

The Impact of Social Media on Young Chinese Consumers' Purchasing Decisions on Pet Products

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Abstract: China's pet economy, as the latest business blue ocean, has demonstrated great consumer potential in the past, bucking the economy. Currently, social media platforms play a pivotal role in influencing young Chinese consumers' pet product purchase decisions. This study examines the impact of social media marketing on the consumer decision-making behaviours of young Chinese pet owners, emphasizing the roles of influencers, user feedback, and science-based content. The study conducted a quantitative survey by distributing an online questionnaire in social media pet-related communities and offline pet business venues (e.g., pet hospitals), and collected 140 valid responses. The study revealed that social media marketing has a profound impact on consumer decision-making, with the majority of respondents influenced by product promotions, reviews, and influencer endorsements. However, challenges such as impulse buying and over-reliance on online promotions were also identified from respondents' answers, suggesting that brands need to strike a balance between digital strategy and offline engagement. The findings emphasize the importance of marketing content authenticity, user feedback, and message content quality in building trust and increasing customer loyalty in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Pet Product consumption, Young Chinese Consumers, Purchasing Decision, Digital Economy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's pet economy has rapidly emerged. Despite the challenges in the pessimistic macroeconomic environment, the pet industry has continued to experience significant market expansion. The steady increase in the number of pets and the continuous growth of the pet market has provided a solid foundation for the development of the industry [1]. At the same time, China's pet market has become increasingly diverse, from brands to product categories, catering to the needs of different consumer groups. The scale of China's pet market will reach RMB 592.8 billion in 2023, an increase of nearly RMB 99 billion compared to the previous year, and is expected to reach RMB 811 billion by 2025 [2]. China's pet companies are also favored by the capital market. Gamble Pet Group (301498.SHE.) had a market capitalization of more than \$30 billion on the day of its IPO in 2023, while NEW RUIPENG PET HEALTHCARE GROUP, backed by a group of investors, was valued at about \$30 billion in September 2020. These figures clearly demonstrate the undeniable importance of the pet industry in China's economy.

The rise of the pet track is also tied to digitalization. On the one hand, pet-related content has become a popular segment on social media platforms in China and around the world. Data shows that on Douyin, China's leading short video platform, pet-related content has garnered over 300 billion views. This indicates that pet content has not only attracted widespread attention but has also created new channels for brand promotion. On the other hand, the sales landscape of pet products has also changed with the rise of social media. In 2020, the scale of China's pet-related e-commerce market approached RMB 30 billion, nearly six times that of 2015 [2]. This demonstrates the crucial role that social media plays in driving pet product sales and brand awareness.

In this paper, young consumers in China are defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. This group is characterized by strong spending power and a close connection to social media and online platforms. Among them, young pet owners in China exhibit high spending and emotional consumption, as pets in the pet economy are often personified, becoming a projection of the owner's self-awareness. Due to the spending habits of young pet product consumers, such as high digitization and personalization, the survey shows that about 14% of Chinese respondents are willing to pay for products endorsed by pet web celebrities. Therefore, leveraging social media to enhance the promotion of pet products has become a key focus for boosting pet product sales.

2. Literature Review

With the rise of the internet track, more and more companies are opting for online marketing strategies such as blogger endorsements and encouraging user-generated content to build brand awareness among consumers [3]. Therefore, the impact of social media marketing activities on consumer purchase intention and purchase decisions has become topical research. According to the study from Jamil et al, social media marketing activities (SMMAs) such as interactivity, content creation, and customer engagement significantly influence consumer intentions, such as persistence, engagement, and purchase. It also emphasized the mediating role of social recognition and satisfaction in influencing these intentions [4].

Using Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, the study proposes a model that finds that social media marketing campaigns significantly strengthen factors such as commitment, trust, and satisfaction, thereby increasing online repurchase intentions of consumers in China's e-commerce industry [5]. Similarly, the SOR theory was also utilized with a sample of Indian students, Yadav and Rahman stated that social media marketing campaigns have a positive effect on customer equity drivers (CEDs) and customer satisfaction in e-commerce has a positive effect on customer loyalty in e-commerce websites [6]. According to Joshi et al., social media influencers play a key role in shaping consumer attitudes, perceptions, and purchase intentions, and the appropriate influencers can increase followers' knowledge of and attraction to products, which positively affects purchase decisions [7].

In terms of the pet economy, Liu argues that younger consumers (especially those in their 20s and 30s) prefer online purchases due to their familiarity with digital platforms and the availability of low-priced offers online, but are risk-averse to placing fewer orders on online platforms after experiencing quality issues in e-commerce. Liu also pointed out that the popular pet-owning population in China is the younger generation with limited financial resources, most of whom are price-sensitive consumers, but the key determinant of the purchasing decision is still the quality of the pet food [8].

Although many scholars have conducted research on the impact of social media marketing campaigns on consumer decision-making, no one has yet to analyze Chinese young people specifically in the area of pets.

3. Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative survey method to investigate the impact of social media on young Chinese consumers' purchasing decisions on pet products. The target population for this study consisted of Chinese pet owners aged 18-35. The survey was conducted through the 'Wenjuanxing' platform, a widely used online survey tool in China.

The survey questionnaire comprised 22 questions, designed to gain demographic information, social media usage habits, and purchasing behaviors related to pet products. To ensure a high degree of accuracy, the survey was distributed using a combination of online and offline methods. Specifically, online surveys were disseminated via social media platforms and relevant pet owner communities, while offline questionnaires were shared through pet-related businesses and events. This hybrid distribution approach was adopted to ensure a wide and representative reach of the target population.

The survey distribution period lasted for 11 days. In total, 176 responses were collected. However, to ensure data quality, specific criteria were established to identify and exclude invalid responses. Responses were considered invalid if they did not meet the sample criteria (e.g., not within the 18-35 age range or not a pet owner) or if all options were answered the same, indicating a lack of engagement or careless response. After this validation process, 140 valid responses were retained for analysis.

4. Result

The results show that the gender ratio of respondents was about equal, with slightly more men (52.14%) than women (47.86%). No respondents chose the "Other" category. In terms of age, the majority of participants belonged to the 31-35 age group (60.71%), followed by the 25-30 age group (25.71%) and the 18-24 age group (13.57%).

In terms of city tier, most respondents were from second-tier cities (58.57%), with a smaller proportion from first-tier cities (21.43%) and third-tier cities or below (20%). When it came to monthly income, over 60% of respondents reported earning between 10,000-20,000 CNY, while 22.86% fell in the 5,000-10,000 CNY range. Only a small percentage (6.43%) earned over 20,000 CNY.

All participants were pet owners, and when asked about the types of pets they owned, dogs (78.57%) and cats (76.43%) were nearly equally popular, with a small fraction owning other types of pets (3.57%). Most respondents spent between 2,000-3,000 CNY per month on pet products (64.29%), with fewer spending under 1,000 CNY (8.57%).

Regarding social media platform usage, Weibo (59.29%) and WeChat (58.57%) were the most commonly used, followed by Xiaohongshu (46.43%). Douyin (22.14%) and Bilibili (22.86%) had relatively lower engagement. In terms of frequency, over half of the respondents reported checking pet product promotions on social media several times a week (56.43%).

In terms of purchasing behaviour, the vast majority of respondents (96.43%) have had the experience of purchasing a product after seeing social media marketing. After seeing social media marketing, 73.57% of respondents said they check reviews and user feedback before making a decision. More than half (53.57%) of respondents save products to their shopping carts or wish lists, and 32.86% said they would buy them immediately. Additionally, 42.14% of respondents said they would follow influencers or brands after viewing promotions, while only 0.71% took no further action. The most influential marketing types were influencer recommendations (63.57%) and interactive activities such as giveaways (55.71%). Respondents placed a high value on discounts (70.71%) and user reviews (50.71%) when making purchasing decisions.

When respondents were asked about their pet product consumption habits, nearly half of the participants (46.43%) indicated that they prioritize brand and quality when purchasing pet products. About 28.57% mentioned that they focus on cost-effectiveness, while a smaller percentage (15%) stated they enjoy trying new products. Only 10% reported that they only purchase essential items for their pets.

In terms of content preferences, over half preferred image-text combinations (54.29%) and live streams (57.14%) as content formats for learning about products. Video (32.86%) was also popular but less influential than written content. Similarly, knowledge-based content (59.29%) and user experience/reviews (73.57%) were the most preferred styles, while emotional stories (40.71%) also had a notable following.

Finally, most respondents (95.71%) reported being influenced by story-driven advertisements, and nearly all (95%) expressed a preference for interactive content. Trust in products was primarily built through user feedback (65%) and emotional resonance (69.29%).

5. Discussion

First of all, 96.43% of respondents said they had purchased pet products through promotions on social media, and close to one-third of respondents said they would buy pet products immediately after seeing them promoted in new media, which means social media has a powerful shopping-oriented function in the pet field. Social media platforms provide rich visual and interactive content that stimulates the senses and allows consumers to see the effects of a product firsthand. In addition, influential testimonials endorse the product, adding credibility and guiding followers to spend for it. Third, creating highly interactive campaigns (e.g., sweepstakes) and online brand communities can greatly increase user engagement and induce immediate consumption.

Under this trend, companies utilize this efficient sales channel to expand market coverage and establish closer interaction with consumers. At the same time, consumers get richer information during the purchasing process, which improves the satisfaction of purchasing decisions. However, negative impacts also exist. Over-reliance on social media promotion may cause brands to overlook the potential of offline channels, and can also affect the brand's reputation if the influencers they choose to promote have negative press. Also, consumers are easily induced to shop and spend impulsively, and they can easily lose trust in brands and platforms after realizing that the goods are not as expected. Prizes or discounts from frequent interactive campaigns may affect the brand's image, and the fact that most consumers of pet supplies are price-sensitive may lead to sales of normally priced products. To maintain the advantages of social media promotion, pet brands should continue to choose the right influencer marketing that fits the tone, craft interactive campaigns, and keep the content varied. To prevent negative impact, brands can increase offline investment, such as pet clinic partnerships and participation in pet supply expos, to balance online and offline promotional tools.

The majority of respondents (73.57%) said that user feedback is an important reference for their purchasing decisions, truly indicating that pet consumers have an increasing demand for product authenticity and reliability. There are four reasons for this: information asymmetry, social validation effects, and the authority of negative information. Due to the importance of social media marketing campaigns, businesses have seized the virtual discourse, resulting in the common occurrence of false advertisements on social media. With such information asymmetry, consumers become skeptical of brand advertisements, and reviews and user feedback have become important channels for understanding the authenticity of products. Negativity Bias Theory suggests that people pay even more attention to negative reviews than positive reviews and negative reviews are often perceived by consumers as more authentic feedback. And in the pet economy pets are considered more as family members rather than just pets [8], because pets are unable to speak up and voice out their demands, so pet owners take extra care in pet-related supplies to prevent harmful factors to their pets. While

bad reviews show potential risks or negative consequences, pet owners will find them more convincing to help avoid falling into marketing traps and avoid risks. The Conformity effect is the tendency for consumers to follow the choices of the majority. Research has shown that because perceived risk plays an important role in purchase decisions, and when a large number of consumers give positive reviews of an item, potential buyers feel an enhanced sense of trust and security that the product is of reliable quality [9]. This power of collective identity is particularly evident in pet product purchasing decisions, as pet owners place a high value on product safety and effectiveness. Positive group evaluations can reduce the consumer's doubts and decision-making process about the product, leading to the consumer's purchase decision.

Therefore, brands can actively utilize the positive parts of user feedback as marketing materials, as well as strengthen interaction with consumers to create a favourable community atmosphere. In order to deal with negative feedback, companies should set up a feedback management system to handle consumer comments and respond openly and transparently on social platforms. Positively, the power of user feedback improves brand-consumer interaction and transparency of product quality, which encourages brands to pay more attention to the consumer experience and optimize their services. However, negative feedback can have a rapid and widespread impact on a brand's image and consumers who are overly reliant on feedback from others may overlook the personal suitability of a product. Furthermore, brands may invest too much in PR, lowering their quality standards and falling into the short-term profit trap. To address these issues, brands can actively utilize positive user feedback as marketing material, and create a positive community atmosphere while strengthening interaction with consumers. To cope with negative feedback, companies should establish a comprehensive feedback management system to deal with consumer comments in a timely manner and respond openly and transparently on social platforms. Pet brands should in addition guide consumers to make more rational judgments through content education, rather than relying solely on the experiences of others. On the other hand, platforms can crack down on brushing and fake reviews and implement a review screening mechanism to ensure that consumers can see more objective and real reviews.

The survey results also show that 59.29% of respondents will determine to purchase because of knowledge-based science content, and 63.57% of respondents are easily attracted by recommendations from bloggers or industry opinion leaders. This indicates that knowledge-based content and blogger recommendations have become important factors influencing young pet owners' purchasing decisions. Whether it's in understanding how pet products are used or choosing the right product, respondents are more likely to rely on authoritative or expert advice, as well as accessing information in an interesting and intuitive way.

In order to have a longer-lasting companionship, modern young pet owners pay more and more attention to their pet's physical and mental health and care about how to provide better living conditions for their pets. Therefore, knowledge-based content, especially popular science information on pet care, feeding, and health management, can directly meet their needs. This kind of content usually helps pet owners solve practical problems and boosts their goodwill towards the brand or platform. Moreover, internet celebrities, especially those industry opinion leaders with large followings, build a trusting relationship with their audience by sharing personal stories and opinions. For many consumers, bloggers' recommendations are more authentic and credible than official brand promotions due to emotional connection and consumer self-projection. Especially in short video platforms, bloggers' recommendation videos can form resonance through emotional stories or usage experiences, thus stimulating the desire to buy.

This content preference is a double-edged sword for both brands and consumers. In the benefits, by providing useful knowledge content, brands not only help consumers solve their problems but also build their own image as professionals in pet health and care. Consumers are more likely to continue

to follow and trust the brand after receiving valuable information, thus increasing brand loyalty. Secondly, recommendations from bloggers bring great exposure opportunities for brands. By cooperating with bloggers who have a large number of followers, brands can push their products to the target audience, expanding the influence and popularity of the brand. Under the influence of the blogger's personal charisma and story content, audiences are often willing to follow the blogger's recommendation and form potential purchasing behavior. However, when consumers receive a large amount of scientific information or blogger recommendations in a short period of time, they may suffer from information fatigue and find it difficult to make a clear purchase decision. Moreover, the repetition of too much-homogenized content may weaken the effectiveness and attractiveness of the content. Most importantly, some popular science content is not created by professionals, but more often a secondary or even tertiary creation by marketing numbers, which may contain misleading knowledge. This not only misleads consumers but may also have a negative impact on the brand's reputation, especially if the consumer experience is grossly inconsistent with the promotional content. To capitalize on the positive impact of this content preference and minimize its negative effects, there are a number of steps brands can take. Brands should continue to strengthen their investment in science-based content to ensure that this content is integrated with their products and can truly address consumers' pain points and needs. Collaborate with professional pet caregivers or veterinarians to ensure the scientific and authoritative nature of science-based content and enhance consumer trust in the brand. When cooperating with bloggers, brands should keep the cooperation transparent and avoid excessive commercialization that affects the objectivity of influencers. This can be done by clearly labeling the nature of the promotion to enhance the audience's trust in the blogger's recommendations and prevent conflicts of interest from affecting the brand's reputation.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that social media plays a crucial role in the purchasing decisions of young Chinese consumers in the pet product market. The results of the survey prove the strong influence of social media marketing, with the majority of respondents possessing the experience of purchasing a pet product after seeing it advertised online. User feedback is a key factor in building trust, with respondents placing a high value on reviews and authenticity when making purchasing decisions as it relates to the safety and universality of pet products. Additionally, key marketing tactics, such as influencer recommendations and science-based content, were particularly effective in driving consumer engagement and direct purchase behaviour. However, while social media marketing is an effective branding tool today, if a brand's products do not meet expectations an over-reliance on digital channels may lead to negative reviews, which can lead to a loss of consumer trust. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of balancing online promotions with offline activities to create a more consistent brand image.

In conclusion, for pet brands looking to increase customer loyalty and market reach, it's crucial to effectively capitalize on the strengths of social media marketing while addressing its potential pitfalls. By integrating user feedback, expert advice, and informative content into their brand strategy, brands can build trust and foster long-term relationships with their target audience.

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