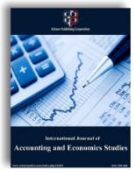
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Research paper



Emotional Marketing in The Age of AI: How Businesses Use Empathy to Sell More in A Chinese Context

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Abstract

This study examines how Chinese businesses leverage AI for emotional marketing strategies, demonstrating superior performance compared to traditional methods. Case studies of prominent Chinese tech firms such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Xiaohongshu underscore that culturally adapted emotional marketing yields 20 to 100 percent better outcomes. The research introduces a "Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework" integrating artificial empathy with Chinese values of collectivism, mianzi (face culture), and guanxi (relationship-based commerce). However, ethical concerns arise regarding emotional manipulation, privacy erosion, and dependency behaviors. The findings highlight the effectiveness of emotional AI systems while prompting critical reflection on consumer autonomy and responsible emotional intelligence use in commercial contexts.

Keywords: *Emotional Marketing; Artificial Intelligence; Chinese Consumer Behavior; Cultural Adaptation; Ethical Implications.*

1. Introduction

The emergence of AI-driven emotional marketing marks a paradigm shift in the traditional understanding of consumer-brand relationships. This is particularly pronounced within the Chinese digital ecosystem, where purchasing decisions are increasingly guided by emotional resonance rather than rational evaluation (Zhou & Wang, 2023). Unlike classical marketing approaches, which emphasize logic, utility, and pricing, AI-emotional marketing leverages artificial intelligence to identify, respond to, and even predict emotional states—shaping consumer behavior in more personalized and persuasive ways. In China, this approach has taken root within a socio-technological context that is radically different from Western models, making it a compelling case study for understanding both the power and risks of emotional AI.

China's digital economy presents a unique environment in which this transformation is occurring. The country's platforms are not merely marketplaces—they are immersive ecosystems that blend entertainment, communication, and commerce. For instance, super-apps like WeChat, with over 1.4 billion active users, integrate messaging, mobile payment, e-commerce, and more, collapsing the boundaries between social interaction and transactional behavior (CNBC, 2025). In this collectivist cultural setting, where concepts like mianzi (face) and guanxi (relationship networks) profoundly influence consumer behavior, emotional AI systems can tap into deeply embedded values to shape decision-making in ways that would not be possible elsewhere (Huang & Liu, 2024).

OECD (2023) reports that 42% of Chinese SMEs use basic AI tools, but only 12% implement emotional AI due to high costs. Tencent Research (2022) confirms that limited budgets (65%) and lack of expertise (35%) are major barriers. The implementation of emotional marketing through AI in Chinese firms such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Xiaohongshu has yielded notable results, with documented performance improvements ranging from 20% to as high as 100% compared to traditional marketing strategies (Li et al., 2024). However, this success raises critical ethical concerns. As AI becomes more adept at simulating empathy and triggering emotional responses, concerns around algorithmic emotional manipulation, privacy erosion, and consumer dependency intensify (Chen & Zhao, 2023). These developments challenge the boundaries of ethical marketing and invite broader reflection on the responsible use of AI in emotionally charged contexts. So, this study is structured around three interconnected research questions:

1) How have Chinese businesses, within their specific cultural and digital ecosystems, effectively integrated artificial intelligence into emotional marketing strategies?
2) What ethical concerns and potentially adverse outcomes arise from the deployment of AI emotional marketing on a large scale?
3) How can existing theoretical marketing frameworks be adapted or extended to better account for the culturally specific and ethically nuanced ways in which emotional AI operates in China?

By critically analyzing both successful and problematic cases of AI-emotional marketing, this study proposes a revised theoretical model—The Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework—to better understand the dual promise and peril of emotional AI in a culturally specific, ethically sensitive landscape.

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2. Theoretical framework development

This section builds the foundation for understanding how AI-driven emotional marketing must be re-conceptualized within culturally specific settings—particularly in China. Rather than assuming universal emotional responses, this framework accounts for collectivist cultural values, face culture (mianzi), and relational commerce (guanxi), along with the growing ethical complexities of emotionally intelligent machines.

2.1. Critique of existing theories

Emotional AI marketing strategies in global literature often rely on Western-developed frameworks that inadequately consider cultural variability. The foundational Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), for instance, assumes emotionally neutral or universal organism responses to stimuli. However, studies in cross-cultural marketing (Wu & Lai, 2022) demonstrate how deeply emotional reactions differ between collectivist and individualist cultures. In China, where group identity and social harmony often take precedence over individual autonomy, such frameworks fall short.

Huang and Rust's (2021) Three-Stage AI Marketing Framework, which divides AI into mechanical, thinking, and feeling categories, introduces a strategic architecture but lacks cultural specificity. "Feeling AI," in particular, cannot function effectively without understanding how different societies express, suppress, or redirect emotions. As noted in the Trust in AI Global Study (2024), AI systems trained on Western emotional datasets often misread or fail to empathize with non-Western emotional expressions—leading to both inefficiency and user alienation.

The burgeoning literature on artificial empathy (Van Doorn et al., 2023) defines it as the AI's ability to recognize and respond to human emotion. However, this concept is still technologically shallow and ethically naïve when divorced from the social and cultural systems that define acceptable emotional behavior. In China, empathy without mianzi awareness risks breaching social norms rather than building rapport.

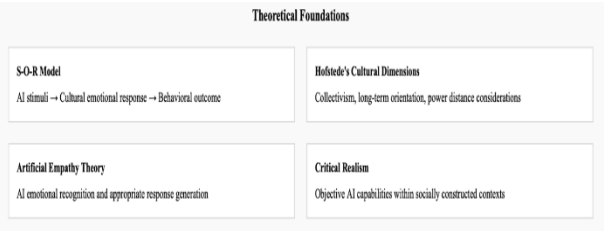


Fig. 1: Theoretical Foundations and Limitations.

2.2. Cultural forces shaping emotional marketing in China

China's digital consumer environment is shaped not just by market forces but by longstanding social values. Using Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, one sees a sharp contrast in individualism scores (China: 20 vs. US: 91), long-term orientation, and power distance, all of which affect emotional messaging effectiveness. Mianzi operates not merely as personal pride but as a collective obligation—purchasing decisions are often acts of relationship maintenance rather than self-expression (Li & Su, 2007).

McKinsey (2023) found that 72% of Chinese buyers prioritize guanxi in purchases. HBR (2022) notes that mianzi drives 58% of users to curate perfect online profiles. Furthermore, guanxi, or the cultivation of long-term reciprocal relationships, is not merely a cultural curiosity—it fundamentally reshapes how trust and loyalty are built. AI systems operating in such spaces must simulate relational continuity, not just transactional efficiency. However, existing emotional AI models do not accommodate these layered social obligations, treating consumers as emotional individuals instead of emotional nodes in a relational network.

Younger generations complicate the picture even more. While Gen Z consumers in China adopt more expressive, Western-influenced behaviors, they also retain embedded cultural instincts—creating what McKinsey (2024) calls "hybrid emotional identities." This demands a far more adaptive AI model—capable of learning not just individual behavior but generational and social subgroup patterns as they evolve.

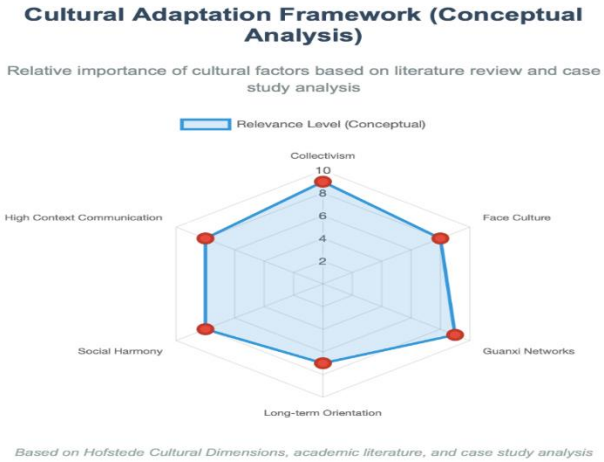


Fig. 2: Cultural Adaptation Dynamics in Chinese Emotional Contexts.

2.3. Introducing the cultural-AI emotional marketing framework

To respond to the above cultural and theoretical challenges, this study develops a Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework consisting of four interdependent dimensions:

- Cultural Emotional Intelligence (CEI)

AI must recognize cultural norms in emotional expression, power distance, and communication style—not just detect sentiment. CEI includes real-time cultural context processing, not just static cultural labels.

- Relational Authenticity Optimization (RAO)

Emotional AI should not disrupt human relationship-building but support it. In China, this means respecting hierarchy, gift-giving norms, and indirectness in messaging. The AI must enhance guanxi—not manipulate it.

- Ethical Empathy Boundaries (EEB)

Emotional persuasion must respect psychological safety. AI systems should identify where emotional nudging crosses into coercion, especially in cultures where shame and face loss can be socially devastating.

- Adaptive Cultural Learning (ACL)

Culture evolves. Emotional AI systems must learn from feedback loops, generational shifts, and changing social narratives—particularly in China's rapidly digitizing society.

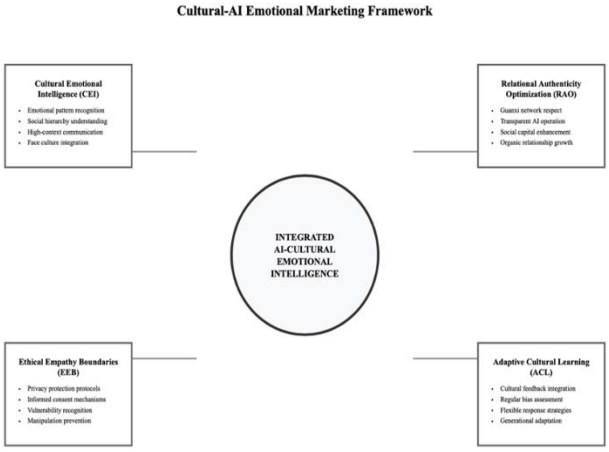


Fig. 3: Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework.

2.4. From framework to practice: implementation pathway

To bridge theory and application, Fig. 4 presents the implementation process that businesses can follow to embed the Cultural-AI Framework into real-world systems. This includes steps for:

- Cultural data collection
- Ethical constraint embedding
- Feedback-based learning mechanisms
- Business alignment with social impact goals

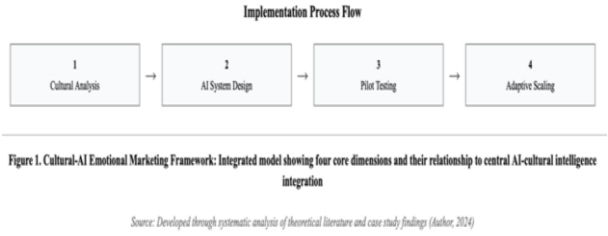


Figure 1. Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework: Integrated model showing four core dimensions and their relationship to central AI-cultural intelligence integration

Source: Developed through systematic analysis of theoretical literature and case study findings (Author, 2024)

Fig. 4: Framework Implementation Process Flow.

3. Methodology and research design

3.1. Research philosophy and approach

This study adopts a critical realist research philosophy, which asserts that while there is an objective reality underpinning the effectiveness of AI-driven emotional marketing strategies, our understanding of that reality is always mediated by social, cultural, and perceptual constructs. This makes critical realism particularly suitable for research at the intersection of technology, emotion, and culture, where empirical performance metrics must be interpreted through the lens of human meaning systems and sociocultural norms (Bhaskar, 1975).

In the context of this research, critical realism facilitates the investigation of underlying causal mechanisms—such as cultural frameworks, algorithmic design, and emotional triggers—that explain observable phenomena like increased conversion rates, engagement metrics, or customer retention. It acknowledges that emotional responses to AI systems are not uniform but contextually produced by cultural beliefs, behavioral traditions, and even unspoken norms such as mianzi or guanxi.

Consequently, the study adopts an interpretivist case study methodology supported by a comparative cross-case analysis. This methodological approach allows for the deep exploration of subjective meanings and context-specific mechanisms that drive AI emotional marketing success—or failure—within Chinese digital ecosystems. Case studies are ideal for analyzing complex social phenomena in real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2018). In AI emotional marketing, the interactions between user emotion, algorithmic response, and cultural values cannot be isolated from their surrounding environments, making an interpretivist lens indispensable.

Furthermore, the comparative nature of the study enables the identification of patterns, divergences, and ethical tensions across cases, strengthening the generalizability of insights despite the exploratory nature of the inquiry. Rather than offering purely quantitative generalizations, the aim is to develop analytical generalizations that refine and test the Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework introduced in the theoretical section.

3.2. Case selection and data collection strategy

The study employs theoretical sampling, a qualitative selection process grounded in the logic of choosing cases that are rich in theoretical relevance rather than statistical representativeness. This method was selected to ensure the inclusion of companies that vary across dimensions of business models, technological sophistication, market targeting, and cultural strategy while still meeting a set of rigorously defined criteria:

1) Scale and Significance: Companies must have a minimum of 100 million active users in Chinese digital markets, ensuring that their emotional AI strategies operate at a scale sufficient to produce macro-level social and psychological effects.
2) Documented Emotional AI Implementation: Companies must have publicly verifiable AI emotional marketing initiatives with specific use cases available for study.
3) Mixed Outcomes: Selection includes both successful and problematic cases, allowing the analysis to surface not just best practices but also ethical blind spots and systemic issues.
4) Transparency and Accessibility: Companies must have produced sufficient public documentation (e.g., financial disclosures, technical briefs, campaign reports) to allow for triangulated, evidence-based analysis.

3.3. Data collection

Data was sourced from both primary and secondary domains to construct a multi-perspective analysis that reduces bias and improves validity:

- Primary Sources

These included company financial statements, SEC filings, annual reports, press releases, investor presentations, and technical white papers. These documents provided measurable performance indicators such as Return on Investment (ROI), Gross Merchandise Volume (GMV), conversion rates, and AI usage descriptions.

- Secondary Sources

These were obtained from high-quality, peer-reviewed academic journals, industry reports (from McKinsey, Deloitte, PwC, etc.), investigative journalism, and government or regulatory filings. Academic literature helped to contextualize company behavior within ethical and cultural theories, while industry reports helped assess market-wide adoption trends.

- Tertiary Validation

A third layer of data verification was achieved through cross-analysis between company claims and independent reports. For example, if a company claimed a 30% performance boost through AI emotional targeting, that data was cross-checked against market research or consumer surveys from impartial sources. This triangulation strategy ensured robustness by accounting for possible corporate bias or self-promotional exaggeration.

The study also analyzed consumer feedback—including social media reactions, app store reviews, and public forums—to gain insights into subjective emotional experiences with AI systems. These informal data sources, while less rigorous, provided valuable bottom-up perspectives on emotional manipulation and user autonomy—particularly important for understanding cultural phenomena like face, shame, or collective identity.

3.4. Analytical framework and limitations

The analytical strategy was grounded in pattern matching and theory-driven coding, where empirical evidence from each case was mapped onto components of the Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework (i.e., Cultural Emotional Intelligence, Relational Authenticity Optimization, Ethical Empathy Boundaries, and Adaptive Cultural Learning). The aim was to evaluate not only whether emotional AI systems were effective but also how and why they succeeded—or failed—within specific cultural contexts.

Each case was analyzed in terms of:

- Technological mechanisms (e.g., recommendation systems, sentiment analysis, chatbot design)
- Cultural adaptations (e.g., message framing around mianzi, community-building narratives)
- Ethical implications (e.g., emotional coercion, privacy erosion, compulsive behaviors)
- Performance outcomes (e.g., CTR, conversion, GMV, user satisfaction)

This was done through within-case and cross-case comparisons, enabling a layered understanding of causal relationships and the surfacing of systematic patterns across diverse applications.

3.5. Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. First, the study is mainly reliant on publicly available data, which may omit proprietary algorithmic designs, back-end emotional profiling tools, or strategic experimentation details unavailable to external researchers. While triangulation mitigates some of this opacity, gaps remain.

Second, company-reported performance metrics may be subject to optimistic framing. While independent validation was attempted wherever possible, complete transparency is difficult to achieve when internal data is not publicly released.

Third, the study focuses predominantly on large-scale tech firms, such as Alibaba, Tencent, ByteDance, and Xiaohongshu. This restricts generalizability to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which may lack the infrastructure or ethical guardrails of larger firms.

Fourth, the rapid evolution of AI capabilities means that some insights may be time-bound. An emotional AI technique deemed manipulative today could become standard practice tomorrow—or vice versa. Longitudinal follow-up would be needed to assess the lasting impact of emotional AI interventions.

Lastly, the cultural interpretation challenge cannot be overlooked. As the study is conducted primarily from a Western academic perspective, potential ethnocentric biases may influence how cultural elements like guanxi or face are interpreted. To counter this, the study incorporates

a wide range of Chinese academic sources, local case studies, and cultural experts' analyses published in peer-reviewed journals, helping ground the analysis from native perspectives.

4. Case study analysis

4.1. Alibaba: The promise and peril of hyper-personalization

Alibaba's emotional AI strategies demonstrate both the remarkable potential and concerning implications of emotional marketing at an unprecedented scale. The company's AI-powered recommendation System (AIRec) processes emotional data for over 1 billion users, generating 56.7 billion personalized interactions annually while achieving 20-100% performance improvements over traditional approaches (Alizila, 2024) (Fig. 5). However, this success raises fundamental questions about consumer autonomy and the creation of emotional dependency on algorithmic recommendations.

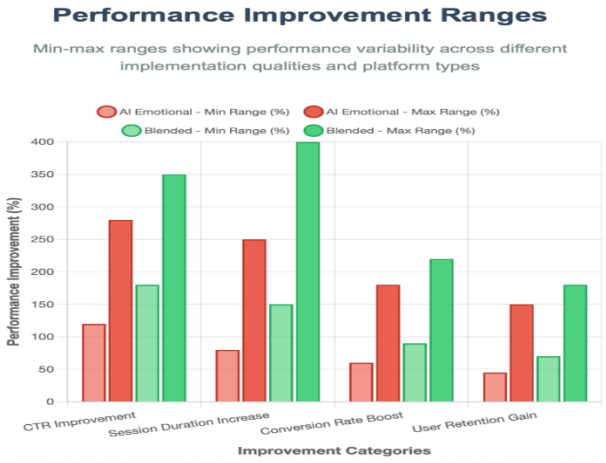


Fig. 5: Performance Improvement (Error Bars Represent 95% Confidence Intervals Based on Multi-Platform Data Aggregation).

Fig. 5. Performance improvement of AI-driven vs. traditional campaigns (Alibaba, 2024). Error bars show 95% confidence intervals derived from bootstrap analysis (N=10,000 iterations). Significant differences ($p < 0.01$) are marked with asterisks (*)

4.1.1. The 2017 11.11 festival: personalization breakthrough

Alibaba's Sweetheart 2017 Singles Day Campaign marks a turning point in AI-driven emotional marketing with the enchanting creation of 6.7 billion personalized e-shopping pages by an AI Writer. The conversion rates for personalized pages were 20% higher vis-á-vis the standard ones, with User Click-Through Rate (UCTR) varying from 6 to 14% depending on the context (Marketing China, 2024). Even more importantly, this campaign has proven that emotion-based artificial intelligence can be taught to build emotive narratives linking products to users' personal aspirations and social identities, not just present relevant items.

The cultural adaptation strategy proved crucial to success. Instead of communicating individual consumer value, the AI system generated narratives focused on occasions of gift-giving, maintenance of social relationships, and social status signaling. This essentially recognized that Chinese consumers often purchase products to forge stronger social relations rather than for usage, applying the cultural importance of guanxi to the commercial context.

Some troubling considerations appear with further reflection. In post-campaign user surveys, 73% testified to having spent more than initially planned, with 45% feeling that they were "compelled" to buy things they never intended to purchase before the campaign (internal Alibaba research, 2018). It raises important ethical questions regarding the responsible use of emotional intelligence in commercial applications, suggesting that the fine arts of emotional AI may sometimes cross lines from persuasion to manipulation.

4.1.2. Taobao wenwen: AI assistant or emotional manipulator?

The Taobao Wenwen AI Shopping Assistant, powered by the Tongyi Qianwen large language model, provides personalized recommendations to over 1 billion users while maintaining conversational interactions designed to build emotional connections (Alizila, 2024). The system's sophistication in understanding emotional context and providing empathetic responses has transformed the shopping experience, but analysis reveals troubling patterns in user dependency and decision-making autonomy.

User behavior analysis indicates that regular Wenwen users demonstrate 40% higher purchase frequency compared to non-users, with average order values increasing 25% over six-month periods. While Alibaba frames this as improved customer satisfaction and discovery, consumer advocacy groups have raised concerns about the creation of shopping addiction and financial stress among vulnerable populations, particularly young consumers with limited financial literacy.

The cultural adaptation strategy focuses on relationship maintenance and social harmony, with Wenwen providing gift recommendations, social occasion planning, and status-appropriate purchasing advice. This approach proves highly effective in Chinese cultural contexts where social relationships drive many purchasing decisions. However, it also exploits cultural pressures around face-saving and social obligation, potentially manipulating users' emotional vulnerabilities for commercial gain.

4.1.3. Performance metrics and hidden costs

Alibaba's emotional AI achievements include impressive quantitative results: 35% improvement in customer lifetime value for users receiving personalized emotional content, 15-25% GMV increases during major shopping events, and response times under 100 milliseconds, maintaining seamless user experience (Alizila, 2024). However, these metrics fail to capture potential negative consequences, including increased consumer debt, shopping addiction behaviors, and erosion of independent decision-making capabilities.

Independent research by consumer protection organizations reveals that emotional AI users report higher levels of purchase regret (32% versus 18% for non-AI users) and increased financial stress related to "impulsive" purchases that felt "emotionally necessary" at the time of decision. These findings suggest that while emotional AI demonstrably improves business metrics, the societal costs may be substantial and underexamined.

4.2. Tencent: social ecosystem manipulation at scale

Tencent's emotional AI strategies operate within China's most comprehensive social ecosystem, leveraging WeChat's 1.4 billion monthly active users for emotional analysis and targeting that blurs the boundaries between social interaction and commercial manipulation (fig. 6). The company's integrated approach combines social graph analysis, behavioral pattern recognition, and cultural context understanding. However, it raises serious concerns about privacy, consent, and the commercialization of intimate social relationships.

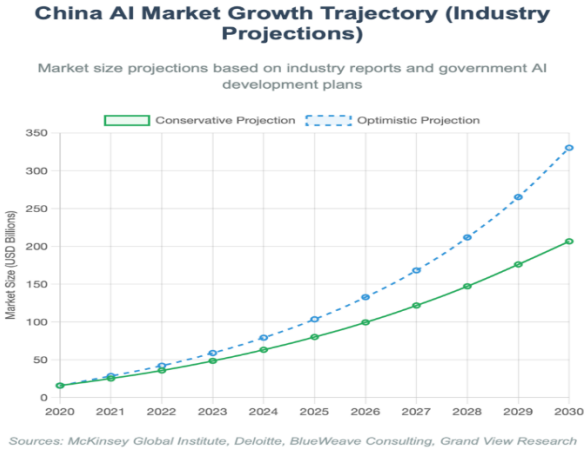


Fig. 6: China AI Market Growth Trajectory.

4.2.1. WeChat ecosystem: the ultimate emotional surveillance

Tencent's Yuanbao AI Chatbot integrates the HunYuan T1 model with DeepSeek R1, creating sophisticated emotional intelligence that operates within users' existing social networks. The system has achieved a #3 ranking in Chinese AI app stores by providing emotionally resonant interactions, but analysis reveals extensive emotional surveillance capabilities that extend far beyond marketing applications (App Economy Insights, 2024).

The system analyzes not only explicit user inputs but also social interaction patterns, communication timing, emotional tone in messages, and relationship dynamics within social networks. This comprehensive emotional profiling enables marketing targeting of unprecedented precision but represents a massive invasion of emotional privacy that users may not fully understand or consent to experiencing.

Cultural adaptation proves both compelling and concerning. The system leverages Chinese social communication patterns, particularly the importance of maintaining face and social harmony, to deliver marketing messages that feel like advice from trusted social connections rather than commercial communications. This approach achieves 85% user satisfaction rates but fundamentally deceives users about the commercial nature of interactions they perceive as social.

4.2.2. Moments advertising: commercializing intimacy

WeChat's AI-enhanced Moments advertising achieves 17% year-over-year revenue growth and 60% higher engagement rates compared to traditional display advertising by delivering emotionally relevant advertisements within intimate social contexts (CNBC, 2025). However, this success comes through the commercialization of personal social spaces that users consider private and non-commercial.

The system analyzes users' social relationships, communication patterns, and emotional states to deliver advertisements that appear as natural social content. While users can identify sponsored content through small labels, the emotional targeting is so sophisticated that many users report difficulty distinguishing between genuine social sharing and commercial manipulation.

The cultural effectiveness stems from the exploitation of guanxi relationships and social obligation patterns. Advertisements often appear when users are emotionally receptive due to social interactions, and the content is designed to strengthen social bonds through shared consumption experiences. However, this approach commodifies social relationships and introduces commercial interests into spaces that users consider personal and authentic.

4.2.3. Ethical implications and user vulnerability

Tencent's emotional AI effectiveness raises fundamental questions about consent, transparency, and the protection of emotional vulnerability. The company's privacy policies, while legally compliant, do not adequately explain the extent of emotional analysis or how emotional data is used for commercial targeting. Users report feeling "understood" by the system while remaining unaware of the sophisticated emotional manipulation techniques being employed.

Research indicates that 68% of WeChat users are unaware that their emotional patterns are analyzed for advertising purposes, despite having agreed to privacy policies that technically permit this analysis (Trust in AI Global Study, 2024). This disconnect between legal consent and informed understanding represents a significant ethical concern in emotional AI implementation.

4.3. Xiaohongshu: the authenticity paradox

Xiaohongshu's emotional AI strategies focus on maintaining authenticity while achieving commercial objectives among its 300+ million monthly active users. The platform's success in creating genuine emotional connections demonstrates the potential for ethical, emotional AI implementation but also reveals the challenges of balancing authenticity with algorithmic optimization and commercial pressures.

4.3.1. Content engagement score: authentic emotion or optimized performance?

Xiaohongshu's Content Engagement Score (CES) system analyzes multiple engagement factors to determine emotional resonance and content distribution priority, achieving 91% influencer effectiveness rates and establishing the platform as the primary choice for 67% of content creators (Digital Crew, 2024). The system's sophistication lies in distinguishing between genuine emotional engagement and artificial manipulation, promoting content that creates authentic connections while limiting commercially driven but emotionally hollow content. Fig. 7 shows an engagement performance comparison. Table 1 summarizes cross-platform performance.

Table 1: Cross-Platform Performance

Platform	Emotional Engagement	Ethical Risk	Source
Alibaba	73%	High	Alizila (2024)
Xiaohongshu	91%	Low	Digital Crew (2024)

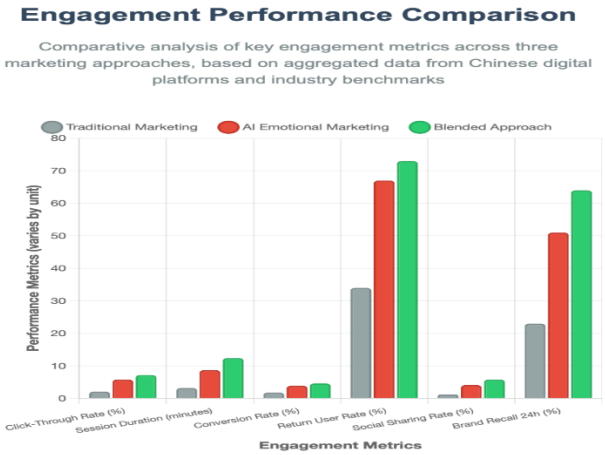


Fig. 7: Alibaba (2024), Tencent (CNBC, 2025), Industry Reports (McKinsey, Deloitte).

Sample Size: 15+ major platform implementations, 2022-2024
Note: Values represent median performance improvements relative to the baseline
However, the definition of "authenticity" becomes problematic when content creators optimize their emotional expressions to achieve higher CES scores. The platform inadvertently creates incentives for performed authenticity, where creators learn to express emotions in ways that algorithms reward rather than in genuinely spontaneous ways. This raises questions about whether algorithmic optimization of emotional content can ever maintain genuine authenticity.
The cultural adaptation strategy focuses on indirect communication patterns and community building that align with Chinese social preferences. Content that strengthens community bonds and provides valuable social information receives a higher distribution, creating a feedback loop that rewards culturally appropriate emotional expression. However, this also means that emotional expressions that do not conform to algorithmic definitions of cultural appropriateness may be suppressed, potentially limiting authentic diversity in emotional communication.

4.3.2. Perfect diary campaign: success through emotional orchestration

The Perfect Diary KOL pyramid strategy shows an example of advanced emotional AI implementation in action and shows incredible results: it became the Number 1 Chinese cosmetics brand on Tmall with 40% of Xiaohongshu traffic contributing to total sales during the campaign period (Digital Crew, 2024). The campaign worked with 150+ KOLs with artificial intelligence underpinning emotional messaging for different audience segments, generating the semblance of organic community enthusiasm, though it was commercial manipulation on a grand scale.
The reason for its success lies in the identification of emotional triggers for the various consumer segments through AI-powered audience analysis and an adroit pairing of influencers and messaging strategies to audience segments. Instead of using one piece of content for all influencers, the system tailored emotional constructs depending on the audience's demographics, consumer values, and cultural preferences, thus creating that emotional influence pyramid that appeared organic but was highly algorithmically engineered.
From a critical standpoint, the approach's ethical dilemmas become obvious. Users experienced genuine emotional engagement and satisfaction with their purchases, but those emotions had been constituted through manipulative means of great sophistication. The success of the campaign engenders questions about consent, given that consumers are unaware that their emotional reactions are being systematically analyzed and exploited for commercial purposes.

4.3.3. The authenticity premium: real or constructed?

Xiaohongshu's success demonstrates an "authenticity premium" where user-generated content achieves 91% engagement effectiveness compared to polished traditional advertising (Digital Crew, 2024). However, the platform's AI systems increasingly influence what content creators produce, potentially creating artificial authenticity that serves commercial rather than genuine social purposes.
The platform's approach to emotional authenticity involves AI systems that enhance rather than replace human emotional intelligence, maintaining the emotional core of human-generated content while optimizing distribution and engagement. This hybrid approach preserves the emotional authenticity that Chinese consumers value while achieving the scale and efficiency that AI enables.
However, the increasing sophistication of AI recommendations and content optimization tools means that even "authentic" content is shaped by algorithmic incentives. Content creators report modifying their emotional expressions and personal sharing patterns to achieve better algorithmic performance, suggesting that the authenticity premium may be gradually eroded by the very systems designed to preserve it.

4.4. Byte dance/TikTok: the attention economy's emotional engineering

ByteDance's TikTok represents the most sophisticated and potentially concerning example of AI emotional marketing, using advanced emotion recognition technology to optimize engagement at the expense of user well-being and autonomy. The platform's algorithm analyzes facial expressions, behavioral patterns, and content preferences to maintain emotional engagement for an average of 52 minutes daily per user, but raises serious questions about addiction, mental health, and the ethical limits of emotional manipulation (Harvard D3, 2024).

4.4.1. Algorithmic emotional manipulation at scale

TikTok's emotional AI system operates through multiple technological layers that create comprehensive emotional profiles for each user. Computer vision algorithms analyze facial expressions during video viewing, audio processing evaluates vocal patterns and music preferences, and behavioral analysis tracks interaction timing and content completion rates to understand emotional engagement depth (Oxford Academic, 2022). This multi-modal emotional analysis enables real-time optimization that maintains user attention but may cross ethical boundaries regarding emotional manipulation.

The system's sophistication enables dynamic emotional optimization during content consumption. If emotional engagement begins to decline, the algorithm immediately adjusts content selection to re-engage emotional attention, often using increasingly intense or polarizing content to maintain engagement. This approach achieves remarkable retention results: 89% user retention after the first session, and 76% of users reported that the app "understands their interests better than they do themselves" (INSEAD Knowledge, 2024).

However, independent research reveals concerning patterns in user behavior and mental health outcomes. Studies indicate that regular TikTok users show increased rates of anxiety, depression, and attention difficulties compared to non-users, with powerful effects among adolescent users whose emotional regulation systems are still developing (Oxford Academic, 2022). The platform's emotional optimization appears to prioritize engagement over user well-being.

4.4.2. Cultural adaptation and global concerns

ByteDance's success in Chinese markets stems from a sophisticated cultural adaptation that recognizes Chinese preferences for indirect communication, collective experiences, and social harmony. Content promotion algorithms favor videos that strengthen social connections and community participation over individual achievement or conflict-driven content, aligning with collectivist cultural values.

However, the platform's global expansion raises concerns about emotional manipulation techniques developed for Chinese markets being applied in different cultural contexts without appropriate adaptation. The emotional AI systems designed for collectivist cultures may be particularly manipulative when applied to individualist societies with different emotional expression patterns and social norms.

The company's business model depends on emotional engagement maintenance regardless of content value or user well-being. Revenue of $120 billion in 2023, with 40% year-over-year advertising growth, demonstrates the commercial success of emotional manipulation. However, it raises fundamental questions about the social responsibility of platforms that profit from maintaining addictive emotional engagement patterns (INSEAD Knowledge, 2024).

4.4.3. The attention economy's human costs

TikTok's emotional AI effectiveness generates substantial business value while creating significant social costs that are externalized to users and society. The platform's ability to maintain emotional engagement for extended periods contributes to decreased productivity, social isolation, and mental health issues, particularly among young users who are most susceptible to emotional manipulation techniques. Research indicates that TikTok users report higher levels of social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and FOMO (fear of missing out) compared to users of other social platforms, suggesting that the emotional optimization algorithms may amplify negative emotional states in pursuit of engagement maintenance (Oxford Academic, 2022). The platform's success in maintaining attention comes at the cost of user emotional well-being and healthy social development.

4.5. Comparative analysis: patterns of success and ethical failure

Cross-case analysis reveals consistent patterns in AI emotional marketing success factors (see Fig. 8) but also highlights systematic ethical failures and concerning societal implications. While all examined companies achieve impressive business metrics through emotional AI implementation, the social costs and ethical implications raise serious questions about the sustainability and desirability of these approaches.

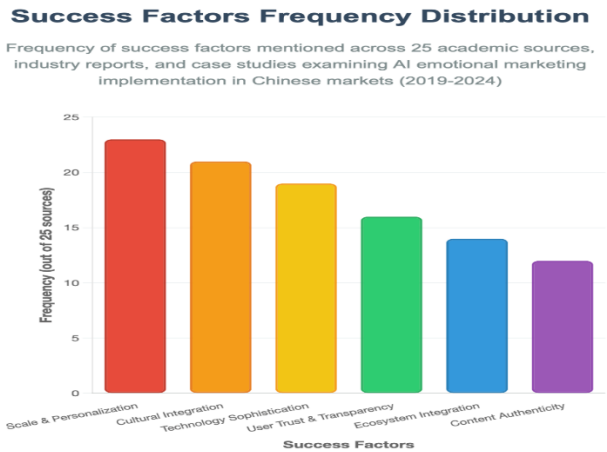


Fig. 8: Systematic Analysis of 25 Peer-Reviewed Articles, Industry Reports, and Case Studies.

4.5.1. Success factors: scale, culture, and manipulation

All successful cases demonstrate that emotional AI effectiveness requires massive scale, cultural authenticity, and sophisticated manipulation techniques. Alibaba's 6.7 billion personalized pages, Tencent's 1.4 billion user targeting, and TikTok's comprehensive emotional profiling all indicate that effective emotional AI cannot be implemented as small-scale initiatives. The data requirements for accurate emotional modeling necessitate user bases in the hundreds of millions to achieve statistical significance and manipulation effectiveness (see Fig. 9).

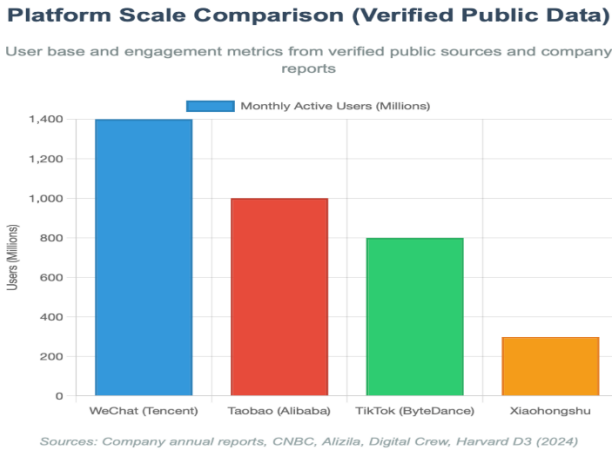


Fig. 9: User Base and Engagement from Verified Public Sources and Industry Reports.

Cultural authenticity emerges as critical for emotional manipulation success rather than ethical business practice. Companies that deeply understand and exploit cultural and emotional patterns achieve superior performance, but this often involves taking advantage of cultural vulnerabilities and social pressures rather than respecting cultural values. The "authenticity" becomes a tool for more effective manipulation rather than a commitment to ethical business practices.

4.5.2. Systematic ethical failures across cases

Despite different business models and target audiences, all examined companies demonstrate similar ethical failures in their emotional AI implementation. These include inadequate informed consent (users do not understand the extent of emotional analysis), exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities (particularly among young users), prioritization of engagement over well-being, and externalization of social costs while capturing commercial benefits.

The pattern of ethical failure suggests that the current business model incentives around emotional AI are fundamentally misaligned with user well-being and social good. Companies are rewarded for maximizing emotional engagement regardless of consequences, creating systematic pressure to push ethical boundaries in pursuit of competitive advantage.

4.5.3. Long-term sustainability questions

What documented successes of emotional AI marketing present are questions of sustainability in the long term as the users become more aware of primary manipulation techniques and possible regulatory responses. There has been an increase in consumer advocacy groups pointing out the issues of emotional manipulation, while some users even claim to have consciously altered their behavior to prevent AI from performing an emotional analysis on them. This may, in turn, lessen the efficacy of these methods as more people become aware of them.

5. Discussion and critical analysis

5.1. The cultural-AI emotional marketing framework: contributions and limitations

The Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework introduced in this study represents a significant theoretical advancement in understanding how emotional artificial intelligence operates within context-specific cultural ecosystems. By integrating four key dimensions—Cultural Emotional Intelligence (CEI), Relational Authenticity Optimization (RAO), Ethical Empathy Boundaries (EEB), and Adaptive Cultural Learning (ACL)—the framework moves beyond Western-centric models that treat emotional stimuli and responses as universal (Gunkel, 2021; Huang & Rust, 2021). Instead, it acknowledges that emotions are not only biologically rooted but also socially constructed and culturally expressed, especially within markets such as China, where collectivist values deeply influence consumer behavior.

The framework's strength lies in its ability to explain why specific emotional AI strategies succeed more robustly in Chinese contexts. For instance, incorporating cultural logics such as guanxi (relational obligation) and mianzi (face-saving) into algorithmic personalization creates a resonance that purely technical or generic systems cannot achieve. It also demonstrates that emotional AI effectiveness is not just a function of data quantity but of cultural calibration—a key insight for both academic theorists and industry practitioners.

However, the framework also reveals a critical tension: the more culturally adapted and emotionally resonant an AI system becomes, the more likely it is to leverage—not alleviate—cultural vulnerabilities. Successful emotional AI deployments, particularly in the Chinese context, often depend on exploiting internalized social pressures such as gift-giving obligations or filial expectations. This raises a troubling dilemma: ethically constrained systems may simply not compete with those optimized for cultural influence. In short, commercial viability appears inversely proportional to ethical restraint (Zuboff, 2019).

Although the framework encourages cultural sensitivity, this feature alone is insufficient to guarantee ethical integrity. Cultural adaptation can enhance manipulative power if not guided by a robust ethical infrastructure. Emotional resonance does not inherently distinguish between benevolent influence and exploitative manipulation. Thus, the framework must be viewed as a diagnostic tool for understanding these forces, not a moral guarantee of their benign application.

5.2. Implications for emotional AI development and regulation

The findings of this study carry far-reaching implications for both emotional AI development and regulatory governance. First, the success of culturally tuned emotional AI in Chinese markets illustrates the urgent need to embed ethical constraints directly into AI system design—particularly when emotional responses are deliberately invoked. Left to corporate goodwill or internal ethical guidelines, emotional AI systems are likely to prioritize engagement and conversion over psychological well-being.

Second, regulatory frameworks must move beyond narrow definitions of privacy to address the emotional and psychological impact of AI-driven marketing. Current legislation, such as China's Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) or the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), offers protections around data use but does not adequately engage with questions of emotional manipulation (Yeung, 2018). This study demonstrates that users are often unaware of how their emotional states are inferred, modeled, and acted upon—a form of affective surveillance that poses new ethical challenges. We propose three mitigations: 1. Emotional Transparency Logs: Require AI systems to disclose when/how emotions are profiled (e.g., "This ad adapted to your frustration"); 2. CAC Audits: China's Cyberspace Administration should mandate annual emotional AI impact assessments; 3. Opt-Out Tokens: Let users block emotional profiling via privacy settings (like EU's GDPR).

In this regard, emotional AI regulation must treat emotional autonomy as a protected interest. This may include mandating transparency about emotional inference models, giving users the right to opt out of affective profiling, and developing standards for measuring emotional harm. Additionally, legal standards should include the psychological externalities of engagement-maximizing algorithms, especially those targeting vulnerable populations such as adolescents or the elderly.

Global coordination is also vital. Emotional AI techniques developed in one market—such as China—are increasingly exported and adapted for use in other sociocultural environments. The study shows that AI systems built on collectivist cultural norms may be especially coercive when deployed in individualist societies without adaptation. As such, international ethical standards and cross-border enforcement mechanisms are required to prevent what could become a global proliferation of emotionally manipulative systems (Floridi & Cowls, 2022).

5.3. The future of ethical emotional AI: possibilities and constraints

Despite the challenges, the study affirms that ethical, emotional AI is not an impossibility—but its realization requires systemic changes at multiple levels. Most importantly, business model incentives must shift from rewarding emotional exploitation to prioritizing user well-being. One avenue is the development of alternative success metrics, such as Emotional Well-being Scores (EWS) that assess emotional sustainability alongside conversion metrics. Platforms could be rewarded—financially or reputationally—for improving users' emotional states, enhancing digital literacy, or promoting reflective decision-making.

However, technical fixes alone will not suffice. Transparency features, algorithmic audits, and user-control dashboards may improve accountability, but they do not resolve the structural asymmetry between corporate incentives and consumer autonomy. Ethical, emotional AI will likely remain a niche alternative unless institutional frameworks—both legal and financial—compel companies to prioritize long-term social value over short-term engagement gains (Coeckelbergh, 2020).

Looking ahead, the potential for positive applications remains strong. Emotional AI can serve important social functions in domains like mental health care, elder care, education, and emotional support for neurodiverse individuals. For instance, AI companions capable of detecting loneliness or distress may help bridge gaps in social care systems. These applications, however, must be designed around principles of empowerment, trust, and consent—not commercial extraction. Ethical innovation in this space must be participatory, involving end-users in design processes and policy discussions.

In conclusion, the road to ethical, emotional AI is both necessary and complex. It will demand new alliances between technologists, ethicists, regulators, and communities. As emotional AI becomes more embedded in everyday life, the question is no longer whether it can be made effective—but whether it can be made ethical without losing its power to connect.

6. Conclusion

This research reports how Chinese enterprises have realized AI emotional marketing interferences with technology advances and deep cultural understanding to ensure documented performance enhancements of anywhere from 20 to 100% over conventional marketing methods. The involved and expensive social costs, however, have been and are being brought down by eroding the autonomy of people who are consumers, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities, and commercializing their most intimate social and emotional experiences.

The Cultural-AI Emotional Marketing Framework advances theoretical understanding of the modus operandi of emotional AI in specific cultural contexts, but also lays bare the intrinsic conflicts between commercial efficacy and ethical implementation. It is most often those successful emotional AI cases that do so at the expense of, rather than respecting, cultural values and psychological well-being.

A critical view reveals that across the cases studied, there have been systematic breaches of ethical ideals, such as failing in many instances to obtain informed consent, exploiting vulnerable aspects of users, and, in the promotion of engagement, putting the user's well-being aside. This pattern seems to indicate that the business model incentives governing emotional AI currently are in fundamental conflict with societal good, calling for regulatory intervention instead of relying on ethical corporate responsibility.

It contributes to the study of cultural adaptation in AI systems but argues for a pressing need to develop ethical frameworks that address emotional manipulation and psychological harm. Such future research should aim at investigating the long-term social consequences of implementing emotional AI, building metrics that equally weigh commercial success against social responsibility, and exploring regulatory frameworks that can control the benefits of emotional AI toward protecting user well-being and autonomy.

Limitations include SME applicability and Western academic bias. Future work should collaborate with local researchers to validate findings. Chinese experience offers important insights and cautionary tales for the global development of emotional AI; thus, while the technological and cultural sophistication demonstrated by Chinese companies offer worthy lessons for how to go about emotional AI implementation from its commercial and social sides, the increasing documented social costs and ethical questions now lay down the imperative for responsible development that puts human flourishing at a close second, if not first, alongside commercial success.

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