Audiobooks in the Post-pandemic Era:
How Can Audiobooks Boost the Silver Economy as a Hot Medium

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ABSTRACT

As a hot medium, the audiobook is easily accepted by the elderly among new Internet media. The elderly groups marginalized by the network society in the past are gradually stripping off the vested title of "digital refugee". This study aims to expound on how audiobooks can grasp the large emerging user group of the senior and vigorously tap the potential value of the silver economy. Through questionnaire investigation and in-depth interviews of ten audiobook senior users, the connection between an audiobook and the sliver economy has been summarized, indicating that audiobook is boosting the silver economy in many ways. This result suggests that audiobook needs to introduce more personalized content to keep their good content samples evolving to achieve a win-win situation of economic and social benefits.

Keywords: Audio Book, Silver Economy, Internet Media, Hot Medium.

1. INTRODUCTION

In China's Internet environment, media crowding is very serious. There are many different forms of communication competing with each other, such as relatively mainstream news, newspapers, radio; Or self-media such as the Red, Bilibili, Zhihu, NetEase Cloud Music, Himalaya, Tencent Video, and other video websites. They occupy different markets, but at the same time, more and more young people choose to give up traditional media to get information and choose to use all kinds of new media on mobile phones to get information [1]. At the same time, some middle-aged and old people still use traditional media with their old habits (about 29% of them still use radio) [2]. At the same time, with the change and development, more and more elderly people have gradually become the target user group of new media.

The discussion of audiobook development can be referred back to McLuhan's theory and related to "Audio is an extension of hearing", meaning that it is easy to use and gives you some knowledge in a "happy way" [3, 4]. So we conclude that the audiobook is the Thermal medium that can spread plenty of knowledge in a short time. As China's elderly population increases to 250 million, the study of countermeasures to social problems caused by aging in various sectors of society has become more and more indispensable and the concept of the silver-haired economy has once again been pushed to the forefront. According to the 48th statistical report of China's Internet Development by June 2021, the number of Internet users in China had reached 1.011 billion, of which 28.1% were aged 50 or over. Hence, elderly people account for a large proportion of the user. In another way, we can see the elderly are a group with a lot of time and energy to spend on recreation and leisure. The Internet continued to penetrate the middle-aged and elderly generations. More and more elderly people start to use the Internet to learn knowledge and try to know more about health care. Audiobooks have become the most suitable means of communication for middle-aged and elderly people with poor eyesight. So at this time, promoting audiobooks is a good choice. At present, the audiobook market is still in the stage of rapid development, effectively improving the national reading rate. In 2019, the market size of the online literature industry reached 20.17 billion yuan, with 25.901 million works created, 3,452 works translated and published in foreign languages, and 9,656 new IP adaptations. According to the 17th National Reading Survey released

by the Chinese Academy of Press and Publication, the comprehensive reading rate of Chinese adults was 81.1 percent in 2019, up 0.3 percent from 2018, and the digital reading rate, which is distributed in the categories as online reading, mobile reading, and e-reader reading, was 79.3 percent, up 3.1 percent from 2018. As an extension of digital reading, audiobooks improve the use of the fragmented time by audiences and show strong market potential [5]. Also in the silver economy, the education part is one of the big markets, older 's reeducation with the audiobook will get a huge market, because of the way that media spread it very easy to learn and get a habit, especially for old people [6]. According to the data of i-Media Research, the scale of China's Audiobook users is expected to increase to 478 million in 2020. From the data, we can see more and more people choose to study audiobooks. And also because global aging is becoming more and more serious, the elderly population has exploded. The Silver Economy will account for a larger share of GDP, and we suspect that with the expansion and development of audiobooks, the share of the Silver Economy will also increase.

McLuhan divided media into cold media and hot media according to the clarity of information provided by media, the extent of imagination of information recipients, and the degree of participation in information receiving activities [4]. "Hot media" refers to the clear and definite information conveyed, which can be understood by the recipient without mobilizing more sensory and associative activities. It is "hot" in itself, and the dissemination object has a low degree of participation in the process of receiving information. Typically, there are photographs, silent films, books, and newspapers. However, "cold media" refers to the little and vague information conveyed, which requires the cooperation of multiple senses and rich imagination in the process of understanding, and the communication object has a high degree of participation in the process of receiving information. Like comic books, sound movies, and television. In McLuhan's view, cold and heat are a pair of analytical tools to measure media and culture, and they can be used to measure whether the characteristics of media are compatible with the social environment. This study starts from the audience's actual feelings and combines the specific environment to study the influence of media. Starting from McLuhan's theory, cold and heat are a pair of analytical tools to measure media and culture, and they can be used to measure whether the characteristics of media are compatible with the social environment [4]. Starting from the audience's actual feeling, combined with the specific environment, the influence of media is studied. Audiobooks are a convenient way for most people to get clear information in a short amount of time without requiring too much effort to understand and associate. So audiobooks should be a cold medium.

For this research, the Audiobook, as a hot medium is similar to broadcasting, so it is easy to spread in the year group of elderly people. The middle-aged and elderly groups marginalized by the network society in the past are gradually understanding the content and rules of the online world, no longer disconnected from the online society. Instead, because older people have more free time, they can get more information from the Internet instead of the working people. For the audiobook industry, how to grasp the large emerging user group of middle-aged and elderly generations and vigorously tap the potential value of the silver economy to achieve a win-win situation of economic and social benefits, is worthy of the attention and consideration of the industry.

2. THE DILEMMA OF MCLUHAN'S THEORY

McLuhan's hot and cold medium theory is one of the theories that are still widely studied today. He believes that the high degree of participation is cool media, while the low degree of participation is hot media. This level of engagement refers to the percentage of the audience's role in the use of the media. However, nowadays, with the development of science and technology, the environment and ways in which people use media are gradually changing. It is difficult for us to define whether a media is "cool" or "hot". McLuhan once defined television as a kind of cool medium. It is defined so, because users can choose their favourite shows, choose not to watch commercials, and even do other things while they watch TV. Nowadays, televisions are getting bigger, the images are getting sharper while people are becoming passive and less engaged. So whether television can now follow the definition of a hot medium is still open to reflection.

Audiobooks, in McLuhan's theory, are a hot medium like radio. Radio is a more participatory medium compared to the audio medium. Audio is still of indispensable importance in today's age of graphics. It is intangible, leaving enough room for the reader's imagination so that the reader's involvement increases. However, radio was also used differently than it is today. In the era of universal radio, President Roosevelt's "fireside chats" might not have been as effective if they had been conducted on a cold medium like high-definition television, which created a more emotional and powerful connection between the listener and the speaker. This is because listening to the radio is taken seriously as the only thing that needs to be done at that time, and it requires a much more dedicated user, just like watching a movie where the reception is one-sided. But for audiobooks, it is hard to say that they can borrow exactly the form of radio because, with audiobooks, people can choose books, they can synchronize with other things, they can pause, and it requires frequent interaction and engagement, which is not something that hot media has.

Therefore, the definition of hot and cool media is relatively subjective to us.

This paper still calls audiobooks "hot media". However, this paper holds the view that although McLuhan's definition of hot and cool media is vague, it still provides us with a new direction to study audiobooks. Whether audiobooks are considered a cool media in the interactive experience or a hot media in the auditory experience, what we need to pay attention to is how audiobooks can use their media characteristics as an advantage to influence the public and further promote the silver-haired economy, and in this regard, McLuhan's theory still gives us a lot of inspiration.

3. NEW AUDITORY CULTURE

3.1. The construction of media identity of the elderly under the "new auditory culture"

Since the 20th century, a large number of auditory cultural products have emerged, such as the earliest phonographs, telephones, walkie-talkies, and smartphones, which have continuously changed our auditory experience and the direction of human culture. It can be said that the development of modern auditory technology and the emergence of rich auditory cultural products are the important material cornerstones and manifestations of the revival of auditory cultural studies in contemporary times [7]. The contemporary "auditory culture" differs from the traditional sound media in the McLuhan context in terms of auditory subject and object and auditory material. In the context of modern consumerism, the new auditory consumption products represented by "audiobooks" have contributed to the transformation of audiences' usage habits, psychological structures and cultural orientations.

In the second half of the 20th century, the proliferation of images and visuals brought about by the visual media represented by television has led to an over-reliance on visual culture, resulting in the "entertainment to death" phenomenon of mass cultural carnival, and even creating an audio-visual imbalance. From the perspective of communication science, McLuhan has divided human society into three periods: "tribalization", "detribalization" and "re-tribalization" by the theory of media evolution, which correspond to the former, they correspond to the pre-writing period when oral communication was dominated by the "sense of hearing," the era of "visual centrism" after the advent of phonetic script and printing, and the era of the return of "acoustic space" after the advent of electronic media [8]. The era of "sound space" returned after the advent of electronic media. Since the 20th century, a large number of auditory cultural products have emerged, such as the earliest phonographs, telephones, walkie-talkies, and smartphones, which have continuously changed our auditory experience and the direction of human culture.

It can be said that the development of modern auditory technology and the emergence of rich auditory cultural products are the important material cornerstones and manifestations of the revival of auditory cultural studies in contemporary times. The rise of new auditory culture is related to the new auditory culture products in the digital media era, but it is also a call for modern urbanites to return to the tradition of the "oral tradition" which is rich in human feelings. According to some scholars, if radio started the history of human auditory culture, then online audio products in the digital age are the starting point of the 'new auditory culture', an integral part of the new media sound culture in the context of media convergence. In this context, listeners are not only receivers of information, but can also be participants, consumers, and producers at the same time. The traditional passive media culture is gradually shifting to a more participatory culture that focuses on creation and sharing. New technologies and applications such as digitization and Web 2.0 are transforming the communication environment, allowing users to participate in the production of audiobooks with simple recording techniques. Users can also participate in the dissemination and sharing of information through retweets, comments and community discussions. The content of audiobooks is mainly labelled as 'cultural' and allows for a concrete representation of local culture and cultural exchange. The satellite distribution technology and RSS feeds enable the interaction of information across time and space, helping users to access the dissemination of information based on cultural content in real-time. This real-time communication is manifest because the live streamers or network anchors perform their live content spontaneously rather than traditional journalists' deliberation on their news reports. This effectively pushes the boundaries of the physical world, which also means that traditional geopolitical and national borders are broken down.

Unlike visual media, auditory media has a wider audience, not only among the young generation who are more active on the Internet but also more middle-aged and older people who are active builders of auditory media [9]. Compared with the ever-changing visual media, auditory products are more in line with their traditional user habits and are more operable and learnable. Compared with reading text, its fragmented arrangement mode also allows people to quickly gain satisfaction and pleasure through listening. According to i-Media Research, nearly 50% of the active audiobook media users are middle-aged and elderly, and this proportion is still rising. As of April 2020, the proportion of Chinese Internet users aged 50 and above has reached 16.9%, and the Internet continues to penetrate the middle and senior age groups [10]. This reflects, to a certain extent, the awakening of the awareness of media identity construction among the elderly groups in the new media era. Media participation among the elderly groups is

generally low because traditional media discourse has long been in the hands of younger groups who shape information systems. This, combined with older people's slower skill acquisition, their rejection of new media, and the mockery of older age groups on the internet, has led to a chronic discursive imbalance for older people in the age of mass communication. The popularity of audio products, represented by audiobooks, among the middle-aged and elderly population has become an effective way for them to adapt and integrate into the new media age. As audiobooks are closer to the radio in form with which older people are familiar while combining the advantages of being relatively friendly to the eyesight and literacy of older people. In this way, they can better help the new media society to give value to the autonomy and freedom of elderly people.

3.2. The role of audiobooks in boosting the silver-haired economy

According to McLuhan, media can be divided into hot media and cool media. The cool media has less information and requires users to use as many senses as possible to participate, while the hot media conveys more clear information and users can enjoy this kind of media without spending too much energy. Audiobook, as a hot medium, is a more acceptable digital medium for the elderly than other entertainment platforms, as they can enjoy audiobooks without thinking too much because of audiobooks' high definition. Audiobooks can physically enhance the elderly's experience of gaining knowledge. As we grow older, our eyesight is becoming worse and worse. But audiobooks are mainly for listening, which allows them to learn without looking at the screen for a long time. Audiobooks are like someone talking to you, which also makes them more immersive. At the same time, the elderly who do not have enough time can listen to audiobooks while doing other things. It leaves enough space for their normal life.

Audiobooks can also alleviate the loneliness of the elderly. The constant learning of new knowledge not only fills the gap between them and young people but also bridges them with the changing world. The elderly are isolated for long periods due to the loss of work and the companionship of their children, and audiobooks allow them to gain additional knowledge or communicate emotionally in fragmented time [11]. Audiobooks allow seniors to gain additional knowledge or communicate emotionally during their fragmented time in isolated spaces, due to the loss of work and the companionship of their children. "Audiobooks can provide highly personalized content and become personalized companions that can be used by the elderly in any scenario, providing a sense of self-sufficient companionship. Thus, audiobooks with both intellectual and emotional characteristics can fully mobilize the imagination of audiences and reactivate users' emotions

through auditory stimulation and voice communication. Audiobooks can provide highly personalized content and become personalized companions that can be used in any scenario to provide a sense of self-sufficient companionship for the elderly. Thus, audiobooks with both intellectual and emotional characteristics can fully mobilize the imagination of audiences and reactivate users' emotions through auditory stimulation and voice communication. We conducted in-depth interviews with 10 loyal audiobook users aged 40-50 and the sense of companionship was the most cited emotional experience. The vast majority of respondents indicated that audiobooks do not interfere with the behavior of the eyes and hands can be seamlessly inserted into numerous life scenarios such as commuting time, housework time, bathing time, etc. Therefore, they naturally have the attribute of companionship, to meet the emotional needs of the elderly.

4. THE CONTENT PATTERN OF AUDIOBOOKS AND THE FUTURE CONSTRUCTION DIRECTION

The communication of auditory products has a natural disadvantage under the image revolution. Neil Bozeman's view that looking at pictures rather than reading words has become the basis for people to make informed judgments has become a reality, and this view is confirmed again in 21st century China. The medium's discipline of people is powerful and persistent, but people are not powerless. To highlight the advantages of audiobooks, the quality of their content becomes the key to victory. At present, most people involved in audiobooks have transitioned from the traditional radio industry and, as a result, the mainstream content is mostly literature, emotion and stand-up comedy. However, as audiobooks evolve in the context of the 'new listening culture', they are becoming more expansive and diverse in their content. Many audiobooks are becoming de-textualized and are being integrated with other forms of content such as podcasts and live streaming. Due to the lowering of the production threshold, the identity of content providers is not limited to professionals. People from all walks of life have joined the content production process. Ximalaya FM, for example, offers recording services in the upper right corner of its application's interface. This function enables people to record their soundtracks and post them on the Internet. This friendly designed interface is reported to be an important reason for the growth of its year-on-year audiobook audiences to reach 63.56%, which is a significant success in the audiobook e-commercial market [12].

Many older people who are established in their respective industries are also actively involved in the process of user-produced content (UGC), contributing to the development of audiobook content with a richer and more professional experience than younger people. The

popularity of audio products such as audiobooks today is still dependent on commercial capital operations, and there are still many problems with their production and distribution, and eventual profitability models. In the case of older user groups, for example, the push mechanism and adaptation of audiobooks to the scene is not perfect. In the future, whether audiobooks can continue to adapt and adjust to the complex media environment and push out more multi-dimensional and personalized audiobook content based on the user habits and scenario needs of the elderly will determine whether audiobooks can continue to maintain good content-like development.

5. CONCLUSION

Focusing on the needs of elderly groups for audiobooks in China, this study analyzes the development status of the audiobook by discussing the role of the audiobook industry in promoting the development of the silver economy in China. The audiobook originated from broadcasting and has the dual attributes of industry and culture. Behind the realistic development opportunities of the audiobook industry, it is particularly important to reflect on the social information environment and the digital generation gap. This paper has shown that society needs to create a good environment for elderly groups to participate in online life. The second major finding was that families need to actively help the elderly groups improve their media literacy. The research has also shown that the information and cultural industry should seize the blue ocean opportunity of the silver economy and develop richer cultural products and services. This is not only conducive to mining economic benefits but also conducive to bridging the digital generation gap and realizing the social and cultural value of the media. The findings highlight the importance of audiobooks to meet the needs of the elderly, which fill in the gap that most current audiobook research has been about young people. Although this finding provides some ideas about the connection between the senior and audiobook, more empirical studies on the silver economy need to be conducted to further refine this finding.

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