



The Shaping of Consumer Behavior by Social Media: an Interdisciplinary Study of Psychology and Management

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Abstract: With the rapid development of social media, consumer behavior is undergoing unprecedented transformation. This study, from an interdisciplinary perspective combining psychology and management, explores how social media influences consumers' cognition, attitudes, and decision-making processes through psychological mechanisms such as cognitive bias, social identity, and emotional contagion. Simultaneously, it analyzes how businesses leverage social platforms for brand building, opinion leader marketing, and precision advertising to achieve user conversion and loyalty enhancement. Through literature review and case analysis, this paper aims to construct an explanatory framework that integrates psychological theories with marketing management strategies, offering both theoretical support and practical guidance for developing more insightful social media marketing approaches.

Keywords: Social Media; Consumer Behavior; Psychological Mechanisms; Brand Management; Opinion Leader Marketing

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

With the rapid advancement of internet technologies, social media has become an indispensable part of daily life. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, TikTok (Douyin), Xiaohongshu (RED), Instagram, and YouTube are reshaping the pathways of information dissemination and the logic of consumer behavior. Consumers have shifted from relying on traditional advertising and offline experiences to placing greater trust in online social evaluations, user-generated content (UGC), key opinion leader (KOL) recommendations, and the collective cognition of social networks. This transformation reflects not only technological progress but also a deeper reconstruction of human psychological mechanisms in the digital environment.

Against this backdrop, studying how social media shapes consumer behavior has become a key topic in marketing management and an emerging interdisciplinary issue across psychology, communication studies, and information science. From a psychological perspective, mechanisms such as emotional contagion, cognitive bias, conformity, and social identity are particularly prominent in

social media communication, exerting profound influence on consumers' attitudes and decision-making. From a management standpoint, businesses must thoroughly understand user behavior patterns within social media environments to achieve marketing goals such as brand building, user engagement, and product promotion. Therefore, this study holds both significant theoretical value and practical relevance.

1.2 Literature Review

Research on the relationship between social media and consumer behavior began earlier in the West, with a gradual shift from platform function studies to explanations of psychological mechanisms and strategic applications in management. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) introduced a six-category classification of social media, initiating a new wave of studies on its integration with business marketing. Hajli (2014) empirically found that social interaction positively influences consumer trust and purchase intentions. Berger and Milkman (2012) proposed that the intensity of emotion is closely related to the "virality" of content, providing theoretical insights into the psychological

mechanisms behind social media dissemination.

In China, research has mainly focused on popular platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. The focus has shifted from advertising strategies to the psychological and behavioral responses of consumers. Wang Qing (2020) examined the influence of Weibo on purchasing behavior and found that the presence of KOLs significantly enhances brand influence. Yang Chen (2020) studied the structural features of UGC and their impact on purchase intentions. However, domestic research tends to focus on single platforms or strategic analyses, with relatively few studies developing comprehensive explanatory models from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines psychology and management.

Although a substantial body of literature exists, systematic integration of psychological mechanisms and managerial strategies remains limited. There is a lack of interdisciplinary research that bridges theory and practice, particularly in terms of deep explanations of influence mechanisms and the integration of multi-dimensional perspectives.

1.3 Research Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to explore how social media shapes consumer behavior from an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates psychology and management. It seeks to clarify key psychological mechanisms, influence pathways, and corresponding corporate strategies, and to construct a multi-level analytical framework that links "psychology—platform—behavior—management." Specifically, this study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

To analyze how social media influences consumer attitudes and behaviors through mechanisms such as emotional contagion, social identity, and cognitive heuristics from a psychological standpoint;

To explore how businesses utilize social media to build brands, guide perception, and improve conversion rates from a managerial perspective;

To validate the proposed theoretical framework through case analysis and provide actionable recommendations for marketing practices.

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach. First, it conducts a literature review to summarize key theories and mechanisms. Then, it selects representative cases of social media marketing (e.g., a beauty brand on Xiaohongshu,

Nike's social campaigns) for content analysis. Finally, it integrates questionnaire surveys and structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze consumers' psychological responses and behavioral outcomes, thereby testing the proposed framework.

Through this methodology, the study aims to enrich the theoretical system of consumer behavior research in social media contexts and offer scientific guidance for businesses to improve their social media operations and user engagement strategies.

2 Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Psychological Foundations of Consumer Behavior: Cognitive Bias, Herd Mentality, and Emotional Arousal

The formation and evolution of consumer behavior are deeply driven by psychological mechanisms. Within the highly fragmented and interactive digital environment of social media, consumers are often influenced by irrational factors—such as cognitive biases, herd mentality, and emotional arousal—rather than by purely rational decision-making processes.

Cognitive bias refers to systematic deviations in information processing and judgment caused by prior experiences, beliefs, or contextual interference. For example, the anchoring effect leads consumers to rely heavily on an initial piece of information—such as price, rating, or like count—as a reference point, often resulting in skewed evaluations. On social media, content with high engagement (likes, shares) is frequently perceived by users as higher quality or more trustworthy.

Herd mentality describes the tendency of individuals to follow group behavior in uncertain or risky situations to gain psychological security. On social platforms, collective recommendations, popular comment sections, or viral trends often drive users to imitate others' behaviors, leading to impulsive or socially reinforced purchases.

Emotional arousal plays a significant role in shaping consumer reactions. Content in the form of images, videos, or short stories—such as emotional testimonials, humorous rants, or "must-buy" recommendations—can quickly stimulate emotional responses. Studies have shown that higher emotional intensity increases content memorability and virality, and directly impacts users' purchasing motivation.

Together, these psychological mechanisms form the basis for understanding how social media influences

consumer behavior and serve as a foundation for building the theoretical model that follows.

2.2 Information Dissemination Characteristics of Social Media

The logic of information dissemination on social media differs significantly from that of traditional media. Its core characteristics include:

Decentralization and High Interactivity: Unlike the one-way communication of traditional media, social media operates through a networked "peer-to-peer" and "many-to-many" structure, where every user is a potential content producer (prosumer). This decentralization accelerates information spread and strengthens the trust dynamics of "social proof."

Fragmented Content and Contextual Presentation: Social media content is often delivered through short texts, images, or videos, and is consumed in rapid, low-attention environments (scroll-click-hover). To be effective, content must quickly engage emotions and context, fueling the logic of algorithm-driven viral content.

Algorithmic Recommendations and Filter Bubbles: Platform algorithms push personalized content based on behavioral data, leading users to see information aligned with their existing beliefs — a phenomenon known as the filter bubble. This reinforces preferences and narrows exposure to alternative viewpoints, influencing judgment and purchase decisions.

Viral Transmission and Community Effects: Through likes, shares, and comments, content spreads virally, especially when promoted by KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) or KOCs (Key Opinion Consumers). This often leads to the formation of collective consumer cognition and decision clusters.

These characteristics not only accelerate the spread of brand influence but also amplify psychological fluctuations and the tendency toward irrational decision-making among consumers.

2.3 Social Media Marketing Strategies from a Management Perspective

From a managerial standpoint, social media has become a central battlefield for brand marketing, user engagement, and strategic communication. Businesses must tailor their strategies to align with consumer psychology and platform

dynamics. Key approaches include:

2.3.1 Brand Content Strategy

Firms should use storytelling, scenario-based marketing, and emotional resonance to build engaging content that fosters emotional connections with users. Consistent emotional tone, cohesive visual identity, and seamless product integration are essential for strengthening brand stickiness and user participation.

2.3.2 KOL/KOC Marketing Mechanisms

Brands often collaborate with Key Opinion Leaders or influential consumers (KOCs) to leverage their credibility and social reach. This "trust-based economy" drives targeted conversion while cultivating a relatable brand persona that resonates with followers.

2.3.3 Data-Driven User Operations and Personalized Push

By utilizing platform analytics, businesses can perform user profiling, identify consumption preferences, and implement precision marketing strategies. Personalized recommendations enhance click-through and conversion rates. Meanwhile, real-time user data feedback can inform iterative improvements in both product design and promotional tactics.

Overall, the logic of social media marketing is evolving toward an integrated model of psychological insight, technical analysis, and content refinement, requiring firms to adopt a systemic and adaptive strategic lens.

3 Psychological Mechanisms of Social Media's Influence on Consumer Behavior

Consumers in the social media environment are not purely rational individuals; rather, they are "socialized users" influenced by multiple psychological mechanisms such as emotions, social relationships, and cognitive load. This chapter analyzes how social media profoundly shapes consumer behavior through psychological pathways, focusing on three dimensions: emotional contagion, social identity, and information processing methods.

3.1 Emotional Contagion and Brand Attitude Formation

Emotional contagion refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals experience similar emotional responses by observing the emotional expressions of others. On social media, emotional contagion has a heightened transmission effect, rapidly spreading especially through highly interactive features such as short videos, live comments (danmaku), and comment sections.

*Table 3-1: Manifestations of Emotional Contagion
Mechanisms on Social Media and Marketing Implications*

Emotion Type	Typical Content Forms	User Psychological Response	Brand Marketing Implications
Positive Emotion	Positive review videos, unboxing, emotional short dramas	Pleasure, trust, willingness to share	Leverage UGC and emotional storytelling to enhance word-of-mouth
Negative Emotion	Complaints, negative reviews, collective outrage	Rejection, avoidance, decline in brand trust	Respond promptly to public opinion and improve crisis management
Motivational Emotion	Achievement displays, inspirational quotes, challenge activities	Desire to imitate, sense of participation, increased brand enthusiasm	Design interactive challenges to boost user engagement
Fear/Anxiety Emotion	Scarcity marketing, limited-time promotions, contrast effects	Sense of urgency, purchase rush	Appropriately use "scarcity + emotion" to stimulate consumer motivation

When users encounter positive brand experiences, heartfelt "planting grass" (product recommendation) videos, or humorous and engaging product reviews on social media platforms, these positive emotions can easily resonate through the mirror neuron mechanism, thereby improving their perception and attitude toward the brand. Conversely, exposure to negative reviews, complaints, or collective criticism similarly facilitates the transmission of negative emotions, damaging the brand's image.

Moreover, social media algorithms tend to prioritize content with strong emotional tension, which further amplifies the scope and intensity of emotional contagion. This necessitates that brands pay close attention to managing the "emotional tone" when shaping user perceptions.

According to the Schachter-Singer two-factor theory of emotion, emotions arise from a combination of physiological arousal and cognitive interpretation. The social media environment simultaneously provides visual stimuli and contextual frameworks, which accelerate the formation and spread of emotions among consumers, eventually translating

into brand preference.

3.2 Social Identity and the Influence of Group Norms on Consumer Decision-Making

Social identity theory posits that individuals categorize themselves as members of specific social groups and seek a sense of belonging and self-validation through these group affiliations. As a highly community-oriented platform, social media provides consumers with a dual reinforcement space of "group identity" and "consumption belonging."

Table 3-2: Correspondence Between Social Identity Groups and Consumer Behavior on Social Media

Community Type	Group Tags or Topics	Consumption Characteristics	Brand Strategy Recommendations
Refined Lifestyle Circle	#MorningCoffeeEveningCocktail, #LifeRituals	Preference for high-quality, aesthetically pleasing products	Emphasize product packaging and lifestyle integration
Tech Enthusiasts	#DigitalFan, #BestValueForMoney	Focus on specification comparisons, preference for objective reviews	Provide detailed evaluations, highlight rational advantages
Mother & Baby Community	#MomRecommendations, #ScientificParenting	Emphasize safety and word-of-mouth experiences	Collaborate with KOCs and incorporate authentic parenting stories
Trendy Youth Group	#OOTD (Outfit of the Day), #TrendyItems	Love for novelty and eagerness to try viral products	Partner with influencers to create viral hype

On platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and Douyin, specific hashtags—such as "refined moms," "tech boys," and "self-pleasing girls" — form distinct subcultural consumer communities. Users tend to adopt recommended products or consumption ideologies shared within the communities they identify with, thereby exhibiting behavioral consistency.

In addition, group norms serve as a form of "soft control." When a certain purchasing behavior is frequently showcased—such as through phrases like "everyone has one" or "must-buy annual list"—it is implicitly accepted as a rational and imitable standard, significantly reducing decision-making hesitation among consumers.

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, along with Asch's conformity experiments, suggest that under group pressure and a desire for belonging, individuals are more likely to exhibit uniform behaviors. Social media functions as a digital amplifier of such group influences.

3.3.Information Overload and Heuristic Processing Pathways

Social media users are exposed to a vast volume of product recommendations, advertisements, and peer reviews on a daily basis, making them susceptible to information overload. Under such intense informational stimuli, users often find it difficult to engage in systematic reasoning and instead shift to heuristic processing—a mental shortcut that relies on simple cues to make quick judgments.

Table 3-3: Analysis of Consumer Heuristic Processing Paths

Type of Heuristic Cue	User Cognitive Expression	Underlying Psychological Mechanism	Example
Social Metrics	"Lots of likes means it must be good", "Everyone in the comments loves it"	Social proof effect	A video with 100K likes is automatically perceived as worth buying
Brand/Celebrity Endorsement	"Same product as the celebrity", "Big brands are trustworthy"	Authority effect, celebrity endorsement	Products recommended by Li Jiaqi are followed by mass purchases
User Scenario Storytelling	"She's just like me, so what she recommends must suit me"	Similarity identification	UGC influencers' "personal tests" generate trust
Limited-Time Triggers	"Buy now or it'll be gone"	Loss aversion,	Flash sales +

gone", "Prices will go up soon"	scarcity bias	countdown timers spark purchase urgency
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Common heuristic strategies include:

Using likes/views as judgment signals: High engagement metrics are often perceived as indicators of popularity or product quality.

Quick judgments based on brand logos or celebrity endorsements: Users tend to substitute product analysis with brand familiarity or celebrity association.

Replacing rational evaluation with user stories or situational examples: Consumers often assess value through the lens of "people like me" rather than by analyzing product specifications.

In addition, while platform algorithms enhance content relevance through personalized recommendations, they also reinforce users' existing preferences and reduce information diversity—thus further solidifying heuristic decision-making patterns.

According to Kahneman's Dual-System Theory, individuals prefer to process information through the fast, intuitive System 1 rather than the slow, analytical System 2. The design and interaction mechanics of social media strongly stimulate the operation of System 1.

Through the psychological mechanisms of emotional contagion, social identity, and heuristic processing, social media not only deeply shapes consumer attitude formation but also significantly alters the logic behind purchase decisions. Understanding these pathways offers critical insight for brands seeking to formulate effective social media marketing strategies and user engagement frameworks.

4 Corporate Practices in Social Media Management

In the era of the digital economy, brand management is no longer confined to traditional media and offline channels. Social media has become the central platform for brand communication and consumer engagement. Leveraging its openness, interactivity, and data traceability, enterprises can build dynamic brand images, stimulate user participation, and utilize technological tools to implement precision marketing strategies. This chapter explores how companies can efficiently leverage social media to achieve both management and marketing objectives, focusing on three dimensions: brand image construction, user-driven content mechanisms, and data-driven operational strategies.

4.1 Brand Image Construction on Social Media

Social media provides a multidimensional space for brand expression and personality shaping. By continuously publishing content, companies can establish a unique "brand persona," enhancing emotional resonance with users and fostering brand loyalty.

Table 4-1: Brand Image Construction on Social Media

Dimension	Strategic Expression	Example Brands
Emotional Tone	Consistent visual and linguistic style	Genki Forest, Xiaomi
Interactivity	Engage in trending topics and challenges	Hema Fresh, POP MART
Personified Branding	Create a brand "character" or spokesperson	Saturnbird Coffee, Zhong Xuegao

(1) Consistent Emotional Tone

Brands should maintain a consistent visual and linguistic style across different platforms to create a sense of familiarity and trust. For instance, Genki Forest uses themes like "fresh, light, and youthful" in its content to reinforce its image as a low-sugar, healthy beverage brand.

(2) Social Rhythm Engagement

Brands should actively participate in trending topics, festivals, and viral challenges to increase exposure through "trend jacking." For example, POP MART launched a customized blind-box video campaign for Qixi Festival, which quickly went viral on Xiaohongshu.

(3) Personified Brand Expression

Through storytelling and anthropomorphism, brands can build emotional connections with users. For instance, Saturnbird Coffee uses "lifestyle propositions" to create an artistic and exploratory brand persona.

4.2 The Driving Role of KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) and UGC (User-Generated Content)

In today's information-saturated social media landscape, users are more inclined to trust content from "people like themselves" or "professional recommenders" rather than corporate advertisements. This shift has given rise to two major content-driving mechanisms: KOL-based promotion and UGC-driven engagement.

Table 4-2: The Driving Role of KOLs and UGC in Social Media Marketing

Content Type	Source of Influence	Representative Platforms	Applicable Scenarios
KOL	Expertise	Weibo,	Product

	and follower trust	Bilibili	launches, brand awareness
UGC	Authenticity and interactivity	Xiaohongshu, TikTok/Douyin	Product recommendations, usage sharing

(1) KOL (Key Opinion Leader) Strategy

KOLs possess a stable follower base and recognized expertise in specific fields. Brands can collaborate with KOLs to promote products, offer reviews, and drive user interest. Their role as trusted endorsers significantly shortens the user journey from awareness to conversion. For example, beauty KOLs on Weibo and Douyin can generate buzz for new product launches, while tech KOLs on Zhihu are more likely to appeal to rational, knowledge-seeking audiences.

(2) UGC (User-Generated Content) Diffusion Mechanism

Compared to KOLs, UGC offers higher levels of authenticity and virality. By encouraging users to post unboxings, product reviews, tutorials, and daily usage, brands can stimulate organic participation and word-of-mouth momentum.

Common UGC incentives include:

Interactive hashtags (e.g., #WhyIBoughtThis)

Giveaways (e.g., "Share and win the new release!")

Creative contests (e.g., "Post a video to win a signed edition")

4.3 Big Data and Personalized Recommendation Mechanisms

The integration of big data technologies has transformed social media operations from intuition-based management into data-driven, precise decision-making processes. Enterprises now leverage data to improve targeting accuracy, content distribution, and performance evaluation.

Table 4-3: Big Data and Personalized Recommendation Mechanisms

Data Application Stage	Implementation Methods	Outcome / Effect
User Profiling	Behavior tracking and tag-based segmentation	Improves targeting precision and increases click-through rates
Personalized Content Delivery	Recommendation algorithms and interest-based	Delivers customized, one-to-one

	clustering	content experiences Lowers
Content Strategy Optimization	A/B testing and conversion rate analysis	advertising costs and enhances return on investment (ROI)

(1) User Profiling

By collecting user behavior data — such as clicks, browsing history, likes, and time spent on content—platforms assist businesses in constructing detailed user profiles. These profiles cover attributes including gender, age, interests, and purchasing power, providing a foundation for targeted marketing strategies.

(2) Precision Marketing Driven by Recommendation Algorithms

Recommendation systems personalize content delivery based on users' historical behavior. For instance, Douyin (TikTok China) pushes product review videos similar to a user's past viewing history, thereby increasing engagement and improving conversion rates.

(3) Data-Driven Optimization of Content Strategy

Content performance metrics — such as view counts, engagement rates, and conversion ratios — offer valuable feedback for content refinement. Businesses can use A/B testing results to adjust headlines, captions, and post timing, ultimately enhancing overall campaign effectiveness.

5 Case Analysis

5.1 Comparative Analysis of Social Media Strategies: Domestic vs. International Brands

The successful implementation of social media strategies depends not only on platform characteristics but also closely relates to the brand's market culture and user preferences. By comparing the social media practices of domestic and international brands, we can reveal differences in brand communication styles and operational focuses shaped by cultural backgrounds.

Table 5-1 comparing successful social media strategies of domestic and international brands

Brand	Country	Key Platforms	Core Strategies	Consumer Psychological Mechanisms
Perfect Diary	China	Xiaohongshu, Douyin	KOL-driven sales + precise targeting +	Social identity, heuristic decision-making

			topic engagement Brand personification + high interaction User-generated content (UGC) + beauty tutorial videos Emotional short films + value embedding + social issue participation	king Community belonging, brand affinity Emotional arousal, trust building Emotion-driven, identity recognition
Xiaomi	China	Weibo, Bilibili		
Sephora	USA	Instagram, YouTube		
Nike	Global	Instagram, TikTok		

Domestic brands tend to focus more on traffic-driven and short-term conversions, emphasizing rapid "buzz creation" and high-frequency interactions, such as leveraging KOL/KOC collaborations to boost product exposure. In contrast, international brands pay more attention to brand philosophy construction and user co-creation, achieving long-term brand loyalty through value transmission (e.g., Nike's "Just Do It" culture). Psychologically, domestic brands emphasize conformity and heuristic cognitive pathways, whereas international brands prioritize emotional engagement and deep trust-building.

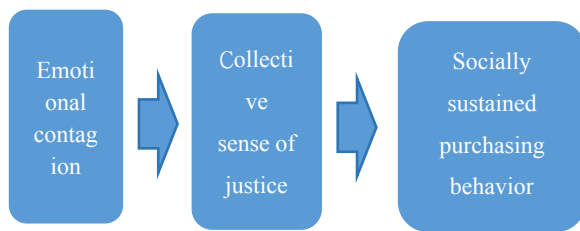
5.2.The Impact of Social Media Public Opinion Crises on Consumer Trust

In the era of social media, information spreads rapidly and sensitively. Once a brand faces a public opinion crisis, its public image is quickly affected, and in severe cases, consumer trust can collapse, resulting in long-term losses. This section analyzes the psychological impact mechanisms of social media crisis events through concrete cases.

Case 1: Hongxing Erke's "Reverse Sales" and Emotional Resonance Reversal

During the 2021 Henan floods, Hongxing Erke received widespread attention on Weibo after it donated funds. Netizens commented, "They're almost going bankrupt and still donate so much," which sparked a large-scale wave of "emotion-driven consumption."

Figure 5-1 Emotional-Driven Consumption Psychological Mechanism

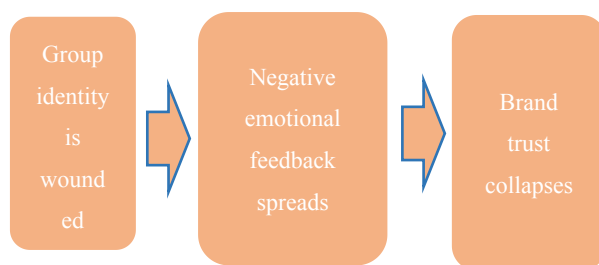


However, the brand failed to consolidate user relationships in a timely manner afterward, resulting in a sales decline once the hype faded. This indicates that emotion-driven purchasing behaviors are easily fleeting without sustained follow-up management.

Case 2: Canada Goose "In-Store Return Discrimination" Incident

In 2021, a customer was refused a return at a store in China due to quality issues, sparking social media outcry and boycotts. Although the brand later issued a statement, it failed to directly address the concerns, resulting in a severe decline in reputation.

Figure 5-2 Specific Psychological Mechanisms



In public opinion, consumers' anger stems not only from the "refusal of returns" but more so from the "differential treatment," which triggers ethnic emotional resonance, leading to long-term trust loss and sales decline.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Construction of a Psychology-Management Integrated Model

With the continuous evolution of social media, the decision-making logic and psychological mechanisms behind consumer behavior have become increasingly complex and dynamic. This study, based on the interdisciplinary perspective of psychology and management, has outlined the underlying mechanisms through which social media influences consumer behavior. Combining analyses of multiple typical cases, a theoretical framework was

constructed and practical recommendations were proposed. This chapter summarizes the research findings, offers strategies for enterprises, and discusses directions for future research.

6.2. Recommendations for Corporate Marketing Practice

Brand marketing in the social media environment is no longer a one-way information delivery but a systematic process of emotional interaction and psychological engagement. Enterprises should approach this by regulating content emotions, stimulating social identity, and coordinating UGC and KOL promotion to build a more approachable, perceptible, and warm brand image. Meanwhile, leveraging data analytics tools for user behavior insights and precise content distribution can establish a "content – psychology – behavior" feedback loop, which not only improves conversion rates but also enhances user stickiness and brand loyalty.

6.3. Research Limitations and Future Outlook

Although this study attempts to construct an integrated theoretical framework combining psychology and management, supported by analyses of multiple real cases, certain limitations remain, such as the lack of experimental data validation, a narrow selection of platforms, and no stratified study of user psychological differences. Future research could incorporate quantitative experiments, expand cross-cultural platform samples, and delve deeper into individual differences and the long-term effects of platform algorithms on consumer psychology construction, thereby providing more robust theoretical and empirical support for brand digital transformation.

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