

Original Paper

Applause without Purchase: The Conversion Gap of Knowledge-Based Book Sales on Douyin in the Context of Fragmented Communication

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Abstract

In the fragmented communication environment, knowledge-based book marketing on Douyin has gained wide attention through the model of knowledge-driven consumption. Yet a clear discrepancy between communication impact and sales conversion persists, forming the typical phenomenon of “applause without purchase”. Guided by cross-media storytelling theory, this study analyzes the Douyin case of high interaction but low conversion through quantitative data from four leading influencers (total followers: 9.199 million; total interactions: 152,000). Results show low conversion efficiency, with CNY 21,500 sales per 10,000 interactions and CNY 3,563 per 10,000 followers. The findings identify three key causes of the conversion gap: the value substitution effect of cognitive bias, attention dissipation under fragmented reading, and market dilution caused by content imbalance. To address these issues, the study proposes three optimization path—cognitive reconstruction, cross-media cultural storytelling, and content ecosystem governance—to bridge the gap between communication and consumption and promote the shift of knowledge-based marketing from traffic generation to value realization.

Keywords

knowledge-based marketing, book sales conversion gap, cross-media storytelling

1. Introduction

In the information ecosystem dominated by short videos, platforms such as Douyin have driven a deep integration of knowledge and consumption, giving rise to the emerging phenomenon of knowledge-based marketing. Originating from the success of Yuhui Dong in the Oriental Selection live-streaming studio, a growing number of creators on Douyin and Xiaohongshu have adopted this model—integrating product promotion with the dissemination of knowledge in areas such as history and literature—to establish a value link between user cognition and purchase behavior. This model of “knowledge-empowered consumption” has rapidly attracted both market attention and audience resonance. However, in practice, a recurring paradox has emerged: despite high visibility and positive engagement, actual purchase conversion remains low. For instance, videos under the Douyin topic *#Ma Boyong* have accumulated over 100 million views and tens of thousands of likes per post, yet the associated book-window click-through and purchase rates remain minimal—illustrating the phenomenon of “millions of likes, few buyers”. This disjunction between massive traffic and weak conversion highlights a deeper structural gap between communication effectiveness and consumer behavior, prompting critical reflection on how attention-driven cultural dissemination can be transformed into sustainable market value.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 *Theoretical Interpretation and Applicability to the Study of Douyin’s Knowledge-Based Conversion Gap*

2.1.1 Cross-Media Storytelling Theory

The concept of cross-media storytelling was introduced by Henry Jenkins in 2003 and further developed in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) (Jenkins, H., 2008, pp. 1-301). It refers to the process of distributing parts of a narrative across multiple media channels to create a coherent and engaging experience. Each medium contributes uniquely to the story, giving the model features such as content extensibility, media diversity, user immersion, interaction continuity and unified world-building (Cao, F., & Yi, W. C., 2025, pp. 38-41). In essence, cross-media storytelling involves coordinated content creation across diverse media forms to build a shared narrative world that meets users’ emotional and experiential needs while encouraging participatory engagement.

2.1.2 Applicability to Douyin’s Knowledge-Based Marketing

Cross-media storytelling emphasizes multi-platform coordination and interactive participation, aligning closely (Li, S. Y., 2016, pp. 26-32) with how knowledge-based short videos operate on Douyin. While short videos attract attention through fragmented content, users’ knowledge acquisition often lacks continuity, weakening purchasing motivation. This disconnection between communication and conversion is where cross-media storytelling can intervene. At the content level, cross-media

storytelling rebuilds fragmented knowledge into a continuous narrative chain. By linking short videos, live streams, text posts, and mini-programs, it deepens engagement and extends the conversion path. For example, historical themes in Ma Boyong's works can be distributed across media: short videos highlight key knowledge points, live streams provide in-depth discussion, and mini-programs integrate interactive tasks tied to book purchases. At the communication level, cross-media storytelling transforms users from passive viewers into co-narrators, solving the problem of one-way communication. Interactive campaigns such as "Te Mystery of Chang'an" could require users to buy books to unlock narrative clues, turning knowledge engagement into commercial conversion.

2.2 Literature Review on Knowledge-Based Marketing

Knowledge-based marketing, combining knowledge dissemination and product promotion, has drawn growing scholarly attention. Research mainly focuses on narrative strategies, consumption motives, and media mechanisms. Lang (2025) finds that knowledge-oriented live streaming creates a trust-based field through the integration of knowledge and product narratives, strengthening user immersion and emotional connection (Lang, Y. Q., 2025, pp. 34-36). Chen et al. (2025) argue that cultural capital and identity-driven motivations underlie users' willingness to purchase (Chen, N., Yang, Y., & Deng, Q., 2024, pp. 149-150). Jing (2023) highlights the formation of stable trust communities as the key distinction between knowledge-based and traditional live commerce (Jing, Q., 2023, pp. 88-95). From a media evolution perspective, Wang and Wu (2023) note a shift from fast-paced promotion to slow, interactive engagement, though challenges such as discourse ambiguity and platform governance remain (Wang, Y. S., & Wu, S. Q., 2023, pp. 58-60).

However, existing studies largely focus on single-platform mechanisms, overlooking cross-platform collaboration and behavioral migration. Introducing cross-media storytelling theory helps reframe knowledge-based marketing within a broader transmedia ecosystem, exploring how multi-media coordination and narrative continuity can transform audience attention into sustainable market value.

3. Data Analysis Based on Douyin Platform

To reveal the phenomenon of "high engagement but low sales" in knowledge-based book marketing, this study combines quantitative description and comparative analysis to examine the dissemination and sales performance of *The Lychee of Chang'an* on the Douyin platform. Data were collected from September 1 to October 7, 2025, verified through Douyin's public data and the third-party monitoring platform *Chanmama*, with duplicate and promotional videos excluded to ensure representativeness and validity.

3.1 Research Design and Indicators

Using the keyword "Ma Boyong *The Lychee of Chang'an*," four leading Douyin creators with over one million followers: @Hailin Loves Reading, @Xiaoxuan Talks Books at Night, @Juxing Huohuo, and @Bul ǔe—were selected as research samples. All accounts shared the same official purchase link to

@Boji Tianjuan Official Flagship Store, ensuring variable consistency. The product's cumulative sales volume under this link reached 113,000 copies, with a unit price of CNY 29.

Two sets of indicators were established: (1) Dissemination scale indicators: total followers and total interactions. (2) Conversion efficiency indicators: sales per 10,000 interactions and sales per 10,000 followers.

$$\text{Sales per 10,000 Interactions} = \left(\frac{\text{Total Sales (CNY)}}{\text{Total Interactions}} \right) \times 10,000$$

Figure 1. Sales Per 10,000 Interactions

This indicator measures the monetary value generated by every 10,000 user interactions, reflecting the conversion efficiency of engagement behaviors (likes comments, saves, and shares).

$$\text{Sales per 10,000 Interactions} = \left(\frac{\text{Total Sales (CNY)}}{\text{Total Interactions}} \right) \times 10,000$$

Figure 2. Sales Per 10,000 Followers

This indicator assesses the average sales revenue contributed by each 10,000 followers, representing the realization level of the audience's commercial potential.

3.2 Data Presentation and Conversion Gap Analysis

Table 1. Summary of Data for Leading Knowledge-Based Creators on Douyin

	Followers (10k)	Likes (10k)	Comments	Saves	Shares	Total Interactions
@Hailin Loves Reading	215.4	3.6	777	12000	8098	56875
@Xiaoxuan Talks Books at Night	254.5	3.0	330	4233	698	35261
@Juxing Huohuo	316.0	3.1	510	3737	1950	37197
@Bul üe	133.9	1.6	533	2924	3634	23091
Total	919.8	11.3	2150	22894	14380	152424

It is important to note that the 113,000 total sales observed reflect the cumulative sales under the store's link, generated collectively by many promoters, including the four analyzed creators. Thus, the analysis does not attribute total sales solely to these creators but compares their aggregated exposure (152,424 interactions, 9.198 million followers) with the total market outcome (113,000 copies sold). Using the fixed price of CNY 29 per copy, the macro comparison aims to assess unit dissemination effectiveness, i.e., sales per 10,000 interactions and sales per 10,000 followers.

Table 2. Dissemination Scale and Conversion Efficiency of Knowledge-Based Marketing

Indicator	Observation	Calculation	Result (CNY)
Total follower	9.198 million	Sum of followers	9,198,000
Total interactions	152,424	Sum of likes, comments, saves, shares	152,424
Reference total sales	3.277 million	$113,000 \times 29$	3,277,000
Sales per 10,000 interactions	/	$(\text{Total Sales} \div \text{Total Interactions}) \times 10,000$	21,500
Sales per 10,000 followers	/	$(\text{Total Sales} \div \text{Total Followers}) \times 10,000$	3,563

3.3 Findings and Discussion

Based on the data in Tables 1 and 2, the analysis identifies a significant discrepancy between dissemination scale and conversion efficiency, reflecting the “high praise but low purchase” phenomenon in knowledge-based book marketing.

3.3.1 Structural Imbalance between Reach and Sales

The four creators collectively reached 9.198 million followers and generated 152,424 interactions, forming a massive communication base. However, the corresponding total sales amounted to only CNY 3.277 million (113,000 copies $\times$ 29). On average, one sale occurred per 22.8 interactions, and only one out of every 81.4 followers made a purchase. This contrast reveals a clear structural imbalance between the breadth of dissemination and the depth of market conversion.

3.3.2 Low Conversion Value per Interaction

The sales per 10,000 interactions was CNY 21,500, equivalent to roughly 741 books sold per 10,000 interactions. According to the Douyin E-Commerce Content White Paper (2024) and Douyin Book Consumption Report (2024), this shows that while knowledge-oriented content stimulates interest, its conversion efficiency remains weak. This gap illustrates a disconnection between communication effectiveness and consumption behavior. Users often experience “instant cognitive satisfaction” through low-cost interactions such as likes or saves, reducing their motivation to purchase—a

manifestation of the value substitution effect, where engagement psychologically replaces buying behavior. Thus, despite strong cultural appeal, knowledge-based content shows structural inefficiency in monetizing engagement.

3.3.3 Underperformance in Fan-Based Commercial Value

The sales per 10,000 followers was only CNY 3,563, meaning each 10,000 followers contributed about 123 book sales. Even for the most interactive creator, @Hailin Loves Reading, this figure reached just CNY 3,658, similar to others. This indicates that low conversion is structural, not a result of individual differences. Overall, 96.4% of followers did not convert into buyers, confirming systemic obstacles in turning fan attention into commercial value.

4. Analysis of the Causes behind the Communication–Conversion Gap

The “high engagement but low sales” phenomenon in knowledge-based marketing is particularly evident in literary content. Works by authors such as Ma Boyong, Yu Hua, and Liu Cixin often attract millions of views on Douyin, yet user engagement through comments or likes rarely translates into actual book purchases. Although Douyin successfully enhances the visibility of knowledge-oriented content, functional disconnections occur within the chain from cognitive stimulation to purchase conversion.

4.1 Cognitive Bias and the Value Substitution Effect

Knowledge-based short videos increase the cultural value of content, providing audiences with a strong sense of cognitive satisfaction. However, this perceived fulfillment is often mistaken for actual consumption (Ye, D. Z., Lian, Y. J., Huang, Y. G. et al., 2012, pp. 80-92), creating the illusion of “watching equals owning.” Under this cognitive bias, users achieve psychological recognition of a product but lose the behavioral motivation to buy it, preventing traffic from transforming into commercial value. For instance, users eagerly comment on knowledge topics such as “Tang Dynasty officials’ salaries” but ignore the purchase link for *The Lychee of Chang’an*. Comments like “This is even better than the book” or “I already understand it after watching your video” reveal a closed cognitive loop in which perceived knowledge acquisition replaces the need to buy the full text.

4.2 Attention Dilution in Fragmented Reading Environments

Driven by digital media, fragmented reading has become a dominant mode of knowledge acquisition, reshaping users’ reading habits (Li, X. G., Jiao, T. X., Li, J. Y. et al., 2019, pp. 73-98). Platforms like Douyin compress content into 15-60 second videos, catering to users seeking quick information during fragmented moments such as commuting or waiting. In such an environment, attention is divided among vast amounts of short-form content. Users gradually lose patience and focus for long-form reading, preferring short videos to gain superficial understanding. For example, China’s landmark sci-fi work *The Three-Body Problem* has inspired numerous short videos interpreting ideas such as the “Dark Forest Theory” or “Cosmic Sociology”. While these increase topic visibility, they confine user

cognition to surface-level knowledge points, discouraging deeper exploration of the book's full narrative system.

4.3 Platform Ecosystem Imbalance and Market Dilution

The proliferation of secondary creation and content reposting disrupts the platform's communication ecosystem and weakens the conversion potential of knowledge-based book marketing. On Douyin, original book-related videos are frequently re-edited or re-uploaded by other users. While such derivative content increases visibility, it fragments the original communication chain, reducing the efficiency of sales conversion. Loose regulation of content reproduction allows free dissemination of knowledge fragments, satisfying users' free knowledge acquisition needs but diminishing their motivation to purchase books. This ecosystem imbalance dilutes the commercial value of knowledge-based content and constitutes a major barrier to effective consumption conversion.

5. Strategies to Enhance the Conversion Efficiency of Knowledge-Based Marketing

5.1 Cognitive Reconstruction through Cross-Media Storytelling: Breaking the "Value Substitution" Barrier

The cognitive illusion of "watching equals owning" weakens users' purchase motivation. Cross-media storytelling provides an effective path for cognitive reconstruction by creating a continuous and immersive experience across multiple platforms. For example, in the case of *The Lychee of Chang'an*, short videos spark curiosity through suspense, live streams offer in-depth interpretation, text-based posts supply contextual knowledge (Henry, J., 2011), and mini-programs introduce interactive tasks linking information clues with purchase behavior. This multi-platform narrative structure prevents users from achieving full "cognitive satisfaction" through a single video, thereby stimulating actual buying intention. Moreover, cross-media storytelling transforms audiences into co-creators of the narrative through comments and participatory interactions. This participatory structure enhances user agency and reinforces the perceived value of knowledge-related products (Hu, J. J., 2025, pp. 12-18), effectively bridging the gap between communication and consumption.

5.2 Cross-Media Cultural Narratives: Activating Fragmented Consumption Scenarios

In short-video-dominated environments, fragmented attention makes it difficult for knowledge-based content to sustain deep engagement or drive purchasing behavior. Cross-media storytelling, by emphasizing functional complementarity and media synergy, offers a mechanism for transforming momentary interest into continuous consumption motivation. Specifically, publishers can deconstruct core knowledge points from a book and adapt them to different media formats—short videos for traffic attraction, cultural derivatives as tangible carriers, and offline activities for experiential extension. This multi-dimensional consumption ecosystem turns abstract historical knowledge into physical, experienceable cultural forms, strengthening users' perception of knowledge value (Wu, D., 2025, pp. 127-135) and converting online attention into offline consumption.

5.3 Cross-Media Ecosystem Governance: Optimizing the Platform Communication Environment

An imbalanced platform ecosystem not only dilutes the communication power of knowledge-based content but also weakens users' willingness to purchase. Therefore, guided by cross-media theory, it is essential to rebuild an integrated, sustainable communication ecosystem (Fan, W. T., 2025, pp. 94-102). Platforms should act not merely as regulators but as co-constructors of content ecology—facilitating authorized partnerships between creators and publishers, distinguishing original content from derivative reposts, and curbing unauthorized reproduction that disrupts original value chains. Following the principle of media complementarity, platforms can use algorithmic recommendations to encourage multi-format continuity—for instance, linking short videos to live replays or book preview pages, thereby transitioning users from fast-paced engagement to deep, immersive interaction. Cross-media ecosystem governance is not the control of a single platform but a form of multi-platform coordination, optimizing the media environment to transform traffic flow into commercial value.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

In the short-video era, knowledge-based book marketing enjoys high visibility but demonstrates weak sales conversion, forming a typical “high engagement but low purchase” pattern. Grounded in cross-media storytelling theory, this study examined the cognitive, structural, and ecological causes of the communication–conversion gap in Douyin-based knowledge marketing. Through quantitative analysis of leading creators—collectively covering nearly 10 million followers and generating over 150,000 interactions—the study confirms a conversion inefficiency, with sales per 10,000 followers reaching only CNY 3,563. Based on these findings, three optimization strategies are proposed: cognitive reconstruction, scenario extension, and ecosystem governance. As a communication paradigm emphasizing media synergy and user participation, cross-media storytelling can build continuous cognitive chains within fragmented information environments and activate sustained engagement and purchasing motivation. In the ongoing transformation of the publishing industry, leveraging new media to extend book value, expand content boundaries, and reshape reader identification has become a vital issue for achieving high-quality knowledge dissemination. Future collaboration among publishers, platforms, and content creators will be key to realizing the integrated transformation of cultural value and commercial value. This study contributes to understanding how knowledge-oriented short videos influence cultural consumption in the Asian digital context and provides insights for the publishing industry's adaptive evolution.

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