A Study on the User Contact of Audiobooks in the Age of Digital Media Based on Computer Technology——A Case Study of the Popular Chinese Application "Himalaya"

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Abstract. With the development of computer technology, digital media technology has also developed rapidly, the audiobook industry is going from strength to strength in China. Among these audiobook platforms, Himalayan FM undoubtedly stands out, through which people can acquire supplementary knowledge by making the best of their fragmented time. In the meantime, paying for knowledge as a consumption habit is gradually developed in China. The purpose of this research is to find out the motivation behind and the reflection of people’s learning experience with audiobook. Taking Himalayan FM as case study, this study combines communication with psychology theories by online interview as “Cyber-ethnography”.

Keywords: Audiobook, Himalayan FM, Pay For Wisdom, Media Contact, Computer Technology

1. Background
Currently, Audiobooks are a big hit in China. According to iResearch, the audiobook market in China has nearly approached 4.63 billion at the compound annual growth rate of 36.4%. At present, an existing competitive landscape has basically taken shape in the audiobook market, and the leading edge of the integrated audio platform is obvious. According to the data of iResearch, in the fourth quarter of 2018, the number of mainstream online audio activities of Himalayan, Litchi and Dragonfly FM reached 89.093 million, 34.392 million and 30.08 million, respectively. Among these audiobook apps, Himalayan is arguably among the most successful both by the scale of users and influence. In this article, I would try to explore why Chinese people listen to audiobooks on apps like Himalayan FM and what are the effects on people after they use this application. Subsequently, suggestions for further construction of digital media like audiobooks would be proposed [1-3].

2. Research method

2.1. Overall research methods
Taking “Himalayan” App as sample for case study, this research adopts documentary analysis according to theory like communication and psychology. Besides, cyber-ethnography would be
applied by means of online review by ten users of “Himalayan” App with different jobs and ages to explore the motivation behind people’s use of media and its effects. Based on the results of online review, a comparative study is also carried out with related theories [4-8].

2.2. Cyber-ethnography
Cyber-ethnography, also known as virtual ethnography or online ethnography, the most commonly term, is an online research method that applies ethnographic methods to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interaction. Ten interviewers, including college staffs, investment managers, civil servants, Internet technology workers, entrepreneurs, college students, and new media workers, express their feelings about audiobooks. This research tends to answer the following questions on the basis of cyber-ethnography and related theories [9].
   i. What is the initial motivation behind using audiobook apps like “Himalayan” and the influence or feelings after using it?
   ii. What are the opinions or suggestions about “Himalayan” App or audiobook?
   iii. What is the attitude towards paying for knowledge?
   iv. What is the feedback after using audiobooks, e-books and “paying for knowledge”?

3. Literature review

3.1. Literature from Chinese studies
Based on Chinese literature search systems like cnki, I searched some key words such as “Audiobook”, “Spoken Words”, “Oral Reading”, etc. Based on the results, I analyzed these papers in order to explore the history of Chinese digital media and audiobook. Besides, the development of paying for knowledge at audiobook apps would also be explored.

3.2. The concept study of audiobook
Chinese scholars usually divide audiobooks into two types. According to American Audio Publishers Association, audiobooks are defined as “any recording product sold in the form of a cassette, a high-density disc, or a simple digital file”. This definition is widely used in studies like “The study of potential development on audiobook in the era of mobile internet” by Fu Naiqin (2015) [10]. Another definition derived from Chinese scholars extends its meaning- “Audiobooks are usually recorded on tape, CD or other carriers of digital audio, and are then sold in the market in the form of sound recordings”. This definition was adopted Shi Qiuyu (2012) [11] in his paper “Literature review about Chinese audiobook”.

3.3. The study on audience of audiobook
According to “The analysis of China’s Listening Booking Industry under the Network and the Analysis of Benchmarking Strategies” by Yang Hang (2011) and “Literature Review of Chinese Audiobook” by Shi Qiuyu (2012) [12], audiobook listeners are divided into three types, the first type is people who have time for reading but lack the enabling environment, the second type is those whose reading ability is inadequate, and the last type is network novel lovers. Besides, some scholars also point that the types of audiobook listeners are still continuously expanded.

3.4. The existing problems with audiobooks
There are many problems in the development of audiobooks, like industry standard, copyright issues, etc. The audiobook industry should establish related organizations and regulations and improve the industrial chain, according to “The Development Status and Research Strategy of Audiobooks in China” by Chen Jie and Zhou Jia (2015) [13].

3.5. Literature of foreign studies
Typing in “Audio books” and “Spoken Words” as key words to search for papers on comprehensive
discipline Document Database like EBSCO ASP and Web of Knowledge, etc, 42 related papers were found. In line with the purpose of this paper, these papers were divided into two types:

The first type aims at rapid development of digital media technology which has largely influenced publishing industry and stimulated the development of audio book.

Another type is revolved around social psychology. These papers explore the impact of audiobooks on listeners, especially teenagers. The typical cases are Grouped controlled trial by Anna Milani, Luisa Lorusso and Massimo Molteni (2010), that suggests that audiobooks help people overcome Dyslexia.

4. Analysis
This research adopts online interviews based on cyber-ethnography. Ten interviewees are from all walks of life: college staff member, investment manager, civil servant, Internet technology worker, entrepreneur, college student, and media worker. They expressed their feelings about audiobooks. Combining theory such as communication and psychology with interview results, there are some key points which should be emphasized in understanding the reasons and effects of audio media contact.

4.1. Uses and gratifications (UGT)
Uses and gratifications is an approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Severin, Werner, Tankard&James,1997). This theory is often used in the study of media contact and usage effects. Also, the purpose of this research is to identify the motivation behind audiobook contact and the effects and feelings after using it. The motivations and effect of audiobooks contact for young people can be analyzed by combining communication theories with interviews.

4.2. “Focus communication” provides people with diverse knowledge
Walter Lippmann (1922) illustrated the term “Pseudo-environment” in his book Public Opinion. As it is impossible for human to interpret the whole world, people have to choose and contact limited media outlets to enlarge their knowledge. In modern society, many Chinese people choose to pay for knowledge on apps like “Himalayan” FM to acquire supplementary knowledge.

These audiobooks listeners have diverse careers, fields, upbringing with different demand for supplementary knowledge, as a result, different needs lead to different groups. Although each member in a group has diverse inclination, individuals within a group have the same preferences for a certain field. Serving a better life with sound is the vision of “Himalayan” FM which has around 328 themes ranging from finance, music, news, novel, cars, etc. Focused communication has the characteristics of detailed communication content, which serves to enhance the initiative of listeners, frequent interaction and integration of transmission. The diverse themes of “Himalayan” accurately cater to the scattered demand for miniaturization, resulting in the long tail effect. Relying on the exclusive adaptation right, celebrity endorsement, the strength of social groups and anchor training, “Himalaya” FM puts together a large number of high-quality content to cater to different scenarios and meet the needs of debris learning.

Interviewers from all walks of life have diverse needs for knowledge and information. For example, one female college teacher said when she need some supplementary knowledge like history, she tend to look for related courses in “Himalayan” FM, and would pay for it if necessary. “It enlarges my horizon on diverse commercial models through audiobooks like “Himalayan” FM, which is a wonderful way to utilize my fragmented time, especially long commuting time,” a male investment manager said. Online knowledge payment platform like “Himalayan” FM not only pays attention to the head resources, but fully tap into the product richness and diversity of the tail resources as well.

4.3. The satisfaction of user participation under decentralization
The information dissemination of knowledge payment is highly dependent on decentralized individual dissemination. With the help of individual social contact, paid knowledge products can be widely disseminated in social networks. Online payment knowledge platform reconstructs communication
ecology by constructing a media environment of numerous information and free circulation, which is characterized by decentralization and open connection. The low threshold for participation allows the user to become a “knowledge sharer” and “opinion leader”, which undoubtedly and greatly enhances the satisfaction of the listeners and users.

“I was invited to share skills of new media operations, which greatly improves my sense of achievement”, a media worker said. Compared with the head content of knowledge payment platform, the production base of small and medium-sized grass-root content producers and other tail resources is larger. Grass-root content producers have longstanding exposure to a certain field. With rich practical experience, their content products are more adaptable to the needs of users.

By deepening the information resources of vertical field, focusing on the professional resources of a large number of related industries, continuously supplementing the content of the original field, giving full play to the long tail effect of the content, and enhancing the satisfaction of users with a diversity of contents, knowledge payment platform like “Himalayan” FM will maintain a sustainable and irreplaceable dominant position in the vertical field (Ibid.).

4.4. The reflection of paying for knowledge through audiobooks

In China, 75% of Internet users are willing to pay for quality content, according to a 2017 report by Chinese science news website Guokr and Internet company NetEase. Meanwhile, Chinese people, especially the younger generation, are suffering from so-called knowledge anxiety. In such a rapidly changing society, people are afraid of not being able to keep up with the latest information and are left behind, according to The Wall Street Journal (2018). The interviews show that eight out of ten interviewers used to pay for knowledge, and six became annual member of “Himalayan” FM in order to obtain better “knowledge service”.

Based on the daily schedule of listeners, contents are divided into seven scenes: “morning”, “night”, “bathroom”, “kitchen”, “commuting time”, “babysit”, and “taking care of the elder”. People can choose different contents depending on their scene. It seems that audiobook apps like “Himalayan” FM can provide people with useful information as well as save time. “I usually listen to audiobooks to broaden my horizon in my professional area, and there are some useful and updated courses I can learn a lot from while utilizing scattered time like the break of conferences at work”, a civil servant interviewee pointed out. He has also developed the habit of paying for knowledge by being a member and purchasing courses.

Meanwhile, the question of whether this can help people obtain useful information effectively nor not is worth discussing. Knowledge is not equivalent to information which can be acquired by listening to a few podcasts, as indicated by an investment manager, it is better to have a systemic course to learn knowledge in a certain area thoroughly. One college student points out that, to get real knowledge, one has to ask questions, analyze and reflect, rather than simply rely on Internet content. Therefore, knowledge payment platforms like “Himalayan” FM should focus on enhancing users’ systemic knowledge instead of scattered information.

5. Conclusion

In the context of computer technology, this present study analyzes the user motivation behind the use of “Himalayan” FM and the effects on users by combining communication and psychology theory with interview results. Inspired by Uses and gratifications, this article explores three dimensions, which are “focus communication”, “user participation” and “the reflection of paying for knowledge” to explain why so many Chinese people listen to audiobook apps like “Himalayan” FM and pay for it. However, knowledge payment platform also has some limitation in terms of learning systematic knowledge, which should be a focus in further development.

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