ATTRACTION OF KNOWLEDGE CELEBRITIES

HOW THEY MOTIVATE USERS TO PAY FOR KNOWLEDGE

Xiaoyu Chen

Attraction of Knowledge Celebrities

This book examines the phenomenon of knowledge celebrities, an emerging group of social media influencers who produce and sell knowledge products online. Its primary goal is to investigate the reasons and strategies behind their ability to attract users and persuade them to purchase knowledge products on digital platforms.

With the increasing demand for high-quality content from online users, various platforms have emerged as pay-for-knowledge platforms, allowing knowledge celebrities to monetize their expertise. This book draws on theoretical frameworks from information science, communication and management to provide insights into this phenomenon and to examine the practices and individuals involved. Building on existing scholarship and analyzing case studies in China, this book presents the background, basic concepts and understanding of knowledge celebrities. It then explores the three key factors that contribute to the attractiveness of knowledge celebrities, as well as the motivations and mechanisms behind pay-for-knowledge practices. Finally, the book offers a glimpse into the future landscape of knowledge celebrities and pay-for-knowledge platforms.

The book will be valuable to scholars, students and practitioners in information, communication and media studies. In particular, it will appeal to those interested in topics such as knowledge celebrities, the creator economy and knowledge management.

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To my wife, my two moms and two dads.

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Introduction

Online Celebrity Practices in China

Individuals may increase their popularity and even become online celebrities by sharing personalized content such as self-created photos, blogs and videos. Online celebrities refer to those who are able to attract a sizable following on the Internet (Chen, Chua, & Pee, 2022). Given their tremendous attractiveness to target audiences, online celebrities are also conceptualized as "digital influencers" or "key opinion leaders" in the existing literature (e.g., Gong & Li, 2017; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). In particular, several online celebrities may shape consumers' purchase decision-making process, for they are seen as credible information sources. It is no wonder that many of them have been hired to review or even subtly endorse products and services via an electronic word-of-mouth approach.

Online celebrities in China, commonly referred to as "Wanghong," encompass individuals who have successfully captured the attention of the extensive online community in China. These individuals have garnered online fame by generating highly tailored content across various digital platforms. Subsequently, many of them have capitalized on their popularity to generate substantial financial gains. The growing significance of online celebrities has prompted an increasing number of digital enterprises, including marketing, advertising and e-commerce platforms, to leverage their influence for commercial purposes. The "online celebrity economy" has been estimated to possess a market value exceeding US$8.4 billion (Han, 2021). One notable exemplification of this phenomenon is *Papi Jiang*, who secured approximately US$1.8 million in funding from venture capitalists to facilitate commercial promotions through the creation of original video-based content (CNNIC, 2021). The primary source of income for these online celebrities predominantly stems from sponsorships by affiliated companies and brands.

The Emergence of Knowledge Celebrities on Digital Platforms

An emerging class of online celebrities—*knowledge celebrities*—who sell self-created knowledge products on online platforms has become prevalent in

recent years (Chen et al., 2022; Maddox, 2022). As with conventional online celebrities globally and locally, knowledge celebrities make themselves appealing to a sizable following and further capitalize on such an advantage to earn money. Initially, they attracted users by creating knowledge-intensive content for free online. Like traditional celebrities, knowledge celebrities may cultivate users to become their fans through ongoing high-quality output. Fans are known to go the extra mile to express their adoration for their favorite idols including offering monetary incentives. Against this backdrop, a novel business model—*pay-for-knowledge*—has emerged (Wang et al., 2022). As the demand for high-quality content has grown, several online platforms have evolved into pay-for-knowledge outfits where payment functions are incorporated to enable these "knowledge celebrities" to monetize their efforts. The platforms in turn share the revenue generated from users' payments with the knowledge celebrities.

There are two aspects that merit special attention to knowledge celebrities. First, the primary income of knowledge celebrities depends on users' payments for their knowledge products in two ways. The first way is to require upfront payment before the knowledge products are released (viz., *pay-before-consumption*). Alternatively, the second way is to ask users to donate voluntarily after consuming the knowledge products (viz., *pay-after-consumption*). Nowadays, it is common for knowledge celebrities to earn money via the two payment patterns.

Second, the *modus operandi* of knowledge celebrities is sophisticated. The knowledge products are usually packaged in textual, audio or video formats and delivered on pay-for-knowledge platforms. The themes of these products for sale span the gamut from academic and current affairs topics to online game commentaries and practical fixes (Chen et al., 2022). Although most knowledge celebrities have been recognized as good-quality and influential knowledge contributors by peers in related domains, in reality they are not pure "professionals" or "experts". Traditional experts such as lawyers and consultants communicate with consumers to learn about their demands, thereby offering professional and objective services. In contrast, knowledge celebrities put much more effort into interacting with users by leveraging digital technologies' features and functions (Maddox, 2022). As a result, they draw target audiences and gradually shape their consumption habits in paid content presentations and payment patterns.

Research Motivation

The attraction of knowledge celebrities has become a significant premise of running the pay-for-knowledge model. After all, if they did not draw users in the first place, they would not leverage such attractiveness to further affect their willingness to pay. Sellers' attractiveness in online transactional relationships has not received much in-depth discussion while being repeatedly mentioned (La Rocca, Caruana, & Snehota, 2012). This is because understanding

the concept could be a basis for related customer relation management and resource allocations on digital platforms (Mortensen, 2012). For example, research on crowdfunding platforms shows that the attractiveness of project creators is a significant factor that further affects backers' intention to donate their projects (Ryu & Kim, 2018). Therefore, project creators are encouraged to boost their perceived attractiveness. Unfortunately, the current understanding of *how* and *to what extent* the attraction of knowledge celebrities affects users' willingness to pay is limited.

Understanding the attraction of knowledge celebrities is important for two reasons. First, from an academic perspective, juxtaposing the attraction of knowledge celebrities and users' willingness to pay, this book may provide a fresh reference point for discussing the role of knowledge celebrities—a peculiar group of online celebrities in China—in users' willingness to pay for knowledge products. For example, the book will suggest that the concept of "attachment to knowledge celebrities" helps to understand why they are able to draw users to pay for knowledge products. Second, the book may inform related digital business practitioners such as pay-for-knowledge platform providers. They can benefit from extracting the value of knowledge celebrities by explicitly presenting their attraction to users who are likely to become potential consumers of the knowledge products.

The book's title, *Attraction of Knowledge Celebrities* and the book content originated from these reflections. Presenting the most insightful and related scholarly literature and relevant practices and cases with the highest level of clarity is my goal with this book. When looking through the book, readers may find answers to three questions of knowledge celebrities, namely, who they are, why they can draw users and why users are willing to pay for their knowledge products. I hope readers will benefit from the findings and implications of the book.

Guided by the book's goal, I identified three gaps in the existing literature. First, it has not accurately shed light on the characteristics of knowledge celebrities. Past research has unveiled various self-presentation styles among traditional online celebrities. For example, past research suggests that online celebrities tend to show their superior expertise in online profiles so as to quickly draw audiences. Unfortunately, in previous investigations, such "microcelebrities" are not famous for creating and selling knowledge-intensive content. Consequently, the extant literature fails to capture the unique characteristics of knowledge celebrities.

Second, what antecedents are important to the attraction of knowledge celebrities is unknown. The book posits that the attraction of knowledge celebrities is associated with their characteristics and social interactions with users. For knowledge celebrities, the interaction approaches may be determined by their characteristics. Users, in turn, may form corresponding perceptions of knowledge celebrities in social interactions. Therefore, the book aims to identify the significant antecedents of the attraction of knowledge celebrities by considering how they shape users' perceptions of them in social interactions.