Frontiers in Business, Economics and Management
ISSN: 2766-824X | Vol. 25, No. 1, 2026

The Mechanism and Implications of Social Media Marketing Strategies on Contemporary Consumer Behavior in the Digital Marketing Environment

Yiling Luo

Adelaide Business School, Adelaide University, Adelaide, SA5000, Australia

Abstract: Social media has become a platform that combines content creation, social interaction and e-commerce transactions, and has revolutionised the way customers obtain information and make purchase decisions . In this work, we aim to study the mechanism of marketing strategies affecting customer behaviour, using the data of digital marketing development and social media development in China in 2025–2026. The research results show that the evolution of participation in information dissemination has made consumers rely more on content created by users rather than one-way brand promotion; algorithmic recommendations have narrowed the scope of consumer choice and improved the efficiency of information matching; and the decentralisation of social trust has made peer evaluation and opinion leader recommendations become important pillars for purchase decisions. These processes show distinct features in different platform environments. Reflexivity tells us that algorithmic recommendations undermine consumer autonomy, that users' contributions to platform content are expropriated without recompense under commercial rationality, and consumer behaviour moves further away from its use value under symbolic provocation. Social media marketing is an ignition. But consumers are do minated by systemic hazards. The commercial value realisation should be based on the protection of consumer subject.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Consumer behavior, Algorithm recommendation, Social trust, Digital labor.

1. Introduction

China's digital economy is transforming the core logic of consumption behaviours. The data released by China Internet Network Information Center showed that the domestic digital consumption in the first half of 2025 reached 9.37 trillion yuan. The number of users topped 958 million, accounting for 85.3% of the total number of internet users. The count of online purchasing users meanwhile reached 937 million, or 83.2 percent of the overall internet population. The boundaries between online and offline consumption have blurred, and customers can now make purchases while they are browsing social media, watching content, and connecting socially. A survey by China Youth Daily found 65.08 percent of consumers examine user reviews on social media, and 84.75 percent of respondents indicated they've been "convinced to buy" by social media influencers. The above indicates that social media has become not only a channel of commercial communication but also the basic arena of consumption activities.

It has attracted a lot of scholarly attentions. Previous research has shown that social media has altered the effectiveness and reach of traditional marketing by being able to mobilise the attention of vast numbers of users in a short period of time and allow for concentrated consumer releases. Some scholars have also observed that social media has transformed from a communication medium to a complex ecosystem of content, social interaction and e-commerce, leading to new models such as interest-based e-commerce and content-based e-commerce [1]. However, the existing studies focus more on the mechanism of social media marketing, and there is less critical examination on the structural impact on consumers' subjectivity, for example, the invisible limitation of algorithmic selection range, the commercialisation of users' content contributions, and the symbolic shift of consumption motivations.

Thus the article asks the following questions: What is the effect of social media marketing on customer behaviour? Other than verifying its positive role in activating intake, are there any alarming unwanted effects? This essay will discuss three key mechanisms in a layered discussion and reflection on the ethical limits of digital marketing in relation to the distinct environment of Chinese social media platforms.

2. The Participatory Turn in Information Dissemination and the Reconfiguration of Consumer Cognition

In the good old days of traditional media, marketers pushed content to their audience one way and consumers were passive recipients. This tendency was overwritten when social media exploded. The production of information was no longer the exclusive domain of institutions. Communication pattern changed from one-way to network distribution. Consumers become into commentators, selectors and re-transmitters of information.

In the pre-social media period, consumers' perception of the new brands was mostly focused on corporate advertisements and the information source was highly concentrated, which placed firms in a good position in information transmission. That changed with social media. In Xiaohongshu, consumers can see real usage records of products; in Douyin, they can see the opening box reviews of amateur bloggers; in WeChat groups, they can get suggestions from friends. These alternative communication outlets are much more numerous than the official brand publicity. Studies have demonstrated the direct impact of opinion leaders and content provided by users on customer purchase intentions, with the mediating role of trust and perceived

value [2]. Brand publicity is less compelling than regular users. They are normal users in the same situation as themselves and have no sales posture. They share what they've used, not hyped marketing points. This peer-credibility based information filtering has permitted dispersed control over brand image among a large number of ordinary consumers.

Social media also allows the consumer to react to and influence information on the brand. Sichuan Tianfu Bank adopted the giant panda Fufu for life in 2017. In 2025, Sichuan Tianfu Bank has innovatively opened exchanges on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. Indeed, the public image of the brand was created in the conversations in the comment area and secondary productions [3]. The brand was no longer a sender to a receiver. The public meaning of the brand was created and changed through the continuous interaction between the brand, the users and the platform.

Another result of participatory dissemination is to reduce the threshold of information diffusion, where accurate and fraudulent information are distributed together. Assessments may contain secret business participation, for example, implicit marketing, exaggerated effect displays, and phoney consumer experiences. According to the Procuratorial Daily, food vloggers have been posing as ordinary consumers to take commissions from merchants and distribute content, blurring the boundaries between sharing of experience and commercial promotion, violating consumers' right to know. But more sources of information does not mean consumers have gotten more discriminating at the same time - the more information, the harder it is to sift truth from deception.

3. The Cognitive Training of Algorithm Recommendation and the Constriction of Consumer Choice

Popular social media platforms predominantly use algorithms to distribute content. Platforms build interest profiles of users by tracking their surfing histories, stay time, likes and collections, skipping behaviours, etc. and select information from a big amount of content to push. Algorithms are also modifying the information that consumers view and helping them decide what is worth buying. On the surface, this makes matching more efficient. The user does not typically see that procedure firsthand.

The first manifestation of algorithms influencing consuming behaviour is the imperceptible limitation of the border of information perception. The recommendation algorithm considers the commercial goals of the platform of higher retention time and transaction conversion. News stream will constantly present content linked to beauty in the news feed of people who have shown interest in beauty products, and other product categories will eventually fade away. Users' perception of information is gradually restricted and into "information cocoon" [4]. The algorithm is trained to choose from the pre-defined range, it seems to be free selection, but actually inside the range provided by the system. A 2025 Dentsu Creative research found 87% of global marketing professionals thought algorithms were playing a larger role in consumers' decision-making, compared with 97% of Chinese respondents.

Interest-based e-commerce just exacerbates the problem. On platforms like Douyin, it has transitioned from "people find goods" to "goods find people. Products are developed to actively push to the users' perspective through short films or live broadcasts [5]. The price of searching has been decreased to where there are no longer the procedures of "active comparison" and "prudent weighing". When people are presented with algorithm-suggested products they often complete transactions swiftly, in an emotional state. User experiences smoothness and happiness. But it is this very smoothness that conceals the necessity for serious scrutiny.

Even more dubiously, algorithms are not merely directing purchasing but changing consumers' perception of their wants. Pushing some products all the time, the persistent exposure of information can stimulate consuming intention that does not exist previously. "What do I need?" is no longer the question, it's "What was pushed to me?" If the need itself is predicted by an algorithm, how much autonomy remains in "independent choice"? The more users use the site, the more accurate the forecast of the algorithm is. The smaller the range of alternatives available to consumers. The scenario is different on various platforms, the difference of the user structure and the content form, the logic of the algorithm manifests in different forms in the real operation.

4. Platform Ecological Differentiation and Consumer Segmentation

As for the platform difference, the user composition and content forms of Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili and WeChat Video Channel are different. But when this strategy is utilised across platforms, the client reactions are radically different. This differentiation is also an element of the remaking of consumer behaviour: consumers on different platforms are being remade into different sorts of customers.

Each platform's differentiation is already rather apparent. Douyin has more over 750 million daily active users, with main content including short films and live streaming, from first-tier cities to lower-tier towns. Xiaohongshu has roughly 320 million monthly active users, and the primary content is graphic notes and short movies. It has a user base that is over 70% female and has created a distinct ecosystem in sectors like cosmetics, fashion and home décor. The feature is medium and lengthy films, and the ratio of users under 24 years old is the highest. Bilibili has more over 340 million monthly active users. The WeChat Video Channel is based on social relationship chains and covers 30+ user groups and lower-tier locations. Businesses that advertize on several channels simultaneously are targeting client groups with varied preferences [6].

Content structure affects customer decision making. Douyin information is scattered and complex, and a short film may have stirred up emotions before the notion is understood. The language of the live-streaming greatly reduces the time taken to make decisions. According to studies, Douyin is a high-incidence scene of impulse consumption. Xiaohongshu mostly relies on graphical evaluation and has more time for comparison during reading, thus it is somewhat careful. Bilibili guides horizontal comparison content to more systematic information processing. The type of material on the platform strongly impacts the course of customer decision making.

Brand-customer connections also differ among platforms. On Douyin, brand connection is largely event-driven, and when the information flow renews, the relationship cools down. WeChat stays in touch via official accounts and mini-programs. Xiaohongshu is in the center where brands constantly promote word-of-mouth content, and consumer

attitudes are created more slowly but also more securely.

Differentiation of platforms leads to segmentation of customers, and allows corporations to target particular demographics. The product information environment that users are exposed on different platforms is very different, which weakens the consumers' ability to compare and select, and makes them more easily influenced by the information ecosystem of a single platform instead of making independent judgements based on diverse information [7].

5. Decentralization of Social Trust and Dependence on Consumption Decisions

Social media has altered the way consumers trust a brand. In the conventional world, trust was built on the company's reputation and advice from friends. Social media has generated a new trust mechanism. The trust object has shifted from brands to nodes in the social network. Consumers are more likely to trust "people who are similar to themselves" [8].

The substitution effect of user generated material for the brand official information is the tangible realisation of such a transformation in the consumer decision. Normal users' authentic sharing is often more compelling than the brand campaign. People will check reviews and comments before buying. The primary reason is that buyers believe that normal consumers are in the same boat as they are, with no desire to beautify the products. What they share is closer to "truth" itself. The results show that opinion leaders and types of user created content directly effect on users' purchase intention while trust and perceived value have a moderating role. Evaluation material has become an important information source before purchase decision in real customer behaviour.

And opinion leaders have a special role to play in this trusted network. They are different from brand endorsers, they have their own independent personal IP and fan following, they are different from pure regular users, there is a business tie between them and the brand. This intermediary identity, "semi-commercial, semi-personal", positions opinion leaders as the bridge between brand exposure and consumer trust [9]. Research in the industry reveals that the market size of KOL marketing in China will reach tens of billions of yuan by 2025. The commercial success of this intermediate model of trust is evidenced by the continuous investment of brands in the opinion leader channel.

But this decentralisation of the trust mechanism also produces structural fragility. As consumers increasingly use social media information to make purchase decisions, the weakest link in the trust chain is perceived authenticity of this information. Some review accounts get commissions from merchants, and publish content disguised as "real sharing", intentionally not identifying it as a commercial advertisement, blurring the line between experience sharing and commercial advertising, and infringing on consumers' right to know, Procuratorial Daily reported. "Social trust" no longer is a means of empowering customers, but rather a mechanism for capturing consumers more efficiently when trust is founded on insufficient or misleading information.

6. Alienation Effects and Reflections on the Boundaries of Marketing Ethics

Social media is reshaping customers through platform distinction. More importantly, this structural arrangement deconstructs consumers' subjectivity from inside, which may be examined in three dimensions, including consumer autonomy, user labour and consumer motivation.

Algorithms manage customer autonomous decision-making, steer preferences, and filter information to constrain consumer choices within the limits of commercial logic. That free choice is to a good extent a result of the tightening feedback loop between the algorithm forecast and the user's conduct. Continuous exposure to homogeneous content can trigger wants that were not there before and the ability to evaluate about one's own true needs is compromised. The more algorithmic the system becomes, the more behavioural data it learns and the more accurate the forecasts become, yet the options space for customers is constantly narrowing. Convenience comes at the price of some liberty [10].

As for the valuation of user content contribution, the platform content ecosystem is founded on everyday material provided by users. Reviews, unboxing videos and interaction with comments increase the platform's content reserves and provide raw materials for algorithm optimisation. Users are not paid content creators but feel that they are engaged in ordinary social contact while in fact they are involved in the labour process of value creation for the platform and businesses.

In terms of motivating customers, social media marketing is the industrialised of attention production. Brands and platforms keep churning out more sensually arousing content and more appealing symbols of consumption to seduce people all the time. Consumption is moving away from the calculation of utility value and toward the desire of symbolic significance. People don't buy the functional aspects of the products, but the lifestyle identity and the sensation of belonging to a social circle that comes with brand names. Consumption that meets needs is replaced with consumption that expresses identity. Every purchase is a statement of identity for consumers. But once they are fulfilled, they require new symbols to fill the void.

The three alienation effects are embedded in the operating logic of the platform economy [11]. Thinking about these things is not anti-technology, anti-commerce, but a question: how can we, in our admiration of the market force created by social media marketing, create institutional and cultural space for consumer autonomy? This is not a simple question to answer, but it should be a basic issue for companies, platforms and regulatory regulations to work together on.

7. Conclusion

This research investigates the mechanism of social media marketing on consumer behaviour in four aspects: the change of communication paradigm, the algorithmic mechanism, the reconfiguration of social trust and the differentiation of platform ecology. The research shows it's not a one-way affect. It is not empowering, it is not disciplining. The complexity can be viewed at the level of mechanism and at the level of expense.

And these three mechanisms are interlinked. Communication is shifting from one-way distribution to participatory co-creation; customers become co-constructors of brand meaning, and UGC gradually replaces brand marketing as the main source in consumption decision-making. Algorithmic recommendations boost the efficiency of matching, but restrict the width of choice horizons for customers and transform their sense of needs. The

decentralisation of social trust has increased the dependence of consumers on peer judgements and the recommendations of opinion leaders; however the cost of decision making has been reduced, and new information asymmetry has also arisen. Together, the three mechanisms supply the structural circumstances of consumer behaviour. The route of action is examined at the level of the mechanisms. But it has its costs.

Consumers are challenged simultaneously by three types of subjectivity loss. Algorithmic aid erodes consumer autonomy and there is a disconnect between the perception of "free choice" and the real choice set. Users' efforts and interactions are not paid adequately, and digital labour is veiled by phrases like "sharing" and "participation". Marketing symbols induce a shift in customer behaviour from utility value to the pursuit of symbolic meaning. Consumers are caught in a never-ending identification search cycle. These three losses are baked into the working logic of the mainstream social media business model.

Brands must look after the trust of the consumer. Platforms have to draw the line between commercial efficiency and user rights. Regulators should establish norms for hidden advertising and information asymmetry. Another major test is the digital proficiency of consumers. The present study did not extensively compare the differences across different platforms and groups. Further in-depth study can be carried out. Marketing cannot be based on the permanent loss of subjectivity of the consumer. A key issue for the expansion of the sector is how to achieve a dynamic balance between efficiency and rights, technology and humanity.

References

[1] Lim, W. M., & Rasul, T. (2022). Customer engagement and social media: Revisiting the past to inform the future. Journal of Business Research, 148, 325–342.

[2] Kanaveedu, A., & Kalapurackal, J. J. (2024). Influencer marketing and consumer behaviour: A systematic literature review. Vision, 28(5), 547–566.

[3] Le, Q. H., Phan Tan, L., & Hoang, T. H. (2022). Customer brand co-creation on social media: A systematic review. Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 40(8), 1038–1053.

[4] Ahmmad, M., Shahzad, K., Iqbal, A., & Latif, M. (2025). Trap of social media algorithms: A systematic review of research on filter bubbles, echo chambers, and their impact on youth. Societies, 15(11), 301.

[5] Kant, T. (2020). Making it personal: Algorithmic personalization, identity, and everyday life. Oxford University Press.

[6] Voorveld, H. A., Van Noort, G., Muntinga, D. G., & Bronner, F. (2018). Engagement with social media and social media advertising: The differentiating role of platform type. Journal of Advertising, 47(1), 38–54.

[7] Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118(9), e2023301118.

[8] Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 53, 101742.

[9] Choi, M., Choi, Y., & Lee, H. (2024). Gen Z travelers in the Instagram marketplace: Trust, influencer type, post type, and purchase intention. Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research, 48(6), 1020–1034.

[10] Apte, D. S. (2020). Explicit autonomy, implicit control: User autonomy in the dichotomous choice architecture of Facebook. Journal of Creative Communications, 15(2), 165–176.

[11] Zajc, M. (2015). The social media dispositive and monetization of user-generated content. The Information Society, 31(1), 61–67.