



Who Sells Knowledge Online? An Investigation of Knowledge Celebrities in China

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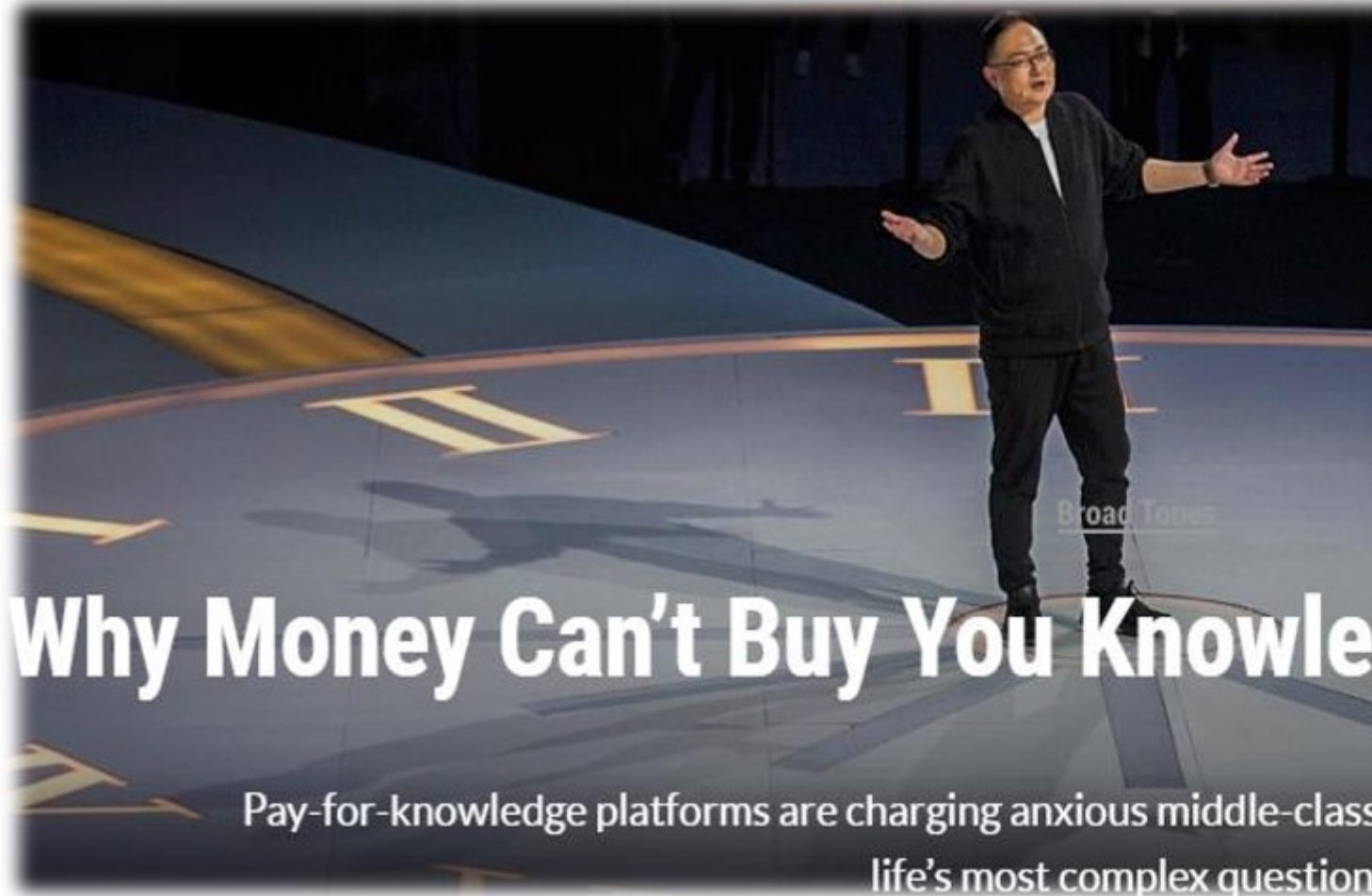
Who Sells Knowledge Online? An Investigation of Knowledge Celebrities in China

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In China, there is an emerging class of online celebrities known as “Knowledge Wanghong” who focuses specifically on knowledge-intensive content. Being knowledgeable online celebrities, they can evoke a strong emotional attachment from their legions of fans. However, unlike conventional online celebrities involved in endorsements, such knowledge celebrities create and sell their own knowledge products directly to fans. Fans often view the outputs from their idols as symbols of affection and thus derive psychological pleasure from the purchase.

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The knowledge products sold by knowledge celebrities are usually packaged in textual, audio, or video formats and delivered on pay-for-knowledge platforms. Themes of the knowledge products for sale span the gamut from academic and current affairs topics to online game commentaries and practical fixes, reflecting the match between what consumers need and what knowledge celebrities can offer.



To thrive in the intensely competitive online environment, knowledge celebrities have to carve their own niche markets and differentiate themselves using what is known as identity signaling. This is a deliberate communication process by which they may provide cues that convey information about who they are, what they can do and the products they sell. On pay-for-knowledge platforms, the opportunity for identity signaling presents itself most naturally via online profiles.

In order to come across as authentic, online celebrities have to set up their online profiles clearly and consistently. This means that their profiles must include distinctive details to conjure the identity they wish to portray. For example, some online celebrities might choose to create a personable and likable character, while others prefer to be seen as efficient and insightful. Different identities appeal to different segments of consumers. In any case, the goal is to project a reputable image, inspire confidence and ultimately nudge a purchase.



Our research aims to uncover the different online identities of

knowledge celebrities in China. To this end, we use a computational approach—Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling technique—to identify frequently-occurring topics from their self-edited content in the profiles, which could cluster knowledge celebrities into different identities. We choose Zhihu (www.zhihu.com) as the data source. This is one of China's earliest and leading pay-for-knowledge platforms. Featuring the online profiles of tens of thousands of knowledge celebrities, it contained the metadata of product-related and seller-related characteristics as well as respective sales performance, which were publicly available.

Our results show four distinctive online identities among knowledge celebrities. They are namely, *Mentor*, *Broker*, *Storyteller*, and *Geek*. Moreover, product-related characteristics, seller-related characteristics and sales performance differed across the four different identities on Zhihu.

Our research holds both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it extends the existing literature by using the notion of identity signaling to analyze a peculiar group of knowledge celebrities—Knowledge Wanghong—who are setting an important trend in the pay-for-knowledge model in China. On the practical front, it also helps inform practices on pay-for-knowledge platforms. For instance, an aspiring knowledge celebrity aware of the different types of online identities can better position himself or herself more consciously in the marketplace.

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