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Why Chinese Gen Z Prefer Xiaohongshu over Traditional Search Engines: The Role of Influencer Trust and Emotional Storytelling in Consumer Decision-Making

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Abstract. This essay examines why Chinese Generation Z consumers increasingly use Xiaohongshu for consumption advice instead of only using traditional search engines. It focuses on the beauty influencer Niexiaoqian and analyses how his content builds trust with audiences. This article uses qualitative case analysis to study two little red book videos: a lipstick comment video and a press-on nail blind box video. Analysis shows that Niexiaoqian has established credibility through honest product reviews, criticism of bad products, emotional storytelling, direct audience speech, and the use of the word to establish an intimate relationship with the audience.These strategies make his suggestions look more personal and trustworthy. This article believes that Xiaohongshu is attractive to young consumers, not only because it provides product information, but also because it provides a real experience, emotional value and a sense of being understood. Therefore, influencer trust plays an important role in shaping Gen Z consumer decision-making on Xiaohongshu.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu, influencer trust, Generation Z, emotional storytelling, consumer decision-making

1. Introduction

These days, the information acquisition habits of Generation Z are undergoing a structural change. The Economic Reference shows that Xiaohongshu has over 300 million monthly active users [1], with approximately 200 million monthly users choosing it as their top platform for getting purchase advice.

These data have demonstrated that for the younger generation, Xiaohongshu is no longer just a social sharing feature, but has become a tool that consumers are dependent on in decision-making. This trend shows that the traditional keyword-matching-based search model can no longer satisfy the younger generation's desire for unstructured and empirical information.

The essence of this transformation is that user needs are upgraded from simple information acquisition to decision-making consultation. Traditional search engines are very efficient, but are restricted by mechanical sorting with algorithms and commercial promotion, and have difficulties providing suggestions with context. By contrast, Xiaohongshu has created a unique trust wall, with real experience sharing. KOL and KOC recommendations won 52.12% and 22.66% of user trust,

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respectively, in 2025 [2, 3], which shows that the personalised creator has replaced the algorithm and become the key node of decision-making. It is no longer the answer people are looking for; it is a guide to life with experience, emotional value, and group resonance. This network of interpersonal relationships between human beings complements the technical algorithm. It is no longer the traditional "answer" that users are looking for, but a life guide with experience, emotional value, and group resonance. This kind of personal connection between people complements the technical algorithm.

With the case of Xiaohongshu's beauty blogger Nie Xiaoqian, this article will delve into the psychological driving force and social logic behind the change of the trust mechanism of Generation Z. This paradigm shift from instrumental rationality to emotional connection is an important analytical topic because it helps to better understand the digital survival of young people today and provides valuable reference points for the current brand communication strategy.

This study aims to explore the following research questions:

Why do Chinese Gen Z consumers prefer Xiaohongshu over traditional search engines when making consumption decisions? How do influencers construct trust through authenticity and emotional storytelling? How does influencer-generated content influence consumer decision-making behavior?

2. Literature review

2.1. Influencer marketing and consumer trust

The excessive saturation of social media has brought a side effect that cannot be ignored: "noise" [4]. This kind of information overload has led to users' strong resistance to traditional hard advertising. In the face of this dilemma, marketers are forced to disguise advertisements (Camouflage) into original content through Internet celebrity marketing and other strategies, trying to re-establish the connection with consumers in a more hidden and organic way [5].

In the field of beauty, KOL often does not have the rigid professional qualification of a dermatologist, but they have established a soft professionalism based on experience through long-term content output. More importantly, compared with the brand's official account, a KOL is regarded as an independent individual, which eliminates the aggressiveness of business intentions, thus significantly improving the reliability. Previous research has found that consumers perceive bloggers as more authentic and accessible than traditional business entities or distant celebrities [4]. Bloggers are like ordinary people who can empathise with them, thus creating a real connection between people and users.

Abidin's concept of "calibrated amateurism" explains how influencers perform authenticity through deliberately casual and unpolished content [6]. KOL conveys a natural, unfiltered impression to the audience by deliberately showing rough, raw aesthetic life clips and behind-the-scenes titbits.

2.2. Source credibility theory

The experimental results of Hovland and Weiss [7] show that the persuasiveness of information does not entirely depend on the content itself; when the same information is disseminated by a source regarded as High Credibility by the audience, the degree of attitude change is significantly higher than when the information comes from an untrustworthy source. This means that in the context of

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Internet celebrity marketing, the trustworthiness accumulated by Internet celebrities is a key variable that contributes to the change of consumer attitudes.

2.3. Narrative transportation theory

Narrative Transportation Theory, developed by Green and Brock [8], proposes that when audiences become absorbed in a narrative, they experience reduced counterarguing and lowered resistance to persuasive content. Transported individuals become less aware of real-world facts and are more likely to accept the claims embedded within the story [8].

When it comes to influencer marketing, emotional storytelling is a means of transportation that helps people ride in personal stories and relax their critical assessment of business purposes. Kim [8] further argues that transportation experiences trigger affective responses that lead audiences to have reduced scepticism of the persuasive intent being communicated within the transportation.

2.4. Parasocial interaction

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) refers to the unilateral emotional bond established between the audience and media figures. Although there is no real reciprocal interaction, the audience also feels a sense of intimacy and connection [9].

Labrecque identifies direct audience address and the use of kinship language as among the most common intimacy-building strategies employed by influencers. These parasocial bonds cultivate the audience's loyalty and perceived credibility, because those who feel emotionally close to influential people are more likely to accept their recommendations and resist rebuttals.

3. Methodology

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach with a case study to delve deeper into the influence of influencer-generated content on consumer trust and decision-making.

The reason for selecting Xiaohongshu's case of Nie Xiaoqian is that he was a high-profile figure in the platform, with a significant influence on Xiaohongshu, particularly young female consumers. From the video, according to the high participation and clear explanation of various types of content, 2 videos were selected for analysis, including 1 lipstick comment and 1 nail blind box video.

Three theories, Source Credibility Theory, Narrative Transportation Theory, and Parasocial Interaction, are used to guide the analysis. These are frameworks for understanding how particular content strategies can aid in the process of trust building and persuasion.

3.1. Theoretical framework

This study is based on three theories: analysing the mechanism of building trust in Nie Xiaoqian's content from a theoretical perspective.

Source Credibility Theory [7] is applied to examine how Nie's deliberate performance of impartiality (through harsh criticism and two-sided evaluations) elevates his perceived credibility and renders his endorsements more persuasive.

Narrative Transportation Theory [8] is used to analyse how Nie's emotional storytelling transports viewers into the content, lowering their critical awareness of its commercial intent.

Parasocial Interaction theory [9] is applied to examine how Nie's use of gendered kinship language and direct audience address cultivates virtual intimacy with his female viewership, reinforcing loyalty and trust.

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4. Case analysis

This study chooses "Nie Xiaoqian's Boss (also known as Nie Xiaoqian/Nie)", the head beauty blogger of Xiaohongshu, as the core case. Unlike the exquisite idealised image of traditional beauty bloggers, Nie Xiaoqian is famous for his highly recognisable life narrative style. In his content ecology, product recommendations are often decentralised, and the rigidity of business promotion is dispelled by embedding real interactions with the team and family (such as purchasing clothes on behalf of others, nail displays, and other daily trivia). In addition, he broke the distance between the blogger and the audience through high-frequency makeup removal videos and reading private messages.

4.1. Case 1: Lipstick review video

4.1.1. Two-sided message strategy

The pacing and emotional curve of the video are carefully crafted. Nie provides fairly balanced reviews of the first two lipsticks, each about 2 minutes long, extolling their millennial chic and some minor issues, like uneven pigmentation.

However, the tone of lipsticks three, four, and five changes dramatically. Nie severely criticised them for being "cheap", "bad pigment", and "dry", compressing each comment to about a minute. Team members outside the screen amplified this negative emotion, openly calling these products "scams" and suggesting that the audience return them.

Liu, Wang, and Chen state that two-sided message strategies with positive and negative evaluations are more likely to be seen as honest and credible by audiences, as they are closer to the real experience. Such a manner of expression makes the message itself more credible and helps to eradicate the possible scepticism that the audience could have if there are any contradictions in the content [10].

4.1.2. Trust-building mechanism

Hovland and Weiss reported that audiences' initial reactions to the justifiability of conclusions and the fairness of information presentation depend greatly on their evaluations of the credibility of the source [7]. In this video, Nie deliberately showed the absolute fairness of his evaluation by ruthlessly attacking products three, four, and five.

This willingness to offend the brand greatly enhanced his credibility as a source of information, causing the audience to subconsciously believe that any conclusion he came up with, including the full score awarded to the final lip colour palette, was reasonable.

4.1.3. Narrative persuasion

The video is now at its 6th product, a multi-shade lip palette, with this "ruthless" honesty. In this section, the story form takes a major turn. For more than four minutes, this single item is screened, and the influencer personally tests out each one, giving it a 10 out of 10 score, and the off-screen team's comments are all positive about all of the colours. Having just witnessed Nie's strict standards, the audience is more inclined to interpret this extended and glorious recognition as a real "hidden gem" discovery.

Kim argues that audiences may have affective responses and block counterarguments when the content is enjoyable, which weakens their negative feelings toward the persuasive intent in the

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content [11].

This is because people who are touched "don't know much about the facts of the real world and are more likely to believe what the author says in the story" [8]. Their attention is focused on the narrative event itself, not any business intention, thus naturally reducing their resistance to information [8].

4.2. Case 2: Nail blind box video

4.2.1. Intimacy-building strategy

The second one is a blind-box shopping video, where Nie Xiaoqian introduces and scores the items with his team, and gets the audience to vote. Notably, during the scoring segment, Nie speaks to his viewers as "jiemeimen (sisters)" even though he is a male himself. Two of the most frequently used intimacy-building strategies used by influencers are direct audience address and kinship language [9]. Therefore, Nie's selective deployment of the gender kinship term "jiemeimen (sisters)" is a deliberate identity adjustment strategy: by adopting the relationship language coded by women, he establishes a virtual emotional bond with the female audience, thus strengthening the loyalty of the audience and the credibility of perception.

4.2.2. Emotional narrative

A recognisable theme of technical assessment and emotional storytelling can be identified in the pacing of the video. His coverage of the first (0:05–2:39), third (5:25–7:13), and fourth (7:19–8:47) sets is predominantly technical in register.

The second set (2:39-5:08) and the fifth set (9:08-11:50), on the other hand, turn towards emotionality. The second set is based on the blogger's pet: a commercial product becomes a symbol infused with personal significance. The fifth set focuses on the theme of "a gift for girls", and the set concludes with an affective statement that it's all about "letting girls become whoever they want to be". This commentary on the two sets is not a product review, but rather a mobilisation of emotions.

Green argues that narrative, as a secret form of persuasion, can promote a change in attitude by reducing the audience's motivation to refute, so that they can be attracted to emotional stories and absorb embedded commercial information without knowing it [6].

4.2.3. Hidden persuasion mechanism

Notably, Nie has been very intentional at the beginning of the video, stating that he is "unaware of which brand" the products are from, instead having his team reveal the brands. Although this staging ostensibly shows the neutrality of independent review, it is more accurately understood as a performance of the authenticity of careful calibration.

Amazeen and Wojdynski [2] believe that only when the audience can link the persuasion clues with their interpretation of the content do the persuasion clues play the role of identifying triggers. By strategically concealing brand information, Nie effectively shortens the identification path, which may activate critical review, so the persuasive work of the video is completed under the condition of less audience resistance.

The nearly limitless range of press-on nails turns into an emotional expression when the pet and the concept of independence equals femininity. What audiences are drawn to in Nie's video is no longer simply the nails, but an identification with a particular form of self-narrative.

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5. Discussion

Both videos show that Nie Xiaoqian's influence comes not only from her understanding of the product but also from the way he builds trust. The two cases have one thing in common: his "realism" is designed. In the lipstick video, he used harsh criticism to show his fairness, and in the nail video, he pretended not to know the brand to show his neutrality. The purpose is to make the audience lower their guard and forget that this is an advertisement.

But the two videos have different focuses. Lipstick video relies more on "telling the truth" to build trust, so that the audience feels that the final recommendation is credible. Nail videos rely more on emotional stories and intimacy, such as calling the audience "sisters" and telling the independent stories of pets and girls, so that the audience feels that he understands himself.

In general, both cases show one thing: good Internet celebrity marketing does not rely on a single technique, but relies on trust, emotion, and intimacy. The audience is first moved by emotions and then persuaded, and this process is often completed unconsciously.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, these two videos make it clear that Nie Xiaoqian's influence cannot only be achieved by relying on product expertise but by establishing a complex structure of trust through performing authenticity, strategic intimacy, and emotional storytelling that ultimately reduces resistance from the audience and turns commercial content into personal, relatable, and trustworthy information.

In an era of information overload, Xiaohongshu's influencer culture is one that users are not only looking for product recommendations but are also looking for a sense of understanding.

In addition to personal cases, the analysis shows that it is rarely the product itself that makes the influencer's content convincing, but the feeling of being truly understood. In this way, the language strategy listed here can be a great place to check to create genuine connections with younger generations, for influencers and brands.

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