

Analysis of the causality, meanings and result behind 'follow the flow' phenomenon

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the Internet, the trend of monetization of self-publishing has emerged. Under this trend, many self media operators want to achieve greater benefits by 'Follow the flow'. The theme of this study is to clarify the causalities, meanings and results behind the phenomenon of 'following the flow' by reviewing and combing the relevant literature, as well as in the form of a questionnaire, and analyzing the collected data. According to the analysis, the four main ways of cashing in for operators under this trend are clarified, which are live-streaming with goods, fan reward, advertising implantation, and paid knowledge cashing. It also clarifies the means to get more revenue by following the flow based on these ways of realizing. The analysis of the negative and positive effects behind these methods and means clarifies the causes of 'Follow the flow' for self-media account operators. Overall, these results clarify the situation of 'cashing in on flow' for self-publishing account operators in today's era of self-publishing popularity. Besides, this paper paves a path for operating their accounts and publishing content to provide informative guidelines for practice.

Keywords: Social media, Self-Media, Cashing in on flow, Questionnaires, Qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Contemporarily, with the development of the Internet and the growing development of social media platforms, self media has become a hotspot globally and the corresponding business model has also been developed and become matured. Especially the self media platforms led by TIKTOK, through the flow conversion structure and combined with various sales models (e.g., advertising, live with goods) bring revenue for self media operators [1]. Therefore, the monetization and commercialization of social media and self media content has become an inevitable trend.

All revenue is originated flow, and the efficiency of traffic conversion and the amount of traffic pushed is directly proportional to the monetary price system and commercial value of the account, thus the phenomenon of 'traffic followers' came into being [2]. The 'Traffic followers', through various ways to comply with the traffic hotspots, publish relevant content, thus increasing account traffic, traffic conversion, and obtain greater revenue from it.

The existing literature and materials have provided some research results on the way traffic is converted, but the results of the way "traffic followers" use the rules and the way it leads to them are still unclear. In this study, the previous literature is reviewed and the data is analyzed collected through qualitative analysis, data analysis, and case studies. The aim is to clarify and analyze the specific ways behind this phenomenon and its results. The rest part of the paper is organized as follows. Sec. 2 will review the existing literature to clarify the present development of the Internet in China and globally, and the context in which the 'following the flow' phenomenon was born. Sec. 3 and 4 will analyze the data collected on display and use the data to explore the causes and means of 'following the flow' and discuss the possible outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Research Background

The 21st century has seen an increase in technology and economic standards, as well as the trend towards globalization. The Internet is rapidly gaining popularity worldwide. In the last 15 years, personalized mobile internet devices (e.g., tablets and smartphones) have emerged and rapidly iterated, resulting in the internet becoming more and more closely linked to individuals' daily lives. According to CNNIC, by 2021Q2, the number of internet users in China reached 1.011 billion, the number of mobile internet users reached 1.007 billion and the number of desktop internet users contracted to 350 million, with the overall internet penetration rate reaching 70% by 2020 [3].

2.2 The Implications and risks of a content monetization strategy

Followership was originally defined as the pursuit of popularity. The phenomenon of 'following the flow' on social media can be explained psychologically by the 'Bandwagon effect', whereby content publishers post specific content to attract a specific group of people to follow their views or opinions [4]. The recipient of the information continues this behavior by following the views of others. The term 'following' is very much a two-sided term, containing a positive aspect. It means that people are enthusiastic about someone/thing and make it a constant goal to follow them over a period of time. The negative aspect, on the other hand, has a degree of flattery, as well as the negative effects that result from fanaticism. The 'following the flow' discussed in this study has the same two-fold aspect.

The content business, which refers to the direct sale of content and derivative products for revenue [5]. The Internet has completely disrupted the media business chain with new links and squeezing media companies into content producers. In this case, it provides new means of production and distribution to support the emergence of new content creators. As a result, it makes content that would otherwise be fee-based free, while gaining a huge number of users. Besides, the latest development is the provision of e-commerce sales methods for content and derivative products.

2.3 The Shifting trends in e-commerce platforms

After years of rapid growth, traditional e-commerce is beginning to enter a period of maturity. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, China's online physical retail sales will be approximately \$9.8 trillion in 2020, accounting for 25.0% of total retail sales of social goods, with growth falling back to 14.8%, and the slowdown will be even more pronounced as traditional categories such as apparel and electronics penetrate high levels. The traditional "search e-commerce" model has entered a bottleneck, with the rise of "recommendation e-commerce" represented by TIKTOK. Nowadays, e-commerce has been combined with self-media and has become one of the means of realization for self-media operators.

2.4 The Summary of the literature review

Based on the huge Internet consumer market brought about by the huge Internet user base, China's Internet industry is undoubtedly at the forefront of the world in terms of height and speed of development. Examples include the rapid rise of online shopping, to the commercialization of self-published content and the rich content realization play in recent years. China's huge spending power has driven one innovation after another in the internet sector [6]. These innovative approaches are also gradually going global, such as TIKTOK and cross-border e-commerce. In such a trend, based on the flow conversion structure of each platform, self-media account operators and owners generate revenue by publishing content. As a result, the phenomenon of 'following the flow' has emerged. By publishing content related to hot topics, scholars are able to gain more traffic and indirectly enhance the realization of their accounts and their content [7].

3. Methodology

This study uses questionnaires and interview case studies. The aim is to investigate from multiple perspectives of both spectators and participants, to make clear as much as possible the multiple ways in which self-publishing account operators, and generally the means of following the flow. As well as the possible positive and negative effects of these realizations and 'following the flow' behaviors.

3.1 The Data

The data is sourced from 20 provinces, cities and autonomous regions within China. As well as 6 overseas regions and countries, namely Hong Kong, Macau, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and Canada. A total of 118 questionnaires were collected, and 3 invalid questionnaires with a response time of less than 10 seconds were excluded. The remaining 115 questionnaires were valid. The questionnaire was open to people aged 16 years and over, with over 60% of the sample being 'female'. The proportion of male respondents was 36.52%. In terms of age distribution, the majority of the sample was "16-23 years old", with 84.0 or 73.04%.

Table.1. Frequency analysis of the gender and age of the respondents

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Gender	Male	42	36.52	36.52
	Female	73	63.48	100.00
Age	16-23	84	73.04	73.04
	24-33	24	20.87	93.91
	34-43	5	4.35	98.26
	44-53	2	1.74	100.00
Total		115	100.0	100.0

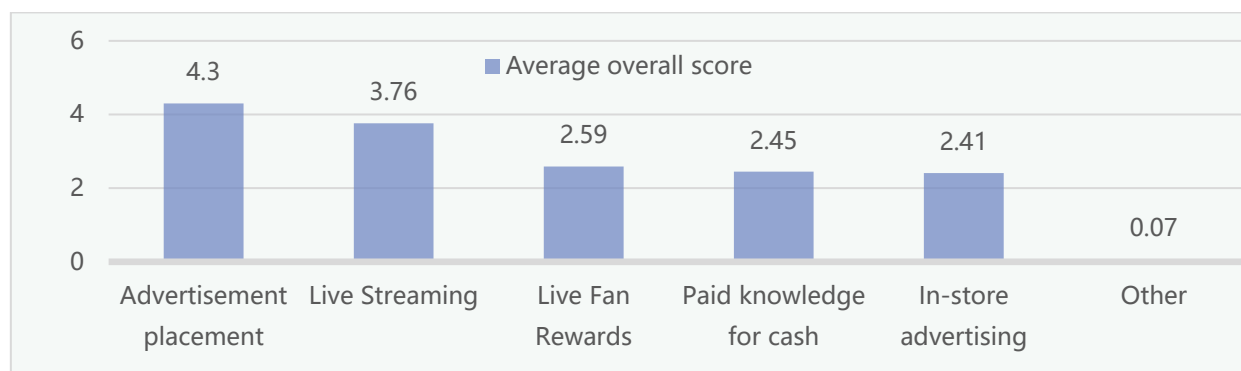


Figure.1. Average composite score for each option of "How profitable do you think these methods of cashing in on your own media accounts are"

Table.2. Cross-tabulation of age with "What do you think is the initial purpose of the relevant account in posting hot related content"

X\Y	Expressing personal views	Expanding the reach of fans	Receive direct advertising revenue	Total
16-23	53(63.10%)	66(78.57%)	44(52.38%)	84
24-33	15(62.5%)	22(91.67%)	12(50%)	24
34-43	4(80%)	2(40%)	2(40%)	5
44-53	1(50%)	2(100%)	1(50%)	2
54 years and over	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	0

3.2 The Processing

In this study, the data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed by SPSS data analysis software. Firstly, a frequency analysis was conducted on the gender and age of the respondents (seen from Table 1). Secondly, the ranked questions on "How profitable do you think these methods of cashing in on your own media accounts are" were analyzed to calculate the average composite score for each option (as shown in Figure 1), calculated as: Average composite score for option = $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weight}) / \text{number of people filling in this question}$. Finally, cross-tabulations were used to analyses the relationship between age (summarized in Tables 2-4) or gender (listed in Tables 5-7) with "perceptions of the negative and positive effects of following the flow" and "perceptions of the initial purpose of following the flow", respectively.

Table.3. Cross-tabulation of age with "Possible positive impact of publishing content on hot topics, in your opinion"

X\Y	Increase in fan base in a short period of time	Gain more exposure	Total
16-23	65(77.38%)	75(89.29%)	84
24-33	14(58.33%)	23(95.83%)	24
34-43	4(80%)	4(80%)	5
44-53	1(50%)	2(100%)	2
54 years and over	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	0

Table.4. Cross-tabulation of age and "what you think are the possible negative effects of publishing content on hot topics"

X\Y	Deviation from the original creative content category and loss of followers	Creative impatience and a decline in the quality of work	Wrong statements, subject to denunciation	Total
16-23	47(55.95%)	62(73.81%)	61(72.62%)	84
24-33	15(62.5%)	18(75%)	16(66.67%)	24
34-43	4(80%)	4(80%)	2(40%)	5
44-53	1(50%)	2(100%)	2(100%)	2
54 years and over	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	0

Table.5. Cross-tabulation of gender with "What do you think is the initial purpose of the relevant account in posting hot related content"

X\Y	Expressing personal views	Expanding the reach of fans	Receive direct advertising revenue	Total
MALE	22(52.38%)	28(66.67%)	25(59.52%)	42
FEMALE	51(69.86%)	64(87.67%)	34(46.58%)	73

Table.6. Cross-tabulation of gender with "Possible positive impact of publishing content on hot topics, in your opinion"

X\Y	Increase in fan base in a short period of time	Gain more exposure	Total
MALE	32(76.19%)	37(88.10%)	42
FEMALE	52(71.23%)	67(91.78%)	73

Table.7. Cross-tabulation of gender and "what you think are the possible negative effects of publishing content on hot topics"

X\Y	Deviation from the original creative content category and loss of followers	Creative impatience and a decline in the quality of work	Wrong statements, subject to denunciation	Total
MALE	25(59.52%)	33(78.57%)	26(61.90%)	42
FEMALE	42(57.53%)	53(72.60%)	55(75.34%)	73

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 The main means of realization and their corresponding ways of following the flow

4.1.1 Livestreaming marketing

Once one has a certain fan base, it will start a live broadcast and attract potential viewers through paid traffic, who eventually buy. The viewer is motivated to spend money through language and sales processes that are somewhat guided, e.g., rousing language, discounts, and price reductions [8]. The income from live-streaming is mainly derived from the commission given by the merchant to the anchor for the corresponding products. Most anchors choose popular products or products with high commissions in order to increase their income. They also give great discounts to consumers by means of moderate subsidies to increase the number of people watching and ordering from the live stream, gaining more followers and thus enabling a constant increase in account traffic.

4.1.2 Direct or indirect placement of product or merchant advertising in video or copy

Direct placement advertising is mainly through the publication of tweets or videos promoting the merchant of a product as the main content. Indirect advertising, on the other hand, is the publication of content related to the category in which the product is located, indirectly leading to advertising content, known as "soft copy", "soft advertising". The revenue from this method comes more from the advertising fees given by the merchant, and sometimes the operator also adds links to products in the content to earn commissions from users.

4.1.3 Live Fan Rewards

In the age of the fan economy, many web hosts have been born. They do not need to have strong intellectual skills or extensive account management skills, but mostly rely on their talent or appearance to attract fans [9]. Fans are rewarded with "gifts" for the purpose of entertainment or to interact with the anchor.

4.1.4 Cashing in on paid knowledge

This approach requires the operator to publish strong knowledge-based content derived from personal experience or practice, so that the audience can feel the value and uniqueness of the knowledge you provide to some extent. Once the target group has been attracted, the operator generates revenue by selling paid courses, consulting services, etc.

4.2 Following the flow and its positive impact

The aforementioned live fan bounty is a way of cashing in, but the fan base's frenetic cycle is not stable, so anchors still need to keep tapping potential fans as they broadcast and publish content. The way to get more traffic during a live broadcast is not only through paid diversion services, but also through "linking up" with other hosts to attract potential fans. "The 'link' can also have a degree of traffic siphoning effect, pooling traffic from multiple broadcasters.

When 'following the flow' occurs, the views expressed by the author, or the personal characteristics shown in the live stream, or the content posted to promote products or businesses, can attract a certain number of potential users, thus bringing more followers to the account. At this point many account operators will choose to increase the means of cash, for example, the video of the day

received a lot of likes and comments, then the operator will choose to live means, so that during the peak of the account traffic to obtain more even income, such a way has also become a means of consolidating fans.

In the process of using social media platforms such as TIKTOK and Weibo we often find a phenomenon: bloggers who used to follow X field, after a period of time change their content to mainly Y field. Such a shift is often not a result of a change in the author's lifestyle, but rather a trade-off between content and revenue, given the strong demand for monetization of content. Imaging a situation where a fitness enthusiast, who runs a personal self-publishing account, accidentally post a food tasting video, it might be unexpectedly receives tens of times more traffic and revenue than previous fitness content videos. Thus, content transformation and upgrading becomes a means of content realization.

4.3 Following the flow and its negative impact

Not all authors who post content related to hot topics will gain resonance as well as greater profitability. Misguided and radical views with wrong values can result in a massive outcry. In such cases, it is almost impossible to regain the image and reputation of the individual and the account in the public's mind [10].

It is also particularly important for bloggers to choose their products /merchants and to have strict control over the quality and price of their products. In recent years, there have been many incidents of bloggers/hosts blatantly selling fake and shoddy products, as well as incidents where their merchandise has "flopped". These incidents have also been devastating to their reputation.

Some bloggers are obsessed with posting hot content at the expense of their original content. In the long run, this has resulted in a massive loss of experienced followers. The inspiration to create has been lost, the content has become more and more fickle and tasteless, and there has been little influx of new followers and traffic. Deliberate following of trending topics can also be off-putting and lead to further loss of followers [11].

4.4 Measures to avoid negative impacts

The literature suggests that there is a growing need for today's self-publishers to understand why users are increasingly averse to the "follow-the-flow phenomenon" on social media platforms [12]. Understanding the causes and consequences of this decision will allow them to move beyond the misconceptions and have a holistic view. One should break out of the misconception of relying on platform traffic to push you, and take the initiative to explore traffic segments that have real value. The misconception of commercialization first and content 'nutrition' second should be abandoned, and the stacking of traffic tags and the number of videos/tweets should be avoided. The relationship between content richness, authenticity, 'nutrition' and commercialization should be reconciled. It is also necessary to coordinate the relationship between private and full-domain traffic, and guide fans from platforms with weak public domain attributes to those with strong private domain attributes.

4.5 Limitations & Future outlooks

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this paper does have some shortcomings and drawbacks. Primarily, owing to the limited sample size, it is not possible to present a fully accurate picture of the public perception of the 'follow the flow' phenomenon. In addition, as the source of the sample is mostly concentrated in China, especially in a few provinces within China, the data cannot present the views of the public on the phenomenon of following the flow in different regions and countries, which is also subject to the level of Internet development in different regions and countries. Moreover, since the traffic conversion structure and traffic pushing algorithm of each platform involves commercial secrets, they are not disclosed to the society for the time being, so this part of the research cannot be in-depth.

In reality, there is no upper limit to the development of the internet industry, and self-media will certainly have more means of monetization in the future. Based on the huge demand for monetization

of content, the structure of self-publishing traffic conversion and push will become more and more sophisticated. We expect more transparent flow algorithm structures to be made available to the public in the future, driving further research in the field of self media traffic. This study will serve as a reference for the current work practices of self media practitioners, and will hopefully stimulate deeper public and academic thinking on the phenomenon of 'following the flow'.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this study clarifies several means of cashing in on nowadays' trend of monetizing self-published content and the way that self-published account operators can create greater value by means of following the traffic. It also analyses the negative and positive effects of their behavior on individuals and society. Together with an elaboration on risk-averse methods, it provides a reference for the practice of self-media operators. Due to the constraints of the sample size and the location of the sample, the results are limited and cannot represent the general situation worldwide. Anyway, it still offers some guidelines to countries and regions with a high degree of maturity in the development of self-media. With the development of the Internet and technological innovation, there will be more and more ways, channels and means to realize cash in the future. Besides, the structure of traffic conversion will become more and more transparent. The academic community will continue to investigate the development of this field in depth. Overall, these results shed light on guiding further exploration of monetizing content correctly.

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