Online Narrators: A Study on the Charisma, Competence, and Cultural Construction of Live-Streaming E-Commerce Hosts in China

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Abstract. This study explores the pivotal role of hosts as "online narrators" in Chinese live-streaming e-commerce and their impact on consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior. We argue that live-streaming e-commerce has evolved beyond traditional commerce into a unique sphere integrating online performance, immersive interaction, and digital cultural consumption. Adopting an interdisciplinary lens from digital media, cultural industry, and art appreciation, we propose a theoretical framework focusing on hosts' digital performance affordances, aesthetic appeal, and cultural dissemination capabilities. These attributes collectively shape the host's digital persona. Through parasocial interaction, a new mode of social engagement, they profoundly influence consumers' aesthetic pleasure, emotional resonance, and sense of community belonging, ultimately driving digital cultural consumption. This research aims to address existing literature gaps and offer theoretical insights into emerging cultural dissemination paradigms in the digital economy.

Keywords: Digital Cultural Consumption, Parasocial Interaction, live-streaming e-commerce

1 Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital media has fundamentally reshaped society, with live-streaming e-commerce emerging as a prominent example. This phenomenon transcends simple transactions, integrating online performance, immersive interaction, and digital cultural consumption. It blurs the lines between commerce and entertainment, transforming shopping into a multisensory, real-time experience rich in cultural meaning. At its heart are hosts, who have evolved beyond salespeople to become digital-era content creators, cultural disseminators, and community builders—"online narrators."

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China leads this transformation, showcasing the deep integration of digital media and the cultural industry. Since Taobao Live launched in 2016, live-streaming e-commerce has exploded, particularly post-2020. With over a billion short video users by December 2022, and a market projected to reach 4.9 trillion RMB by 2023 [1], China has forged a unique "live-streaming consumption" paradigm. Here, hosts leverage their charisma, diverse skills, and platform affordances to turn product promotions into engaging "online theaters." Audiences gain not just products but also aesthetic pleasure, emotional resonance, and a sense of community belonging, akin to traditional cultural consumption.

Despite its rapid growth and academic interest, current live-streaming research primarily focuses on marketing and information systems, often overlooking its cultural connotations and artistic expressions. Specifically, how hosts, as "online narrators," engage in cultural construction and artistic expression through their charisma and competence, and how these factors, via parasocial interaction, ultimately influence consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior, remains an area requiring further exploration. This study aims to address this by deeply analyzing the pivotal role of "online narrators" in live-streaming e-commerce and the mechanisms by which their charisma, competence, and affordances influence digital cultural consumption.

2 Research Subject and Conjectured Research Questions

This study focuses on "online narrators"—live-streaming e-commerce hosts in the Chinese context. We view them as a product of the integration of digital media technology and the cultural industry, a core role that encompasses commercial promotion, cultural dissemination, and artistic performance. Hosts are not merely salespeople; they are key figures who engage in cultural construction and artistic expression through their unique charisma, diverse capabilities, and the affordances provided by platforms, thereby influencing consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior.

Based on the aforementioned background and a review of existing research gaps, this study attempts to provide a framework for understanding the role of online hosts in China and proposes the following conjectured research questions:

1) What is the impact of hosts' digital performance affordances, aesthetic appeal, and cultural dissemination capabilities on consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior in Chinese live-streaming e-commerce?

2) In Chinese online live streaming, how do hosts' digital performance affordances, aesthetic appeal, and cultural dissemination capabilities influence their parasocial emotional connection with consumers?

3) How does parasocial emotional connection influence consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior in Chinese online live streaming?

4) Does parasocial emotional connection mediate the relationship between hosts' digital performance affordances, aesthetic appeal, and cultural dissemination capabilities and consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior?

3 Literature Review and Dimensional Framework

This chapter aims to systematically review the theoretical and empirical research related to live-streaming marketing, the characteristics of "online narrators" (hosts, including affordances, charisma, and competence), and parasocial interaction. Based on this, it outlines the four core dimensional frameworks that address the aforementioned research questions. As an exploratory paper, this study is committed to providing a theoretical framework for understanding the role of online hosts in China.

The evolution of live-streaming marketing has transformed it from a traditional, one-way product promotion into a highly interactive, real-time, and performative digital cultural arena. Live-streaming technology has enabled a leap forward in two-way real-time interaction between information sources (hosts) and audiences [2]. This not only fulfills users' social needs but also allows hosts to become cultural opinion leaders [3]. In this host-centric ecosystem, the hosts' unique charisma, excellent professionalism, and strong cultural influence collectively shape their distinct image as "online narrators." By vividly sharing their product trial experiences, they enhance the credibility of marketing information [4] and, through their professionalism, attract target audience traffic, ultimately influencing consumer behavior through their intangible influence.

This study will deeply explore four key dimensions that form the core of "online narrators": host affordances, host charisma, host competence, and parasocial interaction. These four dimensions are not isolated but are interconnected, jointly constructing the host's digital persona and cultural narrative, thereby influencing consumers' digital cultural consumption behavior.

3.1 Host Affordances: Empowering Artistic Expression and Interaction through Digital Media

The concept of "affordance," initially proposed by ecological psychologist Gibson, emphasizes the complementarity between the environment and the organism. This theory was subsequently introduced into the field of communication by Wellman and Schrock to explain how new media technologies influence people's daily lives and communication practices. [5] Pan Zhongdang further categorized new media affordances into "information production affordances," "social affordances," and "mobile affordances."

In the digital cultural sphere of live-streaming e-commerce, host affordances represent the unique possibilities provided by digital media technology for hosts to engage in artistic expression, content creation, and community interaction. For example, the real-time interactive affordance of live-streaming technology not only supports instant Q&A between hosts and audiences but also empowers hosts' improvisational performance and spontaneity, enhancing the "live presence" and "authenticity" of the stream, making it more akin to a vibrant online performance. High-definition visuals, multi-camera switching, and filter effects, which are visual presentation affordances, offer rich means for hosts' digital aesthetics and visual artistic presentation. Furthermore, platform functionalities like tipping, fan groups, and exclusive emoticons, which are

community building affordances, help hosts cultivate a loyal fanbase and form communities with shared cultural identities. These technologically provided affordances are the cornerstone for hosts to transcend traditional sales roles and transform into online narrators and cultural constructors, providing abundant possibilities for their artistic expression and cultural dissemination.

3.2 Host Charisma: Aesthetic Pleasure and Emotional Connection Through Artistic Expression

In the context of increasingly frequent online shopping and converging product prices, price is no longer the sole driving factor. Consumers are increasingly focusing on the host's personal image and entertainment value, as well as service demands beyond the product itself [6]. This makes the charisma of live-streaming hosts a crucial external cue for consumer purchasing decisions. While scholars currently lack a unified definition of host charisma, they generally focus on the host's personal characteristics, temperament, charm, and style [7]. Meng Lu et al., through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews, concluded that the charisma and interactivity of influencer hosts are most effective in eliciting consumer emotions and engagement for entertainment-oriented hosts.

This study elevates host charisma to the level of aesthetic, artistic, and performance charisma, defining it as the host's ability to attract consumers to participate in live-streaming interactions and activities through attributes such as appearance, demeanor, vocal tone, expressive facial expressions, interpersonal skills, and humor, thereby fulfilling consumers' desires for self-image enhancement and aesthetic pleasure, and consequently influencing their digital cultural consumption behavior. It is not merely external attractiveness but a comprehensive manifestation of the host's image shaping, visual presentation, and camera presence, akin to presentation in stage or visual arts. The host's linguistic charisma (e.g., humor, storytelling skills) and emotional appeal allow audiences to experience emotional resonance and artistic enjoyment during the shopping process. This charisma is a core element of cultural construction, as it can inspire and unite audiences, fostering a shared cultural identity.

3.3 Host Competence: Cultural Content Curation and Community Atmosphere Creation

With the rapid expansion of China's online shopping market and the explosive growth of live-streaming e-commerce, host competence has become critical for success. Host competence refers not only to sales skills but, more importantly, to their ability to create and disseminate cultural content and cultivate a specific community atmosphere. This new digital transaction method instantly transmits the host's voice, product images, and other information from one location to multiple others via live-streaming platforms, providing consumers with an immersive experience [8]. This addresses issues of delayed information exchange and rigid interaction methods prevalent in traditional e-commerce [9].

This study refines host competence into several dimensions, imbuing them with cultural connotations: First is interactivity, which is not merely simple Q&A between host and consumer but rather a "dialogic performance" and "co-creation of content" between the host and the audience, guiding active participation in this "online carnival" to collectively form a unique community cultural practice [10]. Second is professionalism, which, beyond a deep understanding of products, is reflected in how hosts artistically or culturally present this knowledge. For instance, incorporating cultural background or aesthetic lifestyles when introducing beauty products or regional flavors when discussing food. They are both "domain experts" and "cultural evangelists" [11]. Furthermore, an entertainment orientation is crucial, referring to the pleasure and enjoyment consumers experience while watching live streams. Hosts, through their wit, eloquence, and artistic performance, can stimulate consumers' pleasure perception, thereby promoting purchasing behavior. These competencies collectively enable hosts to elevate a mere shopping act into a cultural consumption scenario and community atmosphere experience. This goes beyond simply facilitating a transaction; it makes audiences feel a sense of belonging and participation, as if they are in a shared online cultural space.

3.4 Parasocial Interaction: Emotional Connection and Cultural Identification in the Digital Age

The concept of "parasocial interaction" (PSI) was introduced by Horton and Wohl to describe the one-way, media-mediated, illusory social interaction between audiences and media personae. While PSI in traditional media was largely considered one-way, the development of digital media technology, especially live-streaming, has greatly expanded host-audience interaction and communication, extending the PSI concept. In the context of live-streaming marketing, interactions and communication between hosts and audiences still fall under the umbrella of parasocial interaction, even if the interaction remains asymmetric (audiences understand hosts in real-time, but hosts know little about individual audience members).

In live-streaming e-commerce, this parasocial interaction is not merely a marketing strategy but a new form of interpersonal relationship and emotional connection in the digital age. Hosts, through their artistic and personalized "online narration," establish emotional bonds with audiences that transcend physical distance. What audiences gain from parasocial interaction is not just product information, but also emotional companionship, cultural belonging, and identity. This form of interaction fosters the formation of fan culture, making hosts significant cultural symbols or spiritual comfort in the lives of their fans. The act of audience tipping in live streams can be interpreted as recognition and support for the host's content creation and performance art, representing a unique form of digital age cultural consumption. The establishment of this emotional bond is the deeper cultural logic that distinguishes live-streaming e-commerce from traditional e-commerce models.

4 Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth, speculative analysis of "online narrators" (hosts) in Chinese live-streaming e-commerce, focusing on their influence on digital cultural consumption. Integrating perspectives from digital media, cultural studies, and art appreciation, we've developed a theoretical framework centered on hosts' digital performance affordances, aesthetic appeal, and cultural dissemination capabilities, with parasocial interaction as a key mediator. We argue that live-streaming e-commerce transcends traditional commerce, functioning as a unique digital cultural exhibition. Hosts, through their charisma and content creation, build an artistic and emotionally resonant space. This delivers not just products, but also aesthetic pleasure and community belonging, underscoring the deep integration of digital technology and cultural industries.

Our research contributes by elevating the understanding of hosts as crucial content creators and cultural disseminators, moving beyond purely economic interpretations of live-streaming. It offers theoretical insights into evolving cultural dissemination paradigms within the digital economy, helping us grasp live-streaming's complexity as a digital cultural phenomenon. However, as an exploratory theoretical paper, our framework awaits empirical validation. Future research should quantitatively and qualitatively examine these relationships. Expanding studies to other cultural contexts would also enrich cross-cultural understanding. Looking ahead, live-streaming e-commerce will continue to thrive as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon. This study lays a vital foundation for further interdisciplinary exploration into its cultural production, artistic appreciation, and broader societal impacts.

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