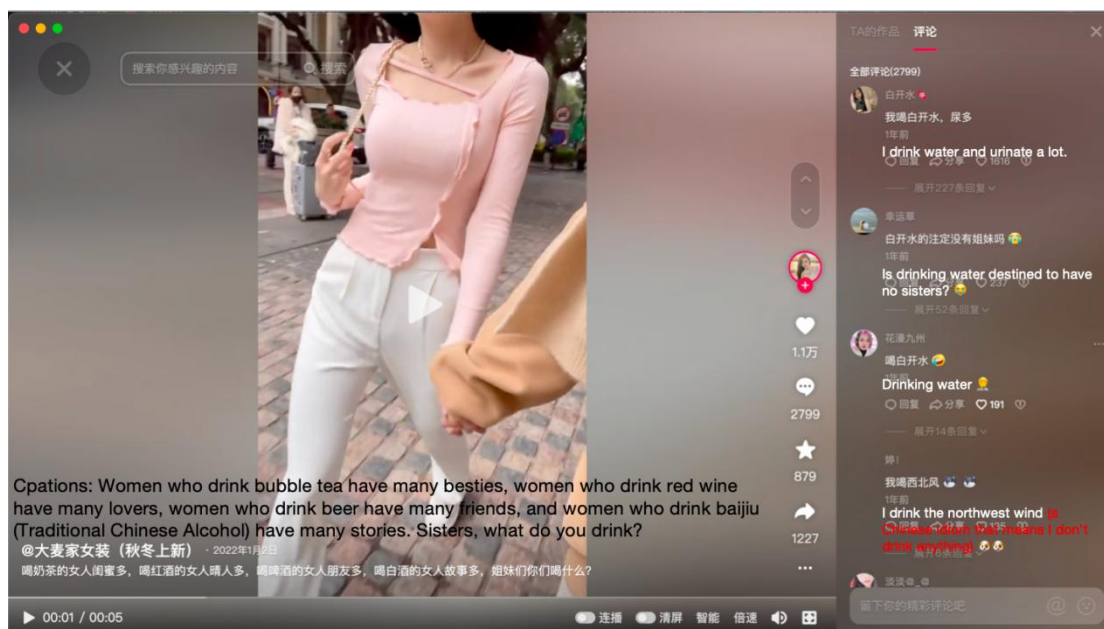
is crucial for brand content to be relevant to the target audience to drive customer engagement. The research explores the specific communication elements of content in greater detail based on evidence collected in the project. De Plessis acknowledges that while content being attractive and valuable to customers is a well-understood necessity for most brands, there is a need to comprehend how to make content more engaging and make its value more perceptible. Addressing the issue, the research summarises four themes which emerged from the evidence: social value, snark trap, simplification, and continuity.

5.4.4.1 Social value

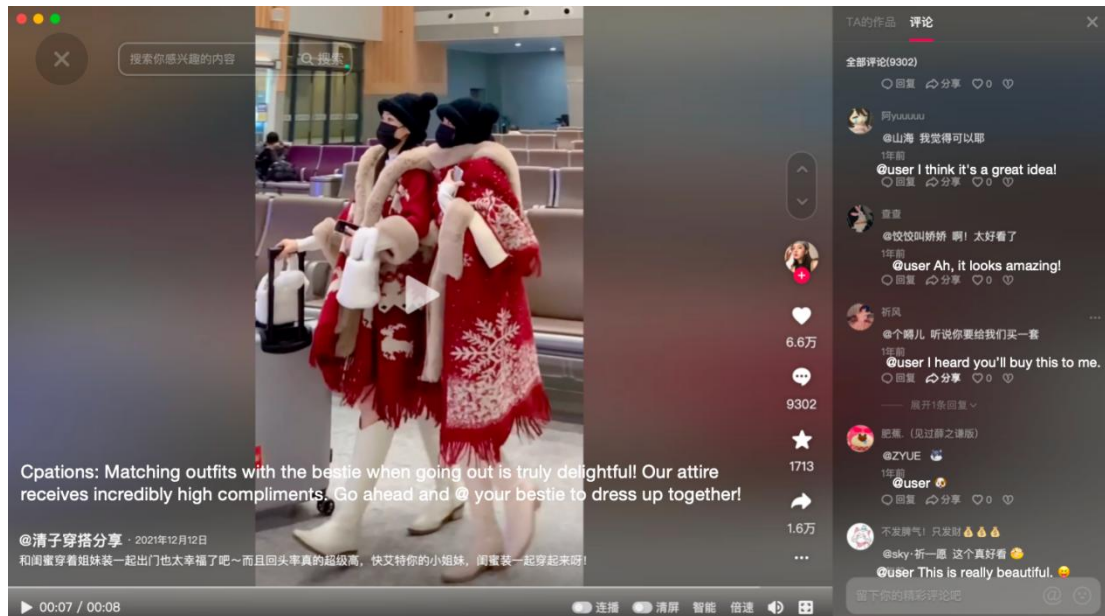
Social value has been recognised as a driver for adopting and using new media (Henning-Thurau et al., 2010). Libai (2010) identifies that customers seek connection value in social media based on peer-to-peer bonds. Customers need to communicate and interact with other online identities, perceive similarities, and sense the possibility of interaction (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Connection value is essential for brands to use in communication to attract customers. Studies have found that creators in the TikTok fashion community often apply techniques to provide social interaction value to customers (eg. Yang & Ha, 2021; Chowdhury et al., 2024). In the content, creators design question-style titles (Picture 42) or suggestive statements to encourage consumers to involve their social relations in the content discussion (Picture 43).

The research have discovered that creators' content focuses on fashion-related information and incorporates specific content features to encourage social interaction and establish an intimate relationship with consumers. From the two images provided, it is evident that many consumers either unilaterally interact with the creators by responding to questions posed in the content or encouraging their friends to participate in discussions within the content. As can be seen from the captions in both figures, creators in the community use questioning captions and call-to-action captions to drive customer interaction in the comments section. For example, in the representation of Picture. 42, the creator uses different drinks to classify people and ask customers which category they belong. This type of content design effectively stimulates consumers' contributions and creativity. The researcher needs to briefly

explain the meaning of the caption of Picture 42, in which different drinks have different meanings in the Chinese context. Milk tea (non-alcoholic) is the drink of choice for Chinese girls when they go shopping with their friends and when they are relaxing (Sotomayor & Zheng, 2023), and girls usually ‘drink milk tea together’ with their best friends. Red wine generally represents romance. Deeply influenced by French wine culture, girls who love red wine are considered romantic in Chinese culture (Maguire & Lim, 2015). Therefore, the picture mentions that women who drink red wine have many lovers. Thirdly, beer has the representational meaning of partying (Betancur et al., 2020). In China, friends usually drink beer at parties, so the picture describes women who drink beers have many friends. Finally, baijiu is a traditional Chinese distilled spirit known for its high degree (Chen, 2022). In China, most young people cannot accept baijiu because it is strong, so the people who drink baijiu, in general, are usually older and more experienced (Xia, 2023). Therefore, the picture says that women who drink baijiu have more stories.



Picture 42. The example of stimulating interaction in the community



Picture 43. The example of stimulating @ friends content in the community

Based on this content design, the interviewees argue that more than merely emphasising customer engagement is needed. They need to also establish a robust and adhesive relationship with consumers through other means. They emphasise the importance of creating an intimate persona. They consider in encouraging consumers to share their thoughts or demonstrating the creator's attention and appreciation for consumers by sharing their content and responding to comments. Additionally, some creators apply intimate language to bridge the gap between themselves and their audience. They also emphasise adopting various methods to surpass consumers' perceived expectations of their relationship with creators. Interviewees note that when individuals become Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), they are adored by their fans, like celebrities. In such cases, if KOLs attempt to develop an equal relationship with consumers, it surpasses consumers' anticipated value of social interaction, resulting in stronger loyalty to the creator. Furthermore, some interviewees believe that once creators have built a substantial fan base, they can establish strong relationships with consumers through online and offline events resembling celebrity meet-and-greet sessions. These approaches serve to strengthen consumers' sense of belonging and identification.

JJ: *“I set up some questions in my content and interact with them[...] then I also leave comments on their profiles when I have spare time[...] they will think of me as a blogger who is very willing to engage with fans,”*

LI: *“As a fan, when I leave comments for someone, and they reply, it is amazing. They would think, ‘Wow, the blogger replied to me[...]’”*

GU: *“It is the same as with celebrities; you have to notice some fans on Douyin, and their love and passion for you are no less than for Xiao Zhan or Wang Yibo (both of them are Chinese celebrities). When you engage with them, they will be surprised. If your actions exceed their expectations, like when I used to send birthday wishes to fans, they will develop a strong attachment to me,”*

LL: *“I remember the names of some fans and interact with them in the comments section of my content most of the time. It is very challenging[...] I have 100,000 fans; how can I possibly remember them all? So, you need to filter and select some valuable users[...] if these users have a very positive brand reputation and are also loyal customers, then I need to connect with these individuals and reduce the perceived distance,”*

LI: *“For high-quality fans, we organise various online and offline activities. For instance, if you have been following me online for a long time, we can invite some high-quality fans to our store for free or host an offline fan interaction event. Doing something like this can boost everyone’s enthusiasm. In reality, it is similar to managing a celebrity,”*

Evidence suggests that the value of social interaction in content design is crucial in enhancing the development of solid user relationships. The approach not only elevates the influence of creators but also meets consumers’ needs for social integration. Consumers engage with content to get to know the creator, but more is needed to establish a connection between consumers and creators. Therefore, bridging the gap by offering consumers social interaction value is essential. It lets consumers know that creators are not authoritarian figures but maintain a peer relationship with their fans, which benefits their brand promotion and image-building efforts. However, this kind of work is often highly targeted because fan bases are typically large, and it would be impractical for most brands to maintain such intensive interactions with every fan. Therefore, creators need to select loyal consumers to maintain strong relationships with, and as this behaviour is also observed by more consumers, it sets the idea in potential consumers’ minds that they, too, can interact with the creators they admire, ultimately enhancing consumer loyalty.

5.4.4.2 The ‘Snark Trap’

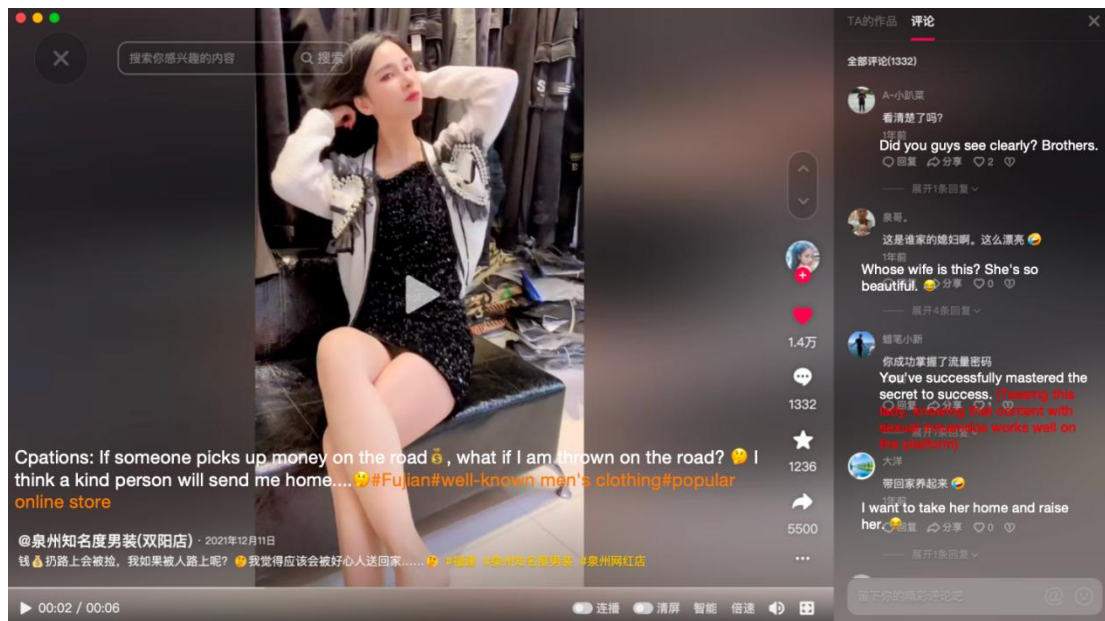
The research finds that creators in the Douyin fashion community often intentionally include elements in their content that others can “tease” to enhance their connection with consumers. Teasing typically refers to a playful behaviour, often aimed at provoking emotional release and entertainment, making the audience more engaged in the content. Creators intentionally incorporate elements worth teasing into their videos. A “snark trap” can be understood as a dialogue trap the creator intentionally leaves behind while creating the content. The creator intentionally shows something in the content that may be sarcastic or mocking to lure others into an argument or response.

Firstly, evidence suggests that many men’s clothing brands choose female models for their content. Picture 44 demonstrates how this men’s fashion brand designs its ‘snark trap.’ In the video, a woman is wearing a dress, with men’s trousers displayed in the background, appearing to be a standard video but with a hidden agenda. She intentionally exposes her underwear, a detail noticed by consumers that sparked discussions in the comments section. Besides that, the caption used by the creator is teasing: “If someone picks up money on the road, what if I am thrown on the road? I think a kind person will send me home, right?” Some consumers also responded to the caption in the comments section, as below.

Some interviewees also believe that sexual innuendo or teasing is a critical factor in quickly generating interaction in the community.

CH: “ *The first motivation is sexual. Women love to see handsome guys, and men love to see beautiful women. Of course, this is not in the common sense of sex, but it is a deeper human impulse: love but cannot have, so there is a term ‘edging.’ [...] Everyone is very interested in arguments and conflicts, just like the battle between the sexes. I do not want to say more about this; it is simply a bug. If you support women, whatever you sell, they will buy.* ”

LI: “ *As long as you have some good looks and shake your buttocks, it does not matter what the content is, and the video can get millions or tens of millions of views[...] But generally, these people have powerful psychological resilience. You have to face the teasing from men and pretend not to notice it[...] You will find that they have also gained a group of loyal female consumers.* ”



Picture 44. An example of sexual innuendo in the content

Interviewees mention ‘Cabian’, which does not have a direct English equivalent. The research considers that ‘tease’ is a similar term in meaning. According to Collins, tease is defined as “If you refer to someone as a tease, you mean that they pretend to offer someone what they want, especially sex, but then do not give it to them.” ‘Edging’ is a term that has emerged on Douyin in recent years, specifically used to describe creators who shoot content with sexual innuendos.

These elements are deliberately set to provoke teasing and discussion among male consumers. While these elements may lead consumers to associate creators with other aspects, as long as consumers engage with the creator’s content, AI judges the content to be high quality, making the content go viral.

LI: “the more comments a video has, the more AI will push it into a larger traffic pool. Do not think that only positive feedback will get you into the traffic pool. If many people criticise you in the short video, AI hopes that more people will criticise you, whether with positive or negative feedback... The result is that you become popular[...] The key to making people tease is to leave something behind”

Additionally, some interviewees mention creating a sense of conflict or discord in their image to stimulate audience interaction.

LL: *“Sometimes I deliberately play the fool or perform actions that do not make sense, which makes users want to interact with and tease us,”*

JJ: *“When the company defined my persona, I was defined as an angelic bitch (this word means girls who pretend to be pure and innocent but in fact are manipulative and calculating.). The main advantage of this persona is that it has points of conflict, so all the things I posted afterwards had people arguing, increasing interaction[...] There may be some negative impact, but it is a probability issue. What you need is to make more people see it. Believe me, if 10,000 people are teasing you, there will be 10,000 people supporting you. Even if 1,000 people support you, it does not matter if those 10,000 people tease you[...] Always remember, your goal is to use the power of AI to make more people see you.”*

Using ‘snark trap’ as a strategy encourages consumers to participate in content despite seemingly unsavoury elements. When consumers enjoy emotional release, they are more likely to pay attention, share, and comment on content, thus increasing the exposure and influence of creators. In teasing, users can express their emotions and convey their opinions and values. It allows creators to gain a deeper understanding of their audience and better meet their needs, effectively setting public agendas. Moreover, teasing as a strategy is also a peculiar way of information promotion based on Douyin’s recommendation algorithm. However, teasing should be used cautiously. While moderate teasing can trigger emotional release and entertainment for consumers, excessive teasing may harm the brand/personal image. Therefore, brands/individuals need to find a balance where teasing can stimulate user engagement without damaging their reputation.

5.4.4.3 Continuity

Evidence gathered in the research process unearths continuity as essential for creators in setting public agendas. It is also the main element in making content a part of customers' lives. Continuity refers to creators maintaining audience interest and engagement by consistently publishing relevant and coherent content, further establishing their image and credibility.

The fundamental strategy to achieve continuity is the consistent publishing of content. In an information overload environment, creators need to regularly release new content to maintain user attention and meet their demand for fresh information.

Regularly published content can also create a sense of rhythm, prompting consumers to check for new content periodically. Then, content coherence is a vital factor in maintaining customer engagement. All content on a page should have a unified theme or storyline, making it easy for consumers to understand and follow the creator. This coherence helps consumers understand and remember the brand's message and guides them gradually more deeply into the brand's values and story. Finally, establishing credibility is also part of the continuity strategy. By consistently publishing high-quality content, creators can gradually build their professional image and reputation. This attracts more consumers and enhances their trust in the brand/personal information and products.

LI: *“One must constantly update content because by updating, you keep appearing in front of your fans, reinforcing their impression of you[...] Whether there is a long-term plan for the account,[...] my accounts team colleagues have a rhythm for updating, updating daily or weekly, depending on the difficulty of video production. [...]It creates a feeling that if you continue to follow me, I have more and better content to offer you,”*

HR: *“The hardest part of content creation is continuously publishing high-quality video content[...] Everything needs to improve trust; continuity is also for trust because continuous updating lets others know you are active, and being active proves your strength and credibility[...] When I manage accounts, I would not say I like to make content too full (overload a single video with information) because it is easy to run out of creative ideas, so I usually make a video about a tiny point. We call it a steady trickle’ (an ancient Chinese saying meaning to create content in a controlled manner to maintain a long-term output),”*

YC: *“Although people may like you and follow you if you do not have new content for everyone, their expectations might not be so high, so you need to continuously have new content (updates) and maintain your creative ability,”*

In summary, continuity is a critical factor for creators in the Douyin fashion community to integrate their content into customers’ lives non-invasively. By consistently publishing content, maintaining coherence, and establishing credibility, they effectively capture user attention and sustain customer engagement. The strategy is critical for long-term success in the highly competitive social media landscape.

5.4.4.4 Timeliness

Timeliness is primarily divided into two parts. The first involves content aligning with the newest events or trending movements, known as Newsjacking. The second part is the creator's ability to respond promptly to consumer feedback after content publication. As one of the intrinsic elements, brands foster a dependency on customers on their content by strengthening the frequent connection between the brand and the customer's daily life.

Firstly, keeping up with new trends is crucial for achieving content timeliness (Newsjacking). Popular trends and prominent events often attract considerable attention and discussion among users in the rapidly evolving social media environment. Therefore, brands and influencers need to closely follow these trends and events, promptly publishing relevant content to draw user attention and engagement. The brands/influencers can design their own content by getting access to the daily interesting topics through various channels. These topics are divided into several categories: 1. popular topics of the day 2. an important upcoming event. 3. some unexpected events and topics.

LI: *"Our job is generally to first open Douyin when we arrive at the company in the morning to see what are the popular topics today, anything, and then we will design whether these topics can produce a connection with the content of my video, after which we write an outline and then start shooting."*

LA: *"You have to know that these topics are the things that the platform helps you filter for what people are most concerned about today, and you combine your content with them, and your content will naturally be categorised by the platform as relevant to that topic. That's a huge amount of data."*

Douyin has a daily list of the events and topics (Picture 45) that people are most concerned about at every moment. This service is helpful for brands/influencers who can check the list to know what is popular every day and create content.

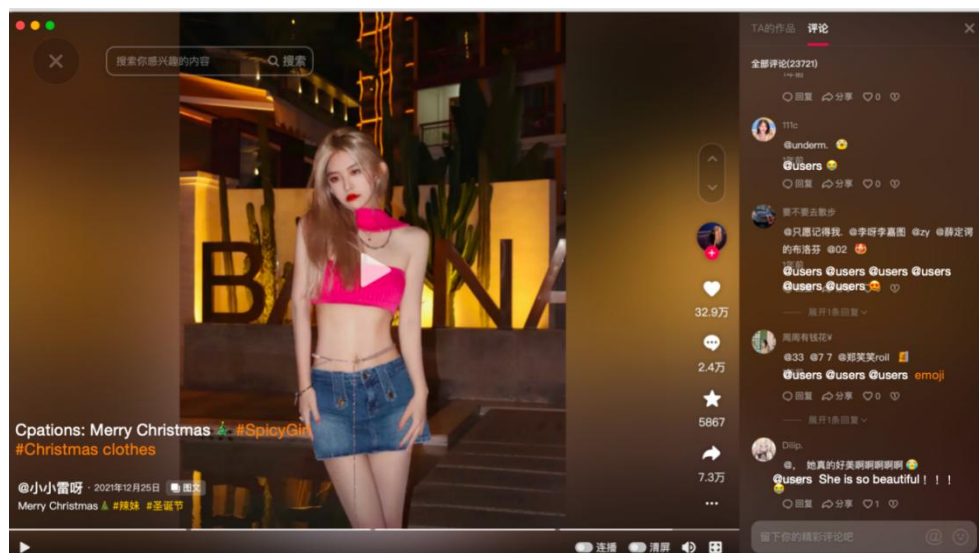


Picture 45. The daily trend list of Douyin

LE: “*The Labor Day holiday is coming up, so we’ll start preparing content for the recommended tours for users on the Labor Day holiday. You have to design content in advance, or you won’t be able to compete with others until that day.*”

CH: “*The students will soon have their summer holidays, I have to prepare some content related to this.*”

During the research’s observation period, two festivals were experienced: Christmas and Chinese New Year. During these two time points, there is an abundance of content related to “New Year Outfits” and “Christmas Outfits” (Picture 46).



Picture 46. An example of newsjacking content in the community

GU: *“You should know that the trending keeps updating, you should always pay attention to the trending. I previously had a video received 100w likes, which is the divorce of Yang Mi (a female celebrity) and Liu Kaiwei (a male celebrity) was announced. Then I immediately released a video about Yang Mi's outfit. The key point is "quick", your reaction must be quick.”*

The “speed” emphasised by the interviewees can be understood as timeliness. There is evidence that the mainstream media’s agenda also influences the agenda in the community. Agenda setters in the community are not just information disseminators but also information receivers. Responding to the mainstream media’s agenda promptly creates topics more aligned with the Douyin community's agenda. At first glance, the mainstream media’s agenda seems unrelated to the community’s topics. However, there is evidence that community agenda setters combine these with mainstream media topics, increasing the exposure of their content. Additionally, because creators integrate content with the mainstream media agenda, it becomes easier for community content to enter customers’ lives. Due to the mainstream media’s agenda effect, customers feel a sense of familiarity with the community’s content rather than perceiving it as isolated or intrusive.

Secondly, responding to user feedback is also an important strategy. Creators need to closely monitor feedback on their content and respond and adjust promptly. For example, if users show strong interest in a particular topic or product, more related content may need to be published; if there are questions or dissatisfaction with certain content, clarifications or explanations might be needed promptly. This timely response to feedback meets user needs and enhances customer engagement and satisfaction.

HR: *“I create new content based on the feedback I get from users[...].”*

JJ: *“Some comments that receive much attention[...] Can they generate a video? I will select one or two and then create content.”*

YC: *“I adapt my content based on fan requests and video data,”*

LI: *“We have a content schedule; usually, for every one published, I have already prepared three. But we will add content on the fly based on things like fan feedback and*

comments, including suddenly popular things that may arise. We keep adjusting these content materials, but the overall direction remains unchanged.”

In summary, timeliness is an intrinsic factor for brands in the Douyin fashion community to become a part of customers’ lives. By following contemporary trends and responding to user feedback, they can attract user attention non-invasively, satisfy audience cognitive needs, and establish brand influence.

5.4.5 Corollary elements

Du Plessis (2015) defines the corollary element as the purpose of content marketing to turn consumers into brand advocates through the content created, sharing and co-creating brand stories. The elements mentioned by the researcher differ from those mentioned by Du Plessis but have the same purpose. The research considers from the evidence gathered that a content marketing strategy is a long-term practice, and the corollary elements of a content marketing strategy should include data analysis by the brand on the effectiveness of marketing content to ensure the ultimate purpose of content marketing is achieved. Therefore, in this study, corollary elements reflect the results of content marketing, which in turn helps brands achieve a long-term and effective content marketing strategy. The corollary elements in this study have two main themes: traffic monitoring and data review.

5.4.5.1 Traffic Monitoring

Traffic monitoring can be understood as the observation of content traffic following the release of brand content. Subsequent promotion actions are determined based on the traffic volume. This theme primarily arises from evidence of Douyin’s content traffic pool push mechanism.

Traffic Pool

Yang (2019) introduces the concept of a traffic pool. This theory reflects Douyin’s use of segmented data buckets to test content after classifying it and distributing it based on user behaviour, seeking broader audience participation and resonance. The platform randomly distributes videos to a certain number of users to test the content’s quality (participation and resonance). The four fundamental indicators are completion

rate, likes, comments, and shares, each weighted differently. When a video's composite score of these indicators reaches a certain threshold, it 'overflows' from the bucket into the next larger one for further testing, a process which can be repeated with increasing score against higher thresholds. The larger the bucket it overflows from, the broader the content's reach. This technique determines content quality based on user behaviour, ensuring high-performing videos gain maximum exposure while low-performing ones are phased out. Traffic pool theory (Figure 5) is crucial for practitioners as evidenced by responses from the following interviewees:

LI: *"Douyin's short video content algorithms might be more esoteric; I cannot provide a specific presentation. But we advise clients to enhance content quality to boost their traffic, considering the existence of traffic pools[...] For instance, aiming for higher traffic pools like 500, 1000, 2000,"*

LU: *"How many people watch for five seconds, the entire video, how many like, comment, share[...] all these standards determine if your video gets seen by more people[...] The first traffic pool is 200, then 1000[...] It is crucial; it determines if you can enter a larger traffic pool and if your video can trend,"*

YY: *"After manual review, your content is pushed into a traffic pool, starting from 200-500, then 1000-5000, and then 10,000 to 30,000, gradually trending. There are precise calculation indicators involved. I am not clear on the probabilities, but obviously, it is about stimulating users to like, share, and comment more,"*

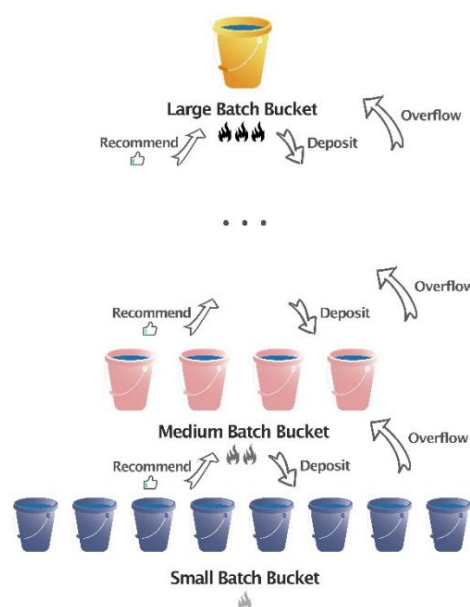


Figure 5. The Data Bucket System (traffic pool) of Douyin. (Yang, 2019)

The traffic pool theory is practically recognised and applied from the evidence. Most interviewees believe content quality stimulates user interactions, increasing content weight and allowing it to enter larger traffic pools and potentially go viral. It could be an effective method for content evaluation. With the vast amount of content on Douyin, multi-tiered filtering is a very reasonable way to ensure content quality. The key maxim to employ is that ‘only good content can retain users’.

Initially, interviewees emphasise the importance of the initial traffic pool. They considered it a critical benchmark for determining content quality and its potential for dissemination.

LL: *“After posting a video, the system places it in a 500-person traffic pool. The feedback from these 500 viewers directly affects the video's dissemination[...] Generally, you can observe a videos performance in the initial pool about an hour after posting;[...] You need to ensure your video enters the next pool, aiming for 1,000, 10,000, or larger pools. Analyzing my account, I had a video with 5 million views, over 500,000 likes, thousands of comments, and many shares[...] Roughly, likes should be 10% of views, comments 10% of likes, and shares about 5% of views. Analyzing my other videos, it is roughly the same... I use these indicators to assess my video content quality,”*

HR: *“Generally, in the initial pool, if any of your content's metrics - completion rate, likes, comments, shares - exceed about 10%, you can progress to a larger pool. If your content does not meet the standard in the initial pool, you have two choices: hide the video, meaning you give up on it, or if you believe in your content, you can try buying a 100-yuan (approximately £10) Dou+ for a trial. One hundred yuan Dou+ buys a 5000-traffic boost. If it still does not perform well, then you can give up,”*

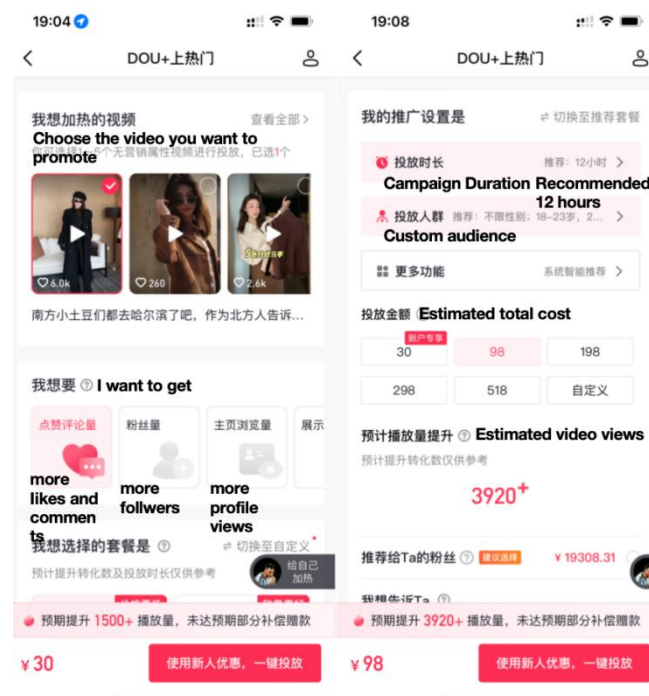
Observing a video's data performance in the initial traffic pool can determine whether the content meets platform standards or user quality expectations. The content is amended, modified, or redesigned if the data does not retain the initial pool's standards. When the initial performance is relatively good, some interviewees mentioned using Dou+.

Dou+

Dou+ is a video boosting tool launched by Douyin, and TikTok has a similar tool called ‘Promote’. When creators purchase Dou+, Douyin recommends their videos to more appropriate users, increasing video views and the chances of the video going

viral. The research tested Dou+’s functionality. First, the researcher created a video and uploaded it to their homepage. Then, he selected the Dou+ service, which presented a series of options.

The upper left part of Picture 47 shows the selection of the video to be “boosted”. Below that is the “I want to get” option, which includes increasing likes and comments, boosting the number of followers, and enhancing the profile views. The upper right part allows the selection of the duration for the boost, which means how long it takes to obtain all the purchased views. The lower half is for choosing the desired user categories for content reach, including gender, age, location, interest tags, and similar creators. Finally, the lower right part allows the creator to choose the amount they want to pay, with more money leading to more traffic.



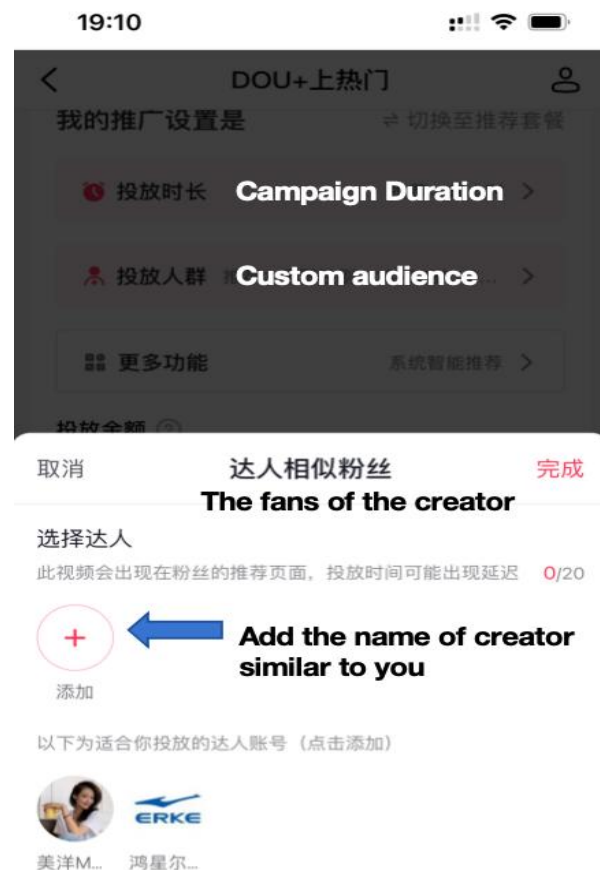
Picture 47. The process of get Dou+

However, interviewees argue that purchasing Dou+ should be done with caution. Creators need to clearly understand their content's potential consumers and make choices that maximise the chances of reaching users interested in their content.

The research highlighted the “the fans of the creator” option in “custom audience”

(shown in Picture 48). What it does is that after the creator fills in the name of the creators, when the creator promotes content using Dou+, the algorithm prioritises the content to their selected creators' followers. In more detail, the creator selects similar creators because the customers the creator wants to attract are the same as these similar creators, so when the creator posts content with the help of Dou+, the fans of these similar creators are the most direct potential customers.

Once similar influencers are identified, AI prioritises the promotion of the video to fans of these influencers or audiences interested in their content during the promotional phase. Interviewees indicated that choosing this option when buying Dou+ is essential.



Picture 48. The option to choose similar creator to you to post the video

JJ: *“[...]When I use Dou+, I do not do it blindly. You need to select carefully. For instance, you can choose bloggers similar to you and target their followers. You can try to attract users from their fan base. You cannot just target all users. You can also specify whether to target male or female users, their age range, and interests. This way, your targeting will be more precise, although there will still be some discrepancies,”*

YY: *“When buying Dou+, it is essential to identify similar influencers because you have benchmark accounts when you position your account. If you direct your videos to the fans of these benchmark accounts, there is a good chance they will also like your content. However, remember not to choose influencers with too many followers or trendy ones when selecting similar influencers. Their fan loyalty is extremely high. You should know that you are trying to attract fans from accounts similar to your content, but the fans of these big influencers are not easily swayed. I usually look for accounts with content similar to mine and with about 100,000 to 200,000 followers. That way, I can compete with them,”*

Most interviewees regarded Dou+ as an essential official content promotion tool. For new accounts, Dou+ can quickly help gain followers and build an initial follower base. Dou+ is seen as a leverage tool by some interviewees, which can help the video get more user views. Combined with Douyin's recommendation algorithm, the more views a video gets, the higher the chance of customer engagement and the video going viral. However, it is also noted that Dou+ is just an auxiliary tool. Whether a video goes viral largely depends on its quality. Even if a significant amount of traffic is obtained through Dou+, if the video quality is not of sufficient quality, it will not aid in spreading the content effectively.

LU: *“You can invest in Dou+, but we invest less now, unlike when we started the account. It would help if you got more people to see my content quickly. We used to invest a lot, but now we barely do. We have a fan base now, and with their participation and interaction, the video data is generally good,”*

JJ: *“In the early stages, we spent much money on Dou+ to support traffic. We provide Dou+ services to some of our new accounts, helping them gain followers as quickly as possible, assuming their content is also likeable,”*

GA: *“At the beginning, we bought Dou+, spending about 500 yuan (around 65 USD) daily. Right, then, it is about improving your video quality. You will reach more users if you can capture the traffic they provide. It is basically like that[...] easier at the start. Initially, we would invest around 100 yuan (around 15 USD), not too much. If you invest 100 yuan in Dou+ and find that a video that originally had 10,000 views suddenly jumps to 100,000 views,*

doesn't that prove your video has exploded in popularity? Then you might invest 300 to 500 yuan, and the content might go viral again[...]"

GU: *"Our team monitors the data of the work in the backend, mainly to see which pool the video has entered. If the pool is good enough, has it entered the second or third-tier pool? Then, we decide how much more to invest or whether to invest all at once or in ten instalments. It is about using Dou+ as a lever to drive more traffic and data performance and then get the video into the most significant possible traffic pool,"*

LL: *"Because Dou+ is essentially buying traffic, if you are willing to spend the money, you can buy much traffic. But the main problem is, I see much content that is not done well, but they have invested a lot in Dou+, and although there is much traffic, people are not buying it,"*

LU: *"If your video is good, then you should invest in it, and it will improve. But if your video does not go viral, you know it yourself; investing in it is useless. The so-called likes or followers you get in the end are fake. They are bots. What is the point then?"*

YY: *"Dou+ cannot perform miracles; it can only enhance what is already good. First, your video must be of high quality. Then, it can help you. If the quality of your video is not good, relying on it to make you popular is impossible,"*

In summary, Dou+ is widely accepted as a platform promotion tool. Firstly, Dou+ is about buying traffic, similar to the traditional advertising model where ad space is paid for. It allows the brand content to occupy an "ad slot" within the platform. This "ad slot" can target specific users, allowing for personalised audience customisation. This method attracts vertical users more precisely and enhances content conversion rate (turning viewers into followers or customers).

Secondly, Dou+ can also serve as a lever for content dissemination. Though considered high-quality by creators, many videos may receive only average feedback. This situation could be due to the imprecise primary 500 traffic from the AI recommendation mechanism needing to be more precise. There is a saying: "Fish where the fish are." The initial 500 traffic might not contain the desired audience, but Dou+ leads to the right "fishing pond," giving videos a second chance. On the Dou+ launch page, the brand can boost comments and likes and target a range of accounts similar to the brand's positioning. These accounts become the brand's "fishing ponds," and their followers are the "fish." After the campaign, compare the data with the

organic metrics. If there is a significant increase in completion rate, comments, and shares, it indicates the right “pond” was chosen. Subsequently, there will likely be new organic traffic as Douyin’s algorithm gradually leads the content to larger “ponds.” After several promotion rounds, the algorithm tags the brand account, recognising where it best fits. The next step is to focus on producing high-quality content. Certainly, the most crucial factor is that content quality is a necessary precondition for purchasing Dou+.

5.4.5.2 Data review

When a video performs well in the initial traffic pool and enters the largest possible traffic pool, while practitioners continually “boost” the content through Dou+, interviewees believe this should not be considered the end of data analysis. The popularity of a single video does not guarantee an overall improvement in the account’s performance. Interviewees suggest that each video content should be analysed individually, a process called data review.

Analysis of content key performance indicator (KPI)

For each video, a thorough content review is conducted, involving key metrics that help creators better understand the strengths and weaknesses of each video and guide them on how to improve. According to the interviewees, the data analysis observed during the content review goes beyond simple metrics like completion rate, like rate, comment rate, and share rate. They analyse these data points more intricately using analytics tools provided by Douyin’s backend.

LI: *“We have positive and negative values when we do the content review. For example, positive values include likes, follows, comments, etc. We might assign a positive score based on user actions, like 2 points for a follow, which is quite high, 1 point for interactive comments, and 3 points for shares. These scores are then added together to get a positive value. Then, for things like dislikes, reports or complaints, unfollows, or negative comments in the comment section, we consider these indicators as negative values. We have our formula to calculate all the data for each video, look at the positive and negative values ratio, and then judge how to adjust the content and change the promotion strategy,”*

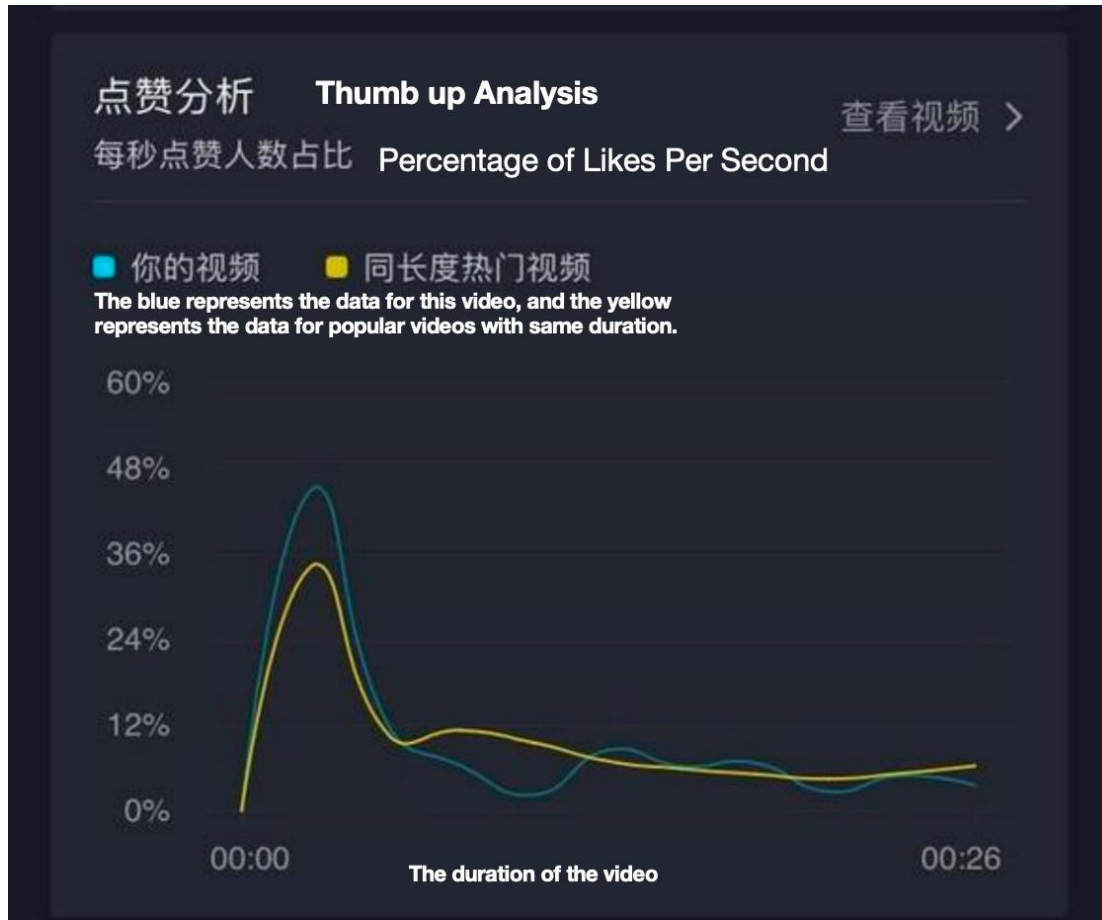
Fine-grained processing

During the data review process, apart from observing the performance of key indicators, the respondents believe it is also essential to closely monitor the trend graphs of video data based on the video content itself. Picture 49 refers to the browsing data for each video, accessible to Douyin creators through their backend. This data is used for detailed processing of the content, providing a foundation for creating and refining future video content.

J1: *“When reviewing data, it could be more superficial to look only at the overall performance of video data. You need to see at which second the most likes occurred and at what point users swiped away from your video. [...] The Douyin backend data analysis tool is sufficient for this purpose, ... as it allows for detailed data analysis. For example, suppose you notice a peak in likes at 5 seconds into your video. In that case, you should analyse which words or content resonated with the audience in the first five seconds, [...] it is something you have to guess, but having data to support your hypothesis makes it more convincing. Then, if most users swipe away at the 10-second mark, you should examine what between 5 and 10 seconds might have bored them, whether your pace broke or became too slow. I am just giving an example. That is the general idea,”*

HR: *“You must do a content review, focusing on several aspects: the like curve per second, average viewing duration, user dropout points[...] User dropout points are when viewers swipe away and stop watching your video[...] These data points make your content adjustments more targeted and important,”*

Overall, the evidence suggests that observing consumer behaviour after consuming content and analysing content performance data is essential. Based on the results of data analysis, content creation strategies should be revisited to start a new round of content marketing activities, ultimately forming a complete cycle of brand content marketing strategy in the Douyin fashion community.



Picture 49. Graph of likes per second for a video

5.4.6 Summary

Based on De Plessis' (2015) conceptualised classification of elements of community content marketing, the research developed content marketing strategy for Douyin's fashion community.

Unlike De Plessis' (2015) view, his study considers the five elements as recursive relationships and culminates in a content marketing model. The model developed by the research as a result of data analysis found that the five elements are semi-circular. The Strategic Elements help brands define their image in the community and find their niche and potential customers. The formation elements, the intrinsic elements, and the communication elements form vital cyclic relationships in the content design process, and the interplay between the three elements is a prerequisite to ensure that the content is innovative and high-quality. Finally, the corollary elements provide

external visual feedback to content creation, which allows brands to better analyse and refine the three elements of the inner loop. The model derived from the evidence of this research is termed the Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) and is explored in Chapter seven.

Chapter Six: Testing the Hypotheses: Cause and Effect from the PLS-SEM

6.1 Introduction

The chapter examines the data findings from the quantitative technique employed in this research to explore the relationship between agenda-setting effects and customer engagement behaviour. The result provides an answer to research question 2: ***Does the content agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community impact customer engagement behaviour?*** The outcome is determined by following the process of PLS-SEM research systematically. The results show that agenda setting has a significant impact on customer engagement behaviour within the community, but that consumers' needs for orientation (NFO) of different intensities, as a prior psychological factor of agenda setting, do not show significant differences between different NFO groups. Nevertheless, the key to the result is that it confirms that content marketing strategies based on community agendas can positively improve customer engagement behaviour within the community. In other words, this result confirms the effectiveness of content marketing in the Douyin fashion community from a communication perspective.

6.2 Determining the effectiveness of content marketing in Douyin fashion communities from an agenda-setting effectiveness perspective.

In this section, the research examined the impact of the agenda-setting effect of the Douyin fashion content community on customer engagement behaviours (CEB), based on the results of online survey data analysis. The researcher first reiterated the research hypothesis:

H1: The higher the media use by customers in the community, the more significantly they are influenced by the community's agenda-setting.

H2: The more frequent the media use the stronger the intention of consumers to (a)

consume, (b) contribute and (c) create content.

H3: The more significantly customers perceive the community's agenda-setting effects, the more willing they are to engage in behaviours: (a) consumption, (b) contribution, and (c) creation.

H4: The level of media use has a significantly different impact on customers' perception of the community's agenda-setting between high NFO and other NFO levels.

H5: The level of media use has a significantly different impact on customer engagement behaviours (a. consumption; b. contribution; c. creation) between the high NFO group and other NFO groups.

H6: The impact of the community's agenda-setting effects on customer engagement behaviours (a. consumption; b. contribution; c. creation) differs significantly between the high NFO group and other NFO groups.

The research, drawing on the structural equation modelling (SEM) test steps outlined by Hair et al. (2019), employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to validate the model (Figure 6). The research has already examined the demographic sample characteristics of the participants in the methodology section, so this part of the model validation process includes the examination of model reliability and validity, testing of variable correlations, and analysis of model path coefficients. The results of PLS-SEM used to test H1, H2, and H3. Subsequently, to test H4, H5, and H6, the PLS-MGA (Multi-Group Analysis) was employed to examine inter-group differences. Following the approach proposed by Cheah et al. (2020), Hensler's bootstrap-based MGA method was utilised to test the differences in path coefficients between groups with different Needs for Orientation (NFO) levels.

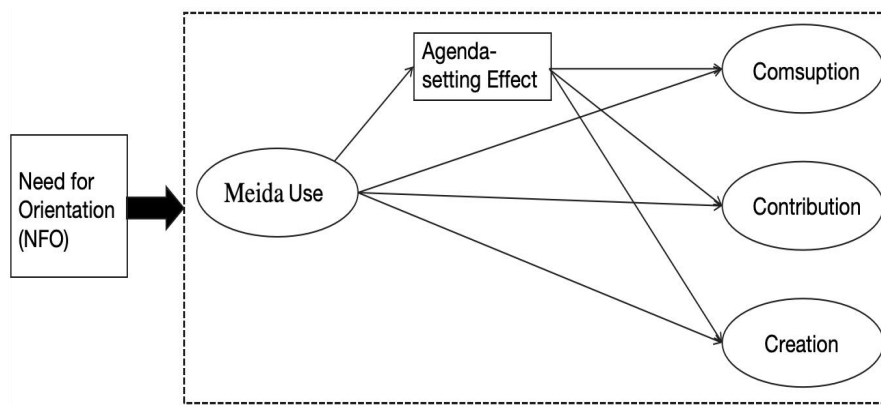


Figure 6. the conceptual model.

Source: Researcher

6.2.1 Common method variance (CMV)

When using self-report questionnaires and collecting data from the same participants, Common Method Variance (CMV) can be a concern. This concern is most pronounced when both the dependent and focal explanatory variables are perceptual measures from the same respondents (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). CMV is “variance attributable to the measurement method rather than the constructs the measures represent” (Podsakoff et al., 2003, p. 879). CMV creates a false internal consistency, indicating an apparent correlation between variables generated from a common source. “Common method variance is often a concern, and researchers need to do their utmost to control it” (Podsakoff et al., 2003, p.900).

Research adopted various strategies to minimise its impact in response to the potential issues with CMV. These may include methodological approaches like ensuring anonymity of responses to reduce social desirability bias, using different scales for different constructs, or applying statistical techniques like Harman's single-factor test, normally applied to test common method bias in confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in PLS-SEM (Kock, 2020), to assess the extent of CMV. Ensuring that the measures for independent and dependent variables differ in their collection method can also help reduce CMV. Measuring CMV is clearly relevant in determining the likelihood and degree of common method bias (Chang, van Witteloostuijn & Eden, 2010). To assess Common Method Bias (CMB), the study examined the Variance Inflation

Factor (VIF) values at the factor level. The research found that all VIF values were below 3.3, indicating the absence of common method bias (Kock, 2015). Additionally, the study conducted Harman's single-factor test. The study performed an exploratory factor analysis (with fixed single-factor extraction and no rotation) to determine the total variance explained by the extracted single factor. The study assessed whether the total variance explained by the single factor was below the cutoff value of 50% (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The results showed that the total variance explained by the single factor was 37.4%, indicating that the research did not detect common method bias.

6.2.2 Correlation Analysis between Variables

The research examined the correlations between agenda-setting effects and other key variables (Table 16). The Pearson correlation test assesses the correlation between variables (Ersin Karaman et al., 2011). Research can only proceed if there is a correlation between the variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient takes values between -1 and 1, where 1, 0, and -1 represent a perfect positive correlation, no correlation, and a perfect negative correlation. (Ersin Karaman et al., 2011). It is defined as the covariance of the compared variables divided by their standard deviations. (Ersin Karaman et al., 2011) Pearson correlation does not imply a causal relationship between two variables; there could be a hidden variable that serves as the underlying cause of the changes. It can be observed that there are significant positive relationships between the variables, allowing the research to explore their direct or indirect impacts on each other (Table 12).

Table 12. Correlation Analysis between Variables

	IASI	MU	CONS	CONT	CREA
IASI	1				
MU	.84**	1			
CONS	.81**	.81**	1		
CONT	.86**	.82**	.80**	1	
CREA	.83**	.81**	.79**	.839**	1

*** Significant at $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).*

6.2.3 Evaluation of Measurement Model

Following the assessment criteria for measuring models outlined by Hair et al. (2019), the research examined factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Examining the factor loadings determines whether each observed variable effectively reflects the latent variable. Generally, the higher the factor loadings, the better the observed variables explain the latent variables. Factor loadings of at least 0.5 or higher are usually required (Shevlin & Miles, 1998). Composite reliability is used to assess a latent variable's reliability and reflects the measurement instrument's internal consistency. The CR should generally be at least 0.7, indicating that the latent variable consists of a set of related and consistent observed variables (Bacon, Sauer & Young, 1995). Assessing convergent validity determines whether the observed variables consistently measure the same latent variable. Commonly used assessment methods include average variance extracted (AVE), which should have a value of at least 0.5, indicating that the observed variable explains more than 50 per cent of the variance of the latent variable (Amora, 2021). Assessing discriminant validity ensures that each latent variable is unique and can be distinguished from other latent variables. Commonly used assessment methods include the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which states that the square root of the AVE of a latent variable should be greater than its correlation coefficient with other latent variables (Lucas, Diener & Suh, 1996).

The IASI has been calculated as an intuitive observed variable, so it does not require further examination.

Firstly, Hair et al. (2019) recommend that all factor loadings exceed 0.7 to indicate item reliability. Table 13 displays that all factor loadings meet this criterion. Composite reliability (CR) can assess internal consistency (Joreskog, 1971), and in this study, all CR values exceed 0.7. Moreover, the extracted Average Variance Extracted (AVE) determines convergent validity. In this study, the AVE for all latent variables surpasses 0.5, as Hair et al. (2013) recommended. Finally, the research utilised the HTMT ratio to examine discriminant validity. HTMT assesses discriminant validity by calculating the ratio of the correlation coefficients between

different latent variables (Heterotrait) to the correlation coefficients between the same latent variables (Monotrait). Specifically, it is the correlation ratio between different latent variables to the correlation within the same latent variable (Henseler et al., 2015). If the HTMT value is low, it indicates that a high level of differentiation between different latent variables represents good discriminant validity. If the HTMT value is high, the differentiation between the different latent variables is low, which means poor discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 14 indicates that HTMT ratios are less than 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). All indicators confirmed that the measurement model is reliable and effective.

Table 13. Convergent validity

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Consumption	CONS1	0.84	0.78	0.87	0.7
	CONS2	0.84			
	CONS3	0.82			
Contribution	CONT1	0.81	0.83	0.88	0.66
	CONT2	0.79			
	CONT3	0.82			
	CONT4	0.81			
Creation	CREA1	0.77	0.84	0.88	0.61
	CREA2	0.79			
	CREA3	0.77			
	CREA4	0.81			
	CREA5	0.76			
Media use	MU1	0.82	0.83	0.89	0.67
	MU2	0.81			
	MU3	0.81			
	MU4	0.81			

Table 14. Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

	CONS	CONT	CREA	MU
CONS				
CONT	0.76			
CREA	0.84	0.82		
MU	0.48	0.56	0.51	

6.2.4 Evaluation of Structural Model

After determining the reliability and validity of the variables and data for this study, the, to assess the results of the model (Figure 1), standard evaluations, including model fit, determination coefficient (R-squared), and statistical significance and relevance using path coefficients, were employed (Hair et al., 2019).

Firstly, prior to testing structural relationships, collinearity was examined to ensure it did not bias regression results. VIF was used to check for collinearity, and the results showed that VIF values in this study were all below the standard threshold of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2013) Table 15.

Table 15. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

Items	VIF
CONS1	1.698
CONS2	1.652
CONS3	1.59
CONT1	1.773
CONT2	1.678
CONT3	1.868
CONT4	1.814
CREA1	1.686
CREA2	1.832
CREA3	1.726
CREA4	1.901
CREA5	1.666
IASI	1
MU1	1.832
MU2	1.819
MU3	1.747
MU4	1.797

The model fit was evaluated ($\chi^2 = 517.67$, with $p < .001$). Other statistical data indicate a good fit: NFI (Normed Fit Index) = 0.92, SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Residual) = 0.049. Following the suggestion from Hu and Bentler in 1999 to use composite standards for testing model fit, e.g., $NFI > 0.9$ and $SRMR < 0.10$, it can be observed that the model fit in this study is satisfactory.

Additionally, the research recognised that demographic variables as exogenous variables may impact the structural model. Therefore, the possibility of demographic characteristics acting as control variables for the influence on the dependent variable was investigated. The research found that none of the demographic variables significantly impacted the talent variables. Hence, it means that the demographic variables can be excluded from measuring the structural model (Table 16). This result suggests that the independent variables have such a strong influence on the dependent variable that the influence of demographic characteristics as control variables is relatively small and thus appears insignificant in statistical analyses (Hair et al., 2019). In other words, customer engagement behaviours in the community are not influenced by the gender, age, education level and income of the users.

Table 16. The structural paths of control variables

Structural Paths	Std. β	t-value	p values
GENDER -> CONS	-0.04	0.815	0.415
GENDER -> CONT	0.047	1.009	0.313
GENDER -> CREA	-0.006	0.138	0.89
AGE -> CONS	-0.025	1.112	0.266
AGE -> CONT	-0.002	0.109	0.913
AGE -> CREA	-0.017	0.798	0.425
EDU -> CONS	0.02	0.523	0.601
EDU -> CONT	-0.012	0.379	0.705
EDU -> CREA	0.014	0.388	0.698
INCOME -> CONS	-0.019	0.529	0.597
INCOME -> CONT	-0.019	0.588	0.557
INCOME -> CREA	-0.072	2.101	0.036

And then, the final model is displayed in Figure 7. Firstly, the R-squared of the endogenous latent variables (IASI (.71); consumption(.72); contribution(.77); and creation(.71)) is examined. It indicates that all the predictor variables can explain 71%; 72%; 77% and 71% of these latent variables respectively.

Finally, the path coefficients (β) are examined. Bootstrapping (with 5,000 resamples) was employed to calculate the significance of the paths. Streukens and Leroi-Werelds

(2016) illustrate that the purpose of testing for path coefficients (β) is to assess the strength and significance of individual paths in structural equation modelling (SEM). The path coefficient (β) indicates the direct effect of one latent variable on another and is the key statistic in SEM. The Bootstrapping method with 5,000 resampling is used to determine whether a path is significant by generating a large distribution of sample path coefficients and calculating the standard error, confidence interval, and p-value for each path coefficient.

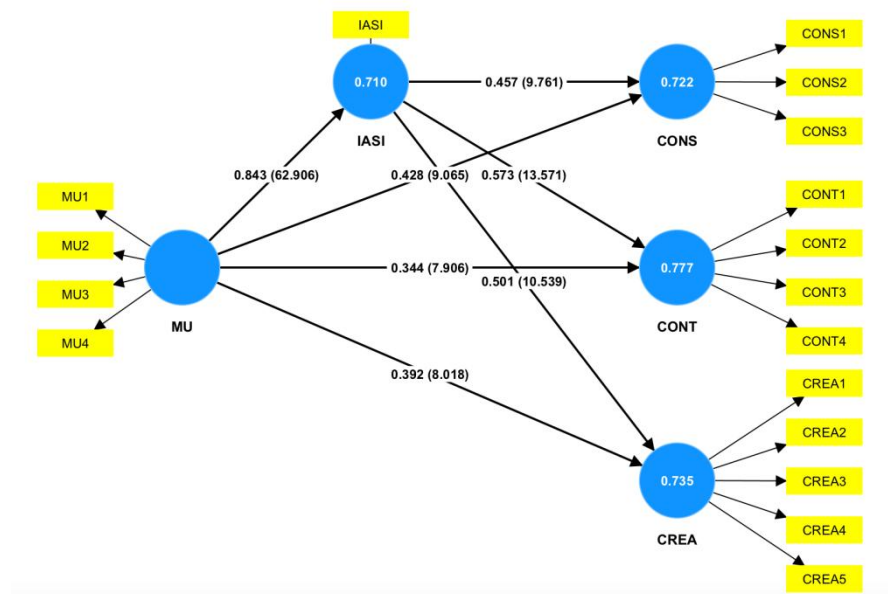


Figure 7. Path analysis model between media use (MU), community agenda-setting effects (IASI) and customer engagement behaviours: consumption (CONS), contribution (CONT) and creation (CREA) (data reported in Table 21)

The results in Table 17 demonstrates that all paths are significant at $p < 0.001$. The standardized coefficients of (H1) media use indicate direct influence on agenda-setting effects (.84, $p < .001$). Meanwhile, (H2) media use also positive affect on consumption (.42, $p < .001$), contribution (.34, $p < .001$) and creation (.39, $p < .001$) significantly. (H3) The effects of agenda-setting on consumption (.45, $p < .001$), contribution (.57, $p < .001$), and creation (.5, $p < .001$) are also significant.

Table 17. Structural Model TEST

Hypothesis	Structural Paths	Std. β	t-value	Decision
H1	MU -> IASI	0.84***	62.90	S
H2a	MU-> CONS	0.42***	9.06	S
H2b	MU-> CONT	0.34***	7.90	S
H2c	MU-> CREA	0.39***	8.01	S
H3a	IASI -> CONS	0.45***	9.76	S
H3b	IASI -> CONT	0.57***	13.57	S
H3c	IASI -> CREA	0.5***	10.53	S

*** Significant at $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Note: S=supported.

6.2.5 NFO Group Differences in the Model

PLS-MGA was conducted to explore differences between the high NFO group and the other three NFO groups using Hensler's bootstrap-based MGA method (Cheah et al., 2020). Following Cheah et al.'s (2020) recommendations, the research ensured that the sample size differences among groups were not substantial, all variables were consistent, and completed reliability and validity tests. Subsequently, the study conducted the Measurement Invariance of Composite Models (MICOM) test (see Appendix 2, Table 27), and only when all variables passed this test did the researcher proceed with the MGA analysis of intergroup differences (Cheah et al., 2020). The results of the MICOM test are satisfactory and are presented.

The difference between high NFO and the other three NFO group analysis results is shown in Table 18, where it can be observed that none of the hypotheses were fully supported. A few hypotheses were partially supported. Overall, high NFO did not show significant positive differences compared to the other groups, except that high NFO exhibited a more substantial impact on IASI (H4) in media use compared to passive-involvement NFO and low NFO groups. The remaining H5 and H6 are not supported.

Table 18. Path differences by high NFO and other three NFO

	Paths	Difference (H-A)	Difference (H-P)	Difference (H-L)	Decision
H4	MU -> IASI	0.029	-0.119**	-0.112**	PS
H5a	MU -> CONS	-0.044	0.111	0.031	NS
H5b	MU -> CONT	-0.025	0.129	0.118	NS
H5c	MU -> CREA	0.059	-0.207	-0.073	NS
H6a	IASI -> CONS	0.029	-0.145	-0.049	NS
H6b	IASI -> CONT	0.024	-0.153	-0.185	NS
H6c	IASI -> CREA	0.064	0.051	-0.088	NS

***Significant at $p < 0.05$. Note: (1)H=High NFO; A=Active involvement NFO; P=Passive involvement NFO; L=Low NFO (2) NS=Not supported; PS=Partial supported.*

The results of the structural assessment can be found in Table 17 (direct relationship results) and Table 18 (differences in paths between the high NFO group and the other NFO groups). Initially, H1 is supported. The more media use, the more consumers are influenced by agenda-setting($\beta=.84$). Media exposure and attention have a significant impact on agenda-setting effects . This aligns with previous agenda-setting research (Camaj & Weaver, 2013) but in the context of social media brand communication. This result indicates that media use is decisive in predicting agenda-setting effects, not only in politics and news communication.

Additionally, H2 is also supported. Previous antecedents of customer engagement did not involve media use, and this study confirms the direct impact of media use on CE. The more media use, the more likely consumers are to engage (consumption $\beta=.42$; contribution $\beta=.34$; creation $\beta=.39$) with brand content. Media use has the most significant impact on consumption, indicating that the primary intent of customer media use is still centred around consuming content. Indeed, there is also a significant impact on contribution and sharing.

Then, H3 is supported, indicating that content community agenda-setting effects directly influence CE (consumption $\beta=.45$; contribution $\beta=.57$; creation $\beta=.5$). The impact on contribution is the most significant. This indicates that the more vital customers perceive the community agenda, the more actively they engage. Among these, the impact on contribution is the most pronounced. This finding confirms the

effectiveness of agenda-setting effects in content communities on customer engagement and demonstrates the theoretical value of agenda-setting theory in social media commercial communication.

Although there are significant path relationships between key variables in the model, significant differences were only partially observed when examining the variable path relationships between the high NFO group and other NFO groups.

Firstly, the study did not find significant differences between high NFO and active-involvement groups regarding media use and agenda-setting effects. The research identifies significant differences between the high NFO group and the passive-involvement NFO and low NFO groups. The results indicate that the high NFO group uses media more frequently and is more influenced by the agenda-setting effect compared to the passive-involvement NFO ($\beta = -.11$, $p < 0.05$) and low NFO ($\beta = -.11$, $p < 0.05$) groups. These results partially confirm the influence of NFO as a psychological factor on agenda-setting in social media content communities. Therefore, H4 is partially supported. H5 is not supported, as there were no significant differences in the direct impact of media use on customer engagement when comparing the high NFO group with the other groups. Finally, no significant difference between agenda-setting and customer engagement existed between the other groups and the high NFO group. Therefore, H6 is not supported.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the findings of the research in the context of the project's the research questions. The chapter summarises all the findings and ultimately produces a conceptual framework for the answers to each research question separately.

The four research questions need to be restated:

- 1. As a social media content marketing platform, what are the features that set Douyin apart from other platforms?**
- 2. Does the content agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community impact customer engagement behaviour?**
- 3. Which customer motivations and needs for using media have an impact on content agenda-setting in the Douyin fashion community? To what extent do these motivations influence customer engagement behaviour?**
- 4. How should fashion short video content be created on Douyin to improve customer engagement?**

The findings of this study illuminated critical insights into the interplay between Douyin's unique platform dynamics, agenda-setting mechanisms within its fashion community, and customer engagement behaviours. Ultimately, the research created a content marketing framework to explain the content marketing strategy within the Douyin fashion content community. Collectively, these insights bridge theoretical gaps between agenda-setting theory and uses-and-gratifications frameworks in digital contexts while offering pragmatic guidance for brands navigating Douyin's complex engagement economy. The subsequent discussion synthesises these dimensions, critically evaluating their implications for content marketing praxis in algorithmically mediated environments.

7.2 As a social media content marketing platform, what are the features that set Douyin apart from other platforms?

After the analysis of the relationships between pattern codes presented in the previous chapter, this chapter orders them in two classifications, encompassing four themes. The research develops a model based on all relevant themes in the evidence to understand Douyin's specific characteristics as a content marketing platform and its potential impact on content marketing (Figure 8).

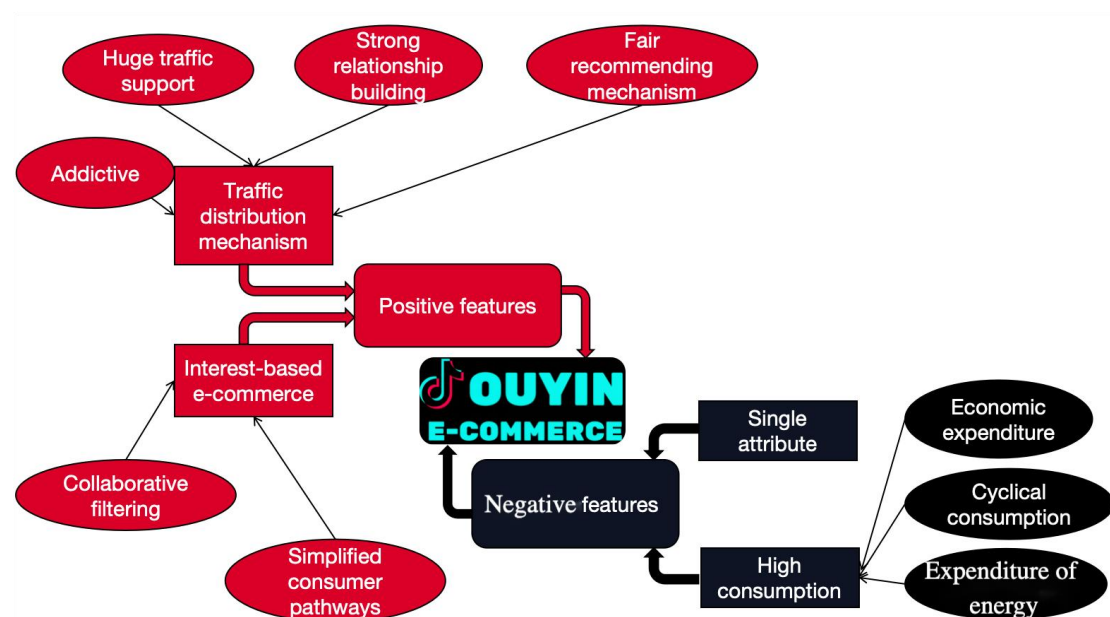


Figure 8. The conceptual framework of Douyin content marketing features.

The exploration has two features: the positive and the negative aspects of Douyin for marketing. The findings derived from the in-depth analysis of Douyin's operational mechanisms and their implications for brand marketing strategies reveal a complex interplay between algorithmic design, user behaviour, and corporate adaptation.

The study underscores Douyin's traffic allocation mechanisms as foundational to its appeal for brands. The platform's vast user base macro-level advantage enables brands to achieve significant exposure, aligning with resource-based theories that emphasise audience reach as a critical asset in digital ecosystems (Barney, 1991). However, the findings complicate this narrative by revealing that sheer traffic volume is not an absolute determinant of success. Instead, Douyin's fair distribution algorithm

and loyalty fan mechanism introduce micro-level dynamics. The former democratises visibility, reducing customer acquisition costs compared to traditional platforms, while the latter strengthens customer-brand relationships by prioritising content tailored to active users' preferences. This duality resonates with algorithmic fairness (Mehrotra et al., 2018) yet diverges by emphasising relational quality over mere equity. The loyalty fan mechanism challenges Wright's (2021) scepticism about platform-mediated relationships. By fostering sustained engagement through personalised recommendations, Douyin enhances user retention and satisfaction, strengthening brand loyalty. This aligns with relationship marketing theories (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), suggesting that algorithmic curation can deepen emotional connections when aligned with user preferences.

Douyin's transition to interest-based e-commerce -facilitated by collaborative filtering and simplified consumption pathways- represents a paradigm shift in social commerce. Collaborative filtering, often criticised for creating ideological echo chambers (Pariser, 2011), paradoxically expands user content horizons on Douyin. The algorithm stimulates serendipitous discovery by cross-recommending diverse yet contextually relevant products, activating latent consumer demand. This finding refines the "filter bubble" critique, suggesting that algorithmic design can mitigate isolation when prioritising novelty alongside similarity. The simplified consumption pathway-integrating entertainment and commerce- echoes "flow" theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), where seamless user experiences enhance engagement. However, the evidence of this research reveals a tension: streamlined paths boost conversion rates and heighten brand competition, necessitating higher content quality. This condition aligns with the Red Queen Effect (Dorfus et al., 2008), where continuous innovation is required to maintain visibility in saturated markets.

The addictive nature of Douyin, driven by its infinite scroll and personalised content, creates a double-edged sword for brands. On the one hand, it increases customer-brand interaction opportunities; on the other, excessive screen time may lead to cognitive overload (Lang, 2000), diluting message impact. This impact aligns with studies on digital fatigue (Ravindran et al., 2014) but introduces a

platform-specific nuance: addiction-driven engagement does not inherently translate to brand loyalty. Brands must balance frequency with creativity to avoid alienating users, a challenge exacerbated by the platform's single-attribute dominance in entertainment. The high-consumption environment of Douyin -marked by intense competition and algorithmic demands- forces brands to prioritise content quality over production polish.

Contrary to Fiallos et al. (2021), who equate simplicity with low barriers to entry, this study posits that strategic creativity- not technical sophistication- determines success. This aligns with the attention economy theory (Davenport & Beck, 2001), where originality trumps resource investment. However, the pressure to consistently produce non-intrusive, engaging content underscores a critical gap: the absence of a standardised content marketing strategy model for Douyin, which this study identifies as a pressing need.

7.3 Does the content agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community impact customer engagement behaviour?

The present study addressed the research question: Does the content agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community impact customer engagement behaviour? By employing a quantitative approach grounded in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the research-validated a theoretical framework that integrates agenda-setting theory, media use, and customer engagement behaviours (CEB) within the context of Douyin's fashion content community. The findings offer robust empirical evidence that the agenda-setting effect significantly shapes customer engagement behaviours, though nuances emerge when considering psychological antecedents such as consumers' Needs for Orientation (NFO). The research results verify the significant influence of agenda-setting effects on users in the Douyin fashion content community and thus confirm the effectiveness of content marketing from a communication perspective.

The study confirmed that the agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community exerts a significant favourable influence on customer engagement behaviours, encompassing consumption, contribution, and creation. Specifically:

Media Use and Agenda-Setting Effects (H1). Media use directly strengthens the perceived agenda-setting effect ($\beta=0.84$, $p < 0.001$). This result aligns with traditional agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, it extends its application to social media brand communities, where user-generated content (UGC) and algorithmic recommendations amplify the salience of specific fashion trends.

Media Use and Engagement (H2). Frequent media use directly enhances all dimensions of CEB - consumption ($\beta= 0.42$), contribution ($\beta= 0.34$), and creation ($\beta= 0.39$). This finding underscores the centrality of platform immersion in driving participatory behaviours.

Agenda-Setting and Engagement (H3): The perceived agenda-setting effect strongly predicts CEB, with the most substantial impact on contribution ($\beta= 0.57$), followed by creation ($\beta= 0.50$) and consumption ($\beta= 0.45$). This outcome suggests that users who internalise community agendas are more likely to contribute content actively, reflecting a shift from passive consumption to co-creation.

NFO Groups Differences (H4-H6): While high-NFO users exhibited slightly stronger agenda-setting effects than passive and low-NFO groups, no significant differences emerged in how media use or agenda-setting translated into engagement across NFO segments. The finding challenges assumptions about NFO's moderating role in commercial social media contexts.

This finding confirms that the agenda-setting effect within Douyin's fashion community significantly enhances customer engagement behaviours. While psychological factors like NFO play a limited role, the findings underscore the transformative power of social media platforms as agenda-setters in commercial contexts. Additionally, content marketing has proven its effectiveness as a strategy that uses content dissemination as the primary marketing tool.

7.4 Which customer motivations and needs for using media have an impact on content agenda setting in the Douyin fashion community? To what extent do these motivations influence customer engagement behaviour?

Subsequently, the research developed a conceptual framework (Figure 9) based on the pattern codes of the data results to explain customer motivations corresponding to different levels of CEB. The diagram describes the motivations for different customer engagement behaviours. The six UGT elements are broken into 17 pattern codes corresponding to different CEBs. The Douyin fashion community represents a dynamic ecosystem where user motivations and needs intricately shape content creation, dissemination, and engagement. This study, grounded in uses and gratification theory (UGT) and customer engagement behaviour (CEB) frameworks, identifies six core motivations—hedonic needs, cognitive needs, affective needs, social integration needs, self-expression, and incentive-driven behaviours—that influence content agenda-setting and engagement dynamics.

Hedonic needs emerged as the primary driver of consumption within the Douyin fashion community. Users flock to the platform seeking entertainment, leisure, and emotional upliftment, aligning with Douyin's broader identity as an entertainment-first platform. Three sub-themes—the pursuit of happiness, “brainwashing” content, and influencer/brand attachment—highlight how pleasure-seeking behaviours underpin initial user interactions. Pursuit of happiness: Respondents emphasised using Douyin to “pass the time” or seek “interesting” content, reflecting escapism and momentary gratification. This finding aligns with UGT's assertion that media consumption fulfils diversionary needs (Katz et al., 1973).

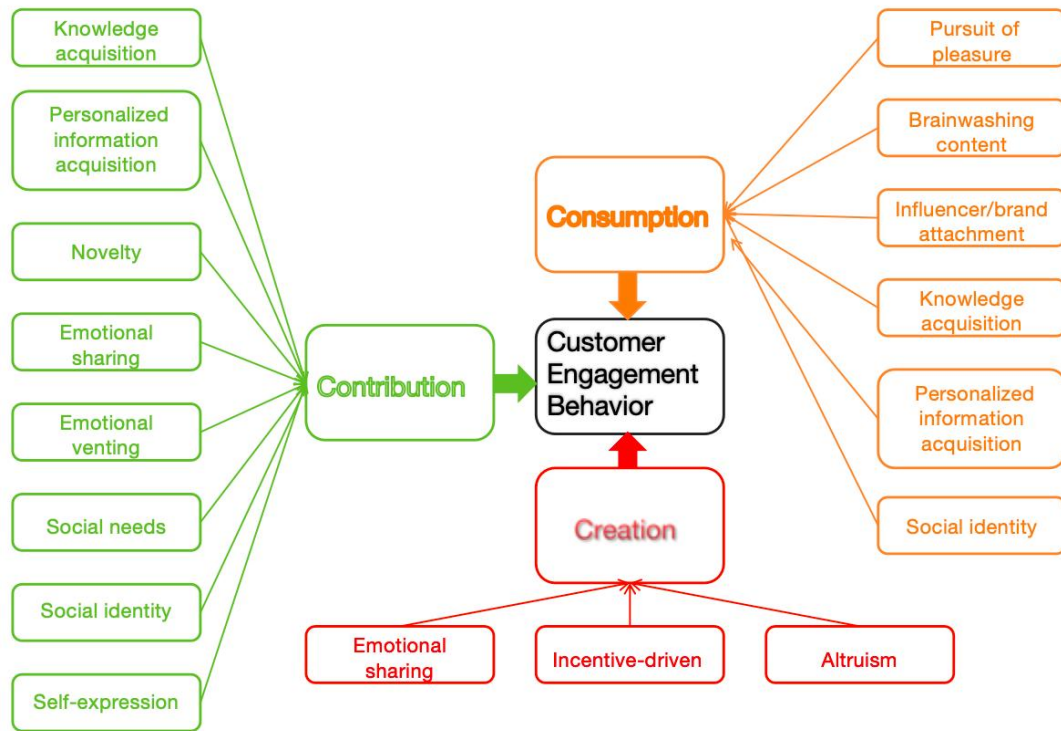


Figure 9. Motivations corresponding to different levels of customer engagement behaviour.

Source: Researcher

For instance, humorous or visually stimulating fashion content captures attention but often lacks direct conversion potential, as noted by creators like JJ: “Even if many people like your videos, few will be your consumers.” Brainwashing content: Repetitive, addictive elements—catchy music, viral challenges, or meme-like visuals—create immersive experiences. The platform’s algorithmic promotion of trending sounds exemplifies how sensory stimuli hijack user attention, fostering habitual consumption. However, such content risks superficial engagement, prioritising views over meaningful interaction. Influencer/brand attachment: Personal charisma and aesthetic alignment between creators and users build trust. Followers like R2 emphasised trusting influencers who “filter out things I hate,” illustrating parasocial relationship dynamics (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Long-term consistency in creator personas (e.g. uniform video characters) reinforces loyalty but may limit diversity in content innovation.

In summary, brands prioritise hedonic elements to attract initial traffic, often at the expense of depth. For example, creators use viral music or humour as “nets” to capture broad audiences (YC’s metaphor), later funnelling engaged users toward transactional content. However, over-reliance on entertainment risks diluting brand messaging, necessitating a balance between allure and substance. Moreover, hedonic needs drive high-frequency consumption but low conversion rates. Most users engage passively (e.g., scrolling), and only a few transition to deeper interactions (e.g., liking, commenting). This result underscores the need for layered content strategies where entertainment is a gateway to value-driven engagement.

Cognitive needs -knowledge acquisition, novelty, and personalised information-propel consumption and contribution. Users seek utility, novelty, and relevance, reflecting UGT’s information-seeking dimension (Ruggiero, 2000). Knowledge acquisition: Practical insights (e.g., styling tips, product details) drive liking, saving, and questioning behaviours. Users like R10 highlighted needing “quality and price” information to make purchase decisions, while observational data (Picture 15) showed users crowdsourcing answers in comments. This aligns with Sundar and Limperos’ (2013) finding that informational utility reduces perceived risk. Novelty: Unexpected elements (e.g., bystanders in videos, unplanned virality) spark curiosity. Creators like LL leveraged serendipity (e.g., quirky backgrounds) to differentiate content, while others engineered surprises (e.g., cross-influencer appearances) to sustain interest. Novelty satisfies exploratory needs but requires authenticity to avoid gimmickry. Personalised information: Tailored content for niche demographics (e.g., plus-size or petite styling) fosters identification. Videos showcasing “ordinary people” or “transformative outfits” bridge the gap between idealised fashion and real-world applicability, addressing insecurities and building trust. Creators strategically embed educational and novel elements to retain cognitively driven users. For example, tutorials with actionable advice (e.g., “slimming hacks”) are paired with clickbait titles to balance utility and intrigue. Algorithmic personalisation further amplifies relevance, as Douyin’s push mechanism rewards content that matches user preferences. Cognitive needs elevate engagement quality. Users seeking knowledge or

novelty are likelier to comment or share than passive viewers (per Feigua data). However, superficial novelty can fatigue audiences, necessitating continuous innovation.

Affective needs manifest through emotional sharing (positive resonance) and emotional venting (negative release), both of which deepen engagement. Regarding emotional sharing, users share content that aligns with their values or elicits joy, fostering communal bonds. For instance, R2 forwarded “funny videos” to friends, while emotional resonance with themes like female empowerment (see Picture 19) or patriotism (see Picture 27) strengthened communal identity. Age-based differences emerged: younger users sought “universal value alignment”, while older users prioritised empathy. Regarding emotional venting, criticism and self-deprecation served as cathartic outlets. Mockery of exaggerated beauty filters (see Picture 21–22) or humorous self-roasts (see Picture 23) allowed users to challenge unrealistic standards while bonding over shared frustrations. Paradoxically, negative comments boosted algorithmic visibility, as YY noted: “Notoriety is also fame.” Creators deliberately evoke emotions to provoke interaction. Titles emphasising cultural pride (Hanfu) or social issues (gender equality) spark debates, driving comment volume. However, polarising topics (e.g., feminism) risk alienating segments of the audience, necessitating careful calibration. Affective needs correlate with the highest comment rates. Videos with emotional hooks (e.g., transformation stories) saw more shares than purely informational content. However, excessive negativity (e.g., trolling) can harm creator reputations, requiring active community moderation.

Social integration -social identity, social needs, and altruism- strengthens communal bonds and sustains engagement. Regarding social identity, Content tailored to specific roles (e.g., civil servants) or subcultures (e.g., ACG fans) fostered in-group solidarity. Creators like GU emphasised using “ordinary people” to reduce perceived elitism, while cultural symbols (e.g., Hanfu) tapped into national pride, resonating with China’s rising cultural confidence. Regarding social needs, tagging friends (e.g., @ “besties”) transformed content into social currency. This behavior, rooted in China’s

one-child policy context, reflects the importance of peer validation in fashion choices. Regarding, altruism, sharing practical advice (e.g., discount alerts, R7) or warnings (e.g., product pitfalls) enhanced users' self-perception as helpful community members. Altruistic acts also strengthened offline relationships, as R11 shared content with family for collaborative decision-making. Brands design content to trigger social rituals, such as challenges encouraging user-generated content (UGC) with friends. Collaborative campaigns leverage social networks for organic reach. Social integration drives UGC creation. Altruistic users are more likely to post reviews or tutorials, while identity-driven content (e.g., Hanfu) sustains long-term fandom. However, overly niche topics (e.g., subculture fashion) may limit mass appeal.

Self-expression enables users to assert individuality and influence community norms. By commenting on polarising topics (e.g., gender roles), users engage in “public deliberation” (Habermas, 1991), shaping the community's ideological landscape. Value alignment: Users like R5 commented to “uphold justice,” while others (R2) celebrated creators as their “Internet mouthpiece.” This reflects UGT's self-presentation dimension, where engagement serves identity construction. Controversy as strategy: Creators like HR intentionally adopted contentious stances to spark debates, knowing algorithmic systems favor high-interaction content. For example, gender-themed videos attracted disproportionate comment volumes, even if divisive. Provocative titles (e.g., “What men do not understand”) are engineered to trigger debates, ensuring sustained visibility. However, this risks fostering echo chambers or toxic discourse. Self-expression correlates with the highest comment depth (e.g., threaded debates). However, Such interactions devolve into unproductive conflicts, necessitating moderation.

External rewards -discounts, gifts, or social capital- motivate transactional participation. While effective for UGC campaigns (e.g., HR's “1-yuan deals”), overuse risks gamifying engagement, where users prioritise rewards over content quality. Regarding direct incentives, discount-driven contributions achieved short-term goals but rarely fostered loyalty. Indirect incentives: Social recognition (e.g., “loyal fan” status) and algorithmic exposure (e.g., initial 200–500 views per

video) provided intangible rewards, encouraging sustained engagement. Brands balance tangible and intangible rewards to maintain authenticity. For example, limited-time offers paired with community recognition (e.g., featuring user content) blend extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Incentives boost UGC volume but not necessarily quality. Only few of reward-driven content met brand standards, highlighting the need for creative guidelines.

In the Douyin fashion community, content agenda-setting is a negotiated process between user motivations and platform mechanics. By strategically addressing hedonic, cognitive, affective, social, self-expressive, and incentive-driven needs, creators and brands can craft resonant, multi-layered content ecosystems that transcend mere visibility to foster meaningful, sustained engagement.

7.5 How should fashion short video content be created on Douyin to improve customer engagement?

The rapid proliferation of short-video platforms like Douyin has revolutionised content marketing, particularly in the fashion industry. This study synthesises Du Plessis' (2015) content marketing framework with empirical data from interviews and observational analyses to propose a dynamic model for optimizing fashion short video content on Douyin. The findings underscore the interplay of strategic, formation, intrinsic, communication, and corollary elements in driving customer engagement. The research studied the content marketing strategy model of the Douyin fashion content community designed based on the five elements. This research calls this model the Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) (Figure 10).

In DCMLM, the strategic elements are the starting point for starting content marketing. After determining reasonable strategic elements, creators can carry out content design in a more targeted manner. Strategic elements are pivotal in content marketing on Douyin, necessitating brands to align their positioning with both algorithmic logic and audience psychology. Three core positioning strategies have emerged: Audience Positioning, Tag Positioning, and Identity Positioning (IP).

Audience positioning involves segmenting users by demographics (e.g., age, location) and psychographics (e.g., interests, purchasing power), with younger audiences (18-25 years) favouring aesthetics and influencer trust, while middle-aged users prioritise practicality and reliability. User personas, derived from Douyin's interest-tagging algorithm, enable precise targeting by mirroring ByteDance's hierarchical classification system. Tag positioning focuses on "growing an account" to educate Douyin's algorithm about a brand's niche. By consistently engaging with specific content (e.g., beauty tutorials for a beauty brand), accounts acquire algorithmic "tags," ensuring content is pushed to aligned audiences, a strategy validated by Xu & Cao's (2019) patent on hierarchical interest discovery. Identity positioning (IP) distinguishes brands in a saturated market, with personal IPs resonating more with younger audiences due to emotional relatability, while corporate IPs maintain credibility among older demographics. Unique IPs leverage symbolic differentiation, such as recurring catchphrases or visual motifs, aligning with Nandan's (2005) theory of brand symbolism. Theoretically, strategic positioning bridges traditional marketing theories (Kotler's positioning theory) with platform-specific algorithmic logic, reflecting the hybrid nature of digital content ecosystems through a dual focus on human-centric segmentation and machine-readable tagging.

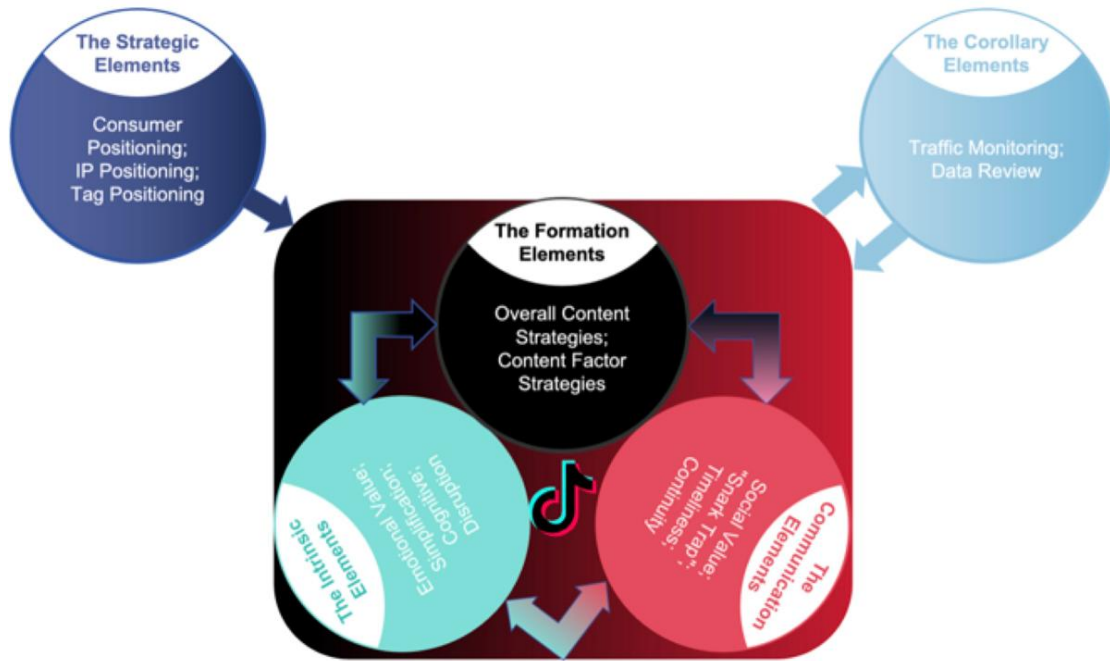


Figure 10. The Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) .

Source: Researcher

After confirming the three positions, the creators begin content creation. First they need to determine the formation elements of the content in content marketing. Formation elements are critical in shaping content production to captivate users within Douyin’s fast-paced environment, with three macro-strategies dominating the landscape: the Race Mechanism, Re-Creation, and the Golden Three Seconds. The race mechanism employs A/B testing through rapid content iteration (e.g., posting five videos daily and promoting top performers via Dou+) to identify audience preferences, ensuring the survival of the most engaging content through AI-driven feedback loops. Re-creation, though often criticised as derivative, adapts trending templates (e.g., dances, challenges) to inject novelty while minimising creative risks, capitalizing on “meme trends” where familiarity drives virality, as exemplified by lip-syncing videos. The golden three seconds strategy emphasises the importance of the initial moments of a video, demanding immediate sensory or emotional triggers (e.g., striking visuals, provocative questions) to secure viewer retention, with the

subsequent “silver 10 seconds” sustaining attention to ensure high completion rates- a key metric for algorithmic promotion. At the micro level, several content factors further enhance engagement. Duration plays a crucial role, with short videos (5-15 seconds) dominating (75.4% of observed content) due to their alignment with fragmented consumption patterns, though longer videos (30-60 seconds) can succeed with rapid pacing or compelling narrative hooks. Scene Design leverages spatial (e.g., office settings for work-wear) and temporal (e.g., holiday themes) contexts to resonate with scenario-based marketing principles (Naredla et al., 2018), while contrasting scenes (e.g., luxury attire in mundane settings) create cognitive dissonance, enhancing memorability. Captions vary from consultative (questions) to intimate (peer-like tones), driving interaction, with Y-style captions (psychologically tailored) outperforming X-style (creative but abstract) by lowering cognitive barriers. Background Music (BGM) amplifies exposure through music meme trends, while signature tracks build iconic recognition, aligning with Holt’s (2011) theory of atmospheric influence. A practical insight is that content must strike a balance between brevity and emotional resonance, leveraging both algorithmic metrics (e.g., completion rate) and human psychology (e.g., curiosity, familiarity) to maximise engagement and effectiveness.

Intrinsic elements are fundamental to ensuring that content feels organic and seamlessly integrated into users’ experiences, rather than intrusive or overtly promotional. At the heart of this approach lies emotional value, which is critical for building a genuine connection with the audience. Content that addresses specific pain points -such as body insecurity, lifestyle challenges, or personal struggles- creates a sense of empathy and relatability. For example, videos showcasing individuals overcoming fashion dilemmas or sharing personal stories of transformation often resonate deeply, sparking emotional interactions and fostering loyalty. This emotional resonance not only captivates viewers but also encourages them to engage with the content on a more personal level, transforming passive consumers into active participants. Another key aspect is simplification, which involves distilling complex messages into easily digestible and accessible formats. In the fast-paced environment

of platforms like Douyin, users often prefer content that is straightforward and immediately impactful. Slogans such as “Instantly look 20kg slimmer” or “Effortless beauty hacks” tap into cognitive heuristics like laziness and greed, appealing to users’ desire for quick and effective solutions. Additionally, visual minimalism plays a crucial role in avoiding information overload, ensuring that the core message is clear and memorable. By stripping away unnecessary complexity, brands can communicate their value proposition more effectively, making it easier for users to absorb and retain the information. Cognitive disruption further enhances engagement by introducing elements of surprise and novelty. Plot twists, such as unexpected outfit transformations or dramatic before-and-after reveals, break the monotony of predictable content and capture viewers’ attention. Similarly, secret revelations—like exposing “beauty salon scams” or sharing insider tips—leverage curiosity and novelty bias, compelling users to stay engaged. These techniques not only make the content more entertaining but also create a sense of anticipation, encouraging users to return for more.

From a theoretical perspective, these strategies align closely with Du Plessis’ (2017) intrinsic content theory, which emphasises the importance of making brands an invisible yet indispensable part of users’ daily routines. By embedding content naturally into the user experience—whether through emotional storytelling, simplified messaging, or cognitive surprises—brands can foster a sense of authenticity and trust. This approach ensures that content resonates on a deeper level, building long-term engagement without appearing forced or overly commercial. Ultimately, intrinsic elements enable brands to create content that feels less like an advertisement and more like a valuable, organic part of the user’s world, driving both loyalty and meaningful interactions.

Communication elements are central to fostering social connectivity and driving engagement on platforms like Douyin. These elements prioritise creating a sense of community and interaction, ensuring that content not only reaches users but also encourages them to participate actively. One of the key components is social value, which leverages question-driven captions and peer-tagging prompts to stimulate

user-generated content (UGC). For instance, captions that ask, “What would you wear to this event?” or “Tag a friend who needs this!” invite users to engage directly with the content, transforming passive viewers into active contributors. Additionally, intimate interactions, such as personalised replies or direct messages, mimic the dynamics of celebrity-fan relationships, fostering parasocial connections that deepen user loyalty and emotional investment. Another strategy is the “snark trap,” which incorporates provocative elements—such as sexual innuendo, class-baiting captions, or polarising statements—to spark debates and generate algorithmic traction. While this approach can significantly boost engagement by tapping into users’ emotions and curiosity, it requires careful balancing to avoid alienating audiences or compromising brand safety. Over-reliance on controversy can backfire, leading to negative perceptions or even backlash, making it essential for brands to tread carefully and maintain a nuanced approach. Continuity and timeliness are also critical to maintaining visibility and relevance. Regular updates ensure that brands remain top-of-mind for their audience, while newsjacking -leveraging trending topics or events, such as Yang Mi’s divorce or viral cultural moments- allows brands to capitalise on fleeting attention spans. By aligning content with real-time trends, brands can position themselves as timely and culturally aware, enhancing their appeal to users. However, the use of provocative strategies like snark traps raises ethical considerations. While these tactics can drive short-term engagement, they risk perpetuating stereotypes, alienating certain audience segments, or fostering toxic interactions. Brands must exercise ethical oversight to ensure that their communication strategies align with their values and do not harm their long-term reputation. Striking a balance between edginess and responsibility is crucial to maintaining trust and credibility.

In summary, communication elements that prioritise social connectivity—such as fostering social value, leveraging snark traps, and maintaining continuity—are essential for driving engagement on platforms like Douyin. However, brands must navigate these strategies with care, ensuring that their efforts to connect with audiences are both effective and ethically sound. By doing so, they can build

meaningful relationships with users while safeguarding their brand integrity

Corollary elements play a crucial role in closing the feedback loop, ensuring that content strategies are continuously refined and optimized for maximum impact. These elements focus on monitoring performance, analysing data, and making strategic adjustments to enhance engagement and reach. Traffic monitoring is a foundational aspect of this process. Douyin's traffic pool system prioritises content that demonstrates high completion rates (typically above 10%) and strong interaction ratios (e.g., likes-to-views ratios of approximately 10%). This algorithmic preference incentivises brands to create content that not only captures attention but also sustains it throughout the duration of the video. Additionally, Dou+ campaigns can be employed to amplify reach by targeting niche audiences, such as fans of similar influencers or users with specific interests. This targeted approach ensures that content is delivered to the most relevant and receptive viewers, maximising its potential for engagement. Data review further enhances the feedback loop by providing fine-grained analytics that inform content refinement. Metrics such as dropout points—where viewers tend to stop watching—help identify weaknesses in pacing, messaging, or storytelling, enabling brands to make precise adjustments. Positive-negative KPI scoring systems, which assign values to different types of engagement (e.g., +2 for follows, -1 for dislikes), offer a quantitative measure of content quality. This data-driven approach allows brands to assess not just the volume of engagement but also its nature, ensuring that interactions are meaningful and aligned with broader marketing goals. Strategic recommendation emphasises the importance of treating content marketing as an iterative process. Creativity alone is not enough; brands must blend innovative ideas with empirical adjustments based on performance data. This iterative approach ensures that content evolves in response to audience preferences and platform dynamics, maintaining relevance and effectiveness over time. By continuously testing, analysing, and refining their strategies, brands can stay ahead of trends and deliver content that resonates deeply with their target audience.

In summary, corollary elements such as traffic monitoring, data review, and strategic

recommendations are essential for closing the feedback loop in content marketing. These elements enable brands to measure performance, identify areas for improvement, and make data-driven adjustments, ensuring that their content remains engaging, relevant, and impactful in the ever-changing digital landscape.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter underscores the principal contributions of this study and assesses the importance of the topic for future research in content marketing on social media platforms. It begins with a recapitulation of the key findings of this study. Subsequently, the chapter examines how these findings enhance academic understanding of the current value of content marketing and proceeds to investigate the implications of these findings especially for management practices. The chapter ends with an evaluation of the study's limitations, detailing specific measures taken to mitigate the impact of these limitations and offering recommendations for future research.

8.2 Goals met by the study

Based on the research framework of agenda-setting theory, this study aims to enhance the theoretical understanding of communication effects within content marketing research. Utilising the uses and gratifications theory, it further seeks to examine the impact of user motivation and perception on brand content marketing within the Douyin fashion community. The ultimate objective is to advance content marketing theory within content communities, thereby improving brand engagement and communication results, and providing actionable insights for marketers.

8.2.1 Douyin is Intrinsically a Content Marketing Platform

The first research question of this project is: what are the features that set Douyin apart from other platforms? This study identifies four main features, two of which are positive (traffic distribution system and interest-based e-commerce) and two of which are negative (single attribute and high consumption). Central to these findings are the contextual elements provided by the platform for this study. The two positive features highlight the unique advantages and differences of Douyin as a content marketing platform compared to others. Brands should select platforms with a large user base for

their marketing initiatives. Currently, Douyin has the most active users in mainland China.

Secondly, Douyin engages users for long periods, often leading to addiction to the platform. This situation provides brands with more opportunities to reach potential customers. Additionally, compared to other platforms, Douyin offers a more equitable environment for access, irrespective of brand awareness and image. As long as the content posted by the brand is of high quality and resonates with the platform's users, high levels of exposure for the brand's content are inevitable. Most content on the platform is distributed based on algorithms targeting specific audiences. Brands on Douyin should focus more on understanding the algorithmic recommendation system and the quality of their content, as these are crucial factors in leveraging the platform's algorithmic dominance. Douyin also offers a paid promotion service, "Dou+", but interviews suggest that this service is more akin to "adding icing on the cake" than "throwing a lifeline". If the video quality is poor, even the promotion service proves ineffective.

Finally, Douyin's random playback feature has been criticised for its strong limitations in building relationships (Wright, 2021). Wright (2020) contends that the random play on the "For You" page, while keeping users engaged on the platform for extended periods, does not allow them to consistently follow specific creators. This system often causes users to forget about a creator until they encounter their content again, which weakens brand relationships. However, the platform is continuously being updated and iterated. Current research indicates that this issue has been effectively addressed with the introduction of the "die-hard fans" system, which is an excellent solution for establishing stronger relationships on Douyin. In essence, once a user views a single piece of a brand's content on the "For You" page, the algorithm begins to push more of that brand's content to the user, fostering solid relationship building, even if the user takes no further action.

The features described above are positive constitutive elements for all users and creators across the platform. Additionally, Douyin's interest-based e-commerce program, which is strongly promoted, serves as a direct positive factor for brands to

initiate marketing activities on Douyin. The platform also utilises collaborative AI filtering to more accurately identify and match target customers with marketing videos. Algorithmic interest-based recommendations make audiences more receptive to subtly integrated “marketing content”. Studies have shown that customers inadvertently encountering algorithmically suggested "marketing content" that appeals to them is an effective marketing strategy. The study found that customers' inadvertent “encounters” with algorithmically suggested “marketing content” that they might like was an effective marketing strategy.

Nevertheless, the research identifies significant challenges stemming from the single attribute feature of Douyin. Firstly, most users do not visit the platform with the intent to obtain product information or make purchases. This leads to a robust aversion among the audience to overt marketing content, which can subsequently foster resistance to the brand. Reflecting on this, the research suggests that since Douyin is predominantly entertainment-based, brands entering the Douyin community should carefully tailor their content creation to align more closely with the platform's entertainment-centric attributes and audience preferences.

Moreover, the second negative feature of Douyin—high competition—emerges from this analysis. As brands need to design their social media content marketing strategies more thoughtfully, they require more time and effort to be effective. Additionally, brands within the same category face intense competition on Douyin, where one of the key competitive factors is the continual innovation of content design. While generating short-lived inspiration is feasible, the challenge lies in maintaining consistent content creativity. Ultimately, this intense pressure leads some smaller brands to capitulate.

In conclusion, the positive features identified in this study affirm that Douyin is an effective content marketing platform that brands can leverage. Douyin's unique content recommendation system encourages users to spend more time on the platform compared to others, providing brands with enhanced opportunities to reach potential customers. Additionally, through the continuous optimization of its algorithm, Douyin enables brands to build strong relationships with potential customers by offering

quality, non-intrusive content, akin to the approach Du Plessis (2017) describes for engaging customers within a community. Furthermore, the interest-based e-commerce project, supported by the collaborative filtering system, offers additional support for brands to reach more potential customers with non-invasive premium content. Although this study also highlights current challenges with Douyin as a marketing platform, such as the homogenisation of platform attributes and the high expenses for brands, it argues that the key is developing an appropriate content marketing strategy to effectively navigate these issues. This research enhances understanding of Douyin's capabilities as a marketing platform and corroborates its effectiveness in content marketing, emphasising the importance of quality content delivery to customers.

One of the goals of this research is to analyse critically the emergence of Douyin within the wider field of social network marketing studies. As a social media content marketing platform, Douyin distinguishes itself through a unique combination of algorithmic design, user engagement mechanisms, and a dynamic content ecosystem that collectively shapes its appeal for brands. The platform's traffic allocation mechanisms, including its fair distribution algorithm and loyalty fan system, democratise visibility and reduce customer acquisition costs while fostering deeper brand-user relationships through personalised content recommendations. This dual emphasis on algorithmic fairness and relational quality challenges traditional notions of platform-mediated engagement, aligning with relationship marketing theories prioritising emotional connections over mere exposure. Furthermore, Douyin's transition to interest-based e-commerce, facilitated by collaborative filtering and simplified consumption pathways, enables serendipitous discovery and seamless integration of entertainment and commerce, enhancing customer engagement while intensifying competition among brands. However, the platform's addictive nature, driven by infinite scroll and personalised content, presents a double-edged sword. While it increases user-brand interaction opportunities, it also risks cognitive overload and message dilution, necessitating a balance between content frequency and creativity. Douyin's high-consumption environment prioritises strategic creativity

over technical sophistication, underscoring the need for innovative, non-intrusive content strategies. This study highlights the absence of a standardised content marketing strategy model for Douyin as a critical gap, emphasising the platform's unique challenges and opportunities for brands navigating its complex ecosystem.

8.2.2 Agenda-setting and Customer Engagement: A New Perspective on Content Marketing

The second research question of the project is: does the content agenda-setting effect within the Douyin fashion community impact customer engagement behaviour? The research examines the role and influence of content agenda-setting on customer engagement behaviour (CEB) within the Douyin fashion community. The study reveals that users' perceptions of agenda-setting content significantly impact their CEB. Thus, it validates the impact of agenda-setting effects on CEB in the Douyin fashion community and supports the communication effects theory as a framework for measuring the efficacy of content marketing within the community.

Leveraging the explanatory strength of agenda-setting theory, the research further assesses the influence of media use on CEB and explores variations in the relationship between community agenda-setting and CEB, attributable to differing levels of Need for Orientation (NFO) as a psychological motivator on Douyin. Although no substantial effects of varying NFO levels on the community's CEB were discovered, the study identifies a partially significant difference in the path relationship between media use and agenda setting among the high NFO group compared to other groups. This finding indicates that different NFO levels modify how audiences experience agenda-setting effectiveness in fashion communities. It also underscores the presence of agenda-setting effects in Douyin content communities and affirms the practicality of applying agenda-setting theory, traditionally rooted in media studies, to social media business research.

The research findings related to objective 1 enabled the study to ascertain the extent to which Douyin's overall characteristics are crucial for content quality and content

creation in branded content marketing. The evidence concerning Objective 2 allows the research to assess the impact of content community agendas on the effectiveness of audience agenda-setting.

The results fundamentally affirm the validity of content marketing within Douyin's fashion community. The Douyin fashion community is capable of executing effective content marketing strategies. The research emphasises that content marketing revolves around brands engaging with their customers in the community through the dissemination of non-invasive content. For our purposes, non-invasive content is defined as content that aligns with the community's theme. This study substantiates that community content can shape customer behaviour; therefore, when devising content, brands should integrate more of the community's thematic elements to attract potential customers and amplify the impact of content marketing.

8.2.3 A Deep Dive into Customer Motivations in Content Marketing Engagement

The third research question of this project is: which customer motivations and needs for using media have an impact on content agenda setting in the Douyin fashion community and to what extent do these motivations influence customer engagement behaviour? Employing the explanatory framework of UGT in analysing the data collected for this project, it was revealed that six primary motives drive customer engagement in Douyin's fashion content community: Hedonic, cognitive, social integration, affective, self-expression, and incentive-driven needs. Echoing the findings of prior research, these motives represent the principal reasons why people engage with social media platforms universally (Silaban et al., 2022; Cornlissen et al., 2019; Lim & Kumar, 2019).

However, the six motivations do not operate in isolation but intersect dynamically, creating a multifaceted framework for content engagement. Understanding these intersections is key to crafting strategies that resonate deeply with audiences and drive meaningful interactions. Hedonic-Cognitive Synergy is a powerful intersection where

entertainment meets utility. For example, entertaining tutorials that combine humor with practical advice -such as humorous styling hacks or witty life tips- appeal to a broader audience by satisfying both the desire for enjoyment and the need for useful information. This synergy ensures that content is not only engaging but also valuable, increasing its likelihood of being shared and remembered. Affective-Social Loops highlight the interplay between emotional resonance and social connectivity. Content that evokes strong emotions -such as transformation stories, heartfelt narratives, or inspiring journeys -paired with social sharing features can amplify reach exponentially. When users are emotionally moved, they are more likely to share the content, creating a ripple effect that extends its visibility and impact. Self-Expression as Amplifier leverages the human desire for individuality and self-representation. Polarising or thought-provoking content -such as bold fashion statements, controversial opinions, or niche interests -encourages users to express their views through comments, shares, or reactions. This self-expression not only boosts engagement but also signals to algorithms that the content is highly interactive, further enhancing its ranking and visibility.

The third research objective of the research aimed to discern the various motivations behind customer engagement levels with community content. The outcomes of this study narrow the existing gap in understanding customer perspectives in content marketing, simultaneously delineating various customer engagement behaviours linked to diverse motivations, thereby enhancing the analysis of customer motivations within content marketing. From the customers' perspective, their fundamental needs are consistent, regardless of whether they engage with Douyin's fashion content community or other social media platforms. This study delves deeper into the specific motivations behind varying levels of customer engagement behaviours within the community. Through meticulous coding and summary of the data, the research identifies that six specific motives drive customers to consume community content, eight motives encourage them to contribute to the community, and three distinct motives influence them to create community content (Figure 7). These insights enable brands to craft content marketing strategies that effectively stimulate customer

motivation based on varied needs, thereby achieving the desired marketing outcomes. As noted above, the achievement of objective 1 underscores the importance of content quality for brands engaging in Douyin content marketing. The completion of Objective 2 lends theoretical support from communication theory to content marketing strategies within the Douyin fashion community. To increase effectiveness, content marketing strategies in Douyin communities should be aligned with community themes. The fulfilment of Objective 3 offers an in-depth exploration of the specific motivations behind varying customer engagement behaviours within the community, presenting a novel perspective on content marketing theory from the consumer's viewpoint. The findings from this analysis can assist brands in better understanding and meeting users' needs, thereby increasing the efficacy of content marketing strategies.

8.2.4 Crafting Content Marketing Models for Douyin's Fashion Community: Insights and Innovations

The final research question of the project is: how should fashion short video content be created on Douyin to improve customer engagement? This study extends Du Plessis' (2015) framework by integrating platform-specific dynamics and cultural nuances. The DCMLM (Figure 10) emphasises a cyclical relationship between strategic positioning, content creation, and data refinement. Its core features are:

Algorithmic Symbiosis: Success hinges on educating AI through consistent tagging and leveraging its feedback (traffic pools) to optimise content.

Emotional Primacy: Content must balance rational appeal (product features) with emotional triggers (humour, empathy) to sustain engagement.

Cultural Adaptation: Localised strategies resonate deeper than generic templates. To thrive on Douyin, fashion brands must master a trifecta: strategic precision in the audience and algorithmic alignment, creative agility in content design, and data-driven adaptability. By harmonising these elements, brands can transform fleeting views into lasting engagement, turning users into advocates in Douyin's

hyper-competitive arena.

The fourth research objective of the project to develop a content marketing strategy model for Douyin's fashion content community, leveraging the insights from De Plessis's work on content marketing (2015) and the data collected during this project. The first three research objectives provide both practical and theoretical foundations for this fourth objective, analysing in detail the characteristics that make Douyin effective as a content marketing platform.

De Plessis (2015) emphasises that each brand must establish its unique positioning. From the DCMLM, it is evident that three positioning strategies -Audience positioning, Identity positioning, and Tag positioning- are refined as critical strategic elements that externally influence overall content creation. These strategies form the foundation of the conventional content marketing model. By relying on these strategic elements, brands can clarify how they should be recognised by algorithms, define their community personas, and effectively reach their target customers within the community. Only when these three strategic elements are clearly identified can future content marketing efforts be successful.

De Plessis (2015) identifies three key elements: Formative, intrinsic, and communicative elements. This research project has expanded on these by uncovering a circular dependency among the three. Intrinsic elements set the potential criteria for content creation, communication elements define the proficiency of the content, and formative elements ultimately manifest the content criteria through specific content components, showcasing the content's capabilities to evoke strong perceptions of the brand, which in turn captures audience interest and attention. These three elements are found to be cyclical and together form an effective content marketing strategy, where each element is contingent upon the presence of the other two.

The final element identified by De Plessis (2015) is the corollary element, which pertains to the anticipated outcomes of content posting. De Plessis argues that content should convert consumers into brand advocates as its expected result. However, the findings of this study indicate that such a transformation cannot be achieved with only a single piece of content; it requires a sustained, long-term effort. Specifically, brands

must maintain a prolonged presence on the platform, enabling consumers to develop a routine of engaging with the brand's content, thereby actualising the goals of content marketing. A critical prerequisite for achieving this desired effect is a deep understanding of how consumers perceive each piece of content. Accordingly, this study emphasises the importance of video data analysis for gauging the effectiveness of content marketing strategies. As a corollary, analysing data from branded content provides insights into consumer preferences and allows brands to adapt their content marketing strategies effectively, ultimately fostering consumer conversion into brand advocates. The developed content marketing model includes an inferential element as the concluding process, which interacts with the content design element. Once content is released, the brand can analyse its data performance to discern consumer preferences, thus offering informed recommendations for future content design. This inferential process creates an external feedback loop with the three content design elements in the DCMLM.

8.2.5 Forward-looking analysis

The rapid evolution of social media platforms, driven by advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and mobile technology, necessitates a forward-looking analysis of content marketing's trajectory. Building on the Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) developed in this thesis, this section examines three critical dimensions of potential future impact: (1) the transformative role of AI in content creation and platform dynamics; (2) the cross-cultural adaptability of Douyin's content marketing paradigm; and (3) the potential for expansion of the DCMLM framework to industries beyond fashion. These perspectives underscore how technological innovation, cultural pluralism, and industrial diversification will redefine content marketing strategies in the coming decade.

Generative AI is poised to revolutionise content creation on Douyin, enabling hyper-personalised narratives that blur the lines between human and machine creativity. The DCMLM's emphasis on algorithmic symbiosis will intensify as brands

leverage AI tools to automate video scripting, optimise hashtag positioning, and predict trending formats. For instance, AI could analyse real-time engagement data to dynamically adjust a video's BGM or pacing mid-upload, aligning with the emotional primacy principle identified in the DCMLM. However, this raises critical questions about authenticity and algorithmic bias. If AI-generated influencers dominate Douyin's fashion community, brands risk homogenising content to appease recommendation algorithms, eroding the self-expression and cultural adaptation elements central to the DCMLM.

Collaborative filtering systems underpin Douyin's interest-based e-commerce and may evolve into predictive persuasion engines. By analysing micro-gestures (such as pause duration and swipe-back frequency), AI could infer users' unconscious preferences and deliver content that manipulates purchasing decisions through subliminal cues. While this aligns with the DCMLM's cognitive disruption strategy, it exacerbates concerns about "passive planting seed" tactics and artificial need creation. Simultaneously, AI could democratise content creation, addressing the research-identified challenge of "high competition." Smaller brands might use AI tools to simulate successful campaigns' simplification and social value elements, reducing reliance on creative agencies. However, this risks saturating the platform with formulaic content, necessitating updates to the DCMLM's continuity and timeliness principles. Brands may need to prioritise AI-augmented creativity -human-led ideation enhanced by machine learning- to maintain differentiation.

Furthermore, while this study focuses on China's digital ecosystem, the DCMLM's emphasis on cultural adaptation and algorithmic symbiosis holds significant implications for TikTok (Douyin's global counterpart) and emerging short-video platforms in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, cultural nuances will demand strategic recalibration. For example, the DCMLM's hedonic-cognitive synergy -effective in China's collectivist context- may require rebalancing in individualistic markets. Western users often exhibit more scepticism toward algorithmically recommended content, as seen in TikTok's #NotMyAlgorithm movement, where users resist perceived manipulation. Future iterations of the

DCMLM must incorporate cultural friction coefficients to adjust strategies for local trust thresholds.

The addictive design critique central to this study's ethical analysis will gain urgency in global markets. Europe's Digital Services Act (DSA) and U.S. state-level social media regulations already target infinite scroll and algorithmic amplification. Platforms adopting the DCMLM abroad may need to replace Douyin's "die-hard fans" system with opt-in engagement models that prioritise user control, potentially weakening the DCMLM's tag positioning efficacy. Comparative studies could test whether the DCMLM's loyalty loop- where sustained content output builds advocacy -translates to markets with stricter data privacy laws.

Emerging markets offer a testing ground for the DCMLM's scalability. In India's Moj or Indonesia's SnackVideo, where smartphone penetration outpaces e-commerce infrastructure, the interest-based e-commerce component of the DCMLM may need reworking. Brands might prioritise offline integration -using short videos to drive QR code scans or in-store promotions- rather than direct sales. This hybrid approach could extend the DCMLM's applicability beyond purely digital ecosystems.

Finally, the DCMLM, developed for Douyin's fashion community, provides a blueprint for the education and healthcare industries. For instance, the model's emotional primacy and cognitive disruption elements could transform how online courses are marketed in the edutainment sector. A maths tutoring brand might create 15-second videos blending humour with problem-solving techniques (hedonic-cognitive synergy), using AI to tailor difficulty levels based on user engagement patterns. Similarly, healthcare brands could apply the DCMLM's social value principle to promote mental wellness content, though ethical safeguards would be critical to avoid exploiting vulnerable audiences.

The DCMLM's corollary element -data-driven optimisation- will prove vital for industries with longer sales cycles. Real estate brands, for example, could use engagement metrics to identify which virtual home tours (simplified via AR filters) resonate most with young buyers, iterating content to emphasise features highlighted in comment sections. However, this requires extending the DCMLM's feedback loop

to integrate offline conversion data, challenging the model's current digital-centric design.

Non-commercial applications present the most radical opportunity. Public institutions could adapt the DCMLM to drive social good, testing whether algorithmic symbiosis can prioritise civic value over profit. A climate advocacy group, for instance, might use the DCMLM's tag positioning strategy to push educational content about carbon footprints into the feeds of high-consumption users. Success here would validate the model's flexibility but necessitate platform partnerships, a frontier area for research.

8.3 Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to the expansion of content marketing theory, refining and building upon foundational theoretical frameworks such as agenda-setting theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Moreover, this research extends the body of knowledge on social media marketing platforms, with a particular focus on Douyin.

Firstly, this study seeks to detail the characteristics of Douyin as a tool in social media marketing. As AI algorithms become increasingly prevalent, this research enhances our understanding of Douyin by summarising its distinct features. The insights garnered about Douyin offer valuable suggestions and guidance for future investigations into algorithm-driven social media platforms.

Secondly, by employing agenda-setting theory to examine the communicative impacts of content marketing, this study elucidates how the extent to which customers perceive community content influences their engagement with the Douyin fashion community.

This study's significant contribution lies in addressing a void in the existing content marketing literature by highlighting the importance of content dissemination effects on customer behaviour, moving beyond traditional research that focuses solely on content effectiveness. This approach underscores the pivotal role of content communication effects in content marketing and furnishes both theoretical insights

and practical guidance for brands devising content marketing strategies on social media platforms.

This study also enhances the theoretical framework of agenda-setting theory. Traditionally applied in political and mass media contexts to examine how media shapes public attention and attitudes towards issues, this study pioneers the application of agenda-setting theory within content marketing in the Douyin fashion content community. It demonstrates that the theory provides substantial explanatory value in marketing communications. Specifically, it reveals how on platforms like Douyin, branded content can significantly shape users' perceptions and engagement with brands and products by setting the agenda. This extends the applicability of agenda-setting theory and supports its empirical relevance in novel research areas. The study encourages future research to explore the agenda-setting effects within business communication studies. It finds that community agenda-setting behaviours in the Douyin fashion community notably impact customer engagement behaviours (CEB). Agenda-setting is traditionally viewed as a learning process (Moon et al., 2012), and this learning extends beyond political or news communication. In community settings, consumers absorb attributes set by brands or creators, access information, and interact with them, with the agenda-setting effect emerging as a strong predictor of CEB, demonstrated through the application of the uses and gratifications theory from media studies.

Furthermore, the study confirms that the intensity of media use on the platform also influences the impact of community agenda-setting. This finding is consistent with traditional agenda-setting studies. Additionally, media use impacts CEB both directly and indirectly through agenda-setting effects, expanding the scope of CEB research. Previous studies on CEB antecedents have focused on consumers' psychological characteristics and subjective needs as motives (Carlson et al., 2019; Algharabat et al., 2020; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Oliveira & Fernandes, 2020; Quach et al., 2019; Samala et al., 2014), neglecting how users' extended exposure and engagement with brand content directly influence CEB. While consumers' psychological traits and needs may

drive their media use, they do not fully account for users' media consumption behaviour.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on customer engagement behaviours (CEB) by suggesting, for the first time, that different motivations drive different types of CEBs. Previous studies have explored the motivations for CEB on social media based on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Dolan et al., 2015; Kamboj, 2020). However, the specific motives behind different levels of CEB have not been thoroughly examined. This research refines and expands the understanding of motivation for CEB. It identifies six motivational needs—hedonic, cognitive, social integration, emotional, self-expression, and reward needs—that propel consumer engagement, aligning with findings from earlier studies (Dolan et al., 2015; Kamboj, 2020). The study synthesises these insights, concluding that self-satisfaction, encompassing hedonic and cognitive needs, primarily motivates shallow CEB (consumption). Social needs—comprising emotional needs, self-expression, and social integration—are key drivers of deeper CEB (contribution). The deepest level of CEB (creation) is driven by more profit-oriented needs, including reward and altruistic needs. This revelation enhances the motivational research in CEB and offers a new dimension to the application of UGT.

Finally, building on the results of these theoretical expansions, this study develops the Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM) for fashion brands on Douyin, refining and contextualising the key components and the model of branded content marketing strategy as proposed by De Plessis (2015).

By unpacking the Douyin content marketing model, the study specifically interprets several crucial elements proposed by De Plessis (2015), tailoring them to the research. Firstly, the research categorises the strategic elements into three distinct targeting strategies: Audience positioning, tag positioning, and identity positioning. Second, regarding the formation elements outlined by De Plessis (2015), this study divides these into two categories: Overall Content Strategy and Content Factor Strategy. Within the Content Factor Strategy, the study examines key aspects such as duration, background music (BGM), and scene in detail. Third, the research introduces three

intrinsic elements - Simplification, Cognitive Disruption, and Emotional Value - that are posited to impact the efficacy of content marketing. Fourth, in addressing the communication element, the study identifies four current critical elements that can encourage consumer interaction with brands: Social Value, “Snark Trap”, Continuity, and Timeliness. Lastly, the research explores corollary elements, enhancing this area with the addition of data visualisation of content to analyse customer reactions as a novel aspect of corollary elements. Unlike previous studies that focused on customer advocacy as a corollary element, the results of content visualisation (data representation) provide brands with deeper insights into consumer behaviour, enabling them to swiftly adapt to consumer preferences. This adaptation not only improves their standing in consumers’ minds but also has the potential to convert consumers into brand advocates.

By synthesising all these elements, the research constructs a comprehensive Douyin content marketing model (Figure 11). This model elaborates on the key components of content marketing from earlier studies, detailing their interactions and processes, and offers a solid theoretical framework to support and guide future research on social media content marketing.

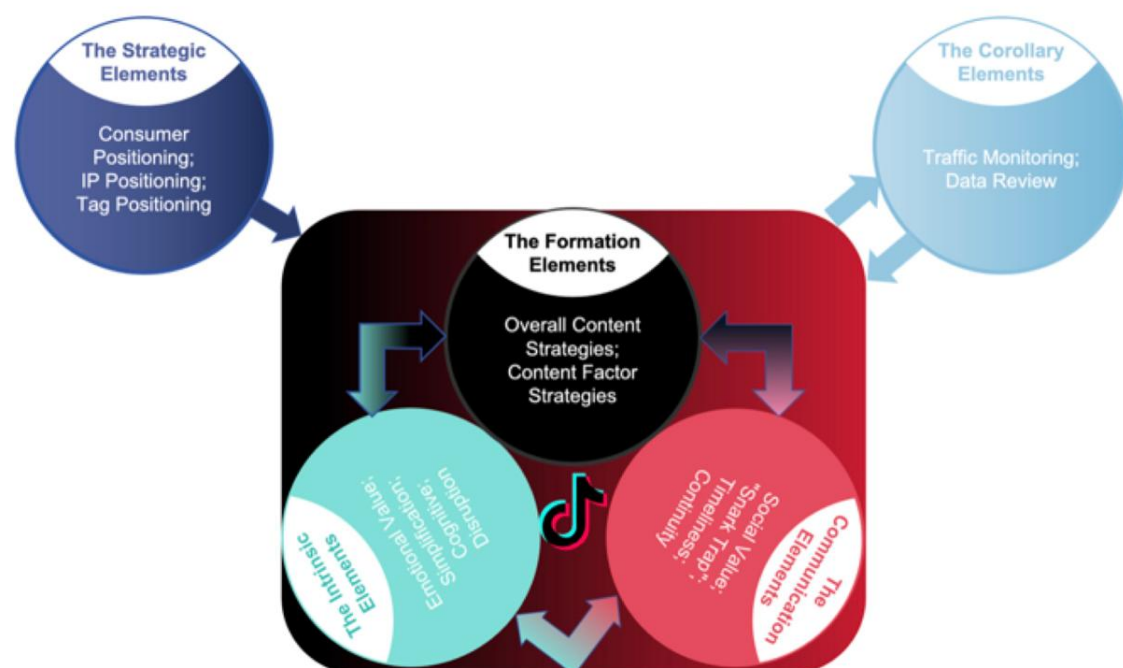


Figure 11. The Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM)

8.4 Practical implication

In the previous section of this chapter, the research outlined the contributions of this study to the academic literature. In contrast, this section will discuss the practical implications of the study's critical findings, aiming to detail how these insights can guide brands toward achieving effective content marketing, improved CEB, and thus a successful brand marketing strategy.

Firstly, the study highlights Douyin's effectiveness as a social media marketing platform, particularly for fashion brands. These analyses enable brands to grasp the platform's advantageous features. By integrating these attributes with a brand's strategy before entering the Douyin fashion community, brands can more effectively develop their content marketing strategies. Businesses utilizing Douyin for marketing need to strike a balance that increases brand visibility while respecting user experience and attention. Rather than exploiting users' addictive tendencies, they should focus on providing valuable, engaging, and non-intrusive content.

Secondly, the identification of negative platform aspects by the research alerts brands to potential challenges they may face upon entering the Douyin fashion community. This awareness helps brands pre-emptively identify problems and devise strategies to address them, ultimately enabling the realisation of the most effective social media marketing strategy within the Douyin fashion community.

The second practical value of this study lies in providing brands with insights into the relationship between the effectiveness of content distribution and CEB. Customer engagement, defined by Hamelin et al. (2017) as a company's deliberate effort to incentivize, empower, and measure the voluntary contributions of customers to the company's marketing functions, is increasingly vital for brands. Furthermore, the effectiveness of social media content distribution is essential for brands to secure voluntary contributions from consumers. Effective content marketing strategies provide numerous benefits to companies, including access to customers' online assets, creativity, and persuasive capital (Harmelling et al., 2017). These non-transactional

advantages play a crucial role in maintaining and developing customer-brand relationships in the contemporary Douyin marketing landscape.

Notably, due to Douyin's characteristics, these non-transactional interactions significantly influence the depth and breadth of branded content distribution. As CEB is directly fed back to the platform's AI, it evaluates these engagement behaviours to decide whether to continue disseminating specific branded content. This study, therefore, provides guidance for branded content dissemination and efforts to improve CEB on Douyin. It confirms the effectiveness of the agenda-setting effect in enhancing customer engagement. Brands should consider the main topics within specific Douyin content communities and strive to align their content with these topics to engage consumers non-intrusively.

Additionally, this study finds that media use significantly boosts CEB, offering brands various methods to sustain consumer interest and increase media exposure. These may include initiatives like daily check-ins, incentives, or multimedia creation methods to intensify media use and thus more effectively stimulate customer engagement.

Moreover, based on the key issues, brands can tailor the core of their content to align with various objectives. The research encourages organisations to develop distinct content marketing strategies for different marketing goals. Although there are three levels of customer engagement, it does not imply that high customer engagement (creation) is superior to low customer engagement (consumption). It represents a unique marketing objective that brands must address according to the circumstances. If a company aims to enhance customer engagement, publishing content with altruistic elements and reward schemes can significantly boost consumers' creative activity on Douyin. Rewards may take the form of direct financial incentives (such as discount coupons, coupon codes, cash) or indirect financial rewards (like special brand memberships or preferential purchasing rights for branded products) for each consumer who retweets or generates user-generated content (UGC). Altruism can be seen as focusing on the relationship aspects that are most important to the target consumer when crafting content. For instance, if a brand specialises in clothing for the elderly, the heart of the brand's marketing content might focus on family and

intergenerational relationships, topics that are likely to engage this demographic and inspire content creation.

If a company aims to achieve a moderate level of engagement, its content marketing strategy should prioritise increasing interaction through addressing the social needs of consumers and catering to their emotional, self-expression, and social integration needs. Emotional needs can be met through content that resonates emotionally or provides catharsis for the target audience. Self-expression can be facilitated by content that allows the brand to share its perspectives or opinions on various topics. Such content often prompts agreement or disagreement from the target audience, eventually sparking widespread discussions between them and the brand. The desire for social integration can typically be fulfilled by incorporating elements into videos that encourage viewers to connect socially and engage in discussions about the content. Research indicates that the most frequently employed type of content is ‘Come on @yourbestie to join you...’. This approach tends to increase interactions both between consumers and the brand and among consumers themselves, thereby boosting the brand’s visibility and reputation.

Finally, some brands may need only minimal engagement behaviours for a specific period, which could be an effective content marketing strategy for those new to the community or lesser-known brands aiming to promote themselves within the community. They may find it advantageous to incorporate straightforward content that features entertaining or educational attributes into their videos. This type of content is more likely to captivate potential customers and subtly draw their attention to the brand’s message. New brands should begin with such content and progressively work towards more actively engaging their target consumer community.

The third significant contribution of this research is the development of the model tailored for the Douyin fashion community, which directly informs brands’ marketing strategies. Initially, brands assess consumer needs before selecting an appropriate marketing strategy, namely consumer targeting. Brands must understand the characteristics of their target customers, which include demographics, interests, social identity, group status, and emotional values prevalent within the group. They should

then identify one or more subgroups on the platform as potential consumers. Moreover, on Douyin, compared to other platforms, brands need to facilitate accurate recognition by the recommendation algorithm, thereby implementing a content promotion strategy, or tag positioning. This requires brands to consistently produce specific and relevant content that allows the AI to accurately deliver their posts to the screens of potential customers. Consequently, brands should grasp the preferred content styles and formats of potential customers, using these insights to formulate and persistently execute a content promotion strategy that increases AI recognition. Additionally, given the diverse and changeable preferences of potential consumers, brands must also strategically package themselves before engaging the consumer base, identified as positioning (IP). This step is crucial for brands to distinguish themselves from competitors and captivate consumers. Opting for a straightforward and personalised IP could be advantageous, yet brands are encouraged to use their creativity to stand out and be more attractive than their rivals. By employing these three positioning analyses, brands can more effectively penetrate the community for content marketing.

In the second step, after entering the community, the brand should engage potential consumers with a non-intrusive content marketing strategy. This gentle approach to content creation is detailed in the The Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM), which elucidates how the themes mentioned in the formation element relate to the constituent elements of the video. This understanding aids the brand in recognising the function and impact of various elements in crafting effective marketing content. The intrinsic element enhances the brand's grasp of the video's overall tone—for example, adding more emotional value to the video to capture consumer attention through consistent output. Additionally, in response to an unexpected event or an upcoming holiday, brands should swiftly adapt their content strategy to capture consumer interest as quickly as possible. The communication element equips brands with the ability to create a compelling 'hook'—a crucial component in content that drives consumer engagement and attention. The synergy of these three elements in the model guides brands in content creation on the platform.

Finally, as brands deploy content into the community, they must also conduct a thorough analysis of the marketing content using visual data, leading to continuous optimisation and enhancement of content quality and an uptick in consumer engagement, ultimately fostering growth in interest. The research provides detailed advice on necessary data analysis techniques, such as examining the video ‘like’ curve, identifying the point at which likes peaked, and analysing why users favoured the video at that specific moment. Brands are advised to document the outcomes of each analysis. Armed with these insights, the brand can pinpoint the type of video content that resonates with users. Ultimately, brands can craft new marketing content based on this successful video format.

8.5 Limitations of this study and future research

An evident limitation of this study is its focus on social media marketing specifically within the Douyin fashion community. Consequently, the findings may not be fully applicable to other platforms, which differ in functionality and content marketing features. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that such limitations are common in research, and previous studies have examined various marketing strategies for different social media platforms (Evans, 2010; Lee et al., 2014; Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). The insights from this study are likely more relevant to algorithm-driven social media platforms like Douyin. However, it remains to be determined whether the results can be entirely generalised to other algorithm-driven platforms. Looking forward, with the ongoing advancement of algorithms and artificial intelligence, future research should consider using different algorithm-driven platforms as study subjects. Scholars are encouraged to test the applicability of these findings in various settings or extend them to a wider range of fields.

Secondly, current research lacks a theoretical distinction between content and content marketing. To strengthen conceptual rigour, “content” remains under-theorised in marketing literature, often conflated with broader digital media. Future research could adopt a phenomenological approach to “unpack” content by examining its context (such as, platform-specific affordances), intent (user-generated vs. branded), and

temporality (ephemeral stories vs. evergreen posts). This direction would enable a more granular taxonomy, distinguishing, for example, between “organic content” (user-driven) and “curated content marketing” (brand-driven) -a distinction only partially addressed in this study.

Furthermore, although this study proposes a discussion section based on Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory, the analysis explores how content marketing on Douyin achieves a “sweet spot” between entertainment and persuasion by fostering intrinsic motivation. However, the framework critically interrogates when this absorption transitions into problematic addiction, such as compulsive scrolling behaviors driven by algorithmic reinforcement. In future research, more topics on “focus” can be carried out based on the power relations and privacy settings between platforms, enterprises, and users.

Other limitations of this study, in relation to agenda-setting theory, emerge primarily in two areas, and suggestions for future research directions are also provided. Firstly, this study is an initial effort to apply agenda-setting theory in a marketing context, specifically assessing its effectiveness for brands in the Douyin fashion community. Future research should expand to include a wider range of social media platforms to increase the theory’s relevance in social media brand marketing. Additionally, while this study features a substantial sample size ($n=607$), future studies should consider increasing the sample size to improve generalisability. Furthermore, this research employed a cross-sectional correlational design, where data was collected over time. According to Leckie, Nyadzayo, and Johnson (2016), this approach has limitations as it captures a participant’s evaluation of a phenomenon at a single point in time, which may not reflect the dynamic nature of the phenomenon. However, given that this method has been frequently used in previous brand communication research and has consistently produced valuable insights (Booth & Matic, 2011; Amoakko et al., 2017), the research upholds the validity of this data collection approach for this study.

The third limitation of this study concerns the findings of Customer Engagement (CE) research. While the study provides an intuitive examination of CE through its

behavioural dimensions, it is important to recognise that CE is inherently multidimensional. Future research could improve understanding of how brand content dissemination influences CE by incorporating both cognitive and emotional dimensions.

Furthermore, Dolan et al. (2016) analyse the impact of social media content on Customer Engagement Behaviours (CEB) considering both positive and negative valences, whereas the present study focuses solely on consumers' reactions to content and the motives behind their behaviours in terms of positive valence engagement behaviours, potentially introducing bias. This is because a single motive can lead to outcomes with both positive and negative valences. However, the primary goal of this study was to explore the motivation behind CEB and to establish a theoretical foundation for the Douyin content marketing model. Therefore, focusing on the positive valence effect of motivation alone can still provide theoretical support for the model. Nevertheless, the research suggests that future studies could benefit from revisiting the model based on the negative valence effect to more dialectically refine the model paradigm.

The final limitation of this study pertains to the developed Douyin Content Marketing Loop Model (DCMLM). Initially, this model was generalised based on the Douyin fashion community as the subject. Furthermore, the generalisation method is naturally prone to data bias and data omission, stemming from limitations in sample size and the complexity involved in data synthesis. Additionally, despite the research's efforts to remain reflective, objective, and neutral throughout the research process, the generalised model is inevitably influenced by the research's subjective interpretation. The research anticipates that future research will optimise and refine the model using a deductive approach, treating each theme in this study's model as a variable. Ultimately, future research of this nature may lead to the development of a still more robust and convincing content marketing model.

The research process of this study discusses exclusively the content marketing strategy and content distribution model of Douyin from a commercial perspective. However, the ethical critique of Douyin's content marketing ecosystem should be of

concern in future studies. The concept of “passive planting seed” is critically examined as a strategy that exploits psychological vulnerabilities: by embedding commercial messages in seemingly neutral entertainment, brands artificially cultivate needs that users may not recognize as externally imposed. This raises ethical concerns about autonomy (do users freely choose to engage, or are they nudged by addictive content design?) and transparency (are marketing partnerships adequately disclosed?). The analysis further should highlight tensions between platform responsibility and commercial imperatives. While Douyin’s collaborative filtering algorithms optimise engagement, they risk amplifying mental health harms. Therefore, future research can conduct a deeper study of the content marketing model from the perspective of how to strike a balance between platform/enterprise profitability and user well-being.

Finally, further research should be conducted on a dynamic DCMLM framework. During this process, further research could create adaptable DCMLM modules for regional markets, informed by comparative studies on algorithmic trust and content consumption norms. They can establish metrics to evaluate how DCMLM elements perform in non-fashion sectors, identifying universal vs. context-dependent strategies. They also can develop audit protocols to ensure AI tools enhance rather than undermine the DCMLM’s human-centric principles.

As mobile technology advances -5G enabling richer AR/VR content, foldable devices reshaping video formats- the DCMLM’s content factor strategy (duration, BGM, scene) will require continual revalidation. Ultimately, the model’s enduring value lies in its cyclical ethos: Just as brands must refine content through data feedback, scholars must iteratively update the DCMLM itself, ensuring it remains a compass for navigating content marketing’s uncharted future.

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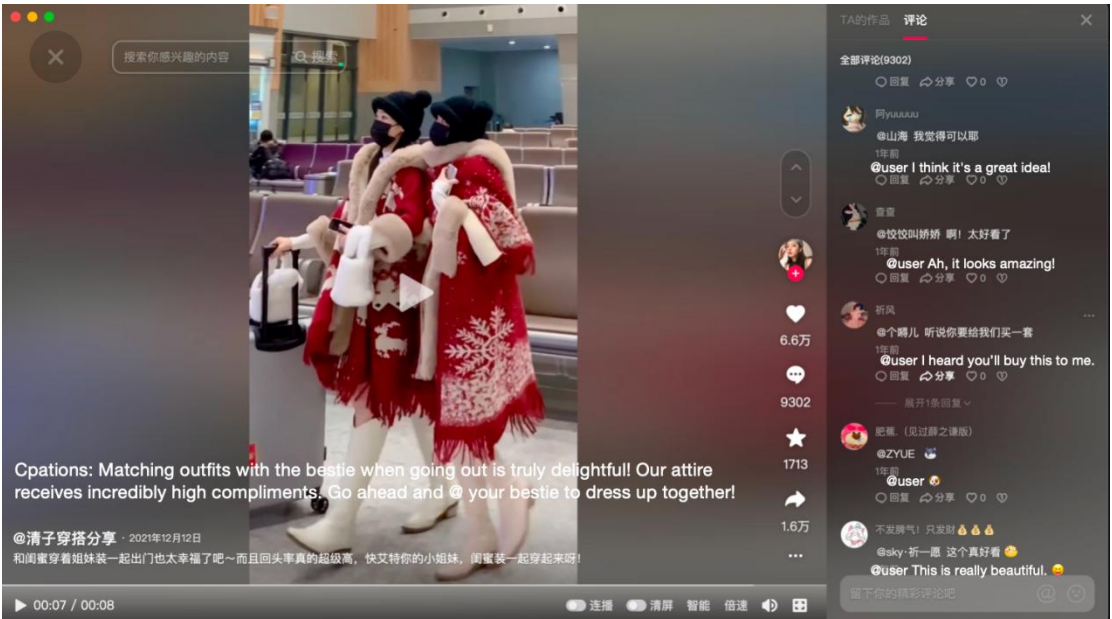
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Appendix 1: Related examples of data collections

Date	Creator	Duration	BGM	The style of caption	Video type of Douyin	Theme in community(objects)	Scenes	Likes	Comments	Sharing	Note
15/11/2021	1	<15s	1	Casual	Street fashion	cultural attire	outdoor	198000	13000	3629	These six videos, the most viewed one is a video showing ancient Chinese wedding dresses, according to the comment analysis, users like this kind of things they don't know and have a curiosity psychology. Through the observation of this person's account, we found that she attracts users by posting traditional Chinese dresses that most of them don't know to increase user stickiness, and then posts some life-like clothes to promote users' purchase. Secondly, the sharing of photo poses is also a very popular content. Analysing the reason, girls like to take photos to share and show their beauty. The content that explains the photo poses can easily make users fantasise, which in turn promotes users to buy the clothes in the video to take photos to share. You can see that one account is a corporate account, because people are naturally resistant to corporations, so this business uses emotional titles, resonating with the user through the title, which in turn promotes purchases. In other words, what the user buys is not the product, but the emotion that this product is given by the company. However, some exaggerated promotions are not liked by users, for example, in the last video, it is overly exaggerated to show that a dress can make people look thin even if you are 100kg, people are suspicious of this kind of video content
15/11/2021	1	<15s	1	Consultative	Tutorial	cultural attire	indoor	995000	59000	113000	
15/11/2021	1	<15s	1	Formal	Pictorial slideshow	personal image construction	indoor	155000	11000	18000	
15/11/2021	1	>15s	1	Casual	Outfit transitions	outfit ideas	indoor	93000	4263	14000	
15/11/2021	2	<15s	1	Formal	Advertisement	quality and value	indoor	30000	72	128	
15/11/2021	2	<15s	1	Casual	Outfit transitions	outfit ideas	indoor	11000	1519	2726	
16/11/2021	1	<15s	1	Intimate	Street fashion	personal image construction	outdoor	1150000	83000	197000	
16/11/2021	1	>15s	2	Intimate	Oral speech	outfit ideas	indoor	258000	7329	13000	

Figure 12. an example of coding book via observation



Picture 50. The example of comment section

Appendix 2: Related tables

Table 19. the list of interviewees

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Position
CH	M	31	An influencer has 1.71 million followers
GA	F	29	An influencer has 200 k followers
GU	F	30	A staff member of Douyin MCN company
HR	M	29	A staff member of Douyin MCN company
JI	F	30	A staff member of ByteDance
JJ	F	27	An influencer has 1.22 million followers
LE	M	41	An influencer has 657 k followers
LA	F	30	An influencer has 80 k followers
LI	F	34	A staff member of ByteDance
LU	F	32	An influencer has 123 k followers
YY	M	27	A staff member of Douyin MCN company
YC	F	32	A director for an influencer with 8 million followers
R1	F	25	An office worker
R2	F	24	An office worker
R3	F	20	A university student
R4	M	21	A university student
R5	F	22	A university student
R6	M	44	An owner of an enterprise
R7	F	38	A head of Human Resources of a company
R8	F	41	A government servant
R9	F	35	A lecturer in university
R10	F	36	A marketing manager of a company
R11	F	60	A lawyer
R12	M	61	A retired person

Table 20. An example of coding

Raw statements (some fragments of information are taken as examples)	Codes
I'd prefer a video that's interesting—maybe funny, I guess.	Funny
It's very useful, or I'm drawn to it if I really like it.	Practicality attracts attention
I'm just trying to express my opinion in general.	Expressing one's point of view
For the more radical statements, I would have commented and argued with him.	Countering the views of others
If something works for my brother, I forward it to him. I'm more likely to @ him, I guess.	Useful for others to drive @
It is my main source of information.	Get more information
I have a look to see if there are any discounts.	Getting the Offers
With Labour Day coming up, we're going out tomorrow to shoot a video about what to wear on a trip. That's a good topic.	Tracking trending topics in real time
I'll send my friend the more interesting videos	Share the joy with others
Some of my peers recounted their experiences, and then there were some business insights and stuff.	Getting inspired by experience
Comments are sometimes made because there are questions that need to be asked, like asking about size.	Access to specific information
Then my curiosity was satisfied.	Satisfying Curiosity
Hopefully there will be something useful in each video.	Acquiring Practical Knowledge

Table 21. The pattern codes of the research

Pattern Codes	Codes
Huge traffic support	Large user base; High user engagement.
Addictive	High user retention; Strong user immersion.
Strong relationship building	Algorithm favouring fans; frequently presents similar content.
Fair recommendation system	Traffic allocated based on content quality; high visibility; anti-monopoly measures; supportive of new accounts.
Collaborative filtering	Drives impulse buying; taps into user interests; uncovers new demands.
Simplified consumer pathways	Streamlines user decision-making; enhances purchasing interfaces; simplifies the consumer journey.
Single attribute	High entertainment value; unique reasons for platform choice by users; habitual user thinking.
Economic expenditure	Platform imposes high commissions; fierce competition within categories; rising personnel costs.
Cyclical consumption	Lengthy cycles for realizing benefits; unstable creative teams.
Expenditure of energy	Challenges in producing non-branded content; improper corporate practices impacting content visibility.
Self-expression	Expresses personal opinions; challenges others' viewpoints.
Social identity	Receiving acknowledgment from others; Showcasing social status; Gaining attention from others
Social identity	Receiving acknowledgment from others; Showcasing social status; Gaining attention from others
Social needs	Engaging in conversations with others; Building interpersonal networks.
Altruism	Provides assistance to others; helps others mitigate risks; highlights important issues.
Emotional sharing	Shares emotions with friends; alleviates personal feelings; spreads joy; achieves

	emotional resonance.
Novelty	Explores content voids; investigates innovative ideas.
Knowledge acquisition	Genuine learning; gathering more information; Obtaining specific details; Questioning content creators
Personalised information acquisition	Accesses product information relevant to personal needs; seeks inspiring experiences.
Emotional venting	Releasing negative emotions; Expressing dissatisfaction towards content creators; Self-deprecation
Incentive-driven	Pricing; Obtaining discounted products; Receiving rewards for positive feedback.
Pursuit of pleasure	Entertainment; Funny; Passing time.
Brainwashing content	Viral music; Viral content
Influencer/brand attachment	Fondness towards content creators.
Drive interaction	Stimulates content-driven questions; promotes participatory content.
Intimacy	Uses an intimate tone; fosters equal relationships; Remembering followers' names.
Breaking identity expectations	Actively interacts with followers; organizes celebrity meet-and-greets; hosts online/offline events.
Addressing emotional confusion	Responding to followers' queries; Empathizing with followers' emotions.
Triggering emotional responses	Infusing emotions into content; Associating emotions with products
Sexual innuendo	Attractive individuals; Suggestive dances
Conflict creation	Subjective viewpoint expression; Designing contentious content
Pain and itch points	Stimulates consumer needs; identifies consumer demands.
Fast-paced	Delivers condensed content; high density of content; caters to users with limited patience.
Simplification of complex issues	Clickbait titles; simplifying complex issues; Users engaging without critical thinking.

Concretization	Using simple language without adjectives; Simplifying complex issues
Consistent updates	Ensures perceived account activity; consistently delivers high-quality content.
Long-term planning	Establishes regular content updates; prevents creative burnout.
Newsjacking	Tracks hot topics in real-time; plans for holidays; monitors major events.
Rapid response	Promptly addresses comments; aims to meet user comment needs.
Plot twists	Introduces unpredictable endings; includes clues within content.
Cognitive breakthroughs	Challenging user perceptions of value; Altering societal perceptions.
Unveiling secrets	Reveals industry secrets; creates suspense; satisfies curiosity.
User persona	Understanding user preferences for content; Vertical user targeting; Imprecise targeting of the desired audience leads to marketing challenges.
Uniqueness	Differentiates from similar brands; struggles to establish specialized IPs; relies on personal charisma; features distinctive content; focuses on personal and corporate IP.
Classification of IPs	IP positioning directly affects the target consumer groups for promotions; tailors positioning for marketing.
Tag positioning	Douyin patents; Nurturing accounts; AI-recognized account content
Racing mechanism	Employs content creation filtering techniques.
Re-creation	Draws inspiration from other popular videos; achieves high efficiency in content design; produces high content output; serves as a source of creative inspiration.
Golden three seconds	Captures audience attention within the first three seconds of a video; essential for ensuring viewers watch videos to completion.

Duration	Controls video length; impacts viewers' completion rates.
Background	Maintains consistency in scene and content style; creates contrasts between scenes and content.
Captions	Crafts engaging titles; offers five distinct title styles; titles evoke emotional resonance and foster intimacy.
BGM	Leverages Douyin's music chart to boost content consumption; relies on cognitive inertia to encourage repeated listening to familiar music; harmonizes music and content styles; uses music as a branding tool.
Dou+	Douyin's video promotion tool; increases exposure with high-quality content via Dou+; notes limited impact of Dou+ when content quality is low.
Initial traffic pool	AI allocates 500 views to each piece of content, a significant metric for assessing content quality.
Fine-grained processing	Monitors the 5-second dropout rate; analyses specific moments when consumers like a video; examines data second-by-second.
Analysis of Key Performance Indicators (KPI)	Analysis of consumer engagement metrics

Table 22. Themes after condensing

Themes	Pattern Codes
Traffic distribution system	Significant traffic support; Engaging; Effective in fostering strong relationships; Equitable recommendation system
Interest-based e-commerce	Collaborative filtering; Streamlined consumer options
Single attribute	Single attribute
High consumption	Economical spending; Recurring consumption; Energy expenditure
Self-expression	Self-expression
Social integration needs	Social identity; Social needs; Altruism
Affective needs	Emotional sharing; Emotional venting
Cognitive needs	Novelty; Knowledge acquisition; Personalized information gathering
Incentive-driven	Incentive-driven
Hedonic needs	Pursuit of pleasure; Manipulative content; Attachment to influencers/brands
Social value	Driving interaction; Enhancing intimacy; Challenging identity norms
Emotional value	Addressing emotional disarray; Provoking emotional reactions
Controversy bait	Sexual innuendo; Conflict creation
Simplification	Identifying pain points; High-speed; Simplifying complex topics; Making abstract concepts tangible
Consistency	Regular updates; Strategic long-term planning
Timelines	Newsjacking; Rapid response
Cognitive disruption	Plot twists; Cognitive insights; Revealing secrets
Consumer positioning	User persona
IP positioning	Distinctiveness; Categorization of IPs
Tag positioning	Tag positioning
Overall content strategy	Competitive mechanics; Reimagining content; Critical three seconds
Content element strategy	Duration; Background; Captions; BGM

Traffic monitoring

Dou+; Initial traffic pool

Data review

Detailed processing; Analysis of Key Performance Indicators
(KPI)

Table 23. Sample characteristics

Characteristics		Frequency	(%)
Gender	male	197	48.40%
	female	210	51.60%
Age	18-25	78	19.20%
	26-32	23	5.70%
	33-40	54	13.30%
	41-48	41	10.10%
	49-56	67	16.50%
	57-64	83	20.40%
	Over 64	61	15%
	Under Level3	77	18.90%
	Level3	73	17.90%
Education	Level4	69	17%
	Level5	24	5.90%
	Level6	71	17.40%
	Level7	53	13%
	Level8	40	9.80%
Income/per-month	Under 3000 CNY	94	23.10%
	3000-5000 CNY	63	15.50%
	5001-7000 CNY	27	6.60%
	7001-9000 CNY	38	9.30%
	9001-11000 CNY	69	17%
	11001-13000 CNY	30	7.40%
	Over 13000 CNY	86	21.10%

Table 24. The themes of Douyin content marketing features

Themes	Pattern Codes	Codes
Traffic distribution mechanism	Huge traffic support	Large user base; High user engagement.
	Addictive	High user retention; Strong user immersion.
	Strong relationship building	Fan-based algorithm; Frequent presentation of similar content.
	Fair recommending mechanism	Allocate traffic based on content quality; High exposure rate; Anti-monopoly; User-friendly for new accounts.
Interest-based e-commerce	Collaborative filtering	Impulse consumption; Mining user interests; Creating unknown demands.
	Simplified consumer pathways	Shorten user decision paths; Optimize purchase interfaces; Simplify consumer journeys.
Single attribute	Single attribute	High entertainment value; The singularity of user platform selection purposes; User habitual thinking.
High consumption	Economic expenditure	Platform charges high commissions; Intense competition within the same category; Increased personnel costs.
	Cyclical consumption	Long conversion cycles for benefits; Unstable creative teams.
	Expenditure of energy	Difficulty in creating non-branded content; Improper corporate operations affecting content exposure.

Table 25. The themes of customer motivation in the community

Themes	Pattern Codes	Codes
Self-expression	Self-expression	Expressing personal views; Challenging others' perspectives.
	Social identity	Receiving acknowledgment from others; Showcasing social status; Gaining attention from others
Social integration needs	Social needs	Engaging in conversations with others; Building interpersonal networks.
	Altruism	Providing useful help to others; Assisting others in avoiding risks; Drawing attention to important matters.
Affective needs	Emotional sharing	Sharing emotions with friends; Alleviating personal emotions; Spreading joy with others; Emotional resonance
	Emotional venting	Releasing negative emotions; Expressing dissatisfaction towards content creators; Self-deprecation
	Novelty	Exploring content gaps; Investigating novel concepts
Cognitive needs	Knowledge acquisition	Genuine learning; gathering more information; Obtaining specific details; Questioning content creators
	Personalised information acquisition	Accessing product information that aligns with personal needs; Seeking inspired experiences.
Incentive-driven	Incentive-driven	Pricing; Obtaining discounted products; Receiving rewards for positive feedback.
	Pursuit of pleasure	Entertainment; Funny; Passing time.
Hedonic needs	Brainwashing content	Viral music; Viral content
	Influencer/brand attachment	Fondness towards content creators.

Table 26. The themes of the content marketing model on Douyin

CM Elements	Themes	Pattern Codes
The Strategic Elements	Consumer Positioning	User persona; Identified potential customers
	IP Positioning	Uniqueness; Classification of IPs
	Tag Positioning	Tag positioning; Growing the account
The Formation Elements	Overall Content Strategy	Racing mechanism; Re-creation; Golden three seconds
	Content Factor Strategy	Duration; Background; Captions; BGM
The Intrinsic Elements	Simplification	Pain and itch points; Fast-paced; Simplification of complex issues; Concretisation
	Cognitive Disruption	Plot twists; Cognitive breakthroughs; Unveiling secrets
	Emotional Value	Addressing emotional confusion; Triggering emotional responses
The Communication Elements	Social Value	Drive interaction; Intimacy; Breaking identity expectations
	“Snark Trap”	Sexual innuendo; Conflict creation
	Continuity	Consistent updates; Long-term planning
	Timeliness	Newsjacking; Rapid response
The Corollary Elements	Traffic Monitoring	Dou+; Initial traffic pool
	Data Review	Fine-grained processing; Analysis of KPI

Table 27. Measurement invariance of composite models (MICOM)

Constructs	Configurational Invariance S1	Compositional Invariance S2		Partial Measurement Invariance	Equal Mean Assessment S3a		Equal Variance Assessment S3b		Full Measurement Invariance
		Original Correlation	5.00 %		Original Difference	Confidence Interval	Original Difference	Confidence Interval	
H NFO vs A NFO									
MU	Yes	0.999	0.995	Yes	0.078	[-0.214, 0.219]	-0.067	[-0.297, 0.295]	Yes/Yes
IASI	Yes	1	1	Yes	0.062	[-0.224, 0.217]	0.041	[-0.266, 0.239]	Yes/Yes
CONS	Yes	0.999	0.992	Yes	0.078	[-0.229, 0.223]	-0.032	[-0.249, 0.225]	Yes/Yes
CONT	Yes	0.998	0.991	Yes	0.039	[-0.222, 0.222]	-0.019	[-0.324, 0.312]	Yes/Yes
CREA	Yes	0.998	0.992	Yes	0.085	[-0.229,0.224]	0.002	[-0.330, 0.262]	Yes/Yes
H NFO vs P NFO									
MU	Yes	0.998	0.996	Yes	0.591	[-0.212, 0.253]	-0.057	[-0.290, 0.268]	No/Yes
IASI	Yes	1	1	Yes	0.693	[-0.218, 0.234]	-0.148	[-0.296, 0.256]	No/Yes
CONS	Yes	0.997	0.993	Yes	0.625	[-0.228,0.244]	0.06	[-0.276, 0.265]	No/Yes
CONT	Yes	0.995	0.995	Yes	0.615	[-0.228, 0.243]	-0.124	[-0.316, 0.290]	No/Yes
CREA	Yes	1	0.995	Yes	0.615	[-0.232, 0.261]	-0.102	[-0.292, 0.274]	No/Yes
H NFO vs L NFO									
MU	Yes	1	0.997	Yes	1.375	[-0.278, 0.286]	-0.167	[-0.239, 0.248]	No/Yes
IASI	Yes	1	1	Yes	1.524	[-0.266, 0.291]	-0.258	[-0.237, 0.247]	No/No
CONS	Yes	0.999	0.998	Yes	1.431	[-0.267, 0.290]	-0.031	[-0.246, 0.251]	No/Yes
CONT	Yes	0.999	0.998	Yes	1.402	[-0.270, 0.281]	-0.377	[-0.259, 0.269]	No/No
CREA	Yes	0.998	0.996	Yes	1.38	[-0.266,0.275]	-0.072	[-0.275, 0.274]	No/Yes

S1: This is automatically established. S2: The original correlation is higher than 5% and the

permutation p-value is higher than 0.05. S3: (a) Not all confidence intervals of latent variable score means include the original differences value, there is not equal means. (b) Not all confidence intervals of latent variable score variances include the original differences value, there is not equal variances.

Appendix 3: Interview Consent Form

Consent Form

School of arts and media

Researcher: Haochen Qi

E-mail: H.Qi@edu.salford.ac.uk

Tel: F+447522554706/+8613840203953

Dear Sir / Madam,

I would like to ask you to participate in the data collection for my PhD study at the University of Salford.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 60 minutes in length to take place by arrangement.

You may decide not to answer some of the interview questions if you wish. You may also decide to withdraw from this study at any time by advising the researcher interviewing you using the contact details at the start of this document. If you notify me of your withdrawal, all identifiable data will be destroyed.

I may ask for clarification of issues raised in the interview some time after it has taken place, but you will not be obliged in any way to clarify or participate further.

The information you provide is confidential, except that with your permission, anonymised quotes may be used. If you request confidentiality, beyond anonymised quotes, information you provide will be treated only as a source of background information, alongside literature-based research and interviews with others.

Your name or any other personal identifying information will not appear in any publications resulting from this study; neither will there be anything to identify you.

The information gained from this interview will only be used for the PhD objective, will not be used for any other purpose and will not be recorded in excess of what is required for the research.

Even though the study findings will be published in conferences and journals, only the researcher will have access to the interview data itself. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information please ask me before, during, or after the interview.

Yours Sincerely,

Haochen Qi

Interview Consent Form

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, **without giving reason.**

☐

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

☐☐

4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded

☐

5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

Please complete Section A or B at any one time - Thank you.

Section A. Consent Form:

Name of Participant:


Date:

Signature:

Name of Researcher: Haochen Qi

Date: 16/04/2022

Signature:



Signed consent form will be stored securely by the researcher.

Section B. Consent Withdrawal:

I withdraw my consent to participate in research outlined above. By signing below I agree that any information given by me will not be used for the above research purpose.

Name of Participant:

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 4: Interview Questions for Experts

1. Can you start by talking about your understanding of Douyin?
2. We can see from the data that Douyin's user growth is very impressive. What do you think is the reason for this? What do you think the motivation is?
3. What are all the reasons why Douyin has become the social media platform that companies are now moving into?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Douyin over other social media platforms in the marketing field?
5. Do you understand Douyin's algorithm? How do you use this algorithm?
6. What content attracts users and makes them become your or a creator's fans?
7. Because I have learnt that users stay on the "For you" page to see more content, even if they follow the sort of brand, they may not be able to sustain a following of the product or brand. What do you think about this? Do you consider this situation will negatively affect your marketing strategy?
8. What efforts have you made to make your followers highly loyal to you or a creator?
9. How do you maintain your fans' loyalty and increase user stickiness?
10. What are the main reasons you have these sticky fans, and what needs do you fulfil for your users?
11. Can you tell me about some of your impressive interactions with users?
12. What are the main factors that attract consumers to buy?
13. What do you think are the factors in content presentation that influence consumers' purchasing decisions about brands and products?
14. What considerations do you make when designing content?
15. What basis do you make adjustments to your content?
16. Do you think the hedonic value in your content is essential? Or is utilitarian value more important?
17. Do you think content's hedonic or utilitarian value or any other value is more important for users to have a positive relationship with the brand or you?
18. How do you incorporate hedonic value when designing content for your audience?

19. There are several variables. Can you introduce the different considerations for different variables when you make content?

Personal account or Corporate account

Duration of the content

Choice of music

Caption of the content

Form of the content

Scene selection of the content

Labelling of videos

20. What are all the possibilities for Douyin content and e-commerce in the future?

Appendix 5: Interview Questions for Users

1. What is Douyin to you?
 2. Have you ever bought fashion products on Douyin?
 3. Why do you choose to buy products on Douyin?
 4. Which way do you buy products (video or live streaming)?
 5. What do you think about the sense of transaction on Douyin?
 6. What type of content are you generally attracted to?
 7. What content generally gets you to like, comment, and share?
 8. Do you have a brand that you are particularly attracted to? If you have, did you learn about the brand from Douyin? Do you remember the reason why you liked this brand in the beginning?
 9. What do you think is why you like this brand?
 10. Do you communicate with brands? What do you usually say to them? Or what types of messages do they post to you that you follow?
 11. have you ever once ordered something thinking it was a video? Can you remember what kind of content it was?
 12. Do you prefer to follow content that makes you happy or valuable content?
 13. What kind of content will make you very interested and have the impulse to produce some behaviours?
 14. There are several (factor) variables. When you watch the content, can you introduce the different considerations for different (factor) variables?
- Individual or corporate accounts: Do you prefer to trust the people or the company?
- Duration of the content: How long do you find the content more acceptable to you in general (fashion)?
- Music of content: Is music important to your viewing process?
- Caption: Do you read the caption? What behaviours do you perform with interesting captions?
- Types of the content: Which kind of content do you prefer?
- Scene selection: Do you pay attention to the scenes in the video?
- Tagging of videos: Do you seek the content via video tags?

