How Content Producers on Xiaohongshu Compete for Users' Attention?

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Abstract With the emergence of the digital era, attention has become a limited resource, and social media platforms have now emerged as primary spaces for competition of attention. This paper aims at studying the case of content producers on Xiaohongshu and the usage of their content strategies in order to gain and hold the attention of users in the framework of the attention economy. With the help of literature review approach, it is found that content producers on Xiaohongshu utilize certain strategies based on the manipulation of recommendation algorithms, involvement in communication processes, and authenticity performance in order to gain the attention of the audience.

Keywords Attention Economy, Xiaohongshu, Content Strategy, Platform Governance

1. Introduction

In today's digital world, attention is one of the scarcest resources. At a time when there is so much information on social media sites, attention has become the key resource in the digital economy (Mears, 2023). Attention economy theory says that attention has become the key commodity that content creators and platforms compete and monetize. From a cross-border beauty product review site to one of China's major social e-commerce platforms, Xiaohongshu currently has more than 300 million monthly active users (Yang, 2025). Xiaohongshu has a distinctive "content + social + e-commerce" ecological system that creates a vivid ecosystem where content creators use different methods to fight for the attention of the users (Yang, 2025). The unique thing about the Xiaohongshu model is that its elements interact in such a way as to reinforce each other rather than simply stack one on top of another. In particular, the content aspect of the service builds trust through user notes that combine user experience with commerce. The social aspect of the platform performs as a trust mechanism by involving reference groups and authenticity in purchase decision making. The e-commerce aspect is a natural extension of the community aspect. Unlike social media sites where visibility of contents depends on social networking, on a platform like Xiaohongshu where visibility of content is determined by the algorithms, content producers experience different opportunities and challenges.

Studies related to Xiaohongshu have been conducted on its “content+social+commerce” model (Yang, 2025), brand marketing strategy (Ning, 2024; Zhao, 2025) and role of user-generated content (UGC) in purchase decisions (Lin & Shen, 2023). Other areas researched are the concept of participatory communication (Shen et al., 2023), re-appropriation of hashtags (Wan et al., 2025), and digital labor of micro-influencers (Feng, 2025). In particular, Liu (2026) proposes the concept of “clustered governance” used for the management of creators in the platform. The majority of works examine platform logic, governance, and users’ behavior using marketing or political economy perspectives, and there are few studies devoted to the strategic competition of content producers for attention as their primary form of work. This paper fills this gap by focusing on the attention economy perspective. Therefore, the main research question of the paper is: How do content producers on Xiaohongshu compete for users' attention?

The choice of the research topic is justified by the growing impact of the platform on the consumers' decision-making process and the unique content governance system that operates on it.

Structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 is Theoretical Framework. Section 3 is Research Context. Section 4 is Content Strategies Analysis. Section 5 is Findings. Section 6 is Conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Attention Economy and Social Media Platforms

According to the attention economy model, when there is an abundance of information in the world, then attention becomes the limiting factor. This is a relevant theory today due to the advent of social media sites that make use of attention-based economic models (Mears, 2023).

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Attention can be viewed as capital which is exchangeable into economic, social, and symbolic value, but attention holds more value only if it comes from a socially valuable audience.

Attention can be garnered by the platforms through different means such as algorithms that make recommendations, engagement (in the form of likes, comments, shares), and content forms that keep people on the platform for long. This theory is highly applicable to Xiaohongshu as engagement directly results in monetary gains.

2.2 Content Production

Content creation on social media is considered digital labour within the framework of the political economy of communication. This approach is appropriate for the analysis of Xiaohongshu as the user-generated content (UGC) contributes to the platform's value (Yuan, 2023). The theory of audience as commodity, which claims that audiences are sold to the advertisers, has transformed in the era of digitization into a broader concept that includes the content creation by users. Content creation in digital marketing terms can be described as the creation of engaging information (textual, visual or audio) to engage the target audience (University of Greater Manchester, 2023). Users of Xiaohongshu act both as producers and sellers creating content and data utilized by the platform for accumulation of capital.

2.3 Platform Governance and Algorithmic Control

Platform Governance refers to the means through which platforms can control users' behaviors and production of contents. Platform governance on Xiaohongshu happens via algorithmic curation, content moderation, and community management (Liu, 2026). Liu (2026) defines "clustered governance" for the way Xiaohongshu clusters some selected creators into its own communities for exclusive support with maintaining centralized control.

The recommendation algorithms of Xiaohongshu affect content visibility by producing what Liu (2026) calls "dual visibility regime" that combines both algorithmic and curated structures. The reactions of creators include different forms from "folk theories" to adapt algorithmic systems to "adaptive tactics" involving strategic use of hashtags and participation in campaigns.

2.4 Authenticity and Relational Labor

Authenticity plays an important role in content creation, with performers required to enact "authenticity" to gain the trust of their followers (Mears, 2023). Mears (2023) identifies "personal authenticity," which involves influencers who establish personal relationships with niche audiences, and "situational authenticity," used by viral content performers to reenact mundane situations.

Relational labor refers to the process of establishing and maintaining audience relationships. Relational labor on Xiaohongshu includes comment replies, direct messaging, and live performances (Feng, 2025). It should be noted that creators can intentionally reject these expectations and take up an in and against the platform attitude.

2.5 Summary

There are four distinct perspectives that together offer a comprehensive approach to examining the phenomenon of attention competition on Xiaohongshu: the attention economy (attention as a rare commodity which is monetized by algorithms and participation); content creation (content creators as digital workers who create content and data for the platform by means of their UGC); platform governance (governance by clustering and a double visibility system through which visibility is determined by algorithms and humans, thus forcing creators to engage in adaptation); and authenticity and relational work (creators enact authenticity and make relational work with emotions).

3. Research Context: Xiaohongshu Platform

3.1 Platform Overview and User Demographics

Xiaohongshu has emerged as one of the key platforms in lifestyle by combining social interaction, content creation, and e-commerce (Yang, 2025). By 2023, Xiaohongshu had more than 312 million active users each month, where users belonging to birth cohorts of 1995 and 2000 make up more than 70% of the total users (Ning, 2024). The majority of the users are young and urban females, where 70% of the users are females and 50% belong to the Tier 1 and 2 cities (Zhao, 2025). The underlying theme of Xiaohongshu is "mark my life" (Yang, 2025) which means users should share their genuine experiences with regards to beauty, fashion, travel, food, and lifestyle.

What sets Xiaohongshu apart from other social media apps like Instagram or TikTok is that it has a unique beauty and lifestyle community culture, "zhongcao" culture, and its social commerce ecosystem. According to Lim (2020), what makes Xiaohongshu different from other conventional social media sites like Instagram is its lifestyle social content, which is integrated with the process of product discovery and consumer engagement. Furthermore, according to Shao (2025), Xiaohongshu is a discovery site that lets users discover various fashion, beauty, travel, and consumer goods through user-generated content, and linking content discovery with purchase.

3.2 Platform Architecture and Algorithmic Mechanism

Xiaohongshu applies recommendation-driven approach in distributing the content (Wan et al., 2025). According to WEPR (2026), the approach applied in Xiaohongshu is based on recent user actions such as clicks, likes, saves and comments that allow retrieving, ranking and redistributing the content. The Explore feature applies personalized recommendations by analyzing searches, clicks,

likes, comments and saves. The process involves filtering, in which the algorithm flags all the content that violates the policy and moves it into the traffic pool through user tagging. The content that is filtered is then matched with users, and its redistribution will depend on the engagement indicators and performance evaluation. The future recommendations will be based on the engagement activities.

3.3 Governance and Content Moderation

Xiaohongshu is regulated via several mechanisms such as algorithmic regulation, human curation, and community governance (Liu, 2026). Clustered governance involves putting selected creators in WeChat groups organized by the platform based on specific themes, allowing them to be informed about the campaign briefs and interact with the content operators. Preferences of content operators make up between 10% and 20% of traffic allocations. Apart from that, Xiaohongshu uses human content moderators to moderate content and control posts when needed. WIRED (2025) reports that Xiaohongshu makes use of teams of content moderators to carry out content enforcement and deal with emerging moderation issues. Content regulation is thus a two-way process involving checking before and after posting.

4. Content Strategies for Attention Competition

4.1 Algorithmic Optimization Strategies

Content creators adopt advanced tactics to ensure that their content is optimized in terms of being seen by the algorithms. Content producers know know how to utilize the performance indicators such as likes, collectibles, followers, comments, and shares (Ning, 2024).

Hashtags play an important role in facilitating algorithmic visibility in Xiaohongshu. Through strategic hashtag choice, creators can attract a certain audience. Female creators have re-appropriated hashtags such as baby food to exclude undesirable male audiences and attract desirable ones. Trending hashtags are used as another traffic acquisition method, where creators use hashtags like College Entrance Examination during exams to attract a wider audience (Zhang, 2025). This practice is an illustration of the conflict between authenticity and optimization.

Creators optimize the format and timing of content in order to enhance their algorithmic performance in Xiaohongshu. Short-form videos have become dominant, but in-depth graphic notes are still popular when it comes to knowledge-based content (Yang, 2025). Creators within the managed groups by platforms get comprehensive instructions regarding posting time, hashtags, and style elements to increase traffic rewards. The horse-race mechanism illustrates competition and gamification where higher GMV winners get more platform assistance.

4.2 Content Differentiation and Niche Positioning

Content differentiation acts as an important method of attention capturing. A Severe content homogenization leads to disengagement. Content producers use some approaches for differentiation.

Content creators tend to specialize in verticals to become experts in certain niches. As Ning (2024) shows, such brands as XiaoXianDun (a freshly stewed bird's nest brand) succeeded in marketing using vertical positioning. Small influencers usually achieve engagement of 7-10% in vertical niches compared to 5-7% of large influencers (Feng, 2025). The engagement rate of micro-influencers (10,000 – 100,000 followers) in vertical niche is estimated at 7–10%. Their content is highly targeted at particular audience, and, thus, leads to a large number of likes, comments and saves. The engagement rate of mid-level and macro-influencers (more than 100,000 followers) is 5–7%, as their audience is more general and engages less on average per follower. This example proves that niche strategy is worth implementing, as engagement is directly related to the algorithmic weight of recommendations.

Creators that manage to create an authentic personal brand will be able to make use of personalization for attracting an audience. Nevertheless, personal branding is contradictory to the optimization process (Zhao, 2025). The viral content creators use situational authenticity—the creation of scenes of everyday life—that differs from personal authenticity popular in influencer culture (Mears, 2023). This approach is typical of the content that was created for the mass consumption.

4.3 Participatory Communication and Community Engagement

Communication strategies that are participatory in nature represent the third dimension of attention capture. Shen et al. (2023) show how participatory communication impacts the attention of the users and commercial intentions. As per the findings of the researchers, the forwarded notes get more attention as compared to the original notes. It means that the content passed via participatory methods gets perceived to be more trustworthy.

Xiaohongshu offers various methods for participatory communication that create “human-computer-human” interaction. In analysis, it is found that liking behavior positively influences the decision of forwarding, whereas commenting behavior negatively impacts forwarding decisions (Shen et al., 2023). Content creators make use of community building practices for building an engaged audience (Zhang, 2025). The fan communities act as community mechanisms for content co-creation by the users.

4.4 Emotional and Relational Labor

Emotional labor becomes an important part of content strategy for Xiaohongshu. Creators engage their emotional energy in establishing connections with their audience (Fan, 2025). Small-scale influencers spend many hours

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per day answering on comments, being afraid of losing followers (Feng, 2025).

Emotional content engages audience more actively. The production of "interesting, useful and touching content" represents social currency that encourages sharing (Zhang, 2025). Krolicki & Arslan (2025) reported that a Xiaohongshu creator gained a large following through humorous and heartfelt content while maintaining frequent interactions with viewers, illustrating how personal connection and emotional appeal can strengthen audience engagement. It demonstrates attention economy logic where emotional content wins over purely informative content.

Despite all the pressure, creators show their resistance. Fan (2025) uses a new concept called "in and against the platform" to show the duality of creators' position where creators collaborate with platform demands but resist certain rules at the same time. The latter is shown by creators who resist hyper-competitive Chinese professional culture through influencer work.

4.5 Platform Campaign Participation

One way to achieve algorithmic visibility on the platform is through campaign participation. According to Liu (2026), it is possible to classify creators into communities because of the "clustered governance" nature of Xiaohongshu which allows for early notification of campaigns. However, campaign participation hinders creativity as the process is governed by rules and regulations. Gamification facilitates campaign participation through the establishment of performance targets and key performance indicators, with creators having to monitor engagement, reach and saves in order to prove the effectiveness of the campaigns (ALLXHS, 2026). The creators work almost like machines in such an environment.

5. Discussions and Findings

Finding 1: The content producers on Xiaohongshu are located at different points on the spectrum in terms of their positions on the field of social media production. Vertical influencers' positions are closer to that of autonomy since they focus on symbolic capital and niches, while those who produce viral content choose to be more heteronomous in focusing on the masses and economic capital (Mears, 2023).

Finding 2: There is a complicated relationship of algorithmic governance and creator agency since despite being shaped by the latter one, the creators have agency in exercising "strategic compliance" by having an "in and against the platform" position and participating in collective actions, like hashtag appropriation by women.

Finding 3: There are parallels in the ways how content creation strategies correspond to the wider trends in the attention economy. On Xiaohongshu, users work as both content producers and consumers (Yuan, 2023); however, labor precarity still exists: small influencers spend a lot of time for little earnings (Feng, 2025), and there is a psychological toll from emotional labor. Nevertheless, the creators show resilience through cooperation.

Finding 4: This means that there are certain implications for the platform policies and design. The opacity of algorithms is connected with the precarity of creators, which calls for greater transparency (Feng, 2025). Psychological costs of the emotional labor mean that there is a need for protection of creators, while lack of labor rights protection shows exploitation and requires social security.

6. Conclusion

The present paper considered the ways of competition for user attention on Xiaohongshu from the viewpoint of the attention economy paradigm. Based on a literature review, five dimensions of attention competition were identified, including algorithmic optimization, content differentiation, participatory communication, emotional and relational labor, and participation in platform campaigns.

As shown in the paper, the success of content producers is contingent on operating in a highly complicated environment of platform governance, algorithms, and the needs of the audience. Algorithmic optimization, differentiation in a vertical niche, communication with the audience, performing of relational and emotional labor, as well as participation in platform campaigns are important activities of content producers. At the same time, content producers hold certain positions in the field of social media content production which are either niche-orientated and focused on symbolic capital or mass-oriented and focused on economic capital. They also have some forms of agency in the form of "strategic compliance" and "in and against the platform" attitude.

There are three contributions of this research. First, the present paper contributes to the theory of the attention economy as it considers it in relation to non-Western platform Xiaohongshu, thus expanding an approach developed in the framework of Euro-American scholarship. Second, the paper combines four theories—the attention economy, content production as digital labor, platform governance and algorithmic control, and authenticity and relational labor—into one analytical framework which offers a more comprehensive approach to attention competition on social media where recommendations play an important role. Third, it offers the perspective of the content producer in addition to the platform and marketing perspectives of previous research, showing platform-specific aspects of content creation and the tensions of authenticity and commercialism.

From a practical standpoint, the paper demonstrates the importance of algorithmic transparency and creator protection by platforms as well as the implementation of some social security mechanisms. For content producers, it shows that vertical specialization and strategic partici-

pation in platform governance might be used as tools for gaining visibility and sustained engagement.

Further research may consider the influence of changes in the platform governance on content strategies, internationalization and expansion of Xiaohongshu, new technological developments, and comparative research of different platforms.

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