User Purchase Intent on social media: A Case Study Utilizing the SOR Model on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract. Social media has become an important platform for influencing consumer behavior, and it is widely used for product promotion, brand marketing and consumer interaction. However, many differences between social media marketing and traditional marketing methods need to be studied and explored in depth. The purpose of this paper is to combine the Xiaohongshu marketing model with the SOR model and analyze the reasons influencing consumers’ purchase intention and their Xiaohongshu marketing through specific case studies to find the optimization solutions to help enterprises and brands improve the effectiveness of Xiaohongshu marketing. This paper first introduces the characteristics and modes of Xiaohongshu social media marketing, including UGC mode, KOL/KOC integration and grass-seeding marketing strategy. Then, through the SOR model, this study analyzes in detail the influence of stimulus factors such as content quality, KOL/KOC influence and user engagement and how they affect users’ purchase intention and decision-making. Finally, some suggestions are provided to improve the effectiveness of Xiaohongshu marketing, including improving content quality, choosing appropriate KOLs/KOCs, and promoting user engagement.

Keywords: Social media, Purchase Intent, SOR Model, Xiaohongshu.

1. Introduction

Social media has recently become the main battlefield of competition for major brands and businesses. It is an important platform for enterprises to realize the commercial goals of their products, build brand image, and interact effectively with consumers. Moreover, from a business perspective, social media platforms enable interactions between customers and businesses, establish direct or indirect relationships, and facilitate purchase intentions and purchase decisions [1].

At present, there are fewer studies on the users of domestic social media platforms, so it is beneficial to improve the relevant theoretical research in China by studying the influence of social media marketing dimensions on consumers’ purchasing intention for domestic social media platforms. In addition, the study of its influence on consumers’ purchasing intention is conducive to the targeted adoption of social media marketing means by brands, providing a reference for the more targeted use of social media marketing by brands and helping brands to carry out social media marketing more efficiently, thereby enhancing brand benefits [2].

As one of China's most popular social media platforms, Xiaohongshu is typical and valuable for research. Xiaohongshu is a social platform founded in 2013. It started as an overseas shopping-sharing community, where users shared their product experiences through graphic notes and short videos to influence other users’ purchasing decisions [3].

In 2014, the site underwent a makeover into an e-commerce platform, formally establishing Welfare Society as an e-commerce platform, setting up a closed-loop operation, and collaborating with several businesses. In just a few years, Xiaohongshu’s user base has more than doubled to 200 million people. User-generated content (UGC) has always been a defining characteristic of Xiaohongshu, unlike other e-commerce platforms [4]. By sharing their experiences with items, users can have an impact on the purchasing decisions of others. Xiaohongshu helps users find the information they need on the platform, communicate and share, encourages impulsive spending, and increases the effectiveness and conversion rate of purchases by giving the “grass-seeding” marketing approach a full emotional identity. Additionally, encouraging user sharing and brand
recommendations improves the consumers’ perception of the platform, encouraging user repurchase, brand sharing and secondary marketing [5].

The stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework develops the traditional S-R methodology. The purpose of this paper is to combine the Xiaohongshu marketing model with the SOR model, to specifically analyze the factors affecting consumers’ purchase intention and their reasons for Xiaohongshu marketing from specific cases, and then to find the optimization solutions to help enterprises and brands to improve the effect of Xiaohongshu marketing.

2. The Characteristics and Mode of Social Media Marketing of Xiaohongshu

2.1. UGC mode

“UGC” is an Internet term for “User Generated Content”. On the Internet, ordinary users can share their content with other users by uploading their videos, texts, etc. As a content-based social e-commerce platform, Xiaohongshu has evolved from a nautical guide to a life-sharing community, inspiring users to create original content and forming two-way interactions through instrumental products and social attributes. Xiaohongshu’s UGC community includes content production, distribution and consumption, and user communication and identification stimulate more content generation. At the same time, accurate pushing increases users’ interest and desire to buy, attracts user retention and promotes the cycle of “people and content and people” [6]. Currently, there are “43 million +” sharers and “200 million +” monthly users on Xiaohongshu, with “post-90s” making up 72% of the total. Users comprise 72% of the total, and “43 million +” people share [7]. Xiaohongshu’s UGC marketing is different from conventional platforms. It spreads high-quality graphic and original video content to arouse users’ interest in and enthusiasm for the products, prompting them to generate a desire to buy and eventually complete the purchase behavior. Xiaohongshu’s innovative UGC marketing strategy has brought about rapid user growth, improved user stickiness, and realized a win-win marketing strategy for the platform, celebrities, and celebrities. This UGC model has brought great commercial value to Xiaohongshu and promoted the platform’s user growth and the prosperity of content creation [3].

2.2. KOL/KOC integration

KOL marketing, known as Key Opinion Leader (KOL) marketing, is a marketing strategy that utilizes people with influence and expertise as brand advocates to promote products or services. These Key Opinion Leaders, often called KOLs, are highly trusted and influential figures in a particular field and can be industry experts, celebrity entertainers, fashion bloggers, social media vloggers, etc.

The core idea of KOL marketing is to spread brand messages and influence users’ purchasing decisions through the prestige and influence of KOLs. They attract the attention of their fans and followers and guide their purchasing behavior by posting content on their platforms, sharing their usage experience and recommending products. Compared with KOL, the core concept of KOC marketing is to transform ordinary consumers into brand advocates and promoters. These consumers influence their social circles and followers’ purchasing decisions through real-life usage experiences and sharing their purchasing feelings. Compared with traditional celebrity endorsement, KOC’s recommendations are more authentic and convincing, enhancing user engagement. More importantly, compared to KOL, KOC will help companies save a lot of promotion costs [8].

Xiaohongshu platform adopts the strategy of combining KOL and KOC, which is also a popular marketing strategy of major social media platforms, no longer relying on the leading role of KOL alone but greatly utilizing the power of the platform’s massive number of ordinary creators to cultivate KOC for marketing purposes [9]. For the KOL strategy, Xiaohongshu merchants establish partnerships with well-known industry experts and influencers on social media and invite celebrity artists to move in and open official accounts, utilizing their expertise and influence in specific fields to promote brands and products.
Through cooperation with KOLs, Xiaohongshu can leverage its social influence to expand brand exposure and awareness. Some of the more well-known celebrities in China who are stationed in Xiaohongshu include Bai Jingting, Liu Genghong, Zhao Lu Si, and so on. The very influential netroots V is represented by "nana who doesn’t love durian," who shares her favorite outfits, goodies, and makeup.

As for the KOC strategy, Xiaohongshu emphasizes the voices and sharing of ordinary consumers and encourages users to become KOCs to promote brands and products by sharing their buying experiences, writing product reviews, and posting beautiful pictures and videos. Xiaohongshu increases the credibility and attractiveness of its brands through user-generated content and uses positive user reviews and sharing as a promotional asset for its brands.

2.3. Marketing strategy for grass-seeding

Grass-seeding marketing is a marketing model based on the combination of UGC (User Generated Content) and KOL/KOC (Key Opinion Leader/Key Opinion Consumer) strategies, aiming to stimulate users’ purchasing desires and drive sales through users’ authentic recommendations and sharing of products, as well as promotion by influential opinion leaders [3].

New media platforms like TikTok, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu have been competing for exceptional content creators, allowing them to join and collaborate within the quickly evolving atmosphere of "grass-seeding" commercial promotion. Due to the promotional potential of "grass-seeding" marketing and the high number of active users on these platforms, many firms have been drawn to advertise their "grass-seeding" marketing methods on e-commerce platforms.

Xiaohongshu is a pioneer and representative of the grass-seeding marketing model, and its grass-seeding marketing strategy is based on user-generated content (UGC), KOL/KOC cooperation, supplemented by personalized recommendation algorithms, and the establishment of interactive communities.

On Xiaohongshu, users are encouraged to share user-generated content (UGC), such as purchase experiences, product reviews and usage tips, to show their recognition and love for the products. These authentic user shares inspire other users’ interest and desire to buy.

As an important part of grass-seeding marketing, Xiaohongshu cooperates with influential KOLs and KOCs and invites them to share products through grass-seeding recommendations. Borrowing their expertise and influence, they attract and guide users’ attention and purchase interest in these products.

At the same time, Xiaohongshu recommends content and products related to users’ interests through a customized recommendation algorithm, including users’ favorite brands, commodities, and recommendations shared by weeder. This personalized recommendation makes the content more relevant to the user’s needs and increases the user’s click and purchase behavior.

In addition, Xiaohongshu builds an interactive community atmosphere where users can interact with other users by commenting, liking and sharing. This community interaction strengthens the connection between users, brands, and products, increasing the reliability and certainty of purchase decisions.

3. Xiaohongshu Marketing Stimuli Based on the SOR Model

In Xiaohongshu marketing, the author drew on the study by Yang et al. [10] and assumed that “quality of content”, “influence of KOL/KOC,” and “user engagement” as “stimulus” factors have an impact on users and trigger two types of user responses, “perceived value” and “perceived risk”, which in turn affects users’ purchase intention and decisions. Stimulus” factors, the impact on the user, and the trigger of the user’s “perceived value” and “perceived risk” are two types of user response, which in turn affect the user’s willingness to buy and consumption decisions.

First, the quality of grass-seeding content has an important impact on users’ perceived value and perceived risk, which has a role in the willingness to buy. High-quality grass-seeding content provides
detailed and valuable information, enhances users’ perception of the product and sense of value, and, at the same time, alleviates users’ concerns about the risk of purchase. This high-quality seeding content shapes users’ attitudes toward the product, stimulates their desire to buy, and motivates them to engage more actively in purchasing behavior. Users are more inclined to trust this quality content, and this trust can improve their purchase decisions and willingness.

Meanwhile, the influence of KOL (Key Opinion Leader) and KOC (Key Opinion Consumer), another important stimulus, is quite important in Xiaohongshu marketing regarding the user’s perceived value, perceived risk, and willingness to buy. KOLs and KOCs, through their influence and professional knowledge, deliver product information to users, usage tips and suggestions, thus helping users form their perceived value of the product. Their recommendations and reviews involve real user experiences and insights; users often find such content credible and valuable. In this way, KOLs’ and KOCs’ recommendations are positively associated with users’ perceived value, which enhances users’ knowledge of and trust in the product.

Although recommendations from KOLs and KOCs help increase users’ trust, users still hold some concerns about the risks involved in purchasing. Users may worry about the risks associated with the product’s effectiveness, quality, and applicability. However, recommendations from KOLs and KOCs tend to mitigate the perceived risk to users. Since these opinion leaders and consumers make recommendations oriented to users’ actual needs and provide detailed experience sharing and product reviews, users can rely on their recommendations to reduce the perceived risk of purchasing. This, in turn, influences users’ purchase intention and decision-making.

User engagement, as the third influencing factor, directly affects the product’s perceived value. Users who are actively engaged are more likely to interact with other users, share their experiences, ask questions, and show their purchases. This interaction and sharing enriches the user’s perception of the product, providing more information and advice on usage and perspectives from different experiences. Through participation, users gain more comprehensive and diverse views and perspectives, which enhances their perceived value of the product and influences their purchase intentions and decisions.

Users can learn about the product’s performance, quality, and suitability through active participation and interaction with other users. At the same time, they can learn about other users’ problems, concerns, and experiences to better assess potential risks at purchase, i.e., to influence their perceived risk of the product. By participating, users can reduce their perceived risk at the time of purchase, increase their confidence, improve their trust in the product, and enhance their willingness to buy.

The impact of these three stimuli is reflected in the user’s perception and triggers a series of reactions and outcomes. It will not only affect their attitude towards the brand, purchase decision and behavior but also the brand’s exposure and word-of-mouth spread by users on social media, which will affect the purchase intention and decision of other consumers again.

Therefore, the quality of content, the influence of KOL/KOC and user engagement as the stimulus factors in the SOR model significantly impact the user’s attitude towards the brand, purchase decision and behavior, brand exposure and word-of-mouth spread on social media. As stimulus factors in the SOR model, KOL/KOC recommendation and user engagement impact the outcome of users’ responses and purchase intention. This theoretical model connects stimulus, response and result, which helps us understand the relationship between stimulus factors and user behavior and results in Xiaohongshu marketing.

4. Case Studies

4.1. Quality of Content

The quality of content is a crucial factor, or the primary factor, for the formation of users’ purchase intention and purchase decision in the marketing of Little Red Book because when a user sees an advertisement, the first thing he focuses on is whether the advertisement can arouse his interest so
that he has the intention to watch it. In Xiaohongshu, when the original creators interpret the implanted ads, the quality of the content created by them has an important impact on the users’ intention to continue to watch, which plays an important role in the users’ willingness to buy and decision-making.

Round15 is a male fashion blogger on the Xiaohongshu platform whose content is mainly created through cross-dressing videos to show fashionable outfits. He shows a unique fashion vision and diverse styles and can grasp the latest trends. He is good at capturing and applying fashion details skillfully in his outfit creation, presenting a unique and diversified fusion of fashion styles, including classic ones, and experimenting with surprising collocation ways. He is good at exploring the uniqueness of the combination and conveying different fashion attitudes and personalities. At the same time, his style could be more avant-garde, giving users something to learn from and bringing them practical guidelines and inspiration for what to wear. The above is one of the most appealing reasons for Round 15’s creative content.

In addition, Round15’s video style is light and fast-paced, with particularly special cross-dressing editing effects and cool hip-hop music, bringing a sense of freshness to the eyes. Such a creative approach breaks through the traditional presentation format, arousing the interest and curiosity of the audience and inspiring a strong desire to continue watching. At the same time, Round15 actively interacts with readers and responds to their comments and questions promptly. He establishes good communication and interaction with readers, shares more knowledge, advice and personal experience about dressing, and provides readers with answers to questions and fashion advice. As seen in the comment section of the content created by Round15, many users actively ask him for the purchase links of the fashion items they are wearing, which is a side reaction to the fact that the users’ willingness to buy has been aroused.

The skill and creativity in displaying implantable advertisements is also an important reflection of the quality of Round15’s content. Round 15 will design interesting special shows, close-up displays of clothes, or some well-designed poses and actions, inadvertently showing the brand logos of the products to the audience, leaving a deep impression on the audience.

The audience can feel his expertise and creativity in the field of fashion. He gives the viewers a lot of dressing inspirations and suggestions to make them feel confident about how to mix and match the clothes and accessories skillfully. Viewers can take fashion inspiration from Round15’s videos to enhance their image and self-confidence, and this perceived value inspires a desire to buy.

4.2. The influence of KOL/KOC

The influence of KOLs and KOCs is undoubtedly an important factor in shaping users’ willingness to buy. KOLs and KOCs have a strong social media presence and fan base. They have specialized knowledge and experience in specific fields and have many loyal fans and followers. Their recommendations and opinions have high authority and credibility for their fans, so consumers are more likely to accept and trust their advice.

Generally speaking, KOLs and KOCs share their recognition and love for products, stimulating consumers’ interest and curiosity in the products through real usage experience and vivid content presentation. Consumers are usually more inclined to trust recommendations from others with similar backgrounds, experiences or needs.

“Nana who doesn’t like durian” (“nana”) is a blogger on the Xiaohongshu platform who mainly shares her content on clothing, makeup, skincare and lifestyle with users and is one of the platform’s top tier bloggers with 1.339 million followers (as of August 27, 2023), with a total of 1.8 million fans. With 1.339 million followers (data as of August 27, 2023), the platform’s first-tier V is primarily positioned as a beauty blogger, and her main forms of content sharing are videos and graphics.

Nana has many fans and followers on social media platforms, and its influence covers a wide range. Therefore, their content reaches many users, spreads quickly, and triggers extensive social sharing, which gets the products or services they recommend more attention and spread.
Top expertise and experience are also important reasons why Nana, the KOL, has a strong appeal. In most of Nana’s beauty recommendation videos, Nana will test each product on the face, explain the characteristics of each product in a detailed and scientific manner, describe the advantages and disadvantages of each product, and recommend each product to the appropriate segment, so that each viewer can find the right product for them. In the comments section of the beauty recommendation videos, many users have shown great interest in different products and have asked Nana for further information about the products and purchase channels, to which Nana patiently replies and explains. The frequency of content updates has also brought Nana closer to her users. By regularly posting videos and graphics, Nana continues to provide valuable information to her fans and interact with her audience, solidifying her influence as a KOL.

The following is a vivid example of how the fit between a KOL/KOC and a brand’s product can lead to unexpected promotional results. On July 29, 2023, Nana posted a promotional post on the Xiaohongshu platform with the caption, “She set off a cold storm”, which reads “YSL Free Water Platinum Realm” perfume promotion content. Because of the large number of female users on the Xiaohongshu platform, YSL Beauty emphasized the promotion of this new perfume on the Xiaohongshu platform. In addition to the official account of YSL Beauty, YSL selected more than 20 KOLs with a greater say in the beauty field to carry out the promotion. Among them, Nana’s promotional post topped the charts regarding views, with 35,000 likes, 2,953 favorites and 1,051 comments (data as of August 27, 2023), even far exceeding the views of YSL’s official beauty account. In the comment section, it can be seen that many users are as enthusiastic as ever about the blogger’s response, and there is also a strong interest in the product itself, with many users asking for detailed information about the product.

4.3. User Engagement

For the Xiaohongshu platform, user engagement is an important manifestation of the community atmosphere and an indispensable factor influencing users’ perceived value, perceived risk, and, thus, their willingness to purchase. It should be noted that the participation of other users in this context includes but is not limited to, the degree of participation of other users (the number of likes and comments), asking questions, sharing tips, and displaying the results of purchases. In particular, compared to “quality of content created” and “influence of KOLs/KOCs”, “user engagement” does not seem to be directly controlled by content creators, merchants or brands, as merchants and brands can control it. It seems that “user engagement” is not directly controlled by content creators, merchants or brands because merchants and brands can independently choose content creators with high-quality content and influential KOLs/KOCs to promote their products, while they do not decide the engagement of other ordinary users. But in fact, it is also indirectly decided by them. The author believes that user engagement depends on two factors: the high quality of the product promotion content and the high quality of the product itself. The former will arouse the curiosity and interest of users, resulting in their active liking or commenting to ask further questions about the product information, i.e., the enthusiastic degree of user participation rises, which in turn increases the heat of the promotional content, and the high degree of heat will inadvertently increase the recognition of other users for the product; the latter will result in the display of the results of the user’s purchases and sharing of the use of experience. To summarize, the user’s comprehensive participation will increase, affecting the user’s perceived value and risk and further affecting the user’s willingness to purchase.

In 2023, an affordable square vintage watch accessory launched by a small merchant on the Little Red Book platform was popular among young, fashionable men and women. The merchant produced a beautiful video and graphic promotional content that showed off the watch’s beautiful appearance in the best possible way, generating many views, likes, and comments. In addition to the quality of the watch product, many users posted positive comments on their experience and beautiful pictures after purchasing it, resulting in a very high level of overall user engagement for the watch product. A total of 3,216 pieces of the watch have been sold, generating a revenue of about RMB 128,318, a
considerable amount of income for individual small merchants on the Xiaohongshu platform and a typical successful case of utilizing user engagement.

5. Suggestion

5.1. Suggestions for the Quality of Content

High-quality promotional content significantly impacts users’ willingness to buy, so it’s important to emphasize content quality and user experience in marketing. Platform creators can be innovative and groundbreaking in delivering promotional messages in a way that catches viewers’ eyes and triggers their curiosity. Implanted advertisements should be skillfully integrated into the content to reduce consumers’ perceived risk and increase users’ trust and willingness to buy the product.

To enhance the promotion effect, the explanation and display of product features can be strengthened, user interaction and participation can be increased, and more convenient purchase information and links can be provided. Improving as above can better influence users’ perceived value and perceived risk and increase purchase intention.

5.2. Suggestions for KOL/KOC Influence

If companies and brands want to enhance users’ perceived value and reduce their perceived risk, choosing the right KOL or KOC to promote their products in social media marketing is crucial. If they choose a KOL/KOC with a high degree of fit with the brand’s products, the promotional effect will be twice as effective with half the effort. You should study the platform in advance, understand the popular KOL/KOC on the Xiaohongshu platform, and observe their audience groups and attention. Please pay attention to their fan interaction and comments to understand the user’s evaluation and preference for them and the frequency of interaction.

Please pay attention to the expertise of KOL/KOC in their respective fields and select KOL/KOC with specialized knowledge and experience in specific fields; their expertise can help the brand deliver accurate and credible information and increase the product’s perceived value to users.

Matching the form of cooperation and content is also a factor to be considered. According to the nature of the brand’s products and the preferences of the target audience, we should choose the appropriate form of cooperation and content, such as product trials and reviews, matching recommendations, fashion tips, or other forms of content creation, to ensure that the content of the cooperation with KOLs/KOCs matches the brand’s image and the audience’s needs, and to reduce the perceived risk of the user, thus increasing their purchase intention. And thus enhance their purchase intention.

5.3. Suggestion for User Engagement

Active user engagement is critical to the success of merchants and brands in Little Red Book marketing. First, providing quality promotional content is key. Creativity and uniqueness can attract users’ eyes, show the product’s features in detail, and maximize the advantages of the product to arouse users’ interest in the product and satisfy their needs for product information. Various forms (such as graphics videos) adapt to different users’ preferences, maximizing their enthusiasm for the product and its perceived value.

Ensure that the product has high-quality features to meet the user’s expectations and needs for product quality, prompting and guiding the user to publish positive comments and purchase experience to promote the secondary promotion and sale of goods. Special attention should be paid to improving user feedback channels and after-sales service channels, actively collecting feedback for product optimization to ensure the sustainability of product promotion, increasing the stickiness of old customers and weakening the perceived risk of new users.

In addition, measures can be taken to encourage user participation and interaction. Set up interactive mechanisms and activities to incentivize users to participate, comment and share, and provide attractive participation rewards or activities to increase users’ enthusiasm for participation.
Creating an interactive and favorable atmosphere for user participation promotes interaction and communication among users, enhances their sense of participation, increases their perceived value, and ultimately acts on their purchase intentions.

6. Conclusion

This study establishes the Xiaohongshu marketing model from the perspective of the SOR model, using the three influencing factors of quality of content, the influence of KOL/KOC and user engagement as stimulus factors, and perceived value and perceived risk as intermediate organism factors, which ultimately affect the user response of “purchase intention”. The three influencing factors of quality of created content, influence of KOL/KOC and user engagement are used as stimulating factors, and perceived value and perceived risk are used as intermediate organizational factors, which ultimately affect the user response of willingness to buy.

Through typical case studies, this study gives enterprises and platform creators several optimization and improvement solutions in Xiaohongshu marketing. For the stimulus quality of content creation, platform creators should create content in innovative and out-of-the-box forms to stimulate users’ curiosity, as well as to maintain users’ relationships and enhance users’ perceived value through more interaction with users and providing more convenient purchase links and guidelines. At the same time, the clever integration of implantable ads can effectively reduce the user’s perceived risk and enhance their willingness to buy; for the influence of KOL/KOC, enterprises and brands need to observe and study the platform in detail and choose KOL/KOC that matches their own brand and product positioning, which will often bring unexpected promotion. This will often bring unexpected promotional effects. In addition, the degree of expertise of KOLs/KOCs in specific fields and the form of cooperation are also important aspects that need to be grasped, which have a significant impact on the user’s perceived value and perceived risk and for user engagement, providing high-quality promotional or advertisement content is the key to arousing users’ interest in and curiosity about the product. Providing high-quality products is also a top priority, which can effectively meet users’ expectations and needs for products, enhance users’ perceived value, and promote secondary promotion and sales. In addition, establishing a user feedback and interaction mechanism to encourage users to participate in the interaction is also an effective way to improve the community atmosphere and enhance the perceived value.

Although this study constructs the Xiaohongshu marketing model from the perspective of the SOR model, analyzes the influence mechanism of the quality of creative content, KOL/KOC influence and user participation on purchase intention, and gives optimization and enhancement solutions, there are still some limitations.

First, this study only selected Xiaohongshu as the research object, ignoring the influence factors of other social media platforms. Future research can consider comparing multiple social media platforms to explore the applicability and differences of the SOR model under different platforms. Second, this study is based on an idealized model that focuses on the relationship between the three elements of stimulus, intermediate and response factors but does not consider the influence of other variables, such as individual consumer differences. Future research could incorporate consumer characteristics and other relevant influences for a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior. In addition, this study focuses on the factors affecting purchase intention but needs to delve into effect indicators such as actual purchase behavior and conversion rate. To evaluate marketing effectiveness, introducing more specific indicators for quantitative analysis can also be considered to establish a more complete social media marketing model.

References


