

The Transformative Impact of Digital Media on Consumption: A Case Study of the E-Commerce Platform the RED

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Abstract: Digital media has greatly influenced modern consumption patterns, transforming traditional purchasing behaviors into a multifaceted experience that combines culture, emotions, and social interactions. Traditional consumption consumers engaged with products directly in physical stores. However, with the rise of digital platforms, user-generated content has become a key part of the process. This change is especially evident in e-commerce platforms. The Red is a leading e-commerce platform in China that integrates user-generated content with online shopping, merging entertainment, community interaction, and shopping into one system. It demonstrates how digital media has constructed a consumption culture that goes beyond simple transactions, extending into lifestyle creation and emotional satisfaction. The Red encourages consumers to move through a dynamic cycle: from developing a purchase desire to achieving consumption satisfaction and then sharing their experiences, leading to more interactions. This process involves not only the purchase of commodities but also the construction of a unique social and lifestyle. This Essay focuses on the e-commerce platform The Red and explores how social media reshapes the relationship between digital and material consumption to change consumer behavior. It also examines how the diversity of platform content breaks the limits of traditional consumption, as well as The RED build emotional connections through user-generated content and guides consumers to change their minds from basic product needs to lifestyle pursuits. shaping a lifestyle-centered consumption pattern. And reflecting on the issue of over-consumption brought by the new consumption pattern. Finally, this essay aims to analyze how e-commerce platforms construct a new consumer culture.

Keywords: digital media; consumer culture; the Red App; sign consumption; lifestyle

1. Introduction

With the advancement of digital technology, consumer behavior is progressively shifting from physical settings to hybrid experiences that blend the virtual and the real. As a leading social e-commerce platform in China, the Red app reshapes the connotations and boundaries of consumer culture by integrating User-Generated Content (UGC), algorithmic recommendations, and online shopping features. Grounded in the theory of materiality [1], the theory of sign consumption [2], and practice theory [3], this paper analyzes how the Red app reconfigures consumer culture and reflects on its societal implications.

2. The Relationship between Digital and Materiality

In e-commerce platforms, the materiality of products and their digital representation, such as images, short videos and live streaming. Which create the core meaning of consumption together. Magaudda (2011) claims that materiality has not become less important in daily life due to the development of digital media [1]. Instead, their significance has been reorganized and enhanced through digital methods. On this basis, The Red is a typical e-commerce platform that uses algorithmic recommendations and user-generated content to widely spread the digital display of products online, and consumers can use text descriptions, videos and images to perceive the materiality of the products directly, such as texture and color, making a basic understanding and expectation of the product. McLuhan (1964) points out the idea that “the medium is the message” [4], meaning that the medium is not just a tool for communication but also changes the form and meaning of information. This implies that The Red uses digital technology to reshape the presentation and perception of materiality, making product information more visual and transforming the way consumers understand and engage with products. Kozinets (2001) mentioned that the culture of consumption is shaped by commercially produced media [5], images, and objects. Influencer marketing is an important part of e-commerce. Its main goal is to highlight the materiality of products through digital visualization. Consumers can get high-quality content from influencers, such as tutorials and comparison videos of products, to know more detailed information, including how they use and feel. Which helps consumers build expectations of product quality. Attaching purchase links on the content page (Figure 1) may also allow consumers to make quick decisions and complete purchases easily. The content-driven pattern reduces the time for decision-making and saves time comparing multiple options, giving consumers a faster and more efficient shopping experience. Magaudda (2011) states that digital technology reduces the limitation of time and space on consumption, making consumer behavior more flexible [1]. The Red seamlessly combines content with product sales, creating a complete consumption chain from generating desire to making purchase, and providing an instant digital shopping experience.



Figure 1. Screenshot of The Red post.

Although digital shopping experiences have greatly improved convenience. Consumers still have requirements to have a physical experience with products. Many consumers choose to visit offline stores to try or purchase the products after browsing product recommendations on The Red. Consumers may only understand the basic meaning given to the product by online content at first. After trying the product in an offline store, they may feel the material properties more directly. Then, users post their experiences and feelings on the Red, creating a new cycle of digital content. In this process, the product is given new meanings again. Products move back and forth between digital and physical spaces, constantly gaining new value. E-commerce helps embed products into social and cultural networks throughout this cycle, giving products ‘circulative’ and ‘sociality’.

This combination of digital and material interactions allows the ‘social lives’ of products to continue and expand further [6]. E-commerce is not just a carrier of information but also a key part of shaping consumer behavior. It makes the materiality and digital visuals of products work together as the core of the consumer experience, enriching the shopping experience and the social meaning of products.

3. Reshaping Consumer Culture: The Positive Influence of The Red

3.1. Bridging the Class Gap in Consumption

Diversification of information in e-commerce expanded the range of consumers’ choices, which promotes freedom of consumption. Bourdieu (1981) has highlighted that taste is not just a personal preference but a social behavior that reflects a social class and cultural capital [7]. This implies that in traditional societies, the higher social class expressed their status through luxury goods or elegant art, while the lower social class tended to prefer practicality or popular products. Traditional consumption patterns often reinforced social stratification. People use taste to distinguish class and express their identity. The rise of e-commerce has reduced class stratification. For example, The Red has a wide range of brands and merchants; consumers can access from luxury to affordable products. Users can browse high-quality beauty reviews while also finding recommendations for similar affordable products as alternatives (Figure 2). The diversity reduces the limitation of class-based consumption, allowing consumers to choose the products which are necessary and interests rather than their social class, making decisions that align better with their economic conditions. However, the budget-friendly alternatives emphasize temporary usage rights rather than permanent ownership [8]. Consumers can temporarily get the luxury style or similar high-quality products without actually owning the luxury goods. Focus on instant gratification and experiential consumption. And the e-commerce platform continues to gain business benefits.



Figure 2. Screenshot of The Red post.

3.2. Deepening Emotional Engagement

Digital platform influences consumer decisions by creating emotional connections. The Red integrates user-generated content with social interaction, personalized recommendations, and entertaining shopping experiences to satisfy consumers’ experiential and emotional expectations [9]. Unlike traditional consumption patterns, where consumers passively receive advertising information, The Red provides a more interactive and participatory shopping experience. ‘Recommendation’ posts, beauty tutorials, and coffee-making guides allow consumers to actively engage in the consumption process and build deeper emotional connections with the

products. Moreover, according to Shang's (2023) quantitative research [10], 80% of surveyed users said their purchase decision was influenced by The Red content. This type of social marketing strategy constructs a stronger, real-time, two-way connection with consumers. For instance, a tutorial on makeup techniques not only demonstrates how to use the product but also makes consumers feel enjoyment and participation in imitation, which gives them the motivation to try and imitate and promote immersively. Research by Kozinets (2001) points out that products are not just tools to satisfy functional needs [5]; they also become a conversation topic or connection between people, which plays an important role in social interaction. This states that digital platforms may help products gain popularity on digital platforms, increasing their exposure and providing consumers with more incentives to buy. Milhinhos (2015) helps to prove that tutorial content can significantly increase sales by as much as 35% [11]. This states that consumers are no longer passive receivers of advertisements but become active participants. This not only enhances their shopping experience but also improves the conversion rates for businesses.

3.3. Elevating the Symbolic Dimension of Consumption

The Red transforms consumption from commodity demand to emotional expression by giving product signs and symbol values. According to Baudrillard (1998) [2], the meaning of material products is multi-layered and often carries symbolic value that goes beyond their function. The Red could guide consumers to focus on emotional and symbolic. More specifically, influencers recommend perfumes as gifts; they may not only describe the scent but also emphasize the special feeling that the perfumes bring in certain scenarios. For example, different scents are described as 'good love' or 'a cozy and healing home vibe' (Figures 3 and 4), giving the perfume symbolic meaning and conveying information about love, care and happiness. This implies that The Red does not just show the functional information of products but turns them into carriers of emotion, adding culture and emotional significance. This makes products an important choice for expressing personal feelings and special meaning. Consumers engage with the "concept" of a product rather than its material essence [7]. This is often driven by hedonistic motives, where individuals gain satisfy from the experiences and symbolic meanings associated with products rather than their actual usefulness [12]. This states that symbolic value has a more direct influence on consumer decisions and enhances emotional connections during the consumption experience, changing both the behavior and meaning of consumption. Moreover, social media extends the signs and symbol value of products into digital space, blurring the boundaries between physical and virtual. Both Baudrillard (1998) and Goffman (2023) research have highlighted that when purchasing products [2,13], consumers consider not only the practicality or unique design but also the representation in digital space. This implies consumers might choose a product based on its ability to attract attention when shared on media. Consumption has changed from material-focused to multiple value-focused, allowing consumers to pay more attention to how the products are represented on digital platforms.



Figure 3. Screenshot of The Red post.



Figure 4. Screenshot of The Red post.

3.4. Building a Lifestyle through Consumption

E-commerce has changed consumer behavior from focusing on individual product needs to pursuing an overall lifestyle. For example, recommend a coffee machine for making drinks; it may not only be described as a tool but also as a product that brings a ‘morning ritual’ (Figure 5). Using consumers’ hopes and their imagination of life changes creates a connection between consumer emotion and the product even before purchase [12]. Consumers browse this type of content, and they are attracted to the idea of a ‘fine life’ or ‘slow life’ and see the products as an important tool for achieving an ideal lifestyle. consumption gradually transforms to include both the functional and cultural meaning of a product. However, while it may seem that people freely choose products. Users gradually internalize specific consumption preferences within this cultural framework, which influences their behavior choices. According to Bourdieu (2020) [14], habitus is a long-term internalized tendency shaped by repeated exposure to certain content, eventually becoming the foundation of users’ daily actions and lifestyles. The three elements constitute what Shove and Pantzar (2005) propose as practical behavior [3], consumers might start by purchasing a coffee machine (materials), then identifying the cultural idea of ‘rituals’ (meanings), and studying the skills of brewing coffee (competence). Physical participation emotional involvement, and specific cultural practices become part of people’s daily life. Consumers may gradually contract knowledge, emotional experience, and engagement with the product [15]. This shows that e-commerce may shape consumer behavior and change consumer culture.



Figure 5. Screenshot of The Red post.

4. Fostering Consumerism: The Critical Side of the Red

Although digital media offers unprecedented diversity in product recommendations and taste shaping, it is worth questioning whether modern tastes are truly diverse or just superficial phenomena driven by certain cultural environments and herd mentality. According to Shang (2023) [10], The Red largely induces and improves the purchasing desires of female consumers. E-commerce redefines the meaning of products by adding symbolic and emotional values which attract consumers while it also increases the pursuit and doubts about the authenticity of consumption. Miller (2001) supports the idea that product consumption in modern society is deeply influenced by media and marketing [16]. The relationship between individuals and products has become complex, even perceived as artificial or fake. It may 'perform' a certain identity or lifestyle in digital society [13]. Both these studies strongly seem to state that they may find it hard to distinguish whether their consumption behavior is based on real needs or influenced by a herd mentality induced by 'mainstream approval' created by the platform for commercials.

More specifically, e-commerce uses hashtags like 'must buy this month' or 'best-selling' to create a sense of urgency and necessity around products and link products to a type of lifestyle and personal images, enhancing symbolic value while also improving consumption anxiety. Users may unconsciously believe 'I need this too'. However, this may not be based on the satisfaction of a need but rather on an urgent desire for symbolic identity. This behavior is closely related to digital media. People constantly compare themselves to elaborate lifestyles and personal identities in media, which may lead to increasing sense of inferiority and divorce from reality [17]. To fill this psychological gap, consumers often turn to consumption as a way to find satisfaction.

Moreover, as Miller (2001) points out, a sense of joy in consumption is often constructed [16]. The satisfaction often marks the beginning of control of more intense desires [18]. This is because people always long for what they lack, which might never be fully satisfied. In fact, people may be chasing the sense of absence rather than any specific products [19]. This constantly stimulated desire may lead to an endless cycle of consumption [20]. This implies that e-commerce continuously stimulates users' consumption psychology by creating novelty, triggering desire and improving consumption. Consumers' decision-making process is marked by the consumer culture and symbolic value shaped by e-commerce, ignoring their own judgement on the functional or actual suitability of products. Consumers may not have realized that they fall into a recurring consumption cycle.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, e-commerce has shaped a new consumer culture. Turning consumption from a commodity exchange activity to a multifaceted cultural experience. e-Commerce redefines the relationship between digital and material consumption, linking shopping with lifestyles that combine symbolic and emotional value, building emotional connections and shaping consumption habits, which redefined the shopping experience and the social meaning of consumption. What's more, consumption patterns change has also brought an issue of overconsumption. Purchasing choices may lose authenticity and be driven by social or emotional appeals. And the blind pursuit of symbolic value often pushes consumers into the consumerism trap. It is important for consumers to remain critical of their purchasing decisions and evaluate whether their needs are misleading or shaped by marketing strategies. Finally, e-commerce platforms are not just a tool for product selling but also a force of culture that shapes the interaction between consumers, products and society. E-commerce creates a complex system that redefines consumption as a mix of material, emotional, and social values. Balancing these elements is essential for shaping sustainable and meaningful consumption.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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