Desire Guidance Mechanisms and Covert Advertising: A Case Study of Xiaohongshu

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Abstract: With the rapid development of the internet, social media has gradually evolved to offer many new features to meet user needs. As a popular social media platform, Xiaohongshu occupies an important position in the advertising field with its large group of young users and unique "experience sharing" culture. With the development of the platform, the definition of "advertising" and "experience sharing" is difficult to clear. Many hidden advertisements cover the essence of "advertising" by releasing flashy "experience talk", accompanied by copy and pictures and inducing words from the first perspective. It is found that the current academic research on individual marketing of the Xiaohongshu platform mainly focuses on the "profit model" and "development strategy". Through online field investigation, it is further found that, compared with the marketing mode dominated by the implicit advertisement of Key Opinion Leader (KOL) on traditional media platforms, the ordinary creators on the Xiaohongshu platform cover up the underlying desire guidance mechanism through elaborate speech techniques, thus forming a new implicit advertisement mode. This phenomenon reveals the blurring of the line between advertising and non-advertising content in platform content creation and highlights the increasingly important role that ordinary creators play in modern digital marketing.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the desired guidance mechanism of covert advertising in the we-media platform. The reason why this mechanism can successfully act on consumers is that ordinary creators use and transform the mechanism of consumerism. In a theoretical sense, this study complements the existing research gaps on covert advertising published by ordinary creators on social media platforms. In a practical sense, this paper is expected to help consumers improve their ability to identify advertisements and strengthen the supervision of Xiaohongshu platform.

The ultimate goal of the research is to reveal the mechanism of covert advertising on Xiaohongshu platform and provide a theoretical framework and practical guidance for understanding and coping with the impact of covert advertising in the broader social media environment. This paper comprehensively uses three research methods to promote the development of research comprehensively and concretely. Firstly, the literature analysis is adopted to discuss the mechanism of covert advertising, Xiaohongshu advertising, and consumerism from three dimensions,

aiming to deeply explain the operation mechanism of individual marketing on the Xiaohongshu platform. Secondly, using the case analysis method combined with the existing theoretical framework, the "desire guidance – resonance – consumption" model is constructed to further analyze the marketing path of the platform. Finally, this study conducted an in-depth observation of ordinary creators through online field investigation. It analyzed the transformation of their advertising launch form in the process of transferring from a Xiaohongshu platform to a private contact. The results show that this change represents the gradual transformation of covert advertising to explicit advertising.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Research on Covert Advertising

Relative to the concept of "explicit advertising", covert advertising mainly refers to the form of advertising that is hidden in the carrier and together with the carrier constitutes the information content

perceived by the audience and can unconsciously show the information of the product or brand to the audience (Fan et al., 2005). For a long time, there has been a phenomenon of narrowing the scope of research on covert advertising in China. In the definition of covert advertising, Zhao Shan interprets covert advertising as "embedding advertising" or "embedded advertising". In the interpretation of covert advertising, the types of implantations and placement are regarded as the same type (Zhao, 2007). Hong Qiong divided covert advertising into the category of film and television advertising and defined the role of covert advertising as the strategic integration of products or brands and their representative visual symbols and even service content into the content of movies, TV plays, or TV programs. Through the reproduction of scenes, viewers can leave a deep impression on products and brands, and then achieve the purpose of marketing (Hong and He, 2011). Zhao Suxin defines covert advertising from the perspective of embedded advertising, which can be embedded in any plot (Zhao, 2007). Based on the concept of "embedded", Zhang Huiji analyzes the implantation methods and advantages of covert advertising in movies more pertinently (Zhang, 2008). The relationship between covert advertising and media communication is analyzed by taking covert advertising, product placement, and soft advertising as a whole. In many studies, the implicit advertisement is generally referred to as implant advertisement.

This definition makes the scope of implicit advertisement broader, and it is difficult to investigate the "implicit" connotation of implicit advertisement.

In addition, there are three research focuses on the study of covert advertising: First, film and television series product placement is a hot field of research, because the earliest covert advertising is the product placement in film and television series, product placement is also the most common form of covert advertising, so the research on covert advertising is mainly focused on film and television series product placement. Second, examines covert advertising from the perspective of advertising laws and regulations. China's advertising law requires advertisements to be identifiable so that the audience can independently identify them as advertisements. However, the "implicit" nature of covert advertising infringes on consumers' right to know and misleads consumption decisions when they reduce their vigilance. And through the establishment of the characteristics of the covert advertising rules and advanced legal supervision system to regulate covert advertising behavior (Meng, 2007). Third, with the advent of the Internet era, the research focus has shifted from traditional covert advertising to online covert advertising. However, the research on online covert advertising is mostly from the perspective of advertising regulations and development status and is limited to online celebrity advertising. In social media, ordinary covert advertising in the form of Posts and comments has long been rampant. There is little research on this kind of covert advertising.

Foreign research on covert advertising in social media is relatively comprehensive. Some scholars have recognized the concealability of covert advertising and suggested that media platforms should take appropriate measures. For example, scholars like Tina Toma Z et al. define covert advertising as a communication method designed to inform potential buyers about products or services, aiming to persuade and motivate them to make a purchase. In their research results, they illustrate the deliberately false and deceptive characteristics of covert advertising through cases. In conclusion, it is pointed out that journalists and editors are the ones who protect the public from hidden advertisements and other manipulations and should be responsible for their actions (Tomažic et al., 2014). Some scholars also take the YouTube platform as an example to study "consumers' response to hidden advertisements on social media" and believe that hidden advertisements on social media are a kind of cheating behavior, that will damage the image of companies' brands, and media managers should be aware of the possible damage to the reputation of the platform (Göbel et al., 2017). However, based on the collection of literature, no scholars have conducted in-depth research on the covert advertising situation of "ordinary creators" and clarified its action path. Therefore, the results of this study can fill the gap by helping consumers better understand and recognize covert advertising, avoid unnecessary consumption, and assist platforms in identifying and controlling such users to maintain their image.

At present, there is research on the marketing path of online anchors in the platform of Xiaohongshu, and the researchers mostly focus on Xiaohongshu as a corporation and analyze the marketing strategy or native advertising and information flow advertising of Xiaohongshu. For example, Yu Yunqi analyzed the word-of-mouth marketing of female users of Xiaohongshu APP and put forward suggestions for optimizing the word-of-mouth marketing strategy of brands in Xiaohongshu APP (Yu, 2021). Wei Ruolan analyzed the communication advantages, communication elements, and communication characteristics of native advertising in Xiaohongshu

APP, and analyzed the communication mode of native advertising in Xiaohongshu APP from two perspectives: theoretical basis and practical basis (Wei, 2020). Secondly, the research on individual users focuses on three subjects: Key Opinion Leader (KOL), Internet celebrities, and stars. For example, Deng Sha takes Xiaohongshu as an example to summarize the factors that influence KOL's "planting grass" on users' purchase intention. Song Qiuyan tries to find a legal path to define the legal responsibility of stars in the process of recessive marketing (Deng, 2022). He Yihong takes the hidden advertisement of a Xiaohongshu network as the research object to analyze the characteristics of hidden advertisements, and further explore the problems that are difficult to identify, difficult to confirm, and harmful, to put forward effective management strategies (He, 2022). On the whole, due to the characteristics of difficult to identify and sample covert advertising, there are only a few relevant studies on covert advertising. In the research on the marketing of Xiaohongshu Plain creators, there is more blank research on the mechanism of the combination of covert advertising and consumer psychology, which requires researchers to enrich the research content.

2.2 Research on Consumerism Mechanism

Since the 1960s, with the progress of science and technology, the rapid development of productive forces and the turn of social movements, the private commodity economy has been highly developed in western capitalist countries. Under this background, the industrial era led by modernism gradually transitioned to the post-industrial era led by postmodernism. The core of social operation has shifted from traditional production to consumption, and unprecedented material wealth encourages the public to actively participate in consumption. As some scholars have pointed out, "the saga of the producing protagonist has now given way to the consuming protagonist." In the past, people's single consumption of goods was upgraded to the consumption of symbols of goods, symbols began to control the exchange value of things, and all kinds of different symbols became the symbols to distinguish social classes and measure the meaning of value. "Objects, as symbols, become the only symbol worshipped by the unconscious masses, which in reality is manifested as the worship of consumption", at the same time, human subjectivity also begins to lose in the face of the dominance of symbols.

In the research on the "mechanism of consumerism", there is no relevant research to clarify the connection between consumerism and covert advertising. In previous studies, the dynamic mechanism of consumerism has been elaborated and the "social-cultural psychological" support behind it has been put forward, that is, consumption meets people's various needs (Chu, 2017). The emphasis is on eliciting a high level of respect and self-fulfilling psychological satisfaction. Driven by business interests, consumer goods are artificially labeled with various labels to stimulate people to consume. Zuo Luping and Zhu Yuli put forward the concept of "cultural consumption", which is the national consumption mania in the shape of a consumerism cultural atmosphere (Zuo and Zhu, 2021). At present, consumerism enters people's daily lives by means of multiple means such as media publicity and creates a cultural atmosphere of universal consumption for people.

2.3 Theoretical Overview

According to S-O-R new behaviorist learning theory by Howard and Sheth, motivation is the core driving force of consumer purchasing behavior, which includes biological and psychological needs, desires, and wishes (Sugimoto, 2024). This motivation not only directly affects the purchase behavior of a particular product, but also indirectly affects the level of information and reaction of consumers by adjusting their excitement level. In addition, Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell's consumer decision model further refines this process, dividing consumer decision making into multiple stages, including desire cognition, information exploration, pre-purchase selection evaluation, purchase, consumption, and post-purchase evaluation. In these stages, motivation, as the fundamental psychological tendency that drives consumer action, guides consumer choice and behavior by stimulating excitement.

In general, the consumerist desire guided model influences the purchasing decision-making process by stimulating consumers' internal motivation and external stimulus. Based on these theories, this study constructs a "desire guidance – resonance – consumption" model to illustrate how covert advertising can guide consumers' desire from the "potential purchase motivation" of consumers and stimulate consumers' excitement by building a "cultural atmosphere" in the comment section, so as to promote the generation of "consumer behavior".

3 CASE STUDY

3.1 Consumer Psychological Mechanism Driven by Desire

Under the trend of "enthusiasm for postgraduate recommendation" in Chinese society, colleges and universities take whether to participate in discipline competitions, business competitions, and science and technology competitions as a major standard to measure whether undergraduate students can participate in postgraduate protection. On the Xiaohongshu platform, searching keywords like "college students", "competition", and "research support" reveals many individual users sharing their competition experiences, often accompanied by certificate photos and detailed experience posts. In the comment section, messages like "PPT and plan book for sale, please DM me" can also be found. In addition, they will answer questions in the comment section carefully and leave their contact information.

Taking a certain amateur blogger on the Xiaohongshu platform as an example, the content they post often includes titles such as "Didn't expect to win first place in the competition on my first try – experience sharing", "Please, don't slack off in sophomore year – join these competitions", "Please, this provincial competition template is super useful", and "If you want to secure a postgraduate recommendation, you can't be too honest". These types of titles have a tendency to "induce consumption", using exaggerated language to attract users' attention, but in essence, they are covert advertisements.

In terms of content, the description of competition experience is very brief, but it is accompanied by several award certificates. This amateur blogger posts a pinned comment in the comment section: "Paid sharing of PPT and proposal, please contact me" Through extensive interaction and discussions with users in the comment section, a strong "atmosphere of competition discussion" is created. Behind this behavior is a drive to stimulate users' consumption desires. In the positive atmosphere and responses, consumers choose to add the amateur blogger on WeChat for deeper information exchange.

3.2 The Relationship Between Consumerism Culture and Advertising Invisibility

"Experience sharing" is the interaction between the blogger and the fan, the blogger publishes the relevant content of the product he has personally experienced, and the fans participate in it because of their interest and love, and express their emotional experience through comments, forwards, likes, barrages, private messages, etc., and then generate collective interest and resonance, and the products they share are recognized and accepted by fans, which can be regarded as a successful interaction. However, the potential profit-making behavior under the sharing of experience, and the generation of implicit advertising is obscured. In this case study, the interactive behavior of competition-related bloggers involves using so-called "experience sharing" to create the illusion that "winning competitions is easy" and "postgraduate recommendation qualifications are within easy reach", thereby stimulating users to engage in deeper interactions (adding on WeChat) and purchase competition-related derivative products (project proposals, PPTs, etc.), thus achieving the marketing goal of covert advertising.

In modern consumerism, people's pursuit of "Symbols" is reflected in the pursuit of "High Education", "Luxury Cars", "Logomania" and "Personal Branding". On the Xiaohongshu platform, every post's image is carefully edited, and the copy is short yet highly provocative, guiding consumers to click on the post and browse. On personal homepages, related covert advertisements are continuously pushed. For example, a post titled "Collection! Recent outfit ideas!" is essentially an advertisement for products. As these types of posts accumulate on a user's homepage, the consumer is subconsciously guided by the value orientation behind consumerism, longing to become a person filled with "aura", or "symbols". The pursuit of these "symbols" compels consumers to continuously invest their time and effort into consumerism. The excessive pursuit of "personal branding" can prevent consumers from integrating into real society and accepting the truth that "achievements require time and effort", thus leading to a state of psychological anxiety.

3.3 Platform Responsibility and Supervision

Since most of the interactive users of the competition are undergraduate students, they do not have social experience and are eager to find a "shortcut" to obtain the qualification for further study, so they cannot have a strong ability to identify such implicit advertisements. This kind of covert advertising requires adding the WeChat accounts of ordinary users to obtain products, creating ambiguity in the assumption of legal liability. The supervision of such

advertising on Xiaohongshu platform is insufficient, making it difficult to distinguish between commercial promotion and genuine user sharing.

Xiaohongshu platform should strictly introduce rules and regulations and warn consumers in text form to distinguish the difference between "covert advertising" and "experience sharing", that is, to judge whether it is necessary to add the contact information of individual users who have not been certified by the platform, and strengthen the certification audit of "merchants", to distinguish them from individual marketers and facilitate supervision. In addition, the platform should stipulate that if the consumer adds the contact information of individual users and loses money, the individual shall bear legal responsibility.

4 COVERT ADVERTISING AND CONSUMERISM'S "DESIRE GUIDANCE – RESONANCE – CONSUMPTION" MODEL

Through the analysis of the above cases, this study constructs the "desire guidance – resonance – consumption" model of covert advertising and consumerism, involving how covert advertising stimulates consumers' purchase desire through subconscious and suggestive means and plays a key role in consumerist culture. The core of this model is that covert advertising drives consumer behavior by manipulating consumers' psychology and emotions, making them have a strong demand for goods that they do not have to buy.

Through subtle symbols, images, or "words", covert advertising makes consumers unconsciously attracted and have a desire to buy. For example, metaphors and symbolism in advertising can associate a product with an ideal lifestyle or identity, thereby stimulating consumer desire. This strategy is not limited to direct commercial promotion, but also involves shaping consumer perceptions through cultural symbols and media communication. In other words, by arousing the desire of consumers, covert advertising makes them pursue the symbolic value and symbolic meaning of commodities, rather than just the actual use value of commodities (Baudrillard, 1970). This pursuit of symbolic value leads to excessive consumerism and intensifies the consumption of limited resources. By creating a "false need", advertising convinces consumers that they need to buy certain products to achieve happiness and satisfaction.

The model indicates that individual marketing reduces users' defensive psychology towards advertising by establishing emotional resonance and integrates advertising content more naturally into users' daily lives through the guidance of latent desires. This represents the core of emotional resonance and covert advertising mechanisms. At the same time, driven by consumerism, covert advertising makes use of users' emotional needs, expands consumers' false demand effect, and uses suggestiveness to drive consumer behavior, forming a two-way mechanism of consumerism and desire guidance. In addition, through transparent advertising identification and user education, the platform can not only meet the advertising needs of ordinary bloggers but also enhance users' ability to identify advertisements, to maintain the credibility of the platform and user experience, while achieving a balance mechanism between platform supervision and user education.
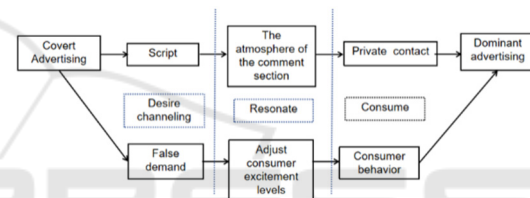

Figure 1: "Desire guidance – resonance – consumption" model (Picture credit: Original)

This theoretical framework is not only applicable to Xiaohongshu platform but also provides theoretical support for the research of covert advertising on other social media platforms. This theoretical model can make consumers intuitively understand the potential marketing path of ordinary creators and improve their ability to distinguish hidden advertisements. At the same time, managers of social media platforms can combine this model with AI to build a "hidden advertisement" identification system for the platform, accurately add advertising signs to such posts, and help users avoid unnecessary consumption behaviors.

5 CONCLUSION

This study believes that by establishing emotional resonance with consumers, covert advertising on Xiaohongshu platform reduces users' defensive psychology towards advertising, making advertising content more naturally permeate into users' daily lives. It is further concluded that this mechanism not only enhances the attraction of advertisements but

also makes consumers accept advertising information unconsciously, thus affecting their purchase decisions. Driven by consumerist culture, covert advertising uses consumers' emotional needs to build a "desire-guiding" effect. Through suggestion and guiding speech, covert advertising drives consumer behavior, while consumers' pursuit of specific symbols in turn strengthens the effect of covert advertising, forming a mutually reinforcing closed loop.

The covert advertising and desire guidance mechanisms model proposed in this study is not only applicable to Xiaohongshu platform but also provides theoretical support for the covert advertising research on other social media platforms. This model can help researchers better understand how covert advertising affects consumers in different social media environments and how to develop effective regulatory strategies. This study provides a new perspective and theoretical basis for future research. In addition, this study provides reference significance for future research on covert advertising, especially in the maintenance of media platforms. Social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu should be evaluated through indicators such as user feedback, advertising transparency, and content authenticity to ensure advertising compliance. At the same time, consumers' advertising recognition ability should be enhanced, user education should be strengthened, and users should be helped to distinguish the difference between "covert advertising" and "experience sharing", to protect consumers from misleading. In summary, this study not only reveals the mechanism of covert advertising on Xiaohongshu platform, but also provides a theoretical framework and practical guidance for understanding and coping with the impact of covert advertising in the broader social media environment.

Future research can further explore the impact of covert advertising on different consumer groups and how to promote the healthy development of the advertising industry while protecting the rights and interests of consumers. It also looks at how technology, such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics, can be used to more effectively identify and police covert advertising.

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