

The Impact Mechanism of Digital Marketing in Cultivating Cultural Interest on Z-Generation Participation in Cultural Tourism: A Case Study of the Palace Museum

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Abstract: As the Z generation gradually becomes the main group of cultural tourism consumption, how to effectively attract this group through digital marketing methods has become an important issue faced by cultural institutions. This study takes the digital marketing practice of the Palace Museum as a case study, focusing on the Z generation in China and exploring the relationship between their digital exposure, cultural interest formation, and tourism participation behavior. The research integrates the use and satisfaction theory and the customer engagement theory. Through a questionnaire survey of 208 Chinese Generation Z respondents, reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, and other methods were used to empirically test the hypotheses. The results indicate that the algorithm recommended short videos and graphic content platforms are the main entry points for Generation Z to obtain cultural information. Digital exposure and cultural interest significantly positively predict travel intention and cultural and creative product purchase intention, with cultural interest having the strongest explanatory power. The intention of social sharing plays a partial mediating role in both influencing paths, and its role is more prominent in the purchasing intention path. This study suggests that cultural institutions should attach importance to the construction of platform native content, prioritize cultivating audience cultural interests rather than simply expanding exposure, enhance the shareability of content, and develop differentiated content strategies for different groups within Generation Z. The research provides reference directions for future longitudinal tracking, cross-border comparison, and multi case design.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; Cultural Tourism; Generation Z; Customer Engagement.

1. Introduction

The popularization of mobile and Internet technologies is reshaping the way of communication between cultural tourism destinations and audiences. Printed advertisements, brochures, and interpersonal recommendations are giving way to social media, short video platforms, and virtual exhibitions. Digital marketing has not only changed the way tourists obtain destination information, but also the way they form intentions and consume, making it a core force in the cultural and tourism market. Museums and other cultural institutions are increasingly relying on digital marketing to reach their target audience, enhance cultural dissemination, and maintain competitiveness.

These dynamics have the most profound impact on Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). As "digital natives" who have grown up in ubiquitous network connections, Generation Z exhibits extremely high media literacy, strong platform dependence, and unique consumption logic [1] and is becoming the main force of cultural consumption [2]. Therefore, how to stimulate their cultural interest, travel intention, and consumption through digital marketing has become a crucial core issue in cultural tourism management.

This study takes the Palace Museum as a typical case, aiming to comprehensively analyze the driving mechanism and profound impact of digital marketing on the cultural tourism participation of Generation Z in China.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1. Use and Satisfaction Theory: Exposure and Cultural Interest (UGT)

The Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) suggests that audiences actively choose specific media content to meet their own needs [3]. In the context of cultural and tourism digitalization, digital marketing can stimulate positive psychological tendencies among audiences by satisfying their four major gratitude factors of information, entertainment, social interaction, and identity recognition, specifically manifested as an increase in cultural interest. Based on this, the following assumptions are proposed:

H1. The frequency of exposure to digital marketing at the Palace Museum is positively correlated with the increased cultural interest of Generation Z.

2.2. Consumer Participation Theory: Direct and Direct Driven Effects (CET)

The Consumer Engagement Theory (CET) views participation as a multidimensional psychological investment of cognition, emotion, and behavior [4]. In the integrated model of motivation participation behavior, the frequency of digital marketing exposure plays a direct information effect, while cultural interests cultivated through digital media are the most direct psychological driving force for subsequent tourism and consumption behavior. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Increased cultural interest is positively correlated with

(a) travel intention and (b) purchase intention of cultural and creative products.

H3. The frequency of exposure to digital marketing is positively correlated with (a) travel intention and (b) purchase intention of cultural and creative products.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Social Sharing

In the consumer participation chain, there is an interdependent relationship between the various dimensions of behavioral participation. Social sharing, as a highly interactive participation behavior, can further amplify and guide actual cultural and tourism consumption and on-site travel intentions through network diffusion and peer influence [5]. Therefore, social sharing plays a crucial bridging role in the entire transformation mechanism. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Social sharing intention plays a mediating role in the influence of "contact frequency" and "cultural interest" on "travel intention".

H5. Social sharing intention plays a mediating role in the influence of "contact frequency" and "cultural interest" on "cultural and creative product purchase intention".

2.4. Within Generation Heterogeneity of Generation Z

Although Generation Z shares the label of 'digital natives' at a macro level, this group spans a time span of up to 15 years. This means that individuals with different birth years within the group have significant differences in the process of digital socialization, media dependence, and actual life stages, and their cultural identity and consumption logic are not completely homogeneous [1]. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. There are significant differences in cultural interests and behavioral intentions (travel, purchasing, sharing) among different birth generations (groups) of Generation Z.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a single case design based on quantitative research, with the Palace Museum as a typical case [6]. The reason for choosing the Palace Museum is that it is both the flagship institution of Chinese cultural tourism and a pioneer in digital marketing innovation. Its marketing practices are highly compatible with the media habits of Generation Z, which can fill the previous research's neglect of cultural institution contexts and meet the heterogeneous needs of

tourists.

The study used purposive sampling (non probability sampling) method [7] with the target population being Chinese Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). The questionnaire is managed online through the Qualtrics platform, and data collection takes about two weeks. It is distributed through social media platforms, cultural and tourism interest communities, and researchers' personal networks to enhance sample diversity. After data cleaning, 208 valid questionnaires were ultimately retained. The research tool is divided into five parts: research description and informed consent form; Demographic characteristics (birth generation, gender, past travel experience; Q1-Q3); Digital marketing outreach situation (information source platform and contact frequency; Q4 – Q5); Motivation/Perception Based on Usage and Gratitude Theory (UGT) (Q6-Q8); Participation behavior based on Consumer Engagement Theory (CET) (Q9-Q11). Except for demographic characteristics, all items were measured using the Likert five-point scale [8].

This study used the Likert five-point scale to measure five core concepts: frequency of digital marketing exposure (Q5), increased cultural interest (Q6), travel intention (Q7), intention to purchase cultural and creative products (Q8), and social sharing intention (Q9). Channel preference (Q4) is used to capture the audience's information source platform.

All data analysis in this study was conducted in SPSS software, strictly following standard social science research ethics. The research has obtained ethical approval from the host organization; The interviewee's participation fully follows the principles of voluntariness and anonymity, and can freely withdraw at any stage; For a very small number of respondents under the age of 18, the guardian informed consent clause in the ethical agreement has been strictly enforced.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and Validity

The scale showed excellent internal consistency: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.932$ (standardised $\alpha = 0.932$), with all corrected item-total correlations ≥ 0.76 and no item improving α if deleted (Table 1).

The KMO measure was 0.903 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 824.723$, $df = 10$, $p < 0.001$), confirming suitability for factor analysis and supporting construct validity.

Table 1. Reliability and descriptive statistics (n = 208).

Construct (item)	Mean	SD	Median	CITC	α if deleted
Exposure frequency (Q5)	3.50	1.138	4.000	0.764	0.926
Increased cultural interest (Q6)	3.894	1.150	4.000	0.860	0.909
Visit intention (Q7)	3.837	1.147	4.000	0.820	0.916
Purchase intention (Q8)	3.740	1.200	4.000	0.838	0.913
Social-sharing intention (Q9)	3.639	1.243	4.000	0.819	0.917

Note: Overall Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.932$; KMO = 0.903; Bartlett's $\chi^2 = 824.723$, $df = 10$, $p < 0.001$.

4.2. Sample Profile and Descriptive Statistics

Of 208 respondents, 51.9% were born 1997–2000, 33.2% 2001–2004, 11.1% 2005–2008 and 3.9% 2009–2012; 59.6% identified as female. All core variables had a median of 4.000, indicating broadly positive attitudes (Table 1).

4.3. Correlations

All core variables were positively and significantly

correlated ($p < 0.01$; Table 2). Exposure correlated with cultural interest ($r = 0.694$) and with visit, purchase and sharing intention ($r = 0.670, 0.697, 0.705$). Cultural interest correlated most strongly with purchase ($r = 0.799$) and visit intention ($r = 0.793$). H1 is supported, with preliminary support for H2–H3.

Table 2. Pearson correlations ($n = 208$).

	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Q5 Exposure	1				
Q6 Cultural interest	0.694**	1			
Q7 Visit intention	0.670**	0.793**	1		
Q8 Purchase intention	0.697**	0.799**	0.748**	1	
Q9 Sharing intention	0.705**	0.761**	0.724**	0.740**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

4.4. Within-generation Differences

One-way ANOVA across the four birth cohorts showed no significant differences in channel exposure (Q4: $F = 0.543, p = 0.654$) or exposure frequency (Q5: $F = 2.099, p = 0.102$), indicating uniform digital reach. However, attitudinal and behavioural variables differed significantly: cultural interest (Q6: $F = 6.664, p < 0.001$), visit intention (Q7: $F =$

$3.974, p = 0.009$), purchase intention (Q8: $F = 5.378, p = 0.001$) and sharing intention (Q9: $F = 4.631, p = 0.004$) in table 3. Post-hoc tests showed the youngest cohort (2009–2012) scored significantly lower on all four than the older cohorts (1997–2004), which did not differ markedly from each other. H6 is supported: despite equal exposure, older Generation Z exhibit stronger cultural identification and behavioural intentions.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA across Generation Z birth cohorts (means).

Variable	1997–2000 ($n=108$)	2001–2004 ($n=69$)	2005–2008 ($n=23$)	2009–2012 ($n=8$)	F	p
Q5 Exposure	3.61	3.48	3.35	2.63	2.099	0.102
Q6 Cultural interest	4.00	4.06	3.39	2.50	6.664	0.000
Q7 Visit intention	3.95	3.91	3.43	2.75	3.974	0.009
Q8 Purchase intention	3.81	3.83	3.74	2.13	5.378	0.001
Q9 Sharing intention	3.74	3.71	3.48	2.13	4.631	0.004

4.5. Regression

Regressing visit intention on exposure and cultural interest yielded a significant model, $F(2, 205) = 195.241, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.656$ (adjusted 0.652), Durbin–Watson = 1.967, VIF = 1.93. Both predictors were significant: cultural interest $\beta = 0.632$ and exposure $\beta = 0.231$ (both $p < 0.001$), supporting

H2a and H3a. For purchase intention, $F(2, 205) = 215.904, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.678$; cultural interest $\beta = 0.609$ and exposure $\beta = 0.274$ (both $p < 0.001$) in table 4, supporting H2b and H3b. Cultural interest is the dominant driver in both models.

Table 4. Multiple regression results ($n = 208$).

Predictor	Visit intention (Q7) B (β)	t	Purchase intention (Q8) B (β)	t
Constant	0.565	3.274**	0.253	1.451
Exposure (Q5)	0.233 (0.231)	4.058**	0.289 (0.274)	4.984**
Cultural interest (Q6)	0.631 (0.632)	11.104**	0.635 (0.609)	11.061**
R ²	0.656		0.678	
F	195.241**		215.904**	

Note: ** $p < 0.01$. Standardised coefficients (β) in parentheses.

4.6. Mediation Analysis

Following Baron and Kenny (1986), for visit intention: step 1, exposure and cultural interest significantly predicted

visit intention ($B = 0.233$ and 0.631); step 2, both significantly predicted mediator, social-sharing intention ($B = 0.374$ and 0.566); step 3, with the mediator added, direct

effects shrank but remained significant (exposure $B = 0.156$, $p < 0.05$; interest $B = 0.515$, $p < 0.01$) and the mediator was significant ($B = 0.205$, $p < 0.01$), R^2 rising to 0.674. This indicates partial mediation, supporting H4. The parallel test for purchase intention also showed partial mediation with a

stronger indirect path (mediator $B = 0.223$, $p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 0.697$) in table 5, supporting H5. Social sharing thus mediates more strongly for purchase than for visit intention, underscoring the role of peer influence in cultural-creative consumption.

Table 5. Mediation of social-sharing intention (Baron and Kenny three-step).

Path / step	Visit model (Q7)	Purchase model (Q8)
Direct effect of exposure (step 1)	0.233**	0.289**
Direct effect of interest (step 1)	0.631**	0.635**
Mediator effect of exposure (step 2)	0.374**	0.374**
Mediator effect of interest (step 2)	0.566**	0.566**
Exposure with mediator (step 3)	0.156*	0.206**
Interest with mediator (step 3)	0.515**	0.509**
Social sharing → outcome (step 3)	0.205**	0.223**
R^2 (full model)	0.674	0.697
Mediation	Partial	Partial (stronger)

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Unstandardised coefficients.

5. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Path	Result
H1	Exposure → cultural interest	Supported ($r = 0.694$)
H2a/H2b	Cultural interest → visit / purchase	Supported ($\beta = 0.632 / 0.609$)
H3a/H3b	Exposure → visit / purchase	Supported ($\beta = 0.231 / 0.274$)
H4	Sharing mediates → visit	Supported (partial)
H5	Sharing mediates → purchase	Supported (partial, stronger)
H6	Cohort differences	Supported (Q6–Q9 sig.; Q4–Q5 n.s.)

A descriptive comparison further showed in Table 6 that digital marketing's effect on offline visit intention exceeds its effect on cultural-creative consumption and content sharing, consistent with Generation Z prioritising immersive on-site experience over purely online or transactional engagement.

6. Discussion

6.1. Channel Preferences and the Logic of "Platform as Search Engine"

The findings of this study clearly reveal that Generation Z exhibits a distinct channel preference shift in obtaining cultural tourism information: algorithm-driven short video and graphic platforms have taken an absolute dominant position compared to official websites and offline recommendation channels. This result not only confirms Hu's [9] assertion that Generation Z sees social platforms as the primary search and inspiration engine, but also highly aligns with Moni et al.'s (2025) observation that young users have a deeper trust in authentic, interactive user generated content (UGC).

6.2. Motivation Satisfaction and Participation Chain

The empirical results of this study support hypotheses H1 to H3, which suggest that the digital content output by the Palace Museum can simultaneously satisfy the core motivations of Generation Z users in terms of information acquisition, entertainment, and social interaction. Specifically, the Forbidden City transforms its profound and complex cultural heritage knowledge into highly accessible and visually appealing multimedia forms, making previously distant and solemn cultural content more everyday, perceptible, and emotionally warm. More importantly, this study found that the cultural interest cultivated through content exposure constitutes a stronger behavioral driving force than simply the exposure effect. This conclusion validates the logical chain between the Use and Satisfaction Theory (UGT) and the Consumer Engagement Theory (CET) [4]: the deep role of digital marketing lies not in the infinite expansion of reach, but in transforming shallow attention into deep cultural interests, which are the psychological basis that truly drive subsequent engagement behavior. At the same time, the partial mediating role played by social sharing (supporting

H4-H5) further indicates that behavioral participation in Generation Z has inherent interdependence - sharing behavior is both an external expression of individual participation and a reverse amplification and diffusion of participation effects, forming a self reinforcing participation cycle [10].

6.3. Heterogeneity within Generation

A core contribution of this study is to reveal that the participating groups within Generation Z are not homogeneous, thus providing support for hypothesis H6. Although the digital content of the Forbidden City has achieved roughly the same reach rate among young users of all ages, data analysis shows that the youngest group (born between 2009 and 2012) is significantly weaker than older members of Generation Z in terms of awakening cultural interests and behavioral conversion intentions. In other words, equal exposure of information does not automatically translate into equal cultural participation; The formation of cultural identity seems to be closely related to an individual's cognitive maturity, life stage, and disposable autonomy. Future researchers must be sensitive to the differences in cognitive levels, cultural reference frames, and autonomous decision-making abilities among different age groups and develop differentiated content strategies based on this.

6.4. Cultural IP Background as a Boundary Condition for Transformation

Although some existing studies have reported that cultural digital marketing performs on average in terms of purchase and sharing conversion rates, the individual behavioral intention observed in this study is significantly higher. This study believes that this difference is not a methodological accident, but can be attributed to the unique cultural representativeness carried by the Palace Museum - it is not only a museum, but also a concentrated symbol of Chinese civilization, which is greatly amplified and activated in the rising "China-Chic" movement in China. The powerful cultural IP endows digital marketing with an added value that goes beyond the function of information transmission, elevating it from a tool for informing and persuading to a triggering mechanism for cultural resonance and identity recognition. This means that the conversion effect of digital marketing is not a universal constant, but highly dependent on the IP strength and symbolic capital possessed by specific cultural institutions; For general tourist destinations lacking similar cultural status, it may not be realistic to simply copy the content strategy and conversion expectations of the Forbidden City.

7. Conclusion

This study takes the Palace Museum as a case study, systematically models and empirically tests the intrinsic mechanism of digital marketing driving the participation of China's "Gen Z" cultural tourism. Research has found that in the digital age where algorithms are deeply embedded in the information environment, the younger generation's access to cultural content has become highly dependent on the intelligent recommendation mechanisms of social media platforms; Digital marketing effectively cultivates the deep interest of this group in cultural heritage by precisely meeting their four needs of information acquisition, entertainment, social interaction, and identity recognition, and further

stimulates their participation in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels. It is worth noting that cultural interests constitute the core driving force behind on-site visits and consumer purchase intentions throughout the entire conversion path, while social sharing intentions play an important mediating role between marketing stimuli and participation outcomes, especially in terms of the mediating effect on purchase intentions. In addition, the study revealed differential findings that compared to online content sharing or consumption of cultural and creative products, digital marketing has a stronger driving effect on stimulating offline on-site visits. Although digital marketing generally covers the entire 'Generation Z', there are still significant differences in segmented groups based on interest preferences, media usage habits, and cultural identity within the generation. This suggests that academia and industry need to go beyond homogeneous understanding of the 'Generation Z'.

At the same time, although this study provides a feasible basis for preliminary exploration, future research needs to rely on larger sample sizes, adopt stratified sampling strategies, and expand to cross-border and cross-cultural contexts to test the stability and heterogeneity of digital marketing effects in different socio-cultural contexts.

There may be systematic differences in the input-output ratio, conversion path, and user reach efficiency of digital marketing among cultural institutions of different scales. Future research can organically integrate these institutional, social, and psychological variables into the model to construct a more inclusive and explanatory comprehensive theoretical system.

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