

Grass-Planting Strategies on Content E-Commerce Platforms: A Value Co-Creation Analysis of Douyin

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Abstract

Grass-planting (zhongcao) marketing has become an important way for content e-commerce platforms to turn everyday media use into commercial activity. Yet the same mechanism is increasingly associated with overstated recommendations, repetitive content, and an erosion of trust, making a one-way promotion perspective inadequate. Guided by value co-creation theory and the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework, this article examines how grass-planting is organized on Douyin, how value is produced among participating actors, and where the current model remains vulnerable. The analysis combines a literature review, a platform case study, a survey yielding 220 valid responses, and qualitative coding of a cleaned comment corpus of approximately 11,000 Chinese characters. The results portray grass-planting as a multi-actor process involving the platform, brands, creators, and users. Algorithmic recommendation, short video, livestreaming, creator endorsement, and comment interaction together connect exposure, interest, communication, purchase, and post-purchase feedback. Survey results indicate consistently positive evaluations of content production and distribution, although user-side outcomes associated with repeat purchase and word-of-mouth are somewhat weaker. Comment coding shows that users do more than react: they ask purchase-related questions, discuss use details, offer professional judgments, compare alternatives, share content socially, and add missing information. On this basis, the article argues that sustainable grass-planting depends less on maximizing short-term traffic than on improving authenticity, product fulfillment, algorithmic accountability, meaningful interaction, post-purchase participation, and longitudinal evaluation. The study extends value co-creation research to content e-commerce and offers practical guidance for platforms seeking to balance conversion efficiency with durable trust.

Keywords

Content e-commerce, Douyin, grass-planting (zhongcao) marketing, S-O-R framework, value co-creation.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have changed the way Chinese consumers encounter products. In shelf-based e-commerce, shopping typically begins with an explicit need and a search query. On content platforms, by contrast, products appear within short videos, livestreams, reviews, and community conversations, often before users have formed a purchase intention. Grass-planting, or zhongcao, has emerged from this environment as a bridge between content consumption and commercial conversion. Rather than presenting goods through specifications and prices alone, it places them in recognizable situations and relies on demonstrations, personal experience, creator interpretation, and peer discussion to make the offering easier to understand.

This shift also changes the consumer's role. Users are not simply audiences for brand messages; through comments, reposts, evaluations, follow-up reviews, and user-generated videos, they help interpret and recirculate product information. Value therefore develops through interaction among the platform, brands, creators, and consumers instead of being delivered by one firm to a passive buyer. This view is consistent with service-dominant logic, which treats value as an outcome of resource integration and use rather than a product embedded unilaterally by the seller [1-3].

The commercial success of grass-planting has nevertheless exposed several weaknesses. Product effects may be overstated, sponsorship is not always easy to identify, and popular scripts are frequently copied until the information becomes repetitive. When the experience after purchase fails to match the promise made in the content, the immediate result is disappointment; the broader consequence is a loss of confidence in creators, brands, and the platform itself. Grass-planting should therefore be examined as a value co-creation arrangement with both productive and harmful possibilities, not merely as another promotional format. Using Douyin as the focal case, this article addresses three questions. What function does grass-planting perform in content e-commerce? Through what interactions do the relevant actors create value? And how can the system be adjusted so that long-term trust matters alongside short-term traffic?

2. Theoretical Foundations

Value co-creation provides the first theoretical lens. Vargo and Lusch [1] distinguish between the value proposition offered by a firm and the value that emerges when resources are combined and used. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's DART model further identifies dialogue, access, risk assessment, and transparency as conditions that enable co-creation [2]. Later work on service-dominant logic places these exchanges within wider service ecosystems involving multiple actors [3]. The content e-commerce setting fits this account particularly well: platforms supply distribution and transaction infrastructure; brands contribute products, service capacity, and commercial propositions; creators translate those propositions into culturally intelligible content; and users add attention, experience, evaluation, and word-of-mouth.

The S-O-R model offers a complementary explanation of user response. In the original formulation, environmental stimuli alter an individual's internal state, which in turn shapes behavior [4]. Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis [5] adapted this logic to online retail. For grass-planting, the stimulus may include the format of the content, the credibility of the recommender, the realism of the scene, opportunities for interaction, and the platform's governance signals. These inputs affect perceived usefulness, value, emotional resonance, and trust. Observable responses may then range from purchase intention and actual purchase to sharing, repeat purchase, and continued use of the platform.

Evidence from social commerce and livestreaming research shows that interaction, trust, influencer participation, and parasocial ties shape consumer responses [6-8]. Chinese studies likewise identify usefulness, ease of use, everyday expression, interactivity, scenario construction, authenticity, and platform trust as important antecedents of emotional arousal, loyalty, and purchase intention [9-11]. Work on platform incentives and live-commerce content further links traffic support, content quality, user experience, and perceived value to purchasing responses [12-14]. Much of this literature, however, treats purchase intention as the endpoint. By combining value co-creation with S-O-R, the present study follows the process beyond initial conversion to repeat purchase, word-of-mouth, and the circulation of feedback.

3. Research Design

Douyin was selected for a focused case study because it brings together the main components of content-driven commerce within a single platform: short video, livestreaming, creator recommendation, algorithmic distribution, social interaction, and in-app transactions. This combination makes it a useful setting in which to observe how grass-planting operates from initial exposure to post-purchase feedback.

Four sources of evidence were used. The literature review established the conceptual basis and located the case within prior research. Platform and case materials were then examined to reconstruct Douyin's development, the principal forms of grass-planting, and the connection between content and transaction functions. A 28-item questionnaire, designed around the content-marketing process and the value co-creation perspective, yielded 220 valid responses. Finally, comments were collected from Douyin videos in the food, agricultural products, household, and fashion categories. After cleaning and consolidation, the corpus contained approximately 11,000 Chinese characters and was coded qualitatively.

The survey was analyzed descriptively. Item means were first calculated, after which items were aggregated by marketing stage and by actor layer to compare content production, content dissemination, effect realization, and the performance of the platform, brand, and user sides. Equations (1) and (2) summarize the procedure. Here, x_{ij} denotes respondent i 's score on item j , n is the number of valid questionnaires, s identifies a stage or actor layer, and m_s is the number of items assigned to that group.

$$\bar{x}_j = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n x_{ij} \quad (1)$$

$$M_s = \frac{1}{m_s} \sum_{j \in s} \bar{x}_j \quad (2)$$

Table 1. Characteristics of the questionnaire sample

Variable	Main distribution
Gender	Female 53.18%; male 46.82%
Age	26-35: 35.91%; 36-45: 25.00%
Occupation	Enterprise employees: 33.64%; students: 25.46%
Income	RMB 6,000-10,000: 33.64%
Douyin use	Daily: 33.18%; >10 min/session: 86.82%

4. Industry Context and the Value Co-Creation Mechanism

Content e-commerce has expanded alongside online shopping and mobile media use. Figures compiled from the underlying research dataset show that the number of online shoppers in China rose from 782.41 million in 2020 to 974.43 million in 2024, while penetration increased from 79.1% to 87.9%. The enlarged user base gives content platforms a larger pool of attention that can be redirected toward transactions. Figure 1 summarizes the trend.

Content e-commerce differs from conventional e-commerce not only in format but also in the order of the decision process. Traditional shopping sites are organized around explicit demand, search, and comparison. Content platforms often begin with an interesting scene or narrative and allow demand to emerge during viewing and interaction. Research on livestream marketing, knowledge-paid content commerce, and Douyin's short-video business model supports the relevance of the people-goods-scene framework and platform-based value co-creation [15-17]. Within grass-planting, value does not move in a single direction from brand

to consumer. It is negotiated through algorithmic matching, brand claims, creator interpretation, user questioning, and subsequent feedback.



Figure 1. Growth in China's online-shopping population and penetration rate, 2020-2024

The participating actors contribute different resources. Douyin provides production tools, recommendation systems, governance rules, and transaction links. Brands are responsible for the product itself, the accuracy of the information supplied to creators, and service fulfillment after the sale. Creators and users contribute attention, questions, practical experience, evaluation, and peer influence. Because each contribution affects the usefulness and credibility of the others, the process is better understood as a co-creation cycle than as a linear advertising pipeline.

Table 2. Actors, strategic resources, and co-created value in grass-planting

Actor	Strategic resources	Co-created value
Platform	Algorithms; governance; transactions	Matching efficiency; risk reduction
Brand	Product; content; service fulfillment	Trust; relationship maintenance
Users/creators	Comments; reviews; UGC	Feedback; word-of-mouth

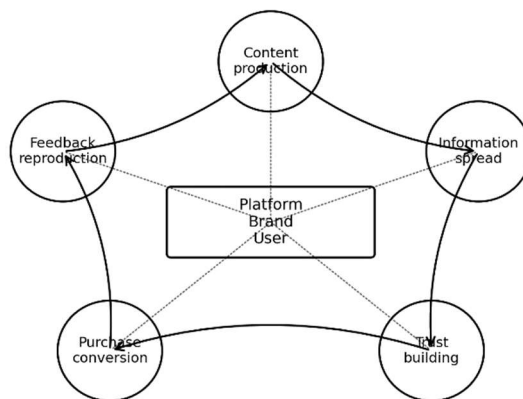


Figure 2. Value co-creation cycle in platform-based grass-planting

5. Douyin Case Analysis

Douyin supports several forms of grass-planting, and their effects are mutually reinforcing. Short videos are the most common: products are placed in use situations, comparison tests, tutorials, or lifestyle stories. Livestreams add real-time demonstration and question answering,

reducing uncertainty at the point when interest may turn into purchase. Creator-led recommendations introduce another layer of credibility through domain expertise, familiarity, and accumulated audience trust. Comment sections and user reviews then extend the original content by adding peer experience, objections, clarifications, and post-purchase observations. Together, these elements form a recurring sequence of exposure, interest formation, interaction, purchase, and feedback. The final stage is not merely an endpoint. Follow-up comments, longer-term reviews, and user-generated videos return to the platform as information that can influence later viewers. In other words, one user's consumption experience becomes part of another user's pre-purchase environment.

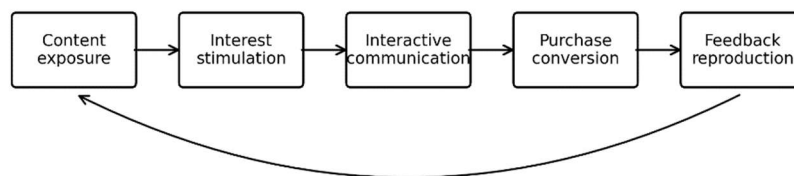


Figure 3. Operational chain of grass-planting on Douyin

Respondents evaluated Douyin's front-end content functions positively. Content production and content dissemination each received a mean score of 3.79, while effect realization received 3.78. The numerical difference is slight and should not be overstated, but its direction is informative: performance appears marginally stronger at the stages of presentation and circulation than at the point where attention must translate into purchase and sustained behavior.

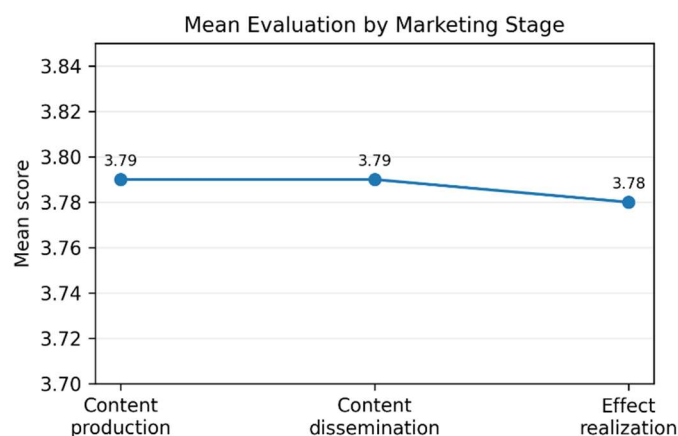


Figure 4. Mean evaluation scores by marketing stage

The actor-level comparison reveals a somewhat clearer pattern. The platform layer recorded the highest mean, at 3.81, suggesting that recommendation, transaction convenience, and platform governance are comparatively well developed. The brand layer scored 3.76, and the user layer 3.75. Although the gaps remain modest, the lowest user-side score is consistent with the view that repeat purchase, word-of-mouth, and durable trust are harder to secure than exposure or access.

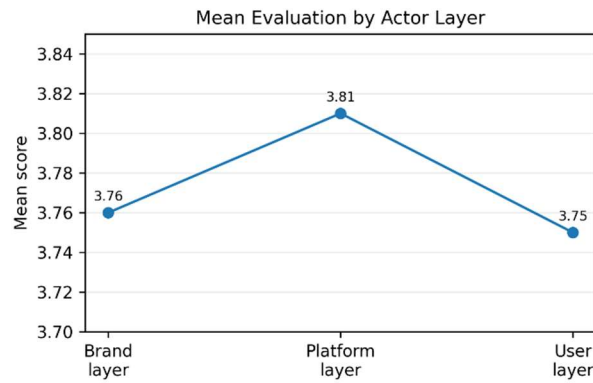


Figure 5. Mean evaluation scores by actor layer

Comment coding shows how users contribute at the micro level. Six categories were identified: demand extension, detail discussion, professional endorsement, critical comparison, social sharing, and information supplementation. Demand-extension comments asked about purchase conditions or product attributes, while detail discussions focused on use scenarios and procedures. Professional endorsements relied on expertise; critical comparisons introduced reservations and alternatives. Social-sharing comments circulated the post, and information-supplementation comments added experience or instructions missing from it. The mix of supportive and critical material matters because an open discussion is generally more credible than a uniformly promotional one.

Table 3. Comment categories and associated behavioral meanings

Type	Share	Behavioral meaning
Demand extension	20%	Purchase inquiry or attribute confirmation
Detail discussion	20%	Questions about use scenarios or procedures
Professional endorsement	10%	Expertise-based trust
Critical comparison	20%	Preference, comparison, or reasoned doubt
Social sharing	10%	Interpersonal diffusion
Information supplementation	20%	User knowledge and instructions

6. Discussion and Strategic Recommendations

The results point to a central tension in Douyin's grass-planting system: the platform is effective at generating and distributing attention, but the conversion of that attention into dependable trust is less secure. The DART framework is useful here because it treats risk assessment and transparency as prerequisites for co-creation [2]. Brands should therefore describe product functions, suitable use cases, limitations, after-sales arrangements, and foreseeable risks with the same care given to visual appeal. Platforms can reinforce this practice by making sponsorship more visible and by giving greater prominence to verified-purchase reviews and follow-up evaluations.

Algorithm design is part of the same problem. A ranking system centered on views, completion, likes, and immediate sales may reward dramatic claims and copied scripts even when they produce returns or dissatisfaction later. Longitudinal signals such as complaint and return rates, satisfaction, repeat purchase, useful comments, and credible post-purchase feedback should therefore enter the recommendation and evaluation process. Doing so would alter the incentives facing creators and brands: content would still need to attract attention, but attention alone would no longer define success.

User interaction also needs to be treated as substantive input rather than as a secondary engagement metric. Recurrent questions, negative experiences, and practical suggestions reveal where product information is incomplete or where service delivery has failed. Brands should establish routine procedures for answering these issues and for converting them into revised explanations, content updates, or product improvements. Platform tools can support the same objective by encouraging trial reports, long-term reviews, and scenario-based user videos.

A longer time horizon is equally important for performance evaluation. High gross merchandise value (GMV) accompanied by high returns and low satisfaction is not evidence of an effective campaign. Conversely, content with moderate immediate sales may create greater value when it produces saves, favorable reviews, repeat purchase, and peer recommendation. Evaluation should therefore include trust, loyalty, recommendation willingness, and the quality of feedback, not only exposure and sales. This emphasis is consistent with the connected-customer logic of Marketing 4.0 [18].

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that competition in content e-commerce will increasingly turn on the quality of trust rather than the volume of traffic alone. Differentiated content, responsible use of technology, meaningful user participation, and long-term measurement are likely to matter alongside conversion efficiency. Platforms that combine these elements are better placed to sustain a credible grass-planting ecosystem.

6.1. Interpreting the Mechanism

The observed pattern can be understood as an interaction between platform affordances and consumer cognition. Douyin's recommendation system lowers search costs by placing product-related content inside an entertainment feed. Users may first respond to a story, tutorial, visual scene, or familiar creator and only afterward attend to the product itself. This sequence is different from shelf-based e-commerce, where a defined need usually precedes comparison. In grass-planting, demand is often latent; it becomes salient when the content fits a viewer's routines, aspirations, or imagined lifestyle.

The equal mean scores for content production and dissemination (3.79) suggest that respondents recognized both the quality of presentation and Douyin's capacity to reach relevant audiences. In S-O-R terms, short videos, livestreams, comments, and governance cues form the external stimulus environment. Perceived usefulness, emotional resonance, and trust represent internal evaluations, while purchase, sharing, repeat purchase, and continued use are behavioral responses. The small decline at the effect-realization stage is therefore consistent with a familiar conversion problem: generating interest is easier than sustaining commitment after the transaction.

The actor-level results sharpen this interpretation. With a mean of 3.81, the platform layer appears to be the most mature component of the system, reflecting the strength of recommendation, store links, livestream entry points, comment spaces, and transaction protection. Lower scores for the brand and user layers indicate that infrastructure and traffic do not by themselves create relationship value. Brand trust depends on whether product experience matches content claims. User loyalty, in turn, depends on whether post-purchase feedback is noticed and leads to visible correction.

The distribution of comment types offers further evidence. Purchase inquiries and attribute questions show that grass-planting can activate concrete demand. Detail discussions and information supplementation show users reorganizing the original message and supplying practical knowledge to others. Professional endorsement and social sharing, however, account for smaller shares. Interaction in the sample is therefore more often immediate and problem-oriented than relational. Users ask, compare, and add information, but only some become long-

term advocates. This helps explain why visible engagement can coexist with relatively weak word-of-mouth accumulation.

6.2. Governance and Managerial Implications

At the platform level, authenticity needs to become measurable rather than rhetorical. Production quality and engagement volume are poor proxies for whether a recommendation is reliable. A stronger governance system would connect front-end content metrics with transaction and service outcomes, including return and complaint rates, repeat purchase, the quality of verified reviews, and the share of longer-term follow-up comments. Content that attracts large audiences but produces widespread dissatisfaction should be treated as a governance failure, because it consumes trust that is shared across the platform.

Recommendation systems also shape the supply of content. They are not neutral delivery channels: the signals they reward influence what creators and brands choose to make. When completion rate, emotional intensity, and immediate conversion dominate the objective function, imitation and exaggeration become predictable responses. Giving weight to original testing, balanced comparison, verified experience, and post-purchase satisfaction would encourage more informative and differentiated work. Algorithmic optimization thus has a normative as well as a technical role in platform markets.

For brands, a grass-planting post should be treated as a service promise. The claims made in a short video or livestream need to remain consistent with actual product performance, logistics, and after-sales support. Appropriate users and situations should be stated clearly, as should relevant limitations and service conditions. This is especially important in categories such as cosmetics, food, apparel, household goods, and digital devices, where suitability and long-term experience vary across consumers. Transparent communication lowers perceived risk and gives practical effect to the risk-assessment and transparency dimensions of co-creation.

Creator partnerships should likewise move beyond one-off traffic purchases. Follower counts and single-session sales are insufficient selection criteria. Brands should also consider subject-matter expertise, audience fit, comment quality, prior credibility, and a creator's willingness to discuss limitations. A balanced demonstration that compares alternatives and responds to criticism may generate less immediate excitement, yet it can create more durable trust. Creator credibility is therefore a relational asset that both platforms and brands have an interest in protecting.

Post-purchase participation should be built into retention strategy rather than left at the edge of the product page. Follow-up reviews, trial reports, tutorials, and problem reports can all improve the information available to later users. Platforms can invite verified buyers to publish longer-term feedback, while brands can revise explanations or service policies in response to recurring issues. When users can see that their comments produce correction or improvement, they are more likely to regard themselves as participants in value creation rather than as targets of persuasion.

6.3. Theoretical Contributions and Cross-Platform Implications

The study makes three related contributions. First, it applies value co-creation theory to the specific practices of content e-commerce. Here, value is produced not only during product use but also during content interpretation, algorithmic distribution, comment interaction, and the circulation of post-purchase experience. The platform is consequently more than an intermediary. It integrates resources and determines who receives access and visibility, what risks are made legible, and how transparent the exchange becomes.

Second, combining value co-creation with S-O-R connects the structure of the platform to the psychology of the user. Grass-planting content may provide a strong stimulus, but behavior depends on whether viewers find it useful, identify with it, and trust the source. This explains

why entertaining content can raise awareness without producing repeat purchase when the product experience is disappointing. It also clarifies why credible user comments can convert an initial stimulus into a more stable judgment.

Third, the findings distinguish activity from relationship quality. Large numbers of comments, likes, or questions show that users are engaged at a particular moment; they do not necessarily indicate loyalty. Sustainable grass-planting requires trust to accumulate across viewing, purchase, use, and feedback. This distinction matters for platform evaluation because short-term engagement can make a campaign appear more successful than it is when satisfaction and word-of-mouth remain weak.

Although the empirical focus is Douyin, the argument is relevant to other content-commerce platforms. Xiaohongshu may rely more heavily on community search, Kuaishou on relationship-based livestreaming, and other services on private-domain trust, but each must manage the tension between commercialization and credibility. As sponsored recommendation becomes more pervasive, transparent disclosure and reliable fulfillment become even more important. Otherwise, users will verify information elsewhere, weakening the efficiency of the original platform's recommendation system.

Content e-commerce should therefore not be framed simply as a contest for traffic scale. It is also a contest over trustworthy information, distinctive scenarios, responsible technological governance, user participation, and the ability to evaluate outcomes over time. Platforms that combine algorithmic efficiency with credible feedback are more likely to turn temporary attention into sustainable ecosystem value.

This interpretation is consistent with the wider social-commerce and live-commerce literature, which links design features, relationship quality, livestream affordances, uncertainty reduction, perceived value, engagement, and post-purchase service to purchase intention and trust formation [19-30].

6.4. Implementation Roadmap

Implementation can proceed in four stages, beginning with diagnosis. Douyin and participating brands should classify grass-planting content by product category, risk level, source of promotion, and the difficulty of the user's decision. Low-risk everyday goods may be adequately explained through use scenarios and price comparison. High-involvement products require stronger evidence, more explicit limitations, and longer follow-up. A differentiated approach avoids both excessive control of low-risk content and weak oversight of consequential claims.

The next stage is to strengthen the evidence surrounding each recommendation. Creator demonstrations, brand specifications, verified-buyer reviews, and after-sales responses provide different kinds of information. Agreement among them reduces uncertainty; disagreement is itself useful and should not be concealed. Platforms can make conflicting accounts visible and prompt clarification, turning the comment area into a structured decision-support space rather than an undifferentiated stream of reactions.

Feedback then needs to be closed rather than merely collected. Questions and negative experiences are usually scattered across comments, product reviews, and livestream records. Brands should aggregate recurring issues, investigate their causes, and publish follow-up explanations or service changes. Platforms can label resolved questions, highlight updated answers, and connect later reviews to the content that prompted the purchase. Participation is more likely to continue when users can observe a change in information quality.

The final stage is longitudinal evaluation. A practical dashboard should combine exposure and interaction with conversion, satisfaction, returns, complaints, repeat purchase, and recommendation. This prevents short-term sales from being interpreted in isolation and helps decision makers judge whether a campaign has created ecosystem value. The same evidence

can inform later creator selection and traffic allocation. In this form, long-term evaluation makes the value co-creation perspective operational.

7. Conclusion

This article analyzed grass-planting on Douyin as a value co-creation process. The case shows how exposure, interest formation, interaction, purchase, and feedback are connected within a recurring content-commerce cycle. Effectiveness is shaped jointly by platform infrastructure, brand propositions, creator interpretation, and user experience; it cannot be attributed to promotional content alone.

Douyin's main strengths lie in algorithmic matching, flexible content formats, livestream interaction, creator endorsement, and convenient transactions. The weaker part of the system is the user-side relationship after purchase. Concerns about authenticity, repetitive content, unclear commercial boundaries, limited brand response, and weak trust accumulation remain unresolved. Improvement therefore depends on credible product and content quality, transparent governance, recommendation objectives that reflect long-term value, deeper interaction, and mechanisms that retain users after the transaction.

The analysis extends value co-creation research by linking platform-level arrangements with the small-scale interactions visible in comments and post-purchase feedback. Its conclusions should nevertheless be read in light of a single-case design and a sample of 220 respondents. Future work could compare platforms, examine differences among product categories, and test the proposed relationships using structural equation modeling, longitudinal data, or causal inference.

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