

Digital Storytelling and Audience Engagement: A Case Study of Chinese Fashion Designer- Entrepreneurs with a Focus on Jicheng

Yuhong Zhou*

Department of Economics and Management, Tongji Zhejiang College, Jiaxing 314051, Zhejiang Province, China

*Corresponding author: Yuhong Zhou, Zhou-yuhong@hotmail.com

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Abstract: This study examines how fashion designer-entrepreneurs (FDEs) leverage digital storytelling on social media to build brand identity and engage audiences, focusing on the case of Jicheng, a Chinese FDE on Weibo. By analyzing posts over nine months, the research explores how storytelling formats (text, photos, videos) and cultural themes (such as human nature and time/space) affect audience engagement, measured through likes, comments, and shares. The findings indicate that text-photo combinations and relatable, timely content are the most effective in fostering interaction and social capital. The paper offers recommendations for FDEs to enhance digital storytelling, emphasizing the importance of balancing thematic consistency with content novelty to support brand growth and audience loyalty. This approach underscores the critical role of cultivating sustainable relationships between FDEs and their audiences.

Keywords: Entrepreneur; Digital storytelling; Fashion designer; Audience; Branding

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1. Introduction

The fashion industry, a vibrant sector at the intersection of art, culture, and commerce, has undergone significant transformations due to the rise of digital technology and social media. Within this evolving landscape, fashion designer-entrepreneurs (FDEs) increasingly use digital platforms to establish brand presence, engage with audiences, and craft compelling cultural narratives. Social media has reshaped the communication strategies of FDEs, enabling them to build global brand identities that transcend traditional offline channels. This paper investigates how digital storytelling facilitates audience engagement and social capital development, focusing on the practices of Chinese FDEs in an ever-changing digital environment.

In China, platforms such as Weibo and WeChat play pivotal roles in shaping the online presence of FDEs. Weibo, a microblogging platform similar to Twitter, enables FDEs to share content, construct brand narratives, and interact with audiences in real time. WeChat, China's leading messaging and social networking app,

allows FDEs to engage audiences more intimately through private group chats, public accounts, and interactive content. Together, these platforms enable the dissemination of fashion content while fostering community-building through storytelling.

Digital storytelling in this context extends beyond conventional marketing tactics. It involves crafting rich narratives that convey a brand's ethos, heritage, and cultural identity. For FDEs, storytelling through digital platforms is a vital component of expressing "expressive individuality"^[1], blending personal brand vision with broader cultural themes to resonate with target audiences. As consumer behavior shifts toward greater reliance on online platforms for brand discovery and interaction, the role of digital storytelling has become increasingly critical for FDEs to distinguish themselves in a competitive digital market.

The challenge lies in creating storytelling that aligns with the brand's cultural capital while fostering audience participation and interaction. This requires understanding how different storytelling formats—such as text, photos, videos, and articles—elicit varied audience responses and how cultural themes embedded within these formats influence engagement depth. Given that FDEs must manage design, business operations, and social media strategies simultaneously, producing storytelling that aligns with audience preferences and brand values is essential for success.

The objective of this paper is to analyze how FDEs utilize digital storytelling to engage audiences on social media, with particular attention to the interplay between storytelling formats, cultural themes, and audience engagement. By examining the practices of Jicheng, a prominent Chinese FDE, on the Weibo platform, this study seeks to identify the strategies that effectively foster social capital and audience loyalty. This research holds significance for its potential to offer actionable insights to FDEs aiming to refine their digital storytelling strategies and enhance audience engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Creativity and entrepreneurship

Creativity has long been a fundamental aspect of the fashion industry, intertwining with cultural production and economic dynamics^[2]. The expansion of the science of creativity, alongside developments in media and art, has propelled a greater number of artists and designers to establish entrepreneurial ventures^[3]. The rise of cultural entrepreneurs in the fashion sector is characterized by their focus on artistic expression, brand identity, and the development of cultural products that align with both individual creativity and market demand^[4].

The traditional definition of an entrepreneur originates from the French term *entreprendre*, meaning "to undertake," with an emphasis on individuals who demonstrate initiative, risk-taking, and dynamic activity within a capitalist economy^[5]. Weber highlighted that entrepreneurs operate within a market framework, utilizing capital to systematically seek profit and rationalize business operations^[6]. In the context of the fashion industry, this framework has evolved to include artistic and symbolic elements as key drivers for value creation and market differentiation.

Schumpeter's theory of innovation positions entrepreneurs as agents of economic growth, driving change through the introduction of new goods, technological advancements, and markets^[7]. Diala and Antonella studied how female transnational entrepreneurs in the modest fashion industry navigate their multi-layered identities and transform them into entrepreneurial opportunities^[8].

2.2. Cultural capital

Bourdieu's theories of capital provide a critical framework for understanding the intersection of culture and entrepreneurship^[9]. According to Bourdieu, capital exists in various forms: economic (monetary assets), social (networks and relationships), cultural (knowledge, skills, and education), and symbolic (prestige and recognition). For FDEs, cultural capital encompasses their creativity, design expertise, and understanding of cultural trends, which are then converted into social capital through networking, brand identity, and audience engagement. Na et al. found that cultural capital significantly enhances the probability of entrepreneurial entry^[10].

The conversion of cultural and social capital into economic capital is a crucial process for FDEs. Scott emphasizes that cultural entrepreneurs rely on their ability to mobilize and convert these forms of capital to survive in the market, influence consumer tastes, and establish social status^[5]. By actively engaging in storytelling, FDEs effectively objectify their cultural capital into symbolic capital—building their brand narrative, reputation, and market appeal. Swedberg explores creative entrepreneurship as the practice of introducing novel combinations within cultural production, resulting in both aesthetic and economic value^[11].

2.3. Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling has emerged as a contemporary tool for FDEs to connect with audiences and build brand identity. Defined by Malita and Martin as the practice of combining narrative with digital content—including images, videos, and sound—digital storytelling invokes emotional responses and communicates brand messages effectively^[12].

Unlike earlier models of brand storytelling, where content production and distribution were controlled by brand owners^[13], the current digital landscape enables FDEs to engage in co-creation and interactivity with their audience^[14]. Platforms such as Instagram, Weibo, and TikTok have democratized storytelling, allowing FDEs to present their brand narratives through a mix of visual, textual, and audiovisual content. This approach creates unique opportunities for FDEs to personalize their brand voice, develop “expressive individuality”^[1], and establish a digital reputation^[15]. With images surpassing text as the preferred medium for social conversation in the fashion industry, research has examined what makes the image content of fashion brands successful on platforms like Instagram^[16].

2.4. Audience engagement

Audience engagement is an integral aspect of FDEs' digital storytelling strategies. As Conner^[17] asserts, the co-creation of meaning and value between brands and audiences is fundamental to storytelling success. Engagement on digital platforms manifests in various forms, including likes, comments, shares, and follows—all of which contribute to the visibility and perceived value of an FDE's brand. This form of digital engagement fosters “networked engagement,” allowing for the formation of online communities around the brand^[18].

The development of social capital through storytelling relies on building trust and reciprocity with audiences. According to Bourdieu^[19], social capital comprises durable networks of relationships that provide shared group resources and recognition. For FDEs, social capital translates into a community of brand advocates who actively participate in and amplify the brand's storytelling. Through this process, digital storytelling not only communicates the brand's cultural values but also builds a sense of shared identity and community among followers.

3. Research framework

3.1. Theoretical underpinning and conceptual model

In examining the creative processes behind FDEs’ digital storytelling, Schein’s framework of cultural dimensions is utilized to analyze how values and assumptions shape storytelling content^[20,21]. Schein identifies six basic underlying assumptions—reality and truth, time and space, human nature, human activity, human relationships, and the relationship between humans and nature—that influence how individuals perceive and interact with their environment. These cultural dimensions guide the themes and narratives that FDEs incorporate into their storytelling.

The research is also grounded in Bourdieu’s theory of capital, which identifies cultural, social, and symbolic capital as core elements shaping the practices and success of FDEs. Cultural capital is represented by the knowledge, creativity, and aesthetic sensibility that FDEs embed in their storytelling. This is manifested in the content they produce, the themes they select, and their overall brand narrative. Social capital pertains to the relationships, networks, and audience interactions fostered by the FDEs. Audience engagement—measured by metrics such as follows, comments, shares, and likes—represents a form of social capital that strengthens the FDE’s community and extends its brand’s reach.

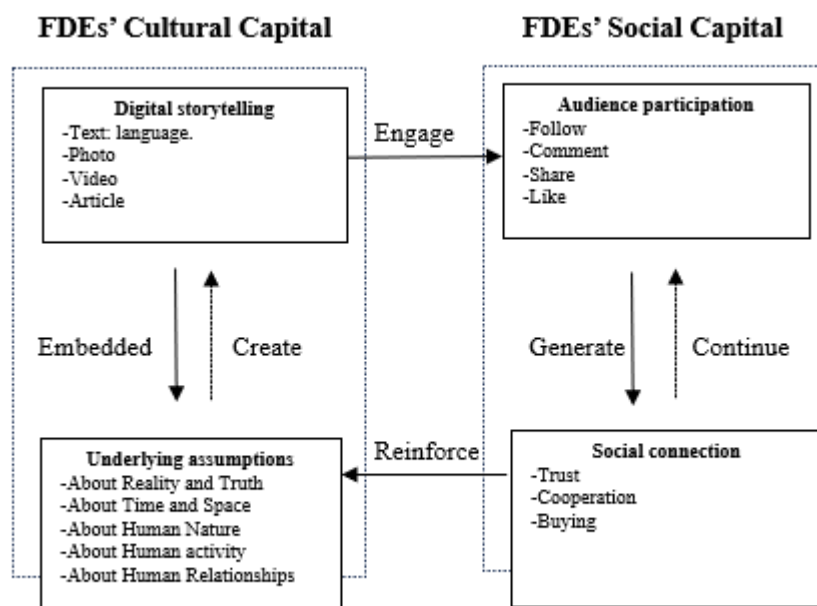


Figure 1. The research framework of FDEs’ digital storytelling effect on audience engagement

The conceptual model of this research is designed to examine how FDEs leverage digital storytelling to mobilize and convert cultural capital into social and symbolic capital. Through their online presence and content creation on platforms like Weibo, FDEs generate social connections, enhance brand loyalty, and ultimately achieve greater economic success.

The cyclical nature of the framework illustrates that as social and symbolic capital increase, they contribute back to the FDE’s cultural capital, further enhancing storytelling and brand development. This dynamic interplay between cultural production, audience participation, and capital conversion highlights the strategic value of digital storytelling for FDEs in brand building and entrepreneurial success (**Figure 1**).

- (1) Cultural Capital (Input): Expressed through digital storytelling formats (text, photos, videos, articles).
- (2) Storytelling Content: Categorized by cultural dimensions (reality and truth, time and space, etc.).
- (3) Audience Engagement Metrics: Includes likes, comments, shares, and follows.
- (4) Social and Symbolic Capital (Output): Contributes back to the FDE's cultural capital for continuous storytelling improvement.

4. Methods

4.1. Case study approach

The case study approach was selected for its ability to provide a detailed examination of a specific context and its relevance in understanding complex social phenomena. Jicheng, a Chinese FDE with significant influence in the digital fashion space, was chosen as the focal case study due to her established presence on Weibo and her recognition as a digital storytelling innovator. In 2016, Jicheng received the Digital Fashion Award from Fendi's art director, Karl Lagerfeld, highlighting her as an exemplar of effective storytelling within the fashion industry. To this day, this fashion designer and entrepreneur continues to maintain a presence on social media, particularly on Weibo, with only one or two posts per month.

Jicheng's use of Weibo, China's premier microblogging platform, offers a unique opportunity to investigate how an FDE engages audiences within a specific cultural context. The case study facilitates an in-depth analysis of her storytelling practices, audience interactions, and the integration of cultural dimensions in her posts. By focusing on Jicheng, the research captures the nuances of digital storytelling within the Chinese fashion industry, offering insights that may extend to broader contexts.

4.2. Data collection

Data for this study were collected over a nine-month period, from January 1 to October 1, 2017, encompassing all public posts made by Jicheng on her Weibo account. This time frame was selected to ensure the capture of a diverse range of content, interactions, and audience responses. The data collection process included the following steps:

- (1) Identification of posts: All posts made by Jicheng on her official Weibo account during the specified period were identified and cataloged. Each post was categorized by its format (text, photo, video, or article) to analyze the diversity of storytelling formats used.
- (2) Categorization by cultural dimensions: Guided by Schein's cultural dimensions, each post was further categorized based on its thematic content. Themes included reality and truth, time and space, human nature, human activity, human relationships, and the relationship between humans and nature. This thematic coding was conducted manually to ensure an accurate reflection of the nuances within each post's content.
- (3) Audience engagement metrics: Engagement data for each post were collected, including the number of likes, comments, and shares. These metrics serve as indicators of audience interaction and the level of engagement elicited by different storytelling formats and themes.

The comprehensive collection of Jicheng's Weibo posts enables a robust analysis of both the content produced by the FDE and the audience engagement patterns that followed. The decision to focus on a single social media platform, Weibo, ensures consistency in data collection and facilitates a meaningful comparison of

engagement metrics across posts.

5. Results

5.1. Breakdown of content by cultural dimension and format

Table 1 reveals that the cultural dimension of “human nature” is the most frequently represented theme in Jicheng’s Weibo posts, comprising approximately 25% of all content. This emphasis aligns with the notion that FDEs utilize storytelling to forge emotional connections, incorporating themes such as personal experiences, beliefs, and interpersonal dynamics. The prominence of “human activity” (21%) and the dual dimensions of “time/space” and “human relationships” (both at 19%) suggest that Jicheng deliberately creates content that resonates with her audience’s lived experiences and temporal context. Examples include narratives centered on fashion trends, cultural events, and everyday activities.

The formats predominantly employed—specifically text-photo combinations—indicate the significance of visual storytelling in Jicheng’s narratives. Nearly half of her posts (48%) integrate text and photos equally, achieving a balance that combines visual appeal with narrative depth. Posts with a text-heavy focus supplemented by photos (37%) suggest a strategy where imagery reinforces detailed storytelling, enhancing thematic communication while visually engaging the audience. By contrast, video content constitutes only a minor portion (approximately 2%), suggesting that while videos hold potential as a storytelling tool, they do not yet dominate Jicheng’s audience engagement strategy.

5.2. Audience engagement by cultural dimension

Table 2 indicates that the cultural dimensions represented in Jicheng’s posts elicit varying levels of audience engagement, with “sharing” emerging as a particularly significant form of interaction. Posts focused on “human nature,” for instance, are highly shared, reflecting their alignment with audience values and personal experiences. Similarly, the “time and space” dimension drives notable engagement, suggesting that content linked to current events, trends, or timely themes effectively stimulates sharing and interaction. This observation reinforces the idea that combining novelty with relatability enhances audience engagement.

Interestingly, despite the relatively infrequent posting of content centered on “reality and truth,” such posts garner a disproportionately high level of shares. This finding underscores the audience’s appreciation for storytelling that emphasizes authenticity, deeper truths, and brand transparency. Such content resonates with the audience’s desire for insight into the designer’s perspectives on life, culture, and social issues. This dynamic reflects the concept of embodied cultural capital, wherein an entrepreneur instinctively “knows” how to present themselves in alignment with the prevailing expectations and norms within their field.

5.3. The impact of digital storytelling on social capital

Audience engagement, measured by metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, reflects the capacity of FDEs to convert cultural capital into social capital. The strong inclination toward sharing demonstrates that Jicheng’s content prompts active audience participation, transitioning from passive forms of engagement (e.g., likes) to more active interactions (e.g., shares and comments). Shares account for 60% of total engagements, while likes and comments contribute 33% and 7%, respectively. This pattern suggests that Jicheng’s audience finds her content valuable enough not only to engage with personally but also to share within their own networks.

Table 3 highlights relatively consistent audience engagement across various cultural dimensions, with minor variations. For instance, the “human nature” dimension attracts more comments, indicating that audiences

are more likely to discuss content that is personal and relatable. Conversely, posts themed around “time and space” and “human activity” receive more likes, showing that visually appealing content tied to specific events or activities resonates strongly with the audience.

The balanced engagement across all cultural dimensions underscores the role of consistency in storytelling themes in fostering audience loyalty. While novel content is essential for capturing initial attention, maintaining a coherent narrative style and thematic focus helps build trust and establish a robust brand identity. This, in turn, contributes to sustained, long-term engagement.

5.4. Correlation between content format and engagement

Analyzing the relationship between content format and audience interaction reveals that different storytelling approaches generate distinct types of engagement. Posts combining text and photos achieve the highest average engagement, particularly in terms of likes and shares. This indicates that audiences favor content that merges visual appeal with contextual narratives, offering both an immediate visual draw and substantive storytelling that can be engaged with and shared. This aligns with the idea that digital serialization enables cultural entrepreneurs to capture consumer attention during the cultural production process^[23].

Table 3 further shows that text-heavy posts supported by photos also perform well, suggesting that detailed storytelling or descriptive content paired with visuals enhances shareability and audience interaction. Pure text posts, although less common, attract a moderate level of engagement, often generating thoughtful comments and discussions due to their reflective nature.

These findings demonstrate that FDEs such as Jicheng effectively employ digital storytelling to build social capital and engage audiences by skillfully combining cultural dimensions and storytelling formats. By focusing on themes such as human nature, human activity, and time/space, and consistently utilizing text-photo combinations, Jicheng creates narratives that resonate with her audience, encourage active participation, and strengthen her brand’s cultural capital.

The results highlight the importance of aligning storytelling content with the audience’s cultural values and interests. Additionally, the preference for shareable content suggests that digital storytelling strategies should go beyond merely attracting passive engagement (e.g., likes). Instead, they should aim to foster deeper involvement through shares and comments, which have a greater potential for amplifying social capital and broadening the brand’s reach.

Table 1. Cultural dimension and forms of digital storytelling (01012017-10012017)

Posts	Forms of digital storytelling										Total	Percentage
	C.D.	Text	Text > +P	Text = +P	Text > +V	T = +V	Photo	P > +T	Video	V > +T		
R&T	-	1	4	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	7	11%
T&S	-	4	5	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	12	19%
HN	-	6	9	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	16	25%
HA	-	9	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	21%
HR	3	1	7	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	19%
R-H&N	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	5%
Total	3	23	30	1	-	-	5	-	1	-	63	1
Percentage	5%	37%	48%	2%	0%	0%	8%	0%	2%	0%		

Table 2. Forms of digital storytelling and audience engagement (total amount) (01012017-10012017)

Posts	Forms of digital storytelling										Audience engagement						
	C.D.	Text	Text > +P	Text = +P	Text > +V	T = +V	Photo	P > +T	Video	V > +T	V = +T	Total	Linking	Share	Comment	Like	Total
R&T	-	1	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	7	1	579	51	192	822
T&S	-	4	5	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	12	1	840	45	429	1,314
HN	-	6	9	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	16	1	1,158	151	660	1,969
HA	-	9	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	807	125	591	1,523
HR	3	1	7	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	3	779	98	362	1,239
R-H&N	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	167	16	118	301
Total	3	23	30	1	-	-	-	5	-	1	-	63	6	4,330	486	2,352	7,168
														60.41%	6.78%	32.81%	

Table 3. Relationship between audience engagement and FDE underlying assumptions (01012017-10012017)

Posts	Audience engagement							Jicheng's DSS						
	C.D.	Share		Comment		Like		Total		Total	Percentage	A. -F.		
R&T	579	13.37%		51		10.49%		192		822	11.47%	8	11.59%	-0.12%
T&S	840	19.40%		45		9.26%		429		1314	18.33%	13	18.84%	-0.51%
HN	1158	26.74%		151		31.07%		660		1969	27.47%	17	24.64%	2.83%
HA	807	18.64%		125		25.72%		591		1523	21.25%	13	18.84%	2.42%
HR	779	17.99%		98		20.16%		362		1239	17.29%	15	21.74%	-4.45%
R-H&N	167	3.86%		16		3.29%		118		301	4.20%	3	4.35%	-0.15%
Total	4330	100.00%		486		100.00%		2352		7168	100.00%	69	100.00%	

6. Conclusion and future work

This study highlights the critical role of digital storytelling in fostering social capital and audience engagement for FDEs. By examining Jicheng's use of Weibo as a case study, the research demonstrates that consistency in cultural themes, a balanced application of visual and textual storytelling formats, and strategic engagement on social media platforms contribute significantly to effective digital brand-building efforts. Jicheng's case exemplifies how leveraging cultural capital and converting it into social and symbolic capital is vital for establishing a compelling online presence and cultivating meaningful audience connections within the fashion industry. Scholars have noted the importance of exploring how women can achieve leadership roles in entrepreneurial pursuits ^[24]. This research also demonstrates how a fashion designer grows in society through entrepreneurship.

While the case study provides valuable insights into Jicheng's storytelling strategies, its findings are limited in terms of generalizability. The research focuses solely on a single FDE's use of Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform, and may not comprehensively represent the dynamics of digital storytelling on other platforms or in different cultural contexts, such as Instagram, TikTok, or Western social media ecosystems.

Future research could address these limitations by extending the scope to include a more diverse range of FDEs across multiple social media platforms. Analyzing how cultural contexts and platform-specific features influence storytelling strategies could yield a more comprehensive understanding of digital engagement practices. For instance, comparing the practices of Chinese FDEs on Weibo and WeChat with those of their Western counterparts on Instagram, TikTok, or Pinterest could provide insights into cross-cultural variations in storytelling styles and audience interaction.

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