

# Agenda Setting and Symbolic Resonance: A Study on the Cultural Hotspot Generation Mechanism of the "KAWS×UNIQLO" Joint Event

## -- An Interdisciplinary Analysis based on the Integrative Theory Framework

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### Abstract

This study aims to deconstruct the intrinsic mechanisms through which commercial marketing events transcend their economic boundaries to evolve into participatory cultural phenomena in the social media era. Taking the 2019 KAWS × UNIQLO collaborative launch as a key case study, we construct a triangular analytical framework integrating consumer semiotics, agenda-setting theory, and participatory culture theory. Employing a mixed-methods approach (case study and content analysis) and conducting a three-tier coding analysis of public-generated content meeting stringent sampling criteria across platforms like Weibo and Douyin, this study reveals that the 'brand-media-public' triad operates not as a linear transmission but as a cyclical, interactive dynamic process. Core findings indicate that the public's creative symbolic practices (secondary creation, playful adaptations) serve as pivotal transformers elevating events into cultural phenomena, their impact far exceeding passive information reception or consumption. Ultimately, this paper proposes a localised 'agenda triggering-framework competition-symbolic co-creation' model for phenomenon generation. This not only contextualises existing theories but also offers fresh analytical perspectives for understanding contemporary Chinese cyberspace's cultural production logic.

### Keywords

Cultural Hotspots; Brand Collaborations; Symbolic Consumption; Participatory Culture; Framing Theory.

### 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2019, the release of collaborative T-shirts between international street artist KAWS and fast-fashion brand UNIQLO triggered a socio-cultural upheaval in the Chinese market that far exceeded commercial expectations. The event manifested as consumer spectacles-such as in-store stampedes and online sell-outs within seconds-yet its deeper significance lay in rapidly evolving into a nationwide cultural phenomenon. This transcended diverse social circles, catalysing a deluge of textual re-creations (including meme images, jokes, and short videos). This phenomenon constitutes a highly researchable "critical case": it clearly demonstrates how, within the digital media ecosystem, a standardised brand marketing campaign can potentially-and indeed does-transcend into a self-organising, self-propagating participatory cultural phenomenon.

This transformation process raises the core questions of this study: Firstly, what core driving mechanisms propelled the 'KAWS×UNIQLO' case from a "commodity" to a 'cultural symbol'?

Secondly, what roles did the brand, traditional and new media, and the general public respectively play within this mechanism, and what interactive relationships emerged among them? Third, how should theories of consumer society and classical paradigms of communication studies, originating from Western academic contexts, engage in dialogue and adapt to the highly dynamic, grassroots-driven creative landscape of contemporary Chinese internet culture to provide more explanatory analytical frameworks?

To address these questions, this study pursues a dual objective. Theoretically, we seek to bridge consumer culture studies with media communication research. By introducing 'participatory creation' as a core analytical unit, we aim to address previous research's neglect of public agency and creativity, thereby advancing the localised integration and innovation of relevant theories. Practically, this study aspires to offer evidence-based insights into brand cultural marketing strategies, media role adaptation in complex issues, and the cultivation of public media literacy.

## **2. Literature Review and Integrative Theoretical Framework**

Existing research provides a foundation for this study, yet reveals gaps that demand bridging. This section critically examines three primary theoretical strands and articulates the necessity and pathways for their integration.

### **2.1. From Symbolic Consumption to Symbolic Democratisation: The Contextual Limitations of Theory**

Jean Baudrillard's seminal assertion posits that consumption in post-industrial society fundamentally pursues symbolic value, with commodities becoming vessels of social identity and meaning [1]. This perspective offers a meta-theoretical foundation for interpreting brand collaborations—the grafting and reconfiguration of symbolic capital. However, traditional theories of symbolic consumption often presuppose a top-down, brand-led imposition of meaning, frequently focusing on cases like luxury goods that aim to establish 'distinction' [2]. This contrasts markedly with the "democratisation" of symbols demonstrated by 'KAWS × UNIQLO' through accessible pricing strategies, and the subsequent spontaneous, carnivalesque reproduction of meaning by the public. Theory must explain: when symbolic thresholds are lowered, how do the production and control of meaning shift?

### **2.2. Agenda Flow and Framing Contests in Mediated Societies**

McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory reveals media's capacity to influence what the public 'thinks about' [3]. In the social media era, agenda-setting actors have become increasingly diverse, forming complex, cross-platform 'networked agenda-setting' patterns [4]. Within commercial cultural events, brands themselves have emerged as significant initial agenda triggers. Concurrently, Entman's framing theory reminds us that actors not only set agendas but also define issues through selection, emphasis, exclusion, and interpretation (i.e., 'how to think') [5]. In this incident, we observe a distinct process of negotiation and contestation between media frames and public self-generated frames. For instance, the media's initial 'consumer frenzy' frame was swiftly supplemented and even overturned by public frames such as 'fun competition' and 'identity performance'. Consequently, analysis must concurrently examine both the fluid pathways of agenda-setting and the competitive dynamics of framing.

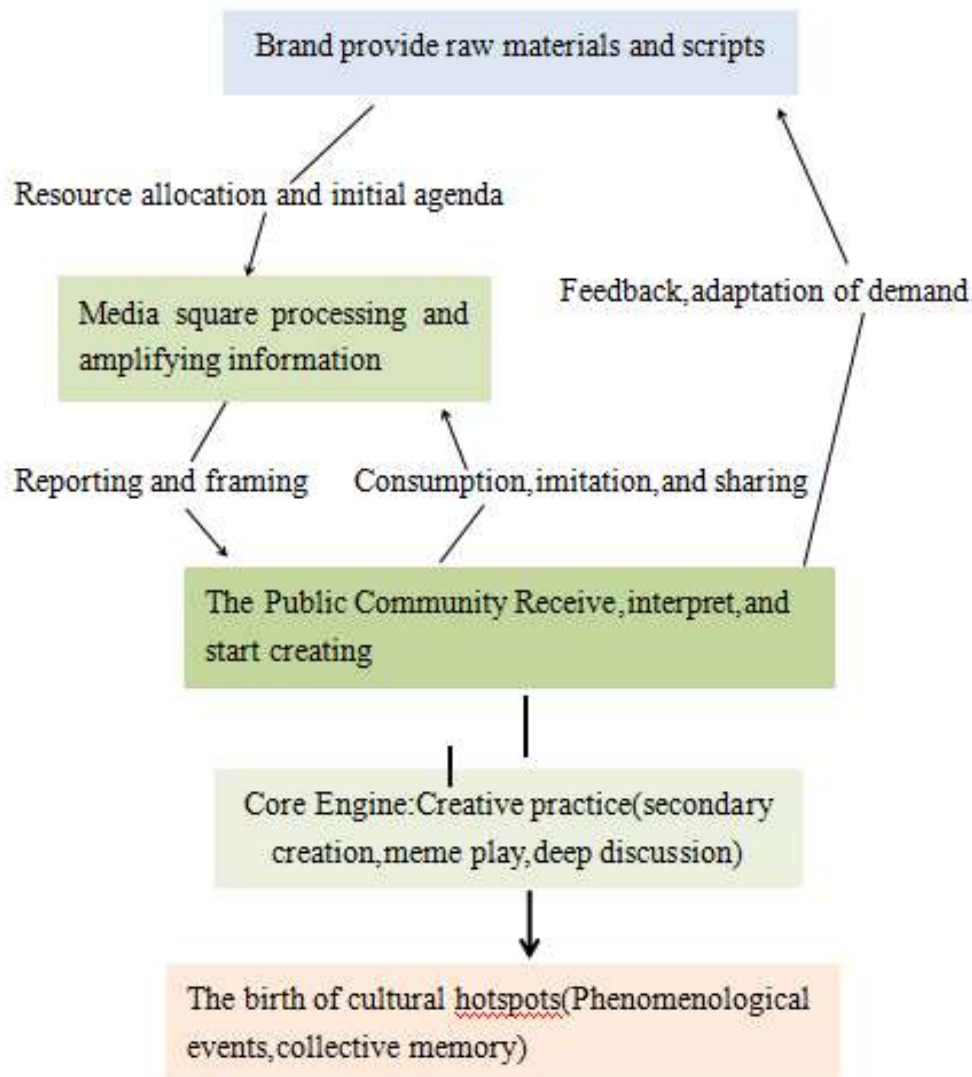
### **2.3. Participatory Culture: The Public as Prosumers and Text Poachers**

Dawkins' concept of the "meme" provides a biological analogy for understanding how cultural units—such as memes or emojis—spread virally through imitation and mutation [6]. Jenkins' theory of 'participatory culture' advances this further, emphasising how new media

technologies empower ordinary citizens to transform from passive cultural consumers into active “prosumers” and ‘text poachers’ [7]. They appropriate, collage, and remake media content, infusing it with personal or communal meaning. This provides direct theoretical tools for analysing the vast volume of secondary creative acts within events. The public’s creative participation serves not only as an accelerator of dissemination but also as a new wellspring of meaning production – the crucial leap that elevates an event to a higher dimension.

**2.4. The Integrative Framework of This Study**

To bridge the aforementioned theoretical gaps, this study proposes an integrative triangular analytical framework (Figure 1). This framework conceives the event as a dynamic system: brands function as providers of symbolic resources and initial agendas; media (encompassing traditional and social platforms) serve as arenas for agenda diffusion and framing competition; while the public act as active symbolic poachers and co-creators of meaning. Their interactions are not unidirectional transmissions but constitute a continuous feedback loop. This study’s empirical analysis will unfold within this framework, focusing on exploring the specific patterns of their interactions and the core mechanisms of public co-creation.



**Figure 1.** An Integrated Triangular Analytical Framework for the Generation of Cultural Hotspots

### 3. Research Design and Methodology

#### 3.1. Methodology and Case Selection

This study employs an embedded single-case research design guided by qualitative analysis. The 'KAWS×UNIQLO' event was selected as it represents an 'extreme yet instructive' case illustrating the 'commercial-cultural' transformation process, thereby maximising the demonstration of relevant mechanisms [8]. Analysis units within the case encompass brand actions, media coverage texts, and user-generated content.

#### 3.2. Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

Data collection spanned the event's duration (April to July 2019) across four core digital domains: (1) Weibo (public opinion fermentation and textual interaction); (2) Douyin (visualisation and performative participation); (3) WeChat Official Accounts (in-depth interpretation and framing competition); (4) Mainstream news websites (official media agenda). To ensure the significance and influence of the analytical sample, stringent sampling criteria were established: Weibo posts (original) with  $\geq 10,000$  reposts; Douyin videos with  $\geq 50,000$  likes; WeChat Official Account articles achieving '100,000+' reads; news articles sourced from national-level or major commercial news portals. This ultimately constructed a heterogeneous dataset comprising  $N=260$  samples.

#### 3.3. Data Analysis and Coding Process

Data analysis employed a three-stage coding scheme based on continuous comparison:

- (1) Open coding: Line-by-line analysis of samples to extract initial concepts (e.g., 'limited-edition anxiety', 'showcasing purchases for display', 'meme creation').
- (2) Axis coding: Categorising initial concepts into more abstract domains, forming three core categories: behavioural patterns (e.g., ritualistic consumption, playful reproduction, critical discourse), emotional tone (e.g., fervour, humour, irony, nostalgia), and meaning frameworks (e.g., trend pursuit, economic rationality, generational cultural identity).
- (3) Selective Coding: Centring on the core narrative of 'how public creative participation mediates and transforms commercial agendas,' all categories were synthesised to map the dynamic process from event initiation to cultural sedimentation.

Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Final coding consistency reliability (Cohen's Kappa) reached 0.89, meeting research standards. All analysis was performed using NVivo 12 software.

#### 3.4. Research Ethics and Limitations

All analysed data in this study derived from publicly accessible online sources, with no infringement of personal privacy. The research explicitly acknowledges the inherent limitations of single-case studies regarding generalisability, prioritising theoretical refinement and mechanism identification over statistical inference. Subsequent investigations may validate and expand upon these findings through multi-case comparative approaches.

### 4. Research Findings: A Dynamic Generative Model

Analysis reveals three distinct phases in the evolution of the 'KAWS×UNIQLO' event from commercial launch to cultural phenomenon, with each phase witnessing significant transformations in the roles and interaction patterns of the brand, media, and public.

#### 4.1. Phase One: Agenda Triggering and Symbolic Warm-up (April-May 2019)

During this phase, the brand held absolute dominance. By officially announcing the 'ultimate collaboration,' releasing KAWS' iconic 'XX eyes' and "companion" imagery, and establishing

narratives around ‘final collaboration’ and ‘limited edition,’ the brand successfully set the initial agenda and core symbols. Traditional fashion media and commercial information platforms acted as the first wave of amplifiers, framing the narrative around ‘trend-setting event’ and ‘collectible value.’ The public primarily functioned as an ‘anticipatory audience,’ expressing excitement and discussing purchasing strategies on social media, though creative engagement had yet to gain significant traction.

#### **4.2. Phase Two: Spectacle Explosion and Creative Revelry (2019.06 Launch Day)**

On launch day, the visual spectacle of offline scrambles was captured by users' mobile lenses and instantly uploaded to social networks, triggering explosive engagement. This phase witnessed a fundamental shift in dominance:

(1) Diversified Media Framing Dynamics: Media coverage rapidly fragmented into distinct narratives: one perpetuating the ‘consumer spectacle’ framework; another pivoting to a “sociopsychological” lens examining irrational consumption; and a third adopting a ‘commercial critique’ perspective analysing scarcity marketing tactics. Meanwhile, on platforms like Weibo and Douyin, a user-driven ‘playful creativity’ framework gained mainstream traction through its formidable meme propagation capabilities.

(2) The Public as Symbolic Poachers and Co-Creators: The public's creative practices became the core engine driving the phenomenon. Their actions extended far beyond mere “purchasing” and “sharing”, primarily encompassing:

- Playful Adaptations: Transforming the rush-buying scenes into memes and short videos depicting scenarios like “Spring Festival travel chaos” or “zombie siege”, using humour to deconstruct the tension.
- Meaningful extension and grafting: Collaging KAWS imagery with unrelated social issues or film clips to imbue them with fresh satirical or critical resonance.
- Identity performance and community differentiation: Showcasing ‘successful’ status through purchase displays, or demonstrating cultural capital via unique meme creation, forming new communities of shared interest.

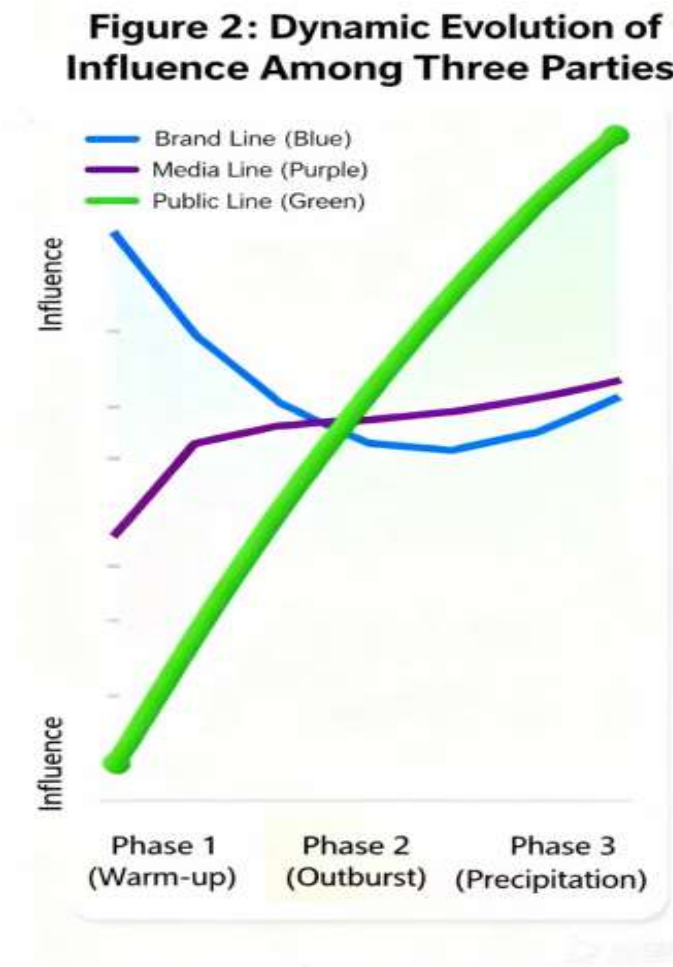
#### **4.3. Phase Three: Consolidation, Reflection and Institutionalisation of Meaning (Post-July 2019)**

Following the peak, the event entered a period of meaning consolidation. The brand attempted to reclaim narrative control through restocking and design storytelling. Media coverage shifted towards in-depth commentary framed as ‘decoding youth culture’ and ‘reflecting on the collaborative economy.’ Public discourse became more rational, shifting focus from ‘securing purchases’ to exploring KAWS' artistic origins, fast fashion ethics, and the event's significance as a cultural artefact. Select high-quality derivative works were reposted by art or marketing accounts, completing the institutionalisation of meaning from ‘grassroots meme’ to ‘recognised creative work.’

#### **4.4. Core Mechanism: Public Creative Participation as Transformative Hub**

Analysing all three phases, this study identifies the public's spontaneous, creative symbolic practices as the pivotal transformative hub connecting commercial agendas with cultural phenomena. Brands provide only an initial ‘material kit’ of symbols. The media's competitive-collaborative frameworks offer diverse contexts for interpreting these materials. Ultimately, it is the public who, through appropriation, collage, parody, and reinterpretation, ‘poach’ these commercial symbols into cultural currency expressing their own emotions, attitudes, and community affiliations. This liberates the symbols from singular commodity logic, embedding them within broader socio-cultural discourse. This process exhibits strong self-organising and

emergent characteristics, with the dynamic evolution of its tripartite influence illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Dynamic Generation Model for Cultural Hotspots

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

### 5.1. Theoretical Dialogue and Contributions

(1) Advancement of Symbolic Consumption Theory: This study confirms that, within the context of social media and ‘democratised design’, the ultimate establishment of symbolic value constitutes a collaborative process wherein a brand provides the original symbolic capital, and the public proliferates it through creative labour. This expands the interpretative dimensions of symbolic consumption theory within participatory media environments.

(2) Contextualisation of Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories: The study reveals that agenda-setting authority is fluid within cultural hot-button events, and the outcome of framing competition is often determined by the public’s creative receptivity. Through reproductive activities, the public votes to select and reinforce a particular frame, or creates entirely new, counter-frames.

(3) Constructing an Integrated Analytical Model: The proposed dynamic model of ‘Agenda Triggering – Frame Competition and Cooperation – Symbolic Co-creation’ organically integrates perspectives from consumption, media, and cultural studies, providing an operational meso-level theoretical framework for analysing similar online cultural phenomena.

## 5.2. Practical Implications

(1) Implications for Brand Marketing: In the era of participatory culture, successful marketing must shift from 'telling stories' to 'designing participatory story worlds'. Brands should provide open-ended and extensible symbolic elements, courageously relinquishing partial control over meaning.

(2) Implications for Media Practice: Media must recognise their position within the competitive framework arena. Beyond reporting phenomena, they should cultivate framework reflexivity, attentively monitoring and understanding the emergence of public-generated frameworks to foster more rational and pluralistic public discourse.

(3) Implications for public media literacy: This case demonstrates the public's formidable cultural creativity. Enhancing media literacy entails recognising the symbolic power and cultural value of one's own creative participation, thereby fostering more conscious and responsible meaning production.

## 5.3. Sociocultural Implications and Reflections

This case study functions as a prism, refracting several profound cultural dynamics within China's digital societal transformation:

(1) Creative Practices as Emotional Catharsis and Meaningful Self-Rescue: The public's 'poaching' and re-creation of commercial symbols constitutes spontaneous meaning production and emotional release, reflecting their yearning for collective belonging and social recognition.

(2) Dialectical perspectives on 'antagonistic decoding' and 'commercial collusion': Public playfulness and reimagining both subvert brand-led narratives through playful deconstruction and, by boosting engagement, form a deep-seated collusion with commercial logic, revealing the complex subjectivity of producers-consumers in the digital age.

(3) Calls for cultivating a healthy participatory cultural ecosystem: This necessitates collaboration among brands, media, platforms, and educators. While respecting public creativity, efforts should focus on enhancing media literacy and fostering rational discourse spaces to channel participatory enthusiasm towards more constructive socio-cultural interactions.

## 5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

As an in-depth qualitative exploration, this study's conclusions require comparative validation through more diverse case studies. Future research could: First, employ computational communication methods to quantify the evolution of public meanings; Second, conduct audience interviews to delve into the motivations behind diverse participation behaviours; Third, track the long-tail effects of cultural symbols, observing how they are either sustained in memory or forgotten.

## 6. Conclusion

The 'KAWS×UNIQLO' incident vividly demonstrates that in the social media era, the generation of cultural phenomena constitutes a dynamic, cyclical process of meaning negotiation involving brands, media, and the public. Within this, the public's creative symbolic practices play a pivotal role as transformers, effectively 'translating' commercial agendas and integrating them into the vibrant currents of participatory culture. Understanding this mechanism holds significant implications for academic research, commercial practice, and the cultivation of a healthy digital public cultural ecosystem.

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