

The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Tourist Consumption Behaviors in the Social Media Era: A Case Study of Xiaohongshu

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Abstract: In the era of social media, Xiaohongshu, a social media platform that integrates user-generated content (UGC) with social interactions, has significantly influenced tourist consumption behaviour. This study explores the critical role of influencer marketing in the tourism industry. Through a literature review, surveys, and in-depth interviews, this paper analyses the impact of influencer marketing on tourist consumption behaviours on the platform and examines how it influences destination choice and enhances tourism consumption potential. The findings reveal that the platform not only diversifies travel options through rich and user-generated contents but also improves travel decision-making through authentic user experiences. However, the study also highlights issues such as excessive advertising and discrepancies between presented content and actual experiences, which may erode trust and lead to negative impact on tourist experience. This paper provides insights for optimizing tourism marketing strategies and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu; Influencer Marketing; Tourist Consumption Behaviours

1. Introduction

Tourism, as an evolving cultural phenomenon, has captured the interest of a broad spectrum of individuals. With the development of the internet, social media platforms have reached an unprecedented level of popularity, and "influencer marketing" has become a significant force in the tourism industry. Tourists increasingly engage with, share, and gather valuable information from these platforms, with their consumption behaviors profoundly shaped by the recommendations and endorsements of social media influencers. Xiaohongshu, renowned for its effective utilization of influencer marketing, has become a leading platform in shaping tourist behavior across China. With its frequent content updates and authentic user-generated experiences, it has played a crucial role in guiding tourists to choose their destination. This paper investigates the impact of influencer marketing on tourists' behaviors. By analyzing tourist consumption patterns, the platform's role in promoting tourism growth, and its influence on consumer behaviors, this study aims to provide insights into the evolving dynamics of the tourism industry and serve as a reference for future research in this field.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Influence of Xiaohongshu

Xiaohongshu, as a leading social media platform in China, has integrated user-generated content (UGC) with community interactions, playing a significant role in shaping consumer purchasing behavior. This platform effectively promotes travel guides and products through social media, expanding its influence across various fields ^[1]. This combination of social networking and e-commerce fosters consumer trust in products and services through shared, authentic user experiences, significantly influencing purchasing decisions ^[2]. Furthermore, social media platforms like Xiaohongshu have fundamentally transformed the relationship between consumers and brands, promoting a more interactive and consumer-driven marketing environment ^[3], which is worthy of further research.

2.2 The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Consumer Behavior on Xiaohongshu

Influencer marketing is a key driver of consumer behavior on Xiaohongshu. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) on the platform are capable of exerting influence upon users and even some may decide purchasing decisions, particularly in categories such as fashion and cosmetics for female customers. Lou & Yuan (2020) highlight that the credibility and perceived trustworthiness of influencers are crucial in building consumer trust and enhancing purchase intentions. Their research emphasizes that the value of influencer-generated content—especially its informativeness and credibility—directly affects followers' brand awareness and purchase [4]. Additionally, Campbell & Farrell (2021) explore the functional components of influencer marketing, emphasizing that the ability of influencers to establish personal connections with their audience is critical in driving consumer behavior on Xiaohongshu [5].

2.3 The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Tourist Consumption Behavior on Xiaohongshu

In the context of tourism, influencer marketing plays a significant role in shaping tourist consumption behavior on Xiaohongshu. Travel influencers influence potential tourists' decision-making by sharing personalized travel experiences and detailed destination reviews [6]. This content helps users form emotional connections with destinations, making them more likely to choose those recommended by influencers [7]. Wang & Xie (2024) suggest that repetitive recommendation on Xiaohongshu not only creates psychological motivation, encouraging consumers to purchase and participate in "checking-in" at popular locations, but may also lead to a form of tourism alienation, where the focus shifts from authentic experiences to merely documenting one's presence at specific sites [2]. Furthermore, Deng & Xu (2022) investigate how informational cues provided by influencers affect credibility assessments, which are crucial in tourism marketing on social media platforms like Xiaohongshu [8].

2.4 Summary

While existing research have explored positive impact of Xiaohongshu as a social media platform in driving consumer behavior, particularly in enhancing brand awareness and purchase intentions, there has been limited investigation into its potential negative effects. This study addresses this gap by analyzing both the positive and negative impacts of Xiaohongshu on tourists' destination choices and consumption behaviors. Moreover, by combining empirical research, this study offers practical suggestions for optimizing new media marketing strategies for tourism destinations. These findings are significant for enhancing tourist engagement and strengthening the brand presence of destinations on social platforms.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Herding Theory

Herding Theory describes the phenomenon where individuals tend to follow the actions or opinions of a larger group, often leading to collective behavior patterns. On social media platforms like Xiaohongshu, herding behavior can result in certain products or experiences rapidly gaining widespread popularity, driven by users' desires to conform to perceived social norms or the actions of influencers and peers. This theory is particularly useful for understanding how viral trends emerge on the platform and how collective user behavior can amplify the effects of influencer marketing [9].

3.2 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), introduced by Davis in 1989, explains how users accept and use new technology. It highlights two key factors—perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use—as determinants of technology adoption. For Xiaohongshu, TAM helps analyze how users view the platform's features, such as its user interface and e-commerce integration. A platform that is perceived as useful and easy to navigate is more likely to engage users and increase their interaction, thereby influencing user behavior, especially in following KOL recommendations [10].

4. Methodology

4.1 Survey

The survey method involves the use of detailed and structured questionnaires to gather responses from participants on specific topics, thereby collecting data for research purposes. In this study, we distributed questionnaires to tourists to collect information about their demographic characteristics and their behavior regarding tourism consumption recommendations on Xiaohongshu. A total of 150 participants were selected using stratified random sampling, ensuring a representative demographic distribution. Data were analyzed by using SPSS. The survey primarily focused on analyzing tourists' attitudes toward recommendations made on Xiaohongshu and how these recommendations influence their travel consumption decisions. Additionally, the survey results highlighted some shortcomings in the practical application of influencer marketing, based on which specific improvement measures were proposed. By integrating theoretical research with the survey findings, this study provides empirical support for understanding the impact of influencer marketing on tourist consumption behavior in the era of social media.

4.2 Interview

The interview method, also known as face-to-face interviews, is a psychological research approach that involves direct interaction with respondents to gain in-depth insights into their thoughts and behaviors. Participants for the interviews were selected from the survey pool, focusing on frequent users of Xiaohongshu. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with a randomly selected sample of tourists to complement the survey results. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Xiaohongshu influences tourists' usage habits and purchase intentions. Furthermore, the study also explored the strengths and weaknesses of the platform from the perspective of tourists. Written Informed Consent was obtained from all participants before the study, and they were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The findings from the interviews not only corroborate the survey results but also offer a multidimensional analysis of the role played by the platform in shaping tourism consumption behavior.

5. Analysis of Results

5.1 Analysis of Basic Information

A total of 150 questionnaires were randomly distributed to tourists, but 8 participants dropped out and did not complete the entire questionnaire. Therefore, 142 valid responses were received, resulting in an effective response rate of 94.67%. The basic characteristics of the sample are analyzed and shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic Information of Respondents.

Basic Information		Number (142 People)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	86	60.56%
	Male	56	39.44%
Age	Under 18	3	2.11%
	18-25	45	31.69%
	26-30	46	32.39%
	31-40	33	23.24%
	Over 41	15	10.56%

The survey results show that among the 142 tourists surveyed, the majority were female, accounting for 60.56%, while males accounted for 39.44%. This gender distribution indicates that Xiaohongshu has a higher usage rate and influence among female users. In addition, the age distribution shows a trend toward younger users, with those aged 18-30 accounting for 64.08%, making this age group the main users of the app. The 31-40 age group also accounts for 23.24%, indicating that Xiaohongshu has a certain level of penetration among slightly older groups as well. Users over 41 years old are relatively few, accounting for only 10.56%, indicating that its major users are still concentrated in younger demographics.

According to the TAM model, users' perceived ease of use of Xiaohongshu significantly influences

their usage frequency, which aligns with the user behavior patterns observed in our survey. In Table 2, it has shown the survey of users using Xiaohongshu before traveling, 35.92% of respondents indicated that they occasionally use it, which represents the highest proportion, suggesting that many tourists refer to information on the app intermittently before traveling. Additionally, 26.76% of respondents indicated that they often use it, while 26.06% indicated that they sometimes use it. Together, these two groups account for more than half of the respondents, showing that it has become an important tool for many tourists to obtain travel information before their trips. Relatively fewer tourists reported always using it (4.23%) or not using it at all (7.04%), indicating that although its influence in gathering travel information is growing, not all tourists rely on it before their trips.

Table 2: Frequency of Using Xiaohongshu Before Traveling.

Option	Number (142 People)	Percentage (%)
Do not use	10	7.04%
Sometimes	37	26.06%
Occasionally	51	35.92%
Often	38	26.76%
Always	6	4.23%

Table 3: Frequency of Using Xiaohongshu During Travel.

Option	Number (142 People)	Percentage (%)
never use	14	9.86%
Sometimes	38	26.76%
Occasionally	60	42.25%
Often	26	18.31%
Always	4	2.82%

Just as Table 3 shown, the analysis of usage frequency during travel shows that 42.25% of respondents occasionally use Xiaohongshu to plan itineraries or select travel activities. This high proportion indicates that many tourists refer to content on the app from time to time during their trips. Additionally, 26.76% of respondents indicated that they sometimes use it, reflecting its importance as a source of travel information. 18.31% of respondents often use it, while only 2.82% always use it. Moreover, 9.86% of respondents indicated that they have never used this app during travel, showing that despite its increasing role in tourism, some tourists still prefer to rely on other information sources or explore freely.

Table 4: Frequency of Using Xiaohongshu after Traveling.

Option	Number (142 People)	Percentage (%)
Do not use	27	19.01%
Sometimes	54	38.03%
Occasionally	44	30.99%
Often	17	11.97%
Always	0	0%

Regarding usage frequency after travel (see **Table 4**), 38.03% of respondents indicated that they sometimes use Xiaohongshu to review and share their travel experiences, while 30.99% indicated that they occasionally use it. This shows that many tourists continue to engage with the platform after their trips, particularly to share their experiences or view feedback from other users. However, 19.01% of respondents indicated that they do not use the app after their travel, which is a relatively high proportion. This possibly reflects that some tourists no longer feel the need to use Xiaohongshu after their trips have concluded.

5.2 The Impact of Xiaohongshu on Tourist Consumption Behavior

5.2.1 Positive Impacts

(1) Diversifying Travel Options and Stimulating Consumer Potential: Xiaohongshu aggregates a wide array of travel content from numerous bloggers, offering travelers an extensive range of options. Through this content, tourists can discover new destinations and experiences, as well as explore various travel methods and activities. This diversity of information stimulates tourists' interest and consumer potential, making them more inclined to try new things during their trips, thereby increasing their related travel expenditures.

(2) Enhancing Travel Decision-Making and Improving Travel Quality: The travel bloggers on Xiaohongshu share content based on their authentic experiences, providing tourists with reliable information that helps them avoid potential pitfalls and select suitable travel plans. With this information, tourists can better plan their itineraries, choose the most appropriate attractions and activities, thereby enhancing the overall quality of their travel experiences.

(3) Promoting Scenic Areas and Increasing Popularity: Xiaohongshu serves as a significant promotional platform for scenic areas, enabling them to collaborate with high-quality travel bloggers to showcase their unique features and innovations. Through user interactions such as clicks, likes, shares, and bookmarks, the visibility of these scenic areas is increased, attracting more tourists to visit. The platform's fast-paced information updates, coupled with accurate and trustworthy content, effectively meet tourists' demands for timely travel information, further enhancing the attractiveness and visibility of the scenic areas.

5.2.2 Negative Impacts

(1) Eroding Tourists' Trust: Xiaohongshu's platform is characterized by an overabundance of advertisements and sometimes misleading marketing practices. This leads to a suboptimal consumer experience, which can erode tourists' trust in the recommended content on the platform. Additionally, the content presented by some bloggers or businesses on Xiaohongshu often significantly differs from the actual experience; while the images and descriptions may appear appealing, the reality may fall short of expectations. According to some interviewees, this discrepancy has caused disappointment among tourists, leading them to question the platform's credibility and ultimately affecting overall user trust. These discrepancies cause disappointment among tourists and may lead them to question the platform's credibility, ultimately affecting overall user trust. Such negative experiences not only impact individual travel decisions but could also harm the reputation of the platform.

(2) The Influencer Effect and Tourist Congestion: Herd Behavior Diminishing Experience: Due to Xiaohongshu's recommendations, certain scenic spots rapidly become popular "check-in" destinations, attracting large numbers of tourists. However, this herd behavior often results in overcrowding, significantly diminishing the actual experience of visitors. Some interviewees noted that their visits to certain attractions were less enjoyable due to the overwhelming crowds, which not only undermined their expectations but also strained the resources and environment of these destinations. Such over-congestion not only undermines tourists' expectations of the destination but also potentially leads to excessive resource consumption and increased environmental strain. Although the "influencer effect" can bring short-term economic benefits to scenic areas, it also poses challenges to the long-term sustainable development of these locations, thereby negatively impacting the overall tourist experience.

(3) Concentrated Visitor Flow and Operational Pressure: Xiaohongshu's recommendations can quickly turn certain scenic areas into popular destinations, attracting an influx of tourists. This concentrated visitor flow places tremendous pressure on the reception capacity of these sites and may result in the overloading of infrastructure and the excessive depletion of environmental resources. Meanwhile, other scenic areas that are not featured may face declining visitor numbers and revenue. This uneven distribution of tourist flows leads to increased operational costs and maintenance difficulties for some scenic areas, potentially jeopardizing their long-term sustainability. For tourism enterprises, this phenomenon of localized high demand coupled with low activity in other areas poses significant challenges to overall market strategy and resource allocation.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Findings and Future Prospects

This study examined the impact of influencer marketing on tourist consumption behavior on the Xiaohongshu platform. The findings indicate that Xiaohongshu's influencer marketing effectively stimulates tourists' interest and consumption potential by providing diverse and comprehensive content that aids in better travel decision-making. Moreover, the collaboration between influencers and tourist destinations on Xiaohongshu significantly enhances the visibility and attractiveness of these locations, contributing to their economic growth. However, the study also uncovered some negative effects associated with influencer marketing. Issues such as misleading marketing and excessive advertising on the platform have undermined user trust. Additionally, the "herd effect" caused by influencer recommendations has led to overcrowding in certain tourist spots, putting pressure on resources and negatively impacting the sustainability of these destinations.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. For practitioners, the findings suggest that influencer marketing on platforms like Xiaohongshu can be a powerful tool for boosting tourist engagement and driving economic benefits for destinations. However, it also highlights the need for careful management of marketing content to maintain user trust and ensure a positive tourist experience. For researchers, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on social media marketing by providing insights into how influencer marketing can influence consumer behavior in the tourism industry. Since the research primarily focused on the Xiaohongshu platform, the findings may not fully apply to other social media platforms. Additionally, the sample in this study may not entirely represent the whole user base, which could limit the generalizability of the results. These limitations suggest that caution should be exercised when interpreting and applying findings.

6.2 Future prospect

Future research could explore several avenues to build on the findings of this study. First, investigating methods to reduce the impact of misleading marketing practices and enhance user trust would be valuable, potentially through the development of better platform regulations and influencer guidelines. Second, addressing the “herd effect” and developing strategies to distribute tourist flows more evenly across destinations could help alleviate the pressure on overcrowded sites and promote sustainable tourism. Comparative studies across different social media platforms could also provide deeper insights into the varying impacts of influencer marketing. Finally, leveraging artificial intelligence and big data analytics to refine and personalize influencer marketing strategies presents a promising area for future exploration.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the Special Project for Enhancing the Comprehensive Strength of Disciplines Project of Yi Li Normal University: “Research on the Optimization of the Path to Realizing the Ideological and Political Education Value of Red Tourism in Xinjiang” (No.22XKSY46) and Project of the Belt and Road Research Institute of Yi Li Normal University: “Analysis on the Promotion strategy of Xinjiang Silk Road tourism brand under the Belt and Road Initiative” (No. YDYL2023YB033) to Ms. Geng Rui.

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