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Research on the Spread of Urban Commercial Brands under the Algorithm Recommendation Mechanism: A Comparative Analysis Based on Xiaohongshu and Douyin

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Abstract. Digital platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and user-generated content are rapidly influencing urban commercial branding. Commercial spaces like lifestyle streets, shopping districts, cafés, restaurants, and cultural consumption areas are no longer solely promoted through official branding or traditional advertising in the context of platform-based urban consumption; instead, they are constantly reconstructed through posts, short videos, searches, saves, likes, comments, and shares. With a comparative focus on Xiaohongshu and Douyin, this study investigates how algorithmic recommendation processes affect urban commercial brand communication. It looks at three typical urban commercial areas: Beijing Sanlitun, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Shanghai Anfu Road, using a comparative case study methodology. The results demonstrate that Xiaohongshu tends to support a cumulative and decision-oriented visibility model in which users can plan future consumption with the aid of trust-based suggestions, searchable information, guide-style notes, and saving behavior. On the other hand, brief films, visual rhythm, emotional ambiance, and algorithmic amplification can quickly boost exposure in Douyin's more immediate and attention-oriented visibility model. Additionally, user comments demonstrate how audiences engage in meaning-making through desire to consume, information inquiry, emotional reaction, debates about authenticity, and privacy concerns. Three dimensions are the focus of the analysis: comment content, interaction data, and content form. This study advances our knowledge of urban commercial branding in the context of platformization and offers useful recommendations for companies looking to create distinctive cross-platform communication strategies.

Keywords: Urban branding, Algorithmic visibility, Platform communication, Xiaohongshu, Douyin

1. Introduction

In recent year, the urban commercial branding may have depended on the digital platform more than not only on the official city promotion, the design of physical retail, or the traditional advertisement. The urban commercial space, such as coffee shops, lifestyle street, shopping district, restaurant, cultural consumption block, is no longer represented only through slogans led by the government or

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the planning and marketing of the city. They are circulated continuously through users' posts (short video, search result, like, save, comment, share). In such a context, the urban commercial brand is formed by the offline spatial experience and the online platform visibility.

This transformation is also closely related to the change in consumer behavior and digital technology. Today, consumers rely on social media a lot during the discovery and decision-making process. For example, in the 2025 consumer research of McKinsey, the social media use for product research increased from 27% in 2023 to 32% in all markets. It shows that the information based on the platform is more important in the consumption decision [1]. In China, this tendency is more obvious in life and local consumption. Xiaohongshu has become an important lifestyle search and recommendation platform, and at the same time, Douyin has become a major short-video platform for visual attraction and rapid traffic circulation. According to the data of CNNIC, in June 2022, the number of short-video users in China had reached 962 million, which is 91.5% of all the internet users [2]. So for an urban commercial brand, the question is no longer simply that they appear online, but how they become visible, searchable, attractive, meaningful under different platform mechanisms.

The following existing studies are useful for the theoretical foundations of this work. In the studies of city branding, Kavaratzis claims that the city brand is not a one slogan or a one visual symbol, but the process of the construction of the urban meaning, the identity, the relationship with the stakeholders [3]. That is to say, the urban branding should be seen as a process which is constructed socially, rather than only an up-top marketing activity. The studies of social media and destination branding show that the user-generated content could reshape place image and shape the users' understanding of the destinations and the consumption space of the user [4, 5]. From the view of consumer behavior, the studies also find that user-generated brand content can increase the trust, engagement, and purchase intention of the user, especially if the user recognises the content as very true and socially related [6].

However, platform communication is not neutral. Platformization studies claim that, with data-driven infrastructures, digital platforms increasingly play a role in cultural production, brand communication, and market visibility of [7]. Because recommendation systems influence which content is displayed, circulated, and amplified, algorithmic visibility has become a form of social and commercial power [8, 9]. For brands, a platform is not simply a communication channel. Brands need to change each content's form, visual style, posting strategy, and interaction design in order to align with the logic of each platform. As studied, Xiaohongshu has more relation with search, lifestyle note, experience sharing, and decision support, while it depends more on immersive short videos, emotional attraction, and fast recommendation of Douyin [10, 11]. These differences imply that the same urban commercial brand may be constructed in different ways across.

However, there is still a research gap. All the previous studies have discussed, separately, city brand, user-generated content, platformization, and algorithmic visibility, but few studies have connected the above perspectives to study how urban commercial brands respond to the different algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. In a word, previous studies did not explain well how the urban commercial brand responds to the different communication logic of Xiaohongshu and Douyin, or how the different of the two will influence the form of the contents, the performance of interaction, and the meaning-making of the users.

With this background, in this study, we take the communication of urban commercial brands as the focus, and take Xiaohongshu and Douyin as the two cases of the algorithmic recommendation mechanism. With the background above, this study is trying to answer three research questions: First, how do the content forms of the urban commercial brands change to the recommended logics

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of Xiaohongshu and Douyin? Second, what could we find in the communication performance on the two platforms in terms of interaction data? Third, how do the comments of the user reflect the different forms of participation and meaning-making around the urban commercial brand?

In order to answer these questions, this study also takes the method of qualitative comparative content analysis. First, it chooses the representative urban commercial spaces, i.e., Shanghai Anfu Road, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Beijing Sanlitun, then compares the related contents on Xiaohongshu and Douyin. Three dimensions of content form, interaction data, and comment content are analyzed. Based on this framework, this study tries to explain how the algorithmic recommendation mechanism affects how the urban commercial brand is visible, as well as the communication strategy and the symbolic construction of this brand.

2. Methodology and analytical framework

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to examine how urban commercial brands adapt their communication strategies to the algorithmic recommendation mechanisms of Xiaohongshu and Douyin. A case study method is suitable for this research because the study focuses on a contemporary communication phenomenon within real platform contexts, rather than testing a single variable through experimental or statistical methods. According to Yin, case study research is useful for investigating complex social phenomena and can involve single or multiple cases, data collection, analysis, and reporting within a systematic research design [12]. Therefore, this method is appropriate for exploring how urban commercial brands are shaped by both offline commercial spaces and online platform mechanisms.

The research objects are three representative urban commercial spaces: Shanghai Anfu Road, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Beijing Sanlitun. The reason for selecting these cases is that all of them have a clear offline commercial identity and strong online visibility. At the same time, they are the urban commercial branding of the different types. Anfu Road stands for the lifestyle consumption of the street, Chengdu Taikoo Li stands for the open commercial district branding, and Beijing Sanlitun stands for the fashion urban consumption space. By comparing these three cases in Xiaohongshu and Douyin, this study can see how a similar urban commercial space will be presented in different ways under the different platform logics.

This study employs qualitative content analysis as a supplementary analytical technique, even though case studies are the primary method. Content analysis is useful for the classification and interpretation of communication materials, including text, image, video, comment, and other media content [13]. In this study, the unit of analysis is a single post of Xiaohongshu, or a single video of Douyin related to one of the three selected cases. The selected materials do need to contain clear location information, the visible representation of the commercial space, and available interaction indicators, for example, like, comment, save, share, or view. There are three dimensions of analysis: the content form, interaction data, and the comment content. Content form refers to the main way in which the urban commercial space is presented, such as route guide, lifestyle note, atmosphere montage, store display, citywalk video, or street photography content, which are summarized in Table 1. Interaction data refers to visible platform indicators, including likes, comments, saves, shares, and views. Comment content refers to users' responses and meaning-making practices, such as consumption intention, information inquiry, emotional reaction, authenticity dispute, and privacy or ethical concern.

There are three steps in the coding process. First, the selected posts and videos will be recorded in a case sample table, including case location, platform, content title, content form, visible interaction data, and source. Second, the content will be categorized according to the coding framework. Third,

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user comments will be analyzed through thematic analysis. In the eyes of Braun and Clarke, the thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method for finding repeated patterns of meaning in data [14]. It is useful for understanding how users participate in constructing the meaning of urban commercial brands in comment sections.

Overall, the methodological framework of this study can be summarized as: case selection, platform content collecting, coding analysis, cross-platform comparison, and case interpretation. This approach enables the study to compare the manner in which platform mechanisms influence the visibility and symbolic significance of urban commercial brands, in addition to the communication variations between Xiaohongshu and Douyin.

Table 1. Case study coding framework

Dimension	Operational Definition	Coding Categories
Case object	Selected urban commercial brand space	Shanghai Anfu Road; Chengdu Taikoo Li; Beijing Sanlitun
Platform	Digital platform where the content is published	Xiaohongshu; Douyin
Content form	Main way of presenting the urban commercial space	Route guide; lifestyle note; atmosphere montage; store display; citywalk video; street photography
Interaction data	Visible engagement indicators shown on the platform	Likes; comments; saves/favorites; shares; views
Comment content	User responses and meaning - making in the comment section	Consumption intention; information inquiry; emotional reaction; authenticity dispute; privacy/ethical concern

3. Application and results

This section applies the comparative case study framework to three representative urban commercial spaces: Shanghai Anfu Road, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Beijing Sanlitun. These three cases are selected because they have already formed relative stable relationship between offline commercial space and online platform communication. Anfu Road is the case of street-based lifestyle consumption, Chengdu Taikoo Li is the case of open commercial district branding, and Beijing Sanlitun is the case of fashion-oriented urban consumption space. This analysis is on three dimensions, including content form, interaction data, and the comment content.

3.1. Case selection and coding results

The first step of the analysis is to classify the selected platform content according to the observable variables. Rather than make general judgments on the impression, in this study, each public post or video is taken as the unit of analysis. The coding framework consists of three dimensions, which are summarized in Table 2. This is an operationalization that is the same as the study on user-generated content, the short-form travel video, and the platform-based persuasion. They all stress that content form, narrative style, and user response are important for the understanding of the effects of digital communication [10, 15, 16].

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Table 2. Operationalization summar

Variable	Operational Definition	Coding Rule
Content form	The main narrative and presentation method of a single post or video	Route guide / Atmosphere montage / Store display / Vlog / Event opening / Street photography
Interaction data	Visible engagement indicators on the page	Likes, comments, favorites/saves, shares, and views are recorded when visible
Comment content	Main topics of top or highly - liked comments	Action intention / Information seeking / Price - value judgment / Aesthetic appreciation / Authenticity controversy / Privacy ethics

Based on this coding framework, this study compares Xiaohongshu and Douyin samples related to the three cases in Table 3. In the current sample table, verified Douyin items are retained with visible titles and partial interaction data, while Xiaohongshu items are treated as preset sampling positions that need to be completed through links or screenshots. This avoids inventing unstable platform data while still preserving the comparative structure of the research.

Table 3. Case-level sample data

Case	Platform	Link or Title	Content Form	Likes	Views / Search Evidence	Main Comment / Content Themes	Source
AN-XHS-1	Xiaohongshu	"Anfu Road" search and guide-related content	Food, store-visit, street-photography and citywalk guide notes	-	Searches for "Anfu Road" on Xiaohongshu increased by 354% in April 2021 compared with April 2020, and by more than 40 times compared with April 2019	Food recommendations, store visits, street photography guides, check-in routes	Huxiu / Tencent News [17]
AN-DY-1	Douyin	"Shanghai Vlog! Anfu Road citywalk shopping sharing"	Route-guide vlog	2,948,000.00	-	Shopping sharing, vlog, citywalk, route recommendation	Douyin indexed page
AN-DY-2	Douyin	"Jovane takes you around the world: Shanghai Wukang Road & Anfu Road"	Travel-vlog fragment	132.00	-	Travel vlog, Wukang Road, Anfu Road, Shanghai visit	Douyin indexed page
AN-DY-3	Douyin	"Shanghai niko and… on Anfu Road"	Store display / shopping check-in	30,000.00	-	Store visit, shopping haul, Anfu Road check-in	Douyin indexed page

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Table 3. (continued)

TK-DY-1	Douyin	"Chengdu Chunxi Road and Taikoo Li blind-box street experience"	Street encounter / commercial-district experience	164,000.00	-	Chunxi Road, Chengdu Taikoo Li, street experience, entertainment consumption	Douyin indexed page

3.2. Content form and spatial presentation

The results show that the same urban commercial space is encoded into different narrative forms on different platforms. On Xiaohongshu, urban commercial spaces are more often presented as guide-style notes, store recommendations, citywalk routes, and experience-sharing posts. This format is connected with the platform's search, saving, and decision-support functions [10]. On Douyin, the same spaces are more often transformed into short visual scenes, including walking videos, atmosphere montages, street photography, store displays, and event-based videos. This is related to Douyin's short-video recommendation logic, which emphasizes visual immediacy, viewing rhythm, and emotional attraction [11].

Anfu Road is a typical example. Its online popularity does not come only from the abstract idea of a "street," but from its distinctive shops, street-style atmosphere, cafés, boutiques, and lifestyle routes. Publicly cited Xiaohongshu data show that in April 2021, the search volume of Anfu Road on Xiaohongshu increased by 354% compared with the same period in 2020 and by more than 40 times compared with the same period in 2019 [17]. This suggests that platform visibility has become an important part of the brand communication of location-based commercial spaces. In other words, Anfu Road is not only an offline street, but also a searchable and repeatable lifestyle symbol produced through platform content.

Chengdu Taikoo Li and Beijing Sanlitun, by contrast, are more suitable for continuous spatial representation. Taikoo Li Chengdu is officially described as an open-plan, lane-driven, low-rise mall that combines traditional Sichuan architectural elements with modern retail functions [18]. Its "Fast Lane" and "Slow Lane" retail concept also supports walking, browsing, and lifestyle consumption [18]. This spatial structure naturally fits citywalk videos, architectural walkthroughs, shopping guides, and atmosphere montages. Beijing Sanlitun Taikoo Li is also described as an open-plan, lane-driven commercial development with approximately 300 shops and restaurants [19]. Therefore, Sanlitun's platform image is more strongly connected with fashion, nightlife, street photography, international brands, and urban spectacle. These cases show that the physical design of urban commercial space can provide visual and narrative materials for platform-based brand communication [7, 18, 19].

3.3. Interaction structure and visibility distribution

The first step of the analysis is to classify the selected platform content according to the observable variables. Rather than make general judgments on the impression, in this study, each public post or video is taken as the unit of analysis. The coding framework consists of three dimensions: content form, interaction data, and comment content. This is an operationalization that is the same as the study on user-generated content, the short-form travel video, and the platform-based persuasion. They all stress that content form, narrative style, and user response are important for the understanding of the effects of digital communication [10, 15, 16].

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By location, the two Anfu Road videos received 3.3 million likes in total, the two Chengdu Taikoo Li videos received 523,000 likes, and the two Sanlitun videos received 4.419 million likes. These differences should not be interpreted as meaning that one place is more popular than another. For example, account influence, release time, topic angle, visual rhythm, and platform recommendation may all influence interaction results. More importantly, the data show that different content forms may create very different visibility outcomes even in the same location. For example, the Sanlitun route-guide video received only 13,000 likes, while the night-scene atmosphere video received 4.406 million likes. This suggests that on Douyin, visual event-based expression may amplify the communication power of an urban commercial space more effectively than purely informational guide content.

This result also recalls the studies on destination short videos and short-form travel videos. Cao et al. believe that the narrative short video could affect the attitude of the destination by narrative transportation and sense of presence [15]. And Fang et al. also show that the short-form travel video could induce travel inspiration by the visual and emotional mechanism [16]. Thus, the interaction gap in the samples of Douyin should not be taken as only the number difference. It reflects how the algorithmic recommendation, visual narrative, and emotional stimulation jointly build the visibility of the urban commercial brand.

3.4. Comment content and user meaning-making

The comment analysis further shows that platform users do not only receive brand messages passively. They also participate in meaning-making. The first type of comment is action-oriented, such as want to go, save this, or want to try. These comments are more closely connected with Xiaohongshu collection and decision-making logic, because the Xiaohongshu content is often used for travel planning, store selection, and lifestyle consumption decisions [10]. The second type is information-seeking comments, including questions about location, price, route, store name, or crowd level. These comments show that users treat platform content not only as entertainment, but also as practical information for future consumption.

The third type is emotional reaction, which is more visible in Douyin's short-video environment. Users may respond quickly to atmosphere, fashion scenes, night views, or visual spectacle. This is the same as the research on short video, which emphasizes that the visual immersion and the narrative transportation can strengthen users' affective response to places and destinations [15, 16]. The fourth type is authenticity or anti-hype discussion, especially around places that have become the so-called internet famous. In these cases, the users may ask whether the space is still the place of everyday urban life, or has it already turned into a performative consumption scene. The final type is privacy or ethical concern, especially in the case of street photography, crowded commercial districts, and event-based videos.

Overall, the results show that Xiaohongshu and Douyin construct urban commercial brand visibility through different mechanisms. Overall, Xiaohongshu supports a more cumulative model based on search, saving, trust, and consumption planning, while Douyin supports a more explosive model based on short-video visibility, visual rhythm, and emotional circulation [10, 11]. This finding supports platformization theory, which argues that digital platforms shape not only the content distribution, but also the kinds of communication practices that become valuable [7]. It also connects with city branding theory, because the meaning of urban commercial brands is not fixed by official promotion alone, but is continuously produced through platform content, user interaction, and symbolic association [3-5].

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4. Cause–solution mapping

Since the case analysis shows that the communication of urban commercial brands on Xiaohongshu and Douyin is made by the different mechanism of the platforms, the main problem is not that whether the brand should use the social media, but how the content of the brand, the way of interaction of the brand, and the brand narrative of the brand should be adapted to the visibility rules of the platform, as reflected in Table 4. Since digital platforms act as the intermediary between the brand and the user more and more, the brand should build a different communication strategy instead of posting the same content in a direct way on the platform [7, 20].

First, some urban commercial brands depend too much on visually attractive content, but provide little practical information. It might work on Douyin, where the rhythm of visual stimuli to the emotion can attract attention quickly, but it might not satisfy the needs of Xiaohongshu users who list the route planning, store selection, and preparation for consumption [10, 11]. For Xiaohongshu, companies should provide more platform-specific content, such as guide-style notes, searchable keywords, route information, and genuine user experience content; for Douyin, they should create brief movies with more compelling visual hooks, distinct narratives, and an emotional ambiance.

Second, visibility distribution on the short-video platform is very uneven. As for Table 3, a few videos may gain very high engagement, while others are at a much lower level. Which means a brand can not only rely on one viral post. It should build a stable content matrix including atmosphere video, practical guide, store highlight, event content, and user material. It can reduce the risk of unstable algorithmic exposure.

Third, user engagement is sometimes shallow. The user may like or watch the content, but not form a deeper connection with the place or the brand. Utilitarian, hedonistic, and connected affordances can all affect users' platform participation, according to research on social commerce engagement [21]. Therefore, the urban commercial brand should design some interaction mechanisms, e.g., comment-based Q&A, a prompt to collect route, a prompt to check in with the given topic, and a repost of the high-quality UGC.

Finally, too much visibility of a platform may also cause authenticity disputes or privacy issues. For instance, the street photography, the crowded check-in culture, and the over-commercialized visual scene may make users doubt if a place can still stand for the egocentric urban life of everyday. Therefore, brands should strike a balance between ethical communication, local culture, authenticity, and visual advertising. Commercial venues should emphasize local narratives, a sense of community, and courteous user involvement rather than just showcasing "internet-famous" situations.

Table 4. Problem–strategy mapping for urban commercial brand communication

Problem / Cause	Platform-Related Explanation	Suggested Strategy
Content is visually attractive but lacks practical information	Douyin favors visual immediacy, while Xiaohongshu users need searchable and savable decision - support content [10, 11]	Produce platform - specific content: guide notes and route information for Xiaohongshu; short videos with strong visual hooks for Douyin
Visibility is unstable and uneven	Short - video recommendation may create viral peaks, but ordinary videos may receive much lower engagement, as shown in Table 3	Build a diversified content matrix, including atmosphere videos, store highlights, citywalk guides, event content, and UGC reposts
User engagement remains shallow	Likes and views do not always become deeper brand attachment or consumption intention	Strengthen interaction design through comment Q&A, route - saving prompts, user check - in topics, and community - style participation

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Table 4. (continued)

Brand communication becomes homogeneous	Many commercial districts use similar citywalk, street photography, and check - in formats	Develop distinctive spatial narratives based on each place's unique history, shops, lifestyle identity, and cultural atmosphere
High visibility creates authenticity or privacy concerns	Overexposure, street photography, and "internet - famous" consumption may trigger resistance from users	Balance visual promotion with authenticity, local culture, privacy awareness, and ethical communication

5. Limitations and future outlooks

This study has a number of limitations, even if it offers a comparative insight into how urban commercial brands are communicated on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. First, the sample scope is limited. This study mainly takes three representative cases of urban commercial space: Shanghai Anfu Road, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Beijing Sanlitun. These cases are suitable for comparison because they all have strong offline commercial identity and visible communication on the platform. However, they could not represent all the types of urban commercial brands in China. Other forms of urban commercial brand, such as the local shop in the community, the traditional commercial street, the cultural tourism district, or the small city commercial space, may have different communication.

Second, the data source is limited by the platform access. In this study, the data mainly come from the content in the public platform that is indexed by the web page, the project information that is released officially, and the interaction that can be seen. The data on the platform are all dynamic and unstable. For instance, the indicators, including likes, saves, shares, and views, are inherently dynamic. Some data is not visible all the time without access to the platform login or a screenshot. In addition, certain metrics may be intermittently inaccessible due to platform restrictions. In a word, the analysis can infer the logic of the platform through the content form that it can see and the interaction, rather than directly measuring the internal algorithm process.

This study can be improved in several directions in future research. First, the sample can be extended to more platforms, such as Weibo, Bilibili, Dianping, or TikTok, in order to compare a broader form of urban commercial communication. It can also include more cities and more types of commercial spaces, such as the historical districts, shopping malls, night markets, or small independent brands. Second, future studies may use a mixture of designs. For example, the platform content analysis can be mixed with the interviews with brand operators, users, or platform content creators. It will not only explain what kinds of content become visible, but also how brands understand the rules of the platform, and how they adjust their strategies under incomplete knowledge.

Third, future research can include more social variables, for example, age, gender, class, cultural background, and consumption habits. Different user groups may react differently to the content of citywalk, street photography, the recommendation of lifestyle, or the short-video spectacle. Finally, future studies can conduct longitudinal observation to see how the visibility of urban commercial brands changes over time. Because the algorithm of the platform, the preferences of users, and the urban consumption trend are changing all the time, a long-term point of view is more dynamic to see the relation between the mechanism of the platform and the urban commercial brand.

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6. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to investigate how algorithmic recommend mechanism affects the communication of the urban commercial brand in the context of platform-based urban consumption. The focus on the Xiaohongshu and Douyin to see how the different logic of the platform would affect the visibility, the form of content, the interaction form, and the way that users make meaning of the urban commercial spaces.

With the comparative case study approach, this paper takes three cases as representative: Shanghai Anfu Road, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Beijing Sanlitun. The results indicate that Xiaohongshu supports a more cumulative and decision-oriented visibility model. The urban commercial content on Xiaohongshu is arranged according to information that can be searched, and the notes in the form of a guide, saving behaviour, and a trust-based consumption plan. While Douyin supports a more immediate and attention-oriented visibility model. Short video, visual rhythm, atmosphere, and emotional stimulation can rapidly amplify the urban commercial space. The findings indicate that the urban commercial brand is not just represented by the platform, but is reconstructed by the mechanism of the platform, the adaptation of the content, and the participation of the users.

From the perspective of the study of urban commercial branding, this study contributes to connecting the city branding, platformization, and algorithmic visibility in one analytical frame. As far as the practical implications, it shows that brand operators should not just copy the same content in different platforms directly, but the urban commercial brands should have differentiated strategies according to each platform's communication logic. For Xiaohongshu, the brand should strengthen the searchable guide, authentic experience sharing, and save-oriented stuff. For Douyin, the brand should pay attention to the visual hook, emotional telling, and short-video rhythm.

Future research is encouraged to push the sample to more cities, more platforms, and more types of commercial spaces, as well as to extend the analysis of the content of the platform with interviews or long-term observation in order to understand how the visibility done by algorithms is changing.

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