

Differentiated Approaches to Emotional Marketing: A Comparison Between Xiaohongshu and Traditional E-commerce Platforms

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the distinctive approaches of Xiaohongshu and traditional e-commerce platforms in emotional marketing strategies, revealing the underlying logic and differences in their effectiveness. Using a comparative analysis method, the research examines four key dimensions: content format, social characteristics, business models, and visual storytelling strategies. The findings indicate that traditional e-commerce focuses on "functional display," "weak social connections," "immediate stimulation," and "real-shot presentation," emphasizing instrumental rationality and short-term conversion. In contrast, Xiaohongshu relies on "diverse content creation," "strong social interaction," "long-term cultivation," and "aesthetic construction" to build an emotionally-driven community guided by value rationality, fostering deep emotional bonds between users and brands. The study reveals that emotional marketing in traditional e-commerce is limited by a focus on transactional efficiency, whereas Xiaohongshu strengthens emotional assets through its content ecosystem and social network. This research provides theoretical and practical insights for developing differentiated emotional marketing strategies across e-commerce platforms.

KEYWORDS

Emotional marketing; Traditional e-commerce; Xiaohongshu

1 Introduction

With the upgrading of consumption and the evolution of user demands from mere functional satisfaction to emotional resonance, emotional marketing has become a key approach for e-commerce platforms to enhance user loyalty and brand value. Unlike traditional marketing, emotional marketing centers on addressing the emotional differences of consumers as its core strategy. This approach not only helps companies achieve their business objectives but also integrates emotional marketing into every stage of the marketing strategy (Li Jin & Li Jinkui, 2005) ^[1]. Under the context of consumption upgrading, user needs have progressed from functional fulfillment to the pursuit of experiential value, symbolic meaning, and emotional connection. As a result, the effectiveness of traditional marketing strategies, which primarily focus on rational appeals, has gradually weakened. Successful emotional marketing in e-commerce can improve user satisfaction and loyalty while shaping a differentiated brand image and creating core competitive advantages. However, the practice of emotional marketing on e-commerce platforms faces unique challenges. Compared to offline scenarios that offer rich sensory experiences and immediate interactions, online environments inherently present a "barrier" to emotional transmission. Traditional e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao and JD.com, focus on "shelf-style" transactions, relying on functional displays and promotional incentives to drive short-term conversions. Their emotional marketing efforts are often limited to superficial interactions, making it difficult to establish deep connections between users and brands. In contrast, Xiaohongshu, as a representative of social e-commerce, bases its model on user-generated content (UGC). Through diverse content creation, strong social attributes, and aesthetically appealing narratives, it has built an ecosystem where "content equals consumption." This approach embeds products within users' lifestyles and emotional stories, forming a unique closed loop of "recommendation, purchase, and re-sharing." This paper aims to compare these two types of platforms in terms of content forms, social attributes, business models, and visual strategies, revealing the underlying logic of their emotional marketing practices. The findings provide theoretical insights for traditional e-commerce platforms to optimize emotional touchpoints and for Xiaohongshu to balance commercialization with community tone.

Xiaohongshu and traditional E-commerce: A comparative analysis of emotional marketing strategies based on platform differences.

2 Content Format: The "Functional Display" of Traditional E-commerce versus the "Diverse Creation" on Xiaohongshu

Traditional e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao and JD.com, primarily focus on functional content presentation, with the main objective of directly facilitating transactions. Product pages on these platforms typically follow

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standardized templates that include technical specifications, product images, price comparisons, and user reviews. This format emphasizes efficiency and practicality, aiming to stimulate consumer purchase intentions through clear product descriptions and promotional offers. Emotional marketing plays a limited role in traditional e-commerce, often relying on immediate incentives like discounts and time-limited deals, resulting in a shallow emotional connection between users and brands. The interaction between consumers and brands tends to remain at a basic "need-satisfaction" level. In response to this limitation, some brands attempt to convey emotions through storytelling advertisements or brand videos. For example, Patagonia places its brand story and philosophy—such as "durability over trendiness"—on its product homepage, thereby linking brand values with consumers' genuine needs. Overall, traditional e-commerce prioritizes functional display over emotional engagement, though it has begun to adapt in the face of intense market competition. In contrast, Xiaohongshu is founded on a "content community" model characterized by highly diverse content formats. By deeply integrating user-generated content (UGC) with the platform ecosystem, Xiaohongshu creates a unique scenario where "content is consumption." Users do not only share product features but also embed products within authentic life contexts and personal narratives through photo-text reviews, short video vlogs, and live interactions. The content covers multiple dimensions, including product evaluations, lifestyle, and emotional resonance. The platform employs algorithmic recommendations and topic tags—such as "recommended products" and "healing lifestyle"—to transform fragmented content into emotionally rich scenarios, enhancing users' sense of identification and belonging. Brand marketing on Xiaohongshu emphasizes soft integration, for instance, collaborating with key opinion leaders (KOLs) to produce immersive content or launching UGC campaigns that encourage user participation in storytelling. This approach not only communicates product functionality but also fosters emotional resonance, building long-term user loyalty and forming a closed loop of "discovery, purchase, and sharing." According to QuestMobile, Xiaohongshu users spend more than 30 minutes daily on the platform, with interaction rates (likes, comments, favorites) exceeding those of traditional e-commerce by more than three times. The core driver is the emotional added value of the content—users consume not only products but also stories, values, and a sense of community. The differences in content forms between traditional e-commerce and Xiaohongshu fundamentally reflect divergent emotional marketing pathways. Traditional e-commerce is guided by "instrumental rationality," where emotional expression serves immediate conversion needs, and content design aligns with consumers' utilitarian demands. In contrast, Xiaohongshu centers on "value rationality," constructing emotional communities through diverse content that embeds consumption within social and self-fulfillment contexts. The former depends on clear value propositions, while the latter relies on more implicit yet potent emotional identification. This distinction means that traditional e-commerce must seek emotional enhancement within a functional framework, whereas Xiaohongshu must balance commercialization with community atmosphere to avoid excessive marketing that could dilute user experience.

3 Social Attributes: The “Weak Social Connections” of Traditional E-commerce versus the “Strong Social Interactions” on Xiaohongshu

Traditional e-commerce platforms exhibit relatively weak social attributes, with user interactions primarily limited to product reviews and customer service inquiries. This form of interaction is typically characterized as “instrumental,” focusing on brief feedback related to product functionality. It lacks deeper expressions concerning the usage scenarios, personal feelings, or emotional experiences associated with the products. For example, on platforms such as Taobao or JD.com, users can leave reviews on product pages after purchase; however, most comments concentrate on logistics speed, product quality, and cost-effectiveness. Interactions among users predominantly occur through customer service systems to resolve issues. This model results in predominantly “one-way” user relationships with low social stickiness, hindering the formation of stable community structures among users and making it difficult to establish long-term emotional connections between brands and consumers. In contrast, Xiaohongshu demonstrates notably strong social attributes. The platform's “grass-planting” (recommendation) marketing leverages social media dissemination and user interactions to create a socially-driven information transmission model. Social marketing enhances consumers' trust and identification with products or services, thereby increasing purchase intentions (Dong Yuanyuan, 2023) ^[2]. Users function not only as content consumers but also as creators and disseminators. For instance, when a user posts a note about skincare products, other users can interact through comments, reposts, or derivative content creation, further fostering a community atmosphere centered on shared experiences. The platform's optimization of features such as topic tags, interest-based recommendations, and community mechanisms enables users with similar interests to form stable interaction circles, promoting emotional identification and value resonance. This “strong social interaction” not only reinforces connections among platform users but also substantially enhances the effectiveness and depth of emotional marketing. Brands can utilize “grass-planting” marketing as social proof within the network, naturally linking products to users' lifestyles and identities, thereby eliciting emotional resonance and increasing brand emotional capital. For example, frequent use of keywords like “healing,” “self-pleasure,” and “atmosphere” in recommendation notes reflects the fusion of emotional appeals and consumption intentions. Virtual online communities connect users with shared

interests into circles where spontaneous interactions fulfill their socialization needs that might be unmet in physical society (Sun Shaojun & Zhang Yuhong, 2017) ^[3]. The differences in social attributes between traditional e-commerce and Xiaohongshu significantly influence the outcomes of emotional marketing. The weak social connections in traditional e-commerce hinder the dissemination of emotional marketing and make it challenging to build brand loyalty. Conversely, Xiaohongshu's strong social interactions provide a broad space for emotional marketing, where user communication and sharing enhance the brand's emotional value and improve user loyalty and engagement.

4 Business Models: The “Immediate Stimulation” of Traditional E-commerce versus the “Long-term Cultivation” of Xiaohongshu

Traditional e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao and JD.com, typically adopt a business model centered on “promotion-driven, rapid conversion.” While some platforms attempt to enrich user experience through brand storytelling and contextual advertising, their overall focus remains primarily on product information, lacking deeper user engagement and sustainable operational mechanisms. In contrast, social e-commerce platforms represented by Xiaohongshu emphasize long-term user relationship maintenance and emotional brand value accumulation. Their business model is based on a user-generated content (UGC) ecosystem, where users share authentic life experiences through images, short videos, and notes, thereby fostering emotional identification and consumption resonance. Brands leverage content created by key opinion leaders (KOLs) and key opinion consumers (KOCs) to encourage product interest, while also engaging users through continuous content output, topic guidance, and emotional embedding. This model does not prioritize immediate conversion but focuses on a “content–relationship–trust–purchase” pathway to deeply influence users' mindset. Users on Xiaohongshu are more integrated into community contexts and interest networks, implicitly absorbing brand messages and values. This emotional identification-based business logic allows brands to cultivate consumer groups with strong emotional attachment. The core distinction between traditional e-commerce and Xiaohongshu lies in their business model orientation: the former is driven by “short-term stimulation,” focusing on promotional conversion efficiency and transaction closure; the latter emphasizes “long-term cultivation,” prioritizing content interaction, emotional co-creation, and user lifetime value (CLV). In terms of emotional marketing, traditional e-commerce largely remains at the level of functional information dissemination, with relatively simple and transient emotional expression; conversely, Xiaohongshu constructs sustained and authentic emotional connections through lifestyle-oriented and community-based content contexts. This difference results in traditional e-commerce adopting a more instrumental rationality in emotional marketing, whereas Xiaohongshu leans toward value rationality. Therefore, for traditional e-commerce platforms to achieve breakthroughs in emotional marketing, they should consider integrating content operations and user relationship management mechanisms. Meanwhile, Xiaohongshu must remain vigilant against excessive commercialization that could undermine community ecology and emotional connections, striving to maintain content authenticity and user trust.

5 Visual Narrative Strategies: The “Authentic Presentation” of Traditional E-commerce versus the “Aesthetic Construction” of Xiaohongshu

Traditional e-commerce platforms primarily adopt a visual narrative strategy centered on functionality, emphasizing the objective attributes and practical use of products. Their visual content typically consists of standardized, high-resolution photographs and videos that showcase products from multiple angles, highlight details, and include specifications. For instance, platforms such as Taobao and JD.com require sellers to upload images with white backgrounds, contextual scenes, and usage demonstrations to reduce information asymmetry and assist consumers in making rational purchasing decisions efficiently. This “authentic presentation” approach is efficiency-driven and aligns with the conventional “shelf-style” sales model of traditional e-commerce. Its emotional marketing focus lies in building trust by providing transparent and realistic visual representations to alleviate consumer doubts, thereby encouraging immediate conversions. However, this model has limitations in generating emotional resonance; an excessive reliance on functional displays may weaken deeper connections between brands and users. In contrast, Xiaohongshu reconstructs visual narrative logic through “aesthetic construction,” which aims to evoke emotional identification by using scenographic and artistic content. Users, especially key opinion leaders (KOLs) and key opinion consumers (KOCs), skillfully employ filters, layouts, lighting effects, and storytelling scenes to integrate products into lifestyle or emotional narratives. For example, a skincare product post might adopt a “weekend healing time” theme, combining soft lighting, cozy home settings, and personal testimonials to convey the emotional value associated with the product. This strategy downplays the functional features of products and instead highlights their symbolic significance—products become mediums for users to express individuality and pursue ideal lifestyles. Xiaohongshu's visual storytelling not only facilitates sales conversion but also attracts user engagement, prolonged browsing, and secondary content creation through high-aesthetic content, forming a closed loop of “content-emotion-community” that fosters long-term user

loyalty. From the perspective of emotional marketing, the visual narrative strategies of traditional e-commerce and Xiaohongshu illustrate a distinction between "rational trust" and "emotional resonance." Traditional e-commerce's authentic presentation satisfies consumers' need for security through transparency, but its utilitarian nature may lack emotional warmth. Conversely, Xiaohongshu's aesthetic construction builds brand identification through emotional connection, visual aesthetics, and scene narration, though its reliance on subjective expression might compromise some informational accuracy. These differences stem from the platforms' positioning and user demands: traditional e-commerce focuses on "transaction efficiency," whereas Xiaohongshu emphasizes "social experience." Moving forward, brands should flexibly integrate both strategies according to their target audience and product characteristics—for example, incorporating scenographic content in traditional e-commerce to enhance emotional touchpoints, or embedding detailed product shots in Xiaohongshu posts to increase credibility. Such a dynamic balance between rationality and emotion can maximize the effectiveness of emotional marketing.

6 Conclusion

This study compares the emotional marketing strategies of Xiaohongshu and traditional e-commerce platforms, revealing significant differences in content formats, social attributes, business models, and visual storytelling approaches. Traditional e-commerce primarily focuses on "functional presentation," "weak social connections," and "immediate incentives," relying on promotional activities and rational tools to drive transaction efficiency. Its emotional marketing emphasizes information transparency and short-term conversions, with user relationships largely limited to superficial needs fulfillment. In contrast, Xiaohongshu is characterized by "diverse content creation," "strong social interactions," and "long-term cultivation." By building an emotional community through a user-generated content (UGC) ecosystem, it embeds consumer behavior within deeper contexts of social identity and self-realization. The platform's high user engagement and sense of community demonstrate the effective conversion of emotional value. However, traditional e-commerce platforms are exploring ways to enhance emotional engagement under competitive pressure, while Xiaohongshu must remain cautious of the risk of community dilution caused by excessive commercialization. Traditional e-commerce should strengthen content management and social features, employing scenario-based storytelling, user co-creation, and a dual strategy of "content plus promotions" to balance short-term conversions with emotional retention. Meanwhile, Xiaohongshu needs to preserve community authenticity, strictly regulate commercial content, integrate rational and emotional narratives to improve credibility, and extend emotional connections through dynamic management of the user lifecycle. In the future, brands should flexibly combine the strengths of both platform types—for example, by embedding key opinion leader (KOL) reviews within traditional e-commerce sites to increase emotional touchpoints, or by inserting direct links on Xiaohongshu to shorten the conversion path.

About the Author

Ying Wei, female, Master's Degree, Assistant Professor, Her primary research interests include Emotional marketing, Traditional e-commerce.

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