User-Generated Content in Social Commerce: A Study of Xiaohongshu

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Abstract:

Social commerce blends social interaction and online shopping, and it relies heavily on user-generated content (UGC). UGC refers to any information about products or services created by ordinary users (not companies) in formats like text reviews, photos, videos, or live streams. On platforms like Xiaohongshu, UGC is the main source of product information and greatly influences what people buy. This paper examines the types and features of UGC in social commerce and explains how UGC affects consumer decisions through both information and emotional paths. This study also discusses challenges such as fake reviews, hidden advertisements by influencers, and algorithm bias. For example, studies show that UGC builds trust and community by sharing real experiences, but false or sponsored posts can erode that trust. By combining literature review and real cases from Xiaohongshu, this paper highlights how authentic UGC can support better shopping decisions. This study concludes that with better transparency and moderation, UGC will remain a powerful and trustworthy force in social commerce.

Keywords: UGC; social commerce; Xiaohongshu.

1. Introduction

Social commerce is a new form of online shopping that combines e-commerce with social media features. In recent years, many people have turned to social platforms to discover and buy products. One reason is UGC content created by regular users sharing their own experiences (reviews, photos, videos, Q&A) rather than company advertisements. Unlike traditional ads, UGC is seen as more authentic because it comes from actual customers. For example, on many shopping apps, users trust reviews written by peers more than slick marketing materials [1]. This trust makes UGC a critical factor in modern consumer behavior. A survey by Mei found that on Xiaohongshu, a popular social commerce app, about 90% of posts were user-generated content [2]. This shows how central UGC is on that platform.

Xiaohongshu is a Chinese app where people share product tips and also buy items. It has been described as a "UGC shopping and sharing community" that combines content feeds with e-commerce functions. In fact, one study notes that Xiaohongshu successfully blends social interaction and shopping, allowing people to post pictures, videos, and notes about products while also purchasing on the platform [3]. This unique model means Xiaohongshu's success depends on active UGC. Researchers like have analyzed its

marketing, noting that Xiaohongshu uses UGC together with influencer strategies, such as Key Opinion Leader/Key Opinion Customer (KOL/KOC) to engage users [4]. Other scholars have focused on how Xiaohongshu's features (like note-sharing and live shopping) influence consumer behavior [2,5].

With UGC playing such a big role, it is important to understand exactly what kinds of content users share and why it affects buying decisions. This paper will first review the types and key features of UGC in social commerce (Chapter 2), including examples from Xiaohongshu. Then it will explain the mechanisms by which UGC influences consumers, following two main paths: an information path and an emotional/social path (Chapter 3). Finally, this study discusses challenges such as fake reviews, unclear sponsorships, and algorithm bias (Chapter 4), and suggest ways to address these issues. Throughout, this study draws on recent studies (2020–2025) to support the discussion. The aim is to give a clear, high-school level overview of how UGC works in social commerce and why it matters for both shoppers and platforms.

2. Types and Characteristics of UGC in Social Commerce

User-generated content on social commerce platforms comes in many forms. It can be text reviews describing a product, photos showing someone using the item, short videos or live streams demonstrating the product, or even Q&A posts where users ask and answer each other's questions. On Xiaohongshu, for example, it is common to see combination posts: a user might share an image of a new lipstick on their arm along with a written review or post a quick video tutorial of a makeup routine. Studies show that different UGC formats have distinct effects: short videos and images often grab attention and make information vivid, while text reviews provide detailed feedback. Research finds that on Xiaohongshu, visuals (like photos and videos) provide immediacy and engagement, while written comments add useful details for buyers [2]. Together, these UGC types allow consumers to get a richer sense of the product from real people.

Several key features make UGC powerful in social commerce. First is authenticity. UGC comes from ordinary users, so people often consider it more honest than ads. A candid photo of someone using a gadget at home seems more trustworthy than a polished company brochure. Because UGC is "from the street" instead of the company, consumers tend to trust it more [1]. This sense of authenticity helps shoppers feel confident. A second feature is interactivity. UGC allows users to comment, like, or share posts. This means a review is not a one-way message; other users can ask questions or add their own experiences.

For example, someone might post a kitchen gadget demo, and then other users comment with tips or ask about the price. These interactions create a community feeling and engage shoppers. In fact, shared UGC experiences can foster a sense of community among users, building social connections and trust. Mei notes that high engagement (likes, replies, reposts) in UGC strengthens the viewer's trust and sense of belonging to the community [2].

A third feature is diversity. Because so many people contribute content, UGC covers a wide range of products and opinions. Whether it is a common item or a niche product, a user is likely to find at least one review or photo. This broad coverage means consumers can get information even on unusual brands. Lastly, UGC is often very timely. Users post about new products or trends soon after they appear. The Xiaohongshu app even encourages "shopping notes" that give the latest advice. Because of this, UGC reflects up-to-date trends much faster than traditional ads, which take time to create.

In summary, the many types of UGC (text, images, video, live chat) and their features (authentic, interactive, diverse, timely) explain why UGC is central to social commerce. As Mei shows, platforms like Xiaohongshu thrive on this mix of UGC formats, using both rich visuals and detailed text to inform users. These characteristics together help consumers make decisions with more confidence, since they feel they are hearing from fellow shoppers rather than just companies.

3. Mechanisms of UGC Influence on Consumer Decisions

UGC influences what people buy through two main mechanisms: an information (cognitive) path and an emotional/social path. These paths often work together in shaping a choice.

On the cognitive path, UGC provides extra product information and reduces uncertainty. In a normal market, sellers know more about products than buyers, so buyers may worry about making a bad choice. However, reading UGC (reviews, demos) narrows that gap. For example, imagine a buyer choosing between two smartphones. On Xiaohongshu, another user might post a video comparing their camera results or battery life, giving real data that the buyer cannot get from ads. This kind of UGC increases the perceived quality and value of products and makes buyers more willing to purchase. In other words, UGC acts like a collective advice source that reduces risk. Studies have found that this extra peer information makes evaluation easier. UGC often includes comparisons or pros/cons lists that help shoppers focus. A short video review, for instance, may show two lipsticks side by side, saving the buyer time and guiding clearer judgment. Researchers em-

phasize that different UGC formats (graphics vs. videos) have specific effects on purchase intentions, indicating that the form of UGC can make the information more vivid [6]. Overall, by giving real examples, comparisons, and data, UGC makes the product information richer and the purchasing process more efficient.

The emotional and social path is equally important. UGC is full of personal stories and feelings. When people read or watch someone's genuine excitement about a product, they feel those emotions too. Niu highlights that UGC creates emotional resonance: shared experiences in UGC foster a sense of community among consumers [1]. For example, if a user watches a live Xiaohongshu broadcast about new sneakers and sees many other people excitedly commenting, the viewer may feel that joining (by buying the sneakers) will connect them to that group. This is the power of social proof. Seeing others endorse a product gives confidence. In fact, research shows that when users see friends or influencers, they trust recommending a product, their trust in the platform and product increases.

Peer influence is a big part of UGC's effect. On Xiaohongshu, some users called "KOCs or influencers get free items or payment to post reviews. Sometimes these posts look just like ordinary reviews, which can be confusing. When people trust that their friends or real customers are happy with a product, they feel safer making the same choice. Positive emotions also spread through UGC: a cheerful unboxing video can make viewers excited to try the product themselves. Both peers' opinions and emotional excitement travel through UGC to persuade consumers.

In practice, these two paths combine. A detailed video review might mix clear explanations (cognitive info) with the reviewer's honest enthusiasm (emotional appeal). For example, a Xiaohongshu user reviewing a stroller might include technical details (how it folds) along with a happy message about how smoothly it moves with their child. This blend gives facts and feelings. Research confirms that such combined UGC has a powerful influence on buying decisions [7]. Overall, the cognitive path of UGC supplies valuable information and reduces risk, while the emotional path builds trust, community, and positive feelings. Together, they make UGC a very strong force in shaping consumer behavior.

4. Challenges of UGC in Social Commerce

While UGC has many benefits, it also brings challenges. One major problem is fake or paid reviews. Not all content on social commerce platforms is truly honest. Some companies pay people to write overly positive reviews or plant sponsored content. For example, Xiaohongshu

itself reported in 2021 that it removed over 172,000 fake reviews and banned many accounts for this reason. When users suspect that reviews are fake or influenced by payment, their trust is harmed. If shoppers can't tell which posts are honest experiences, they may become cynical and ignore even genuine reviews.

Another challenge is influencer promotions. On Xiaohongshu, many users act like product ambassadors. Some are KOCs who receive free products or money to post about them. Ideally, sponsored posts would be clearly marked as ads. But in reality, some paid posts are hidden inside what looks like ordinary user content. This blurs the line between genuine recommendation and marketing. For a regular user, it is hard to know if a review is a true experience or a paid advertisement. Clear disclosure helps studies show that labeling sponsored posts (e.g. with an "Ad" tag) actually increases user trust in the long run, even if it makes the content a bit less persuasive at first. Platforms need to enforce such rules, so users understand the context of UGC.

A third issue is algorithm bias. Social commerce apps use recommendation algorithms to decide which posts to show. Xiaohongshu's algorithm tends to highlight very popular or visually appealing posts. This can create an echo chamber effect. If many users like polished photos of the same products, the algorithm will show those repeatedly, while hiding less popular posts (even if some have critical but useful information). As a result, users may see a narrow slice of content and get a skewed picture of products. In this way, the strength of UGC – that it's popular and interactive – can also limit diversity. Users might not see all viewpoints, and critical reviews may be buried.

To address these challenges, several steps can be taken. Platforms should use smarter filters and AI tools to detect and remove fake reviews early. They can add "verified purchase" tags so that users know a review comes from someone who actually bought the item. Clear sponsorship disclosure is crucial: every paid post should be labeled, so readers can judge credibility. Importantly, users themselves should be encouraged to report suspicious content. Community reporting systems allow people to flag posts they think are misleading or fake. Finally, educating consumers helps: users who learn to check multiple reviews and compare sources can protect themselves from being misled. Good-quality UGC is key to building trust in social commerce, so both platforms and users have a role in keeping UGC honest [8-10].

With these improvements, the social commerce model remains strong. For example, front-line steps like banning fake accounts and requiring ad labels have already made Xiaohongshu safer. Over time, the platform can adjust its algorithm to promote a wider range of UGC, ensuring users see a balanced view. If companies and consumers work together to value authenticity, UGC can continue to

guide buying decisions in a positive way.

5. Conclusion

In summary, user-generated content is a powerful force in social commerce, particularly on platforms like Xiaohongshu. As people have seen, UGC comes in many forms (text, images, video, live chat) and offers real customers' experiences. These features – authenticity, interactivity, diversity, and timeliness – make UGC highly influential in shaping consumer behavior. Through the information path, UGC provides detailed product knowledge and reduces buying risks. Through the social/emotional path, UGC builds trust and community, making shoppers feel supported by peers. Many studies confirm that UGC significantly boosts consumer trust and purchase intention.

At the same time, UGC in social commerce faces serious challenges. Fake reviews and undisclosed ads can mislead shoppers and weaken trust. Algorithmic curation, if unchecked, may narrow the range of viewpoints users see. Addressing these issues is crucial. Clear policies (e.g. marking sponsorship, verifying purchases) and better content moderation can help maintain UGC's value. When users trust that the content is genuine, the benefits multiply: UGC continues to provide honest advice that no advertising can match.

Overall, the case of Xiaohongshu shows both the power and the problems of UGC in social commerce. It demonstrates that authentic sharing from real users can guide smart shopping decisions, but it also reminds us that platforms must guard against manipulation. As long as social commerce systems emphasize transparency and community feedback, UGC will remain a key asset. Future research should continue to explore ways to strengthen UGC's trustworthiness. In the meantime, consumers can enjoy the wealth of UGC and use it wisely, always looking at multiple reviews and staying alert to sponsored content.

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