

The 'Ideal Life' on Rednote: The Construction of Consumer Culture and Self-Identity

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Abstract. This article explores Rednote, a popular Chinese platform for female users, analyzing the construction of its "ideal life", the influence of consumer culture, and the shaping of users' self-identity. Rednote was founded in 2013 and has evolved from an overseas shopping sharing platform to a comprehensive platform that integrates e-commerce, social interaction, and lifestyle services. The "Ideal Life" on Rednote is constructed by a combination of technical tools (editing functions, tags), influencers (KOLs setting life templates), and algorithms (interest based recommendations). Its consumer culture is driven by the "grass planting" mechanism, which combines content browsing with shopping through links and soft advertising, turning products into lifestyle/identity symbols. However, it faces a contradiction: the boundary between true sharing and commercial marketing is blurred, weakening the initial trust. It critically analyzes that how Rednote integrates the consumption logic, platform ecology and personal self-identity in the digital era, and reveals the impact of mobile platforms on modern lifestyle.

Keywords: ideal-life discourse, self-identity, consumer culture, commercial marketing

1. Introduction

This paper will investigate the most popular app on female culture in China, Rednote, which was founded in Shanghai in 2013. As a platform which is designed with the mission of "discovering and sharing wonderful worlds", Rednote soon attracted attention of young people, especially young girls. In the app, Users can share life experiences through photos, videos, and text-based storytelling, covering fashion, beauty, food, travel, emotions, workplace and other fields. The massive UGC database makes Rednote a digital handbook of youth culture and youth lifestyle. For example, when users want to find food recommendations or obtain travel guides, they can always search for relevant content on the platform. By applying artificial intelligence and big data technologies, Rednote provides users with accurate content recommendations and matching services based on their interests, which significantly improves the user experience.

However, although Rednote is open to all users for content creation, it also encourages them to display an "ideal life," which usually includes content about travel, beauty care, fitness, and lifestyle. As a result, a series of videos and images themed on "high-quality life" have gradually entered the public view, forming a phenomenon of collective imagination around this concept. The sharing and interaction of such content essentially imply people's consumption behaviors, self-image

shaping and identity affirmation, which reflects the key difference between modern society and traditional society. Individuals no longer rely solely on the identity assigned by the social structure; instead, they break through the constraints of traditional identity through active choices and practices, and continuously confirm their self-identity in this process.

Based upon the discourse of “ideal life”, this article has three research questions: how Rednote constructs the "ideal life" through content; how consumer culture affects users' consumption choices through symbolic communication, and how users shape and recognize their self-image through consumption behaviors.

2. Literature review

In recent years, Rednote has gradually developed into a highly influential lifestyle platform in people's daily lives. In the early 21st century, digital technology developed rapidly; since 2012, the mobile Internet and smartphones have gradually emerged, driving users to shift from personal computer (PC) terminals to mobile terminals, and "smartphones" have become an indispensable part of people's lives. Starting from basic communication functions, smartphones have gradually expanded to multiple fields, integrating social interaction, entertainment, office work and shopping. Whether in crowded subways, busy shopping malls or comfortable homes, users can access information at any time through wireless and mobile networks. This terminal transformation has had a profound impact on the development of mobile applications.

Against this background, Rednote was officially established in 2013. In the initial stage, it focused on overseas shopping and life experience sharing, with the core theme of "sharing beauty". At the time of its launch, Rednote mainly used the "sticky note" function to support user life sharing, allowing users to publish shopping experiences and insights in the form of pictures and texts. In 2016, to expand its user scale, Rednote launched an e-commerce module, enabling users to directly purchase overseas products on the platform. In 2017, Rednote carried out preliminary exploration in the field of celebrity collaborations, inviting some celebrities to settle in the platform and share their shopping content and experiences. Owing to their influence, Rednote's user base expanded rapidly. In 2018, driven by the development of the e-commerce sector, more users joined Rednote; at the same time, the platform launched a short video function, providing users with more diversified ways to share life moments and shopping experiences.

The multiple affordances embedded in Rednote's design enable users to share, consume, and interact, thereby fostering a participatory and commercialized social environment. Wu Zihui pointed out: "The content created on the platform can be interacted with and shared at any time, which fully meets users' needs for self-expression. It integrates the characteristics of multiple media and has the dual attributes of satisfying the audience's entertainment needs and facilitating the audience's creation. Relying on the mobile Internet and taking mobile intelligent terminals as carriers, it fits into users' daily fragmented time, and caters to both the visual enjoyment of users and viewers and the video form that allows free expression of desires." [1] The diversification of video content has not only enriched social forms, but also promoted the dissemination of multiculturalism and stimulated users' creativity. In 2019, Rednote launched a live streaming function, making shopping scenarios more diversified; users can understand products in a more intuitive and visual way, thus improving their shopping experience. Yuan Didi stated: "Under the influence of consumer culture, celebrity live streaming sales stimulate user consumption through the anchor's idol identity. This not only enhances the brand awareness of the sold products, but also shortens the psychological distance between users and products. This is a positive manifestation of focusing on user needs and experience." [2] Due to a large number of fans being attracted to the platform and even participating

in product purchases, the platform's traffic and user scale have formed a mutually promoting growth trend, and its commercial capabilities have been rapidly improved. Rednote has thus gradually become an important platform contributing to economic development. In 2021, after another round of financing, the platform launched the "Account-Store Integration" model, allowing merchants to open stores on Rednote and establish a deep connection between their accounts and stores. Merchants only need to complete a simple authentication process to obtain a Rednote account, and users can directly enter the purchase page on the homepage after viewing the promotion content. This model greatly saves users' time, simplifies the shopping process, and further optimizes Rednote's e-commerce ecosystem. Zhang Shu argued: "Live streaming e-commerce emphasizes interactivity and real-time performance, which can quickly attract users' attention and facilitate transaction realization. The key lies in how hosts attract viewers through real-time interaction and content presentation, and improve users' purchase conversion rate through interaction. Social e-commerce combines the characteristics of social media and e-commerce, and uses social network relationships and user-generated content to promote product sales." [3]

In modern consumer society, people's consumption patterns are no longer limited to meeting basic living needs; instead, consumption has become a way to express personal pursuits and reflect identity, social class and taste. For example, many people drink coffee in daily life, but only a small number of them pursue hand-brewed coffee and purchase hand-brewed coffee sets. The fundamental reason for this phenomenon is the pursuit of a high-quality life. Such consumption behavior is not just about buying products, but about conveying one's life attitude and the differences between one's social circle and others to the outside world. Taste is reflected in implicit consumption choices and concepts: some people are willing to invest time and energy in home decoration, because they want their home to be not only comfortable, but also more elegant and textured; on the contrary, others believe that they should not spend too much time and money on home decoration, and are more willing to invest in other aspects of life. In addition, in terms of self-identity, social media platforms represented by Rednote usually provide a variety of technical supports, enabling users to shape images of different styles through short videos, pictures and texts, live broadcasts, dynamic special effects and other forms. Zhang Lingqun mentioned: "The setting of the personal media interface reflects the blogger's expectations for themselves and is an intuitive display of the personal media image. Just as Rednote encourages sincere sharing, the personalized customization of nicknames, avatars and introductions can create authentic and vivid character images while protecting personal privacy and presenting diversity and fun." [4] Users can choose to collect specific notes or follow favorite bloggers to further understand their own preferences. After that, social media platforms will calculate users' personal preferences and potential interests based on their behaviors and browsing history, accurately identify users' preferences, and guide users to show themselves in different scenarios through the "interest matching and algorithm recommendation" of relevant content.

At the same time, social media platforms usually have a sound interactive mechanism, including comments, likes, collections, follows and private messages. Users can express their views and ideas through these functions. The interaction between viewers and authors not only helps viewers to have a deeper understanding of themselves, but also enables authors to obtain recognition and continue to create.

In summary, Rednote has gradually developed from an initial overseas shopping sharing platform into an integrated platform that combines e-commerce, economic development functions and comprehensive social lifestyle services. Its development process not only reflects the development trend of mobile Internet platforms, but also has a profound impact on people's modern consumption concepts and patterns.

3. The construction of an ideal life

As a platform with female consumers as the main target group, Rednote strengthens the concept of "ideal life" by emphasizing ideal body images, beauty, heterosexual relationships and neoliberal aspirational life politics. On Rednote, the "ideal life" is not a collection of ordinary life moments, but a carefully constructed image. This construction process relies on the platform's technical infrastructure, specifically data-driven content processing, algorithm recommendation and hashtag agenda-setting. Moreover, this process is sustained by the Wanghong (online celebrity) economy: the Wanghong economy uses the visibility and credibility of Internet celebrities to commercialize lifestyle practices, while encouraging ordinary users to participate in aspirational consumption and self-branding.

From the perspective of technology, Rednote has provided users with a complete set of in-app functions, enabling users to transform real life into visual symbols according to the standards of "ideal life". These functions include editing tools, filters and tags. For example, a set of selfies published by users may not be the original material; instead, they may have undergone a lot of post-processing or photo editing. Such modifications may involve using "beauty cameras" or "image enhancement tools" to adjust the face, thereby reconstructing the authenticity of one's own face. Users can delete unwanted elements, blur the background and adjust the color tone to make their photos more in line with aesthetic preferences. In travel scenarios, the "perfect attribute" is reflected in editing functions and tags: users arrange content in a "storyboard-style" layout to form connected fragments, and then match them with text annotations, turning personal diary records into "ideal travel content" that has both aesthetic value and practicality and meets public taste. The tagging system classifies these contents into the attributes and categories of "ideal life"; then, the platform recommends the content defined by these tags to target users through data calculation, such as #healing scenery, #niche travel destinations, #travel fragments, #travel records, etc.

Influencers (Key Opinion Leaders, KOLs) are the main subjects in the construction of "ideal life". Their core role is to set a "standard life template" for ordinary users to learn from and follow. This can be seen in the videos of beauty KOLs: their content mainly relies on advertising placements. For example, in "immersive skincare vlogs" and "good product recommendations", KOLs integrate the basic skincare process (makeup removal - facial cleansing - toner - essence - eye cream - face cream) into an "exquisite life ritual". The camera usually focuses on the neatly arranged skincare products (mostly international famous brands or Internet popular products) on the washbasin, and matches them with soothing background music, thus transforming daily functional behaviors into "ideal life practices" of "self-presentation". Fitness KOLs are good at spreading the concept of "becoming a better self and realizing transformation" to users through "joint exercise" and the promotion of "ideal body shape". They indirectly urge users to check in daily by publishing photos of their exercise results (such as better dressing effect and obvious muscle lines). In addition, the professional background of KOLs (such as "certified beauty artist" and "professional fitness coach") enhances the credibility of the "ideal life" they advocate, and their recommendations are regarded by users as verified optimal choices.

Beyond content creation and subjective influence, platform algorithms play a key role as "filters" and "amplifiers", directly determining which "ideal life images" can enter the public view. Rednote's algorithm recommendation system takes "user interest matching" as the core, emphasizes visual aesthetics, refines the label system, and highly aligns the recommended content with the "ideal life". When a travel note is labeled with #Dali Erhai Homestay, #Seaside Photos and other tags, and obtains initial likes, collections and comments, the algorithm will recommend it to users who follow categories such as "travel", "tourism" and "lifestyle" in the subsequent promotion stage. At the same

time, when users frequently browse content under specific tags, the algorithm will automatically push and associate more content under these tags to users.

In general, the "ideal life" on Rednote is mainly constructed through the joint action of technical tools, influencers (KOLs) and algorithms. Specifically, after ordinary users publish content using editing, tagging and other functions, KOLs upgrade this type of content into an "imitable template"; finally, algorithms continuously spread these images through traffic matching, thus making the "ideal life" a comprehensive and influential concept.

4. The construction of an ideal life

Rednote's consumer culture is mainly driven by the "grass-planting" (product recommendation) mechanism. This mechanism does not rely on simple content recommendation, but on content sharing that can stimulate users' consumption desire. The foundation of this mechanism is essentially "trust". Rednote does not only promote the content of influencers, but also adopts a "traffic equality" strategy to provide ordinary users with more exposure opportunities for their notes. This strategy makes users feel that the content is more "authentic and reliable", thus increasing their sense of security when making consumption choices. Huang Qin explained: "The blogger first briefly explains the motivation and general theme of the video, then gradually expands to introduce various fashion items, and gives detailed descriptions from the aspects of appearance, practicality and use effect. This way can attract the audience's interest without being rigid and abrupt, and promote the audience to watch the whole content." [5] For example, when beauty bloggers promote products such as matte lipsticks, their content design does not rigidly introduce traditional color numbers and texture parameters; instead, they carry out scenario-based demonstrations, such as showing that the lipstick can be matched with natural makeup, has high color saturation without sticking to the cup, and does not fade. These demonstrations directly address the concerns of users when purchasing lipsticks, prove that the promoted products can effectively solve a series of user pain points, and thus stimulate users' purchase interest. Yi Wenkang also mentioned: "The blogger first briefly explains the motivation and general theme of recording the video, then gradually expands to introduce various fashion items, and gives detailed descriptions from the aspects of appearance, practicality and use effect." [6] What supports the purchase behaviour is that Rednote closely integrates content browsing with consumer behavior through the embedding of shopping links, the launch of brand promotion campaigns, and the pervasive use of soft advertising, thereby forming a self-sustaining commercial loop. The platform offers the affordance that attach the shopping link with users posts which direct viewers to the purchase page. The connection of content and purchase successfully turns Rednote into a shopping app [7].

In addition, official accounts of commercial institutions can directly post sales information such as "limited-time discounts," "multi-purchase promotions," and "new product experience recruitment." However, due to the clear labeling of some notes as "advertisements", their interaction rate drops by more than 40%. Therefore, brands tend to hide their marketing attributes by integrating products into life scenarios and personal experience sharing. Huang Qin argues that: "In terms of content, they focus on personal experience, emphasize the practical value of products, and at the same time naturally integrate their symbolic value. This plays an important role in guiding consumer behavior, influencing lifestyle and shaping ideology." [5] For example, clothing brands do not directly promote products, but show clothing styles and matching effects through themes such as "daily wear" and "casual wear for going out", so as to reduce the sense of commercialization.

Under the platform's consumption logic, commodities have transcended their utilitarian function to serve as markers of lifestyle and identity. It is clear to see that users' motivation for purchasing

goods has gradually shifted from "satisfying basic functional needs" to "meeting emotional and identity needs". By consuming specific products and joining specific lifestyle circles, users realize self-identity and obtain a sense of group belonging. Taking the field of luxury skincare and fashion as an example: a high-end face cream brand no longer uses traditional promotion methods; instead, many bloggers link the product to the lifestyle of "pursuing high-quality life and focusing on self-care" through content such as "night skincare rituals" and "morning routines of exquisite girls" [6]. When fashion bloggers promote designer brand clothing, they emphasize characteristics such as "niche design sense" and "avoiding style duplication", and associate the purchase behavior with identity labels such as "refusing to follow the trend" and "pursuing personalized aesthetics". This "product-lifestyle" binding model caters to users' needs for identity affirmation.

The core contradiction of Rednote's consumer culture lies in the blurred boundary between genuine sharing and commercial marketing. The platform established a trust foundation based on "authentic user-generated content (UGC)" in the early stage, but this foundation has gradually weakened in the process of commercialization. Some bloggers, after accepting brand cooperation, still publish content in the name of "personal authentic experience and discovery of good products" without clearly indicating commercial cooperation relations, making it difficult for users to distinguish the authenticity of the content. This blurred boundary has affected the platform's credibility: many users will take the initiative to identify whether the content is an advertisement when browsing notes, such as observing whether a blogger recommends the same product for a long time, or whether there are implicit statements guiding purchases [7].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of Rednote showcased how the e-commerce is absorbed into content industry. For Rednote, it has transformed from initially focusing on overseas shopping and sharing to a comprehensive platform integrating e-commerce, social interaction and lifestyle services. In the process of shaping the "ideal life", visual editing capabilities of digital tools, the lifestyle demonstrations of influencers, and the algorithmic recommendation system of the platform work together to transform daily life fragments into a perfect formula which could be practiced by every viewer. This transformation makes the "ideal life" beyond its original meaning and become a carefully constructed symbolic system. The consumer culture centered on "grass-planting" and the "product-lifestyle" connection drives consumption to move beyond satisfying functional needs, becoming instead a means of identity expression and a vehicle for the construction of users' self-identity. With the support of personalized content creation and platform affordances, users shape their ideal self-images in the virtual world; then, algorithms accurately recommend these images to users with matching interests, further reinforcing users' own preferences. Although Rednote faces the challenge of blurred boundaries between genuine sharing and commercial marketing, it remains a representative case for understanding the consumption logic, platform ecology and individual self-identity in the digital age, and has far-reaching enlightenment for exploring how the mobile Internet affects modern lifestyles.

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