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The Knowledge 'Utopia': A Sociological Exploration of Live Commerce in Our Country

Hongkang Yu
Chongqing Institute of Foreign Studies Lecturer at the School of International Communication,chongqing, China
***Corresponding author,e-mail: 329645564@qq.com**

Abstract:
The core issue in the sociology of knowledge is the relationship between knowledge and society, implying that they influence and promote each other. Since its development in 2016, live-stream e-commerce in our country has seen its field of knowledge production constructed through the interactions between subjects, texts, and social processes.
This article, based on the theory of the sociology of knowledge, reviews the development process of live-streaming e-commerce in China. By analyzing the causes, content, and patterns of knowledge production within the texts, the study finds that the 'narrative' of knowledge has evolved from 'strong truth' to 'weak truth,' from 'ideology' to 'utopia,' and has continued to enrich and expand. The dissemination of knowledge is guided by immersive reception and public endorsement. The perspective of the sociology of knowledge not only opens up a new research space for live-streaming e-commerce through a different disciplinary paradigm but also provides effective pathways for the future development of the live-streaming e-commerce ecosystem.

Keywords:
live-streaming e-commerce; sociology of knowledge; knowledge production; knowledge iteration

1.Introduction

In recent years, the fast-paced nature of live-streamed commerce often drives audiences to make purchases under the influence of the host's urgent prompts and a sense of anxiety, driven by fear of missing out and irrationality. However, in the 'Oriental Selection' live stream, the host constructs a new ecosystem for live-streamed commerce with a 'slow' pace. In the 'Oriental Selection' live stream, the host skillfully switches between languages and alternates between traditional culture and life philosophy, shifting the audience's desire to purchase products to a need for acquiring knowledge. According to statistics[1], 'Oriental Selection' gained nearly five million followers in seven days, with a cumulative viewership of 238 million. This shows that the 'slow commerce' approach in live streaming has initiated a new model for live-streamed sales.

An increasing number of scholars are beginning to research the issue of live streaming sales, covering various aspects. Initially, the focus was mainly on the phenomenon of live streaming sales. Studies by Zhang Xingfang (2020), Yu Juanjuan (2020), and others have indicated that the rise of online live streaming has brought about the live streaming sales model. Today, there are two development models for live commerce:

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one is the collaboration between live streaming platforms and e-commerce platforms, and the other is e-commerce platforms creating their own internal live streaming features. As research has deepened, scholars have started to focus on the impact of live streaming sales on the consumer purchase process. Most scholars approach this from an empirical research perspective. Chen Yitao et al. (2021) summarized the attributes of e-commerce live streaming into five dimensions: refined content, host personality, trust, interactivity, and incentive mechanisms, analyzing the impact of each dimension on consumer willingness and confirming the mediating effect of psychological contracts and involvement. Peng Yuhong et al. (2021) analyzed and pointed out the differentiation effects of financial issues, social factors, and structure in live streaming sales on consumers' online purchase intentions. In addition, many scholars focus on perspectives based on moral construction, suggesting that norm violations in live streaming rooms are potential issues in the development of the online streaming industry. Regulating these violations, constructing moral standards, and establishing ethical boundaries are fundamental to ensuring the long-term and stable development of the industry. Meanwhile, although many scholars have studied live streaming e-commerce from sociological, economic, and legal perspectives, Xu Xuchu et al. (2022) explored the evolution of live streaming e-commerce, the logical mechanisms behind social facts, and in-depth cultural reflections. Chen Weihua (2022) studied the marketing strategies of influencer live streaming e-commerce using the 4C theory. Fan Fei (2022) and Li Jiabin (2022) examined consumer rights in live streaming e-commerce from a legal perspective. According to existing literature, research on live streaming e-commerce often focuses on development models and marketing strategies, with few scholars exploring the knowledge presented in live streaming e-commerce texts.

According to the degree of artificiality, Schelling classifies knowledge into seven categories: 1. The undifferentiated initial formation of myths and legends as religious knowledge, natural knowledge, and historical knowledge; 2. Knowledge implicit in everyday language, contrasted with acquired poetic or technical language; 3. Religious knowledge presented in a stylized manner; 4. Various fundamental forms of mystical knowledge; 5. Empirical knowledge in mathematics and natural sciences; 6. Philosophy—metaphysical knowledge; 7. Technological knowledge. [2]This article will focus on the explicit or implicit everyday language knowledge and technical aspects within live-streaming sales texts. Based on the theory of the sociology of knowledge, it will trace the development of live-streaming sales in our country, exploring the causes, content, and patterns of knowledge production in live-streaming sales texts, thus opening up research space for live-streaming sales from a different disciplinary paradigm.

2. The Dominance of 'Knowledge and Social Relations Theory': From Explicit Knowledge to Tacit Knowledge (2016-2018)

In 2015, Wu Zhaoguo—known as the pioneer of live-streaming e-commerce—established Tudou Ni Live, one of the early live-streaming e-commerce platforms in China. However, due to a lack of internet mindset and operational expertise, Tudou Ni Live failed to rise to prominence. In 2016, the e-commerce app Mogujie was the first to break away from traditional e-commerce models by integrating live-streaming, thus initiating the live-streaming e-commerce model. “The mode of existence of consciousness, as well as the way consciousness perceives the existence of something, is knowledge. Knowledge is the only action of consciousness. Therefore, as long as consciousness is aware of something, that thing becomes an object of conscious-

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ness. Knowledge is the only objective relationship of consciousness." [3]According to Marx, consciousness is determined by material conditions, which represents the initial expression of his "knowledge social determinism". Due to the nascent stage of the live-streaming ecosystem, the knowledge relied upon by live-streamers was also unclear. Early live-streamers on Mogujie, like Yan Qiqi, lacked specialized knowledge and roles, thus mechanically imitating offline sales methods. Consequently, audiences still perceived these live-streamers as merely "online sales assistants." Polanyi posits that knowledge comes in two forms: one is what is commonly referred to as knowledge, expressed in textual symbols, charts, and formulas. Knowledge that remains unexpressed, such as thoughts and emotions, or knowledge inherent in our actions, represents a different type of knowledge. The former is referred to as explicit knowledge, while the latter is considered tacit knowledge. According to his view, explicit knowledge can be fully expressed using a certain coding system. Indeed, Yan Qiqi's 'narration' in the livestream falls under the former category, as he does not have a deep understanding of the livestreaming ecosystem and promotes products using his familiar offline marketing knowledge.

In April 2016, Taobao Live was officially launched, marking the beginning of the era of professional live-streaming salespeople. Tsanetsky believes that when individuals perform a certain social role, they are perceived by the public as possessing the expertise required for that role.

Live-streaming e-commerce, as a new product selling model, relies heavily on the live-streaming host as a crucial factor within the live-streaming ecosystem. Their social role determines the type of knowledge required: as a professional, they must possess specialized knowledge necessary for performing their role, while also having general knowledge about social life. In the same year, Shanghai MeiONE collaborated with L'Oréal Group to plan the 'BA Internet Celebrity Transformation' event, which provided Li Jiaqi the opportunity to transition into an internet celebrity live-streaming host. In the context of media as society, the live-streaming e-commerce ecosystem has constructed people's perceptions of goods. After gradually assuming a specialized role in live-streaming e-commerce, Li Jiaqi leveraged his earlier experience as a L'Oréal counter BA to sell cosmetic knowledge to audiences in the live-streaming room. He used standardized language to describe and showcase products in terms of their performance, characteristics, uses, and techniques.

In 2017, Kuaishou's live streaming officially launched, utilizing a "tips + sales" model to target lower-tier markets and rapidly attract a large number of "town youth". In 2018, social platforms like Kuaishou and Douyin seized the opportunity for transformation, creating a diverse sales pattern with e-commerce as the main focus and lifestyle entertainment as a supplement, thereby advancing the improvement of China's e-commerce system and presenting new business models. Under the dominance of the principle that "environment determines knowledge," a large number of live streaming e-commerce MCN agencies emerged, with specialized paradigms for training hosts and building teams, gradually infiltrating the live streaming sales ecosystem. Polanyi argues that tacit knowledge is difficult to be clearly presented through explicit codes.

It often manifests as experiential skills and cognitive modes of mental perception, utilizing scenarios to acquire tacit knowledge. From professional marketing knowledge to skill-based expressions, hosts employ a perfect set of scripts and exquisite acting to drive audiences to purchase products in a state of fear of missing out.

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Live-streaming sales texts have evolved from early mechanical selling techniques to incorporating individual expertise and various experiential skills, gradually constructing a domain of knowledge production for live-streaming sales.

3."Reflection on the Theory of Bidirectional Interaction Between Knowledge and Society: From the 'Universality of Knowledge' to the 'Relativity of Knowledge' (2019-2020)"

“The ultimate mission of sociology itself is to examine the types and sequences of interactions between ideal factors and real factors, spiritual factors and internal driving forces that determine the content of people's lives. “[4]Ideal factors mainly include conceptual beliefs such as existentialism and materialism, which play significant roles in different ethical and value domains. Real factors encompass elements like population quality, production factors, and geographical factors—these are 'changing factors that exist and have influence in the natural world or social reality'. These two types of factors constrain human development to varying degrees, and together they constitute indispensable conditions for human development. However, they also have their unique mechanisms and methods of action, namely interconnection and mutual reinforcement. The interaction between ideal factors and real factors thus creates a dynamic relationship between knowledge and society.

The year 2019 is known as the 'Year of Live Commerce,' where a microphone and a smartphone combined with the host's 'shouting' can generate sales in the millions. The 'live commerce' sales model gradually became familiar to the public. The human pursuit of the 'universal validity' of knowledge is, in fact, a form of existence where 'cognitive motivation' seeks 'ultimate concern'. [5]Driven by both real-world factors and idealistic factors, a set of standardized live broadcasting scripts, urgent selling scenes, and the pursuit of 'digital marvels' in product sales have developed into industry standards. At this point, the internal logic behind the host's behavior is the ultimate affirmation of the 'universal validity' of knowledge. Luo Yonghao, as an 'information key person' in the field of electronic products, converts information that aligns with his own interests into a 'universal validity' knowledge 'agenda' through his years of teaching experience, professional verbal expression skills, and insight into consumer needs in the live commerce arena. However, his 'narration' lacks interaction with the audience, and some viewers who give 'gifts' do not receive feedback. A form of 'knowledge' that strongly adheres to truth achieves 'discourse hegemony' under logical persuasion.

Since 2020, live-streaming e-commerce has become a 'lifeline' for many online and offline merchants. As an emerging marketing method, live-streaming e-commerce has increasingly entered public view and plays a significant role. According to incomplete statistics, there are now more than 2,000 domestic live-streaming platforms, with daily active users surpassing 200 million. An economic report released by Taobao Live states that within just three months, over 100 professions have shifted to Taobao live-streaming rooms, with celebrities and ordinary individuals from various industries flocking to the live-streaming e-commerce field. Scheler suggests that categories like collective soul and collective spirit are 'merely always in the experience of coexisting with others, continuously regenerating their own spiritual subject and psychological content.' Celebrities 'descending' into the live-streaming e-commerce arena break down the boundaries of mutual

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recognition with a decentralized narrative expression, thereby allowing the audience to engage with their cognitive logic. Under the embodied influence of the live-streaming e-commerce field, celebrities transform knowledge into 'relative' cognition, using cognitive mobilization to achieve action. Through a form of 'general knowledge' with weak truths, they resonate with the audience's emotional, entertainment, and nostalgic perceptions, enhancing audience participation in knowledge co-creation and stimulating expectations for the 'knowledgeable' understanding of their topics through the construction of internal logic. The 2020 report on celebrity live-streamed sales shows that Lin Yilun ranked first. As a singer, he frequently receives song requests from viewers in the live chat. Due to his exceptional cooking skills, he wears an apron and prepares dishes while sharing cooking tips when selling culinary products. Similarly, in May of the same year, actress Liu Tao, under the alias 'Liu Yidao,' joined Taobao Live. Her unique language and approachability captivated the audience, who continuously reshaped their 'group spirit' in the constructed, relatable, and entertaining scenarios. The shift in the validity of knowledge in the realm of celebrity live-streamed sales is characterized by not only meeting audience cognitive expectations but also achieving emotional resonance. This enhances audience participation in knowledge co-creation, allowing them to experience a multifaceted sense of value, emotion, and cognition within the 'broad knowledge' domain.

The evolution of live-streaming e-commerce is not merely about accelerating productivity peaks; fundamentally, it is also transforming production relations, giving rise to a new form—digital production relations. Under the interaction of practical and ideal factors, influencers attract audiences with their content and personal cognitive logic, reaching more potential consumers and reinventing the endorsement model of live-streaming hosts.

4.Mapping the 'Social Construction of Knowledge': From Knowledge as 'Ideology' to Knowledge as 'Utopia' (2021-2022)

In 2021, the era of 'live streaming for everyone' arrived. According to iMedia Research, by 2020, the number of online live streaming users in China had reached 587 million, with a promising continued growth expected, projecting the user count to reach 660 million by 2022.

From the initial establishment of the live-streaming ecosystem in 2016 to its maturation in 2011, Mannheim views this process through the lens of ideology. When a social group uses certain ideas to maintain the existing order and emphasizes stability in its actions, these ideas are considered 'ideology.' In the ever-changing realm of live streaming, time is extracted from the dynamic reality, spaces are digitally constructed, and roles and images are self-defined, thus altering the audience's perception of time and space. Live streaming platforms, with their strong interactivity, high dissemination efficiency, and wide audience reach, have become an indispensable part of daily life, facilitating the free flow of information and enabling individuals to pursue their values. Within these spaces, which differ from real-world scenarios, users gain self-identity and stability within a certain community structure and order. By participating in discussions and sharing based on their personal knowledge systems, they form 'knowledge communities' centered around relevant themes. The members of these groups, due to their similar knowledge structures, develop a stronger sense of belonging, thereby fostering a social bond—authorized and prepared to take collective actions. Actions such as liking, giving gifts, and commenting are themselves cultural metaphors. The interactive nature of live-streamed

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e-commerce and its use of metaphorical imagery stitch together the sense of tension and anxiety brought about by social changes, thereby creating the current 'consumption frenzy' seen in live-streamed sales.

In 2022, several leading live-streaming e-commerce hosts, including Simba from The Lion King, stumbled, but a 'dark horse' burst onto the live-streaming e-commerce scene. From the educational training institution 'New Oriental' to the bilingual agricultural product sales 'Oriental Selection,' and from having over 100,000 fans to over 10 million fans, Oriental Selection achieved this in just 7 days. Dong Yuhui chose to 'slow down' in the consumerism-driven live-streaming arena, exploring the relationship between humans and objects over millennia, and seeking the meaning of human life. When discussing rice, it's the cicada-singing midsummer night and the smoky warmth of childhood at grandma's house. When talking about shad fish, it evokes Zhang Ailing's 'Three regrets in life: first, the camellias have no fragrance; second, the shad fish are too bony; third, the Dream of the Red Chamber remains unfinished'. In his live stream, it’s not just about consumer goods and data amid material surplus, but rather a romantic sentiment about existence. When a group tends to partially or completely disrupt 'the order of things that once dominated' and ideologically seeks to transcend reality, this notion is called 'Utopia'. [6]The new generation of youth and middle-aged individuals pay more attention to acquiring cultural knowledge or enhancing professional skills. Consequently, when engaging with live-streamed sales, people are more inclined to pay for knowledge and skills rather than for the fast-paced, sales-oriented style of the presenters. [7]They seek spiritual solace, cultural enrichment, and emotional resonance.

"Oriental Selection" is deconstructing the live-streaming sales ecosystem and further advancing the narrative approach to knowledge[8]. It diminishes the sense of elitism and truthfulness traditionally associated with knowledge, shifting towards a more immersive reception and public acceptance, thereby promoting the ubiquitous perception of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Mannheim believed that the origin, development, and manifestation of an idea all reflect the permeation and influence of social factors. In the field of live-streaming e-commerce in our country, knowledge production has gradually transcended the model and limitations of 'ideology,' continuously evolving and enriching itself.[9] The demystification of traditional elitist knowledge has broken the boundaries of knowledge dissemination, enhancing the audience's receptiveness to knowledge. Whether driven by consumerist commercial logic or responding to societal cultural needs, the emergence of a 'knowledge utopia' in the live-streaming e-commerce realm will be an inevitable trend[10]. In today's world, where improving national education is fundamental to enriching the people and strengthening the country, exploring a live-streaming e-commerce field with cultural and market power will be a shared aspiration among platforms, producers, and audiences.

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