Literature Review of Reward-based Content Payment

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Abstract: This article mainly reviews the literature of CSSCI publications in the marketing field and summarizes customer payment behavior in the context of Reward-based Content Payment, exploring the application of traditional marketing theories in the Content Payment context. Firstly, the connotation of Reward-based Content Payment in existing literature is sorted out, and the classification of Reward-based Content Payment is explored in depth. Secondly, the influencing factors of Reward-based Content Payment are summarized and sorted out. This article provides direction for future research, aiming to promote further development of the Reward-based Content Payment industry.

1. The definition and characteristics of Reward-based Content Payment

Since the emergence of online payment models in 2003, it has ushered in the era of content payment. Among the derivations of content payment, "reward-based content payment," which is known as a unique innovative business model in the Chinese internet industry, has emerged. "Reward" is a localized product in China and referred to as a gift given by a dignified person to a lower-level or subordinate in ancient times, or as a tip given to someone to show gratitude for their service. Reward-based content payment was initially used in the reward model of self-publishing platforms on literature websites, and later expanded to social platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, news clients, and live streaming platforms, presenting a combination of free and paid content, personalized and customized works, professional outputs, stable and fast update frequency, and a focus on interactive communication between sender and receiver (Zhang et al., 2015).

Content payment includes various payment models, such as reward-based, subscription-based, and community-based payments. Among them, reward-based content payment belongs to pay-after-reading, where the payment is voluntary or impulsive based on personal appreciation and recognition. In contrast, subscription-based and community-based content payments are pay-before-reading, where the payment is rational and compulsory based on the reader's expectation of future delivery of information. Although subscription-based and community-based content payments provide more stable income and higher user retention rates, reward-based content payment is not compulsory and is based on the reader's recognition of the content, which reduces user expectations and regrets.

There are three main characteristics of reward-based content payment. First, it is a voluntary payment method where users pay for personal experiences, mainly due to the audience's positive

emotional response to content (Chen, 2016). Second, it is a source of funding or motivation for content creators. In a sense, "reward-based" recognition for monetizing knowledge. The "reward" payment from users can meet the material needs of creators, providing them with a sustainable income source. It also allows creators to feel the recognition and appreciation of users, inspire their enthusiasm for creation, and strive for higher quality content. Finally, users are free to decide on the reward amount. Unlike subscription-based and community-based content payments where the subscription and group fees have a clear price, reward-based content payments give consumers the freedom to choose the amount they want to pay[1-7].

2. The types of Reward-based Content Payment

Reward-based Content Payment can be divided into the following three categories. First, reward-based payments for online literature platforms. Online literature platforms are an important way of reading after the rise of digital reading. Readers pay authors a certain fee as a reward to express their love for the novels. Second, reward-based payments for social platforms like WeChat, Weibo, etc. The reward feature on these platforms is one way public accounts and Weibo accounts can monetize traffic. Users willingly pay for articles they love and consider valuable. Third, reward-based payments in live streaming platforms, where viewers send virtual gifts to their favourite broadcasters. All three types involve users willingly paying for spiritual pleasure, demonstrating their love and appreciation of content creators. They are also significant sources of income for content creators. However, there are significant differences between them: for example, online literature platforms reward-based payments are for literary works, while social platforms and live streaming platforms are for analysis of current events and production of professional content respectively. Social platform and live streaming performers have media properties and can monetize traffic, unlike online literature platforms. Social platforms use cash payments for the reward feature and the platform does not take any cuts, while the other two feature virtual currency and virtual gifts, which need to be extracted and exchanged for cash, and the platform takes a cut.

Reward-based payments for online literature platforms have been active for over a decade, and fan economy has contributed to its growth. According to Ma's (2020) research, online literature fans built around authors generate immense revenue, increasing the influence of online literature fandom. These fans and readers are the biggest sources of subscription and reward-based income. However, the high income also leads to phenomenon like buying lists and fan swiping, turning reward-based payments into instruments used in fan competition, bringing criticisms and loss of value to online literature. If literary works' quality can be increased, and reward-based payment modes managed better, the online literature reward feature will continue to be active[8-12].

Reward-based payments for social platforms like WeChat and Weibo are one model of self-media commercialization, and one of the main ways for self-media personnel to monetize content. It is an emerging content monetization channel with much future potential. The higher the UGC quality, the higher the self-media's professionalism, and the greater their influence and number of fans, the more people will reward. However, this pattern also has drawbacks, such as uneven resource allocation and the fixed nature of reward-givers. Based on an analysis of Weibo rewards, Pan (2017) points out that in Weibo, big Vs have a large fan base, high popularity, and access to more information resources than ordinary users, making the spread of their articles far beyond that of ordinary people, and so the possibility of their articles being rewarded is far higher than that of ordinary users. Moreover, reward-givers are mainly the fans of Weibo bloggers.

Reward-based payments for live streaming platforms are a newly emerging pattern in which viewers can reward broadcasters during the live streaming process. This is currently the most common and popular reward-based payment method. Based on more than 30 typical online reward

cases, Yu (2020) classifies network live streaming gift rewards into four types: competitive, compensatory, showy and hobby-based, according to the degree of emotional involvement and emotional control. During live broadcasts, interaction between the broadcaster and the users via bullet chat can affect positive payment. The more intense the interaction, the more payments. Head reward givers to broadcasters can increase user's reward willingness, and user rewards are subject to herd behavior. Live streaming expands cultural and entertainment consumer channels to the public, but at the same time, leads to a variety of confusion-inducing problems, such as reckless acts of spending to bankruptcy, and gradually promoting the low-brow. Network live streaming rewards require stricter institutional control to maintain a healthy live streaming environment[13-20].

3. Factors affecting Reward-based Content Payment

From the perspective of the entire consumer content payment process, factors affecting Reward-based Content Payment are an important part of our research. Identifying them can provide strong support for theoretical analysis of reward-based content payment and constructive recommendations in the future. The planned behavior theory is an important basic theory for studying user behavior influencing factors in domestic and foreign literature. Based on this, this article takes the different contexts that affect consumer content payment behavior as a perspective, reviews relevant research literature, sorts out the factors involved in the research literature, and summarizes them into three categories: subjective normative factors, behavioral attitude factors, and perceived behavioral control factors.

3.1. Subjective normative factors

Subjective norm refers to the social pressure individuals feel toward whether or not to adopt a particular behavior. Some scholars have also studied the external environmental factors and interpersonal relationship reasons that affect consumers' subjective norm cognition based on different perspectives or fields, including normative influence, interpersonal influence, and external influence. In the fragmented era, social reading has gradually become a new reading trend, and people are increasingly relying on the internet for communication. Reward-based content payment is also becoming more prominent on various social platforms. Research has found that people are influenced by recommendations from others or the platform, as well as the expectation of group identity, which affects their willingness to pay (Zhang, 2019). Some scholars summarize it as subjective normative variables. Moreover, from the perspective of service providers, in the social network environment, the most common means for businesses to guide consumer consumption is to influence consumers' willingness to pay through the evaluation of efficacy and the recommendation of opinion leaders (Zhang and Peng, 2018). Additionally, scholars have summarized the promotional directional factors (Wang et al., 2021). Based on the social influence model theory and research on preference homogeneity, peer behavior factors include peer payment attitudes and payment behavior, which will generate "psychological persuasion" on users' willingness to pay for content (Wang and Zhang, 2019). At the same time, some scholars have conducted research on the positive relationship between personal innovation consciousness and college students' willingness to pay for digital reading based on social cognitive theory (Zheng, 2020).

Scholars have explored and researched the external influencing factors in subjective norm, but there have been fewer studies on the differences in subjective norm factors for different types of content payment. There is also insufficient research on the behavioral consequences of the psychological mechanisms brought about by external factors, such as social influences, on the payment behavior of tipping-type content[21-26].

3.2. Behavioral attitude factors

In existing studies on factors influencing content payment willingness, domestic and foreign scholars have generally focused on the consumer perspective, and continuously expanded and analyzed the influencing factors and relevant theories based on models such as perceived value and technology acceptance. Typically, the theory of planned behavior is integrated with the theory of technology acceptance, with perceived factors in the theory of technology acceptance referring to consumers' various subjective perceptions and emotional feelings throughout the entire content payment process. This paper will be based on different situational platforms for tipping payment, taking the platform's self-design performance as the main variable directly affecting consumers' subjective behavior attitudes, thereby influencing willingness to pay. This paper summarizes four representative aspects:

(1) Professionalism, refers to the content payment platform providing users with high-quality knowledge and services through enriching and high-quality content, giving users a high-quality information experience, thus creating a perception of professionalism. In virtual knowledge payment platforms, some scholars have established a connection between it and users' trust in the overall platform (Li, 2022). Many scholars have also provided research evidence on the conclusion that high-quality knowledge meets consumer demands and promotes users' payment behavior (Su et al., 2019; Chen and Zhang, 2022). Furthermore, some scholars have found through research that users' perception of the information value of online media in the field of self-media on the network will attract consumers, increase their recognition of the platform, and thus influence consumption (Chen, 2019).

(2) Entertainment, refers to consumers' perception of pleasure, enjoyment, and flow experience during the process. Currently, people tend to tip on live streaming platforms for entertainment purposes and have a higher demand for enjoyable consumption. Corresponding to the perceived entertainment variable factor of the VAM model (Yang, 2015), the entertainment of paid content (Zhang, 2019) and the pleasure factor in consumer experience research, research has proven that perceived interest as an inherent behavioral motivation has a positive effect on willingness to pay (Zhang, et al., 2017). Additionally, some scholars have introduced the experience of flow from a psychological perspective and applied it to the study of information systems and e-commerce, demonstrating its significant positive impact on users' sustained use intention (Tao and Chen, 2020), and its correlation with users' perceived usefulness and satisfaction (Xue et al., 2021).

(3) Perceived ease of use, refers to consumers' perception of usability and convenience in the process of paying for knowledge and using it, including payment and operation. Considering the variability of usage scenarios, platforms need to further improve functions such as playback speed and smooth running (Zhang, 2019). More scholars have conducted empirical research and analysis using the perceived ease of use variables in the TAM and TAM2 models, as well as the perception of acquired variables in the VAM model, proving that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are positively correlated with willingness to pay (Chen and Li, 2019). Additionally, some scholars have conducted research and analysis on users' online knowledge acquisition process, demonstrating a positive relationship between perceived convenience and willingness to pay (Du and Xu, 2018).

(4) Perceived interactivity, refers to the interaction between the paid website platform and consumers, which creates an interactive experience for users and thereby has a correlating effect on willingness to pay. From the earliest text-based websites, the tipping model was based on user interaction, which can enhance the online interaction between authors and users, cultivate fan groups, and deepen the connection between authors and fans. Against the backdrop of social reading trends, some scholars have found that online interaction has a positive impact on users'

willingness to pay in their research on reading and business models (Zheng, 2020). Additionally, some scholars have proposed that social needs of platform users promote interactivity, fostering sustained use intention (Song, 2018). On PUGC platforms, scholars have demonstrated through research that interactivity has a significant positive impact on trust building (Li, 2022). Furthermore, some scholars have summarized this as the contextual quality of the platform, focusing on the overall interaction between users and products or technology, which also has a positive impact on sustained willingness to pay (Chen and Zhang, 2022). In the context of live streaming platforms, research based on 781 live data samples found that bullet screen interaction also has a positive impact on users' payment tipping behavior (Zhao and Zhang, 2022).

(5) Trust. The value of Reward-based Content Payment originated from online literature, and is achieved by establishing connections among users, website platforms, and authors through the internet, strengthening users' trust in the platform and authors, cultivating users' payment habits, and promoting the healthy development of the industry. Some scholars have divided the characteristics of user experience into four dimensions involving trial experience, interactive experience, information experience, and pleasure experience, and the two aspects affecting trust include system trust and interpersonal trust, ultimately affecting user loyalty (Li, 2022). Other scholars have argued that trust is also a significant factor in marketing consumer payment on websites with social attributes (Zhang, et al., 2017). On other knowledge payment platforms, scholars have empirically demonstrated that consumer trust in the knowledge platform positively affects purchase intention (Su, et al., 2019). Additionally, based on the push-pull anchoring model, some scholars have demonstrated that the degree of trust in knowledge payment services will have a positive impact on user transition from free knowledge search to knowledge payment (Xiang, et al., 2021).

(6) The free mentality. In the current Reward-based Content Payment, it generally appears in a combination of free and paid forms, using users' free mentality to cultivate reading habits and interests, and then generating consumers' willingness and behavior to pay. Some scholars have empirically studied from the perspective of psychological inertia and found that when users have a strong free mentality, their willingness to use knowledge payment is inversely affected (Wang et al., 2021; Wang and Zhang, 2019). At the same time, perceived privacy risk (Xue and Dong, 2021) and inertia psychology (Xiang et al., 2021) also have an inverse impact on payment willingness.

Most literature mentions subjective normative factors and perceived factors that affect consumers' willingness to pay (Lu, 2020) and provides empirical evidence. When the reward platform becomes more diversified and increases in quantity, the multi-faceted perception that consumers perceive from social pressures or team behaviors, as well as the multi-party design of third parties on the platform, will become more significant, and the correlation with their willingness to pay will also become more evident. Therefore, there is still insufficient research on the classification, complexity, and relationship of subjective normative factors and the addition of other variable factors in Reward-based Content Payment, which is expected to be a new direction for future research[27-30].

3.3. Perceived behavioral control factors

Perceived behavioral control refers to an individual's perception of their ability to control the resources and opportunities required to engage in a specific action. Some scholars have found that prevention-oriented users pay more attention to price value and content quality (Pham and Avnet, 2004; Wan et al., 2009), and the prevention-oriented personality trait has an enhancing effect on price value and perceived value (Wang et al., 2021). There is less literature research on the exploration of required resources and opportunities in perceived behavioral control and it is

showing dispersion. Future research should focus on the important role of perceived behavioral control factors in consumer pay-for-content based on trust and rewards behavior.

Overall, the planned behavior theory emphasizes consumer behavior-related issues. Currently, there are many research literatures on overall pay-for-content, but there is less research on pay-for-content of various types, and research on Reward-based Content Payment presents a non-systematic characteristic. Most bibliographic studies on Reward-based Content Payment mainly focus on the adverse effects of online tipping youth and analyzing individual platforms' tipping monetization behavior, without systematic and overall analysis. Therefore, future research should focus on the underlying logic of consumers' willingness to pay for Reward-based Content Payment and the overall mechanism of payment behavior so as to better expand the application of factors affecting consumers' willingness to pay in different contexts.

4. Conclusions

As content payment enters the new media era, there have been profound changes in both its connotation and extension. There are also significant differences in the development of payment among different types and fields, especially when it comes to Reward-style Content Payment, where the power to pay is completely transferred to consumers, creating a new business model for content payment. Understanding and distinguishing Reward-style Content Payment and pointing the way for future research are urgent problems that need to be addressed.

Therefore, this article systematically reviews and comments on the literature related to the current research on Reward-style Content Payment from three aspects. Firstly, this paper briefly summarizes the connotation and concept of Reward-style Content Payment. Secondly, this research classifies and distinguishes Reward-style Content Payment. Thirdly, we summarize the existing theories from subjective normative factors, behavioral attitude factors, and perceived behavioral control factors to provide directions for future research.

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