

**A qualitative analysis on Xiaohongshu:
Conspicuous consumption, gender, social media algorithms and surveillance**

By

Xintong Wu, B.A.

Supervisor: Dr. Dilyana Mincheva

A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts

In Communication and New Media

McMaster University

©Copyright by Xintong Wu, August 2021

Introduction

Within the last two decades, people have been gradually adopting the technological advancement of mobile smartphones. It is not hard to find people spoiled by such technology, especially newer generations who grow up with the internet. These are ingrained everyday essentials. These people are dependent on technology for various activities. The abundance of social media platforms in the modern era contributes to unite people scattered from all walks of life and form a vibrant internet community. Social networking sites have advanced a global community where boundaries have shrunk, and real-time conversions occur on a worldwide scale. The interactive features of innovative technologies provide an open-source venue for production and consumption where self-expression, idea-dissemination, and exchange of information happen simultaneously. Merits are undoubtedly attributed to the user-generated content of social networking sites in creating an unprecedentedly connected community, the first of its kind in the history of humanity. Information is not mediated from the top, as in the past controlled by regulated gatekeepers. Yet, at this point, we know that excessive usage of innovative technologies is a double-edged sword: it has benefits, but it can also lead to adverse mental and physical health issues in users.

Social networking sites have a promising impact on the reciprocal behavior of people to people and people to products. The ever-evolving social networking sites embrace broader and fuller functionality that becomes a binding site for digital marketing and branding, anticipated to attract a vast public population, leading to a materialistic sharing culture. I am interested in the culture of sharing pictures and lifestyle information

on social media and how this type of behavior is particularly encouraged, tracked, and articulated on lifestyle platforms that work with advertisers and target young consumers. The intersection of consumer behavior, social media sharing practices, and advertising messaging is at the center of my thesis.

Research aims

Specifically, I am interested in conspicuous consumption. My purpose is to reflect on how excessive social media use triggers conspicuous consumption and conspicuous consumption-inspired sharing. As mentioned, social media are central today to how the public participates and consume. Sharing content has become a prominent social behavior and a practice that defines one's identity and presence in the world. My research project aims to make a modest theoretical intervention in media effects by examining the causal relationship between consumption psychology and consumer behavior due to engaging with social networking sites. The theoretical reflection will be supplemented by an auto-ethnographic thick description of social media consumption. My research aims to organize in a theoretical framework the underlying motives and rationale behind the social media sharing culture. Why do people share information, and how does this practice format their purchasing habits, identity pursuits, and self-esteem? My interest is in providing a tentative explanation – based on the exploration of research and auto-ethnographic insights - of the extent to which users' psychological mind has been influenced by social networking sites prior to, during, and post-consumption. My research does not aim at universal conclusions. Instead, I intent to micro-focus on one social media application and its marketing strategies, intersected with insights from the

research literature on social media, and including auto-ethnographic reflection, it aims to provide theoretical scaffolding for further large-scale studies of media effects on consumers that also consider the intimacies and complications of personalized testimonies.

As my central case study, I take Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media platform whose name translates as "little red book" in English. The platform's purpose is like the yellow pages manual from the past; an organizer that contains valuable information. The company, also known as the "RED," operates as a social media sharing application. I am particularly interested in this application's marketing/branding strategies as described in its online presence and publicly available user testimonies and comments displayed on the platform. I have chosen this platform for it targets young, urban, Westernized clients in China, replicating many of the features of Instagram, and I consider myself to be among them. As a regular user of Xiaohongshu and Instagram, I am well positioned to observe and reflect on the platform. The platform itself has two major sectors. One allows users to share reviews of products, such as but not limited to cosmetics, beauty products, luxury purchases, restaurant taste-test, and product reviews. This includes personal experiences and encounters from various perspectives. The second sector of Xiaohongshu addresses the commercial segments of an embedded e-commerce financial-driven industry for users to shop on the platform directly. These two tiers connect via tags labeled in posts or direct searches that take consumers to the landing page of businesses. Xiaohongshu is one of the most vibrant online social consumption forums, targeting, as mentioned, primarily young, urban, female Chinese users. The platform also aims to

expand internationally to include Western business clients and public consumers. My interest in Xiaohongshu is first describing how the platform participates and encourages the conspicuous sharing and consumption phenomena, outlined in the research literature as inherent to social media, with a particular address to young female users. And second, in contextualizing Xiaohongshu within problematics related to user-generated content and big data algorithms. I will later provide an analytical discussion between Xiaohongshu and Instagram as a representative of Western social networking sites on their similarities and differences in functionality, platform interface, and user experience.

Research question

The central question for me is how social media advertising – fostered through algorithmic recommendation systems, user-generated content, and micro-targeting – is similar or different from traditional advertising. Is conspicuous consumption a result of the platform's technological (algorithmic) features, or is it due to marketing strategies that cannot be explained technologically? What might be the impacts (positive or negative) on individual users, and how will the culture phenomena's significance apply to social-economic class disparity?

Research engine as a significant software system development in the World Wide Web has provided benefits and convenience to get information rather than referencing library books or consulting family friends on certain things. People would "google it," as the word becomes a registered verb in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006 (Schwartz, 2018). According to Carter (2016), the future of search engines undoubtedly goes on social media networks. Indeed, Xiaohongshu has been regarded as the new search engine

in practice by many Chinese clients, and just like the word, Google, Xiaohongshu is verbalized to use in a sentence, "我去小红书一下," literally translating to, I am going to look it up on Xiaohongshu, indicating, I will do my research. Using social media as a search engine is another way of confirming and relying on peer review. If more people have a positive review of products and extensive discussions around one topic, they are socially approved for everyone. But what are the risks of this over-reliance on peer-reviewed products curated algorithmically? While it seems intuitive that people trust other consumers' opinions on a product, it is not apparent how specific reviews or user-generated content reaches us and how the messages there influence our online behavior or psychological well-being. Xiaohongshu's branding slogans are authenticity, positivity, and diversity. These slogans are found in hashtags and topics, which aim to generate genuine conversations among users alongside providing spaces for businesses to sell and advertise their products. There is space on the platform for people who post pictures of beautifying products or lifestyle products, which selectively represent their lives. The purpose of these images, which are often retouched through editing filters, is to draw attention and to generate influencer types of celebrities. Diversity is the third essential component to the business operation strategy of Xiaohongshu. The platform aims to establish a welcoming online community where people from all professions can participate and feel accepted. I am keen to examine if the processes of selling products, generating influencers, and creating a discursive community of difference are accounted for in the documents that present the advertising/branding strategy of the Xiaohongshu platform. Finally, I would like to reflect on the role of images on image-centered media in

inspiring conspicuous consumption. Is conspicuous consumption a trend in China, and what might be the socio-cultural consequences of mixing conspicuous consumption and influencer-led discourse for the Chinese online public sphere?

My tentative hypothesis with regards to these research questions is that the abrupt emergence of social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu are influential in promoting consumption behaviors that are non-essential for people's survival, but which are, nonetheless, significant in terms of social and cultural capital through which young generations measure success in China. This study holds a conflicting yet complimenting perspective drawing upon media effects theories in which social media platforms empower mass audiences to express themselves. On the one hand, for populations such as young adult female users, and people identifying as a woman, who has had less access to public self-expression previously, Xiaohongshu provides a female-oriented discussion that is purposeful and inclusive. On the other hand, evidence from the literature, the public testimonies, and the auto-ethnography discussed here suggests that the environment of extreme self-expression leads to adverse effects, such as lack of independent thinking, decision-making, and loss of individuality. Moreover, Xiaohongshu is no stranger to issues that are usually discussed with regards to popular social media platforms in the West: false information abounds, individual privacy is violated, peer and communal pressure on young users are difficult to account for or regulate, and finally, the platform (due to it being directly related to practices of consumption) also deepens the gap between privileged and the less privileged groups in the country.

Review of Literature

Rational and motivation for social media engagement

The internal drive and motivation for engaging with social media platforms vary. Yet, in general, the rationales were narrowed to staying updated with existing social connections, exploring new relationships, seeking information, socializing, sharing insights, and time-killing (Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2009). Lin and Lu (2011) add entertainment to the mix. Hajarian (2015) believes that while most people engage with social media platforms in their leisure time, some use them for educational purposes. Career opportunities alongside the simple motive of meeting new people online emerge as another major social media platform usage component. However, it has been acknowledged by Hajarian (2015) that using social media to promote career opportunities is not as popular as the platform's social determination (P. 181), which means that more people would prefer to use social media as a light social entertainment technology that connects them with family and friends. Social media attention to the different needs of prospective users, such as social and emotional connection, professional and personal relationship maintenance.

All generations have gradually adopted social media platforms as a daily routine. They are no longer perceived as modern, young-people technology that the older generation tends to avoid. Pew Research Center, Auxier, and Anderson (2021) confirm this conclusion, 73% of the population ranging from 50 to 64 years of age use social media daily. It has been estimated that 80% of people across all generations, including Generation Zers, Generation Xers, baby boomers, and the millennials, use social media

platforms at least once a day (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Cox (2019) finds that image posting is the most popular content sharing on social media platforms among all age groups. Xiaohongshu is also an image-centered sharing platform, emphasizing the visual experience with spaces for captions. This makes the Chinese platform comparable to other photography-centric platforms.

Both Generation Zers and the millennials are heavy social media users. Yet, there are notable differences between the generations in the ways they use social media. Generation Zers are more inclined to spend time on specific platforms. Millennials, by contrast, prefer to divide their usage time on a broader range of platforms. Hence, as a result, they have higher expertise in managing and jumping in between various social media platforms. In 2021, it has been reported that social media multitasking has been the norm in the current cultural sphere. People masterfully navigate several social media platforms at the same time. Users have predominantly expressed this practice under 30 years old. Millennials and Generation Zs use Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat while watching YouTube videos (Auxier and Anderson, 2021). Evidently, age differences are proven not to influence too much social media literacy. However, other user demographics come into play, such as education, household income, and social identity. Hruska and Maresova's (2020) research shows a positive correlation between education and household income with the time spent on social media. Users from a higher educational background engage with social media platforms to acquire information; in a likely manner, people holding more significant household income tend to have more extensive use of social media because they are more likely to own free time to spend

leisurely on social media or they could also spend the time on social media for work purposes.

There has been much research conducted on the usage of social networking sites of adolescents and University students. The teenage and young adulthood years are transitional times when individuals explore themselves and the world. The contribution and facilitation of social media in the self-discovering process of this age group has controversial assessments. Less research has been done to examine users from diverse backgrounds in need of social media for other means, for example, international students, groups of young people living in a foreign country for academic experiences, with social connections in at least two countries benefit from the real-time feature and immediacy of social media to maintain a solid emotional companion, this role of social media facilitates a smooth transition (Seo, Harn, Ebrahim, and Aldana, 2016).

Social media and gender

Social media usage is a gendered experience. In an existing survey, Lin and Lu (2011) have identified gender differences regarding the reasons that make people engage on social networking websites. However, the study does not provide details or a qualitative discussion of gendered practices of social media usage. Webb and Temple (2015), capitalizing on Butler's gender performance theory, clearly distinguished between biological sex and gender, taking gender as a performative and deliberative act. The study investigates how men and women perform differently online; their purpose is to understand if online social behaviors perpetuate traditional gender expectations or promote equality among gender roles. According to Abraham, Mörn, and Vollman

(2010), 76% of women use social media platforms, while 70% of men adopt the platform in the United States. Pew Research Centre (2021) concludes that in February, the percentage of female social media users outnumber male users at 78% to 66%. Similarly, women spend more time on social networking sites (Junco, Merson, & Salter as cited in Webb and Temple, 2015). They show more enthusiasm in the online social community. However, female users' participation level in China is less weak than in the U.S. social media sphere, as demonstrated by the 49% to 51% of female and male Internet users (Thomala, 2021). This notion is to be improved with higher social media penetration because feminists see the increased participation of women in the online community as a positive indicator. Social media platforms are venues for women to explore their social identity, challenge and alter the gender stereotypes and social definition that has on women through posts, meet new people, exchange information, and build social capital via the platform (Webb and Temple, 2015). Social media are desired to be a powerful table-turning technological platform for changes and empowerment.

These research discoveries are relevant to the assessment of Xiaohongshu, which targets urban, young Chinese female populations. Xiaohongshu aims to establish a female-focused community by bringing like-minded people who love shopping, beauty products, traveling, and luxury. Through user-generated sharing activities, they join the female force to explore, discover, and exchange experiences about products, brands, and shopping outside of the local market. Notably, conversations revolve around goods from foreign countries. The platform connects these women with many companies that sell products of interest to their consumption habits as an intermediary. Young Chinese

females living in urbanized areas of China are the audience target of Xiaohongshu and the most vibrant social demographic group of the platform at present.

Social media marketing and consumers engagement

Social media have become a prominent advertising venue and an important place for product promotion. The easiness with which demographics are tracked and profiled on social media is one of the main reasons for this development. Algorithmic tracking helps businesses find audiences with precision and thus ensures their advantage over competitors. Social media marketing (SMM) is a marketing tool adopted by many organizations to raise their presence and reputation. In contrast to traditional communicative models, social media platforms facilitate multi-channel communication, providing easy access for ordinary users to review, share, discuss among themselves, and support the direct connection to business organizations (Vinerean et al., 2013; Fejzagic, 2021). Brands, business organizations, and platforms rely on posts created by individual users, among other strategies, to advertise products. The more people talk about a product, the greater the impact it has on audiences and profits.

Crucial players in digital marketing are social media influencers, defined by Młodkowska (2019) as social media creators with loyal audiences. YouTube and Instagram are prominent places for meeting and tuning in with influencers. The main difference between the platforms is that one allows synchronous visual video (YouTube) while textually levied with corresponding pictures (Instagram). Influencers come in diverse expertise, ranging from beauty, life, high-tech, food, and more. On YouTube, videos are organized in different categories: hauls, taste-test, get (un)ready with me, etc.,

curated to feature extensively products that aim to attract customers. On Instagram, influencers collaborate with certain brands by promoting to the followers with pictures and stories.

Several behavioral-psychological models help our understanding of consumers' relationship with influencers. Sokoloba and Kefi (2019) propose that users deem an influencer credible when they feel proximity with them. Users form a para-social relationship, similar to the one audience feels with celebrities. A false one-sided intimacy guides consumers to search for a continuously updated connection to the influencers. The audience identifies with the influencer's personality and persona. This projection, which happens in the realm of the intimate, psychologically motivates consumers to purchase the products that the influencers recommend (or to visit the shops, restaurants, and sites featured in the influencers' portfolio). Online bloggers and influencers act as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). Social-cultural factors in China contribute to the expansion of the user-recommended economy. For example, the fast-growing e-commerce shopping scheme, Taobao, does allow potential shoppers to see the products in person. Therefore, people have developed a habit of relying on online reviews, comment sections to choose and select products.

A study conducted by McKinsey & Company concludes that online reviews and opinionated peer recommendations are a powerful influence on consumer decision-making across all generations in China. This research primarily focuses on Generation Z and the millennial community in China, discovering that these demographics are heavily influenced by Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) (Zhou, Poh, Zhang, and Zipser, 2020).

Positive reviews on social media platforms, such as messages from favorite YouTube and Instagram influencers, are essential to their purchasing decisions (Młodkowska, 2019). The marketing strategy of word-of-mouth is another way of framing this occurrence. Social media platforms form an organic social community where users feel comfortable voice an opinion, share tastes, or welcome advice on recommended products. Since influencing engages heavily in these behaviors “from below,” they also gradually lead to a trust relationship. Hence, people tend to trust peer consumers more than a commercial message officially presented by companies (Nielsen as cited in Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Xiaohongshu is a platform, which efficiently integrates word-of-mouth and features that include sharing, reviewing, influencer promotion, and e-commerce. Since all these features exist together in one place, Xiaohongshu enjoys a competitive edge over other platforms (Pemarathna, 2019, P. 291).

Engaging SNS and impact on consumer psychology

Pemarathna's (2019) research confirms that Xiaohongshu is influential in users' purchasing decisions (P.291). We could speculate that social networking sites engage impact consumer psychology as they quietly shape in time the preferences and opinions circulating online towards certain products. Users' perceptions and decision-making processes are externally influenced. Conspicuous consumption refers to the purchase behavior in displaying one's wealth for a specific purpose (Page, 1992). Studying the role of conspicuous consumption is essential because it has become a significant rising phenomenon among the public, influenced by social media's ubiquitous use in today's consumer culture climate. The term is not new. It dates to pre-industrial societies where

the behavior of conspicuous consumption acted to satisfy survival competition. However, as Bronner & de Hoog (2018) proposed, the emphasis on conspicuous consumption has shifted from the ostentatious display of wealth to demonstrations of more immaterial and symbolic utilization. The study was conducted on the decision-making of vacation destinations and their association with conspicuous consumption to show status, wealth, and social identity. It is a natural part of identity-formation and persona building to show people within our social circle (or our social media followers) that we have visited unique places or have gone through unique experiences. Conspicuous consumption within the context of China has its specificities due to extreme income inequalities (Memushi, 2013). Another study investigated the difference between status consumption and conspicuous consumption via a survey of individuals in the age cohort of 18 to 25 has demonstrated differences between the two types of behavior. Interestingly, interpersonal relationship building is a substantial factor in their actions towards social media engagement and media consumption (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Conspicuous consumption does not happen only to young people. Shukla's (2008) study illustrates that conspicuous consumption is typical among middle-aged consumers within the age cohort of 40 to 60. The findings show little correlation of media effects but more influence with psychological and brand antecedents and habits forming behavior.

It is equally important to bring up the subtle distinction among different personalities under the spectrum of media analysis. Hwang and Zhang (2018) proposed that the para-social interaction is most compelling to followers' purchase decisions who are high in empathy and low on self-esteem. Henceforth, a review of media effects on the

public's self-esteem is worth examining regarding changes in consumer behavior.

Individuals engage with social networking sites for many reasons. FOMO, the fear of missing out, can be a compelling motive that guides consumers. The "fear" in FOMO refers to the exclusion from one's social bubble. This is the anxious state of mind that urges people to spend a considerable amount of time online learning what others are up to, only for the sake of not being excluded from the conversation (Barrozo, 2020). FOMO can also be applied in social media platforms' digital marketing strategies. Since people do not wish to be left out, they are vulnerable to spending money on specific products or experiences. Advertising capitalizes on this fear. FOMO as an unhealthy state of mind can lead to negative mental well-being. The media angle is critical because media accelerates the natural desire of human beings to stay up-to-date and in touch with the current trend. When the cost of social media participation is too high, mental health problems come into play.

On Xiaohongshu, repetitive posts about particular products or events trigger one's inner desire and eagerness to participate or purchase things. However, physical barriers, schedule inability, and the costs of events or products may limit personal participation as some happenings are in different regions domestically or abroad. Also, other products are too expensive to be universally accessible. In short, Xiaohongshu deepens the manifestations of class distinctions in China, which are measurable through mobility, financial status, and brand affordability, among other things. The conversations and offerings on the platform trigger a type of consumption imagination that is exclusive to some users and potentially harmful to others.

Engaging SNS and associated impact on psychological well-being

It is essential to evaluate users' mental well-being considering selective presentation on social networking sites. Many existing studies have examined the relationship between media consumption and psychological well-being among the public, especially the younger generation. A mixed result was presented by various studies regarding the topic (Shin et al., 2017). However, it is essential to note that all the anticipated hypotheses of the positive and negative association have been confirmed on varying levels. As a negative psychological state experienced by many young adults, loneliness can be eliminated through emphasized connection with peers and family via more status posting (Deters & Mehl, 2013). Distancing from SNS engagement would increase loneliness (Vally & D'Souza, 2019).

Similarly, self-presentation and social media are coercively related to adolescents' self-esteem. Online popularity is measured on the number of "likes," especially in the pre-and early identity formation period (Meeus, Beullens, and Eggermont, 2019). The ability of people with public profiles on social media to win popularity and gain confidence can increase self-esteem. Meanwhile, Deters&Mehl (2013) have disputed this notion. Their research demonstrated that interactive extrinsic rewards, such as "like," are independent of psychological well-being. This notion resonates with the Uses and Gratification theory. The autonomy of utilization remains in the hands of users who attribute social media platforms as emotional outlets that interaction has limited influence.

A Harvard study proposed another perspective on social media's role in emotional well-being. Bekalu (2020) suggested that performing mundane social necessities on SNS positively affects the public while seeking emotional connection has adverse effects. As long as people are preoccupied with how others value/view them on social media platforms (Antheunis and Schouten as cited in Meeus, Beullens, and Eggermont, 2019), SNS becomes a place of peer comparison (Hunt, Marx, Lipson & Young, 2018). The search for popularity puts pressure on people to share updates as a mechanism for attracting attention. This cycle creates a dependent relationship towards SNS and increases the tendency to negatively impact one's self-esteem (Meeus, Beullens, and Eggermont, 2019). The relationship between individual agency and the social media structure/technology is ongoing, complex, and dependent. Most existing studies target social networking sites as personal and emotional sites that have little interference with commercial value. These findings are all relevant to the analysis of Xiaohongshu.

In today's media society, communication on social media platforms is essential to socialization and to the point where one wonders if they will replace personal interaction altogether. Everyone owns social media accounts; hence media surveillance is significant from multiple directions, including family and workforce. Many have expressed that intimate social media platform, such as Facebook and WeChat, are not ideal for personal expression as they are private accounts for close and immediate social circles. Instead, publicly available media platforms, such as Xiaohongshu, have become a choice to publish personal opinions, thoughts, feelings without parental supervision and free of judgment for younger adults and females, respectively. Due to the specificity of

conversations around consumerism, the sharing and interaction between users automatically become commercially valuable. Visual images and texts on Xiaohongshu are conglomerated with an e-commerce section where users can shop. Xiaohongshu presents a unique technological infrastructure where commerce and conversation intersect, allowing personal conversations and personal images to result in a high conversion rate. One's identity choices (beauty products, cosmetics, or other stuff) circulate as immediately available products that others could desire and possess within a few clicks. This is a space of constant peer influence where the personal experience is intertwined with marketing appeal strategies that impact individual behavior and psychology while operating as an impenetrable, invisible system of tastes, recommendations, and status updates. Personal agency and identity formation become thinkable within the firm commercial grip of a system that recognizes consumption as the only manifestation of individual authenticity.

Social media and mass surveillance

Critiques of social media have long been raised on the loss of privacy in the information society. Media platforms and websites implement “cookies” to collect data about users' activity on the internet and develop tracking mechanisms to monitor human behaviors (Brown, 2014; Gangadharan, 2019). In the current data culture, there is a vast traffic flow of information that is organized and monetized by large companies. Believers of reproductive data futurism endorse massive surveillance as a tool that helps understand and tend to the needs of society. In this utopian vision, more data collection leads to a better public life (Zeffiro, 2019). However, many still are not convinced that the benefits

of data collection outwit the potential risks (Auxier et al., 2019). Eight in ten U.S. adults feel little or no control over how government or company entities use personal information (Auxier et al., 2019). Data paradox (Kitchin as cited in Zeffiro, 2019) describes another sector of users who are enlightened of the potential harm of data collection while having internal and social dilemmas to cope with the significant trade-off between services provided by social media platforms personal data. Defenders of social media platforms and internet websites say that they provide privacy consent and terms of use for users whenever they use cookies to gather data. Yet only a small percentage of people say that they read the entire package. In contrast, 63% of surveyed participants say that they lack understanding of the documents experiencing a cognitive gap about data privacy laws and regulations provided (Auxier et al., 2019).

Surveillance within social media platforms comes in various forms, either discreetly implied or made opaque to the public, as in social media algorithms. Many reports from the public users confirm the fears that social media platforms are “listening” to their daily conversation based on the perfect deliveries of news feeds. Facebook has dismissed these accusations as a conspiracy theory (Gillbert, 2019). Social media algorithms perform technology-led calculations to find to match one’s feed with topics, products, or people of interest. The title of Stern’s (2021) article is alarming, “Social-Media Algorithms Rule How We See the World,” but it also seems truthful based on the extensive research that exists in the field. Stern (2021) suggests that social media create an infinite information loop where people encounter the same opinions and meet up with a similarly minded population in terms of demographics and social status. This state of information closure

reinforces individual ideas and thoughts towards a subject. It narrows world perspectives by encouraging people to experience and visualize only their personalized version of reality (Stern, 2021). As a marketing mechanism, algorithms micro-target people with features of a particular item repeatedly. The repetitiveness of the process influences people's mindset and thinking. Moreover, this is how algorithms reinforce users' perception of one product over time, which also becomes reflected in people's purchasing decisions. This is, in essence, the argumentative gist of several media theories that I discuss briefly below: the agenda-setting theory, uses, and gratification theory, and multi-stage interaction model. Then I assess the relevance of these theories to the hypothesis about Xiaohongshu proposed in the beginning. I conclude with auto-ethnographic remarks and assessments.

Theoretical framework

Agenda-setting theory

As illustrated from the literature review, media exposure can impact the crowd at the receiver end, altering the mindset and perception towards a specific topic. In the current media sphere, where algorithms are invasive to public privacy, it is hardly controllable for the public to determine the newsworthy information or assess the algorithm's selective choices. Hence, this discussion aspect is also grounded in the agenda-setting theory proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The mass media determine the salient issues for the public to think about, discuss and act upon. In the long run, the public's perception of the world is framed and constructed to encounter knowledge and agendas set by large media conglomerates.

Uses and Gratification theory

Investigating user's behavior and engagement through the lens of uses and gratification theory under the umbrella term of media effects gives more of a promising prospect. Uses and gratification theory looks at how people consume media as a dynamic behavior. It suggests that users utilize media to gratify their various needs. I find this theory helpful for understanding the role of social media today as it provides a grounded perspective in a new media landscape, which is complex and obsessed with conspicuous consumption. The theory links the behavior of individual consumers to the larger social environment. It allows for the individual agency without disregarding the systemic effects of media.

Multi-stage interaction model

Influencers' presence in the media architecture of today could be explained through the multi-stage interaction model. Key opinion leaders (KOLs), or influencers in the parlance of social media, use expertise, opinions, and tastes to direct commercial or intellectual capital towards larger publics. The KOLs constitute a substantial part of the current digital media advertising, where they are the ideal hotspot for idea dissemination to the outside public. Unlike KOLs in traditional media, the process of influencing is not directional. Social media influencers exist in a dynamic, conversational connection with their publics. User-generated content, essential to influencers, allows for media immediacy and reciprocal exchange of simultaneous communication. Granted that key opinion leaders (influencers) are located between the public and the companies, their credibility results from a double and continuous effort between these two parties.



All described theoretical frameworks provide in-depth insights that ground issues of media impacts on consumer ends. These frameworks were initially being developed to explain media in the print era. Yet, I find these models still relevant in the digital environment, where their implications could be refined and applied with greater sophistication. Several insights from these frameworks help with my analysis of the behavioral psychology that underpins social media consumption. Xiaohongshu is a platform that espouses diversity in terms of functionality, ways of engagement, and audience base. A review of the platform considering these central media theories might shed light on the cultivation of tastes, consumption behaviors, the stages of social interaction and influence models among users, and the rationale behind the algorithmic design.

Methodology

I analyze here Xiaohongshu, the Chinese social media platform and its influence and significance to the users' consumption behaviour in the local and global cultural context, as grounded by media effects theory. As part of my methodology, I include an auto-ethnographic description of my own experience with the platform on topics that are central to my thesis: conspicuous consumption, status, and algorithmic profiling. As a researcher, my positionality is important and it can provide analytical insights. I have grown up in a double cultural context of the East and the West, which allows me to assess

comparatively the Chinese and the Western context of social media use and consumption. I am an active user of the Xiaohongshu platform. I am also a primary target audience for Xiaohongshu being a young female metropolitan user. Yet as part of my analysis, I also assess publicly available data¹, including post, comments, and picture input by users as well as research literature reports done by relevant business reviewers. My work is a heuristic attempt at combining visual images, testimonial texts, and technological perspectives to examine the marketing and algorithmic strategy of the platform. My conviction is that this approach contributes to the expansion and complication of classical theoretical frameworks through nuances that only the multifaceted work on a specific case study can afford.

Findings and analysis

1.1 Introduction

As stated, the key objectives and aims of the study are to investigate the role of Xiaohongshu in shaping consumer behaviour and altering purchasing decision-making through the feature of user-generated content and algorithmic recommendation strategies. The research also looks at the prospective socio-cultural circumstances of the community of local Chinese users in the relationship with the intense gratification of Xiaohongshu. The study has developed a pre-assumptive hypothesis prior to the research that focuses on younger consumer culture cultivation, the importance of female-oriented online community, the uses and gratification of user-generated content and algorithmic

¹ I have been assured in an email exchange by the Ethics Board at McMaster University that I can analyze publicly available data without specific board clearance **on May 31st, 2021.**

recommendation features' impact on user's decision-making. I am particularly interested in the repetitiveness of information, active/passive feeds, the positive and negative impact on users, social empowerment, popularity, potential loss of originality, and finally the social phenomena of mass consumer culture in a macro-scale perspective.

1.2 Overview of Xiaohongshu platform topics

Diverse topics engaged by diverse target audiences and social circles are discussed on Xiaohongshu. Upon registration to the platform, a page containing a range of possible interest tags is provided for new-coming users to choose from. In the current Xiaohongshu market, topics vary among social groups, and many professional subjects have become the center of discussion, including automobiles, electronic devices, lifestyle, and education. Recent studies confirm that the most popular topics on Xiaohongshu are “cosmetics,” “fashion,” “travel and food,” “health and maternity” (GMA, 2021). I am going to insert my testimonies on conversations happening around “beauty products,” “personal experiences,” “food and beverages” to comment on the relevance of the uses and gratification theory as a descriptor of categories on Xiaohongshu that speaks to the theme of the research.

1.3 Marketing strategy on Xiaohongshu - KOL Marketing and KOC marketing

In China, Xiaohongshu is one of the top influential KOL marketing spaces because of the platform's interactive brand and e-commerce sector that allows direct purchases. KOL influencers are groups of people actively posting topics of their own expertise in the media sphere, including the main categories advertised on the platform: beauty, travel, fashion, food, vehicles, education, lifestyle, electronic products, and more

(Lui, 2020). This is a live example of multi-stage interaction model where information travels from the top to the mass, dominating the trendiness and the central conversation.

Individual KOLs are contacted and offered a price to collaborate during brand campaigns. Influencers are not paid the same rates; their ranking is linked to the size of their fan base and potential of audience reach. It is up to the KOLs to decide if they want to work with a specific company. Influencers could negotiate with the brand or advertising company on the specifics of their involvement: product recommendation, videos, regular social media posts, etc. Since Xiaohongshu is a visual-driven platform, most content is graphics or motion pictures, such as photographs, hard and soft advertising short videos, and live-streaming events. A growing trend is the involvement of an intermediary body, like agents for celebrities, that solicit and sign KOLs for specific campaigns. Independent KOLs have more freedom to address specific products or events, while contract KOLs get managed by an intermediary company and assigned advertising mandates. Usually, KOLs with a lesser fan base get managed easily. Self-employed KOLs are expected to provide authentic reviews since they have less pressure from the top. Self-employed KOLs usually have more influence over their subscribers. Some celebrities from the television and movie industry are also involved in the KOL marketing on Xiaohongshu. They have a natural fanbase from other sectors and are naturally desired faces for advertising campaigns.

On Xiaohongshu, numerous KOLs dominate each field of discussion, with Jiaqi Li being on the top one, as she has a considerable number of followers. Jiaqi Li is the most popular beauty KOLs in the current media sphere. She specializes in short videos and live

streaming, primarily advertising beauty products, such as lipsticks and other cosmetics and skincare items. At the time of writing, the 6.18 shopping season within the Chinese local e-commerce community matches the Half-year shopping season in Western countries. All brands have developed product campaigns and sales campaigns in competition to attract consumers and boost sales. Women are often targeted by advertisers more since they are irrational spenders. This is reflected in statistics showing that live stream campaigns and social media promotional feeds target women exclusively, via the choice of words, like “姐妹们” (fellow sisters). We can see how language is employed to attract consumers: phrases such as “the best in the world,” “in a lifetime,” “quality selling,” “before you die,” “absolute favorite,” etc. These slogans incite consumption that influences the entire community to be irrational and participate through consumption. KOL marketing could be compared to past television shopping channels, which feature opinion leaders to shape minds, as described in the two-step flow of media theory. Today all sorts of information are designed and curated to target individuals from all directions. As described in the multi-stage interaction model, data flows from organizations, KOLs/KOCs, and mass audiences interactively. This means that audiences’ feedback can impact messages disseminated from organizations and upper-level message originators. Hence, the mass publics are not mere information receivers who are passive and indeterminate of what to know, think, and react to. User-generated content is equally important to the messages designed by companies, and it, in fact, dominates the public conversation.

What differentiates Xiaohongshu from other major Chinese social media platforms is the entrance of KOC, Key Opinion Customers who are everyday users who do not have a vast audience base, and people who do not live off as a professional social media influencer. In China, KOL and KOC marketing is essential because new media influencers are considered more trustworthy than official advertising by larger organizations. According to Daxue Consulting (2020), KOL and KOC marketing generates more influential positive word of mouth in China than in Western society. As a Chinese consumer, I can testify that the Chinese public is more attentive to authenticity outside the state or company messaging. KOC marketing on Xiaohongshu is on par with KOL marketing, even with a tendency to achieve more substantial influence, despite their microscope audience reach. When average consumers share product reviews, testimonies, and personal encounters, they are deemed authentic, reliable, and trustworthy because of their ordinary and non-interested standpoint. KOCs, compared to KOLs, seem friendlier, approachable, and relatable, which affords prospective users to build a communicative relationship that is intimate and bonding.

1.4 Xiaohongshu and younger female-oriented consumer consumption culture

Xiaohongshu was founded in 2013 by Fang Qu and Wenchao Mao in Shanghai as a social media platform that specializes in the discussion of high-end beauty/fashion products reviews and shares experiences within the community. One of the earliest brand slogans of the company reads: “带你发现国外的好东西”, which means, "Take you (local Chinese users) to discover the good things abroad." The original aspiration of the platform is to establish niche shopping for consumers who have access to the

international markets and thus create a community of privileged users who have the means to buy foreign goods. The platform targets exclusively women interested in lifestyle topics and shopping. A close look at the platform's demographics reveals that more than 60% of users are from top-tier and second-tier cities in China (Liu, 2020). These are the privileged populations in China who are financially capable of consuming at a significantly higher rate compared to affordability standards in rural and smaller town areas. Statistics confirm this conclusion. In 2020, 85% of Xiaohongshu users are female (GMA, 2021), and 57% of them are living in top-tier cities in China (Pemarathna, 2019, P. 288), which includes, but is not limited to urban centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Wuhan and so on, with no order of sequence. Liang (2019) suggests that among the 300 million registered users and 100 million monthly active users (GMA, 2021), users under the age of 35 make up 85% of the entire population. This shows that most users on Xiaohongshu are from the Millennial and Generation Z population. To put it bluntly: Xiaohongshu is a place predominately for young, wealthy Chinese females from metropolitan areas of the country and Chinese citizens living abroad who can afford to shop.

The demographic and the associated socio-cultural profile of Xiaohongshu makes it unique compared to other social media platforms in China. The target population of Xiaohongshu is middle to upper-middle-class young Chinese people. These are well-educated, demographics who have well-paying jobs, some have overseas experience, having previously studied or worked in Western countries. These people are considered cosmopolitans and are socially expected to develop global visions and tastes. Their desire

for high-quality, expensive products (Pemarathna, 2019, P. 292) is no less a result of the socio-cultural pressures that these young people should introduce in China a tasteful lifestyle that combines the benefits of Asia and the West. As a member of this community, I believe most of the Chinese youth within it live with a Western consumerist mindset. Generation Z is a significant spender on Xiaohongshu. This is a paradox since some Generation Z-ers are still in school, or they are recent graduates who lack the experiences to be financially independent. Generation Z and the millennial generation are positioned in a unique situation in China. They were born in the era when China's economy was booming under the Chinese one-child policy. In the metropolitan-area households, the one-child policy determined the extreme attention children received while growing. Families would invest all their means to support their only child's development. The millennials and Generation Z today are the main target population on Xiaohongshu because they are the spoiled, wealthy benefactors of accumulated generational wealth in need of spending.

On Xiaohongshu, younger female users in their senior year of high school or university share life stories through Plogs and Vlogs, as in Picture and Video blogs. These are picture and video blogs that document the whereabouts of the females: what they wear (or eat) in a week; others are haul videos on clothing, make-up products, snacks, and more. They talk about what they have purchased in what they have participated in or spent time on. The purpose is to inspire, exchange ideas, and resonate with prospective audiences.

I want to discuss two examples of KOL and KOC Influencers on Xiaohongshu: IBabee - Iris and Afei MeiMei. They are young female adults similar in age. IBabee - Iris (APPENDIX 1), proficient as a KOL influencer, is one of the most well-known young adults on Xiaohongshu. She was born in 1999 and had more than 360.1K followers. Iris started off her influencer career as a YouTube vlogger. Her content in the past consists of documenting her life living abroad as a high school teenager in the United States. She used to share her clothing hauls and chit-chat videos with friends and families. As she got more attention and increased her fan base, she dropped out of school, returned to China, and became a professional KOL influencer based in Shanghai. Iris has collaborated with many luxury and fashion brands, including Nike, Yves Saint Laurent, GUERLAIN, Gentle Monster, and more, through photograph shoots, participating in PR events, and miscellaneous social media posts. Publicly, she gets unified positive responses for her videos. Supporters of Iris believe that she has found her passion, and she has successfully managed to establish a career that makes her happy at such a young age. Negative commentators approach Iris's career with a conservative view saying that she should receive proper education before entering the industry. The other young girl is called Afei MM (APPENDIX 1), with 56.9K followers. She is 17 years old living in Sydney, Australia. Afei, as a KOC is specialized in fashion, where her content is mostly clothing hauls and unboxing videos featuring luxury brands including Hermes, Prada, Chanel, Dior, etc. Being a KOC means she is not collaborating with any brands, and they are not paid content but genuine sharing. Choosing these two young adults as a Xiaohongshu KOL and KOC representative shows a common ground for promoting

consumption behaviors and materialistic desires. Such a large fan base demonstrates the tendency of purchasing behaviors shifting to young age.

1.5 Xiaohongshu and Inclusive community

Due to the nature of Xiaohongshu, which primarily targets female participation, encouraging sharing and reviews of products among female users, the platform has female-oriented discussions such as beauty products, fashion styles, hair color, and food predominately. Xiaohongshu, in this sense, operates as an inspiring lifestyle platform. It stands out among all popular social media platforms in China, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin (Chinese Tik Tok), because it establishes an inclusive environment and close-tied female-dominated online community. Importantly, Xiaohongshu empowers women by providing a safe environment. According to traditional Chinese values, women are not expected to voice, share opinions, and discuss feminine topics. On Xiaohongshu, they can do all of this without fearing getting attacked and judged by the outside public. Publicly available comments on Xiaohongshu demonstrate positive, tolerant attitudes, supportive of peers' sharing and content creation.

Weight loss is a universal topic regardless of race, religion, color, sex, and national origin. When searching on Xiaohongshu by typing in “减肥,” the Chinese character for weight loss, various types of content show up on the screen. Diet recipes, including both Western and Asian cooking styles, appear at the top of the search. Grounded by uses and gratifications theory, people are voluntarily discussing the topic, asking about a detailed explanation of the steps or where to get the ingredients and sauces to marinate the meat in an active way. At the same time, others compliment the way of cooking, the recipe, and

the photography. The second type of sharing would be daily workout check-in or weekly schedule, where users share their visits to the gym, yoga studio, swimming lessons, etc. This practice encourages them to adhere to their goals while prospective peer audiences supervise them, keeping them lazy. In addition, the atmosphere of the workout schedule would also encourage others to join them, which refers to the quote of Helena Rubinstein, “There are no ugly women, only lazy ones” (Regensdorf, 2014). The third type is sharing personal encounters with weight loss. This kind of post focuses on the storytelling of personal experiences on losing weight with contrasting pictures, which combine the first two aspects of the exercise they recommend and the food recipes they follow. People would also discuss advice they find helpful. This type of content has a motivational and emotional appeal and aims to inspire people to do whatever is necessary to have the bodies they desire: work out more, eat healthily, or just enjoy sports. In this way, people form an inclusive and cohesive online community that inspires, motivates, and exchanges information. Content within this topic would advertise two prominent concepts. One is that extreme and fast weight loss is not healthy; workout and body-fit are for enjoying one’s own body, not pleasing others. This fits well with Xiaohongshu’s aspiration to be a female-oriented and empowerment platform that promotes a better lifestyle regarding food, clothing, living, expenditure, and travel.

Xiaohongshu published a community guideline (SEE APPENDIX 2) on April 12th, 2021, that advocates best practice users’ behaviors when using the platform, reflecting the company’s values to establish a welcoming, inclusive, tolerant community. Shown on the first page, the central theme of the guideline is “真诚分享，友好互动”. This means

authentic sharing and friendly interaction in English, which establishes the expectations for user exchanges on the platform. The ultimate goal is to establish a community atmosphere and a collective experience where each user shares responsibilities for obeying relevant laws and regulations while exhibiting social consciousness.

Xiaohongshu proposed this guideline as a contract that binds all community participants to share sincerely with a warm heart that is neutral and objective.

The community guidelines of Xiaohongshu pay attention to sharing and interaction. People who share are content creators who are expected to post truthful experiences and reviews. The current community guideline is the most up-to-date policy of the platform, which replaced the “community norms” published in February 2020. “Guidelines” are different from “norms” because they are softer than rigid rules. Guidelines lead the community towards shared behavior that appreciates the inherent values of the platform.

As with similar policy documents that determine consumer behavior on Western social media platforms, Xiaohongshu is conscious of copyright protection and plagiarism elimination. It rules that people must reference other creators’ ideas and content, communications and provide appropriate credits to avoid plagiarism and unnecessary conflicts. This is a novel practice for Chinese society, as plagiarism awareness needs to be strengthened. Further, content creators must label paid advertising clearly if they collaborate with business organizations to acknowledge the information. In that way, Xiaohongshu replicates Instagram, which implements a clear label of paid advertising on individual posts. Xiaohongshu also advises people to avoid maliciously showing off or demonstrating wealth. If one owns relatively more fortune, it is recommended that they

should be mindful of others because this might result negatively on public's psychological well-being. Make-up products, clothing outfits, food reviews should not overuse filters for beautification purposes, as they may provide misleading information to the consumer.

The policy on interaction advises all platform users to withhold personal values when judging peers' perspectives and standpoints because as the platform grows, users come from diverse backgrounds in terms of education, social status, and region. In a feminist way, the platform instructs people not to criticize appearances, body shape, and age, which are considered irrelevant discussion elements. Women are usually the victims of criticism, which can significantly lead to anxiety and lack of self-esteem in younger female adults. Meanwhile, Xiaohongshu encourages the public to comment to appreciate people's appearances and body figures if they find them admirable. This behavior is visible from the example of comments review above. Generally, the community guidelines emphasize respectfulness and empathy. These values are essential for putting oneself in other people's shoes and developing mutual tolerance that guarantees open-minded environments for all users.

1.6 User-generated content, algorithmic recommendation, programmatic ads recommendation of Xiaohongshu

Today, users have become prosumers, who both produce and consume content online, especially on social networking sites, largely owe to user-generated content, also known as UGC, as critical characteristics of Web 2.0. UGC, a foundation of citizen media, marks a significant shift in the media industry. It empowers users to publish, share

and discuss topics, rather than only consuming what has been created and disseminated from larger media organizations. Xiaohongshu, like any other popular social networking site, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook in the West, and Weibo and Douyin in China, relies on user-generated content to fill up space and participatory users to create and comment that keeps the conversation flowing. This aspect speaks to the uses and gratification theory of Communication. Participatory users adopt Xiaohongshu as a media outlet to express personal opinions, experiences, and encounters, and users can also choose to review others' posts their preference. Users, in this sense, are active decision-makers of what tailors to their interests. When Xiaohongshu came into the market, it was primarily image-based.

The user interface of Xiaohongshu consists of images other users have posted, usually four posts per page, depending on the mobile device's screen size. Each post can consist of a maximum of nine pictures, scroll from right to left, same with Instagram. However, unlike on Instagram, images posts on Xiaohongshu usually take in the form of 4:3 and 16:9 pictures. It allows different sizes of images in a singular position, whereas on Instagram, the standard form of images is square-shaped, and if there are multiple pictures in one post, all need to be in the same shape. When people scroll down the page at the top of the screen, both platforms refresh the content. For example, Instagram would show the latest content posted by users one follows. This is also a place where Xiaohongshu differentiates from Instagram. When Xiaohongshu users scroll down the page, they can see all publicly available content, not only the one posted by their

followed accounts. However, the content that users see is not random; it only *appears* random to the unconscious consumer.

Xiaohongshu has adopted programmatic recommendation systems that push relevant content to individual users based on a big data reading of their respective search history. For example, time spent on each type of subject automatically determines one's topics of interest. As discussed in section 1.2, users must choose several interest tags to start. Later, when people change their interest or areas of attention after a few new searches, it informs the system to push likely content. As a communication researcher and invested user of Xiaohongshu who identifies as the primary target audience of the platform, I think that I can make an educated assumption that algorithmic recommendation and keywords search are significant determinants in the informational picture that platform users receive. This technocratic infrastructure has to do with users' decision-making on products, and in a way, it incites with technological means conspicuous consumption.

A current example has with a recent event featuring two local brands in Shanghai speaks to the above observation. The brands did a crossover that attracted a lot of attention. MANNER and BEAST are brands in Shanghai (APPENDIX 3). BEAST is a local company specializing in artistic life that pays attention to human emotions. They have products design ranging from flower artwork, home furnishing accessories, and fragrance. BEAST's newest campaign collaborates with MANNER in producing a 'Panda Latte,' a limited edition for ten days, that could be purchased in all MANNER shops across Shanghai. The buyers receive a sample of the 'Panda-poo' perfume complimentary with each drink. On the first day of the campaign, I randomly saw the news on

MANNER's official website, saying that when the layers of 'Panda Latte' blend in, the color of the drink will turn into greyish green, the color of panda excrement. The following day, I walked past MANNER and tried to purchase a drink. I learned that 'Panda Latte' was sold out in every store in the city within one hour of opening. Posts about this drink were all over my Xiaohongshu feeds. Displays from the screenshots below, at least 2 out of 5 posts when I scroll down my feeds are about the drink throughout the day, and much of the content was about people getting up early and lining up for the drink (APPENDIX 4). Of course, I wanted to purchase the drink even more since everyone was talking about it. As the agenda-setting theory explains, the repetitiveness of information impacts individuals' mind-shaping and cognitive processes. I did go to the lineup for the drink the following day. As soon as I got the drink, I was happy posting it on my social media platform. I get more satisfied every time people like, comment, and show curiosity about my post, even though the drink tastes awful as expected. However, taste does not matter in this scenario of conspicuous consumption that aims solely at publicity and status. Just as my posts motivated some of my friends to purchase, even though I explicitly told them it is not worth the price, they still did the same I did: went to the lineup. I wonder if others go through a similar psychological process as I do. I socialize and observe users from the target audience of Xiaohongshu. Many of them pursue aesthetically appealing products as a type of transformation practice of conspicuous consumption.

A similar but far more concerning social phenomenon promoted by Xiaohongshu took place on Wukang Road, where the former concession streets of Shanghai housed

many historical, exotic, European-style buildings in the core area of Shanghai. Imagine a gigantic pink bowknot hanging on one of the most elegant balconies on the streets. The spot has promptly gone viral on Xiaohongshu that suddenly attracts flooded people to visit and took a picture off it, claiming it to be the most romantic scenery in Shanghai, a mixture of modern and vintage (APPENDIX 5) because Xiaohongshu keeps feeding similar posts to its target audience based on location, demographics, and more relevant information. Certain population of users are continuously seeing what are calculated by algorithmic systems for them to see, interpretative by agenda-setting theory. It was the May 1st Labour Week holiday of China, and the place has become one of the most visited scenic spots in China, let alone Shanghai. An old lady was residence in the building by herself, and she became terrified to open the window, going out because every time she does, she sees packed people standing down her balcony, numerous cameras are pointing at her taking pictures of the bowknot and name-calling her the "hidden princess." Later, when people find out through interviews at the old lady's door that she is not originally from Shanghai and speaks unauthentic Shanghai dialect, Xiaohongshu users comment on the old lady's background, accusing her of not being noble enough to live here. The old lady was soon taken away by her family to other places as this spot becomes too crowded and insecure for her to stay or live freely. This is a vivid example of how the trendy phenomenon on Xiaohongshu raises severe social concerns and panic that interferes with public life.

Xiaohongshu now functions as a search engine, too. Users would check topics that are already on Xiaohongshu before searching for information elsewhere. Xiaohongshu's

search function is mainly used before, during, and after decision-making on a purchase. Combining my experience and insights, I see Xiaohongshu as the intermediary of the media effects phenomenon conquered by materialism and consumerism that leads to unfavorable results of a consumption culture among younger upscale Chinese generations. At first, Xiaohongshu centers on the ultimate guideline for offshore shopping, where sharing and reviews are dominated by material consumption, such as "what are best products to buy in Canada" and "my holy grail recommendation on eyeliners." With the continuous growth of the platform, however, the target audience expands, too. Topics and subjects of discussion evolve to accommodate newcomers expanded to "restaurant for the anniversary celebration," "weekend getaway destination," "International flight travel tips," as well as "Job hunting experience sharing." There is a tendency for the topics to focus on the lived experience that touches each and every aspect of individual lives. This might be considered as contradicting my original hypothesis that sees Xiaohongshu as only a platform for conspicuous consumption and unhealthy consumer culture. Indeed, today the sheer variety of content on Xiaohongshu demonstrates the platform fulfills a positive and informative role in the life of users.

Over the last year, Xiaohongshu content-sharing labeled as infotainment appears more frequently via random uses, which shows a higher percentage of similar categorial posts. The content on education around personal growth, personal advancement, academic learning experience, and job application has increased and gradually shifting the central topic of pure consumption. The ubiquity has rendered Xiaohongshu involved

in every aspect of users' life. For many Chinese people, Xiaohongshu is a lifestyle Wikipedia and a search engine for information and planning.

Discussion

Xiaohongshu is a rich arena for observation of many social phenomena that reveal aspects of the technological and socio-cultural landscape of China. Critiques of Xiaohongshu focus on the class privilege of the people who use it. They claim that the content of Xiaohongshu does not reflect the actual image of China. Indeed, when Xiaohongshu was first introduced to the public, it featured high-end products and luxury lifestyle consumption.

Section 1.5 of the community guidelines mention today that displaying wealth and image filtering should be limited. Given the target demographics of the platform, it is natural for critical views to say that Xiaohongshu groups like-minded people together with a specific status in society that is not representative of the entire country. Moreover, the visual aspect of the platform, which gives spaces to perfectly edited and filtered images, allows for the curation of illusionary lifestyles. Critics are right to say that Xiaohongshu presents unrealistic images to young impressionable minds. This brings me to the idea of survivorship bias. Survivorship bias in application in the context of Xiaohongshu refers to the fact that when only the privileged population express themselves and raise opinions from their standpoint, it rings the truth to them and reflects how they view life. Yet, this is limited and exclusive of other people's reality. So, I would like to confirm what I hypothesized at the beginning of my thesis: Xiaohongshu

reflects the wealth gap of China. It sells products and lifestyles that are not accessible to everyone and are not essential for everyday survival. Also, Xiaohongshu, as a busy social media platform that is visible to everyone, ultimately leads to increased social pressure on poorer populations to catch up with the lifestyle of the wealthy.

Guidelines serve as a contract guiding users' practice on the platform. At the same time, it also symbolizes Xiaohongshu's acknowledgment of the problematic social phenomenon - Xiaohongshu, as a venue for wealth, showcases the complex techniques and anonymity of the social media society that lacks a reality check. Xiaohongshu seems conscious of this and addresses the downsides through attempts at regulating users' behavior. However, I am more aligned with the idea that this social phenomenon of displaying conspicuous consumption is irreversible with the rise of China's pan-entertainment industry. Xiaohongshu is the epitome of the pan-entertainment culture where there is a tendency for younger well-off generations to conquer the platform and dominate the discussion. As in other societies, less privileged people have less access to technologies and means that allows them fair competition. The class rigidity leads to a dead cycle.

Limitation

My study espouses a holistic, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic methodology to describe a leading Chinese social media platform and its socio-cultural impact. Speaking from my point of view as a communication researcher with a Chinese background living in the West, I use my rich experiences with the local Chinese social media platform to

further the theoretical insights on social media in general and Xiaohongshu in particular. I have personal, in-depth knowledge of local background histories that have to do with the development of this platform. I am a long-time user of Xiaohongshu, and I think that the auto-ethnographic critical approach helps make some theoretical observations more intimate and deeply personalized. Nevertheless, my intimate encounters with the platform may intervene in my ability to adopt a fully objective stance. I don't claim critical distance in the way others who have never experienced the forum or do not have Chinese background may claim. The research touches on sensitive topics in China such as class dependencies, privilege gap, consumption behavior, survivorship bias. I am aware of my privileges when discussing these topics. Ultimately, my purpose is to articulate them honestly and help, with my research, build a social media environment that is conscious of its limitations and inclusive of less fortunate people.

My initial methodological idea was to conduct a large-scale survey of Xiaohongshu's users. Due to the pandemic, which limited cross-national research and time constraints, I couldn't accomplish this. However, I hope that future studies of Xiaohongshu will use ethnographic methods, interviews, and surveys to provide a fuller and more accurate picture of the changing demographics of the platform and its impact in China and the diaspora. The knowledge that comes straight from the user base of Xiaohongshu can contribute different perspectives and thus complement the theoretical (media, psychology, and cultural studies) and auto-ethnographic research.

Xiaohongshu is a Chinese market-based social media platform, which operates in Chinese mandarin. I am a native speaker of Chinese, and my proficiency allows me to

report my analysis in English. Nevertheless, some meanings would get lost in translation due to varying sentence structure, famous phrases, and idioms. Also, the audience for the study is Canadian. This might present its own challenges, given that Canadians might not have previous knowledge of the local Chinese cultural context within which Xiaohongshu is best understood.

Conclusion

The Xiaohongshu platform is analyzed here as a specific Chinese media phenomenon that could be explained through existing media theories and could be taken as a case study that expands these theories. I proposed in the beginning that Xiaohongshu is one of the most popular social media platforms in China, with a strong influence in promoting a consumption-leading culture, especially among young female adult users. The primary targeting audience of Xiaohongshu is a big determinant of its success as a social media platform which turns the platform into a space where one can observe the Chinese social-cultural situations. In addition, Xiaohongshu is a feminist platform that empowers women who, in terms of having a voice and social power, are a minority in China. My research and analysis confirm the initial proposition. More and more KOLs and KOCs have shifted to influencers and users from the younger generations, such as Generation Z and the millennials. The Community Guideline published by the platform demonstrates that they contribute respectfulness and authenticity while building an inclusive community that promotes a particular lifestyle. Yet, as shown, Xiaohongshu also espouses a wealth gap and leads to an unhealthy consumer culture over-corrupted by

materialism enhanced by algorithmic recommendation and programmatic push systems.

It is hopeful to note, in conclusion, that subjects and topics on Xiaohongshu are becoming diversified over the years. Subjects such as education, helpful information, and experience sharing prove beneficial to fellow users in establishing a positive and aspiring community.

Importantly, I believe this topic of study opens more opportunities for investigation as Xiaohongshu creates a unique while emergent globalized social phenomenon within China with a tendency to migrate internationally into the Western society as the platform continuously grows. It raises questions if Xiaohongshu could be a precursor of Western-style consumption capitalism in China; or if it could signal the emergence of a post-national globalized class of young people whose tastes and consumption habits bind them in a post-racial, post-gender, post-language community that exists through the algorithmic and technological utopias of the luxurious lifestyle. This new media people live in contradistinction with a class of global, racialized, poor, sedentary populations for whom technology and conspicuous consumption are in equal measures metaphorical and elusive. A comparative analysis of Xiaohongshu with Instagram, Amazon, Reddit, and Pinterest can maybe answer some of these questions.

Bibliography

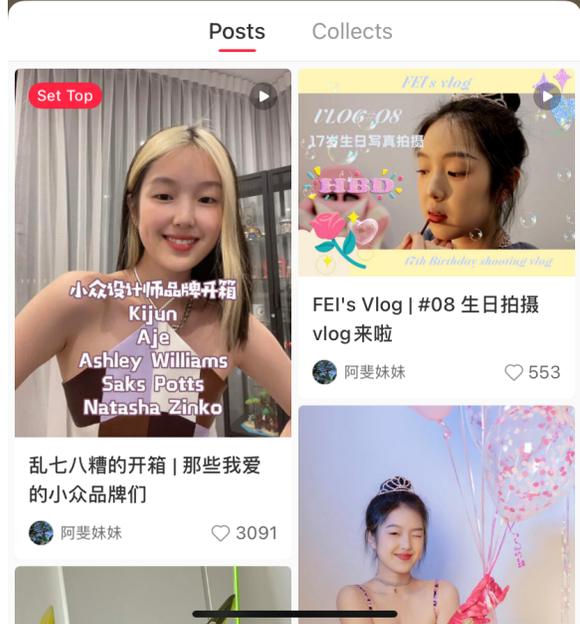
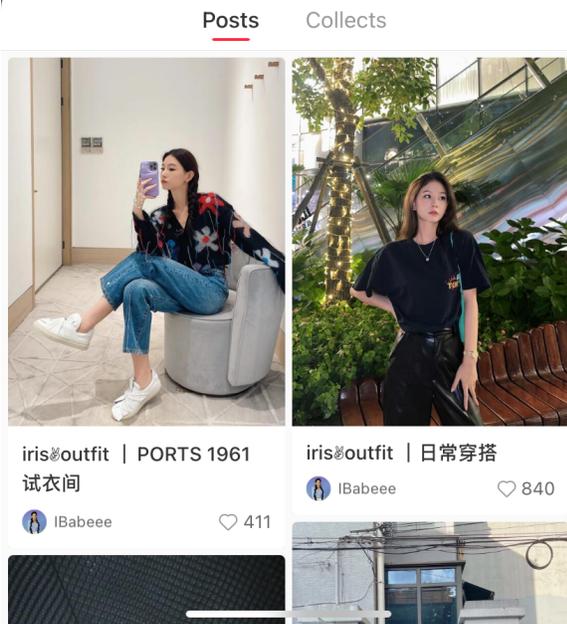
- Abraham, L., Mörn M., and Vollman A. (2010). Women on the Web. How Women Are Shaping the Internet. ComScore, Inc.
http://www.digitalads.org/general%20marketing/comScore_onlinewomen_092010.pdf
- Auxier, B., & Anderson, M. (2021, April 7). *Social media USE 2021: Demographics and statistics*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>
- Auxier, B., Rainie, L., Anderson, M., Perrin, A., Kumar, M., & Turner, E. (2019, November 15). *Americans and privacy: Concerned, confused and Feeling lack of control over their personal information*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/11/15/americans-and-privacy-concerned-confused-and-feeling-lack-of-control-over-their-personal-information/>.
- Barrozo, T. (2020, September 19). Scared to Stay In: The Psychology of FOMO-King University. Retrieved December 13, 2020, from <https://medium.com/the-psychology-of-everything/scared-to-stay-in-the-psychology-of-fomo-king-university-76f36a7dea67>
- Bekalu, M. (2020, January 6). Social media use can be positive for mental health and well-being. Retrieved December 13, 2020, from <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/social-media-positive-mental-health/>
- Brandtzaeg, P. & Heim, J. (2009). Why People Use Social Networking Sites. LNCS. 5621. 143-152. 10.1007/978-3-642-02774-1_16.
- Bronner, F., & de Hoog, R. (2018). Conspicuous consumption and the rising importance of experiential purchases. *International Journal of Market Research*, 60(1), 88–103.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470785317744667>
- Brown, I. (2014). Social media Surveillance. *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*, 1–7.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118767771.wbiedcs122>
- Carter, E. (2016, January 18). *Social media: The next best search engine*. Business 2 Community. <https://www.business2community.com/social-media/social-media-next-best-search-engine-01427662>.
- Cox, T. A. (2019, July 2). *How different generations use social media*. How Different Generations Use social media | March 2021. <https://themanifest.com/social-media/how-different-generations-use-social-media>.
- Daxue Consulting. (2020, November 6). *Xiaohongshu is turning a giant as a social media & an E-commerce platform*. Daxue Consulting Market Research China. <https://daxueconsulting.com/latest-facts-and-insights-about-xiaohongshu/>.
- Fejzagic, E. (2021). *The Impact of Social Media on Consumer Behavior*. LIGS University. <https://www.ligsuniversity.com/en/blogpost/the-impact-of-social-media-on-consumer-behavior>.

- Gangadharan, S. P. (2019, June 1). Technologies of Control and our Right of Refusal. Online: <https://www.odbproject.org/2019/06/01/technologies-of-control-and-our-right-of-refusal/>
- Gilbert, B. (2019, August 14). *There's a wildly popular conspiracy theory that Facebook listens to your private phone calls, and no matter what the tech giant says, people just aren't convinced it's not true.* Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-ads-listening-to-you-2019-5>.
- GMA. (2021, March 15). *Xiaohongshu-Little red book: The Definitive guide for ADVANCED Marketers.* Marketing China. <https://marketingtochina.com/xiaohongshu-little-red-book-the-definitive-guide-for-advanced-marketers/>.
- Hajarian M. (2015). WHY PEOPLE USE SOCIAL NETWORKS?. 4. 177-182. 10.6084/m9.figshare.13668479.
- Hruška, Jan & Maresova, Petra. (2020). Use of Social Media Platforms among Adults in the United States—Behavior on Social Media. *Societies*. 10. 27. 10.3390/soc10010027.
- Hunt, M. G., Marx, R., Lipson, C., & Young, J. (2018). No more FOMO: Limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 37(10), 751. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751>
- Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions, and persuasion knowledge. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 87, 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029>
- Liang, S. (2019, March 22). *Red, an Instagram-like social media platform with An Amazon-like Marketplace.* EqualOcean. <https://equalocean.com/analysis/201903221593>.
- Liu, B. (2021, March 25). *Xiaohongshu cultivates new consumer behavior in China.* Value China. <https://valuechina.net/2020/03/25/xiaohongshu-cultivates-new-consumer-behavior-in-china/>.
- Lui, N. (2020, July 24). *KOL marketing: The key to success on Chinese social media.* Dragon Social. <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/kol-marketing-success-china/#xiaohongshu>.
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187. Retrieved August 2, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>
- Meeus, A., Beullens, K., & Eggermont, S. (2019). Like me (please?): Connecting online self-presentation to pre- and early adolescents' self-esteem. *New Media & Society*, 21(11–12), 2386–2403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819847447>
- Memushi, A. (2013). Conspicuous Consumption of Luxury Goods: Literature Review of Theoretical and Empirical Evidences. *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research*. 4. 250-255.
- Młodkowska, B. (2019, December). Influencers on Instagram and YouTube and Their Impact on Consumer Behaviour. 2019. 4-13. 10.7172/2449-6634.jmcbem.2019.1.1.

- O'Cass, A. & McEwen, H. (2004). Exploring Consumer Status and Conspicuous Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 4. 25-39. 10.1002/cb.155.
- Page C. (1992) , "A History of Conspicuous Consumption", in *SV - Meaning, Measure, and Morality of Materialism*, eds. Floyd W. Rudmin and Marsha Richins, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 82-87.
- Pemarathna, R. (2019, June 24). *Impact of Xiaohongshu on its user based and society: A review*. ResearchGate.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333974009_Impact_of_Xiaohongshu_on_Its_User_Based_and_Society_A_Review.
- Pew Research Center. (2021, April 26). *Demographics of social media users and adoption in the United States*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/?menuItem=45b45364-d5e4-4f53-bf01-b77106560d4c>.
- Regensdorf, L. (2014, October 31). *"There are no UGLY women, only LAZY ONES": A new Beauty Exhibition explores the life and legacy of HELENA RUBINSTEIN*. Vogue. <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/helena-rubinstein-beauty-cosmetics-jewish-museum-exhibition>.
- Schwartz, B. (2018, November 15). *Google now a verb in the oxford english dictionary*. Search Engine Watch. <https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2006/06/29/google-now-a-verb-in-the-oxford-english-dictionary/>.
- Schwemmer, C. & Ziewiecki, S. (2018). Social Media Sellout: The Increasing Role of Product Promotion on YouTube. *Social Media + Society*. 4. 205630511878672. 10.1177/2056305118786720.
- Seo, H. & Harn, R. & Ebrahim, H. & Aldana, J. (2016). International students' social media use and social adjustment. *First Monday*. 21. 10.5210/fm.v21i11.6880.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309753912_International_students'_social_media_use_and_social_adjustment
- Shin, C., Kim, Y., Park, S., Yoon, S., Ko, Y. H., Kim, Y. K., Kim, S. H., Jeon, S. W., & Han, C. (2017). Prevalence and Associated Factors of Depression in General Population of Korea: Results from the Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2014. *Journal of Korean medical science*, 32(11), 1861–1869.
<https://doi.org/10.3346/jkms.2017.32.11.1861>
- Shukla, P. (2008). Conspicuous consumption among middle age consumers: psychological and brand antecedents. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 17(1), 25-36. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420810856495>
- Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2018, March 1). *Social media USE 2018: Demographics and statistics*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.
- Sokolova, K. & Kefi, H. (2019). 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. 10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011.
- Stern, J. (2021, January 17). *Social-Media algorithms rule how we see the WORLD. Good luck trying to stop them*. The Wall Street Journal.

- <https://www.wsj.com/articles/social-media-algorithms-rule-how-we-see-the-world-good-luck-trying-to-stop-them-11610884800>.
- Thomala, L. L. (2021, February 10). *China: Distribution of internet users by gender 2020*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265148/percentage-of-internet-users-in-china-by-gender/>.
- Vally, Z., & D'Souza, C.,G. (2019). Abstinence from social media use, subjective well-being, stress, and loneliness. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 55(4), 752-759. doi:[http:// dx.doi.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1111/ppc.12431](http://dx.doi.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1111/ppc.12431)
- Vinerean, S. & Iuliana, C. & Dumitrescu, L. & Tichindelean, Mihai. (2013). The Effects of Social Media Marketing on Online Consumer Behavior. *International Journal of Business and Management*. 8. 10.5539/ijbm.v8n14p66.
- Webb, L. & Temple, N. (2015). Social Media and Gender Issues. 10.4018/978-1-4666-8310-5.ch025.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297056278_Social_Media_and_Gender_Issues
- Zeffiro, A. (2019, May 16). Towards A Queer Futurity of Data: Published in Journal of Cultural Analytics. Retrieved November 29, 2020, from <https://culturalanalytics.org/article/11050-towards-a-queer-futurity-of-data>
- Zhou, J., Poh, F., Zhang, C., & Zipser, D. (2020, November 26). *China's gen Z are coming of Age: Here's what marketers need to know: Greater China*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/cn/our-insights/our-insights/chinas-gen-z-are-coming-of-age-heres-what-marketers-need-to-know#>.

APPENDIX 1



APPENDIX 2



The image shows the cover page of the Xiaohongshu Community Guidelines. It features a red background with white text. The title 'COMMUNITY GUIDELINES' is written in English, and '社区公约' is written in Chinese. The Xiaohongshu logo is in the top right. A date '2021年04月12日生效' is shown with an arrow. A grid of 8 columns and 2 rows is overlaid on the page. The first cell of the grid contains the number '01' and the characters '分 享'. Below this, there is a paragraph of text in Chinese.

COMMUNITY
GUIDELINES
社区公约

小红书

2021年04月12日生效 →

数以亿计的用户在小红书平台上分享自己的生活经验。这些分享真诚而友好，中立且客观，小红书一直珍视并引以为傲。而社区氛围的维护离不开社区和所有用户的共同努力，需要大家一起进一步营造和维护。为此，在法律法规和公序良俗的要求之外，小红书与用户约定一个共同遵守的社区行为规范，由大家共同遵守，依照公约行事，做到真诚分享、友好互动！

01
分 享

请尊重原创，并分享真实的内容

在小红书进行分享和交流时，请保证所使用的素材来自于自己的经验或创造。如果你需要借鉴，请确保你有权使用它们。同时，也请保证所有素材的真实性，这是沟通交流的基本前提。如果你需要转载，请获得对方同意，并注明出处。

APPENDIX 2 CONT'D

■ 如果你在分享和创作过程中受到商家提供的赞助或便利，请申明利益相关

用户会在社区里根据大家的分享进行消费决策，请尊重和保护他们的知晓权（请让他们在信息透明的情况下进行）。相关利益申明通常不会影响你的口碑，我们观察到主动告知的作者，只要分享的内容真诚和善意，就更容易受到粉丝的正反馈。同时，在你的日常分享中，也请尽量保证客观中立。

■ 请避免炫耀远超常人的消费能力

财富来之不易，对大部分人来说仍然是稀缺的。所以如果你拥有相对更多的财富，请在分享消费过程中，怀有同理之心，主动顾及他人感受，避免浪费，并尊重劳动者/服务者。小红书社区有大量分享消费过程和结果的内容，为大家提供参考和建议，所以“是否对别人有用”将是判定“炫富”行为的重要标准。虚构和编造远超普通人的消费能力也将成为平台治理的重点打击对象。

■ 请分享经过科学论证的内容

科学是引导我们认识世界和自己的一套强有力的方法，也极大改变了我们的日常生活。科学能够被实验重复，且能被证实证伪，使得它在总结规律、预测趋势上有较强的可依赖性。但在健康建议、商业宣传等领域仍然藏匿着伪科学的影子。如果你想分享这些领域的心得，请确保内容是科学的。

■ 请尽量避免过度修饰，尤其在美妆、穿搭、探店等为他人提供建议的领域

小红书社区之所以广受欢迎且长期繁荣，核心原因是社区里活跃着一群乐于为他人提供真诚建议和帮助的成员，他们持续不断地分享真实、多角度的内容。人人皆有爱美之心，你可以适度美化笔记内容，但请记住你分享的内容随时可能会被他人当作决策依据，因此修饰和美化的度，以不产生误导为衡量标准。

■ 请不要分享过度裸露或性暗示的内容

社区明确禁止发布裸露或性暗示内容。如果你的分享是用于教育、医疗目的，或者性别平等公共议题，请严格遵守伦理规范，最大可能避免暗示、挑逗或引起不良联想的内容。谈论性和身体相关的话题是否妥当，判断标准倒置，以受众觉得是否妥当为准，这需要分享者主动承担起责任。

■ 请不要冒充他人

小红书是一个活跃着大量普通用户的UGC社区。我们致力于鼓励普通用户参与分享，所以社区不会对特定姓名做保护，社区允许重名，但请不要冒充他人。

■ 请不要轻易利用你的影响力进行指控或发布煽动性的话语

如果你在小红书社区有一定粉丝量，说明你具备了一定公众影响力，请勿滥用这一影响力。如果你认为受到了社区其他成员针对自己的不公正对待和侵犯，请首先寻求社区投诉渠道的帮助，或者诉诸法律。请谨慎利用你的影响力进行回击和指控。

■ 请避免使用夸张、猎奇等手段吸引用户点击

请分享文题相符的内容。使用夸张、猎奇的标题和封面，是一种不真诚的分享行为，小红书社区也会对此进行适度调控。分享者不应抱有侥幸，请通过真诚分享持续积累粉丝。

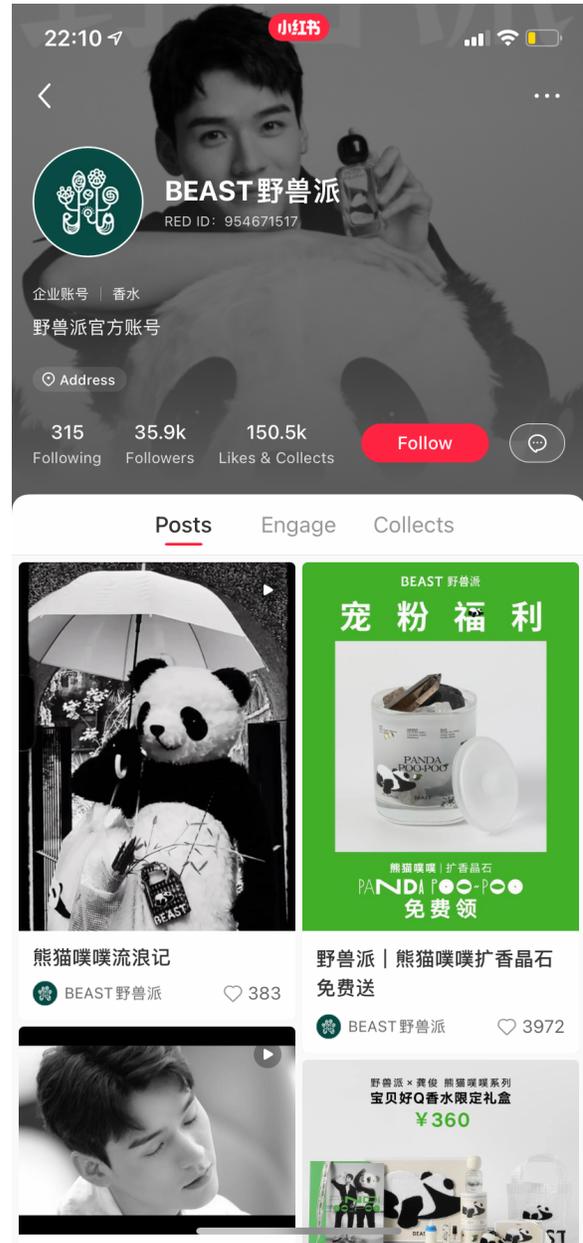
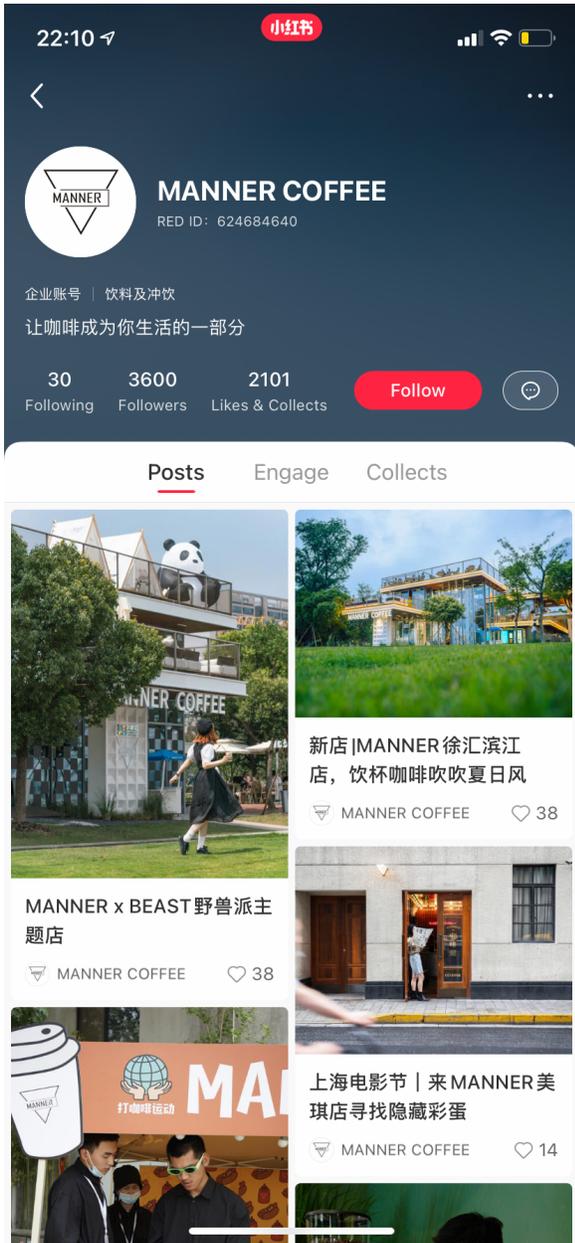
■ 请不要轻易给人医疗和投资建议

医疗和投资关系到用户的人身健康和财产安全，应由专业人士给予相应的建议和指导，没有相关资质的用户应该避免此类内容的分享。如果内容涉及到健康和泛投资话题，请在显著位置标明“不涉及医疗/投资建议”的字样。

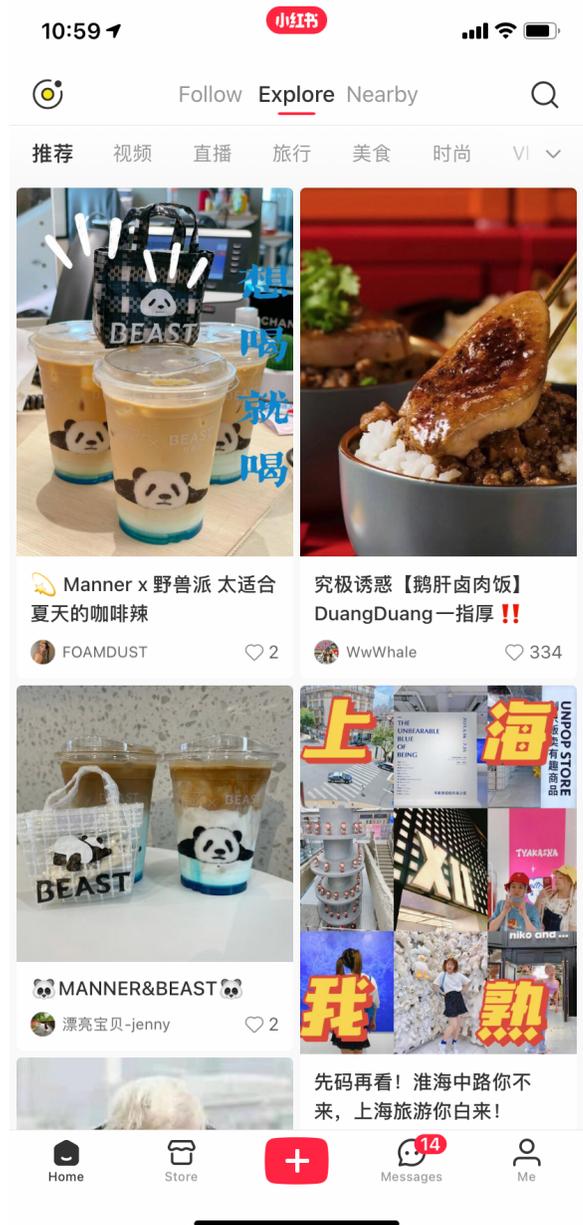
■ 请尊重他人

如果你的分享涉及他人，请坚持自愿原则，并尊重他人隐私、肖像、名誉等权利；
如果你的分享涉及逝者，请主动顾及当事人和家属的尊严和隐私；
如果你的分享涉及未成年人，请对他们的隐私和个人信息给予特殊关注和优先保护；作为父母，请不要分享儿童裸露照片和视频；
如果你的分享涉及弱势群体，请最大程度同理对方处境，维护对方尊严。

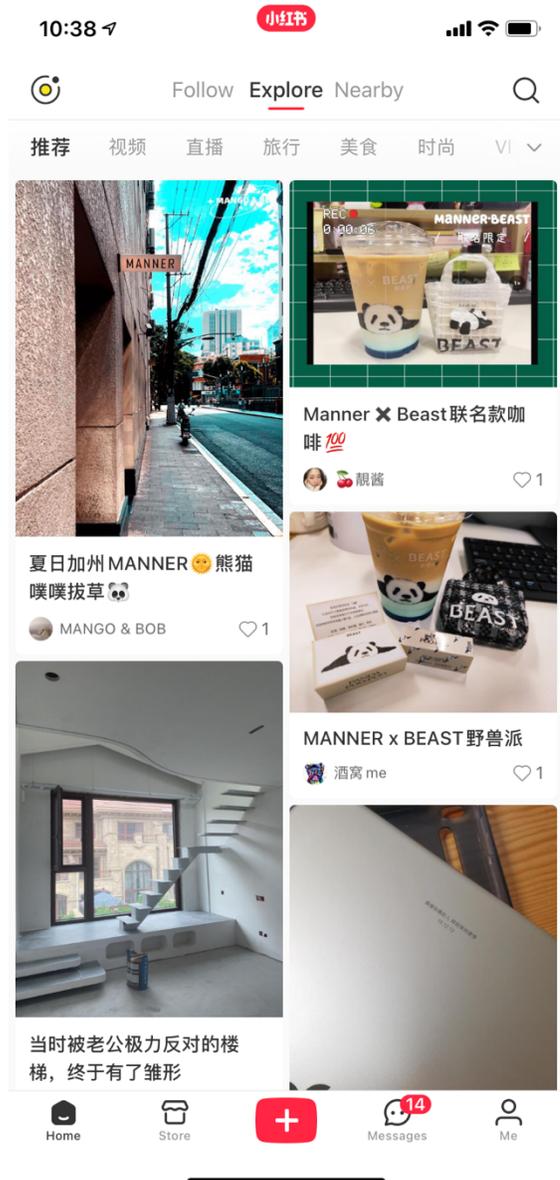
APPENDIX 3



APPENDIX 4



APPENDIX 4 CONT'D



APPENDIX 5

