

WE-MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR FASHION BUSINESS IN CHINA

Case: LingSiYaoYao Ltd.

Abstract

Author(s) Yang Siqian	Type of publication Bachelor's thesis	Published Spring 2020
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Title of publication We-media as A Marketing Tool for Fashion Business in China Case company: LingSiYaoYao Ltd.		
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Abstract <p>In the age of digitalization, fragmenting information has made the fashion industry unpredictable. Fashion brands are facing the risk of being left behind if they don't adapt well to the internet particularly in China, home to the world's powerful consumer groups of fashion consumption. China's digital ecosystem is developing rapidly in recent years, We-media has become an essential marketing tool with influences abreast with the digital trend. Its distinguishing features, strong viewpoints and a huge active user base have made We-media influential and promising in China.</p> <p>The purpose of this research was to provide an in-depth review of the impact of We-media phenomenon in China from a fashion marketing perspective in particular and to identify its characteristics. The study was commissioned with a case company localized in China in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of We-media as a marketing tool in China for the company's future marketing performance. The study was considered as qualitative research combining both literature review and empirical research. The theoretical part was designed to justify the situation of the fashion industry and We-media trend in China along with explanations of fashion marketing purpose. The empirical study was framed to collect primary materials related to the topic with a campaign implementation by the case company and interviewees with Chinese participants in the fashion and We-media field.</p> <p>The findings indicated that We-media plays a vital role in fashion brands doing marketing activities in China aligning with the e-commerce system and KOL economy. We-media is improving consistently for its marketing use with the shifts of marketing model, new-coming platforms and users' habitats of young generation. Furthermore, suggestions based on findings for the case company were discussed as to advice the brand to minimize the use of platforms for a linear and a seamless marketing approach in customer engagement.</p>		

Keywords: We-media, Fashion marketing, Chinese fashion market

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.1	Research background.....	1
1.2	Thesis objectives, research questions and limitations.....	2
1.3	Theoretical framework	3
1.4	Research methodology and data collection	4
1.5	Thesis structure	4
2	THE STATE OF FASHION	6
2.1	A global overview.....	6
2.2	China as a fashion market	7
2.3	Fashion marketing	8
3	WE-MEDIA IN CHINA.....	10
3.1	The concept of We-media.....	10
3.2	We-media as a marketing tool	13
4	CHINA'S WE-MEDIA IN FASHION CATEGORY	15
4.1	The evolvement of fashion media	15
4.2	Characteristics of China's fashion We-media.....	16
4.3	From KOL to KOC	17
5	CASE COMPANY.....	19
5.1	China's homegrown fashion brands.....	19
5.2	3KASHAM	20
5.2.1	Positioning.....	21
5.2.2	Current We-media performance.....	21
5.2.3	Project overview	22
6	EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND DATA ANALYSIS.....	24
6.1	Research methods.....	24
6.2	Phases of the study	24
6.3	Results and Discussion	28
6.3.1	Results	28
6.3.2	Discussion	35
6.4	Suggestions to the case company	38
7	CONCLUSION.....	40
7.1	Answers to research questions	40
7.2	Reliability and validity	41
7.3	Suggestions for further research.....	42

8	SUMMARY	43
	REFERENCES	45
	APPENDICES.....	48

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

Fashion as a complex and competitive field of business has changed a lot over time. From design to distribution, every single sector of fashion business has been driven by digitalization and consumer behavior in recent years. China with its forward development in internet technology and the largest population of consumers – is now becoming the world's largest fashion market overtaking the USA. It is no longer a low value-added manufacturer playing a part in the middle chain, but has become a vital player in the industry's value chain with its contribution to fashion consumptions. (Amed, Balchandani, Beltrami, Berg, Hedrich & Rolkens 2018.) The Chinese e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba has led the fashion players and consumers to a new era of consumption. Furthermore, digital media has shifted the way brands engage with consumers.

With the growth of online fashion empires, the fashion industry is easy to enter nowadays. Regardless of the low-price apparel or high-fashion pyramid, Chinese domestic brands are expanding speedily; consumers are targeted every second via digital media. (Hall & Suen 2019.) For a fashion brand, it is not enough to expect the demand for high quality and fashionable design; it is just as important to know how to market the brand in this fast-changing and competitive environment.

In today's digital world, brands are collaborating with celebrities, bloggers and fashion icons or putting ads on top social media platforms in order to catch consumers' eyes. However, as the market is becoming mature, it is burdensome for fashion players to promote themselves under this trend; thousands of brands are fighting for attention and the costs of digital marketing are booming. (Chen 2018.) Marketers and organizations are struggling in conceiving effective strategies in this crowded digital landscape. While Chinese online marketing has shown a new movement – some small fashion players are taking advantage of the media revolution: We-media also named as 'self-media', is a buzz word used to describe the Chinese new media phenomena. The term refers to content created by generating individual media framework instead of traditional mass media framework. (Yang 2018.)

Content creating and sharing is no longer owned by media firms or exclusive groups of people but every 'citizen' who can gather and share content through various ways — text, photo, audio, video or film. It is an evolution of digital media phenomena. For firms and organizations, promoting on We-media platforms means the distribution sector has transferred from "B2C" (business to customer) to "D2C" (direct to customer) model. With

consumers are sensitive and averse to commercial ads, a 'close to consumer' approach would be effective for brands trying to reach customers in the crowds.

The study of We-media has gained a lot of attention from the business world since the era of digitalization. However, the concept of We-media has been confused in its form and effectiveness of promotion. Sometimes people cannot distinguish We-media from social media. The difference of We-media and the core advantages of it have barely been discovered. Meanwhile, studying the marketing strategies of the fashion industry is tricky, it either focuses on a single side of a firm's actions or on consumer's behavior. Although many fashion brands start to make efforts on digital marketing, the relationships between the firm and consumers online are still unclear and opaque. What is more, the fashion industry in China has become a popular topic in recent years due to its boosting economy and consumers' strong purchasing power in fashion segment; but researches related to it are normally overviews.

Therefore, the study of fashion marketing in the era when We-media is prevalent in China is necessary for fashion players whether they are local brands or foreign players who want to break into the Chinese marketplace. The research brings readers a new insight of marketing approaches based on a case study within a practice of promoting a local Chinese brand on We-media platforms.

1.2 Thesis objectives, research questions and limitations

The aim of this research is to discover the impact of Chinese We-media phenomenon on a fashion brand for its marketing strategy and to identify the role of We-media platforms during the marketing plan implementation process. In this highly competitive and customer-driven industry, We-media in China is becoming a novel marketing tool for fashion brands in customer engagements, branding, and other marketing activities while saving budgets. Precisely, this thesis determines the principles, concepts, and related motives of We-media in China, answering questions: how, why, and what for the case company – a Chinese fashion brand who is at the beginning stage of entering to the Chinese fashion market. In order to fulfill the research goal, the exploration relies upon the implementation of using We-media platform for a commercial campaign of the case company. The research outcomes are gathered to provide the case company some ideas of We-media utilization for their future marketing strategies, and it can be a useful example for brands (domestic or international) to catch this trend, utilizing We-media breaking into the Chinese fashion market.

Hence, the main research question is:

- How can a fashion brand utilize We-media platform for its marketing activities in China?

Sub-questions will be:

- What is China's We-media?
- How is the rise of We-media shifting the ways fashion brands do marketing in China?
- What are the vital elements of a fashion marketing campaign through We-media?

The limitations of the research are those elements of research design and approach that may affect the final findings or the interpretation of the results. Some possible limitations on methodology can be sample size, lack of reliable data, measurements of collecting data and other possible limitations. A researcher's own activity may also create limitations of the research, such as assessment of resources, culture and other type of bias, or fluency of language. (SHU 2019.) Considering the potential research limitations to the study, the limits in the study are based on geographic boundaries and capability of data collection. Respectively, the limited geographic area affects the scale of the research's validation in region, it might be valid for brands in the Chinese market only; and the inability to generate the findings may affect the reliability of the study. This study focuses on the Chinese market and the core subject is the fashion marketing. Moreover, the findings are developed based on the case company's performance solely and the duration of the study is four months.

1.3 Theoretical framework

In order to demonstrate a coherent understanding of theories and concepts listed in this thesis, the researcher has formed a framework consisting of the following theories: at the first, there will be a detailed description about Chinese We-media – the concept and driven forces of We-media; the situation about the use of We-media in China; and what are those platforms. A general state of fashion industry (especially in the marketing sector) on a global stage and in China are presented in the next in order to explain the business trend in this industry and what fashion players are facing. Following by a chapter to explain the concept of China's We-media and how it is used in China with some examples. The last part is based on the previous parts as well as some further theory researches to generates the knowledge of using We-media platform in Chinese fashion marketing and how it is considered as a feasible strategy for brands.

1.4 Research methodology and data collection

The study is a qualitative research which aims at seeking an in-depth understanding of marketing phenomena. It focuses on the reasons and motivations of the phenomena that depend on direct experiences in people's daily lives. It concentrates on the micro-level of social interaction and seeks to explain how and why a phenomenon or a behavior happened in a particular situation. (McLeod 2017.)

The nature of this research is considered as an exploratory study, a valuable means to discover the ongoing trends and gathering insights about a topic of interest. An inductive research approach has been chosen to conduct the research in order to clarify the deep understanding of the problem. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012, 163.)

A case study is associated as a research strategy to achieve the goal. The case study strategy means to explore the research topic or phenomenon within its contexts, and has considerable ability to generate the answers to the questions: "why", "how", and "what". (Saunders et al. 2012, 179.)

Moreover, the case study allows the discovery of the processes involved in marketing implementation. It is a research about "theory creation" rather than "theory testing". By conducting a case study, the phenomenon of We-media in China's fashion marketing can be discovered and understood comprehensively.

Firstly, the research consisted a literature review with careful documentation to build a knowledge base. The case study is showed followed by a case study protocol – semi-structured interviews to collect primary data. The use of a semi-structured interview provides the researcher with the opportunity to conclude causal relationships between variables. Interviews with the case company's employees and some Chinese marketing experts are managed by face to face meetings or online communications, and empirical materials are collected by audio-recording or note-taking of the conversation. (Saunders et al. 2012, 374.) After the data gathering, a thoughtful interpretation of the empirical data is presented and discussed.

1.5 Thesis structure

In this chapter, an overview structure of this research is explained. The structure of thesis is illustrated in Figure 1.

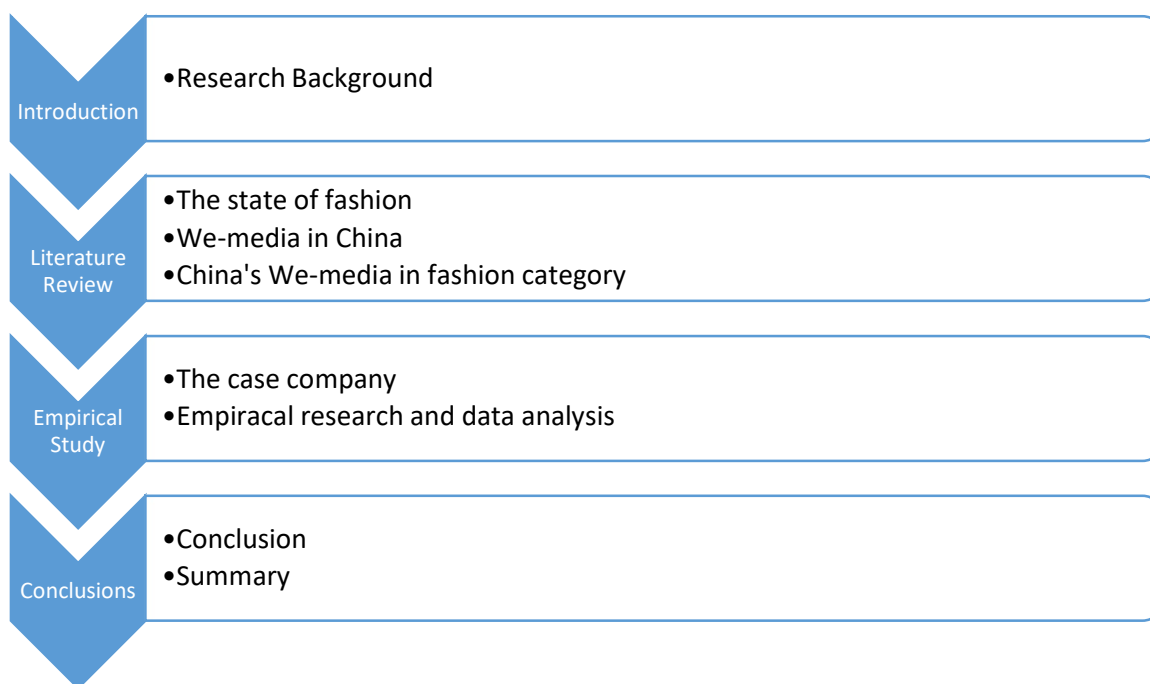


Figure 1 Thesis structure

The thesis starts with an introduction chapter which covers the background of the research and research objectives and methodology. Following by a literature review comprised of three chapters, discussing theories in relation to the research topic. The empirical research is showed in the next two chapters where the case company is introduced first with a description of a marketing campaign implementation on a We-media platform conducted by the case company. The research methods and the process of empirical materials collection and analysis are explained in chapter six. Next is conclusion part to provide the findings and discussions as well as suggestions. A short summary is placed later to generate the study outcomes. References and related appendices are listed at the end of the paper.

2 THE STATE OF FASHION

2.1 A global overview

The fashion industry is growing slowly in recent years, and it is predicted to be even slower in the future. Fashion players are under the pressure of a preference towards digital-first, ineffective consumer communications, and severe competitions inside the industry. So, they are trying to improve their operations and performances, while polarization still exists: big fashion names take the large proportions of economic shares as well as resources in the industry. They are the front-runners cultivating innovations through their product ranges and interactions with consumers, and general brands are facing the risks of being left behind. In this highly competitive and volatile industry, fashion companies should be resilient by building a profound and lasting awareness considering potential risks that they might face or are facing and take strategic actions to minimize them. Brands have flexible operations and can keep-up the fast-paced, uncertain changes can survive. A clear understanding and skills of using new media channels and functions are required as well for those fashion players who want to better address consumers' demand and optimize their networks. Simultaneously, China continues to be the lucrative fashion market for opportunities for many global or local brands in the future. (Amed, Berg, Balchandani, Hedrich, Rolkens, Yong & Poojara, 2019.)

According to the most recent report of fashion industry's statement (Amed et al. 2019), it is clear that fashion industry is full of uncertainty, and only those are capable enough of being flexible and resilient can capture the given opportunities. First, from a global economy perspective, China plays a leading role in the global fashion industry and will constantly provide opportunities for all fashion players. Some international brands have targeted China for a long time, and not all have been successful due to their own strategic mistakes that either offended Chinese consumers' sentiments or they were pressured from the local rival brands. Second, fashion brands need to rethink their online marketing strategies as they are struggling to connect with their customers through traditional online engagement models. There is a significant decrease of the number of active users on big social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WeChat. The overloaded advertisement on those big platforms can have counteractive effects on engagement since consumers are becoming more demanding. Therefore, it is essential for fashion players to discover new platforms and approaches to maximize their return on online marketing spend. An eye-catching content is the core value, reliant on right platform for a specific market, and a seamless link to purchasing. Last but not least, digitalization remains a

major focus in the fashion industry. Fashion brands who played on digital platforms are surprisingly achieving their goals. E-commerce business is on the trend. (Amed et al. 2019.)

2.2 China as a fashion market

In fashion segment, most of the revenue is generated to China amounts to US\$348,700m in 2020 (Statista 2020). China is now the largest fashion market surpassing the USA. Increasing consumptions on apparels, bags, accessories and shoes witnessed the rise of China's fashion market. Because of Chinese shoppers with powerful consumption capacity and the ubiquity of e-commerce, China has become the most important fashion market in the world and an incubation for exciting brands and businesses.

As the world's largest e-commerce market, China's online giants are dominating the retail economy. Alibaba, one of the biggest online shopping platforms in China, reached \$38 billion sales revenue on Singles Day in 2019 (a similar shopping event to Black Friday). The massive sales have proved the dominance of e-commerce in China. To take advantage from this excitement, international fashion firms joined the venture of Chinese digital retails to localize their business. For example, many fashion brands have linked up with Tmall (a sub-platform of Alibaba), Farfetch also merged their business with JD.com (a rival platform to Alibaba) in 2019. Furthermore, the strong influence of e-commerce alongside giant e-commerce platforms provide homegrown brands thriving opportunities to grow further. (Suen 2019.)

A hyper-efficient e-commerce system spurs the fashion consumption as well, Chinese consumers can head to either Taobao, Tmall, JD.com or other countless digital marketplaces for a selection of fashion goods and fast checkout with e-payment then get delivered to their home the next day. The convenient online shopping experience stimulates consumers' desire, they show a strong willingness of spending on fashion. Among those shoppers, the most powerful purchasing group is made up by millennials, a generation of people born in the age of internet and relative wealth. They are fashion lovers, active cyber citizens, and they have strong senses of "being unique", what they wear is an expression of themselves. Chinese millennials are shaping the fashion market. Their consuming views and behaviors create a huge potential for Brands to discover. (Zha 2019.)

The phase "Consumption upgrade" was introduced in China's retail section in 2015. Nearly 80 percent of China's GDP was driven by consumption in 2018, in which fashion purchasing shows a significant growth in luxury goods. Despite that luxury consumption lead the overall fashion market, there is a sign that luxury fashion is facing challenges

from premium fashion surge. Digital-native brands with aesthetic and distinctive style have found favor among younger generations. A constant revision of product formula and reaction to the latest social trend by dropping special edition due to consumer demand are their advantages for consumer engagement as well as a competitive weapon. D2C (direct to customer) business model is threatening the status of luxury fashion among Chinese consumers. (Suen 2019.)

China as a fashion market is huge and diverse which is full of opportunities for brands to find niche. The competition is fierce at the same time, limited international brands approved their success in China, whereas increasingly local brands come to the stage. For all fashion players, how to draw Chinese millennials is imperative within an upgradation of business model.

2.3 Fashion marketing

Fashion marketing as a definition means the application of a mixture of techniques along with a business philosophy that can bear on customers' needs of fashion related products and services for the purpose of achieving missions of the organization (Easey 2009, 7). The concept of fashion marketing (Figure 2) is the combination of positive aspects of design, customers and profit. Designers are highly involved in the process of marketing in the fashion industry. An effective fashion marketing progress requires designers' understanding of marketing functions in creative process as well as marketers' awareness of the importance of creative designs in customer needs. (Easey 2009, 10.)

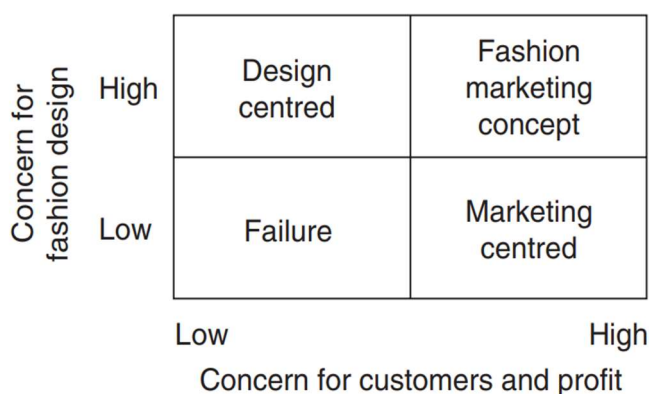


Figure 2 The fashion marketing concept (Easey 2009)

In practice, fashion marketers need to conduct marketing activities wisely with alignment across marketing mix (4P's) – product, price, place, and promotion (Jennifer 2020). The

Fashion industry has all sorts of products from head to toe. A fashion product comprises the design, the brand culture and the value. It is the fundamental element throughout the entire business, linking to consumer need. The price of products helps the firm position itself in the market, generating revenues. The idea of place in marketing terms is associated with distribution of products, where the product is been made and which market in region the company want to target. The last and the most complicated term in marketing is promotion that includes almost everything from traditional marketing with advertising and PR, to digital marketing on social media for sales promotions and consumer communications, taking into account the interaction between the firm and its customers. (Liz 2013.)

Marketing as applied in fashion industry; it is quite different from the general marketing that we have already know for other industries. A normal marketing campaign for other businesses can sustain a certain period of time, whereas, fashion business is more dynamic and changes constantly as up-to-date trends happens on a daily basis. Thus, fashion marketing campaigns only got a short period of time and marketers have to come up with fresh and thriving promotions instantaneously for products and brand image in this crowded industry. (Dennis 2019.) The purpose of fashion marketing is to build brand identity and promote products and services for a fashion firm to achieve success through communications with target customers.

Generally speaking, fashion marketing has always been dominated by creativeness and instantaneity. Since the industry is undergoing extreme digital transformation, having a digital narrative has become the key to communicate with consumers, inspiring them with innovative production processes, new ways of promotion, new channels for engagement.

3 WE-MEDIA IN CHINA

3.1 The concept of We-media

The concept of We-media, also called self-media, was firstly introduced in 2003. The Media Center at American Press Institute released a research report called “We Media” by Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis. (Bowman & Willis 2003.) This report made a clear definition of We-media: a channel where every citizen can be a reporter. This participatory journalism, as illustrated in the report, is a “bottom-down” phenomenon (see in Figure 3) in which participants are peers and have ability to change roles. Later on, in 2004, Dan Gillmor published his book “We the Media: grassroots journalism by the people, for the people”, in which he argues that the Big media have evolved into to a new type of journalism that accepted various communities of interest, emphasising the idea of We-media (Gillmor 2004, 9). In this book, Big media was described as a lecture that authorised journalists told you what the news was, the licences of broadcasting news are owned by powerful institutions or authorities. However, the landscape of news media is changing, Dan claimed that in the future the news reporting and production will be a more of a conversation or seminar – the roles of news reporters and consumers are switching, everyone will have sources to grasp and spread news. (Gillmor 2004, 9.)

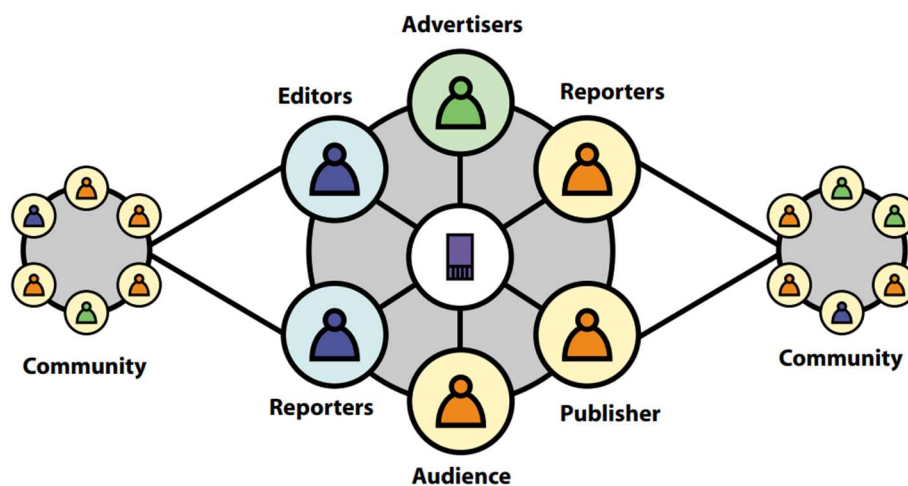


Figure 3 Bottom-Up news (Bowman & Willis 2003)

For years, the role of We-media has been underestimated. The rise of we media resulted from the fast development of internet technology and people’s interests in telling stories. It

is the production of the evolution of the time, and its concept is constantly changing with the world's developing pace. At the beginning, We-media was mainly used for news reporting differentiating from the traditional media organisations based on its bottom-up principles for faster and more comprehensive news spreading advantages, grassroots journalists are highly engaged with audiences. Steadily, in pace with the growth and diffusion of social networking, We-media has expanded its function and audience groups. At this stage, We-media was considered as social media due to the similar effects to the public. The invention of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms have redefined the ways of We-media in transmitting the news, a new type of journalists came into sight -- bloggers. As a result, We-media was known as those individuals who use the new network technology represented by blogs to publish news independently and traditional media was threatened by self-media since then. (Xia 2017.)

However, in recent years, the growth of We-media in China is remarkable, although the network technology developed later than the western country, the new era of We-media is rewritten by China so as the definition of it. As mentioned previously, the shift in internet resulted in the concept of We-media. Thus, the rise of We-media in China is not a coincidence, but an inevitable trend. In 2017, Kaili Di published a research discussing the concept and new characteristics of We-media in China. In which she mentioned networking carriers such as, WeChat, Today's Headline, and other live webcast platforms have risen and become popular one after another. These new phenomenon and processes have created new trends and characteristics of self-media; correspondently, the concept of self-media is changing dramatically. (Di 2017.) Kaili also gave a great example of a We-media person, how she caught the trend and became famous among Chinese netizens is one reflection of We-media effects in China -- Papi Chan (Image 1), an internet celebrity who has more than 33 million fans on China's most used social platform Weibo. In 2015, She posted a short video on Weibo which went viral almost overnight, in her video, she dressed funny and played in various characters in exaggeration, joking the social and familiar issues or latest topics faced by Chinese young generation. (Guo 2016.) Her fame echoes the change in Chinese netizens' demand of entertaining and form of online media. Ever since, the idea of We-media went mainstreaming in association with the appearance of internet celebrity economy.



Image 1 A screenshot of Papi Chan's Weibo post (Baidu 2020)

We-media in western countries tilted towards the concept of news reporting principally which can be seen from Gillmor's explanation, instead, the form of social development and medium in China tend to make people have a different recognition of We-media. From their point of view, self-media is not only the channel for journalism and communication, but an incubation for diversified contents. Citizens' opinions on public affairs are considered as self-media contents, including, novels, comments, advertising, self-expression and so on. And there are various approaches for self-media propagation as well, such as, short videos, posts, subscription articles, and livestreaming. (Di 2017.)

Grassroots owned the voice rights, a number of grassroots opinion leaders arise initially on internet throughout various new media platforms and quickly became famous, gaining large amount of attentions, like Papi, mentioned previously. Those first generation of internet celebrities made their owns rules to get dividends, they are named as influencers or KOL (key opinion leader) who branding themselves with personal and unique styles appeared in their works. Thoughts and advices shared by them are treated as mainstream opinions accepted by the majority of netizens. Due to this strong "peer effect", their audience flow is comparable to the official institutions and sometimes they are even more authoritative than the officials which creates enormous cash flow in this intangible digital world. This decentralised media mode allows the integration of communicators and

audiences, and “diversified content” is the core characteristic of We-media in China, many have seen its profitability. (Di 2017.)

3.2 We-media as a marketing tool

The year 2016 was seen as the first year of the era of internet celebrity economy in China as a result of We-media flourish. Audience groups of influencers has generated from fragments to platform-based or interest-based communities, the form of media contents has transformed from texts to visual images or short videos as well. Later on, there are various ways of converting the intangible “audiences flow assets” to real cash flow, such as “fans reward”, advertising, and etc. The diverse, universal, and civilian features of We-media have brought varied business opportunities for both grassroots and companies. Due to the powerful dissemination of We-media, and a huge number of active netizens in China, the Chinese We-media marketing has expanded rapidly since 2016. More and more people entered in this platform to present their values, get influential, and share the unpredictable profits. In terms of the structure, We-media can be explained as an “information-sharing” marketing, and its main marketing mode is formed by Advertising and paid subscription, the interaction rate and numbers of valid followers are the core features that decide the final profit income. (Jianrong, Yi & Haoyuan 2017.)

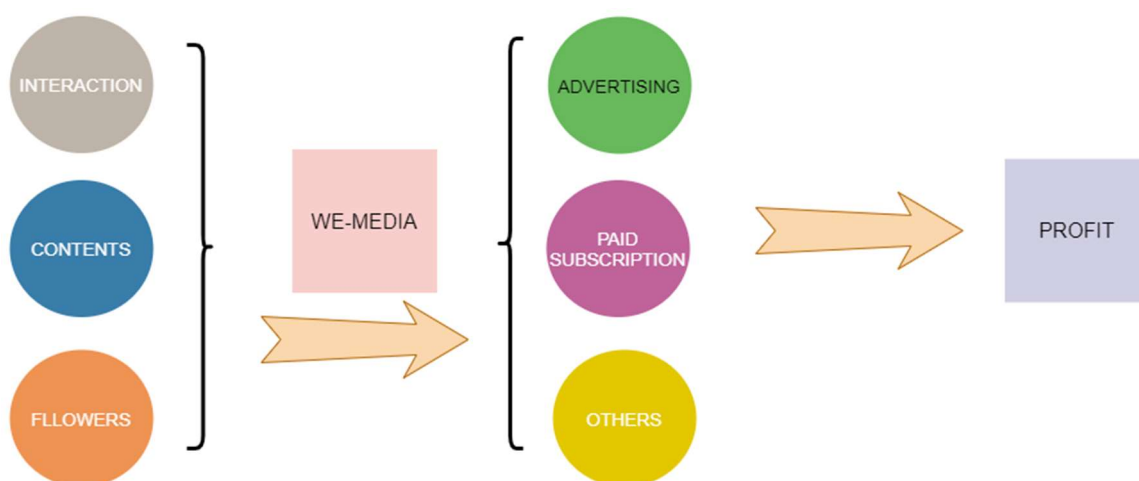


Figure 4 An illustration of We-media marketing profit earning process

A process-oriented marketing approach (see Figure 4) has driven the We-media become commercialized and popular speedily, unaccountable active internet users are the core incentive of individuals or organizations marketing themselves on We-media.

At present, the We-media marketing is getting matured and it is evolving with the netizens/consumers' behaviour, various platforms come to light towards customised online user experience and profit model. Each platform has their target audiences and special operation pattern that fits in certain profit models. For instance, WeChat is one of the top 5 We-media platforms, its profit models consist paid reading, advertisement, O2O (online to offline), and e-commerce. According to Zeng and Wang's research (2016) on China's We-media profit model, there are two main types: "direct profit model" and "indirect profit model", paid reading and advertisement are "direct", O2O and e-commerce are "indirect". In which O2O is an outcome of community economy, the idea of community economy can be told by its name – the inner value of this profit model is driven by communities, in other words, it requires high engagement with the audiences/fans. A subscription account with its special contents that gained enough followers on Wechat and doing offline activities by charging membership fees can be considered as a community economy. (Xia 2017.) To name a few, the We-media marketing is developing diversely with various platforms and profit models, individuals or firms should select the platforms and profit models carefully in order to optimise the benefits brought by the We-media marketing.

To sum up, there are seven points that highlight the advantages of We-media marketing (Xia 2017):

- Diversity -- Either grassroots or organisations can be the We-media person, utilising platforms for their personal or business promotions and information-sharing.
- Variety – varied platforms and multi-types of content forms.
- Interactivity – High interaction between users (including consumers, audiences, influencers, organisations and etc.), therefore, communications and consumptions are directly integrated.
- High-speed dissemination – Internet has shortened the time of spreading information.
- Universality – All field of information can be reached online, and spread broadly.
- Low cost – Compared to traditional media marketing, We-media saves the budget.
- Uniqueness – We-media people or organisations could share contents with specific styles that gathering followers who have the same interests, therefore achieving target audiences. Each community on We-media have their uniqueness.

4 CHINA'S WE-MEDIA IN FASHION CATEGORY

4.1 The evolvement of fashion media

Fashion media means a series of promotion activities conducted by fashion brands towards their offerings (including apparel, accessories, and make-up) throughout vast media platforms with the purpose of marketing achievements, building a good brand image in front of the public is the vital goal. In the past, traditional media limited the ways of fashion marketing, fashion were seen as an untouchable concept to the public because of the scarce of fashion promotion. However, the prosperity of We-media has prompted the fashion being common and popular. (Wang 2018, 8.)

The earliest fashion We-media was presented as blogs, fashion bloggers once become the new pop, they shared their style preferences via writing blogs. Later on, when the internet expands universally, self-media turned out to be the mainstream, grassroot fashion lovers got voice right in the fashion industry, showing off their chick styles and opinions through social media net sites, the traditional press fashion media was replaced by digital form generally. China has got the similar pathway on media evolution, the development even started later than western countries, frankly speaking. Nonetheless, the We-media mediums have grown further in recent years – it went through four main stages: Weibo's launch in 2019 announced the blogging boom in China, then the curation of WeChat official accounts enables fashion audiences follow brands and celebrities. Short video applications such as Douyin (TikTok) followed up, which became the favorite for KOLs (or influencers) since 2015 till present. Livestream platforms is going strong more recently with its powerful call-to-action function. Jiaqi Li (see Image 2), a KOL with enormous followers who made a record when he sold 15000 lipsticks in 5 minutes on Taobao livestream in November 2019's shopping event. (Zoe 2019.)

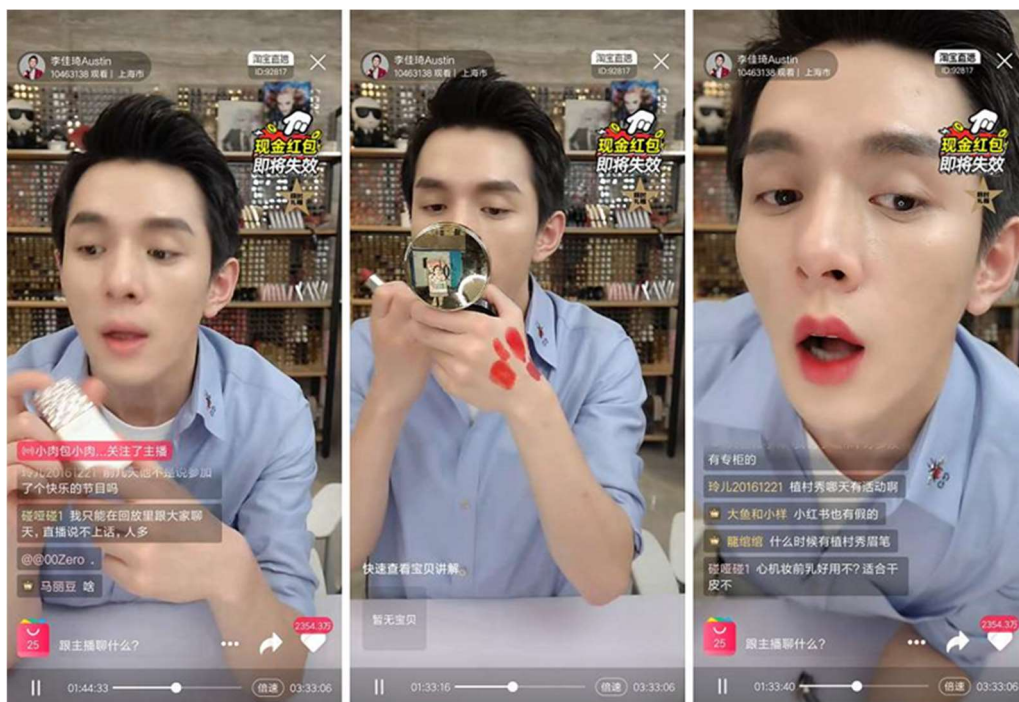


Image 2 KOL—Jiaqi Li promoting lipsticks via livestream (Baidu 2020)

A horizontal expansion of fashion We-media in China provides brands new insights for marketing operations. It improved the means of communication between brands and the audiences linked to the promotion of products and services and the creation and maintenance of the brand identity.

4.2 Characteristics of China's fashion We-media

We-media as serving for the fashion segment, it performs with particularities. Intensive interaction is one of the core characteristics that fashion We-media channel obtained. Fashion We-media persons often play two roles, they are influencers and sellers at the same time, thus an intense relationship to their followers/consumers has created through We-media. This enables brands take quick reaction to audiences' (who are consumers as well) feedbacks and provide a fluent customer service efficiently. Highly interaction with consumers speedup fashion players' innovation process. (Wang 2017, 10.)

Additionally, "Diversified content" is vital for brands to boost their bottom line, so as to KOLs' personal branding. The scale of We-media is heavily relying on content creation, especially when it comes to fashion marketing. Fashion contents across vast sources: outfit suggestions, luxury purchasing, fashion shows and etc., they altered the public's conventional sensation of fashion to make trends catchable and purchasable. In today's already crowded scene, only high-quality contents can inspire audiences. (Yaoqi 2017, 11.)

Fashion We-media enhanced the feature of We-media of being unique. Having a personalized charm is crucial for KOLs, they are required to have fashionable appearances with their own attitudes towards trends. Audiences normally follow a fashion We-media person due to he/she or the brand's first impression to them and later on it will transformed to a focus on content creations. KOLs who have unique style and novel thoughts within innovative contents are more likely to grasp a huge number of followers. Subjective ideas seem important in the We-media era. (Yaoqi 2017, 10.)

4.3 From KOL to KOC

Chinese influencers are often called KOLs, key opinion leader, they are important marketers in the digital market raised from grassroots. Their voices beloved by enormous netizens since the dominance of We-media. Hyper-interaction between KOLs and audiences has provided lucrative opportunities across vast We-media platforms with the fanbase indicates the KOL's marketing value. They are the initial choices for fashion brands to localize in Chinese market by ways of collaborations. (Williams 2019.)

The vast profits that KOLs have brought quickly led the KOL ecosystem oversaturated. A statistic shows that by the mid of 2018 over 20 thousand of KOLs with more than 1 million fans each on one of the most popular We-media platforms – Weibo in China, and a relatively decline on revenues and consumer conversion rates indicates the peak of KOL economy. Consumers are getting numb with duplicate KOLs and content types. (Suen 2019.)

KOCs, key opinion consumers, a new form of influencer in China are now catching audiences' eyes which fashion experts claimed that it may be more beneficial for brand's image building. Differentiating from KOLs, KOCs are consumers with only few hundred followers on their We-media accounts. Their value is based on trustworthy nature. KOCs pivot on product reviews without professional marketing skills and tends to interact more with other consumers. If KOLs are experts, KOCs can be friends in this opaque internet world, building trust is the tier between KOCs and other consumers. (Smith 2019.)

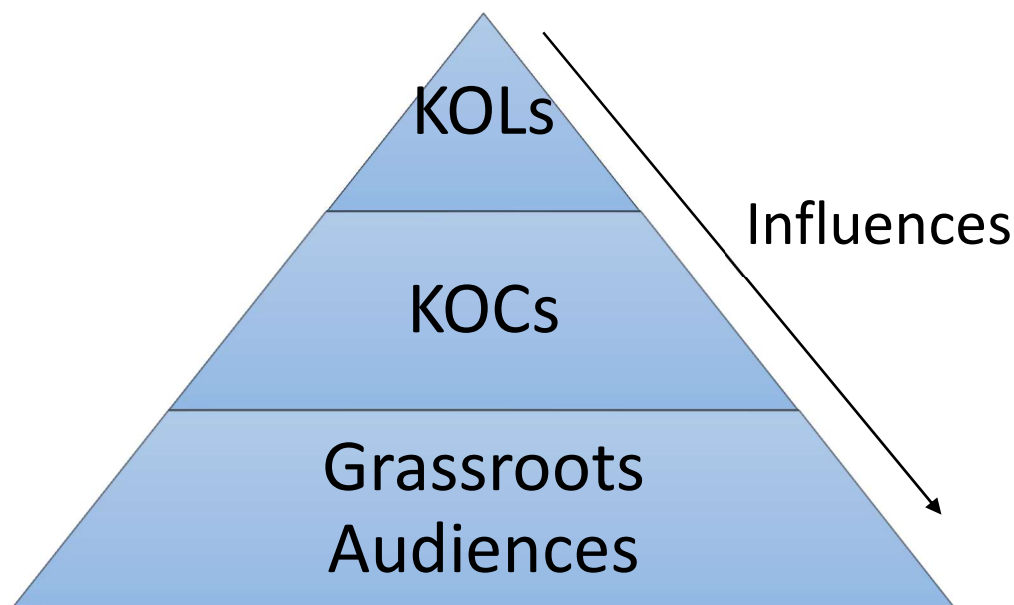


Figure 5 A pyramid of KOL & KOC (Red Digital 2019)

Figure 5 indicates that KOLs' influences is transforming to KOCs gradually. Many Chinese domestic brands have been using KOCs for quite some time, Perfect Diary, a homegrown Chinese cosmetic brand, is using KOCs as one of their key components of their marketing strategies. They began to work with KOCs on a mass scale since the launch of the brand, the brand then appear to the public in a blink as everyone was discussing about it. China as a breeding ground of apps that Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) grew widespread with the focus of product review content. As a social e-commerce platform where KOCs originate and are commonly embraced. In the app, accounts with huge followers are not the favor, instead, accounts have quality content even few fans are often appeared in the homepage recommendation list. (Digital Business Lab 2019.) This encourages grassroots to produce decent and authentic contents and become KOCs eventually.

Shifts are underway, although the KOL economy still remains its importance in the fashion market in China, the change is unavoidable for the future of consumer engagement.

5 CASE COMPANY

5.1 China's homegrown fashion brands

The case company is based in China. A statement of China's homegrown fashion brands within the market environment shall be clarified for a better understanding of the case brand. As a result of the significance and specificity of China's Internet expansion, e-commerce has become a blockbuster for domestic fashion players in China. Few domestic giants have dominated the digital market, including JD.com, and two Alibaba-owned e-commerce platforms: Taobao and Tmall. These top providers create plenty of opportunities for retailers on account of their robust functions and powerful influences among the Chinese online shoppers. (Flaven 2013.) Therefore, the vast majority of fashion players choose to launch their brands with one of the giant e-commerce platforms for positive results.

Among those e-commerce platforms, Taobao has proved itself to be the fertile breeding ground for Chinese independent designer brands because of its ability in creating and cultivating a highly engaged consumer community with D2C (direct to customer) model. On Taobao, designers are free to adapt their designs and build their unique brand identities where consumers are actively involved. The focus on independent designs enhanced Taobao's position through China's digital marketplaces. It is the pivot of China's fashion market where can discover new talents and are beloved by millions of young consumers who are passionate about indie fashion. Taobao is a crowded arena and the competition is fierce but brands are equal there, big names with sufficient budget can buy marketing on the platform, instead, small brands can break through the noise by creating their personal identifiable communities through social engagement across multiple online media platforms and offline interactions. (Hall 2019.) The dynamics in China's fashion market is shifting that consumers gravitate to domestic brands attributed to their authenticity of storytelling and affordable prices along with good qualities.

Millennials and Gen-Z, also described as "post-90s" and "post-00s" in China, are the largest group of Taobao users. They expect to be addressed with highly individual fashion sense and excellence in every touch point. China's young generation is spending over spirit, as reported by Faisal from China Daily, over 65 percent of total consumptions in China are Millennials and Gen-Z, under the age of 35 accounted for over 25% of China's population. The percentage of their spending powers is expected to increase by 11% annually until 2021. (Faisal 2019.) Chinese post-90s and post-00s have a big appetite in fashion, apart from luxury brands, design brands that incubated in Taobao are their preference for purchasing.

5.2 3KASHAM

The case company – LingSiYaoYao Ltd., was one of the homegrown players that aligned itself with the major online platforms, launched its apparel brand 3KASHAM on the back of Taobao in 2018. As a start-up independent design brand, it relies heavily on Taobao for performances and sells profits. The company's business model is completely digitalized with no physical stores apart from occasional pop-ups. Instead, on its Taobao boutique, 3KASHAM present a selection of high-profile fashion products such as bomber jackets. Prices are decent with its core value—about RMB256 (€35) for a T-shirt and RMB640 (about €80) for a hoodie. Sale volumes are considerably fair as a start-up brand: about 40 units for each product per month. From design to distribution, the whole business process is done in China.

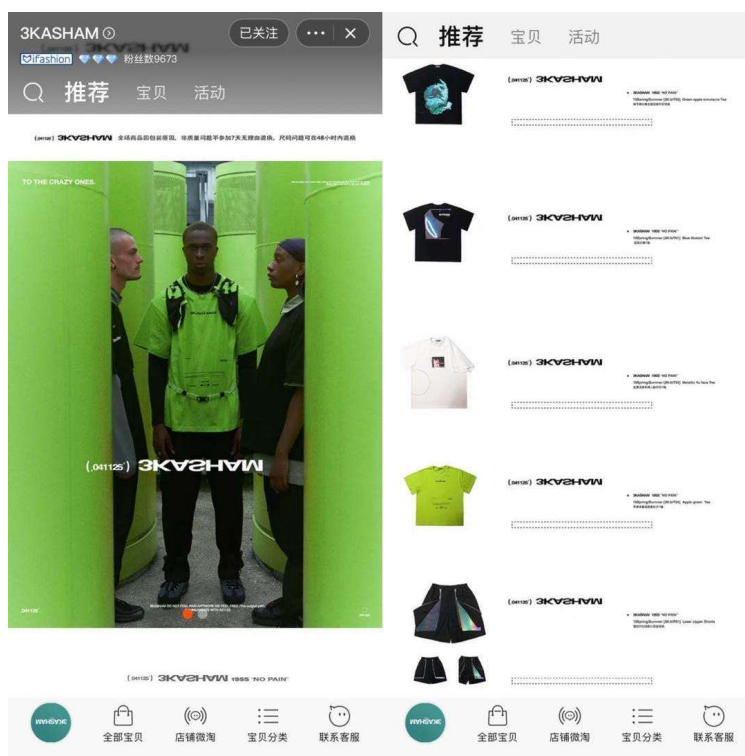


Image 3 3KASHAM's Taobao boutique

Looking through 3KASHAM's Taobao online shop (Image 3), nearly 10 thousand consumers are following the shop, they are either loyalty customers of the brand or people who love the style of the brand. Unlike the traditional e-commerce platform, Taobao tend to be a social-linked e-commerce which means an intense interaction between sellers and consumers. As the majority digital consumers in China accessed internet through mobile phone, Taobao has pivoted on its mobile application upgrading. On Taobao mobile app,

consumers can easily find and compare products that they want. With Taobao's social functions and technology, consumers can receive daily recommendations based on their previous searches and purchases, at the same time they can follow their favorite brands to receive their latest new release and posts. Just like the social media, Taobao's social functions enable consumers commenting, sharing and following brands at their fingertip and all contents are linked to purchase directly.

5.2.1 Positioning

Brand positioning refers a strategy to identify a niche market for the brand across all aspects of its business model, including pricing, promotions, and distribution. It aims at creating a distinctive impression of the brand in consumers' mind and differentiating from competitors. (BJ 2019.)

3KASHAM positioned itself in the high-fashion pyramid, offering unique and offbeat designs that are perfect choices for Chinese millennials & Gen-Z who are active digital users, shopping lovers and open to novel ideas. Youth culture represents its core identity. The brand's vision is to create a fashion label, shaping the concept of fashion in view of the company's value. It aims to create a customer-based community driven by their personalized fashion culture, acquiring customers who have the same perception of fashion culture. In other world, 3KASHAM is no longer just a brand (logo + product), but a label which have a recognisable standard of style, aesthetic, and contents. In fashion industry, a brand gives products meaning, while a label defines the motivation and style of products. The brand pursues to delight customers by offering them high quality products with a "3KASHAM" brand culture.

5.2.2 Current We-media performance

Operating on the back of Taobao e-commerce platform means a DTC business strategy to 3KASHAM. A fully digitalized business model allows 3KASHAM to reach consumers not only in big cities but far way to the rural areas in China. considering the limited budget and visions of the company, China's We-media platforms provide excellent approaches for the brand to optimise its customer engagement. Since the launch of the brand, it has actively built their brand images and put commercial promotions through multiple We-media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat.

As said previously, the We-media in China is consistently shifting due to the sophisticated and fluctuated consumer behaviours and social dynamics. The slowdown of KOL influence along with the rise of KOC hint the change of China's fashion marketing. Marketers

are pivoting to new media platforms beyond Weibo or WeChat for a better result of customer acquisition. Apart from those international luxury brands like Dior, Louis Vuitton, Chanel or Gucci, more brands in lower fashion pyramid both international and local are joining the battle trying to capture the touch points and key driving forces of well-informed Chinese customers under the streaming of We-media.

The case company is also in this game, tapping into diverse We-media market in order to achieve its visions for community-oriented brand identity with loyal customers, so as to inspire further potential consumers.

5.2.3 Project overview

The case company has done a promotion campaign via We-media channel. In order to understand the results of empirical study thoroughly, the project is described with its key features.

Table 1 Case description

Case	Description	Platform	Location
3KASHAM promotion campaign	The case company reached to a KOL who owns more than 200 thousand fans on Bilibili (a video platform) for post promotion in video content.	Bilibili	China

Table 1 demonstrates the case of a marketing activity conducted by the case company. The purpose of this campaign was to build brand awareness, draw attentions from potential customers as well as to increase sales. The promotion campaign was down through a new-rising We-media platform -- Bilibili with video content presents.

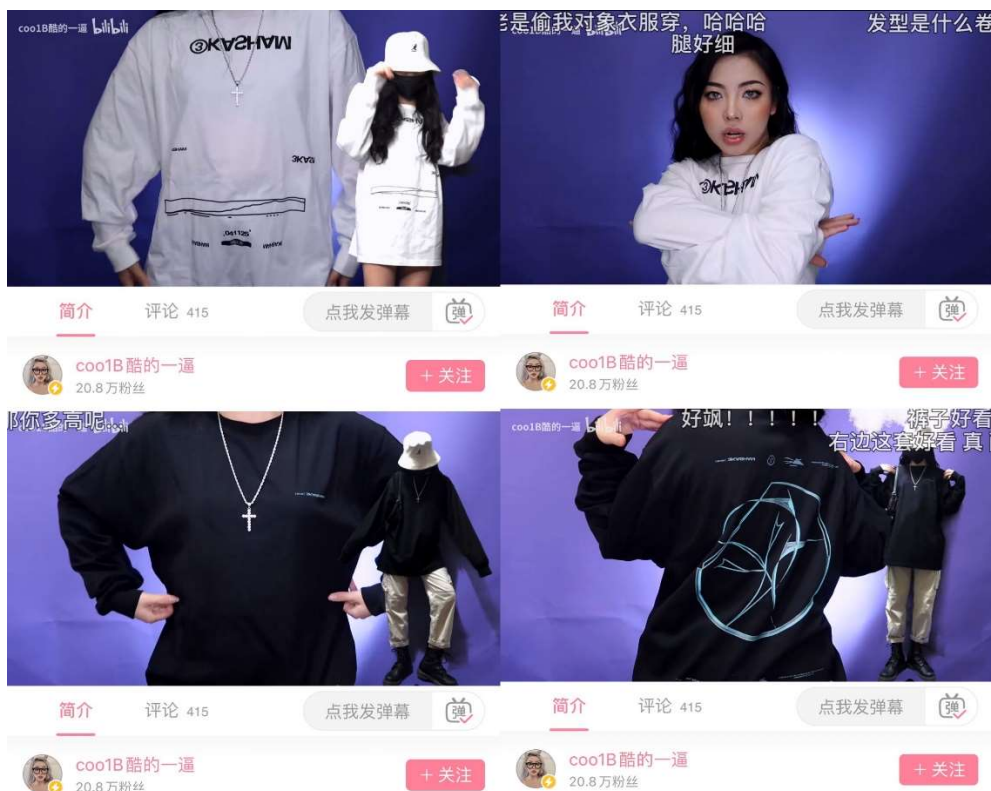


Image 4 Product review from a KOL on Bilibili

Bilibili is now becoming China's most influential video sharing platform corresponds to YouTube in western countries, however, beyond the online sharing element, the value and concept of Bilibili are distinct from YouTube. Bilibili was originally designed for China's ACG (Anime, Comics, Games) industries but has evolved into various categories like beauty, music, fashion, lifestyle and fitness. Its unique membership systems have cultivated a quirky and loyal user base, that turns the platform as a hyper-engaged landscape characterized by "community-feel" in the spotlight. The site's monthly active users are up to 128 million and 78 percent of its demographic are "post-90s" indicate that Bilibili users are those young, creative and trendsetting audiences in China. (Suen & Hall 2020.) Comparing to other big media platforms like Weibo and Douyin, the number of active users on Bilibili seems relatively low, but it doesn't have a big problem facing fake followers and bot accounts, this means the validity of engagement on Bilibili is way more positive than other sites. Therefore, the case company has decided to use Bilibili as their new marketing tool for better customer engagement. 3KASHAM partnered with a KOL who is mainly active on Bilibili as a content creator owning 200 thousand more followers for sponsored post. In the video (Image 4), the KOL was wearing clothes provided by 3KASHAM, showing the outfit, giving a review of each style and the quality to her audiences.

6 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Research methods

The research methodology of this study is referred as a business research of qualitative in nature with an inductive approach associated with a case study. This research is an attempt to seek the in-depth perceptions about the phenomenon of We-media adopted in the fashion marketing tactics in China. (Dudovskiy 2018, 31.)

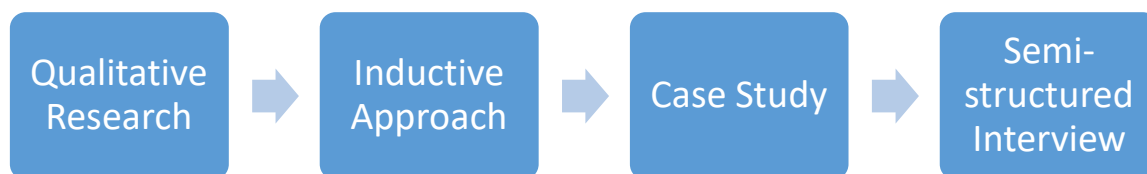


Figure 6 A framework of research methodology

The Figure 6 illustrates the nature of this research. A qualitative case study consists of a detailed investigation, in which data are collected from a specific case that allows an analysis of the context and processes involved in the phenomenon. It facilitates the possibility to identify essential factors, processes and relationships. (Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir & Waseem, 2019.) A range of empirical material collection tools included in a case study can be selected: semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents collections. Hence, With the purpose of answering the research questions, semi-structure interviews are conducted in this study. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher covers a list of themes and some key questions, giving a specific well-structured context that is related to the research topic. The list of questions may be varied depending on the flow of the conversation and additional questions may be required to explore the research question and objectives because of the nature of marketing activities within the case company.

6.2 Phases of the study

The study started with literature review at the beginning of the year 2020, identifying scope of the research and the focus of the study. Since November 2019, the author has kept in touch with the case company helping out with the promotion campaign for the study preparation. Because of the well-preparation beforehand, the literature review was completed effectively with sufficient and trustworthy sources by the end of February. At the same time, the case company has down the campaign as the matter of the study. Afterwards, participants of the semi-structured interviews responded to the agreement within

a short time accelerated the process of data collection. Empirical material from the interviews were collected within two weeks at the beginning of March 2020.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with five interviewees. The author arranged two interviews with the company's owner and the marketing manager. The rest three interviews was made with participants from the field of fashion marketing in China: a professional fashion marketer, A fashion KOL, and a KOC. The objective of conducting interviews with those participants was to dig deep insights of the We-media phenomenon in fashion marketing and the values of using We-media for fashion marketing strategies. The interviews circulated around experiences, motives, process, behaviors, learning, and outcomes of the We-media adoption in fashion marketing in China. The selected interview mode was personal interviewing through phone recording, as participants were in China with busy schedules.

Table 2 Interview schedule

Date	Interviewees	Title	Place
5 March 2020	Interviewee 1	The Founder of 3KASHAM	China
7 March 2020	Interviewee 2	The marketing manager	China
10 March 2020	Interviewee 3	KOL	China
10 March 2020	Interviewee 4	Fashion marketer	China
12 March 2020	Interviewee 5	KOC	China

Table 2 shows the date of interview arrangement with participants. By the end of February, the author has reached to ideal interviewees and made the agreement of interview permission with participants so as the schedule. The duration of each interviews was about one hour through Skype and recorded the conversation with phone. During the Skype conversation, the author firstly introduced the issues related to the study, the purpose of the interview, the value of participants' opinions, the expected outcomes considering the quality of the interview, as well as the confidentiality of results. The language of interviews was Chinese. In order to secure data reliability, interviews were translated and

transcribed in English. Overall, 5 inquiries were made and the author had conversations with all of them. Each conversations was lasted averagely 50 minutes, except the one with the KOC which took 30 minutes, since the role of KOC from a business point of view is not professional enough to provide perceptions related to marketing strategies, but the conversation with the KOC did give the author inspirations that are valuable for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of We-media marketing.

The author set a range of questions based on discussion pointers given in Table 3 with the purpose of this research. The discussion pointers can remind researcher to focus on the scope of research goals during the conversation and it allows a broader exploration that might happen during the conversation with interviewees.

Table 3 Interview discussion pointers

Focus (research Questions)	What I was Looking for
The nature of We-media as a marketing tool	Definition Organizational & personal achievements
The value of We-media	Value of We-media in accordance with the big marketing environment in China From participants' perspective, how do they think of We-media taking into account its marketing value
Networks involvements	Who is involved? How important is the involvement?
Communications	How to communicate with audiences in a content? Is the way of communicating with audiences important?
Platform	Necessity of choosing platforms

The interviews contained eight questions in total for each interviewee. Some questions varied due to the participants' field of career. For interviewee 1 and 2, questions were prepared with the focus of the case company's operation and marketing performances in We-media channels. While for fashion marketer, KOL, and KOC, the author tended to find out some insights of the marketing secrets in the era of We-media in China. Moreover, the last question was set to ask interviewees' personal experience and suggestions in the context of the research questions.

Data analysis is a process of discovering the required information for the research objectives. Data analysis of this research started with translating the interviews from Chinese to English accurately. Thereafter, the author analyzed data following a qualitative data analysis procedure that can be undertaken through three steps: step one is to develop and apply codes, categorizing collected materials into a theme or an idea assigned with meaningful titles. The next step is to identify and interpret themes, patterns and relationships related to codes from the previous stage. This stage requires a critical thinking skill of the researcher, since the empirical material gathered from interviews was rich in nature as compared to other sources and no qualitative study can be repeated to generate the same results. The outcome of data analysis needs to be summarized eventually, associating findings to research objectives. (Research Methodology 2020.)

Table 4 Coding framework

Analytic framework	Concept	Themes	Sub-themes
Knowledge	Reasons of the rise of We-media	We-media as a marketing tool in China	Importance, characteristics
Attitude	We-media in fashion marketing	Understanding the role of We-media in fashion marketing	
Practice	Marketing campaign through We-media channels	Implementing a fashion campaign through We-media platforms	Participation, Involvement, key platforms, communication
Knowledge	Marketing strategies for fashion players	Essential elements of fashion marketing through We-media	

The author has designed a coding framework provided in Table 4 to categorize raw empirical materials from interviews into well-defined themes. On the basis of participants' answer to the interview questions and the objective of this research, the author decided to coding data from 3 perspectives: knowledge, attitude and practice in four concepts in relation to the research topics respectively. Themes and sub-themes were developed on each concept to break transcripts down into the smallest units and reorganizes these units into relatable narratives.

6.3 Results and Discussion

6.3.1 Results

Findings of analyzed data are presented in this sector in the form of coding categories with the objective of this study. The quotes in the present report in English were all drawn

from translated transcripts. Moreover, interview segments quoted in this report were only slightly edited and “cleaned up”.

We-media as a marketing tool in China

It's crucial to have a clear notion of We-media regard to its effects in marketing within the rapid changes in China. Both participants indicated that We-media is now becoming a needed tool for companies to fulfill their marketing goals, because of the digital booming in China led consumers' shifts in ways of communication and lifestyle. There is no clear theoretical definition of what exactly We-media is, at least in China. Chinese people use this buzzword “We-media” to represent a phenomenon that demonstrate all behaviors and activities associate with spreading information across online channels. Social media can also consider as a part that is included in We-media, whereas We-media is a boarder concept to explain these phenomena. Contents or information shared on We-media are diverse as well, we-media person doesn't have to be a professional journalist or a real superstar, they can just share what they want, what's in their mind across those We-media platforms. In fact, the origins of We-media can be seen as a digital diary book for people to note their daily life. Later on, the power of internet network enhanced the social ability of We-media, at that time it announced the era of We-media. China's era of We-media started by the launch of Weibo where people sharing and searching information freely, soon after, people with same interests gathered together online, and they exchange information and build trust with each other because of common interests. According to marketing theory, one of the most vital touch points of consumers in decision making is recommendations from friends or peers. We-media channels provide a perfect place for consumers to listen to their trusted peers instead of authorized organizations. The fashion marketer (Interviewee 4) also gave a further explanation of why We-media is getting important for marketing:

The key of marketing is communication. To let the public, hear from you and know your products so as the brand is the first step. By noticing the company as the initial action across consumer journey, then there is more likely to have a chance for firms to inspire consumers and led them to the next step taking actions on purchasing your products.

Another reason why We-media is essential for marketing activities is that, the cost of promoting on We-media channels is considerably low compared to the traditional media platforms such as advertisement on TV or magazines. In traditional ways of promoting, firms often invite celebrities as their brand endorsement which small sized companies cannot afford it. However, in We-media marketing, firms can have more choices to start a

promotion with their budget and the rewards can even be doubled as effective as those big firms who spent tons of money on a campaign. The Interviewee 3 who is a KOL also mentioned that even though the cost of a marketing promotion on We-media platforms is getting higher every year, but there is still a margin of the price that firms can cut off with strategic plans.

As a KOL, the majority of my income comes from firms who collaborate with me, I charge them on each sponsored post. And the price is getting higher each year due to the market environment as well as my increasing followers. But we are not like celebrities, firms often negotiate with us for a “discount”, the price are negotiable to us. If I really like the brand or I can benefit from the promoting in other way, I would give them discounts. Afterall, we are opinion leaders not real super stars.

Both participants notified that We-media marketing in China is the mainstream and cannot be ignored, if firms do not learn and use it then they are out-of-date and possibly will be eliminated in their field of industries.

We-media in fashion marketing

Fashion business used to seem untouchable, it only showed its elegancy to consumers and big names were remembered merely. However, under the circumstances of digitalization and the rise of We-media, fashion players have brought fashion behind-the-scenes to public, small independent designer brands have got the opportunity to be known by more consumers. We-media turn out to be brands' robust weapon in marketing communication where consumers are proactive interacting with brands during their online journey of decision-making. As a consumer herself, the KOC (Interviewee 5) says that people are spontaneously promoting their favorite brands on we-media channels.

People are addicted to fashion in nature, when there are places (We-media channels) that allows everyone to express themselves, fashion lovers are even more enthusiastic about dressing up, posting their daily outfits online to get attentions and “likes”. They don't expect to get money from the brands, it's all because of the trust they have built with brands.

We-media in fashion marketing plays a vital role, apart from increasing sells, marketing activities carried out in fashion industry requires high-profile visual contents that people can get inspiration for their style of dressing and new trends from fashion brands' marketing messages. An aspiring fashion campaign with visually satisfying to consumers is the fundamental elements that can be easily accomplished through We-media channels plus

value-added interaction with consumers. Audiences' reacts by commenting, reposting, and sharing prove the efficiency of the brand's promotion and feedbacks can be gathered right away. It is no doubt that We-media is a strong fashion marketing tool, especially when fashion business has been competitive and moved fast.

We-media has proved to be an excellent tool for the fashion world, a great opportunity to create new brand content, industries are able to stimulate interactivity, for example with the involvement of artists or companies from other filed of business during the innovation process across channels, more importantly, to form strong and significant relationships with the audiences.

We are witnessing new shopping ways, I mean, e-commerce, mobile pays and other technology conveniences are changing people's lifestyle, in China, the change is significant. And We-media in China is always connected to e-commerce, the tight bond between e-commerce platforms and We-media channels provide companies lucrative opportunities, contents are linked to sales directly. Chinese people are digital shoppers and they don't mind to consume in advance, their positive attitudes towards fashion highlight the value of We-media in fashion business.

Views from the fashion marketer (Interviewee 4) demonstrate the ecosystem of China's digital market which the rise of We-media is result from e-commerce development, in which fashion industry is highly involved. In the fashion world, everything is changing in a fast pace, brands are vying for customer acquisition. While We-media has broadened the ability to reach customers both regionally and demographically and has gathered the most active consumers with strong purchasing power together across multi channels – Chinese millennials are taken the voice.

Both participants stated a positive attitude towards We-media as a thriving tool in fashion marketing under the digital wave in China. As a marketing manager working for the case company, interviewee 2 pointed out some hard times when doing promotions through We-media.

Although we feel burdensome sometimes struggling in content creation that links to sales increase and customer engagement, we still believe that We-media is our gateway to the next level in China's fashion market, we just need to spend more time on it and really do research on the system and secrets behind it.

Moreover, the KOL economy in China can be seen as a result to We-media's impact in fashion industry. All interviewees mentioned this unique economic trend that is prevalent in China, and they believe that brands and fans funded the KOL economy. Celebrities and

opinion leaders are the bridge for brands to target customers across channels in a more friendly way. Using celebrities as ambassadors for brands to inspire customers has a long history in fashion marketing, the traditional fashion media such as advertising on TV or magazine with celebrity effects was one-way communication from companies to consumers that companies controlled and pushed consumers touch points. However, consumers are proactive on We-media since celebrities are off fans' imagination and become more authentic and friendly. The fan culture in China creates this profitable business model, people are crazy for their idols and KOLs and are willing to pay everything recommended by them.

Marketing campaign through we-media channels

Despite the fact that We-media is an impressive marketing toolkit for fashion brands to gain consumers, the process of conducting a forceful campaign is not easy. At the meantime, the market is increasingly saturated, consumers' behavior is complex given the varying expectations, messages, and capability across channels. Therefore, brands have to be careful and thoughtful on every step for a strategic campaign. Interviewee 1 who is the owner of the case company explained that, in china, there are thousands design brands incubated in Taobao and hundreds international well-known brands which offers consumers massive choices. The dazzling choices of products made consumers impatient and hard to express loyalty to a single brand.

When people want to buy things, they have multi-choice of brands in their mind and endless options in searching information online.

They go to We-media channels ask for recommendations to help them make the final decision of purchasing, that's where a brand should pivot on.

Even though our designs are offbeat, it is inevitable that other brands can have a similar product substitute ours. Let's say a T-shirt, there is no really difference between our brand and others in most of consumers' eyes. Thus, to catch their eyeballs, having a voice on We-media channels is vital.

I trust my designs; all we need is to have incredible marketing executions that bring our items to the spotlight.

To execute a marketing campaign, first of all, is to decide which platforms you want to get in with target customers in mind. There are quite many channels in China, each one has its specialty. The most used ones are Weibo, WeChat, Douyin – which is popular in recent years as a short-video application, and XiaohongSu – a social e-commerce platform with KOC gatherings. The case company has chosen Bilibili instead, a new video-sharing

platform that is about to the focus among diverse We-media platforms in China. Coincidentally, all participants discussed Bilibili during interviews.

Bilibili is actually operating for quite many years, it is older than Douyin, Kuaishou (another short video channel) and Xiaohongshu. Despite the slow growing, this platform will be the next center of China's We-media. (Interviewee 2)

As a content creator on Bilibili, I have seen the influence of this platform is rapidly increasing in recent days. Sometimes I even see my videos are reposted from Bilibili to other platforms like Weibo. (Interviewee 3)

The reason why we choose Bilibili to do this campaign is that we want the sense of strong community-feel that the platform is capable to provide, audiences on Bilibili are so tight together and they are China's millennials who we want to target. This unique centered community-like platform is incomparable to other channels. (Interviewee 2)

The platform that companies are choosing need to match their brand identity and company goals, they cannot just run into random channels without evaluating it. (Interviewee 4)

Brand message referred as content creation in a campaign, for fashion players, an eye-catching promotion emphasis on visual components and the value of designs. The form of content shows how brand tend to communicate with consumers. For instance, text and image contents are most used forms adopted by brands. Short videos within 30s can be appealing in a way, whereas, long-form videos can show authenticity to audiences. Having a digital narrative is crucial, however, deciding who to send this message to the public is the priority. Brands need to decide either collaborate with Chinese idols, KOLs, or KOCs, or do it by themselves. Some international luxury brands would prefer to collaborate with Chinese idols or popular KOLs to play safe in China. In addition, they even tie with platforms for exciting promotions. But, for independent design brands, they usually select to work with KOLs who are not as famous as celebrities but owned a group of loyal fans across platforms. The involvement of participants to a brand message can cultivate various forms of impressive contents. Brand can cooperate with an idol in a text and image form presenting as a digital magazine, or collaborate with a KOL with long-form video presence where KOL can show the full outfit and talk about the story behind the brand. And more recently, inviting KOCs for product-review-like promotions shows effective feedbacks.

Companies really need to think twice about which platforms they will use, with or without collaborations, and what kind of message they want to give to consumers in which forms before they start a campaign, otherwise, their promotion will be like a stone in the sea without any splashes. (Interviewee 4)

When the author asked about achievements in a marketing campaign via, we-media platform, all interviewees gave comments according to their experiences. The case company was satisfied with the results of the promotion done by a KOL on Bilibili, they have got a significant increase on click-view rate and followers to their Taobao boutique, and they even restocked those hoodies which are showed in the promotion.

We have tried many promotions via different platforms, but we do not achieve our goals every time. If you did one mistake during the process, then you lose everything. Like, if you collaborated with the wrong KOL whose followers do not match to the brand's style, although he/she is popular and have a large fan base, you cannot get a satisfied result and lose money and time at the same time. (Interviewee 2)

From a KOL or KOC's point of view, every promotion they made for the brands are profitable to them, they can get paid and free items every time and this is how their income base. But they are also stressed in creating content and communicating to their audiences – the content should look authentic and the commercial elements can't be too obvious in the content that followers may be disappointed; they have to be very careful on the way they talk and the words they choose, making sure not to offend the brand and consumers.

Marketing insights

Interviewees have given forward suggestions and insights regard to using We-media as a marketing tool in China's fashion market. Over the decade, China's We-media market has grown rapidly, it enables brands to embrace diverse options for commercial performances. But companies should never take these opportunities for granted, especially in recent years when the market is getting matured and showing a hint to evolve again to the next level. Multi-platforms approach for promotions might come to an end in 2020, alerted by the fashion marketer (interviewee 4). The integrated marketing communications are mostly adopted by companies in the age of We-media, they are using all possible platforms to promote the same idea. However, the Interviewee 4 suggested brands to use only one or two platforms for a campaign and make an effort on it, to guide consumers through their entire journey of their decision-making, instead of advertising on various platforms for a short-term excitement.

It is common to see a brand's campaign on Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, XiaoHongShu, Kuaishou, and other platforms at the same time. This type of marketing strategy used to be efficient, at the early stage of China's We-media, but now, I would hardly agree with it. Firstly, the cost is expensive to embrace multiple platforms. Secondly, fragmented information can distract people and rarely lead consumers to the purchasing stage.

Interviewee 2 suggested that companies should tapping into Chinese millennials and Gen-Z mainly, as they are becoming the most powerful buyers and new testers. Building a community is necessary to remain target customers after a campaign. Brands need to offer them exclusive services and benefits in order to keep their loyalty. Surely, the end of a campaign is not the end of engagement.

The young generation is getting hard to be motivated, because they have so many choices on products and endless sources through, we-media. So, once you have attracted their eyes, you need to take more time to maintain them and keep inspiring them. (Interviewee 2)

We are trying to create a community for our customers, we have a WeChat group for them. People who purchased from our Taobao store can get invited to the WeChat group where we offer them advance releases and discounts, in order to keep them active, we chat with them a lot – we talk about the designs, ideas, and music within the group and customers can share their photos of wearing our products as references to other customers. (Interviewee 1)

According to the KOL and KOC, they have approved that the KOL economy is on its tough time, whereas, KOCs are become favorites to consumers as peer advisors. Lack of originality and sustainability are the major weak point of KOL economy, there are thousands KOLs tend to share the market dividend, and most of them are too commercialized. Fake follower problems and stereotyped faces and boring contents disappointed audiences. While some KOLs with authenticity and interesting personality are still active on the stage.

6.3.2 Discussion

Finally, the author has illustrated the process of fashion marketing via we-media with key involvements given in Figure 7 based on the results and pervious literature review. Moreover, with a comparison of the results and literature review, the shifts and ongoing trends of We-media marketing phenomenon in China are summarized in Figure 8.

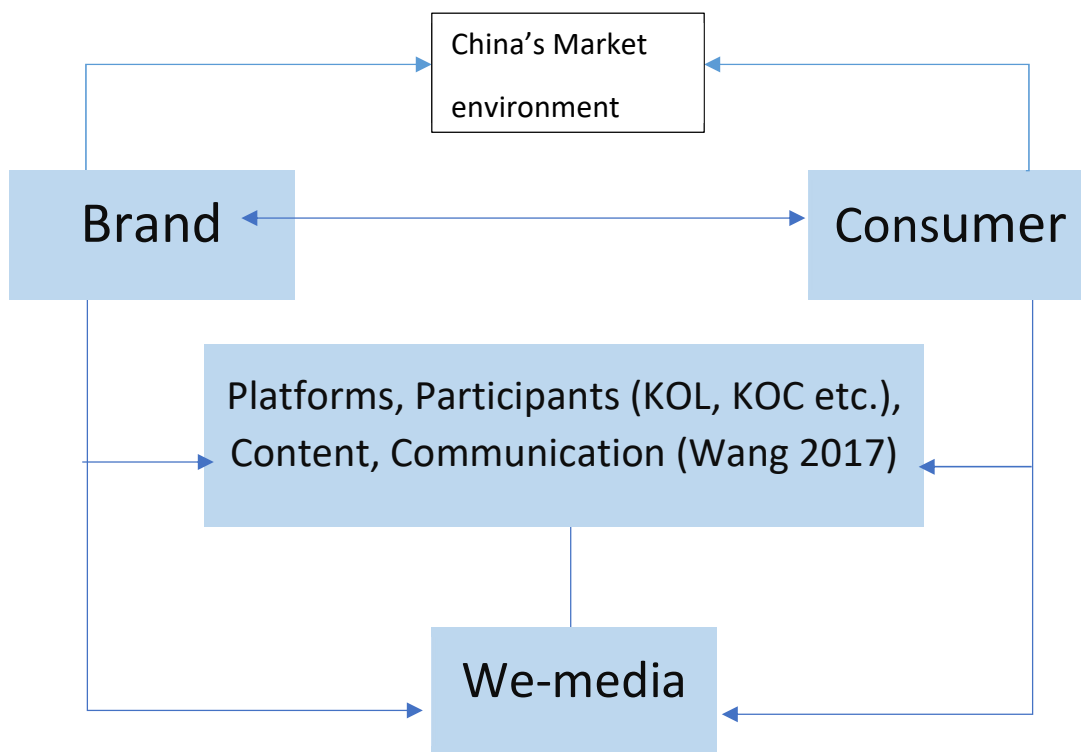


Figure 7 Fashion marketing through We-media

Doing marketing campaigns through We-media channels means brands can directly reach to their target customers without any third-party agencies. Brands should be aware of using the right platform, collaborating with appropriate KOLs or KOCs, and communicating with audiences with right forms and inspiring contents. China's marketing environment may also affect the effectiveness of using We-media as a marketing tool for brands.

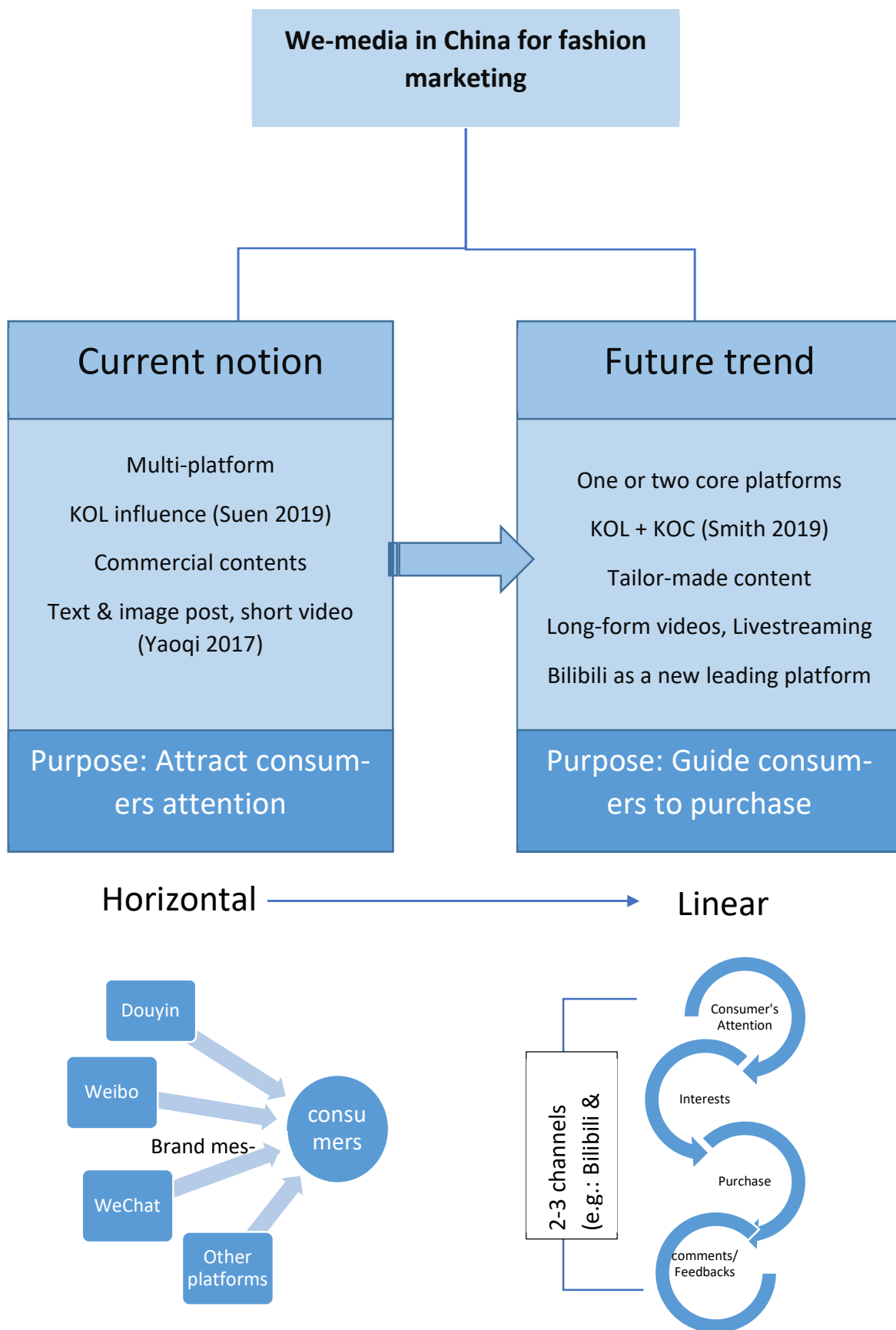


Figure 8 The development of We-media in China

The study has recognized the significance of We-media as a marketing tool in China for fashion players. We-media channels are critical for fashion players executing promotions, communicating to customers and stimulating sales in China. The development of We-media has shifted the way fashion players do promotions, it provides mixed marketing procedures with various platforms and participations. The economic effect is evident that also produced KOL business joining the market for dividends. Nevertheless, the fragmenting of We-media and the proliferation of fashion items has made the marketing ecosystem continuously evolving to satisfy consumers' appetites. And China's young generation will continue to disrupt fashion companies (both international and domestic brands), forcing them to change approaches and mindsets from controlled to unpredictable.

6.4 Suggestions to the case company

Under the We-media scenario in China, the author has outlined some suggestions based on the results of the study for the case company, assisting the brand – 3KASHAM for an improved performance when embarking on marketing activities through We-media. A SWOT analysis (see Figure 9) is used to map out the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats of the case company and how those suggestions are related to the case company's current situation.

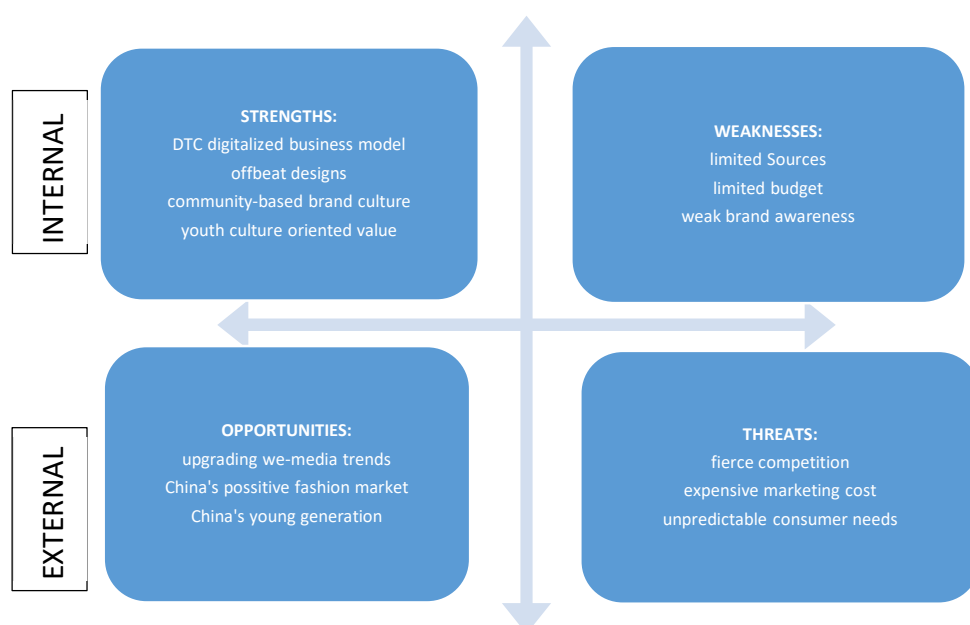


Figure 9 SWOT analysis of 3KASHAM

Operating on the back of Taobao is clearly a strength of the case company, compared with other brands who knows nothing about China's e-commerce system. The platform is

also providing a lot of opportunities towards independent design brands like 3KASHAM. Moreover, social functions that adapted on Taobao app can help the brand interact with customers better in advance. The Taobao livestreaming function is also becoming a widely accepted means of promoting and selling in recent days which the brand should consider to take advantages of using it. Unique designs certainly enhance the brand's image. With a youth-centric brand culture added up values of the brand. Considering the case company is at the beginning of its business, lack of sources and limited budget could be a hindrance for brand exposure, since the tough competition among brands pushed up the cost of acquiring consumers and retaining them. However, the campaign conducted by the case company studied in the research showed a significant opportunity for future marketing tactics. Despite that it is crucial for the brand to invest in advertising and KOL marketing to ensure the contents get seen, the case company should be aware of the use of We-chat platforms and be more careful aligning with KOLs when attempt marketing activities.

Furthermore, producing content alone across all channels is not going to make rewarding impacts under today's unpredictable We-media marketing conditions with the group of Chinese millennials and Gen-Z is growing to be the main consumption force. Therefore, the company can still maintain its performance on WeChat where the brand has already built a community group with loyal customer gatherings. WeChat as a social chatting platform originally, has expanded its services over years with more social interaction and marketing function, but still remains its customization and exclusivity. It is now working to facilitate direct communication between brands and customers. Instead of using WeChat to expand the brand's reach for instant traffic, the company should focus on going deeper on the users, offering customers services with intimate interactions and keep their loyalty to the brand. Additionally, 3KASHAM can test other channels to find out the best suited one and make efforts on exploring it. Bilibili can be the ideal platform, since the brand had experience performing through it. according to the study results, Bilibili is incredibly growing to become a home of a host of young consumers and content creators along with the video content grow in importance. Yet, the brand should be choosy with KOLs, having a discerning approach to choose KOLs to partner with is crucial, after all, the brand would not want to fail on brand presence because of a mistake on cooperation. Overall, staying abreast with We-media trends, making marketing strategies go linear, and saving the budgets are critical for the case company to succeed on marketing activities, lessons can also be drawn from brands outside the fashion industry.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Answers to research questions

The study was carried out to explore tactics of using We-media as a marketing tool for the case company and for other fashion players in China. Answers to the research questions are stated below. The sub-questions were answered first, following with the answer to the main research question.

Sub-questions:

What is China's We-media?

The definition of We-media in China is slightly different from the Western. It can be seen as a decentralized media hub that cultivates diversified forms of contents and breaks the limitation of legacy media. We-media embraces all individuals and organizations to speak from themselves across channels. The use of We-media can have social purpose, commercial determination, or authorized news-spreading intention. Thus, the concept of We-media is used to describe ubiquitous communication behaviors in the digital age in China.

How is the rise of We-media shifting the ways fashion brands do marketing in China?

the rise of We-media in China has provided a new gateway for promotion and consumption for businesses and consumers, in which fashion industry is highly active in the streaming. In terms of fashion business, marketing is heavily relying on communication between brands and customers associated with brands' identities. Hence, We-media has shifted the fashion marketing approaches by providing channels, participants and types of content-creation that allow brands to integrate communication and shopping directly in a hyper-engaged way. Moreover, We-media marketing will continue to evolve from a horizontal model which multi-platform strategies are often used for broader attentions to a linear procedure that aims at providing a seamless guideline through consumer purchasing journey.

What are the vital elements of a fashion marketing campaign through We-media?

To be effective, a brand's marketing campaign must be built on target audience and on customer demands. This means the brand must have awareness of using the right We-media platforms and collaborating with the right KOLs to be able to meet the target audience. And inspired content with an appropriate form remains the key feature for a campaign through We-media.

The main question:

How can a fashion brand utilize We-media for its marketing activities in China?

For a fashion brand, the purpose of conducting marketing activities is to build brand awareness in tune with target customers in order to drive sales and profits.

Since the vast information in digital age has widen consumers' options, the brand no longer controls the relation with its customers, but the opposite: customers' increased awareness means they are more demanding and pickier, they asked to be at the centre. Instead of being passive waiting to be selected, brands need to be more proactive improving its marketing performance connected with digitalisation. We-media in China is working in this direction: it provides companies a digital landscape beyond traditional boundaries of marketing communication, enabling brands to integrate with their customers across channels with diversified approaches.

To win customers over, Brands can align themselves with KOLs or KOCs to create innovative customer-generated contents and spread the messages suitable for target customers across We-media channels. In China, each We-media platforms has its uniqueness, brands can evaluate them by identifying their general active users, the main content forms, or the average cost of a promotion on the platform. The case company in the research as an example, have limited budget and fairly new to the fashion business, so the company chose to put more effort on maintain its current customer group via WeChat, and partnered with a KOL promoting on a new leading platform – Bilibili which is beloved by Chinese millennials and Gen-Z.

7.2 Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are two essential factors to judge the quality of the study. To measure the reliability in a qualitative research means to examine the process and the product of the study for consistency and trustworthiness (Golafshani 2003, 602). Validity in a qualitative research referred as the credibility and transferability of the study. In which, the credibility is affected by the researcher's perception of internal validity of the study, and only participants of the study can judge the credibility of the results, since a qualitative research is conducted with the purpose of understanding a phenomenon from the participants' eyes. Meanwhile, the transferability of a qualitative research can only be judged by the one who wishes to transfer the results to another context. The researcher can enhance the study's credibility and transferability by describing the appropriate strategies that used in the study thoroughly. (William 2020.)

In this research, the author used both primary and secondary data along with a comprehensive research design to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Primary data was collected through a case study with a well-designed semi-structure interview approach. Interview questions were set in the context of research goals and were applied to all interviews. Only minor deviations were made in order to link with the case company and to get additional information and explanation in the discussion flow. Additionally, interviews were recorded in full to enable the author double-check the answers from interviewees thus to ensure the consistency of data interpretation. Secondary sources were collected from authorized materials in the field, including books, scholar articles, professional journals, and research reports related to the topic, and all sources were confirmed to be up-to-date and reliable.

7.3 Suggestions for further research

Due to the sophisticated nature of We-media and changeable fashion market environment in China, it is challenging to cover all aspects of We-media in fashion marketing within one study case. In addition, the research findings discovered some emerging points to several research issues. Hence, there are certain suggestions for future research.

Firstly, it is still worthy to investigate the use of we-media in fashion marketing in China, but pivot on luxury brands' performances, since Chinese consumer consumption on Luxury fashion is incredible and many luxury brands such as Dior, Channel have joined the battle of We-media era. Luxury companies have more sources and financial power to experiment deeper under the We-media phenomenon that can better develop the benefits and knowledges of We-media marketing strategies. Secondly, a study on the profit model of We-media associate with KOL & KOC economy can be conducted to further enhance the understanding of We-media as a marketing tool. The last suggestion is to focus on a single We-media platform, analyzing its functions, user groups, profit model, and operating procedure as a deep review for companies.

8 SUMMARY

We-media as a novel concept derived from the traditional media because of the digital evolution has improved aggressively in the last decade in China. Its strong network connection to the public has been noticed by other industries since then, for commercial purposes. With all the efforts, We-media quickly became a lucrative place for companies to communicate with consumers and to share the dividend. Fashion business with its nature of sophistication and competitiveness, is inevitably be part of the We-media market in China seeking for more opportunities. However, fashion marketing technics are different from the general marketing activities applied by other industries. Thus, the study of We-media marketing in China from a fashion industry perspective was considered necessary by the author.

The research aimed to discover the in-depth knowledges and features of We-media's role and its impact on fashion marketing in China. The findings are collected with a purpose to give suggestions to the case company who is involved in the We-media era as a Chinese independent design brand. Meanwhile, the discoveries are suited for international brands or other Chinese fashion players who plan to tap into the Chinese fashion market digitally.

Theoretically, the thesis examined We-media as a marketing tool for fashion brands by identifying the concept of China's We-media and its implementations in fashion segment. Beforehand, the state of fashion in a global perspective and in China were discussed with an explanation of fashion marketing to give a perception knowing the fashion business comprehensively. Some terminology and phenomenon in China's We-media fashion marketing were explained to reveal the reasons and necessities of using We-media for marketing activities.

Empirically, a case study towards the case company's execution of a marketing campaign on We-media platform and a qualitative data collection scheme – semi-structured interview was thoroughly combined in order to draw an interpretation of the results and to discover the marketing insights in China for fashion players. In which, the case company was introduced with its positioning on the bases of the current situation of fashion market in China.

As a result, findings of the research were interpreted and discussed to provide precise answers to the research questions. The author illustrated the findings visually to assist a clear understanding of the We-media trend and its marketing involvements. Suggestions to the case company were pointed along with a SWOT-analysis of the brand according to the case campaign presence. The research questions were answered in conclusion

chapter and the reliability and validity of the study was discussed. As for future research, the author gave three suggestions with the consideration of the results of the study and the worthiness of the topic.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview questions

1. Considering the surge development of internet in China, do you think we-media is important for a company to tackle marketing activities? And why?
2. How do you define we-media in fashion segment?
3. a. (for participants 1 & 2) How do you think of the role of we-media in fashion marketing after the implementation of a campaign through new we-media platforms?
b. (for other participants) In your opinion, what kind of role does we-media play during a fashion marketing activity?
4. a. (for participants 1 & 2) Can you tell a bit about the marketing achievements your company have got from this campaign?
b. (for other participants) what kind of achievements organizations and individuals can get when using we-media as a marketing tool in fashion industry?
5. During a marketing campaign through we-media, who is involved and how important the involvement is?
6. How does the communication between the organization and consumers start and accomplish during a we-media campaign?
7. There are various we-media platforms in China, is it necessary to tap into all platforms or just focus on some? And can you advice the most essential platforms for fashion players for their marketing activities?
8. As a fashion player under the stream of we-media phenomenon, can you give some suggestions about marketing strategies based on your personal experience or your knowledgebase?