

The Conceive of Community Marketing to Activate the Chinese Hip-hop Music Market: The Case of the Woken Day Label

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Abstract: Currently, the academic research in China mainly focuses on the cultural connotations and dissemination of hip-hop music and hip-hop culture. The research on the marketing value and strategies management of the large and cohesive fan community of hip-hop music is not the majority, and even the marketing activities of the entire Chinese hip-hop music market are not very active. Against this background, to investigate the superiority and feasibility of community marketing in the hip-hop music market, this study utilizes the research method of case analysis. By examining the building and growth of the existing Chinese hip-hop music community, this paper find that community marketing is of great significance for the hip-hop artists and labels, effectively expanding public opinion influence and market reputation while engaging in positive interaction with fans. In the end, this study fulfills the research objective of assisting hip-hop artists and labels in formulating new marketing strategies, thereby providing reference for marketing research in the subculture field.

Keywords: community, Chinese hip-hop, hip-hop music, community marketing

1. Introduction

With the development of the Internet, digital marketing has gradually become mainstream. The demand for direct, two-way, and timely interaction between enterprises and consumers has increased, leading to the emergence and continuous vigorous development of social media marketing. Although the development of hip-hop music in mainland China is still in its early stages compared to its commercial operation in the United States as early as the 1980s [1]. it has gained popularity since 2017 as a subcultural representative in mainland China. The audience has grown significantly and has even had an impact on the mainstream music market, indicating the huge market potential behind hip-hop music. However, marketing activities in the Chinese hip-hop music market lack vitality and creativity, with few targeted plans for specific communities. In order to activate the marketing vitality of the Chinese hip-hop music market, this paper will explore the feasibility of applying community marketing in the hip-hop music market. In the past two years, the markets of research cases in the academic literature on social media marketing have generally been divided into two categories: one is markets with strongly associated audiences and the other is markets with weakly associated

audiences. In markets with strongly associated audiences, marketers are generally brands and we-media of certain industries, such as we-media of beauty makeup, with these research subjects accounting for nearly 3/5 of the proportion. In markets with weakly associated audiences, marketers are generally specific industries and service enterprises, such as agricultural products and publishing, with these research subjects accounting for nearly two-fifths of the proportion in the past two years. Due to the close relationship between hip-hop artists and their fans in the hip-hop music market, it can be defined as a market with closely associated audience, which aligns with the main research direction in academia. Therefore, the hip-hop music market has the foundation to use the special economic value and emotional ties of communities to build an ecosystem for hip-hop community marketing.

Chinese scholars studying community marketing of typical strongly associated marketers, such as we-media of beauty makeup, believe that positive interactive methods play an important role in the good development and marketing management of communities [2]. At the same time, the information feedback and data collection with almost no delay also make social marketing seem to have full advantages in the audience strongly associated market. However, relying solely on the inherent advantages of community marketing is not enough to support the research theme of this paper, that is, whether community marketing has theoretical superiority and practical feasibility in the Chinese hip-hop music market. Therefore, this paper will focus on the research topic of the application of community marketing in the Chinese hip-hop music market and conduct an in-depth analysis of the case of Woken Day, a well-known hip-hop music label in China.

2. Introduction of Woken Day

2.1. About the Woken Day

Woken Day, since its founding by the representative figure of Chinese hardcore rap, Pharaoh, in 2016, has developed into a rap high-profile label in China. The label has brought together numerous rap artists with diverse styles, as well as professional music producers and DJs. Their active performances have been reflected not only in major rap music programs but also garnered widespread attention on social media. Fans jokingly call them the "internet label that can become trending topics five times a day on Weibo." Indeed, from the very beginning, Woken Day has been operating its own online community. As of November 3, 2023, the official Weibo has reached 827,000 followers, and the video views for the past six months have all exceeded one million.

2.2. The Beginning of Community Building

The development of the internet has provided hip-hop artists with more avenues to gain exposure and interact directly with fans to build connections, rather than relying on record companies for music marketing [3]. The origin of Woken Day as an internet label can be traced back to the founder, Pharaoh, creating a WeChat group as the symbol of the establishment of the label. Woken Day is not a real company; it is more like an interest group formed by people who are interested in hip-hop music.

In 2017, "The Rap of China," a program with epoch-making significance, appeared in the public eye. At that time, the hip-hop music environment in mainland China was very "exclusive" to outsiders and most "underground" rap artists and audiences were skeptical of the program. However, Pharaoh keenly perceived this opportunity to quickly gain public attention for the label, so he chose to sign up. Although he was eliminated in the first round of the competition, Pharaoh's unique hardcore rap style and his attire in Chinese-style red Tang suits attracted more and more new rap audiences' attention. This also gradually brought Woken Day into the public eye.

In order to further enhance the influence of the label, Pharaoh participated in the show again in 2018 and made appearances with other members of Woken Day. At the same time, Pharaoh began to

frequently send exaggerated and humorous posts on the Weibo account to invite all rap artists to join the Woken Day label. This move has sparked widespread discussion and attention among netizens. Fans and non-fans have eagerly discussed the latest news of Pharaoh and Woken Day, and some of them have voluntarily gathered together based on common interests, topics, and attitudes, forming a weakly connected network community with the media image of the Woken Day label as its interest [4]. The appearance of this community not only expands the influence of Woken Day, but also provides a free space for fans to share and communicate.

Therefore, Woken Day initially gained public attention mainly by participating in online variety shows to increase popularity and shaping a humorous and witty image on social media platforms. This image successfully attracting the attention of fans and non-fans by being in stark contrast to the stereotypical impression left by traditional hip-hop music labels of being mysterious, cool, gang-related, fierce, and untouchable. This is an important starting point for Woken Day to build the community.

2.3. Community Development Initiatives

Woken Day facilitated communication and emotional resonance between fans and non-fans through Weibo, successfully expanding the community and leveraging the influence of fans' secondary dissemination to gain greater market reputation. Woken Day initially targeted existing fans and numerous non-fans attracted by its humorous and clown-like media image. To achieve this, they focused on Weibo, a social platform with significant entertainment attributes, and consciously guided these two groups to exchange information and resonate emotionally within Weibo's strongly connected social scenes, including Weibo fan groups, comments areas of trending topics, and super topic posting areas, among others. Through the exclusive interaction experience within the Woken Day community, the original fans' sense of belonging to the existing community became stronger, while the newly joined group of non-fans established a special emotional bond with loyal fans. Ultimately, the interaction and dissemination between these groups gradually transformed the temporary gathering for the sake of being part of the excitement into long-term stable emotional blending within the community [5]. With the expansion of the community, Woken Day not only gained greater internal power, but also widely disseminated the label's music and story externally. This fan-initiated second creation, based on the community and driven by love, significantly increased the exposure and recognition of the Woken Day label, and the influence of the community will continue to grow with the passage of time and the expansion of its scale.

Woken Day adopts a clear community structure design and management measures in the Weibo fan group to promote the community identity of core fans, maintain a good social atmosphere and enhance fan loyalty and engagement. In the Weibo fan group, besides the label members as community leaders, there are some senior fans or staff closely related to them serving as administrators, responsible for maintaining community order and posting announcements. In addition, there are also some active fans in the community who usually have strong and sincere feelings for the members and the label, and they are the core fans in the community structure. These fans are enthusiastic about expressing their love within the community and actively instilling a sense of community identity in other members [6]. There are also some marginal fans who are new to the community or gradually leaving the community relationship. They are ordinary fans in the community structure. Generally, core fans will regularly express emotions and drive the atmosphere in the community, and label members will also actively interact with fans in the community, such as sharing life, discussing music, and expressing viewpoints. If ordinary fans do not speak in the community for a long time and show obvious marginal characteristics, administrators will carry out cleaning operations. Woken Day ensures a good interactive atmosphere within the community through this community structure design and maintenance measures.

Woken Day values the feedback and evaluation from community members and takes improvement measures in order to maintain the label's reputation and word-of-mouth. In today's highly developed social media era, labels tend to shape their ideal media image in the open and friendly space of platforms like Weibo [7]. Therefore, the feedback and evaluation obtained on such open social platforms have a crucial impact on the label's reputation and word-of-mouth. Woken Day realizes that community members have the most direct experience and perception of the label's music and social media activities, so their feedback often reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the labels. Therefore, Woken Day actively pays attention to feedback and effective suggestions within the community to understand the needs and expectations of fans, and takes improvement measures before public opinion escalates. In addition, for some negative evaluations, the labels can stabilize the trust and connection within the community by responding to and addressing fans' doubts and issues in a timely manner, thus achieving the goal of maintaining its reputation and word-of-mouth.

2.4. The Social Development Results of the Woken Day Label

In online social communities, individuals not only exist as members of the community but also play the role of supporters of the product [4]. For hip-hop music labels, their products cannot be simply defined as music singles but present in various interactive forms.

First of all, the number of followers on Weibo is an important indicator to measure the label's popularity and influence. Woken Day has more than 800,000 followers on its official Weibo account, ranking first among the current active rap labels. This data fully demonstrates that Woken Day has gained considerable attention and public influence on social media platforms through community building and operation.

In addition, the number of comments on the label's Cypher singles is also an important indicator of the label's popularity and online heat. As of November 3, 2023, the latest Cypher single *Woken Day 2022 has no Cypher* by Woken Day has received over 42,000 comments on the NetEase Cloud Music platform. It has the largest number of comments on Cypher singles released by active rap labels in the past two years (excluding discontinued songs). This data fully demonstrates the popularity and appeal of the Woken Day label in the music community.

3. The Advantages of Community Marketing in the Hip Hop Music Market

Community building and maintenance has played a crucial role in Woken Day's ability to gain the love of a large number of fans and market reputation. From the marketing measures adopted by the active hip-hop music labels in mainland China, it can be divided into two categories. One is the problem of marketing myopia, focusing only on the production of music works and ignoring the spiritual needs of fans who are eager to give themselves specific social "tags" based on their love and thus form a "consciousness community". The other type is to use traditional advertising methods, trying to attract fans through the commercial promotion and exposure of label members, singles and albums. However, the actual feedback shows that most rap audiences do not approve of or even resent commercial marketing intervention, as traditional commercial promotion offends the cultural beliefs of the niche subculture of hip-hop music - Keep it real [8]. However, community marketing can help labels continue to gain traffic dividends without conflicting with the authenticity of hip-hop culture. At the same time, with the guidance of core fans and the "symbols" of hip-hop subculture spirit, the community will gradually become a more mature entity. All behaviors supporting the label will give fans a strong sense of community belonging and collective identity.

In comparison to traditional marketing, there are three advantages of community marketing for rap labels in the hip-hop music market.

The first advantage is that the interactive communication within the community is multi-directional. This means that interactions among members can aggregate and collide within the community to achieve collective excitement, and interactions with external members can also achieve many-to-many and one-to-many network dissemination. This mode of dissemination has significant advantages for attracting attention and generating discussions about hip-hop music artists, labels, singles, and albums within specific circles, which traditional interaction methods cannot compare with.

The second advantage is the high emotional connection within the community. Members will gradually accumulate emotions during the interaction. These emotions will prompt them to defend a sense of morality out of their identification with the group identity when facing negative evaluations from community leaders [5]. For labels, the fan loyalty and inclusiveness within the community are high, which is difficult to achieve with traditional marketing methods.

The third advantage is the spontaneous secondary dissemination within the community. To a certain extent, some community members are filled with a sense of mission and actively share and create secondary content such as label songs and related live videos, which are then post on various social media, short video platforms, and long video platforms. Secondary creation is often spontaneous and driven by fans' love. Compared to the content released by the label itself, secondary content not only better resonates with existing fans, but also attracts potential audiences, which plays an indelible positive role in promoting and exposing the label.

4. The Issue Analysis of Community Marketing

The community has brought many benefits to Woken Day, but there are also some issues that need to be addressed. Thanks to the power of the community, Woken Day has been recognized by more people in a short period of time and has gained a lot of attention. However, there still exists a key issue in the management of Woken Day's community, which is the low threshold set for the community leading to an influx of low-quality fans. The community is a place for sharing values and behavioral guidelines, and the influx of low-quality fans may disrupt this order, making the operation of the community more difficult. Moreover, their inappropriate behavior may affect the experience of other fans, thereby impacting the label's image. In order to address this issue, there is still room for improvement in the community operation and public opinion management of Woken Day. Therefore, using professional social media analysis and public opinion monitoring tools for trend tracking, evaluation collection, competitor analysis, and other marketing control measures is of great importance to Woken Day [9].

In addition, due to some audiences, labels, and artists still hold the belief that underground music should remain independent and not be influenced by commercialization, the marketing system of the hip-hop music market has not yet fully matured in China. This directly leads to marketers of hip-hop music holding a cautious attitude towards marketing, and even labels and artists may deny engaging in marketing activities. The formation of this misconception is related to the development history of hip-hop music, cultural cognition, and prejudices against commercialization in China. Taking Woken Day as an example, there is currently no solid evidence that they have carried out a complete social marketing campaign, only focusing on building and developing communities, and lacking a plan for actual benefit conversion. This is to avoid conflicting with the "hip-hop" cultural authenticity of the audience. However, this irrational emotion is not beneficial to the overall market development. At the same time, the vast majority of hip-hop music audiences and artists are eager for hip-hop music to succeed in the mainstream market. Proponents of hip-hop culture are entangled in the struggle with capital, media, and mainstream values, while unconsciously being assimilated [7]. Therefore, changing this concept requires marketers to emphasize more on the cultural and artistic value of hip-hop music, and that it is not contradictory to commercialization, in order to deepen the audience's

understanding and recognition of hip-hop music. Social marketing may be able to change this situation and truly implement a complete marketing campaign.

5. Advice and Outlook

In response to the above issue, this paper takes community marketing as the breakthrough, providing the following three suggestions.

First, labels and artists need to pay more attention to community operations and public opinion management. For example, Woken Day can set up verification questions or tasks to screen high-quality fans in the community. At the same time, using social media monitoring and marketing tools, such as the *Kongming Social Media Management Platform 2.0*, which supports data analysis, public opinion analysis, and customer management on the Weibo platform. These measures can help Woken Day better understand the operation of the community, the latest public opinion and make improvements to address the issues.

Second, labels and artists need to focus more on the dissemination and promotion of hip-hop music culture in community marketing, for example, sharing the artistic connotation of hip-hop music on social media platforms. This will help hip-hop music audiences better accept marketing activities, thereby changing their bias towards commercial activities.

Third, labels and artists need to communicate with fans sincerely and transparently, explaining their commercial activities and emphasizing that this does not mean a betrayal of hip-hop culture, but rather aims to promote the development and dissemination of hip-hop music. By establishing a good communication mechanism, misunderstandings and negative emotions can be reduced, thereby better promoting the development of the hip-hop music market.

Furthermore, according to the case study of this research, there are three key factors for the successful establishment and development of the Woken Day community. Firstly, fan groups, as a natural community, are excellent for aiding community building. They have common community leaders, same taste in music, and share similar need for collective identity. Additionally, they naturally desire a strong association with Woken Day, which is crucial for the community. Secondly, fan groups have a strong pursuit of unique identity symbols gained from joining the community, which is the driving force behind community development. This pursuit aligns with the strong psychological needs of the hip-hop subculture for differentiation and novelty.

The above key factors are the traits shared by all hip-hop artists and labels. Combined with the evident advantages of multidirectional interaction, emotional connection, and self-operation in Woken Day's community building, it provides theoretical support for the general labels and artists.

Therefore, from the unique case of Woken Day's label to the general labels and artists in the Chinese hip-hop music market, the concept of community marketing has broad application prospects and feasibility. More importantly, hip-hop artists and labels should strive to break free from the shackles of marketing shame and use sincere works combined with diverse marketing methods to reach potential fans [10]. Only in this way can the entire hip-hop music market be vibrant and can also spread the charm of hip-hop music to the outside world.

6. Conclusion

After years of underground development, hip-hop music began to enter the mainstream music market in China in 2017. This change led to a surge in the number of hip-hop music audiences, as well as a series of phenomena and problems. Woken Day, with its unique music style and marketing strategy, has attracted a large number of loyal fans and successfully transformed these fans into their own hip-hop music community. In this community, fans' expectations of artists and labels are contradictory, as they both hope to gain recognition from the general public and strive to maintain their own

subcultural “tags”. Community marketing is expected to be an effective means of alleviating this contradiction. By establishing and maintaining their own community, hip-hop artists can better understand the needs and expectations of their fans. At the same time, community marketing can also help hip-hop artists better integrate into the mainstream market, expand their influence and inject new vitality into the future development of the Chinese hip-hop music market. However, community marketing is not a panacea. This paper still needs to be refined and deepened in terms of the current operation and risk situation of the hip-hop music community, as well as effective response strategies, which will provide new research ideas for niche marketing in other subcultural fields.

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