

Impact of User-Generated Content on Purchase Intentions: A Comparative Study of Fashion Apparel Category among Young Chinese Women Consumers

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Abstract. In the digital age, user behaviour has been fundamentally affected by social media. This paper looks at the effects of user generated content (UGC) on young Chinese female consumers' (aged 18-28) purchase intentions in the fashion apparel category by comparing two of China's leading social media platforms Douyin and Xiaohongshu by virtue of a content analysis and monitoring of network characteristics, as well as by means of a case study of luxury e-tailer NET-A-PORTER. The research indicates that Xiaohongshu's detailed, informative and community-based user generated content promotes trust-based, data-driven purchase journeys, while Douyin's fast-moving, entertainment and visually based UGC causes impulsive buying behaviour arising from viral trends and sharing of the peer network. The NET-A-PORTER case-study reinforces the need for platform specific marketing. This research furthers the understanding of platform governance and consumer behaviour prevailing in the digital environment, and seeks to provide useful insights for brands and marketers keen to connect with the young consumer in China.

Keywords: User-Generated Content (UGC), Consumer Behavior, Platform Economy, Xiaohongshu, Douyin.

1. Introduction

In today's world, social media platforms have become so fundamental that their enormous influence on consumption, especially in China, cannot be ignored [1]. In particular, platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin have had a fundamental influence on the e-commerce environment, particularly in the fashion and apparel sector [2]. This paper therefore aims to assess the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on these platforms on the purchasing intentions of the younger female Chinese consumer in the age group 18–28. These two platforms have been selected for discussion in this context because they have played an important role in the communication of wider social values and norms within this demographic.

This paper examines the two platforms comparatively to measure their contrasting influences on consumer behaviour. In this context, the content analysis of the platforms, an investigation of the characteristics of social networks, and the case study of the digital marketing strategies employed by NET-A-PORTER on these platforms will be examined. The primary aim of the research will be to

identify how the method of content employed is perceived by the target audience in terms of its influence on consumer behaviour. A particular contrast in this analysis will be made with reference to the differing content ecosystems of the two platforms where Xiaohongshu adopts a user-driven, community-focused approach, while the emphasis of Douyin is the entertainment-driven, algorithm-generated content portfolio; thus opening up an important opportunity to examine, as a case in point, the differing influences of such content approaches on contemporary digital marketing strategies. The principal question which will influence this research is that of what persuades consumers en masse to consumptively purchase products consistently within the confines of these differing digital consumer discourses?

This research aims to illuminate the academic knowledge on consumer behaviour on these two platforms and seek to shed light on many of the factors behind contemporary consumption levels. The research is presented in the style of content and social networks of the two platforms, and then supported by the case study of NET-A-PORTER, to try to assess how the nature of the content leads in many cases to corresponding patterns of consumption, and is constantly cyclical.

2. Literature review

To conduct an effective analysis of how UGC affects intentions toward and behavior in markets consumed by young female consumers, one must engage with the academic discourse surrounding the platform economy. One important concept in this discourse is the "platformization of cultural production," theorized by Nieborg and Poell [3], which reveals social media platforms to be not neutral conduits, but systems that produce and shape the content of users. For this analysis, this framework is important as it provides clues for how the very designs of Xiaohongshu and Douyin create different formats of UGC which then affect users' preferences towards certain fashion products.

This general theory of platformization, however, must be placed within its own specific socio-economic context of the digital sphere in China. One study [4] that studies Xiaohongshu exposes a certain logic of "market nationalism" in the social media of China, producing particular formats of consumer trust. There is also the discussion of Lyon [5] about the emergence of a global "surveillance culture," whereby data politics structure what the users see and how they interact with it.

This contextual framework gives a new perspective on the phenomena we are concerned with, suggesting that what informs consumer behavior is a combination of platform design, streams of algorithms which are data-bound and a cultural layer of significance which is unique to a certain region or part of the world.

A good number of studies address the matter of UGC and its use in developing commerce in different ways. One study of Xiaohongshu [6], for example, shows its great effectiveness in the development of the female identity and the consumption identity through individual models, community-led content [7]. Other studies which are broader in context take a more general view of marketing strategies and the respective efficacy they have on behaviour in relation to concern with the area of fashion consumption. These studies paint UGC in a very powerful light in relation to sales [8, 9]. That the role of UGC is of the utmost importance as a driver of consumer behavior in the Chinese market is established from these studies.

What these studies do is confirm the commercial effectiveness of UGC, but generally they look at platforms in isolation, or the market in general [1, 2]. Thus, we are confronted with a direct, comparative analysis which investigates how two platforms that are fundamentally very different in their design and architecture - how the community-led UGC of Xiaohongshu and the entertainment-

led architecture of Douyin produce different user behaviours, and different types of UGC. Here is a major gap in research that demands attention. This paper aims to address this gap, by systematically collating, comparing and contrasting the effects of UGC on these two different platforms, which in turn gives us a fuller explanation of the relationship between platform design and consumer behavior.

3. Methodology

Employing qualitative methods in this study, it examines how UGC changes consumer behavior on Douyin and Xiaohongshu in the fashion apparel industry, with a comprehensive content analysis, one study on the character of the social networks, and an observation of the characters.

The study design consisted of a purposive sampling of user-generated content, as video, photo, and comment formats on Douyin and Xiaohongshu, with regard to their different aspects of fashion apparel, as specified, for the purpose of the content analysis. The collection of the study content was held during the period from September to November 2023, which was focused on content accompanying some of the popular fashion hashtags (for example, #OOTD, #DopamineDressing), in order to cover the broadest range of content on fashion apparel. This was obtained in order to subject these content to a systematic analysis, to the extent that it could be done either by thematic analysis, in order to distinguish the trends of their content types, and which narrative and linguistic forms they are composed of, or into quantitative parts, the object being to collect engagement entities, for example, like-counts, comment figures, share-counts, of the character of the ownership, with a view to their reception by the audience.

The study's observations, characteristic analysis of social networks were made from the notice and perception of the visible patterns in the networks of user relationship on the two lines of networks. In this, the facts of relationship or sharing of content respectively, sharing, reposting, and mention-counts were gathered in qualitative manner, in order to obtain a more close view of the user relationship, by turning our attention to the identification of the important key-influencers, and to the distinction of the character of the relationship which is found in the connections of the news for them, through a close reading of the comment section and repost chains. In so doing the observation was directed to the visual character of the relations of influence and reach of special content and users, rather than to mathematical calculations in respect to formal social model metrics.

Related thereto was made a study of NET-A-PORTER, which objective aimed to make a close investigation of the content and marketing of NET-A-PORTER on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. A close examination of the brand's content was conducted, covering the content-character of the displays (short video, image-text), the influencer-collaborating-collaboration-method, as well as the engagement of the consumers together with the evaluation of its correspondence with the brands identity, the study aims at distinguishing the complexities of the marketing methods which are especially adapted to the particular platform. The greater part of the studies and research, however, is founded on the engagement with such comments – both consumers as well, and marketing-encounters, different forms of information which were given in respect to NET-A-PORTER's publicity efforts.

4. Findings

The results show slight divergences in user engagement in fashion content on Xiaohongshu and Douyin, which relate to the principles of trust and purchase intention with regard to young female consumers in China.

Users on Xiaohongshu show a clear need for the described in-depth content of elaborate product descriptions and fashion suggestions, which indicates a yearning for knowledge and learning. Third-party analytics insights (e.g. from Qiangua) suggest that women aged 18-28 attach varying female characteristics, ideal selves and lifestyles, and buyer behavioural and decision-making preferences to search terms on Xiaohongshu. The tendency is in this age group to choose products that fit in with their principles and values. The popular clothing search terms are words like "urbancore", "dopamine dressing" and "cleanfit". Hence, the more elaborate the notes on Xiaohongshu, the greater the assistance to the user to receive or acquire knowledge. The availability of user content generated on Xiaohongshu and the design of its format are likely to influence purchasing patterns.

On the other hand, the fast-paced and entertainment-flavored nature of Douyin creates an atmosphere of interest in quick but interesting fashion content. As seen by results of insights from sources like Channama, most users search for the term "outfits" and want visual impact. Hence, on Douyin, the videos about the outfits do not give and do not need any detailed description of the article of clothing but impart the essentially finished outfit. The comments are mainly centering on the beauty of the video. The site meets the needs of the users in want of instant news about fashion through the preview of trends.

Another interesting discovery is that both sites opt in their modus directas for clothing being included amongst the incarnate details of everyday life. Notably, the items putting forth real purchase experiences of themselves and stories accruing in experiences gone by, help greatly the building up of trust in the mind of the user, which serves to excite interest in the item and effect sales.

On Xiaohongshu the detailed description of the user's own experience of things in detailed fashion, and suggestions being made for their better use or otherwise are in evidence. Contraiwise, on Douyin, the videos relating to the term "everyday outfit" prevail. On Douyin the self-created narratives generate a correspondingly greater amount of consumer trust amongst the buying public and incite purchasing. Quite often one sees a knife-like behaviour as to the volume of likes and these things, of comments and shares coming in on the videos shown by fashion influencers, are in themselves the indications of greater amounts of trust. Added to this, there is in prospect greater sales of clothes accruing, of such brands of clothes advanced by fashion reinventors.

There is no doubt the power of influencers is large, especially in setting the tone for fashions and effecting sales of clothing. Influencers generally have a larger following online. In Xiaohongshu, influencers are a major factor in leading trends and directing consumer engagement with products. Because of their larger audience and teams, they gain more interaction and engagement in terms of producing content. High exposure means high sales as well so influencer marketing is pointedly important in Xiaohongshu. On Douyin, however, peer network sharing (including forwarding and recommending) plays an important aspect in causing viral trends and impulse purchasing in fashions. In Douyin, all individual users can become promoters of the product, unlike Xiaohongshu which has its detailed posts. They show the same apparel in their product window, and high peer networking is possible in sharing and promoting. Each video may have a product pointed out, and this ingenuity takes advantage of the sales potential of Douyin... a store tied to an individual such as on Xiaohongshu does not have to pay each individual influencer but can have a payment based upon the total sales of a product, so to say a promoter can get large sale commissions and promote user product promoting and sales to peers.

The case study of NET-A-PORTER shows the effectiveness of specific strategies in promotions on individual platform type strategies. On Xiaohongshu the company seeks to promote a total product picture and also work with fashion influencers in the marketing. Each post on Xiaohongshu

is carefully identified to the brands they promote and names of the products in those pictures, so they can be readily found in searching in Xiaohongshu to purchase on the net. This strategy is preferred, as brought out, in the Xiaohongshu platform, more detailed lifestyle type posts being the preferred delivery method. To determine the efficiency of the posts, it is possible to single out which kinds of posts lead to a higher engagement rate than others. Typically, the content shown composed of text and image types leads to higher levels of engagement than short video posts. Further the posts monthly with fashion influencer types are generally those that attract the most likes. On Douyin the marketing approach used by NET-A-PORTER is modified to meet the mood of the platform by keeping it visually descriptive in making videos which are easily attractive to the audience with respect to the succinctness of its advertising. Reports taken from the analysis show that videos using lifestyle and fashion clothing get better interest and response from audience members' interest. From the results exhibited above it appears that these tailored approaches towards engagement generate better content and connection with individual audiences in reach on each specific platform, thus directing the consumer trends among the young female adults in China's fashion clothing segment of industry.

5. Discussion

There are several contributions that this research has made to the literature, as well as practice. The distinct consumer usages of Xiaohongshu and Douyin, give a very clear real-world example of the theory of "platformization" [3]. The analysis shows how the particular design element of each platform; the more searchable, community driven information on Xiaohongshu and more entertainment focused community for Douyin, lends itself to the development of different sorts of cultural production. The design of Xiaohongshu shows the trend to longer-form reviews. The design of Douyin encourages short viral and flashy trends. The distinct type of product and review leads to distinctions in consumer paths; moving a consumer from intended purchase to impulse purchase. This research adds to the study of the role of Xiaohongshu in identity formation [6], in confirming that an alternative form of consumption, one driven by entertainment, can be as potent a force on identity formation, through another means of signalling, through a display-driven and currently visually driven mechanism.

This study also highlights a crucial tension inherent in the digital age: the tension between rational, and impulsive- primarily. While the shell of Xiaohongshu appears to lead to a more rational and informationally heavy approach to consumption, there are dangers in its usage. Indeed, we can find instances where irrational consumption seems to be rewarded. Since consumers can often get lost in information search, and desire to present community ideals, to themselves and others. On the other hand, Douyin will immediately without effort lead to impulse purchases, which transmutes easily into excessive consumption, as this success is often rooted in fad consumption itself, rather than need. This points to a necessary duality of consumer experience that we must consider in modern consumerism. For practitioners, this research serves as a useful indicator of the necessity to abandon a "one-size-fits-all" approach to the subject of digital marketing in China. On Xiaohongshu, a strategy of construction of community trust is the most useful, through the provision of authentic depth of content. On Douyin, the necessity is for the provision of material which can provoke and give rise to memorable and interesting content. The success of the brands involved in the NET-A-PORTER case study shows that successful brands learn the appropriate language, which the unique platforms demand, in order to work successfully on each platform.

6. Conclusion

In summation, this paper has done a comparative analysis of how UGC on Xiaohongshu and Douyin has an influence on the purchase intentions of young Chinese female consumers. We found two different models of contemporary digital consumption: Xiaohongshu generates a research intensive and community trust based model, whereas Douyin engenders an entertainment oriented and trend based model, which is prone to impulsive buying. The principal contribution of our research is to have compared the platforms directly, enabling a sophisticated understanding of how platform architecture affects consumer reasoning.

The current study has limitations. The research was concerned specifically with females aged 18 years to 28 years, and it was limited as to industry to the fashion apparel industry. Future studies might address changes in demographic vulnerability to purchasing by including other ages and different consumer groups. Research might also be directed into the way UGC affects consumer purchases in fields such as beauty products, or the travel industry, where similar platform dynamics have been noted, for purposes of generalizability.

Furthermore, a significant area for new research might be the way that UGC, and changing platform strategies have a long term impact. The digital landscape is constantly changing, and newer technologies, such as AR and VR become integrated with broader UGC and platforms, and it is crucial for future studies to understand how these technologies are going to affect the UGC/consumer engagement dynamics. Such research will ensure that the academic understanding of this area becomes able to contribute meaningfully to the rapidly developing digital realm.

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