

Ethical Issues in Vlog-Style Advertising on New Media Platforms: A Case Study of Xiaohongshu

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Abstract—With the rapid advancement of mobile internet technology, short videos have become a mainstream form of fragmented content consumption. As an evolution of short videos, Vlogs further emphasize the trend of personalized content and present a unique mode of communication. Taking Xiaohongshu as a case study, Vlogs on this platform often appear in the form of “enticing” advertisements, such as product reviews and knowledge sharing. However, this promotional strategy has given rise to a series of ethical challenges. This study examines Vlog-style advertising on the Xiaohongshu platform, exploring the interactions among advertisers, the platform, and influencers, and the resulting ethical dilemmas. Through literature review and case analysis, this paper reveals ethical issues within Vlog advertising and highlights the inadequacy of advertisers' values, platform responsibilities, and related legal regulations. Finally, the paper calls for collaborative efforts to standardize Vlog advertising and establish a more comprehensive legal framework to promote the sustainable and healthy development of this advertising format.

Keywords— New Media Advertising; Vlog; Ethical Issues; Governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Amid rapid developments in IT, digital technologies, VR imaging, and big data analytics, new forms of media platforms have revolutionized advertising in the digital age. These advancements have shattered the limitations of traditional advertising by enhancing information dissemination and transforming how we live and work. Vlogs, as a modern advertising medium, have quickly garnered attention in the Chinese market, creating significant commercial opportunities. However, this rapid growth has also brought ethical challenges to light, sparking public concern. This study explores the ethical dilemmas associated with Vlog-style advertising on platforms like Xiaohongshu, aiming to assess its impact on society and the advertising industry, and to support the sustainable development of advertising practices.

The 2024 China Internet Development Status Report indicates that there are now 1.1 billion internet users in China, with a 78% internet penetration rate^[1]. This marks an unprecedented boom for Chinese internet platforms, which boast diverse formats and highly interactive, intelligent content distribution capabilities, outpacing traditional media^[2]. As a result, a variety of advertising forms have emerged, among which video distribution has seen widespread impact^[3]. However, the regulatory standards for new media advertising remain underdeveloped, leading to issues like false advertising that hinder the long-term growth of this sector. Therefore, this

research uses Xiaohongshu as a case study to analyze the characteristics and ethical concerns of Vlog-style advertising, providing strategies and recommendations to resolve current issues and encourage the standardized development of the advertising industry.

In recent years, academic research on Vlogs has expanded rapidly, both domestically and internationally. Chinese scholars have explored Vlogs from perspectives including communications^[4] and education^[5], investigating their use in advertising and teaching. Since 2019, there has been a significant increase in studies focusing on the commercialization^[6] and user engagement aspects of Vlogs^[7]. Nevertheless, research into the ethical aspects of Vlog advertising is still limited and warrants further investigation.

Research on new media advertising in China started relatively late, but as the medium has evolved, so too have studies into its characteristics and marketing strategies. Currently, the focus is primarily on precise targeting and marketing tactics^[8], with less attention given to the phenomenon of ethical lapses in new media advertising. The existing literature frequently suggests strategies for optimizing advertising communications and standardizing industry practices^[9].

This study focuses on Vlog-style advertising on the Xiaohongshu platform, examining the ethical issues in its advertisement distribution and discussing ways to regulate this medium to ensure more scientifically sound advertising practices, thereby promoting the healthy development of the new media advertising industry. The research employed various methodologies, including literature review, which involved analyzing domestic and international academic research to compile relevant theories and issues that form the foundation of this study. Additionally, case study analysis was used, highlighting certain negative effects observed on the Xiaohongshu platform to further analyze these issues and propose effective regulatory measures for new media advertising.

II. ETHICAL LAPSES IN XIAOHONGSHU'S “ENTICING” CONTEXT FOR VLOG ADVERTISING

Xiaohongshu, which launched in August 2014, began as a portal to discover fabulous finds from abroad. It has since evolved to “find the lifestyle you want,” and currently brands itself as “your guide to life.” As of June 2023, it boasts a user base of 300 million active monthly users. According to 2022 data, 46% of its users are between the ages of 18 and 24,

predominantly located in major cities such as Guangdong, Shanghai, and Beijing. Video content currently constitutes 45% of all exposure on Xiaohongshu. For example, as of November 2023, the platform's top trending posts within a 24-hour period were videos, with four out of the top five being Vlogs, highlighting their significant presence. This indicates that Xiaohongshu has transitioned from primarily featuring text and image posts to being dominated by Vlogs as its main form of interactive content.

As a prominent e-commerce platform, Xiaohongshu's Vlogs are mainly focused on product reviews and knowledge sharing, gradually forming a complete commercial cycle of “enticing-dissuading-showcasing-reenticing,” which encapsulates product recommendations or sales advertisements. This cycle shapes the unique commercial dynamics on the platform, making Vlogs slightly different in length and style from typical Vlogs found elsewhere. On Xiaohongshu, Vlogs typically last between 2 to 5 minutes—a duration that maintains viewer interest without causing information overload. The content style is clear and vibrant, produced with straightforward editing tools that convey a down-to-earth manner, making the advertisements more relatable. Creators integrate product promotions naturally into daily life, reducing the overt commercial footprint, thereby enhancing the personal touch and trustworthiness of the advertisements.

The inherent broadcasting style of Xiaohongshu and its comprehensive “enticing” business model are primary triggers for ethical missteps in advertisement dissemination. (Figure 2.1) The platform's slogan, “your guide to life,” aims to subtly permeate users' daily routines, making it an indispensable part of their lives while its commercial nature is subtly woven into this message. Consequently, many influencers produce a plethora of “enticing” posts.

These “enticing” posts, primarily in Vlog format, often blur the lines between advertising and genuine sharing. Influencers skillfully assume the role of fellow consumers, utilizing Vlog characteristics to make viewers perceive their

sponsored reviews as genuine personal experiences, thereby stimulating users' desires to purchase and fulfilling both the brand's and influencers' objectives of “enticing.” Over time, as users realize the discrepancies between the products promoted and their actual experiences, a crisis of trust can emerge, making it challenging to distinguish between genuine user testimonials and “enticing” Vlogs produced under brand collaborations.

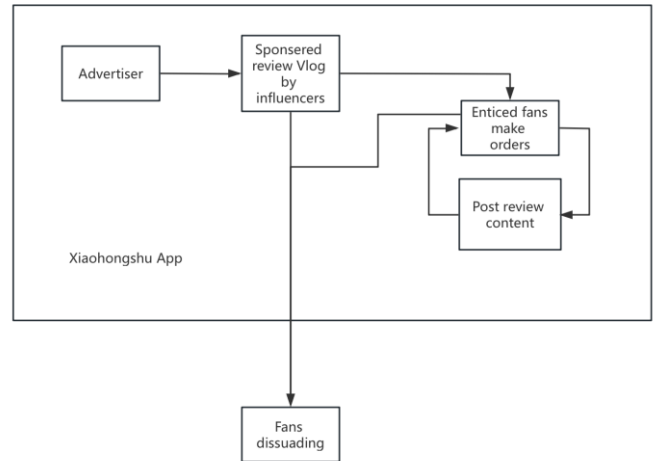
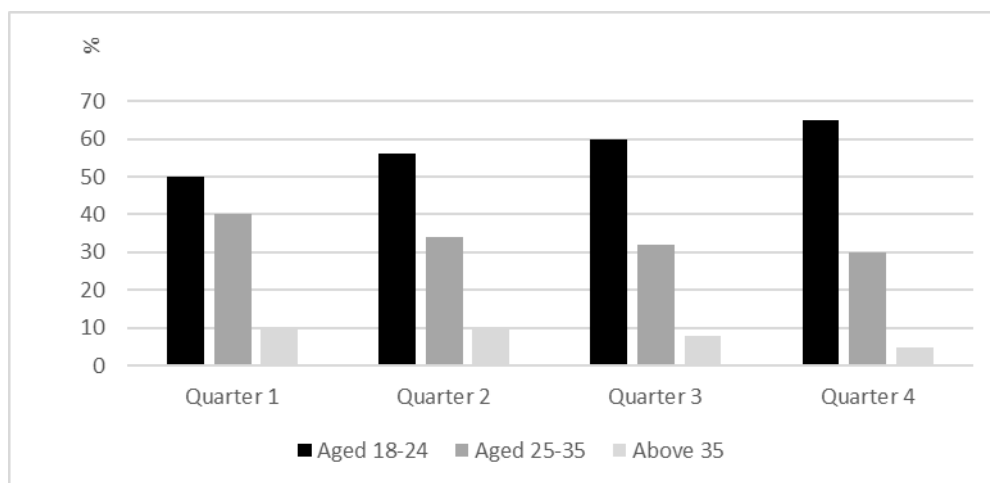


Figure 2.1 Xiaohongshu Vlog-style New Media Advertising Enticing Business Model

This crisis of trust stems from the deceptive and misleading nature of the content. The authenticity of advertisements, which should balance between reality and artistry, can lead to ethical issues in advertisement dissemination when this balance is lost. Over-promotion and beautified filters are ongoing issues criticized on Xiaohongshu, with many influencers prioritizing monetary gains over honest engagement with their followers, which prevents users from objectively analyzing the practical value and truthfulness of the products.



Tab 2.1 2019 Xiaohongshu platform purchase volumes by age group

The dissemination of advertising often sparks numerous ethical and moral issues, most notably the tug-of-war between

money and interest. Not only is earning money a primary goal of advertisement dissemination, but it also holds significant

power over the dissemination of commercial information. This power extends beyond the commercial sphere, significantly impacting societal values concerning communication behaviors, particularly as the formats of new media advertisements on the internet diversify and have a broader reach compared to traditional media^[10]. According to 2019 data from QianGua and official Xiaohongshu platform statistics (Tab 3.1), the age distribution of active Xiaohongshu influencers predominantly spans from 18 to 24 and 25 to 35 years old. Users born after the 1990s, who are at significant stages of familial and social identity shifts, and those born after 2000, who are entering society, have varied consumption needs based on their perceptions. These generations are more susceptible to shifts in cultural and value-based consumption ideologies.

III. XIAOHONGSHU'S "ENTICING" ADVERTISING STANDARDS AND OPTIMIZATION STRATEGIES

The "enticing" marketing model on Xiaohongshu has successfully achieved advertisers' promotional objectives, but as this model has become a closed loop, influencers have gradually shifted from being mere sharers to active participants in advertising practices. Advertisers focus more on the dissemination impact, often overlooking ethical concerns and failing to correct any inaccuracies in the content shared by influencers. Instead, they prefer influencers to recommend products in a natural, everyday manner, blurring the line between advertising and genuine experience.

Vloggers are not only content creators but also participants in their narratives. However, many take advantage of the low barriers to entry for producing Vlogs, neglecting quality in favor of quantity and commercial gain. This is especially prevalent in the maternity and fast-moving consumer goods sectors, where over-promotion and homogenization of information are serious issues, often exaggerating one brand while disparaging others. This not only makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish between truth and fabrication but also undermines the platform's credibility. Despite Xiaohongshu implementing a mechanism to bring in high-quality content creators and instituting review processes, the impact is limited due to the lack of positive values and social responsibility among brands and influencers.

Platform social responsibility refers to a platform's strong inherent sense of social duties and noble emotions, understanding of its social rights and obligations. Corporate social responsibility means that a business, aiming for sustainable development with society, complies with laws and ethical standards, voluntarily taking responsibility for stakeholders throughout its operations and seeking to maximize economic, social, and environmental value.

In 2018, Xiaohongshu launched a brand collaboration platform to better regulate advertisement publications and foster cooperation between influencers and brands. However, this platform has not completely prevented private collaborations between brands and influencers, and the standardization of advertisement publications still lacks.

Xiaohongshu relies on the appeal of its content creators to drive traffic monetization, but it is not stringent enough in

vetting advertising content, leading to the prevalence of false advertising and homogenization. The platform often uses metrics such as shares and clicks to assess advertising effectiveness, with influencers' income models still heavily dependent on advertising revenue, and creators' monetization methods remaining relatively singular. In 2019, Xiaohongshu was temporarily removed from app stores due to issues like false advertising and order brushing. Although the platform intensified its review processes afterward, issues with the covert presence of advertisements persist. The platform has not fully met its social responsibilities regarding the authenticity and credibility of its content, impacting users' trust. It should take proactive measures to address these issues, ensuring the authenticity and high quality of advertisements to better meet the needs of users and advertisers.

The deficiencies in advertiser ethics and platform social responsibility stem from an imperfect new media advertising system. As self-media platforms like Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Weibo rapidly develop, advertising increasingly follows a "traffic is king" model, with anyone capable of disseminating ads, complicating the oversight of new media advertising.

Since the implementation of China's Advertising Law in 1995, despite several amendments, it still fails to keep up with the rapid changes in new media advertising, providing loopholes for unscrupulous media to exploit^[11]. Current laws specify certain responsibilities for advertisers but are insufficiently detailed regarding penalties for publishing false or illegal advertisements, especially concerning Vlog-specific influencers.

Moreover, the diversification of new media advertising adds complexity to regulation, particularly as the frequency of content updates and the ability of publishers to quickly remove inappropriate content increase the difficulty of oversight. The existing technological means and personnel are inadequate to fully address these challenges.

In the world of Vlog-style new media advertising, self-regulation by brands, Xiaohongshu's platform, and influencers is crucial. Brands should ensure the authenticity of their products and services, choose influencers who align with their brand image, strictly control published content, avoid false advertising, and maintain their reputation. As a platform, Xiaohongshu should act as a gatekeeper, vetting content and promoting official collaborations between brands and influencers to standardize advertising processes. Influencers, as opinion leaders, need to enhance their personal integrity, publish high-quality content, avoid false advertising for commercial gain, ensure their advertising content aligns with mainstream values, operate legally, and maintain the healthy development of "enticing" advertisements.

For the optimization of Vlog-style new media advertising, constructing a legal framework is essential. A lack of a well-ordered advertising market threatens the sustainable development of this emerging form of advertising. Drawing on successful legal frameworks from abroad, clarifying industry rules and market principles, and strengthening the oversight and punishment of regulatory breaches can improve the social standing of Vlog-style new media advertising, ensuring that

advertisements guide appropriately and truthfully and lead society in the right direction.

The commercial drive of Vlogs stems from user interest^[12], yet as the number and frequency of brand placements increase, some Vloggers lose audience trust due to excessive advertising. This reflects the limitations of the current profit model for Vlogs, requiring Vloggers to honestly inform their audience about advertisements, which could impact viewership numbers. Thus, platforms should explore additional revenue streams to balance user engagement and advertising monetization, fostering sustainable development for all parties involved.

In dealing with user-generated content on new media platforms, existing governmental and platform regulatory mechanisms are insufficient. It is necessary to shift the regulatory paradigm and encourage the adoption of new supervisory methods. Platforms can mobilize individual users to participate in the oversight process, establishing more rational and comprehensive reporting mechanisms and rewarding individuals for actively reporting illegal content to uphold online legal and regulatory standards. Government departments and video platforms need to establish dedicated complaint departments promptly to address public issues and suggestions. Engaging the public in content regulation can build a long-term effective management mechanism that covers platforms, audiences, and government, thereby reducing the spread of illegal content.

IV. CONCLUSION

Today, the rapid evolution of information and media has turned new media advertising into a vital tool for brand communication, particularly Vlog advertising that integrates video content with social media. This has achieved significant success, drawing in numerous brands and consumers. However, the rise of new media advertising also presents multiple challenges.

This study has explored the characteristics of Vlog-style new media advertising and the roles of advertisers, platforms, and influencers involved. The main ethical issues facing Vlog advertising include homogenization, false advertising, and consumer manipulation. Advertisers often prioritize impact to the extent of neglecting ethical responsibilities in ad dissemination; influencers, for commercial gains, frequently compromise on the authenticity and ethical standards of

advertisements, thereby harming consumer interests and influencing public values.

Moreover, platforms' failure in content oversight and compliance responsibilities is another significant issue. Xiaohongshu has failed to strictly control content, allowing the spread of misinformation and tolerating non-standard content for profit, further exacerbating ethical lapses.

As a significant innovation in new media advertising, Vlog-style ads have distinct communication advantages. However, their future development cannot be separated from effective regulation concerning ethical and legal issues. It is hoped that this study will inspire sustainable development in the new media advertising industry, promoting positive interactions between advertisers, platforms, and consumers to create greater value.

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