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Digital Marketing Empowerment: Research on the Path to Improve the Profitability of Cultural and Tourism E-commerce Enterprises

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the rapid development of the digital economy and the accelerated iteration of information technology, the cultural tourism e-commerce industry has seen a continuous expansion in market size, but it also faces challenges such as product homogenization, high operating costs, and sluggish profit growth. This paper focuses on the mechanisms through which digital marketing drives the profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce enterprises. By analyzing the industry's current state, it is found that leading enterprises achieve profit growth through technological and scale advantages. In contrast, small and medium-sized enterprises struggle due to resource shortages, resulting in an industry-wide phenomenon of 'revenue growth without profit growth.' The study indicates that digital marketing drives profit growth through precise targeting, traffic conversion, advanced technological support, service innovation, and supply chain optimization. Based on this, the paper proposes strategies such as building an influencer live-streaming matrix, deepening precise marketing, innovating service processes, strengthening value chain collaboration, and enhancing user stickiness. It provides theoretical and practical references for the industry to break through its profitability bottleneck.

Keywords:

digital marketing; artificial intelligence; cultural and tourism e-commerce; profitability

1. Introduction

In an era where disruptive information technologies such as big data, blockchain, and artificial intelligence are emerging, digital marketing has revolutionized traditional marketing models and consumer lifestyles, with topics related to digital marketing gradually becoming a hot topic in academic circles (Wang Yonggui et al., 2024). Digital marketing, with its precise targeting and efficient conversion capabilities, has become a key tool for businesses to gain a competitive edge. The rapid development of social media and short video platforms has provided businesses with diversified marketing channels, while consumers' purchasing decisions increasingly rely on online information acquisition and interactive experiences. Against this backdrop, businesses urgently need to explore profit models suited to the digital age to adapt to the profound changes in the

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market landscape.

Under the impact of the digital economy and digital marketing, the traditional tourism industry has accelerated its integration with e-commerce. Internet technology has broken the temporal and spatial constraints on the sale of tourism products. Consumers can conveniently complete transactions such as booking travel itineraries, selecting hotel accommodations, and purchasing attraction tickets through online platforms. In this context, many tourism companies have achieved the online operation of their products and services by establishing e-commerce platforms or joining third-party e-commerce channels, effectively reducing marketing costs and improving operational efficiency (Chen Linlin et al., 2022). The tourism industry is an information-intensive and information-dependent sector, and its synergy with e-commerce has kept the tourism sector at the forefront of industrial e-commerce applications. The advent of 5G technology and the significant data era has opened vast new possibilities for the internet economy, further driving the integration of e-commerce and tourism. According to the 55th 'Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet' released by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) in 2025, as of December 2024, the number of online travels booking users in China reached 548 million, an increase of 39.35 million compared to December 2023, accounting for 49.5% of the total number of internet users, as shown in Figure 1. This 'tourism + e-commerce' model is called cultural and tourism e-commerce. Cultural and tourism e-commerce companies are professional e-commerce enterprises dedicated to deepening their presence in the cultural and tourism e-commerce sector. They utilize the internet as a connectivity tool and possess the capability to integrate industry resources from both internal and external sources. Through comprehensive online and offline marketing platforms, they establish a platform-based operational model that facilitates seamless communication between consumers and suppliers. These cultural tourism e-commerce companies possess a wide range of marketing tools to assist merchants on their platforms in attracting and retaining customers and the technical expertise to ensure the security and stability of their platform's network environment. They are committed to providing high-quality management and an excellent user experience for suppliers and consumers on their platforms. The cultural tourism e-commerce model has not only transformed consumers' travel consumption habits but also injected new growth momentum into the tourism industry, giving rise to numerous cultural tourism e-commerce companies and driving the industry's transformation toward digitalization and intelligence.

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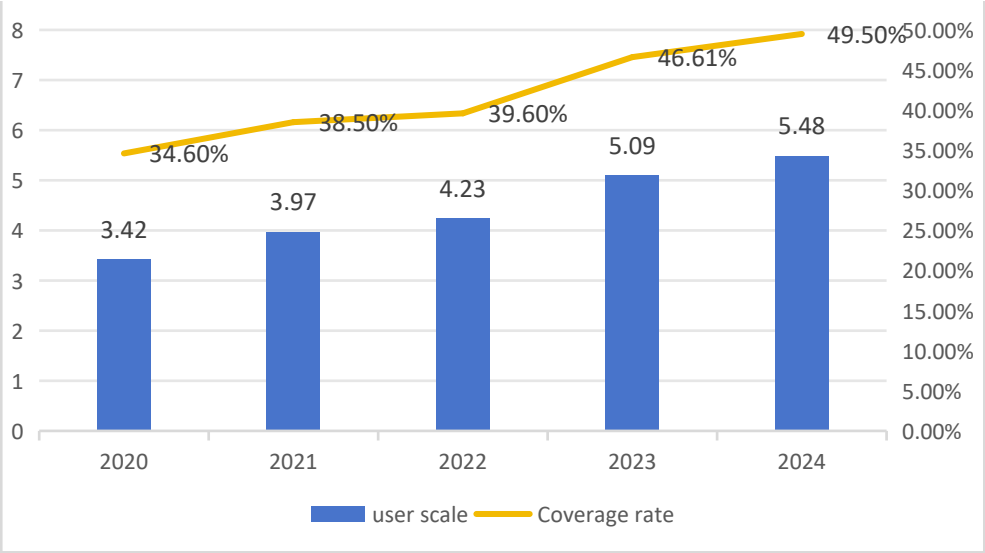


Figure 1: Online travel booking user scale and coverage from 2020 to 2024

Data source: China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC)

In recent years, the cultural tourism e-commerce industry has experienced rapid growth, with the market size continuing to expand. However, the industry also faces numerous challenges, including severe product homogenization, intense market competition, and high operational costs, constraining enterprises' profitability and sustainable development. In this context, digital marketing has become increasingly prominent, serving as a key driver for cultural tourism e-commerce enterprises to break through development bottlenecks. Therefore, conducting in-depth research on the profit models of cultural and tourism e-commerce companies and exploring profit-enhancement pathways driven by digital marketing holds significant practical significance for promoting high-quality industry development.

Currently, few studies are focusing on the profit models and profit-enhancement pathways of cultural and tourism e-commerce companies, and research in this area lacks systematic and in-depth exploration. The rapid development of the digital economy has made it particularly important to study the profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce companies. This paper aims to explore innovative mechanisms for enhancing the profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce enterprises, conduct an in-depth analysis of the current state and issues related to their profitability, and summarize the mechanisms through which digital marketing, service innovation, and value chain/supply chain strategies contribute to profitability enhancement. It also proposes strategies and recommendations to ensure digital marketing continues empowering this emerging industry, creating greater development opportunities.

2. Current Profitability and Issues of Cultural Tourism E-commerce Enterprises

2.1 Current Profitability of Cultural Tourism E-commerce Enterprises

Amid the booming digital economy, the cultural tourism e-commerce industry has demonstrated strong

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growth momentum, with market scale continuing to rise.

From an industry-wide perspective, while revenue scale has shown a sustained growth trend, profit growth faces significant pressures, with the phenomenon of 'revenue growth without profit growth' particularly prominent. Under the combined influence of complex factors such as market scale growth, enhanced technological empowerment, cautious and rational consumption, mismatches between upgrading demand and supply, and intensified market competition, according to financial reports from various companies, the financial performance of China's cultural and tourism groups in 2024 showed significant divergence and a mixed bag of results. The combined revenue of 59 cultural and tourism groups increased by 4% year-on-year. For example, all four online travel companies, including Meituan and Ctrip, achieved profits with significant year-on-year growth, yet their combined net profit attributable to shareholders decreased by 42% year-on-year. Nevertheless, the financial performance of online travel companies in 2024 was particularly notable (as shown in Figure 2), with all four companies achieving profitability and gradually establishing their respective advantages by focusing on niche markets: Meituan is leveraging the high-frequency consumption scenarios of local lifestyle services to accumulate a large user base and capture a portion of the OTA market share; Ctrip is leading in globalization, with increased contributions from its international business; Tongcheng is focusing on lower-tier markets, with synergies emerging from diversified business expansion and improved operational efficiency; and Tuniu has made a comeback through live streaming, enhancing profitability by optimizing operations and reducing costs, ultimately achieving a turnaround from loss to profit.

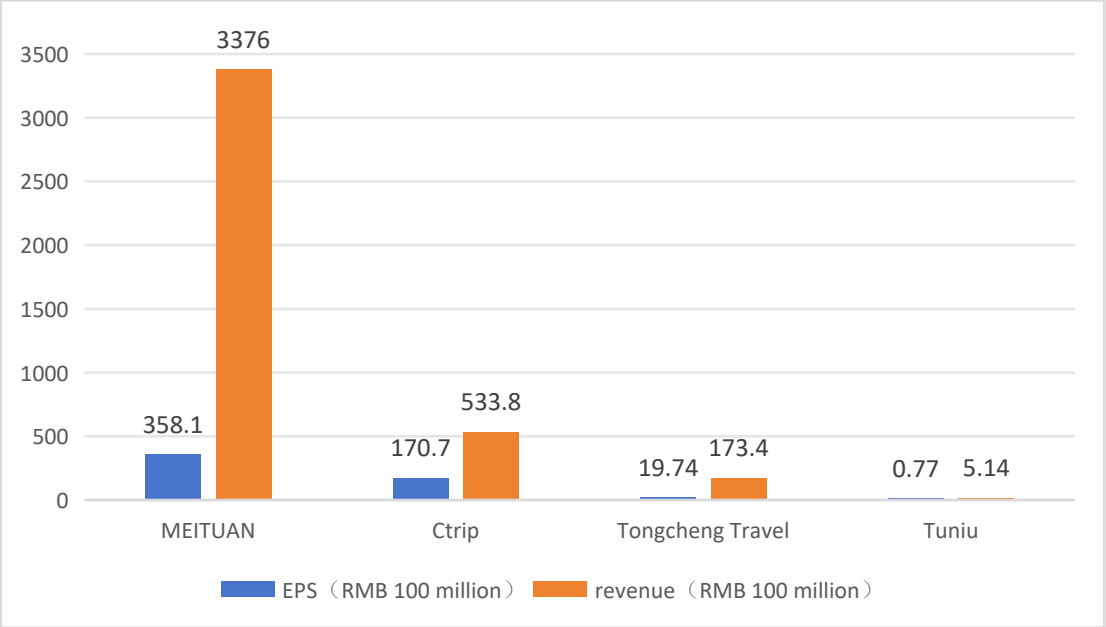


Figure 2: Revenue and net profit attributable to the parent company of major cultural tourism e-commerce companies in 2024

Data source: Annual financial reports of various companies

However, behind the success of leading companies, many small and medium-sized cultural tourism e-commerce companies are facing severe survival challenges, with profitability looking bleak. Due to limited funds, these companies have relatively insufficient investment in technology research and development and

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marketing, resulting in significant gaps between their platform functions and user experience and those of leading companies. In terms of technology, they cannot utilize advanced big data analysis techniques like leading companies to accurately understand consumer needs, nor can they develop intelligent recommendation systems or efficient customer service robots. This disadvantages them regarding the accuracy of product recommendations and customer service efficiency. Regarding market promotion, limited funds make supporting large-scale advertising campaigns and marketing activities difficult, resulting in low brand awareness and a narrow market share. For example, some small and medium-sized e-commerce companies specializing in specific niche travel destinations or unique cultural and tourism products lack sufficient funds for market promotion. Despite their products' unique features, they remain largely unknown, struggling to attract enough customers and thus falling into profitability crises, with some even incurring losses.

2.2 Problems with the profit model of cultural tourism e-commerce enterprises

Analyzing the current profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce companies, as described above, shows that the industry is experiencing rapid growth. However, beneath the surface of this thriving industry lies a crisis in business models, with issues such as product homogenization, obstacles to corporate expansion, and high operating costs acting as barriers to improving the profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce companies.

2.2.1 Intensified market homogenization competition severely compresses profit margins

Cultural and tourism e-commerce products suffer from severe homogenization, with most companies offering highly similar travel routes and cultural and creative products, resulting in uniform content and experiences. Only a few companies can provide differentiated products that truly stand out to users. Homogenization leads to price competition, as consumers base their choices on price comparisons. Companies resort to destructive price competition to compete for market share, lowering prices. This disorderly competition is the direct cause of insufficient profit margins for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies, and it can even disrupt the market. A business model prioritizes survival and growth at the expense of profits is detrimental to the industry's sustainable development. Companies that consistently operate with slim margins or even losses lack the funds needed for product and service innovation, making it impossible to achieve sustainable development in the entire tourism e-commerce industry. This leads to a vicious cycle of continuously lowering product prices (Wei Xiang et al., 2025). This vicious cycle ultimately stems from insufficient corporate innovation and blind self-destruction without market regulation.

2.2.2 Lack of economies of scale and weak supply chain bargaining power

The tourism e-commerce industry is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, such as tourist attractions and travel agencies, which operate independently and struggle to achieve economies of scale. Large tourism e-commerce platforms utilize a tiered mechanism of 'merchant grading—traffic allocation—service standardization' to precisely control the supply-demand relationship (Wang Xintian & Wang Xiangdong, 2019). SMEs struggle to reduce costs through large-scale procurement, standardized production, and standardized management compared to large enterprises. The costs of maintaining tourism products, logistics, and operating online platforms are high when allocated per unit of product or service. Additionally, SMEs can

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only adopt low-price strategies to compete for traffic, leading to intense price competition.

Such cost disadvantages further weaken the market competitiveness of SMEs. Even if some enterprises offer unique, innovative products and services, they struggle to expand their market share due to the Lack of price advantages. During the procurement phase of tourism products, suppliers such as hotels and scenic spots prefer working with large enterprises with established relationships, large procurement volumes, and favorable prices. Due to the Lack of economies of scale, SMEs lack negotiation power and must bear higher procurement costs to obtain product resources, resulting in smaller profit margins for sales enterprises. Some SMEs are exploring ways to enhance their negotiation power through joint procurement. However, coordination between enterprises is challenging, and the mechanisms for dividing interests are complex, making it difficult to achieve effective results.

2.2.3 High operational costs and significant pressure from technical and marketing investments

Cultural and tourism e-commerce companies require many technical and marketing talents, and the direct consequence of high talent demand is high labor costs. The operation and maintenance of e-commerce platforms require companies to invest many funds in technical optimization to enhance platform efficiency and meet the increasingly diverse needs of consumers at different times, thereby providing consumers with a good experience. Building an efficient and reliable online trading market, researching intelligent recommendations, and maintaining internet security all require substantial financial support.

Additionally, to maintain user engagement and expand product customer bases, companies must invest substantial resources in marketing and promotion, from search engines to social media marketing to advertising. Every stage requires substantial financial investment. The high costs of technology and marketing have become a significant burden for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies. For small and medium-sized enterprises already operating with low-profit margins, these high costs make it even more challenging to achieve high profits, and some companies have even exited the market due to their inability to bear these costs. From a business perspective, high operational costs and profit targets are contradictory, requiring a new balance between cost expenditures and business development.

2.2.4 Tourism ethics issues require urgent resolution, and the digital divide persists

As an information-intensive industry, tourism inevitably involves using information and data throughout the entire process, from pre-trip preparation during the trip to post-trip evaluations and sharing (Qiao Xiangjie et al., 2023). Consumers often sacrifice privacy to obtain more convenient travel experiences when visiting unfamiliar locations (e.g., facial recognition services in brilliant tourist attractions, self-service check-in services at airports, etc.), including applications such as digital avatars and intelligent assistants, which collect consumers' personal information and may pose risks of information leakage (Sun Jin, 2021).

Additionally, there is a digital divide between urban and rural areas (Chen Linlin et al., 2022), which is another factor constraining the development of cultural and tourism e-commerce enterprises. According to data from the China Internet Network Information Centre, as of December 2024, the number of urban internet users in China reached 795 million, accounting for 71.8% of the total internet user population; the number of

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rural internet users reached 313 million, accounting for 28.2% of the total internet user population; the internet penetration rate in urban areas was 85.3%, an increase of 1.9 percentage points compared to December 2023; and the internet penetration rate in rural areas was 65.6%. Digital technology's benefits to the tourism industry should be extended to different regions, mainly so that urban and rural residents can experience the convenience of digitalization.

3. Analysis of Profit Improvement Mechanisms for Cultural and Tourism E-commerce Enterprises

The deep integration of the cultural and tourism industry with the digital economy has created a profit improvement mechanism for cultural and tourism e-commerce enterprises that are driven by digital marketing, supported by advanced technology, and characterized by service innovation and supply chain optimization. The following is a detailed analysis of these four dimensions.

3.1 Digital Marketing-Driven: The Key Engine for Precise Targeting and Traffic Conversion

Digital marketing, with its precise and personalized characteristics, is a key tool for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies to bridge the gap with consumers and drive traffic conversion. Against the rapid development of social media and short videos, companies can use big data analysis to understand consumers' preferences, habits, and decision-making patterns and formulate personalized marketing strategies (Lin Xiaorui, 2022). For example, Ctrip uses consumer online search, browsing, and booking information to build consumer profiles, precisely recommend travel products, and drive user purchases.

Additionally, digital marketing eliminates the temporal and spatial boundaries of marketing, enabling companies to reach more potential consumers in various countries at lower costs. Platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu have also helped cultural and tourism e-commerce companies achieve breakthroughs in content marketing. Some listed companies in the cultural and tourism e-commerce industry have gained audience attention and discussion by providing high-quality travel guides, scenic spot experience videos, and other content or inviting influencers to conduct live streams of cultural and tourism scenes, thereby directing consumers to purchase products in their stores. These methods leverage the influence of celebrities, create a relaxed and entertaining shopping experience for consumers, and foster positive interactions with consumers (Liu Gai-fang & Wang Tao, 2025), thereby enhancing brand awareness and loyalty. From a business logic perspective, digital marketing can reduce marketing costs through target audience segmentation and improved user experience, achieving high returns at low costs, thereby becoming a growth point for corporate profitability.

3.2 Advanced Technology Support: The Foundation for Reconstructing Transaction Models and Operational Efficiency

The application of advanced technologies is the foundation and guarantee for developing tourism e-commerce transaction models. Cloud computing, big data, and artificial intelligence have driven the intelligent and automated development of tourism e-commerce platforms (Qiao Xiangjie et al., 2023). For example, in 2025, Tongcheng Travel integrated its intelligent customer service system with Deepseek, enabling rapid

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responses to inquiries, handling everyday issues, reducing human customer service costs, and improving customer service efficiency and satisfaction.

The application of blockchain technology in cultural and tourism e-commerce can address trust issues in transactions by storing transaction information and user reviews on the blockchain, ensuring transparency and reliability of transaction data and mitigating problems arising from insufficient trust. The application of VR and AR technologies can enhance users' immersive experiences. By using VR technology to showcase scenic spots, hotels, etc., users can preview products, increasing their intention to purchase. Technological upgrades optimize user experience while reducing corporate costs, providing a technological foundation for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies to generate greater profits.

3.3 Service Innovation Breakthrough: Breaking the Deadlock of Homogeneous Competition

For the cultural and tourism e-commerce industry, where product homogenization is severe, product and service innovation are the only way for industry enterprises to break out of the vicious competition cycle. By dynamically adjusting service innovation strategies to align with market changes, enterprises can effectively enhance their ability to identify opportunities and define strategic positioning, thereby improving profitability (Zhang Zixuan & Chen Huichao, 2023). Cultural and tourism e-commerce companies should focus on technological breakthroughs and efficiency improvements, enhancing product innovation and differentiated service design to enhance user experience and brand value (Zou Guangyong & Liu Mingyu, 2023). In 2019, Tuniu Travel upgraded its 'Niu Ren Special Line' product, offering personalized travel routes tailored to different consumer groups, providing professional guide services, and comprehensively addressing travelers' concerns regarding booking and travel, thereby meeting users' differentiated travel needs and establishing a competitive advantage in the industry.

Additionally, value-added services can provide enterprises with more growth opportunities. Some cultural and tourism e-commerce companies, in addition to offering travel booking services, have also launched value-added services such as travel insurance, visa processing, and customized travel guides, enriching their product offerings, increasing user consumption frequency, and raising average transaction values. Innovative services can enhance user brand loyalty, help enterprises break free from low-price competition, increase product premiums, and boost corporate profits. Service innovation is the key for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies to break through homogeneous competition and achieve profitable growth.

3.4 Optimizing supply chain levels: The core path to cost reduction, efficiency improvement, and resource integration

Establishing long-term stable partnerships with high-quality suppliers can secure more favorable prices and better cooperation terms, thereby reducing product costs. Zhongxin Tourism has established long-term partnerships with global hotels, airlines, scenic spot suppliers, and others to integrate tourism resources, achieving cost reduction while ensuring the quality of resources. Additionally, digital supply chain management can enhance corporate efficiency. Through supply chain management systems, companies can monitor inventory, orders, and logistics information in real-time, enabling precise procurement and inventory management to

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avoid inventory buildup and capital tied up in inventory. Some listed cultural and tourism e-commerce companies have established digital supply chain platforms to facilitate information sharing and collaboration among suppliers, companies, and users, improving supply chain responsiveness and flexibility.

Furthermore, supply chain optimization can also be reflected in resource integration and collaborative innovation. Companies can integrate upstream and downstream supply chain resources to jointly develop co-branded products, launch themed travel routes, and optimize resource allocation, creating new profit growth points. Supply chain optimization is crucial for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies to enhance their profit margins and market competitiveness.

4. Strategies for Enhancing the Profitability of Cultural and Tourism E-commerce Enterprises

Based on the status and trends of the cultural and tourism industry and the driving forces behind the profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce enterprises, this paper proposes the following five strategies for enhancing profitability. By integrating resources, innovating business models, and deepening user engagement, these strategies aim to achieve leapfrog development in profitability.

4.1 Building a Live Streaming Marketing Matrix to Expand Product Reach

Influencer live streaming is a business model that attracts high traffic and drives product conversions. Cultural and tourism e-commerce companies can expand the breadth of their product sales by establishing a multi-channel influencer live-streaming matrix. On the one hand, they can collaborate with top influencers to leverage their high popularity and strong product promotion capabilities to conduct themed route live streams and cultural and creative product special live streams, using immersive scene displays and real-time interaction to stimulate users' immediate purchasing impulses. For example, some companies hire top travel influencers to live stream real-life scenes of homestays and scenic spots, allowing viewers to experience the homestays and scenic spot projects firsthand. Through vivid explanations and product promotion strategies, this significantly boosts product sales.

On the other hand, companies can build their influencer teams by designing personalized and customized live-streaming content around corporate culture and product attributes. In-house influencers have a certain level of familiarity with the company's products. They can provide fans with more travel tips and product interpretations from a professional perspective, making fans feel more reliable. As a commercial activity, influencer live streaming has changed the one-way nature of traditional marketing, creating a two-way consumer relationship. While increasing product exposure, it also achieves word-of-mouth promotion of cultural and tourism e-commerce products through live streaming sales.

4.2 Deepen the precision marketing system to enhance user conversion efficiency

Precision marketing is based on big data and artificial intelligence technologies to precisely analyze customers' needs and provide the required products and services. Companies need to collect customer information from multiple sources, such as historical browsing information, purchase history, and social media activ-

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ity participation, to conduct precise customer analysis. Through machine learning, they can analyze potential customer needs, predict consumption trends, and select differentiated sales models. In specific platform operation practices, personalized product marketing information can be recommended to different groups. For example, for high-end business travelers, high-quality hotels and convenient travel packages can be recommended; children's playgrounds and family-friendly hotels to family travelers; simultaneously, advertising information can be placed on social media, search engines, and other online platforms to precisely target the desired audience, reducing the blindness of marketing efforts, increasing marketing success rates, and uncovering users' potential value to maximize the return on investment for cultural and tourism e-commerce companies.

4.3 Innovating service processes and content to create a differentiated competitive advantage

Service process innovation focuses on the entire consumer journey. Companies can consider introducing digital technology in booking, payment, and after-sales service to enable one-click ordering, reminders, claims processing, and other services, thereby reducing consumers' time costs and operational difficulties and alleviating their concerns. Additionally, companies can introduce digital customer service to provide 24/7 online support, promptly resolving issues and meeting needs.

Service content innovation must meet users' personalized needs. To meet users' personalized travel needs, develop themed tourism routes such as photography tours and intangible cultural heritage tours; design new products like 'tourism + culture' and 'tourism + wellness' to expand product ranges; and launch customized travel guides and itinerary management services. Innovation in tourism service processes and content helps companies break free from homogeneous competition and makes products more valuable, creating more profit opportunities.

4.4 Strengthen value chain and supply chain coordination management to reduce operating costs

Value chain management involves the positive interaction between various departments and processes within an enterprise. The enterprise streamlines its business processes, adjusts the allocation of internal resources, strengthens coordination between R&D and business departments, and utilizes digital technology to transform and upgrade. It achieves business process automation and intelligence to reduce human resource costs and operating costs.

In supply chain management, form strategic partnerships with outstanding suppliers, centralize procurement, and secure long-term collaborations to gain a competitive edge through cost advantages—Utilize blockchain technology to ensure transparency in supply chain information and safeguard product quality. Employ big data for inventory management to reduce stock levels. Seek collaborative innovation with upstream and downstream enterprises in the supply chain to develop joint products and themed tourism initiatives, achieving shared value creation. The synergistic optimization of value and supply chains can significantly reduce operational costs and expand the company's profit margins.

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4.5 Enhancing user stickiness from multiple dimensions to cultivate a sustainable profit foundation

Increasing user stickiness requires efforts in emotional relationships, incentive systems, and interactive communication. Cultivate member loyalty by setting different membership levels based on the number of purchases and spending amounts. Grant users' privileges such as discounts, reservations, and free flights to encourage purchases. Establish a member community to encourage members to share travel experiences and insights, creating a positive social environment and word-of-mouth promotion.

Regular visits and targeted recommendations should also be adopted to maintain frequent communication with users, promptly understand their needs, provide thoughtful services, and care for them. To enhance user retention, offer blessings and discount information during important holidays and on users' birthdays. Increased user retention encourages repeat purchases and can attract new customers through word-of-mouth, helping businesses build a stable foundation for profit growth.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the mechanisms for enhancing the profitability of cultural and tourism e-commerce enterprises driven by digital marketing. It first analyses the current state of profitability in the cultural and tourism e-commerce sector, including market size growth, profit divergence among enterprises, and the phenomenon of 'revenue growth without profit growth.' It also examines issues such as market homogenization, Lack of economies of scale, high operational costs, and tourism ethics in the profit models of cultural and tourism enterprises. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes strategies from precision marketing, technological support, service innovation, and supply chain capabilities. Hopefully, this study will contribute to the existing research on the relationship between digital marketing and profitability in the cultural tourism e-commerce sector, providing insights for industry development.

In the current era where digital marketing is reshaping the industry ecosystem, cultural and tourism e-commerce companies must prioritize the value of digital marketing in driving profitability. They should leverage data to precisely understand and align with consumer needs, utilize technology to continuously innovate products and services, collaborate to integrate resources and expand markets, and excel in service to enhance user loyalty and reputation. By comprehensively advancing digital marketing practices, companies can break through profitability bottlenecks, enhance core competitiveness, and confidently navigate market changes and competitive challenges to achieve sustainable development.

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