

# **Trust as Capital: A Study on Livestream Influencer Trust Construction and Brand Co-shaping on Xiaohongshu**

## **Introduction**

Within China's rapidly evolving e-commerce ecosystem, livestreaming marketing has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping consumer habits and cultural consumption structures. Platforms like Xiaohongshu have redefined online consumption decision-making through a hybrid model that combines "streamer, content, social interaction, and e-commerce." This integration has restructured the logic of digital consumption dissemination and decision-making pathways. In this transformation, streamers—as core nodes in the "human-product-context" system—not only act as information intermediaries but also profoundly influence the construction of brand image and the evolution of consumer behaviour.

Existing research primarily focuses on the unidirectional effects of streamer characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness, professionalism, interaction frequency) on purchase intentions; however, systematic investigations into the dynamic interplay among streamers, brands, platforms, and audiences remain scarce. Particularly on decentralised platforms like Xiaohongshu, streamers employ differentiated content strategies and impression management techniques to build consumer trust while potentially exerting bidirectional effects (enhancing or undermining) on brand image through "symbolic grafting." Trust, as an emotional bond connecting streamers, audiences, brands, and platforms, serves as critical "trust capital" in the digital era of consumption. However, key questions remain unanswered: How do streamers construct cognitive and affective trust? How does such trust influence brand perception? What moderating roles do platform algorithms and cultural attributes play in this process?

This study aims to address these theoretical gaps by constructing a theoretical model of "streamer trust construction, brand image shaping, and consumer behaviour evolution." Integrating Media Richness Theory, Impression Management Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Trust Development Theory, this research systematically examines how decentralised platforms facilitate a synergistic evolution between brands and consumer behaviour through trust development.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study offers practical insights for brands' trust-driven communication strategies, platform algorithm optimisation, and streamers' content management models, thereby advancing China's livestreaming commerce industry from a "traffic economy" to a "trust economy."

## **Research Background**

Since the early 21st century, China's internet landscape has shifted from a portal-dominated information dissemination model to a Web 2.0 era emphasising user participation and interaction. With advancements in bandwidth, the rise of mobile internet, and widespread adoption of smart devices, short-video platforms such as Weishi, Meipai, and Xigua Video emerged, ushering in a new era of user-generated content (UGC).

Founded in 2013 as a cross-border e-commerce community, Xiaohongshu initially aimed to address information asymmetry in overseas shopping for Chinese users. The platform expanded its e-commerce functions in 2017 by launching "Welfare Society," a B2C self-operated system that integrated product discovery and purchase conversion. Through investments in national-level variety shows like *Idol Producer* and *Producer 101*, Xiaohongshu rapidly scaled its influence. Concurrently, initiatives such as the "Woodpecker Plan" (to combat fake content) and the "Creator 123 Plan" (to cultivate high-quality content ecosystems) transformed Xiaohongshu into a comprehensive platform integrating content sharing, social interaction, and commercial transactions.

Parallel to this evolution, China's e-commerce communication paradigm underwent a pivotal shift in 2016. Platforms like Mogujie and Taobao introduced livestreaming functionalities, giving rise to a "livestreaming + e-commerce" model that redefined the "human-product-context" consumption logic. As a fusion of digital communication technologies and new consumption scenarios, livestreaming commerce transitioned from "price-driven" to "value-driven" growth, becoming a "super infrastructure" in the new consumption era. It optimised supply chains, enhanced user experiences, and propelled high-quality development in China's digital economy.

In 2021, Xiaohongshu launched its livestreaming feature, marking its transition from content marketing to a closed-loop social commerce model. Within its "content + social + e-commerce" integration framework, the platform transformed passive shopping into proactive, search-driven consumption through a "search-browse-interact-purchase" chain. Supported by decentralised recommendation algorithms, Xiaohongshu has fostered "buyer-style influencers" — hybrid identities of content creators and livestream hosts — who bind trust capital to product quality through personalised content and value propositions, shifting content creation from "traffic cultivation" to "value cultivation."

This evolution reflects not only iterative platform strategies but also underscores the pivotal role of streamers in the "trust construction–brand image – consumer behaviour" interaction

chain. Streamers function as cultural intermediaries and trust connectors between consumers and brands, while platform algorithms and cultural attributes profoundly influence their performance styles, trust-building pathways, and user perceptions.

Thus, investigating how streamers construct cognitive and affective trust through content strategies and self-presentation on decentralised platforms, and how such trust influences brand image and consumer behaviour, holds significant theoretical and practical value.

## **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How do streamers' characteristics shape trust through self-presentation?
2. What are the differences in trust construction across content formats (livestreams vs. graphics vs. short videos)?
3. How is streamer trust converted into brand image equity?
4. How do trust crises lead to brand image collapse?
5. How does trust influence the behavioural transition from "content consumption" to "brand loyalty"?
6. How do power dynamics within the "streamer-platform-brand-audience" tetrahedron affect the trust ecosystem?

## **Methodology**

### **1. Content Analysis**

Collect and code content from Xiaohongshu streamers across diverse follower tiers and verticals (e.g., beauty, parenting, tech, fashion). Data sources include livestreams, graphic notes, comment interactions, and user feedback. Guided by trust construction and impression management theories, this analysis will focus on narrative strategies (e.g., authenticity, self-disclosure, professionalism), symbolic expressions (e.g., visual language, text tags), and interaction patterns (e.g., comment frequency, private messaging mechanisms, fan activities) to develop a coding system. Inductive analysis will identify common trust-building pathways, informing subsequent quantitative research.

### **2. Case Study Analysis**

Select representative top-tier and niche streamers on Xiaohongshu for longitudinal tracking, particularly during periods of trust fluctuations (e.g., peak trust periods with innovative strategies, trust collapse events, and responses). Data integration encompasses follower growth, content metrics (such as likes, comments, and shares), sales conversion rates, and external media coverage. Cross-case comparisons and timeline analyses will reveal vulnerabilities and turning points in trust construction, as well as their impact on brand

perception.

### 3. Survey Questionnaire

Design a structured questionnaire targeting Xiaohongshu users to validate the causal relationships between streamer characteristics, trust, brand image, and consumer behaviour. The questionnaire encompasses four dimensions: perceptions of streamer traits (e.g., professionalism, authenticity, approachability), trust evaluations (cognitive and affective trust), brand image perceptions (positive and negative associations, emotional attachment), and consumer behaviour variables (purchase intent, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth). Regression analysis and structural equation modelling (SEM) will test mediating and moderating roles of trust in the "trust-brand-behaviour" mechanism, offering empirical insights for optimising streamer strategies and platform algorithms.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### 1. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986)

This theory posits that the effectiveness of communication varies significantly across media due to differences in information richness. High-richness media (e.g., livestreams) excel at conveying complex emotions and ambiguous information, while low-richness media (e.g., static graphics) are better suited for transmitting clear, structured messages. In this study, the theory provides a framework to analyse how Xiaohongshu's diverse content formats—livestreams, short videos, and graphic posts—differentially impact trust construction.

Through controlled experiments comparing trust perceptions of the same streamer across different formats, supplemented by survey data and interaction rate analytics, the research reveals how media richness affects the development of cognitive trust (e.g., perceived expertise) versus affective trust (e.g., emotional resonance). These findings support the analysis of the "content-trust-brand" pathway, elucidating how platform-specific media attributes shape consumer trust dynamics.

### 2. Impression Management Theory (Goffman, 1959)

The construction of a streamer's persona is fundamentally an exercise in impression management. Through frontstage performances—such as livestream rhetoric, visual aesthetics, and interaction tactics—streamers craft a reliable "buyer-host" image. Simultaneously, backstage behaviours—including product curation, supply chain management, and quality control—ensure consistency between their public persona and private practices. This theory offers a micro-level behavioural lens to examine how streamers shape audience trust through self-presentation.

In analysing Xiaohongshu streamers' dual identity as "content creators" and "e-commerce live streamers", the study employs a semiotic analysis of livestream excerpts and short video

narratives, combined with in-depth interviews, to uncover backstage operational practices. By applying this theory, the research elucidates the mechanisms through which performative authenticity and behavioural coherence become critical drivers of trust in decentralised e-commerce ecosystems.

### 3. Social Identity Theory (Social Identity Theory of Leadership, Hogg, 2001)

This theory posits that individuals derive identity through affiliation with specific social groups, where leaders, as symbolic representatives of group identity, derive their legitimacy and trustworthiness from their "prototypicality"—the extent to which they embody the defining characteristics of the group. In this study, the theory offers a social psychological lens for analysing how streamers construct trust through identity alignment, particularly in the context of mid-tier streamers within Xiaohongshu's decentralised ecosystem. Trust-building here is fundamentally an exercise in crafting a persona that resonates with the values of their follower communities. Through content analysis and in-depth interviews, the study examines the congruence between streamers' self-positioning and the demographic and psychographic traits of their audiences.

### 4. Trust Development Theory (McKnight & Chervany, 1996)

Proposed by McKnight and Chervany, this theoretical model distinguishes trust into two key dimensions: cognitive trust and affective trust.

Cognitive trust refers to rational judgments formed through observations and evaluations of a streamer's competence, professionalism, consistency, and adherence to behavioural norms. This type of trust is grounded in logical assessments of reliability, emphasising transparency and behavioural predictability.

Affective trust, in contrast, arises from emotional resonance, value alignment, and interpersonal warmth cultivated through repeated interactions. It is less dependent on rational evaluations and instead develops incrementally through self-disclosure, empathy, humour, and other relational strategies.

Building on this framework, the study expands the concept of "trust" from a unidimensional affective construct to a dual-axis structural variable encompassing both rational and emotional dimensions. It examines how streamers on decentralised platforms, such as Xiaohongshu, utilise content strategies, symbolic expressions (e.g., visual branding, hashtags), and interactive mechanisms (e.g., Q&A sessions, fan rewards) to establish multidimensional trust. A key focus lies in identifying differential pathways through which cognitive and affective trust influence brand image:

Cognitive trust is hypothesised to shape perceptions of a brand's professionalism and reliability,

Affective trust is theorised to enhance a brand's approachability and emotional belongingness.

Additionally, the research traces the evolutionary trajectory of trust during streamer-audience interactions, probing whether trust transitions linearly from cognitive to affective dominance or manifests as a dynamic, feedback-driven interplay between the two. By integrating Trust Development Theory, this study establishes a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how e-commerce streamers function as pivotal intermediaries bridging content, platforms, and consumer psychology in the "trust economy."

## **Research Objectives and Significance**

### **Research Objectives**

#### **I. Theoretical Objectives**

Construct a Four-Dimensional Dynamic Model of "E-commerce Streamer–Trust–Brand–Consumer"

Reveal the mechanisms through which streamers construct cognitive trust (professionalism) and affective trust (approachability) via self-presentation, content format selection, and platform algorithm alignment, integrating both frontstage performances (e.g., livestream rhetoric) and backstage practices (e.g., supply chain management).

Elucidate how trust, as a mediating variable, positively shapes brand image by binding "streamer persona" to "brand value," while also analysing how trust crises trigger brand image collapse through symbolic contamination (e.g., misleading endorsements).

Decipher the differential impacts of instrumental trust (instant purchases) and affective trust (long-term loyalty) on consumer behaviour. Integrating Social Identity Theory, the study reveals the dynamic chain of "trust perception–image identity–behaviour conversion," where streamers, as community leaders, cultivate brand loyalty through value resonance.

#### **II. Practical Objectives**

Address Unique Needs of China's Livestreaming E-commerce Ecosystem

Analyse how Xiaohongshu's grass-planting culture, characterised by user-generated product recommendations, influences trust construction through the creation of consumerist symbols, offering insights for optimising platform mechanisms.

Identify critical junctures of trust collapse (e.g., influencer scandals, algorithmic bias) and propose repair strategies. Develop a "trust capital management" framework for streamers and brands to mitigate risks associated with overreliance on traffic metrics.

### **Research Significance**

#### **I. Theoretical Significance**

##### **1. Advanced Digital Communication Theories**

Develop a localised "relational trust" model tailored to China's unique "content + e-commerce" ecosystem, constructing a four-dimensional framework that encompasses "streamer–platform–brand–audience" relationships to enrich digital communication scholarship.

Integrate interdisciplinary perspectives from communication studies, psychology, and sociology to establish a "technology–psychology–culture" analytical lens for decoding trust dissemination in the digital era.

## II. Practical Significance

### 1. Strategic Guidance for Streamers and Brands

Equip streamers with dual-dimensional strategies (cognitive + affective trust) to balance commercial objectives with authenticity, preventing trust depletion.

Assist brands in identifying cultural compatibility with streamers, enhancing marketing efficiency through trust mediation. Propose collaborative mechanisms (e.g., joint quality inspections, transparent communication) to strengthen consumers' functional and emotional brand attachment.

## Conclusion

This study elucidates the mechanisms by which e-commerce streamers construct trust on Xiaohongshu and their dynamic impact on brand image and consumer behaviour. Streamers cultivate credibility through a dual-dimensional strategy of cognitive trust (professionalism) and affective trust (approachability). High-richness media (e.g., livestreams) and low-richness media (e.g., graphic posts) play complementary roles in trust-building. At the same time, the platform's decentralised recommendation algorithms facilitate diversified content dissemination and multifaceted trust construction. The proposed "streamer-platform-brand-audience" tetrahedral dynamic model provides a novel framework for understanding trust mediation mechanisms and cultural production logics in the digital era.

Future research could explore cross-platform trust migration (e.g., trust transfer from Xiaohongshu to TikTok or Instagram) and conduct longitudinal studies to track trust evolution across consumer lifecycles. These efforts will provide deeper insights to support the sustainable growth of livestreaming e-commerce ecosystems.

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