

Emotional Appeals and Algorithmic Influence: How Xiaohongshu (Red) Advertising Shapes Consumer Behavior and Brand Loyalty

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformative impact of social media platforms, such as XiaoHongshu, for luxury brands. By integrating user-generated content (UGC) with professionally generated content (PGC), these platforms provide brands with avenues to engage consumers through emotional appeals and personalized interactions. XiaoHongshu's algorithmic recommendation system further amplifies this effect by personalizing content based on user activity, thereby enhancing brand awareness and engagement. Using YSL's 'Inspired Girls' campaign as a case study, this paper investigates how XiaoHongshu's advertising strategies—emotional appeal, UGC engagement, and algorithmic recommendations—affect consumer behavior and brand loyalty.

Keywords

XiaoHongShu, Emotional Appeal, UGC Engagement, Algorithm.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms like Xiaohongshu have significantly transformed digital advertising, particularly for high-end brands. By merging user-generated content (UGC) and professionally generated content (PGC), these platforms offer brands a unique opportunity to engage consumers through emotional appeals and personalized interactions. Emotional connections help cultivate trust and foster long-term loyalty, both of which are key drivers of consumer behavior. Xiaohongshu's algorithmic recommendation system further enhances this by curating personalized content based on user activity, boosting brand visibility and engagement. However, the reliance on algorithm-driven personalization raises concerns about the development of 'information cocoons,' where users are only exposed to limited content. This study examines how Xiaohongshu's advertising strategies—emotional appeal, UGC interaction, and algorithmic recommendations—influence consumer behavior and brand loyalty, using YSL's 'Inspiration Girl' campaign as a case study.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Impact of Advertising Content on Consumer Behavior

Advertising content plays a crucial role in influencing consumer decisions. Research highlights that the authenticity, interactivity, and emotional appeal of advertising are critical factors in determining its effectiveness. For instance, authentic advertising can enhance a brand's credibility, encouraging consumers to trust and purchase its products (Eisend, Muldrow and Rosengren, 2023). Additionally, interactive content can increase user engagement, offering consumers the chance to express themselves while interacting with the brand, thereby boosting brand loyalty (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). Emotional appeals trigger consumers' feelings, making advertisements more engaging and increasing their willingness to buy (Poels and Dewitte, 2006).

In the social media environment, these advertising elements, amplified by platform algorithms, have a more direct impact on consumers' purchasing intentions. Key concepts such as brand emotion and brand trust are central to understanding this process. Brand emotion refers to consumers' emotional responses to a brand, including feelings of liking, trust, and loyalty, while brand trust refers to consumers' perception of the brand's reliability and integrity (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Social media advertising, particularly UGC and highly interactive ads, helps build emotional connections with consumers, further enhancing brand trust (Hudson et al., 2015).

2.2. Xiaohongshu Platform Characteristics and Advertising Model

Xiaohongshu, as a platform combining UGC and PGC, influences user behavior through its distinct user demographics, content generation mechanisms, and advertising model. The platform's primary user base consists of young, well-educated women with strong purchasing power, whose preferences directly shape the advertising content on the platform (Statista, 2024).

On Xiaohongshu, there are notable differences in the effects of UGC and PGC advertising. UGC, often posted by regular users, closely reflects real consumer experiences, making it more trustworthy for other users. In contrast, PGC, created by professional organizations or brands, tends to be more polished and sophisticated. Research shows that while UGC advertisements generate more user interaction and discussion, PGC advertisements are more effective in shaping brand image (Tuten, 2023). Xiaohongshu's algorithm adjusts the balance of UGC and PGC recommendations based on users' preferences, influencing their consumption decisions.

What sets social media advertising apart from traditional media is its interactivity, social engagement, and algorithmic personalization. On Xiaohongshu, users can openly share opinions on ads, sparking discussions with others. This interactivity not only increases the credibility of advertisements but also expands their reach through word-of-mouth communication (Chen and Lin, 2019). Additionally, the feminist discourse commonly found in Xiaohongshu ads resonates with the platform's user base, effectively stimulating consumer desire.

2.3. Information Cocoon and Algorithmic Recommendation Mechanism

The information cocoon theory highlights the limitations posed by algorithmic recommendation systems, where users are exposed to similar content over time, narrowing their information range. This phenomenon influences users' consumption decisions, making them more inclined to choose brands they encounter frequently (Pariser, 2011). Xiaohongshu's recommendation algorithm delivers personalized advertising based on users' browsing history, search behavior, and interactions. This customization operates in two forms: message personalization, which incorporates consumer identity into advertising content, and message customization, which tailor's ads according to user preferences.

Previous research in other digital contexts has shown that personalized advertising enhances its effectiveness, making it more memorable and likely to inspire behavioral change (Tam and Ho, 2006). For example, personalized marketing messages significantly boost response rates, encouraging consumers to take action (Howard and Kerin, 2004). On Xiaohongshu, personalized algorithmic recommendations seamlessly integrate brand information into users' daily activities, increasing exposure to specific brand advertisements and enhancing brand awareness and appeal (Matz et al., 2019).

In summary, advertising content significantly influences user behavior through emotional appeal, interactivity, and authenticity, in combination with platform algorithms and the information cocoon effect. Xiaohongshu's unique advertising model and recommendation system not only increase users' willingness to consume but also deepen the emotional

connection between brands and consumers. However, there remains a need for in-depth analysis of how these elements function on specific platforms like Xiaohongshu. This study will explore how Xiaohongshu advertisements impact users' consumption behavior, particularly in the context of UGC and feminist discourse, and their actual influence on consumer decisions.

3. Case Study

As an international high-end brand, YSL selected Xiaohongshu as its primary advertising platform in China. According to official reports, 75% of Xiaohongshu users are women, mostly from first-tier Chinese cities or living abroad (Statista, 2024). These users' purchasing power and habits align closely with YSL's target demographic. Leveraging Xiaohongshu's algorithmic recommendation system, YSL enhanced its brand visibility through celebrity endorsements, user profiling, and collaborations with platform influencers.

In July 2024, YSL launched the 'Inspiration Girl' short video campaign on Xiaohongshu, in partnership with popular bloggers. The video features a young female photographer inspired by a painter's creative process, encouraging viewers to embrace self-expression and innovation. Released by the influencer 'Art Cauliflower,' who has over 1.03 million followers, the video garnered 624,000 likes. Xiaohongshu's algorithm pushed the ad to female users with a potential interest in YSL's message of self-expression, based on their browsing history and behavior, significantly boosting the ad's reach. The protagonist's image and lifestyle aligned with the campaign's theme, resonating with users and reinforcing brand identity. By analyzing this video and the accompanying user comments, this study reveals how Xiaohongshu's advertising content influences consumer behavior.

4. Analysis

4.1. Emotional Appeal

Emotional appeal plays a vital role in brand promotion, especially when it is marketed through short videos, which can effectively touch the inner needs of potential consumers. When a brand can accurately capture and respond to consumers' emotional appeal, it can establish a deep emotional bond with them and enhance the brand's appeal and credibility (Loureiro, Ruediger and Demetris, 2012). Taking YSL's "Inspiration Girl" short video as an example, the brand accurately positioned the emotional needs of the target audience and shaped an idealized lifestyle, which made the audience have a strong emotional resonance and psychological identification.

First, the protagonist in 'Inspiration Girl' shows the image of an independent, confident and creative modern woman, which is in line with the ideal state pursued by many young urban women. The video not only closely combines the product with daily life by incorporating the blogger's personal style and real-life scenes, but also conveys a positive spirit through the protagonist's fearless pursuit of creativity and inspiration. This idealized lifestyle inspires emotional resonance among the target audience and enables them to empathize with the advertising situation, thereby stimulating their desire to buy the product (Habib, Hamadneh and Khan, 2021). When watching the advertisement, the audience is not only receiving brand information, but also experiencing a story that inspires their lives. This emotional identification makes them eager to get closer to this ideal life by purchasing YSL products.

Emotional appeal is not just a superficial emotional resonance, but also involves a deep identity identification (Cohen, 2013). When watching advertisements, many consumers will project themselves into the image of the 'inspiration girl' and yearn for a lifestyle like the protagonist in the advertisement. This projection makes them believe that buying YSL products can not only improve their personal taste, but also help them realize the ideal life they desire. This

psychological identification strengthens their loyalty to the brand because they believe that YSL not only provides high-end fashion products, but also a way to realize personal dreams and self-expression.

Through this emotional appeal, the brand successfully builds an emotional bridge with consumers, helping the brand stand out in the fiercely competitive market. The combination of emotional attachment and self-identity makes the brand a symbol of consumers' self-expression and pursuit of dreams. This deep emotional connection can not only increase consumers repurchase rate, but also enable the brand to maintain a strong connection with consumers at different stages of life, thereby forming long-term brand loyalty (Matthews, Son and Watchravesringkan, 2014).

4.2. UGC (user-generated content) comment area interaction

UGC (user-generated content) plays an increasingly important role in social media brand promotion. As a public platform, users' comments and interactions can not only increase brand exposure, but also have a significant impact on other consumers' purchasing decisions (Yaylç and Bayram, 2012). Taking YSL's 'Inspiration Girl' video as an example, the audience spontaneously shared their feelings and opinions in the comment area. Compared with official advertising information, sharing between users is often more convincing and can resonate with other users.

In the comment area of 'Inspiration Girl', a user wrote: 'Seeing the protagonist in the advertisement is not afraid of other people's opinions and is brave to be herself, I feel that I am such a person.' This identification with the protagonist of the advertisement not only reflects the individual's emotions, but also reveals the brand's accurate grasp of the target user portrait. This kind of two-way interaction breaks through the limitations of traditional advertising. By creating advertising content that can trigger emotional resonance, the brand makes the audience not only a passive recipient of information, but also a participant in the discussion (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). This interactivity further enhances the user's sense of participation. The sharing and discussion of users in the comment area enables them to find their own position in the brand story, thereby enhancing their sense of identification with the brand.

The active interaction in the comment area further expands the influence of the advertisement. While sharing their views, the audience also inspires the resonance and identification of other users, forming an environment of 'group identification'. For example, when a user shared her identification with the protagonist in the advertisement who bravely pursued his dream, other users responded and expressed similar feelings. This UGC interaction not only enhances the credibility of the brand, but also encourages more audiences to participate in the discussion through the social identification effect, thereby forming a word-of-mouth effect. This effect has a direct impact on consumers' purchasing decisions.

In general, the interaction in the UGC comment area gives users the right to participate in brand building, turning consumers from passive audiences into integral parts of the brand story. This deep sense of participation not only increases the user's interaction rate and participation, but also further enhances the brand's influence and reputation through word-of-mouth effects, ultimately prompting consumers to have higher brand loyalty and actual purchasing behavior.

4.3. Information Cocoon and Algorithm Recommendation Mechanism

When analyzing the impact of social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu on consumer behavior, the role of information cocoon and algorithm recommendation mechanism needs to be critically examined. The information cocoon theory points out that users are often guided by their own interests and preferences and gradually locked into a narrow information environment, and the intervention of algorithm recommendation makes this phenomenon more prominent, which has an important impact on users' consumption decisions.

For example, on the Xiaohongshu platform, after a user clicks on a certain type of video content for the first time, the platform will record this behavior and judge the user's interest in this type of information or brand based on it. In order to improve user stickiness, the platform will continuously increase the frequency of recommendation of relevant content based on the user's browsing history, search behavior and interest tags (Chu, Yang and Peng, 2019). This algorithm recommendation mechanism allows users to frequently contact specific brands or products, gradually forming a 'brand information cocoon'. In this information environment, users repeatedly see content related to a certain brand, and other competing products are excluded from their field of vision. Because consumers are frequently exposed to specific brand information under the influence of the information cocoon, they are often guided into a single consumption path and gradually become dependent on a certain brand (Wang and Zhang, 2022). Although this algorithm-driven brand exposure mechanism increases brand awareness and user stickiness, it invisibly restricts users' freedom of choice.

It is particularly worth mentioning that the 'French Fries Promotion' on the Xiaohongshu platform is a typical paid promotion method. By paying for traffic, brand-related posts can get more exposure opportunities for homepage recommendations. Compared with traditional advertising forms, French fries' promotion uses big data and algorithms to more accurately target young female user groups. For example, when users search for beauty products on the Xiaohongshu platform, YSL can use the promotion strategy to ensure that relevant posts appear in the user's homepage recommendations. Even if users do not actively search for YSL products, they will become interested in the brand due to frequent advertising exposure. Through this subtle influence, users are guided to the brand's preset consumption path, further increasing their willingness to buy.

In short, the information cocoon and algorithm recommendation mechanism have formed an efficient brand promotion method on social media platforms. This mechanism increases the brand's exposure and user stickiness through frequent and accurate brand information push, which has a profound impact on users' consumption behavior. However, this promotion method also limits consumers' freedom of choice to a certain extent, making them guided by algorithms in seemingly autonomous consumption decisions. For brands, this strategy is obviously beneficial because it can always maintain a high exposure rate of the brand in the target users' field of vision in the fierce market competition.

5. Conclusion

This article investigates the main content characteristics, advertising models and user portraits of Xiaohongshu as a social platform for user-generated content and explores the impact of advertising presentation methods under the algorithm recommendation mechanism on user consumption behavior. The study found that taking the 'Inspiration Girl' short video advertisement jointly released by YSL and art bloggers as an example, Xiaohongshu's advertisement not only effectively stimulated the emotional resonance of the target audience through emotional appeals, but also enhanced user participation through UGC comment interaction. sense, thereby increasing consumers' purchasing intention and loyalty to the brand. In addition, the application of information cocoon rooms and algorithm recommendation mechanisms makes the audience frequently exposed to specific brand information, gradually forming a single consumption path. This not only enhances brand exposure, but also significantly affects the audience's consumption choices and decision-making freedom.

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