

# The Research on the Development of Digital Marketing in China

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**Abstract:** *With the advent of the digital era, the scale of China's digital marketing market has steadily increased, and digital technology has been widely used in advertising and data analysis. AI and big data technology have promoted precision marketing and advertising effect optimization. In terms of consumer behavior, the decision-making process of consumers in the traditional marketing model is relatively complex, while consumer behavior in the AI era presents intelligent characteristics, and social marketing also enhances brand influence through influencer cooperation and other ways. However, the development of digital marketing in China also faces challenges, such as the poor timeliness of traditional search engines, legal risks and governance problems, as well as the risk of information leakage and false publicity caused by technical problems and lack of supervision. This paper analyzes the development status quo, existing problems and development trend of China's digital marketing, and provides a reference path for the high-quality development of China's digital marketing, so as to accurately match the production end and the consumption end.*

**Keywords:** *Digital marketing; Digital technology; Green development*

## 1. Introduction

With the arrival of digital age, the digital economy of China is also developing constantly. With the wide popularity of the Internet and the rapid growth of the scale of Internet users, the scale of China's digital marketing market has also steadily climbed, increasing from 275.2 billion yuan in 2016 to 596.2 billion yuan in 2023, with a cumulative growth rate of 116.6%. Digital technology is one of the important factors affecting China's economic development. Traditional marketing methods are gradually transforming to digital, and the marketing means of enterprises are undergoing fundamental changes. This change not only reflects the changes in consumer behavior, but also highlights the necessity of brands to maintain competitiveness in the digital era. With the rapid development of information technology, digital marketing plays an increasingly important role in today's business environment. Digital marketing has not only changed the way businesses interact with consumers, but also shaped the various means of brand communication and marketing. In recent years, with the continuous evolution of technologies such as social media, search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, e-commerce, etc., the trend of digital marketing is constantly changing. The development of digital marketing is not only affected by technological progress and user behavior changes, but also faces opportunities and challenges. For example, how to accurately grasp the needs and preferences of target audiences to accurately match the needs of consumers; How to effectively use user data under the premise of ensuring consumer privacy protection. Research on the effectiveness of digital marketing and its impact on consumer behavior has become particularly important, especially in today's information transparency and user privacy are increasingly concerned, how enterprises balance the use of user information and privacy protection will be a key issue. Therefore, by analyzing the current situation, existing problems and development trend of China's digital marketing, this paper aims to promote better decision-making of enterprises in the process of digital transformation, and provide experience for the high-quality development of China's digital marketing.

## **2. The current state of digital marketing development**

### ***2.1. The Application of Digital Technology in Advertising Placement and Data Analysis***

The current state of digital marketing in China primarily centres on mobile devices, with social media and applications (apps) serving as important channels for enterprise marketing and promotion. With the widespread adoption of smartphones, user behaviour data based on artificial intelligence (AI) has gradually become a key resource for companies to implement precise marketing strategies. The application of AI and big data technologies in advertising placement and data analysis is becoming increasingly prevalent. For example, the TikTok platform provides businesses with a wealth of marketing tools and data support. The overall advancement has significantly propelled the rapid development and technological upgrades within China's digital marketing industry.

In the development of the advertising industry, traditional advertising methods were once the primary marketing approach. However, with the continuous changes in the market and the increasing complexity of consumer behaviour, these traditional methods have gradually revealed numerous issues. One of the most notable problems is the sloppy placing of advertisements. Traditional advertising usually relies on media such as radio, television and newspapers, which have a wide coverage but often lack targeting, resulting in a large number of audiences who are not relevant to the content of the advertisement, thus reducing the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the advertisement. In contrast, through in-depth analysis and mining of massive amounts of data, AI and Big Data technologies can achieve a precise understanding of user behaviour and interests. This deeper insight not only helps to match the format of the advert with the actual demand, thus enhancing the efficiency and conversion rate of the advert, 'but also provides the basis for creative ideas on consumer habits, attitude scales, perception scales and consumer needs. In addition, big data technology also enables accurate placement of advertisements and evaluation of their effectiveness,[1] and enables the adjustment of strategies based on real-time data to further optimise the effectiveness of advertising and the rate of return on investment. In the case of TikTok, for example, Liu et al. (2024) point out that TikTok is a preferred platform for enterprises due to its young user base and activity, and that the use of AI and big data technologies has significantly improved the accuracy of advertising [2]. According to (Xiaolan Zhang, 2023), digital technology has improved the effectiveness of content creation in the field of live broadcasting, and AI has optimised product selection by analysing trends and consumer preferences[3]. Overall, TikTok's advertising campaigns were significantly more effective with a combination of precise content, creative strategy and data analytics.

In the age of information technology and digitalisation, enterprises and organisations have accumulated a large amount of digital resources, which can be effectively utilised through technologies such as data collection, analysis and processing. The application of recognition technology, data mining technology and intelligent algorithms has optimised the operation process in the field of academic publishing, realising accurate content capture, accurate promotion and fine-grained personalised services (Xiangsa, 2019) [4]. By analysing the data with intelligent algorithms and tools, companies can not only discover patterns and patterns in the data, but also gain deeper and more comprehensive insights into the data. These insights help drive data-driven decision making that is both scientific and accurate.

### ***2.2. Consumer behaviour under AI and traditional marketing***

In the traditional marketing paradigm, consumer behaviour research focuses on understanding how consumers make purchasing decisions in the absence of direct interaction with companies. As shown in Figure 1, the traditional marketing model emphasises product promotion through traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and brochures, rather than direct interaction with potential customers. This approach is often inconvenient and time-consuming, and usually does not focus on specific customer needs and satisfaction [5]. After confirming their needs, consumers will obtain basic information about the product, compare and consider the brand's reputation in order to make an informed choice and ultimately select the best product for their needs and budget. After purchase, the consumer will read and operate the product according to the instructions and may seek professional assistance. During the evaluation phase, the consumer provides feedback through the telephone customer service and conducts a long-term assessment to decide whether or not to recommend the product to others. If a product is defective, consumers may choose to repair or upgrade the product, or return it for an exchange if necessary. Despite the shortcomings of traditional marketing compared to digital marketing, a large number of consumers still prefer traditional marketing. This is due to the fact that some

consumers prefer the offline buying experience, where they want to see, try and feel the product in a physical location in order to feel confident and make a purchase decision. This sensory experience helps motivate potential customers and creates a sense of value in the mind of the buyer.

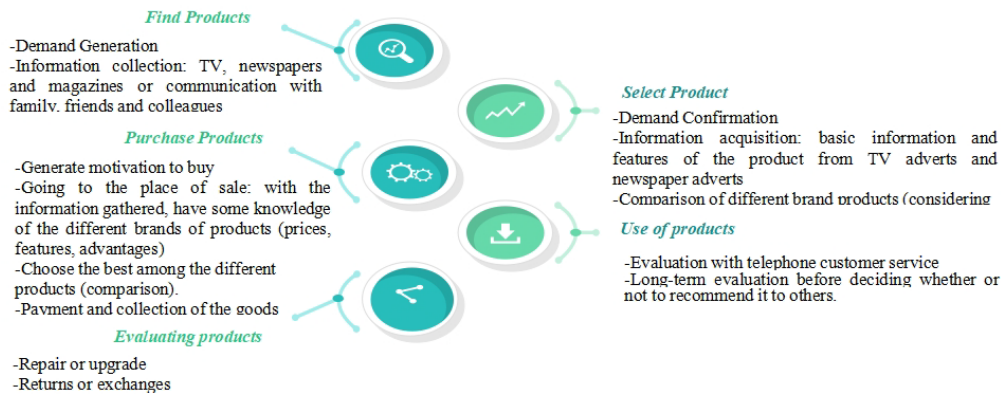


Figure 1: Diagram of the process of consumers buying products under traditional marketing

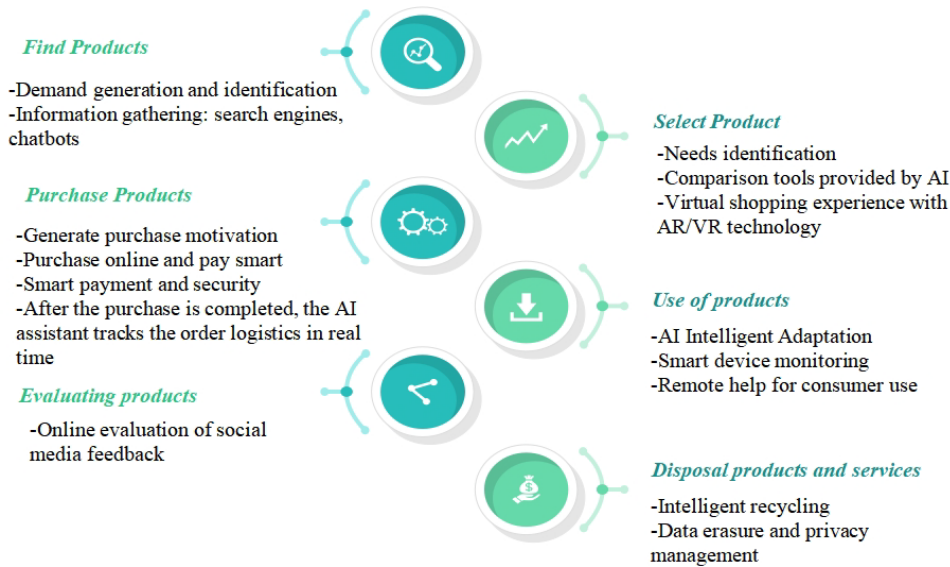


Figure 2: Diagram of the consumer's process of purchasing a product under AI

In the era of artificial intelligence, consumer behaviour is undergoing significant changes, especially in the context of the widespread use of personalised intelligent recommendation systems and webcasting, consumers can enjoy more personalised product and service experiences through AI technology, which will enable e-commerce platforms to provide personalised goods and services that better meet consumers preferences and needs through in-depth learning and precision marketing [6]. As shown in Figure 2, consumers exhibit intelligent behaviours at various stages of the product purchase and use lifecycle. AI technology can analyse consumers' historical behavioural data, search history and preferences to identify their needs. AI comparison tools or augmented reality (AR)/virtual reality (VR) technology can be used to simulate the experience of using a product to help consumers make more accurate and comprehensive comparisons and experiences when choosing a product. Intelligent payment and security mechanisms motivate the purchase, and once the purchase is completed, AI Assistant tracks the order logistics in real time. In the use phase, AI Adaptation upgrades the personalised experience of the product, with smart devices monitoring and assisting consumers remotely, and consumers influencing the purchasing decisions of others through online reviews and social media feedback. Finally, at the disposal of products and services, intelligent recycling processes and data wiping and privacy management enhance consumers' environmental awareness and personal information security. Overall, personalisation not only impacts individual transactions, but also plays a key role in long-term customer loyalty, fostering connection and loyalty by consistently delivering a personalised experience. Personalisation creates a unique brand experience, strengthens the emotional connection between the consumer and the brand, and increases the likelihood of re-transactions [7].

### 2.3. The current state of social marketing

In today's digital age, social media for digital marketing is closely related to statistical production. The emergence of social media, such as Taobao, Jingdong, TikTok, WeChat, Tencent, etc., has changed our traditional way of consumption. According to the 51st Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet, as of December 2022, the number of Internet users in China had reached 1.067 billion, with an annual growth of 35.49 million, and the penetration rate of the Internet had reached 75.6%, which was significantly higher than the global average of 64.4%, and the number of mobile phone users had reached 1.065 billion, with an annual growth of 36.36 million, accounting for 99.8% of the total Internet users. The number of mobile phone Internet users has reached 1.065 billion, with an annual growth of 36.36 million, accounting for 99.8% of the total Internet users, making mobile phones the preferred tool for Internet access. In addition, Internet use among the middle-aged and elderly has increased significantly, accounting for 30.8 per cent of the total, reflecting the widespread trend towards digitalisation. The behavioural habits of digital users have also changed significantly, with online video (including short videos) reaching 1.031 billion users, accounting for 96.5% of the total Internet population (Figure 3).

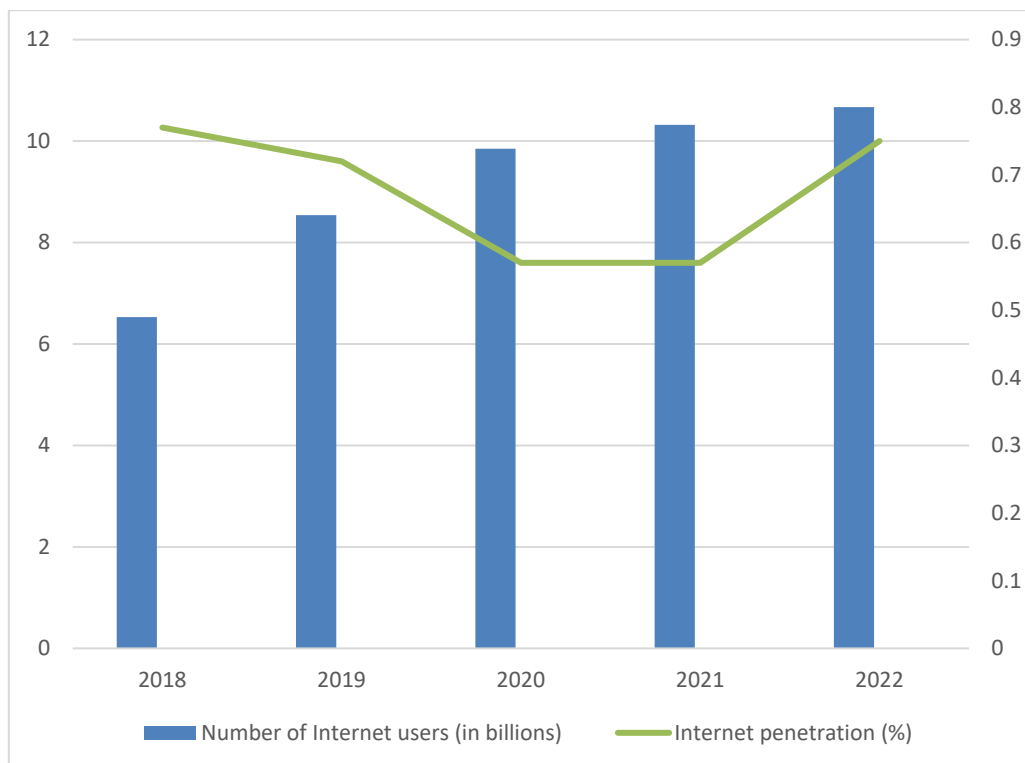


Image source: Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China.

Figure 3: Growth of Social Media Users in China, 2018-2022

Against the backdrop of the widespread popularity of social media, not only have digital users' behavioural patterns undergone significant changes, but brand marketing has also adapted accordingly, particularly in terms of the rise of branded content. For example, Nike used social media platforms to launch a series of creative challenges and collaborated with celebrity athletes and fitness personalities to promote the brand, whose participation not only boosted the reach of Nike's campaigns, but also provided incentives for users to be active and to share the results of their participation via social media. This interactive campaign model not only increases user engagement, but also significantly strengthens the bond and loyalty between the brand and its users. The Nike brand has also been successful in engaging users and gaining fans through Instagram videos and TikTok UGC. Despite the high number of views and comments on UGC such as fitness gear videos, athletic brand users are more likely to focus on images and videos of new product launches and interactive content, according to data from the study [8]. Therefore, brands need to maintain their impact through well-crafted visual content. Overall, social marketing has increased brand reach and user engagement through influencer partnerships, creative campaigns and accurate content strategies.

#### 2.4. Digital Marketing vs. Traditional Marketing

Traditional marketing and digital marketing are different in many dimensions, not only in terms of communication channels and methods, but also in terms of marketing strategy, interactivity and cost-effectiveness. Traditional marketing, such as television, radio and newspapers, can reach a wide audience, but the communication process is usually associated with high time and capital costs. For example, the filming and production of television advertisements require professional teams and equipment, while radio and newspaper advertisements require a series of planning, design and printing processes. These processes are not only time-consuming, but once the advert is released, it is difficult to adapt the content quickly to market changes. In addition, traditional marketing advertisements have limited interaction with consumers, who often only passively receive information and are unable to directly express their opinions and feedbacks; whereas consumers who tend to buy offline prefer face-to-face communication, attach importance to interpersonal interactions, and trust more on the direct information and feedbacks they get through actual exchanges (Table 1).

Digital marketing takes full advantage of the Internet and digital technology to demonstrate greater flexibility and efficiency. Digital marketing can quickly reach target consumers through social media, search engine optimisation (SEO), email marketing and other channels to achieve precise targeting. More importantly, digital marketing allows consumer data to be tracked and analysed in real time so that marketing strategies can be adjusted to better meet consumer needs. This data-driven decision-making approach not only improves the relevance of marketing campaigns, but also helps to reduce unnecessary cost wastage. Digital marketing is significantly better than traditional marketing in terms of cost and interaction. Through internet platforms, consumers can easily interact with brands and share their personal opinions and experiences. This two-way interaction not only strengthens consumer identification and loyalty to the brand, but also provides the brand with valuable user feedback and market insights. Overall, digital marketing shows obvious advantages in terms of flexibility, efficiency, cost control and interactivity. With the continuous development and popularisation of digital technology, digital marketing will continue to play an increasingly important role in the field of marketing [9-11].

Table 1: Difference between digital and traditional marketing

Marketing Name	traditional marketing	digital marketing
Dissemination methods	Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, telephone (time-consuming and costly)	Use of the Internet and digital technology (convenient, time-consuming, excellent publicity).
time limit	The production of magazines and adverts requires at least a week or a month of preparation.	On the Internet, the page can be updated at any time to keep consumers informed about the service.
cost estimate	Large budgets, high costs, and relatively difficult to modify creative and adjust placement strategies.	Flexibility to adjust to budgets and needs, lower investment costs and easier to optimise and adapt
Positioning consumers	For the general public, low positioning accuracy	Use digital targeting (social media, search engine optimisation (SEO), e-mails, etc.) to reach your target audience precisely and efficiently.
Service approach	Offline services allow for face-to-face interactions, and discount cards can be issued to customers to retain repeat business and help brands establish a connection with the individual.	Enjoy a convenient shopping experience with online services, the ability to browse and compare different products at any time, as well as the convenience of placing an order quickly and having it delivered to your home.
Interactivity with consumers	Unidirectional communication and limited consumer interaction with the advert. Consumers who prefer to buy products offline prefer face-to-face interaction with real people.	Two-way interaction, which allows for a closer connection with consumers through social media interactions, online surveys, and instant feedback.
Tracking and analysing data	Difficulty in tracking and generally need to be assessed and analysed through, for example, market research.	Real-time tracking of advertising results and analysis of data to adjust marketing strategies.

### 3. Problems existing in the development of digital marketing in China

Under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital development based on information and communication technology has seen rapid progress in various aspects such as social interaction,

shopping, and travel. Nationwide, not only has the speed of media integration been increasing, but more and more places are exploring the integration of traditional media forms such as newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and new media with the mainstream media of the digital era. While digitalization drives economic development, it also brings about issues of personal information security, with the relationship between consumers, companies, and regulatory bodies becoming increasingly tense over privacy concerns [12].

### ***3.1. The problem with traditional search engines***

The disadvantage of traditional search engines is that their timeliness is poor. There are many users on the Internet, and the data information sources are diverse. The web pages on the Internet are in real-time dynamic change, and the updates, deletions, and other changes are extremely frequent, which will greatly affect the accuracy of the search results. Private investment, control, and commercial search engines exacerbate their legal risks and governance challenges. They destroy the rights of individuals to personal information and the citizens' right to information choice through traffic restrictions, paid priority mechanisms, and information filtering and control. Sponsored search is the most important business model of search engine platforms, in which the platform auctions keywords in search results to advertisers for a fee. In the condition of information asymmetry on the Internet, search engine companies have not effectively identified and deleted false information disseminated by service providers, and have not deleted the false advertisements and website links provided by unlawful advertisers, causing economic losses to consumers [13].

### ***3.2. Technical problems and lack of regulation***

On November 1, 2021, China's first specialized law on personal information protection came into effect, marking the formation of a data security and privacy rights protection system in China centered on the Network Security Law, Data Security Law, and Personal Information Protection Law. However, the practice of using users' basic identity information, location, and especially browsing history data to achieve personalized and precise advertisement push has become the norm in the industry. While enjoying customized services, users are also constantly questioning the ethical legitimacy behind it. In China, there are mainly uneven levels, tyrannical clauses, lack of consultation mechanisms, and unsatisfactory effects in the formulation and implementation of privacy protection policies [14].

Cookie is data stored on the user's local terminal by the network service provider to identify and track network users, which is the most important basis data for precise advertisement placement through Cookie technology. Among the most important categories of Cookie is the one based on the source and destination[18]. First-party Cookie directly created by the visitor's own domain has strong closedness and concealment in data use, while third-party Cookie mainly comes from advertising service providers and data companies, which form a marketing network by signing contracts with a large number of websites, track users' behaviors on different websites and achieve cross-screen push and advertisement monitoring, causing a large amount of personal data to be scattered in the Internet, making it easy to pose the risk of information leakage [15].

### ***3.3. False propaganda issues***

Social media adopts the UGC (User-Generated Content) model, which is the most relied-on content generation model for current social media platforms. Social media marketing activities (SMMA), social networks (SNS), and customer experience (CX) affect customers' behavior outcomes, including purchase intent, loyalty intent, and participation intent. Customer experience includes perceptions of products and services, emotions, behaviors, sensory experiences, and social responses. Relationship quality refers to the collaborative intent of both parties, including trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. For small and medium-sized enterprises in China, the lack of technical and personnel barriers has increased. Anyone or organization can apply for an account on social media and publish information, diversifying the content generation subjects while bringing high-quality, in-depth content, also bringing a large amount of unsystematic, unprofessional, and unintegrated content, making it difficult to guarantee the authenticity and authority of information on social media. Soft advertising is rampant, increasing the difficulty of identification. In recent years, with the substantial improvement of public advertising literacy and consumer awareness, the rigid and didactic tone of search platform pages has turned off many consumers, who are more willing to receive "percolate without being noticed"-style soft advertising. Compared to hard advertising, soft advertising refers to conveying advertising information

to consumers in a clever and indirect way, so that they can receive related products or brand information unintentionally, avoiding consumer annoyance and counterproductive behavior, with less commercial atmosphere but slower dissemination speed. The advertising presentation form on social media is mostly soft advertising, such as on Xiaohongshu platform, where influencers with the flag of "planting seeds" will hide advertising information in their notes with the ploy of recommending and endorsing, often overshadowed by the influencer's personal remarks.[16] These soft advertisements will bring certain challenges to fans' discernment and analysis ability, even leading them into a certain degree of consumerism trap. This makes the objectivity of information on social media platforms greatly diminished. Content repetition, information echo chamber effect. The algorithm mechanism of social media platforms leads users to see only information related to themselves, especially the relevant search behavior will further tighten the algorithm [17].

#### 4. The development trend of digital marketing in China

##### 4.1. China's digital policy development trend

In the development of the current globalized economic system, China's trade pattern has undergone great changes. In the "Internet +" era, various industries and enterprises in China have increasingly high requirements for marketing, and they need to focus on exploring digital marketing methods. The development of the country's economy does not only need to rely on the efforts of the industrialists themselves, the state has also injected "heart tonic" for various industries and enterprises. Starting from 2020, China has also been introducing relevant policies to promote the development of the digital economy. For example, the "14th Five-Year Plan for Digital Economy Development" issued in 2022 has clarified the guiding ideology, basic principles, development goals, key tasks and safeguard measures for promoting the healthy development of the digital economy during the "14th Five-Year Plan" period. And the "Overall Layout Plan for Digital China Construction" issued by 2023 expounds the overall framework and specific layout of digital China construction.

Table 2: Related policies

Time	Publishing department	Policies and measures
February 2020	National Development and Reform Commission	"Implementation Opinions on Promoting Consumption Expansion, Improving Quality and Accelerating the Formation of a Strong Domestic Market"
September 2020	State Council	Launch a national consumption promotion Month
May 2021		
March 2022		
April 2022	China's ministry of commerce	"Opinions on further releasing consumption potential and Promoting sustained recovery of Consumption"
December 2022	CPC Central Committee, State Council	"Outline of the strategic plan for expanding domestic demand (2022-2035)"
December 2022	Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Natural Resources, Ministry of Housing	"On the construction of demonstration zones for the integrated development of national cultural industry and tourism industry notification"
January 2023	China's ministry of commerce	Establishing 2023 as the "Consumption Boost Year", Taking this as the main line, we will coordinate national consumption promotion activities
February 2023	State Administration for Market Regulation	"Measures for the administration of Internet advertising"
February 2023	CPC Central Committee, State Council	"Overall planning for the development of digital China"

Data source: China Commercial Advertising Association, Digital Marketing Committee

The policy support provides a clear path and blueprint for China's digital marketing, aiming to promote the transformation of China's digital marketing, and will continue to improve the integrity, system and synergy of digital China construction in the future, promote the deep integration of the digital economy and the real economy, accelerate the development of the digital economy, and inject strong impetus into the comprehensive construction of a modern socialist country. To enhance the

competitiveness of the country in the globalized economic system (Table 2).

#### ***4.2. China's digital marketing innovation technology integration***

Digital marketing needs to carry out empowering marketing through data, which will be deeply combined with artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, big data and other technologies to promote the innovation of various marketing models and realize the automation, intelligence and socialization of the whole process of digital marketing. The development of enterprise digital marketing is not only the establishment of online sales channels, but also the use of artificial intelligence to achieve accurate marketing push and personalized service. Get richer user data with IoT technology to optimize marketing strategies. Enterprise managers need to establish digital strategic thinking, integrate digital thinking into the whole process of operation and management, constantly adjust organizational planning to carry out marketing activities, stimulate users' consumption desire through precision and customized marketing, and carry out digital marketing promotion by establishing brand digital image, launching digital products with brand characteristics, and enriching online marketing channels. To achieve sustainable development of digital marketing innovation. With the accumulation of data and the improvement of analysis capabilities, enterprises can more accurately depict users and their scenarios, and the "thousands of thousands of faces" data labeling solution will be further upgraded. This improves the agility of marketing information matching, strategy execution, effect feedback and strategy optimization, thus improving marketing effectiveness. Enterprises will attach importance to the combination of marketing and customer experience management, through the deep integration of marketing digitization and customer experience digitization, so as to improve marketing effect and customer satisfaction.

#### ***4.3. Cross-platform integration of digital marketing model***

In today's digital era, the field of digital marketing in China is undergoing profound changes. With the increasingly diversified consumer behavior and the continuous emergence of digital platforms, cross-platform integration has become an inevitable trend in the development of digital marketing models. Social media platforms play an important role in China's digital marketing. Enterprises can effectively enhance brand awareness and user engagement through social advertising and social e-commerce operations on platforms such as Weibo and Tiktok. E-commerce platform is also an important position for brand marketing. Taobao, Jingdong and other e-commerce giants continue to improve their marketing tools and services, providing enterprises with a full link marketing solution from brand promotion, user acquisition to user retention. Through the integration of e-commerce platform and offline retail, enterprises achieve omni-channel marketing coverage; Video platforms have brought new opportunities for digital marketing and become a popular choice for brand promotion. By combining data from different platforms, companies can gain a fuller understanding of consumers' interests, behaviors, and preferences to build more accurate user profiles. The cross-platform integration of China's digital marketing will continue to deepen and innovate. With the popularization of 5G technology, the development of the Internet of Things and the emergence of new digital platforms, the scene of digital marketing will be richer and more diverse. Enterprises need to continuously improve their digital capabilities to adapt to this development trend and stand out in the fierce market competition.

#### ***4.4. Green development of digital marketing***

With the severe challenge of global climate change, China is also actively exploring the green development model in the field of digital marketing. Saving carbon emissions has become a key theme in the green development of digital marketing in China. The development of digital marketing has given birth to models and formats such as mobile payment, platform economy and sharing economy, reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions in production, consumption and circulation. For example, online shopping reduces the energy consumption of consumers during travel; Platform economy helps merchants and enterprises to grasp demand more accurately and reduce production waste; The sharing economy improves the utilization of resources, avoids the duplication of production of goods, helps to achieve the development of emission reduction and carbon reduction of the real economy, and also gradually changes the consumption concept and structure of residents, encourages green purchasing behavior, enhances the overall environmental awareness of the society, and promotes the green upgrading of consumption patterns. The green development trend of China's digital marketing is becoming increasingly obvious, and the promotion of consumers' green consumption concept, the

positive actions of enterprises, the help of digital technology, the support of policies and the improvement of standards will jointly promote digital marketing to continue to move forward on the road of green development. This will not only help enterprises achieve sustainable development, but also promote the green and low-carbon transformation of the entire social production and life style.

## 5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the development status, existing problems and development trends of digital marketing in China. Through the research and analysis of China's digital marketing technology support and relevant policies, China's digital marketing has both achievements and challenges in the development process, which requires the joint efforts of the government, enterprises and all parties in society to promote its high-quality development and make greater contributions to economic development and social progress. However, this study also has some limitations, and we will continue to improve the future research, further explore the overall picture of the development of China's digital marketing, and contribute to this field.

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