CHINESE WEB FICTION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND VALUE CO-CREATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF S-D LOGIC IN THE AGE OF DIGITALIZATION

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

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ABSTRACT

This study explores customer engagement (CE) and value co-creation within Chinese web fiction communities, a rapidly growing cultural phenomenon that has attracted millions of readers both in China and globally.

Using S-D logic-informed customer engagement as a theoretical framework, the research examines how these digital communities, characterized by high interactivity and strong customer-producer relationships, foster engagement and co-creation. Adopting a constructivist research paradigm and utilizing abductive reasoning, the study employs an embedded case study strategy. Data were collected through purposive sampling, involving 21 participants, including 8 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups, and analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations ensured participant confidentiality and methodological rigor.

The research reveals CE's dynamic nature. Three key drivers of customer engagement are identified: self - motivated labour, co - creation infrastructure, and brand - centric interpretive communities. The outcomes of CE are categorized into three dimensions: Positive Transformation Value (PTV), Emotional Resonance Value (ERV), and Constituent Co - Creative Value (CCV), highlighting the platform's roles in personal growth, community engagement, and cultural expression. A customer typology (Transformation Seekers, Emotional Connectors, Co - creators, and Integrated Value Seekers) is developed, and cultural factors like 'Collective Participation', 'Striving Spirit', and 'the Pursuit of Moral and Educational Enrichment' significantly shape engagement.

Theoretically, this study enriches S - D logic by integrating cultural elements into the CE framework, offering a multi - dimensional view that challenges unidimensional

models. Practically, it provides actionable strategies for platform managers. They can enhance user participation by leveraging key themes and understanding cultural factors, tailoring content to boost platform performance.

However, limitations include a focus on educated participants and lack of cross - cultural exploration. The model emphasizes positive value, overlooking potential negatives. Future research should address these aspects. Overall, this study offers valuable insights for digital community management and engagement strategies.

Key Words: Customer Engagement (CE); Value Co-creation; Service-Dominant Logic (S-D logic); Digital Communities; Thematic Analysis; Cultural Factors; Engagement Strategies

ABBREVIATIONS

A2A	actor-to-actor
AI	artificial intelligence
ANT	actor-network theory
BBS	bulletin board system
BCIC	brand-centric interpretive community
CC	co-creators
CCI	co-creation infrastructure
CCV	constituent co-creative value
CE	customer engagement
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CWF	Chinese web fiction
EC	emotional connectors
ERV	emotional resonance value
IVS	integrated value seekers
MSI	Marketing Science Institute
OBC	online brand community
PTV	positive transformation value
RA	research aim
RG	research gap
RO	research objective
RQ	research question
S-D	service-dominant
SML	self-motivated labour
TA	thematic analysis
TAM	technology acceptance model
TS	transformation seekers
UTAUT	unified theory of acceptance and use of technology
WOM	word of mouth

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction

Michel Hockx, renowned in academic circles as one of the most famous sinologists, began introducing and teaching Chinese web literature to Westerners as early as 2000 (Yi and Hockx, 2020). In the Western world, there is a lack of awareness about the existence of literature on the internet. When Western discussions mention 'electronic literature', they typically refer to experimental, electronic, multimedia, and hypertext works that cannot be replicated on paper (Hockx, 2005). For example, *Al-Barrah* (البرَّاح) by Reham Hosny and Mohamed A. Nasef, which was given an Honourable Mention for the 2022 Coover Award by the Electronic Literature Organization, is considered 'the first paper novel to combine augmented reality and hologram technologies with Arabic language text inside the borders of a paper page to provide the reader with a unique experience, and immerse her in the narrative' (Electronic Literature Organization, 2022a, para. 11). Electronic literature, a well-known art form in Western culture, is characterized by hypertext narrative and fiction. Emerging forms of electronic-based literary works, including interactive narrative, net poetry, and others (Electronic Literature Organization, 2022b), demand specialized software for creation, specific distributors for selling, and distinct reading strategies for appreciation. Electronic literature is established as a truly innovative art form in a sociological context (Hockx, 2005).

However, Chinese internet literature is more than just a literary genre; it is a profitable business. Hockx argued, 'The true characteristics of mainland Chinese internet literature (as I see it) lie not in the phenomenon itself but in its academic evaluation and its business model' (Wang and Hockx, 2022, p. 87). He also pointed out that Western scholarship on web literature is primarily concentrated on the most cutting-edge forms, such as hypertext and hypermedia, which overlooks the majority of literary works created by internet users (Hockx, 2005).

Chinese online literature is unique, with novel elements and a strong focus on the interaction between authors and readers or producers and consumers. It is defined as 'written especially for publication in an interactive online context and meant to be read on-screen' (Hockx, 2015, p. 4). Unlike traditional writers who prioritize artistic

autonomy, Chinese online writers must manage their web presence effectively and engage with readers through interactive activities within online communities. They adapt their style and content based on real-time feedback to align with readers' expectations (Feng, 2013, p. 22).

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore customers' online experiences and perceived value in the process of co-producing Chinese web fiction, as well as the interaction between service providers and customers in consuming Chinese internet literature. This study distinguishes the predominant Western view of technology-driven electronic literature from community-driven Chinese web fiction, and emphasizes the societal impact of Chinese web fiction over its artistic and literary significance. Moreover, Chinese online literature is predominantly found on literary websites, which are known for being spontaneous, fluid, open, decentralized, and made up of a vast number of community members (Choi, 2023, p. 107).

Chinese web novels are often co-designed and co-produced by both providers and consumers. Thus, the aim of this dissertation is to investigate the factors that influence customers' individual well-being, such as initiatives and self-motivated labour. To provide a comprehensive understanding of these online activities, this thesis introduces service-dominant (S-D) logic and relevant value co-creation theory to observe and analyse customer behaviours and prosuming activities.

Chinese internet literature offers consumers high participatory creativity, strong sociality, and high levels of customer engagement (CE) in virtual communities. Young people born between 1990 and 2000 make up the biggest cohort of consumption; they account for 56% of online book readers and 59% of content creators (Deng, 2020). Web fiction is growing exponentially in China, with large platforms such as WebNovel, Naver, and Joara investing in this market, which is estimated to be worth around $63 million (AFPRelaxnews, 2022). According to 'the 53rd Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet', released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on 22 March 2024, by the end of 2023, the number of internet users in China had reached 1.092 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 77.5%. The user base of online literature had reached 520 million, which was 47.6% of overall internet

users (CNNIC, 2024); in other words, in 2023, nearly half of internet users in China were consumers of online literature.

In recent years, Chinese companies have also begun expanding into Western markets. WebNovel, a subsidiary of Tencent Holdings, plans to develop more than 100,000 writers from North America (Deng, 2021). Some Chinese online literature has already accumulated a cult following outside China, particularly in the xianxia and wuxia martial arts genres. The overseas market for Chinese online literature grew rapidly during the pandemic, with an increase in both market scale and user numbers.

In terms of CE, many studies focus on positive manifestations of CE, despite the growing need to understand negatively valenced CE (Biljana, Smith and Wilks, 2016; Azer and Alexander, 2018; Marbach *et al.* 2019; Naumann, Bowden and Gabbott, 2020; Naumann, 2022). Positively valenced CE fits into the wider research area of relationship marketing, which focuses on promoting a customer's interactive experience beyond purchase behaviour (Chen *et al*., 2021; Clark, Lages and Hollebeek, 2020; Do and Bowden, 2023). This emphasis is critical because positive CE has been consistently linked to several key business outcomes, such as increased customer loyalty, higher brand equity, and enhanced word-of-mouth recommendations (Chen *et al*., 2021; Lee and Park, 2022; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). Additionally, it contributes significantly to the development of strong emotional bonds between customers and brands, which are essential for long-term business success (Naumann, Bowden and Gabbott, 2022; Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro, 2020).

The predominant focus on positive CE in the literature emphasizes its practical relevance in driving customer satisfaction and fostering brand advocacy. Companies that excel in generating positive CE are better positioned to create memorable and impactful customer experiences, thereby gaining a competitive edge in the marketplace (Bailey, 2020; Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Umunna, 2021). Moreover, positively engaged customers often demonstrate higher levels of involvement and investment in the brand, which lead to more sustainable and profitable customer relationships (Kanje *et al*., 2020; Kumar *et al*., 2019; Storbacka, 2019).

While this dissertation acknowledges the growing recognition of negatively valenced CE, the primary objective is to explore the mechanisms and outcomes of positive CE. By focusing on positive CE, this study aims to provide actionable insights for practitioners to enhance their engagement strategies and optimize customer interactions. This aligns with the broader aim of relationship marketing: to cultivate enduring customer relationships through positive and meaningful engagements.

Early academic endeavours defined CE as the individual emotional absorption and cognitive development stemming from interactive experiences with a brand or company (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan 2012; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). This manifests in CE behaviours that focus on the firm or brand (Kumar *et al.*, 2010; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). However, contemporary business environments, such as the collaborative economy, highlight the shortcomings of this dyadic firm–customer perspective. Recent engagement research emphasizes the social, collective, and reciprocal nature of CE beyond dyadic interactions (Alexander, Jaakkola and Hollebeek, 2018). S-D logic-informed customer co-created brand value reflects a customer's assessment of the value derived from interactive, joint, or collaborative activities with brand-related actors (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021). Co-designing stakeholders (fellow customers or employees) also influence CE (Hollebeek, Keeling and de Ruyter, 2022). The concept of CE has expanded both in depth and scope over time.

The process of conceptualizing CE, despite terminological variants, consistently reflects the same core idea: CE involves the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement of customers with a brand, beyond simple transactional interactions(Marbach *et al.*, 2019, p. 294). This engagement process emphasizes interactive experiences and the co-creation of value between customers and brands. The critical point is understanding the foundational process and outcomes of CE in relate to value co-creation, especially when CE takes place on non-traditional platforms in this digital era, such as virtual settings. In the context of Chinese web-fiction consumption, customers invest their personal resources in co-producing online literary products through interactions within virtual communities or on digital platforms. These digital touchpoints facilitate co-production, regardless of time and space barriers, thus promoting the emergence of prosumers and blurring the boundaries between producers

and consumers.

This study approaches the topic of CE and value co-creation in digital literature platforms by adopting a qualitative research paradigm that utilizes an abductive approach and an embedded case study research strategy (Yin, 2004). According to Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster (2008, p. 1097), contextualized case studies offer an explicit understanding of 'the voice of experience'. This study aims to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals within the dynamic and multifaceted context of Qidian Reading. By focusing on this platform, the study seeks information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) to gain a deep understanding of the mechanisms driving user engagement and value co-creation. Viewing these processes through the eyes of active users of Qidian Reading helps to elucidate the intricate interactions and contributions that define CE and the value users derive from their involvement on the platform. This customer-centric perspective is critical for explaining the phenomena of digital literature consumption and uncovering the meanings that users attribute to their participatory experiences.

1.1 Enquiry Overview

Chapter 1 introduces the background of this research. It explains the social and academic research context, and addresses the practical research background. Furthermore, it illuminates the research gap, research problem, research aims, and research objectives. The research questions are explored and developed under the theoretical framework of S-D logic and value co-creation. The rationale for this study is to contribute to filling the gap in the field of empirical research of CE and S-D logic. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on CE, S-D logic, and value co-creation. Firstly, it outlines the development of CE conceptualization and distinguishes it from customer involvement, participation, and satisfaction to highlight CE's unique attributes. This section posits that only CE is concerned with the issues of interaction and value co-creation, and it manifests both positively and negatively. Secondly, the chapter identifies four perspectives from which CE has been investigated, emphasizing its multidimensional and interactive core. It examines various CE variants: 'consumer engagement behaviours', 'customer brand engagement', 'consumer engagement', and

'customer brand engagement in social media'. For each concept, it stresses different aspects or dimensions, and generates different definitions regarding CE. Thirdly, the chapter discusses the relationship between CE and S-D logic, and positions S-D logic-informed CE as a midrange theory; it showcases that CE, based on S-D logic, emphasizes interactivity and resource investment. The chapter goes on to explore 'value', including 'value-in-exchange', 'value-in-use', and 'value-in-context', emphasizing that 'value-in-use' and 'value-in-context' are critical. It also introduces the concept of the 'prosumer' and actor–network theory (ANT) to prepare for further discussion of the research questions.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework, research approach, and strategy, as well as techniques of data collection and analysis procedures. It begins by examining the philosophical foundations underlying customers' engagement with Chinese web fiction. Qualitative research is then discussed and justified as an appropriate methodological approach; this is followed by an introduction to the selected case study design. Additionally, the chapter provides details of a pilot study conducted before data collection. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the selection of the sample, sample size, and data collection methods, as well as the specific criteria taken to ensure the rigor of qualitative research. The research approach is discussed in terms of its focus on formulating generalizations that pertain to theory, such as SD-logic or CE, rather than a specific social group. Lastly, ethical considerations are addressed, including potential risks that may negatively impact the participants, researchers, and the University, and the measures taken to mitigate them.

Chapter 4 explores the reasoning behind choosing thematic analysis as the method for analysing the data. Thematic analysis is deemed appropriate for this study and is further elaborated upon (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Naeem *et al*., 2023). The chapter explores an analysis of responses from interviews conducted with Chinese online literature users. Specifically, it addresses Research questions 1 and 2 ('What value do customers perceive as a result of their engagement with Chinese web fiction?' and 'How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?'). The findings from the interviews reveal six main themes that outline participants' perspectives on the benefits derived from personal consumption of online literature, as well as the essential process of value

co-creation. These themes are: self-motivated labour, co-creation infrastructure, brand-centric interpretive community, positive transformation value, emotional resonance value, and constituent co-creative value. The chapter then examines the implications of the interview findings and proposes a typology for online literature customers.

Chapter 5 introduces the 'value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption' to explain how CE occurs within Chinese web fiction communities; it uses S-D logic as a theoretical framework. It identifies key factors like digital platforms, community dynamics, and individual contributions that drive the co-creation of value. The chapter emphasizes that CE is multifaceted; it involves cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social dimensions. Through the interaction between consumers, authors, and platforms, participants experience both personal growth and collective benefits, which strengthen their engagement and lead to deeper, more meaningful connections with the content and the community.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the contributions of the research to both theory and practice. It highlights how value is co-created in digital ecosystems through infrastructure, community interaction, and individual effort. Key outcomes of this co-creation process include positive transformation, emotional resonance, and co-creative value. The chapter also categorizes users into distinct engagement types based on their participation strategies. It reflects on the limitations of focusing solely on Chinese web fiction and proposes future research areas, such as extending the model to other digital communities and further exploring technology's role in value co-creation. The study offers valuable insights for managing digital communities and enhancing CE strategies.

1.2 Research Context: Chinese Web Fiction

Online literature in China has become a mainstream cultural phenomenon; it attracts a significant portion of the population and plays a crucial role in the cultural and creative industries (Tian, 2019). Defined as literary works created and published online for users to read or pay for, Chinese web fiction emphasizes interaction between authors and readers (Wang and Hockx, 2022). Cultural production in this context encompasses the creation, dissemination, and consumption of literary works as sociocultural acts that

both reflect and shape collective identities (Hockx, 2015). Unlike traditional literature, Chinese web fiction thrives on its dialogic nature—authors and readers collaboratively negotiate narratives, blending traditional motifs (e.g., *xianxia* mythology) with modern digital aesthetics (Feng, 2013). This process not only generates economic value but also reinforces cultural continuity and innovation. For example, platforms like Qidian Reading facilitate real-time interactions where readers influence story arcs, effectively turning cultural consumption into a participatory ritual (Wu, 2023). Such practices exemplify how S-D logic's emphasis on resource integration and value co-creation operates within culturally specific frameworks, where "value" extends beyond monetary gains to include symbolic and communal significance (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

The commercialization of Chinese literature in the 1990s, and the subsequent rise of internet literature, marked a transformative shift that made online literature a new cultural phenomenon with substantial business implications (Aquilino, 2023, para. 3). Chinese web fiction, characterized by strong social engagement, particularly appeals to young people born between 1990 and 2000, and Generation Z, who constitute the largest cohort of consumers and content creators (Xiao *et al.*, 2022). By the end of 2023, the user base of online literature in China had reached 520 million (see Figure 1.1), nearly half of the country's internet users (CNNIC, 2024). Platforms such as WebNovel, operated by China Literature Limited, have extended their reach globally; this highlights the international appeal of Chinese web literature (China.org.cn, 2024, para. 3).

Figure 1.1: Online literature user size and utilization ratio from March 2020 to December 2023 (source: The 53rd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, 2024)
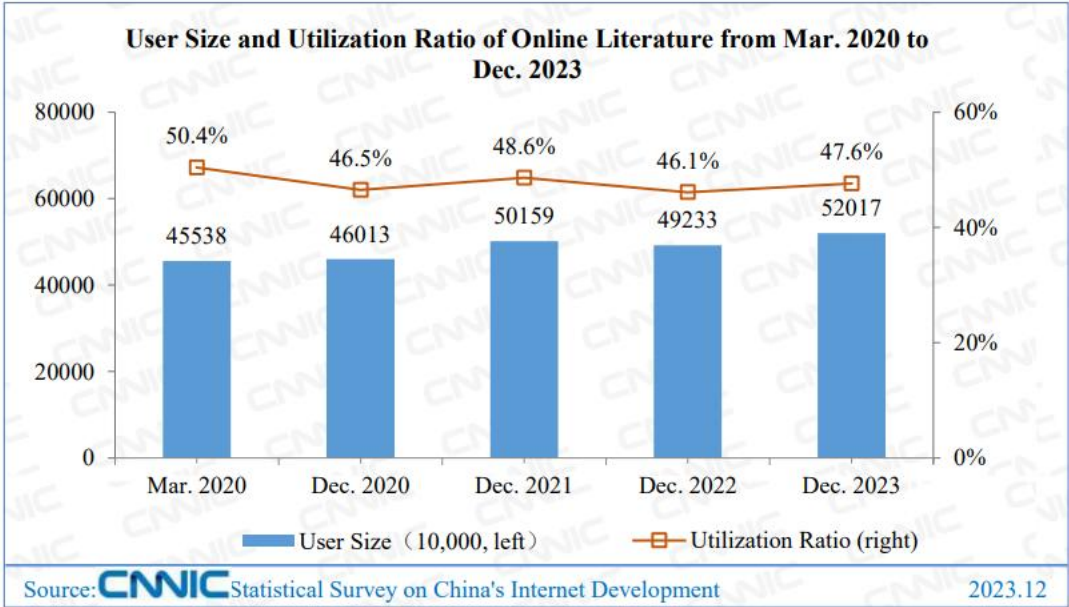
The market for Chinese online literature is diverse, with platforms offering various business models, including paid reading systems and ad-supported content. For example, WebNovel provides a mix of Chinese translated works and original overseas content to cater to a global audience with millions of users (China Literature, 2022). These platforms not only generate substantial revenue but also influence global reading habits and literary trends (App Growing Global, 2021, para. 13).

Moreover, the inclusion of Chinese web novels in prestigious institutions, such as the British Library, emphasizes the growing recognition and cultural significance of this literary form (Yang, 2022). This international recognition reflects the quality and impact of Chinese web fiction, which often addresses themes and narratives resonant with both domestic and global audiences. The global success of these platforms demonstrates the potential for Chinese web fiction to shape global literary landscapes and create new opportunities for cross-cultural literary exchanges.

In addition to entertainment, Chinese web fiction serves as a platform for social commentary and narrative experimentation (Wu, 2023). Authors often explore contemporary social issues, historical narratives and speculative fiction that provide

readers with diverse perspectives and engaging storytelling (Inwood, 2020). This diversity in content attracts a wide range of readers, which fosters a vibrant online community where discussions and fan interactions are commonplace (Ren and Montgomery, 2012).

The rapid development of technology has also played a critical role in the expansion of Chinese web fiction (Zhao, 2022, para. 14). Mobile apps and e-reading platforms have made access to these literary works easier and more convenient, thus contributing to their widespread popularity. These technological advancements have enabled authors to reach a broader audience and engage with readers in real time, and they have enhanced the interactive experience of web fiction (Kong, 2005).

This study aims to explore customers' online experiences and perceived value in the co-production of Chinese web fiction; it will focus on the interaction between service providers and consumers. Guided by the theoretical framework of S-D logic, the research examines how CE and value co-creation processes manifest in this digital context. S-D logic, which emphasizes the co-creation of value through interactions between providers and consumers, provides a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of CE in digital environments (Ozuem and Willis, 2022; Ozuem *et al.*, 2023c). By investigating these aspects, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence supporting the understanding of S-D logic-informed CE and to explore the co-created value arising from customer–producer interactions. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on digital cultural production and consumption, and offer insights into the dynamics of modern literary engagement.

1.3 Research Problem

This study addresses the gap in understanding how customer engagement (CE) in Chinese web fiction contributes to value co-creation within the framework of service-dominant (S-D) logic. Despite the growing popularity and economic significance of Chinese web fiction, there is a notable lack of empirical research on how readers engage with and co-create value in this unique digital context.

Chinese online literature has been developing for over 20 years, with most academic

analyses approaching it from the perspectives of literary theory, criticism, history, philosophical theory, or media communication. However, academic research on Chinese online literature as a distinct cultural and creative phenomenon remains limited. This literature embodies a unique blend of commercial success and media impact. While social media technology offers opportunities for CE, the specific role of CE in value co-creation within digital interactive communities focused on Chinese online literature has not been thoroughly explored. Limited empirical studies have focused on CE, particularly in the context of S-D logic, and its direct influence on the value co-creation process in this realm, as well as its role in cultivating stronger customer–brand relationships (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Huotari and Hamari, 2017; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2016, 2017; Vinerean and Opreana, 2021).

While practitioners and marketing scholars have provided valuable insights on CE, there is a pressing need for further exploration of its applications across various business and cultural contexts (Nam and Kannan, 2020; Chatterjee, Chaudhuri and Vrontis, 2022). The primary aim of this study is to fill the empirical research gap concerning CE and S-D logic in the context of Chinese culture.

Web fiction is highly commercialized in China, whereas in the UK and the US, online literature tends to be fan-based and less profitable (Wang and Hockx, 2022). In other words, while network literature exists globally, it is particularly prosperous and commercially successful in China (Wang and Hockx, 2022). Chinese web fiction heavily represents the features of CE and is characterized by co-creation behaviours, making it a typical case that can support and develop S-D logic-informed CE.

This exploratory study seeks to deepen the understanding of S-D logic and CE concepts as proposed by Hollebeek (2011a), connecting the broader theory of S-D logic with the micro-theory of CE. S-D logic-informed CE requires various empirical studies (such as the qualitative research in this thesis) to establish its credibility or trustworthiness, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). By incorporating these theories, this case study aims to develop a theoretical framework that enriches the data while providing a detailed case analysis and broader relevance (Hartley, 1994, p. 210).

From a service perspective, CE can be enhanced through services that provide significant personal experiences to help customers create value (Dwivedi et al., 2023;

Huotari and Hamari, 2017; Waqas, Hamzah and Salleh, 2021). From the resource integration aspect, desirable affordances, such as specific digital platform services targeting involvement, motivate or enable users to invest personal resources in the process of product co-design or value co-creation (Streukens *et al.*, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2022; Yao and Miao, 2021). The involvement of customers in value co-creation is typically present in the consumption process of Chinese online literary products, which will be further studied and described in this thesis. Despite existing literature offering insights on strengthening CE through value creation, the mechanisms through which customer engagement and value co-creation occur remain relatively unexplored, especially in the context of Chinese online literary products.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

Vargo and Lusch's conceptualization of S-D logic(Vargo and Lusch, 2006, 2008, 2016), including 11 fundamental premises, awaits extended empirical research across various industrial contexts and disciplines (Wibowo *et al.*, 2021). The Chinese online literature industry is an ideal context to support this new logic as well as bridge theory and practice on a realistic basis. In this study, "cultural" refers to the shared practices, values, symbols, and narratives that define a community's identity and are actively reproduced through creative processes (Williams, 1958; Geertz, 1973). Williams (1958) conceptualised culture as a "whole way of life" encompassing both material and symbolic dimensions, while Geertz (1973, p. 89) viewed it as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Within the context of cultural production, this term emphasizes the generation of literary works as both reflections and drivers of societal norms, collective identities, and historical legacies (Hockx, 2015). Chinese online literature, for instance, embodies this interplay through its integration of traditional Chinese storytelling motifs (e.g., *wuxia* martial arts ethics, Confucian values) with modern digital interactivity, thereby reshaping contemporary cultural consumption and identity formation (Feng, 2013).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to understanding and interpreting the Chinese online literature industry based on a conceptual framework developed by the

author. This framework explains the consumer experience process and activities from the perspective of S-D logic. The study explores the perceptions and perspectives of customers of Chinese web fiction as they engage in their reading experiences to comprehend the value that emerges for consumers of Chinese online literature, and how this value is co-created through the interaction and integration of resources within and among service systems.

Research aims:

1. To critically review the existing literature on Chinese online literature and the application of S-D logic in cultural and literary production contexts.
2. To develop a conceptual framework based on S-D logic that explains the consumer experience process and activities in the Chinese online literature industry.
3. To explore customer perceptions of value co-creation when engaging with Chinese web fiction, focusing on how this value emerges and is co-created through interactions and resource integration.

To achieve these aims, the following objectives were established.

1. Explore the experiences of consumers of Chinese web novels in the process of consuming online literature. This involves examining how consumers engage with and perceive online literature, focusing on their interactions and the overall experience. This objective directly supports Aim 1 by providing empirical insights into the existing literature and consumer behaviour, and it also lays the foundation for Aim 3 by identifying the types of value consumers perceive through their experiences.
2. Demonstrate how customers have been empowered to engage in value co-creation in the co-production of Chinese web novels. This involves exploring the ways in which consumers contribute to the creation and development of web novels, and highlighting their active role in the process. This objective is closely related to Aim 3, as it investigates the mechanisms of value co-creation through consumer participation.

3. Analyse the role of direct interactions for value co-creation opportunities in the digital community of consumers of Chinese web novels. This involves studying the significance of interactions within the digital community and how these interactions facilitate value co-creation among consumers. This objective supports Aim 2 by examining the role of interactions within the conceptual framework and Aim 3 by exploring how community interactions contribute to value co-creation.

4. Understand the significance of consumers engaging their subjective initiative and self-motivated labour in the co-production of web novels online, which pertains to the issue of individual well-being. This involves exploring how CE and self-motivated efforts in co-producing web novels contribute to their well-being and personal satisfaction. This objective supports Aim 3 by examining the personal and social value that emerges from consumer participation.

1.5 Research Questions

The research adopts a case study methodology, guided by a service perspective and S-D logic, to examine customers' consuming experiences of Chinese online literature. A case study is particularly suitable for this research due to its ability to provide in-depth insights into complex phenomena within their real-life context (Ehrenthal, Gruen and Hofstetter, 2021). This approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the interactive and value co-creation processes that are central to the consumption of Chinese web fiction. According to Yin (2009), the case study method allows for an examination of how the digital environment influences CE and the dynamics between authors and readers. Qualitative case studies, as noted by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), can provide critical insights into subjective experiences and behaviours, and offer rich, nuanced data. This study aims to answer three research questions as follows:

RQ1: What value do customers perceive as a result of their engagement with Chinese web fiction?

Chinese web fiction has gained immense popularity, particularly among younger generations, due to its interactive and engaging nature. This research question aims to explore the types of value that customers perceive through their engagement with Chinese web fiction. It will investigate the benefits that customers derive from their

consumption, such as enjoyment, practical gains, and social connections. By understanding these types of perceived value, the study seeks to gain insights into the reasons behind customers' continued engagement with Chinese web fiction. This question directly corresponds to Objective 1, which explores consumer experiences and perceptions of value.

RQ2: How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?

Value co-creation is a critical process within Chinese web fiction communities. This research question focuses on understanding how value is co-created through the interactions between customers and authors, as well as among customers themselves. The study will explore the various ways in which these interactions contribute to the overall value experienced by the community. By examining the dynamics of these interactions, the study aims to illustrate how customers and authors collaborate to enhance the literary experience and create a richer, more engaging community. This question corresponds to Objectives 2 and 3, which investigate the mechanisms of value co-creation through consumer participation and community interactions.

RQ3: How can CE processes be conceptualized in a Chinese web novel consumption context?

CE in the context of Chinese web novels involves a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors. This research question seeks to conceptualize the processes through which customers engage with web novels, from initial discovery and consuming to active participation in the community. By conceptualizing these engagement processes, the research aims to provide a comprehensive framework that highlights the unique dynamics of CE in the digital age of Chinese web fiction consumption. This question corresponds to Objective 4, which examines the significance of consumer engagement and self-motivated efforts in co-producing web novels and their impact on individual well-being.

Guided by a qualitative case study design, this research employs abductive reasoning and thematic analysis to explore value co-creation in Chinese web fiction. By

integrating S-D logic and ANT, the study addresses Western-centric biases while capturing platform-mediated collectivism—a methodological innovation for cross-cultural CE research. The following theoretical framework and correspondence matrix are proposed to illustrate the mapping between the theoretical concepts and the research aims and objectives:

Table 1.1: Theoretical Framework and Correspondence Matrix

Theoretical Concept	Research Aim	Research Objective	Research Question
S-D Logic (Vargo and Lusch)	Aim 1: Critically review literature	Objective 1: Explore consumer experiences	RQ1: Perceived value
Consumer Experience (CE)	Aim 2: Develop conceptual framework	Objective 2: Demonstrate consumer empowerment	RQ2: Value co-creation
Value Co-creation	Aim 3: Explore value co-creation	Objective 3: Analyse role of interactions	RQ2: Value co-creation
Individual Well-being	Aim 3: Explore value co-creation	Objective 4: Understand significance of subjective initiative	RQ3: Conceptualize CE processes

1.6 Rationale for the Study

As the largest online community in the world, China has seen significant developments in its digital content industries, particularly in online literature, which has gained increasing global recognition (Zhou, 2019). In 2017, the global profitability of Chinese online literature was highlighted when Tencent's subsidiary, Chinese Literature company, had a highly successful initial public offering (i.e., shares were sold to the public for the first time), which marked the first significant international recognition of China's online publishing industry (Cheung, 2019). However, the origins of Chinese web fiction trace back to the early 1990s with self-published amateur novels shared freely within passionate online communities (Ren and Montgomery, 2012, p. 121). It was not until 2003 that the freemium business model, allowing users to start for free

and then pay for 'VIP content', demonstrated the monetization potential of user-generated content (Ren and Montgomery, 2012, p. 122). After over 20 years of development, the business model of Chinese web fiction is reportedly advancing towards non-fungible tokens through a 'digital collectibles' platform launched by Tencent Holdings (Feng, 2022). This evolution highlights the business model's progression and its increasing global interest.

Despite the popularity of Chinese web novels, formal studies examining them within a business theoretical framework are insufficient. Previous research has examined them from literary, educational, and media communication perspectives (Tse and Gong, 2012; Gao, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Feng, 2020, 2022; Jiaojiao and Youguo, 2020; Wang, 2021; Fadillah *et al*., 2022), but has not yet explored their business implications.

The significance of this research is multifaceted. Primarily, it addresses a significant gap in the empirical literature on CE and S-D logic, particularly in the context of Chinese web fiction. Despite the growing popularity and economic significance of Chinese web fiction, there is a notable lack of empirical research on how readers engage with and co-create value in this unique digital context. By exploring the mechanisms and outcomes of positive CE, this research contributes to the broader discourse on digital cultural production and consumption.

This thesis aims to address this gap by exploring the significance of Chinese online literature within the frameworks of customer engagement (CE) and service-dominant (S-D) logic, an approach grounded in service science. Theoretical frameworks of CE and S-D logic serve as the foundation for understanding how users engage and co-create value within online communities. Managerial and scholarly attention to CE has extended for decades (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). However, the application of S-D logic-informed CE principles to virtual social contexts, such as fandom online communities of Chinese web fiction, remains nebulous. CE has been conceptualized from multiple perspectives and defined in varying, sometimes contradictory, ways (Streukens *et al*., 2019). From a managerial perspective, CE is viewed as 'activities that facilitate repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological, or physical investment a customer has in a brand' (Pansari and Kumar, 2017, p. 298). In contrast,

from the perspective of S-D logic, CE is academically accepted as 'a customer's motivationally-driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources and operand resources into his/her brand interactions' (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019, p. 166; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024).

It is necessary to explore and understand the antecedents and consequences of CE activities and their underlying processes. Additionally, how CE relates to the process of value co-creation and its manifestation within this process remains insufficiently explored (Streukens *et al.*, 2019). S-D logic, a foundational theory in marketing, expands the scope of value creation by suggesting that all social and economic actors engaged in exchange are service-providing, value-creating entities. Thus, all exchanges, whether traditionally seen as business-to-business, business-to-consumer, or consumer-to-consumer, can be considered within an actor-to-actor (A2A) orientation underpinned by S-D logic. This A2A perspective implies that all actors in an exchange contribute to value creation (Koskela-huotari and Siltaloppi, 2020).

In examining the CE process, value is regarded as both an antecedent and a consequence, consistent with S-D logic-informed CE principles (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). This thesis proposes that CE plays a critical role in facilitating resource integration and value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Brodie *et al.*, 2011, 2013; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016; Hollebeek, Conduit and Brodie, 2016). Therefore, it explores the interrelationship between CE and S-D logic as part of a grand theory in marketing research (Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019).

Leckie, Nyadzayo, and Johnson denoted that value is the antecedent of CE, stressing the model of value-experience-satisfaction-attachment, with the consequences of purchased-related and non-purchased-related behaviours (2019, p. 312). Building on this model, this research illustrates that value can serve as both an antecedent and a consequence of CE. This concept is demonstrated through engagement loops explored later in this study, where initial engagement generates value, which in turn enhances community infrastructure, drives knowledge sharing, and reinforces community dynamics. These enhancements lead to increased and deeper engagement, producing further value. By examining the case of Chinese web fiction, this thesis seeks to reveal

how these cyclical processes of value creation and engagement operate in alignment with S-D logic.

Both practical and academic realms continue to promote a dynamic, networked, and systematic perspective on value creation, highlighting the importance of understanding complex interactions among various stakeholders (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Akaka, Vargo and Lusch, 2012; Scaraboto, 2015; Chen *et al*., 2018; Brodie *et al*., 2019; Hollebeek, Clark and Macky, 2020; Hollebeek *et al*., 2021, 2022; Hollebeek, Keeling and de Ruyter, 2022). With the advancing digital era, the expansive interaction of users in online brand communities aligns with trends in technological innovation and democratization (Pohlmann and Kaartemo, 2017). However, it remains unclear how digital natives engage in value co-creation and how digital customer engagement (CE) contributes to value creation in customer-centred industries, where social interactions are vital. Therefore, further empirical research is essential to explore CE's role in value creation within these complex, digital contexts (Ostrom *et al*., 2015).

This research is particularly significant as it bridges theoretical insights with practical applications, offering a comprehensive understanding of how CE and value co-creation operate in a specific cultural and digital context. By focusing on Chinese web fiction, the study not only contributes to the academic discourse on CE and S-D logic but also provides actionable insights for industry practitioners seeking to enhance engagement strategies and manage digital communities effectively, particularly within culturally specific digital environments. The findings can inform the development of more nuanced engagement models that account for cultural specificities and digital dynamics, thereby advancing both theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of digital cultural production and consumption.

Moreover, this research makes several additional contributions. First, the study advances the theoretical and practical development of digital cultural production and consumption by providing new insights into the dynamics of CE and value co-creation. Second, the research offers a new perspective on understanding consumer behaviour in a specific cultural and digital environment, highlighting the unique characteristics of Chinese web fiction communities. Third, specific strategy recommendations for digital

community management are provided, which can help improve user experience and commercial success. Fourth, the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing complex issues at the intersection of business theory and cultural studies is underscored. Fifth, the research helps in developing more effective community management strategies and content creation practices by understanding the mechanisms of CE and value co-creation. Finally, the study provides a culturally rich context for the development of culturally sensitive engagement strategies, which is particularly valuable in the globalized digital marketplace. Through its culturally rich context, the study demonstrates how cultural specificity can inform engagement strategy development in global digital marketplaces, offering a nuanced understanding of how Eastern digital cultural production models may differ from Western-centric frameworks.

1.7 Summary

This chapter positions the study within global discourses on digital literature, framing Chinese web fiction as a cultural-commercial hybrid distinct from Western models. By identifying the empirical gap in S-D logic-informed CE research, it establishes the foundation for bridging theory and practice through an exploration of how platform-mediated collectivism reshapes value co-creation. The research design—qualitative case studies and stakeholder interviews—directly addresses the need for context-specific frameworks in non-Western digital ecosystems, offering actionable insights for platforms like Qidian to balance commercial goals with cultural authenticity. This chapter positions Chinese web fiction as a cultural-commercial hybrid, bridging theory (S-D logic) and practice (platform strategies) through a qualitative, abductive lens. By prioritizing cultural specificity and user agency, the methodology offers a blueprint for global platforms to harmonize technological scalability with ethical engagement—a pivotal step toward inclusive digital ecosystems.

2. Conceptualization of CE and Customer Value

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter analysed and discussed the foundational basis of the research. It discussed the objectives and aims and proposed related research questions. It put forward the reasons why this study can contribute to, and fill a gap in, the field of empirical research of CE and S-D logic.

The aim of the current chapter is to review existing literature regarding CE and value co-creation. Firstly, it discusses the concept of CE, proposing differentiation of similar terms related to relational concepts from ontological perspectives. This differentiation helps to clarify the unique attributes and significance of CE, and sets it apart from concepts like customer satisfaction and involvement. Secondly, this chapter introduces S-D logic as a framework to inform understanding of CE. S-D logic emphasizes the collaborative process of value co-creation between customers and service providers, and positions CE as a pivotal element in this dynamic. This perspective allows for a deeper exploration of how CE contributes to the overall value creation process in various service contexts. Thirdly, the chapter examines the concept of 'prosumer' – a hybrid of producer and consumer – whose activities are crucial in the digital age. By leveraging ANT, this chapter analyses the interactions and co-design processes that occur on virtual platforms, and provides insights into the role of prosumers in value co-creation.

2.2 Conceptual Clarification of CE

In the 2000s, the concept of Customer Engagement (CE) gained substantial attention from both practitioners and scholars (Brodie *et al*., 2011; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017; Hollebeek, 2019; Nadeem *et al.*, 2021; Ozuem and Willis, 2022; Patterson *et al*., 2006; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). Before 2005, the term 'customer engagement' was rarely used in academic marketing literature, but from 2010 onwards, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) included CE as a research priority (MSI, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020).

To better understand the differences among related concepts, Table 2.1 outlines their

definitional differences, dominant features, and key findings, with a particular focus on 'customer engagement' as one of the central themes of this thesis.

CE is widely studied in both academia and practice, but the term has become increasingly ambiguous as it is used to describe various phenomena. Based on observations of related concepts from an ontological perspective, the definitions remain debatable. However, there is growing consensus that 'customer involvement' is primarily affective and cognitive in nature (Hollebeek and Srivastava, 2022), and typically precedes customer interactions. Notably, customer involvement is distinct from value co-creation, as it does not directly involve collaborative creation of value. According to a survey conducted by Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009), articles discussing value creation in brand communities frequently use the term 'engagement', while avoiding terms like 'participation' or 'involvement'. While 'customer participation' is both an antecedent and a consequence of CE, reflecting personal expressions of engagement (Brodie *et al*., 2011, p. 8), 'customer satisfaction' represents a consequence of positive brand-related activity and is therefore distinct from CE, which can manifest in both positive and negative forms.

CE goes beyond involvement by incorporating behavioural and social dimensions (Brodie *et al*., 2013; Hollebeek *et al*., 2019). The Advertising Research Foundation defined engagement in 2006 as 'a measure of attention paid by a consumer to a piece of communication' (quoted in Hollebeek, 2021, para. 3), emphasizing its interactive nature (Hollebeek *et al*., 2023). CE is multidimensional, involving behavioural traits, brand-related activation, and social interactions. This description highlights a customer's resource investment in brand interactions (Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen, 2019; Hollebeek *et al*., 2020; Ferdous *et al*., 2024). Involvement is a key driver of engagement, as customer interest is crucial for investing resources in brand relationships (Hollebeek and Srivastava, 2022).

To clarify the distinctions between Customer Engagement (CE) and related concepts (e.g., customer involvement, participation, satisfaction), Table 2.1 systematically compares their definitions, representative studies, key findings, and dominant features. For instance, *customer involvement* emphasizes cognitive and affective investments in

a brand or context, while *customer participation* focuses on behavioural activities in service delivery. This table highlights CE's uniqueness in its multidimensionality (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social) and emphasis on value co-creation, whereas other concepts are confined to single dimensions or specific stages. This comparison lays the groundwork for discussing CE's multidimensional nature and its dynamic role in service relationships. The multidimensional nature of CE will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Table 2.1: Overview of definitional differences, dominant features, and salient findings for customer engagement and the family of related concepts (source: author)

Tenets	Definitions	Representatives	Findings	Dominant features
Customer involvement	An individual level of interest and the personal relevance of an object (e.g., a product, an advertising message) or situation (e.g., a purchase occasion) in terms of the individual's personal basic values, needs, self-concept and beliefs. Involvement refers to the level of input individuals will invest in a community in the short and long term.	Petty, Cacciopo and Goldman, 1981; Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Richins and Bloch, 1986; Zaichkowsky, 1994; Ozuem and Willis, 2022	Involvement denotes the level of personal importance or relevance to their life that a customer assigns to an activity or an object; it reflects the perceived value of an object or activity as demonstrated through a customer's level of interest in an activity or a goal-object.	1) Cognitive (affective) in nature; 2) involvement is regarded as a driver or antecedent (before a customer's interactions); 3) both in the long and short term.
Customer participation	The degree to which customers produce and deliver service. When customers are more engaged they will have higher participation, a better sense of rapport. Participation refers to the actual activities conducted in online brand communities.	Bolton and Saxena-Iyer, 2009 Brodie *et al.*, 2011 Ozuem and Willis, 2022	Being labelled both as the antecedent and consequence of customer engagement because of the iterative dynamic nature of customer engagement process.	To continue to coexist with customer engagement.
Customer satisfaction	The long-term benefits of having satisfied customers (i.e., customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth comments, and sustainable profitability). Customer satisfaction is a metric used to quantify the positive emotions customers have towards a product, service, and experience, which can be identified on the basis of how customers interact with a brand through an online brand community.	Greenwell, Fink and Pastore, 2002; Liu and Jang, 2009 Ozuem and Willis, 2022	Customer satisfaction results from a customer's beneficial and enjoyable engagement.	1) The consequence of customer engagement; 2) a customer's positive response, emotions, and experiences after interactions.
Customer engagement	Customer engagement is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships. It is a multidimensional concept that is subject to a context-specific and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions. The intensity of an individual's participation and connection with an organization's offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization. The customer engagement process is highly interactive, experiential, and based on a number of sub-processes, including 'learning', 'sharing', 'advocating', 'socializing', and 'co-developing'. Customer engagement is a customer's motivationally driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills) and operand resources (e.g., equipment) in brand *interactions*. In an online context, engagement refers to customers' responses to a social media platform or online brand community. In such environments, the social presence within an online brand community and the consumers' level of emotional connection with a brand play an important role in building engagement.	Brodie *et al.*, 2011 Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012 Brodie *et al.*, 2013 Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019 Ozuem and Willis, 2022, p. 62	1) Going beyond transactions: multidimensional concept (cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural). 2) Referring to consumers' positively/negatively valenced brand-related activity 3) Customer experience and the customer journey have become increasingly important as the conceptualization of customer engagement has evolved; in online communities, customer engagement stresses experiences throughout every stage of purchase.	1) Multidimensional and interactive nature; 2) a context-rich/service context; 3) is experiential (interactive experience) and covers the whole purchase process; 4) a form of value co-creation; 5) customer engagement predominantly manifests positively, even though negative experiences resulting from dissatisfactory engagement can be included in this conception.

2.3 Taxonomy of CE

Section 2.2 discussed the concept of CE in the marketing academic domain, along with influential marketing-related concepts such as participation, involvement, and satisfaction. This section presents and studies the primary streams and sub-forms of engagement as well as various concerns and dimensions of the conceptualization of CE. In the academic literature on 'customer engagement', the dimensions of CE have been explored through two main categories: unidimensional and multidimensional (Figure 2.1). Within these categories, researchers have identified four main streams to date (Table 2.2). These include a behavioural manifestation (van Doorn *et al*., 2010), a psychological state (Brodie *et al*., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b), a disposition (Chandler and Lusch, 2015; Brodie *et al*., 2019; Sim *et al*., 2023), and a process that encompasses several stages of customers' decision making (Maslowska *et al*., 2016; Verleye, Gemmel and Rangarajan, 2014). Most scholars who support the unidimensional perspective define CE from the perspective of behaviour, while others who advocate a multidimensional perspective describe CE from the perspective of a psychological state, a disposition, or a process.

The first category in the marketing literature focuses on a one-dimensional, behavioural definition of CE (van Doorn *et al*., 2010). On the basis of this category, the first stream addresses CE as a unidimensional construct primarily manifested through behaviours, such as peer-to-peer information sharing, customer reviews, and customer-initiated activities with firms (Bolton, 2011), for example, 'likes', comments, and posts on social media. By using the term 'customer engagement behaviour', van Doorn *et al*. (2010) suggested that CE encompasses customers' behavioural expressions towards a brand or firm that go beyond mere purchase, and that these behavioural expressions are driven by motivational factors (Żyminkowska, 2019). Most academics, including Verhoef *et al*. (2010), Bijmolt *et al*. (2010), Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), and Verleye *et al*. (2014), share the viewpoint of van Doorn *et al*. (2010): CE involves activities that go beyond transactions, that is, they extend further than the act of purchasing.

Importantly, the assessment of individual behaviour lacks a theoretical foundation (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978), and a customer who demonstrates engagement actions

may not actually be engaged (So, King and Sparks, 2014). As a result, many researchers have suggested that CE should be viewed as having multiple dimensions.

Thus, the second category stresses the multidimensional nature of CE (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). When CE is considered to be multidimensional, it can be conceptualized as: two dimensions, such as conscious attention and social connection (Vivek *et al.*, 2014); three dimensions, such as cognitive processing, affection, and activation (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014); four dimensions, such as conscious attention, affection, enthused participation, and social connection (Kaur *et al.*, 2020); five dimensions, such as identification, attention, absorption, enthusiasm, and interaction (So *et al.*, 2014, 2016); or even eleven dimensions, which was proposed by Baldus *et al.* (2015) who investigated context-specific-based online brand community engagement. The authors' argument that CE is a complex concept, which can be understood through different cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social dimensions that may vary depending on the specific context or stakeholders, is summarized in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 visually categorizes CE's dimensional perspectives, classifying existing research into unidimensional (behavioural) and multidimensional (psychological state, disposition, process) views. This figure complements the comparative analysis in Section 2.2 (Table 2.1): while Table 2.1 clarifies CE's boundaries through horizontal contrasts, Figure 2.1 demonstrates the theoretical evolution of CE through vertical categorization. For example, the multidimensional perspectives of "psychological state" (Brodie *et al.*, 2011) and "process model" (Verleye *et al.*, 2014) align with CE's interactive and dynamic characteristics outlined in Table 2.1. Furthermore, Figure 2.1 provides a framework for discussing Table 2.2 (CE's theoretical perspectives), illustrating how distinct dimensional views collectively underpin CE's multifaceted nature.

Figure 2.1: Manifestation of dimensional perspectives of customer engagement (source:author)
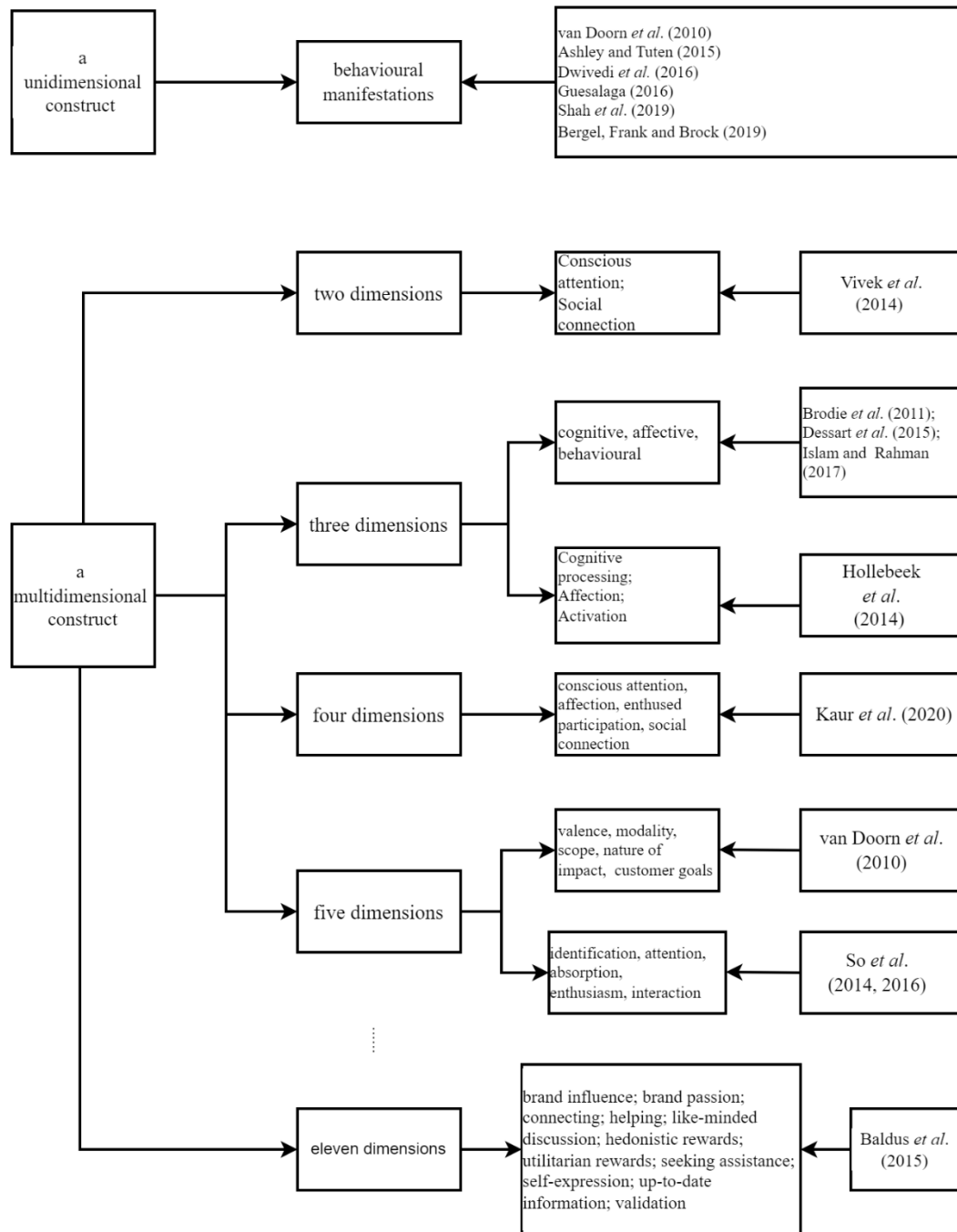
Acknowledging the multidimensional nature of CE, the second stream emphasizes a psychological state that is a result of customers' experiences with a brand within a service relationship (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), which is context dependent and non-linear (Brodie *et al.*, 2013, p. 10). This influential school of thought had a significant impact

on subsequent scholars. For instance, Brodie *et al*. (2011) defined CE as a psychological state that arises from interactive, co-creative experiences between customers and a brand in focal service relationships.

Following this, Hollebeek's customer brand engagement emphasizes both the psychological state and motivational aspects (Hollebeek, 2011b; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019, p. 163) in contrast to the concept of 'consumer brand engagement' (Gambetti *et al*., 2012), which focuses on brand experience (Homburg *et al*., 2015; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and does not include motivational concepts like involvement and CE (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). Indeed, Hollebeek assumes that engagement prominently involves lasting motivational properties that can drive customers' future decisions and behaviours (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019).

The third stream of research, which conceptualizes CE as a 'disposition', offers a more precise understanding compared to viewing it as a 'psychological state'. The term 'dispositional actor engagement' (Chandler and Lusch, 2015; Brodie *et al.*, 2019) recognizes CE as a generalized and stable tendency to adopt ideas and interests. However, Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava (2022) refuted this dispositional perspective, which they referred to as 'actor engagement styles', indicating it is not engagement per se.

The fourth stream extends previous ideas to a process-oriented view of CE. Researchers conceptualized engagement as encompassing several stages of the customer decision-making process. This 'process' model does not confine engagement to a single stage but includes a range of interactions and experiences (Ng, Sweeney and Plewa, 2020). They demonstrated that engagement is inherently interactive, and emphasized the participatory and experiential aspects of engagement, such as brand behaviours and the overall brand experience. This experience encompasses thoughts and feelings related to achieving individual life goals (Malthouse and Calder, 2018, p. 414).

Collectively, these studies contributed to advancing the discourse on CE and its broader implications, and they provided valuable insights for both practitioners and researchers

in this rapidly evolving field. The four conceptualizations of CE – behavioural manifestations, psychological states, dispositions, and process-oriented views – are summarized in Table 2.2, which positions them within the landscape of CE research. This comprehensive examination highlights the multifaceted nature of CE and emphasizes the importance of considering both unidimensional and multidimensional perspectives in understanding customer interactions and experiences.

In this study, a multidimensional perspective is adopted to investigate CE empirically. Consequently, CE will be defined as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, behavioural, affective, and social aspects.

Table 2.2 synthesizes four primary theoretical perspectives of CE (behavioural construct, psychological state, disposition, process), summarizing their definitions, dimensions, and features. This table directly aligns with Figure 2.1's classification: for instance, the *behavioural construct* (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) corresponds to the "unidimensional perspective", while psychological state and process views reflect "multidimensional perspectives". The table further reveals that despite differing emphases (e.g., behavioural constructs stress non-transactional actions, psychological states focus on motivational drivers), all perspectives emphasize customers' proactive resource investments and interactivity. This classification establishes a theoretical foundation for Table 2.3 (CE variants), showing how different constructs are rooted in specific theoretical lenses.

Table 2.2: Primary perspectives of conceptualization of customer engagement (source:author)

Perspectives	Representative definitions	Authors	Dimensions	Features
Behavioural construct	the customers' behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers.	van Doorn *et al.*, 2010, p. 253	behavioural	beyond transaction
Psychological state	a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships. the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions.	Brodie *et al.*, 2011, p. 260 Hollebeek, 2011b, p. 790; Brodie *et al.*, 2011	behavioural cognitive emotional	non-linear; context-driven; a psychological construct with motivational properties
Disposition	It is important to understand actors' psychological states or dispositions to engage and how these dispositions occur and manifest...we consider it a more useful descriptor of an actor-to-actor orientation than the term 'psychological state'. (Brodie *et al.*, 2019, p. 8)	Chandler and Lusch, 2015 Storbacka *et al.*, 2016 Dessart *et al.*, 2016, p. 409 Brodie *et al.*, 2019, p. 8	emotional cognitive behavioural connected	dispositional actor engagement
Process	A 'process' type model that does not restrict engagement to one particular stage, but includes a range of interactions and experiences.	Verleye *et al.*, 2014 Maslowska *et al.*, 2016 Malthouse and Calder, 2018, p. 416	motivational behavioural experiential	participatory; experiential

Regarding the classification of 'customer engagement', the extant literature designates that different variants have emerged. The examples of 'consumer engagement behaviours', 'customer brand engagement', 'consumer engagement' and 'customer engagement' in a specific context can be regarded as variants (Table 2.3). Hence, some researchers use the terms 'consumer engagement' (Hollebeek, 2011b), whereas others use the term 'consumer brand engagement' (Hollebeek, 2011b; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Dwivedi, 2015; Ndhlovu and Maree, 2022).

Table 2.3 lists representative CE variants in marketing studies (e.g., "customer brand engagement", "online community engagement"), detailing their definitions and dimensions. This table extends Table 2.2's framework: for example, *S-D logic-informed CE* (Hollebeek *et al*., 2019) integrates "psychological state" and "multidimensionality," while *brand-related social media engagement* (Schivinski, 2021) aligns with the "behavioural construct" perspective. The table demonstrates that CE variants, despite terminological differences, consistently revolve around multidimensionality, interactivity, and value co-creation, reinforcing Section 2.3's argument for a multidimensional CE framework. Additionally, it foreshadows the discussion in Section 2.4 ("S-D Logic and CE"), such as linking "actor interactions in service ecosystems" to S-D logic's resource integration theory.

Table 2.3: Representative conceptualizations of engagement in marketing studies(source: author)

Authors	Construct name	Definitions	Dimensions
van Doorn *et al.*, 2010, p. 253	Customer engagement behaviours	...we define as the customers' behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers – includes WOM [word of mouth], recommendations, writing reviews, helping other customers.	behavioural
Hollebeek, 2011b, p. 790	Customer brand engagement	...the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions.	psychological state, motivational
Gambetti *et al.*, 2012, p. 668	Consumer brand engagement	Multidimensional concept that combines elements including attention, dialogue, interaction, emotions, sensorial pleasure and immediate activation which is aimed to create a complete brand experience with consumers.	cognitive, emotional experiential, social
Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014	Consumer brand engagement in social media	Positively valenced cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during, or related to, brand interactions.	cognitive, emotional, behavioural
Baldus *et al*., 2015, p. 978	Online brand community engagement	Brand communities prompt the new possibilities of interaction due to recent technological innovations and substantial investments in these communities by their brands. Additionally, those communities have moved into the mainstream and it is common to find as many early and late majority consumers interacting in these communities as lead users. Last, it is the truly first time to provide a holistic understanding of the unique dimensions of engagement for online brand communities.	brand influence; brand passion; connecting; helping; like-minded discussion; rewards (hedonic) and rewards (utilitarian); seeking assistance; self-expression; up-to-date information; validation

Authors	Construct name	Definitions	Dimensions
Storbacka *et al.*, 2016, p. 3009	Actor engagement	Actor engagement is conceptualized as both the disposition of actors to engage, and the activity of engaging in an interactive process of resource integration within the institutional context provided by a service ecosystem.	disposition and activities
Kumar *et al.*, 2019	Customer engagement in service/the customer service experience	the overall customer experience that is borne out of all forms of customer interactions, communications, and transactions regarding the service offerings, over time.	/
Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019, p. 166	Service-dominant logic-informed customer engagement	a customer's motivationally-driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills), and operand resources (e.g., equipment) into brand interactions in service systems.	cognitive (thought-based), emotional (affective), and behavioural (activity-based), social (state-based)
Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava, 2020	Service-dominant logic-informed stakeholder engagement	A stakeholder's state-based, boundedly volitional resource endowment in his/her role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships.	cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social
Schivinski, 2021	Brand-related social media engagement	a set of brand-related online activities on the part of the consumer that vary in the degree to which the consumer interacts with social media and engages in the consumption, contribution, and creation of media content	behavioural
Ozuem and Willis, 2022, p. 62	Engagement in an online brand community context	In an online context, engagement refers to customers' responses to a social media platform or online brand community. In such environments, the social presence within an online brand community and the consumers' level of emotional connection with a brand play an important role in building engagement.	cognitive, emotional and behavioural

These years, considering CE's limitation of only stressing customers' engagement with brands, an emerging sub-stream of CE – actor engagement – is in full swing. Actor engagement has extended the scope of CE to the engagement of any marketing actor, including that of suppliers, employees, distributors, firms, and so on (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Later, Clark, Lages and Hollebeek (2020) applied stakeholder theory to encompass actors' perspectives, and extended CE and actor engagement studies to the domain of S-D logic-informed stakeholder engagement (Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava, 2022, p. 336).

In justifying the use of S-D logic-informed CE rather than S-D logic-informed stakeholder engagement for this research, it is essential to emphasize the distinct focus of the study on customer-specific experiences within the Chinese web fiction community. This choice is driven by the aim to deeply understand how customers, as the primary audience and participants, engage with the content, creators, and platform. S-D logic-informed CE is particularly suited for this investigation because it provides a targeted framework for analysing customer roles and their value co-creation processes (Tuunanen *et al.*, 2024; Re and Magnani, 2022).

Stakeholder engagement theory, while comprehensive, introduces a level of complexity that can dilute the focus on the customer-specific elements central to this study. Stakeholder engagement encompasses a broad range of interactions involving all actors in the ecosystem, including authors, publishers, platform providers, and other supporting entities (Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava, 2022). However, this thesis specifically targets the behaviours, motivations, and value creation processes of the customers themselves. This narrow focus on customers is more aligned with the CE perspective, which provides a clearer framework for examining these specific aspects, rather than the broader scope covered by SE.

Methodologically, using S-D logic-informed CE allows for a detailed exploration of specific customer roles and their engagement behaviours. This is particularly relevant in qualitative research, which seeks to uncover the rich, detailed nuances of individual experiences and interactions (Bhandari, 2023, paras 1, 4). This focus can lead to richer, more detailed insights into how customers perceive their interactions and contributions

within the community. Stakeholder engagement, while valuable, would necessitate a broader investigation across different types of actors, which would potentially limit the depth of understanding that can be achieved for any single group, such as customers (Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava, 2022; Kujala *et al*., 2022; Loureiro, Romero and Bilro, 2020).

In conclusion, the decision to use S-D logic-informed CE rather than stakeholder engagement is justified by the research's focus on customer-specific experiences and the methodological benefits of a targeted framework for analysing customer roles and their value co-creation processes. This choice allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of CE within the specific cultural and digital landscape of Chinese web fiction.

2.4 S-D Logic and CE

2.4.1 S-D Logic Research

According to an extensive investigation, the major focal research within the literature of the field of servitization is the customer-oriented perspective; this perspective mainly revolves around solutions, and the service science perspective, having heavily drawn on S-D logic thinking and the notion of value co-creation (Rabetino *et al.*, 2018). Undeniably, S-D logic makes it possible to more systematically respond to intertwined economic, social, technological, and digital challenges of this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment and increasingly interdependent world (Fehrer and Vargo, 2022). Arguably, it is one of the focal topics of service research since it aroused great interest among professionals and practitioners in the marketing and service fields (Furrer *et al.*, 2020). While technology adoption theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003) are instrumental in explaining individual-level platform usage (e.g., perceived ease of use, effort expectancy), they primarily address antecedents of technology adoption rather than systemic value co-creation processes. For instance, TAM/UTAUT may clarify why readers adopt a web fiction platform, but cannot explain how their engagement transforms into collaborative narrative building—a process best captured by S-D logic. Arguably, it is one of the focal topics of service research since it aroused great interest among professionals and practitioners in the marketing and service fields (Furrer et al., 2020).

In retrospect, two articles by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008), especially Vargo and Lusch (2004), are considered the foundational papers of S-D logic; they reflect the impact and importance of S-D logic in the field of servitization research. A study by Payne *et al.* (2008) pushed the concept of value co-creation to the central position of S-D logic. Research by Zeithaml *et al.* (2002), Parasuraman *et al.* (2005), and Morgan-Thomas *et al.* (2020) on the quality of electronic service has inspired service research to develop into the fields of technological and digital offerings. Notably, while technology adoption models like TAM (Davis, 1989) and UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) explain

individual-level platform usage, they lack the systemic perspective required to analyse how technology acts as an operant resource in value co-creation—a gap uniquely addressed by S-D logic. Sirdeshmukh *et al*. (2002), Palmatier *et al*. (2006), and Ozuem *et al*. (2022) have encouraged and celebrated the evolution of relationship marketing research. Most recently, influential and highly cited articles, including Vargo and Lusch (2016, 2017) and Hollebeek *et al*. (2019), relate to S-D logic. During the same period, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) emphasized customer experience. Lim and Rasul (2022) addressed the implications of social media for digital natives and millennials.

S-D logic, introduced by Vargo and Lusch in 2004, called for a paradigm shift in marketing from focusing on the exchange of tangible goods to the exchange of intangible elements such as processes, specialized skills, and knowledge (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, pp. 1–2). This shift towards a service-oriented marketing approach emphasizes the emergent paradigm, with the term 'service' becoming prominent in both managerial and academic marketing studies (Lusch and Vargo, 2006, p. 283). Vargo and Lusch (2004) defined 'services' as 'the application of specialized competencies (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity' (p. 2).

In essence, 'service' refers to the application of competencies for the benefit of others, which forms the basis of all exchange in service science – a concept that highlights the use of one's resources for the benefit of another actor. This framework places 'service' at the core of social and economic exchanges (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). S-D logic provides an integrated framework that views service-for-service exchange as central to the narrative of value co-creation; it treats service as a process rather than as an 'intangible unit of output' (Vargo and Lusch, 2017, p. 47). This systemic perspective distinguishes S-D logic from technology-centric frameworks like TAM/UTAUT, which focus on antecedents of technology use (e.g., perceived ease of use) but cannot explain how digital platforms enable networked resource integration. For example, in Chinese web fiction communities, S-D logic reveals how algorithms (operant resources) mediate reader-author co-creation, whereas TAM/UTAUT would only explain why readers adopt the platform. This perspective emphasizes that both service providers and customers are active participants in the service process, with the customer always

being a co-creator of value (Fehrer and Vargo, 2022). The core axioms of S-D logic, particularly "value is co-created through service-for-service exchange" (Axiom 1) and "all social and economic actors are resource integrators" (Axiom 2), provide a robust framework for analysing customer engagement (CE) in digital contexts. Under this logic, the distinction between entities as suppliers and customers blurs, as all participants are actors who integrate resources, co-create value, and exchange services. Furthermore, value creation is inherently experiential and contextual, shaped not only by interactions between actors but also by the unique circumstances of the exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2007). This perspective is encapsulated in the concept of 'value-in-context' (Chandler and Vargo, 2011), which highlights the critical role of the customer's experience and the specific context in which value is determined (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

Service management, therefore, requires an understanding of social networks, social norms/culture, and situational factors (time and space) to effectively comprehend value co-creation from the perspectives of various actors (Chandler and Vargo, 2011). This approach emphasizes understanding the experiences and journeys of customers and other actors rather than focusing solely on individual service interactions (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). According to the MSI (2020) report, '*2020-22 MSI Research Priorities*', the integration of technologies, customer journeys, and customer value are among the top issues in academic marketing literature (p. 4–7). Recent research increasingly focuses on consumer experience and behaviour on digital platforms and within digital environments (Vendrell-Herrero *et al*., 2021; So *et al*., 2024; Ozuem, Ranfagni and Willis, 2024); the research highlights that advancing technologies and ongoing digitalization are creating more interconnected individuals, customers, companies, and other actors (Ng and Wakenshaw, 2019). In this context, technology is conceptualized as an operant resource, a dynamic element that acts upon operand resources to enable and enhance co-creation activities (Bartsch, Lührs and Schmitz, 2018).

Constantin and Lusch (1994) differentiated between operand resources (e.g., equipment), which are acted upon to produce effects, and operant resources (e.g., skills, knowledge, technology), which act upon operand resources. Vargo and Lusch (2016)

elaborated on this and explained that operant resources include customers' company-based experience and knowledge, product-based experience and knowledge, and competitor-based experience and knowledge, while operand resources comprise customers' individual resources that can enhance a company's offerings (Hsiao, 2022; Prebensen and Uysal, 2021). This distinction is critical in digital contexts: while TAM/UTAUT focus on operand resources (e.g., platform as a tool), S-D logic reveals how operant resources (e.g., user-generated content, algorithmic feedback) drive value co-creation (Nambisan and Baron, 2009). The interplay between these resources emphasizes the service-oriented view of marketing, which centres on social and economic processes driven by operant resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 5). This perspective highlights how operant resources, such as technology and customer knowledge, act upon operand resources to co-create value in increasingly digital and interconnected environments.

Within the S-D logic framework, the traditional view of linear, transactional exchanges has been replaced by a focus on non-linear and interconnected value exchanges within **service ecosystems** - defined as 'relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange' (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, p. 10-11). The term 'actor' encompasses both humans and organizations, including economic and social entities, all of whom actively participate in value creation processes to achieve individual or collective goals (Lusch and Vargo, 2014, p. 102; Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp and Wilson, 2016; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2020). These actors integrate and exchange resources, leveraging both operant and operand resources, to co-create value and enhance their well-being. Whether these resources are acquired through customer-oriented, public, or private channels, they serve as inputs for collaborative service provision and resource integration (Vargo, 2018, p. 722). This perspective highlights the dynamic and participatory nature of value co-creation, where actors interact within complex networks to address the challenges and opportunities of today's interconnected and digitalized world.

2.4.2 The Theoretical Link Between CE and S-D Logic

As previously described, traditional metrics, such as customer participation or involvement, have provided significant insights, but they fall short in capturing the dynamic, processual, and value-creating aspects of CE (Ng and Vargo, 2018). S-D logic serves as a theoretical lens underlying CE that emphasizes 'customer resource integration' and 'value co-creation'. This perspective is particularly suitable for understanding and interpreting the dynamic nature of customer-centric activities in the context of Chinese web fiction consumption, where technology-mediated interactions dominate.

Although CE features an experiential and interactive relationship between the focal brand and consumers during the consumption process (Brodie *et al*., 2013; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019), engaged customers tend to invest resources in these interactions, thereby co-creating value through service exchange (Kumar *et al*., 2019, p. 141; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). As Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, (2019) suggested, both CE and S-D logic emphasize interactivity between stakeholders, such as customers and employees; this conceptual alignment indicates the potential for a joint exploration of these concepts. They therefore proposed an integrative conceptual framework, namely S-D logic-informed CE, to better understand the relationship between CE and key theoretical constructs within S-D logic, such as 'resource integration' and 'value co-creation'.

Jaakkola *et al*. (2018, p. 583) elucidated how S-D logic and CE inform one another, 'metatheories inform managerial practice by offering a lens to view the general logic of markets'. In other words, S-D logic is the macro-foundation (the general theory) of CE; CE can provide S-D logic with specific contexts and make it meet concrete practice, which generates frameworks and models that can be used to conduct empirical investigations. Furthermore, by providing this metatheoretical framework, S-D logic has a certain potential to allow concentration on the commonalities of concepts instead of their dissimilarities and, thus, join discussions that are seemingly disconnected (Koskela-Huotari and Vargo, 2018). That might be the reason why Brodie *et al*. (2011) considered S-D logic as defining the conceptual domain for CE (Brodie and Peters, 2020, p. 418) and why Hollebeek *et al*. (2019) endeavoured to connect CE to concepts of S-D logic, such as resource integration and value co-creation. Therefore, it needs to

be repeatedly asserted that S-D logic is highly relevant to CE because customers integrate resources by means of 'engagement' throughout the process of value co-creation (Ng, Sweeney and Plewa, 2020). Without actor engagement, no resource integration happens, and no value can be co-created (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016).

The axioms of S-D logic emphasize various aspects of value creation and resource integration, and align closely with the concept of CE: a) Axiom 1 – service as the fundamental basis of exchange, b) Axiom 2 – multiple actor co-creation, c) Axiom 3 – social and economic actors as resource integrators, d) Axiom 4 – beneficiary-determined value, and e) Axiom 5 – cocreation, institutions, and institutional arrangements. The axioms clearly outline the relationship between S-D logic and CE. Axiom 1 establishes that service, defined as the application of specialized competences through deeds, processes, and performances, is the fundamental basis of exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2008b). This is conceptually linked to CE, as engaged customers integrate resources for value-creating purposes (Karpen *et al.*, 2015; Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011). Axiom 2 highlights that value is co-created by multiple actors, which always includes the beneficiary (Baumöl *et al.*, 2016); this mirrors the interactive nature of CE where customers actively participate in value-seeking processes (Fang *et al.*, 2008; Pervan and Bove, 2011). Axiom 3 positions social and economic actors as resource integrators, where resource integration depends on individual, object, and situational factors (Vargo and Lusch 2008). Axiom 4 states that value is uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary, emphasizing the experiential and subjective nature of value creation, which aligns with the customer's role in CE (Bowden *et al.*, 2015). Finally, Axiom 5 asserts that value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).These institutions arise from and coordinate the interactions among actors, reflecting the collective and networked nature of service systems and ecosystems. By fostering shared norms and expectations, they enable interactivity and mutual value creation to play a central role. (Koskela-Huotari and Vargo, 2016).

These axioms collectively emphasize the importance of an integrative, S-D logic-informed perspective of CE, which focuses on the dynamic interplay of resources, actors, and institutional contexts in value creation within **service ecosystems**. A service

ecosystem perspective extends S-D logic by emphasizing three critical elements: 1) Multi-actor networks where customers, firms, technologies, and institutions interact; 2) Resource integration across system boundaries through both market and non-market mechanisms; 3) Institutional arrangements that coordinate value co-creation (Josina et al., 2021; Maximilian et al., 2022;Vargo and Lusch, 2016). In the context of Chinese web fiction, this ecosystem comprises authors, readers, platform algorithms, monetization mechanisms, and cultural norms that collectively shape engagement practices. Thus, S-D logic provides a fruitful theoretical lens, as it highlights that value creation is inherently interactive and customers are always involved in co-creating value (Ramani and Kumar, 2008).

Although Brodie *et al*. (2011) identified the link between CE and S-D logic, they did not explicitly integrate CE with specific S-D logic concepts within a conceptual framework. This omission limits understanding of the nature of CE and its theoretical relationships based on S-D logic. Therefore, Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) proposed an integrative framework that incorporates various theoretical elements of both CE and S-D logic. This effort aimed to clarify and consolidate these concepts to provide a more unified and coherent theoretical understanding. In essence, they sought to bridge gaps in the current literature by creating a comprehensive framework that illustrates not only the theoretical linkages between S-D logic and CE but also their practical applications. For instance, Table 2.4 details customer engagement foundational processes (e.g., operant resources and customer knowledge sharing), corresponding benefits (e.g., personal growth and co-creation value), and examples in the context of Chinese web novels, such as connecting through reader interactions or creating derivative works.

Table 2.4: conceptual framework: customer engagement and the CE foundational processes (adapted from Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019)

	Resources for Integration	Examples in the Context of Chinese Web Novels		Benefits	Examples in the Context of Chinese Web Novels
Customer engagement foundational processes	**Operand resource** Tangible resources, such as physical goods and equipment.	1) Web novel content 2) User data (reading time, click records)	Customer engagement benefits	**Individual operant resource development** A customer's perceived modification (e.g., growth) in their own brand-related operant resources through brand interactions.	Personal growth Psychological consolation Volunteer Community practices
	Operant resource Intangible resources, such as knowledge, skills, and competences.	1) Reader actions: Connecting, helping, like-minded discussion, word of mouth, recommendation, writing reviews, replying to comments, establishing and maintaining QQ groups, end-of-chapter reader exchanges, single-chapter canvassing, and voting and swiping votes. 2) Platform technology: Literary website Digital interactive platform		**Interpersonal operant resource development** Interpersonal operant resource development denotes a customer's perceived modification (e.g., growth) in their own brand-related operant resources through acting as the initiator or recipient of brand-related knowledge sharing with others.	Derivative work Identity recognition The common good Interpretive community
	Customer knowledge sharing and learning	Information-based or experience-based knowledge Development of mental rules and guidelines; the acquisition of new brand knowledge or insight; behavioural modification.		**Customer co-creation** A customer's perceived value arising from interactive, joint, collaborative or personalized brand-related activities for or with stakeholders in service systems.	Hedonic rewards, utilitarian rewards, self-expression. Up-to-date information Self-valorization Automatic labour Digital labour/working consumer/affective labour-based prosumer Alternative reality/utopia/symbolic solutions

In summary, CE at the microlevel can offer a deeper understanding and explanation of S-D logic at the macrolevel. As discussed in the previous section, CE involves interactive and co-creative experiences between brands and consumers or among consumers themselves (Ferdous *et al.*, 2024; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024). This concept highlights the importance of co-creation dynamics, where actors, both human and non-human, engage, experience, and communicate based on shared societal values (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2020). S-D logic emphasizes that companies cannot create value in isolation; instead, they can only propose value propositions, with consumers playing a crucial role as value co-creators (Fan, Hsu and Lin, 2020; Pandey and Kumar, 2020; Vargo and Lusch, 2008, 2016). Consumers are increasingly taking the lead in value creation; they engage in activities such as co-production, co-creation, resource integration, and value innovation (Casidy *et al.*, 2022; Vargo and Lusch, 2008, 2016; van den Broeke and Paparoidamis, 2021).

Therefore, the convergence of S-D logic and CE stresses the centrality of value co-creation, and highlights the need for further empirical and theoretical research. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how customers engage in the value co-creation process, thereby contributing to the existing theoretical framework on S-D logic-informed CE through a focused examination of customer participation.

2.5 Value Co-Creation in Digital Platforms

S-D logic asserts that value is co-created by multiple actors, including consumers, who play an active role in this process (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). This challenges the traditional dichotomy of producers as creators and consumers as mere recipients of value. Instead, all participants, including customers, businesses, and employees, engage in economic activities aimed at value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). The concept of 'prosumer', introduced by Toffler (1980), has become more relevant in the digital age, where the lines between production and consumption blur. Prosumers are now seen as individuals who not only consume but also produce goods and services; they create value not just for themselves but for the wider community (Dellaert, 2019; Kviat, 2021;

Sugihartati, 2017).

Prosumers are knowledgeable and skilled consumers who use digital technologies to engage in product design and usage, and they influence their social networks (Shah *et al*., 2019). This concept aligns closely with S-D logic, and emphasizes the active role of consumers in both production and consumption (Ritzer and Miles, 2018). The idea of prosumption integrates consumption and production; it breaks away from the traditional view that these are separate processes (Kviat, 2021). This integrated approach encourages a more holistic and dialectical understanding of economic activities; it moves beyond the binary mindset of industrialization.

In the process of prosumption, individuals co-create products; they display creativity and seek either entertainment or monetary gain. Through collaboration with brands or peers in communities, they build identities and find meaning (Zeng and Mourali, 2021). These activities can range from creating media and cultural products (Chen, 2018; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017; Sugihartati, 2017) to promoting brands; the latter is motivated by loyalty and devotion (Obiegbu, Larsen and Ellis, 2019). In digital communities, prosumers often gather to share knowledge, collaborate on production, and express creativity; they use digital technologies to disseminate their work (Obiegbu *et al*., 2019; Ozuem and Willis, 2022).

Prosumption serves both utilitarian and hedonic purposes; it functions as both work and leisure. Prosumers may co-create content for profit or as a recreational activity to enhance well-being (Das, Mukherjee and Smith, 2018). This dual nature of prosumption supports social interaction and communication; it contributes to the development of the prosumer's identity and personal meaning (Fox, 2018; Chen, 2018). The digital era enables prosumers to express themselves and connect with others, to form new social bonds and enhance tie strength within communities (Hollebeek *et al*., 2021; Ozuem and Willis, 2022; Planells, 2017).

In the postmodern era, young people, who are inherently 'digital natives', are basically

both customers and producers. They represent fandoms who watch movies or read novels, and they also become co-creators of brand new content within online brand communities (Sugihartati, 2017), which are viewed as digital 'co-design platforms' (Ranjan and Read, 2021).

Online brand platforms serve as hubs for this co-creation process; they offer an environment where customers can engage with brands and other customers. These platforms utilize various features, such as discussion forums, content sharing tools, and collaborative projects, to foster a dynamic and interactive community (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016b; Storbacka, 2019; Rodríguez-López, 2021). Through these channels, prosumers can share their experiences, provide feedback, and even co-design products. This collaborative engagement not only enhances the value proposition for consumers but also allows brands to tap into the collective creativity and insights of their user base (Ind and Schmidt, 2022; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2020; Ritzer and Miles, 2018).

The interaction on these platforms is characterized by a reciprocal exchange, where consumers and brands engage in a continuous dialogue. This process of co-creation emphasizes the shared role of both parties in generating value (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Alqayed *et al.*, 2022). Consumers are not merely recipients of products and services but active participants in shaping their development and evolution. This shift in dynamics emphasizes the importance of understanding the multifaceted nature of CE, which encompasses emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions (Lim *et al.*, 2022; Perez-Vega *et al.*, 2021; Sim *et al.*, 2022).

As noted, Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) posited that customers or actors interact with one another through investment of operant/operand resources in a specific service system, which embraces various entities that are collections of humans, organizations, information, and technologies required for integrating resources and co-creating value (Falkenreck and Wagner, 2022; Kot and Leszczyński, 2022; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016b; Storbacka, 2019). This aligns with the service ecosystem perspective where value co-creation emerges through the dynamic alignment of 1) Actors (readers,

authors, platforms), 2) Resources (content, data, algorithms), and 3) Institutions (community norms, platform rules, copyright systems) (Akaka, Vargo and Lusch, 2013; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018; Vargo and Lusch, 2016).Technology has been conceptualized as an operant resource that plays a silent role in fostering co-creation activities. Furthermore, digital platforms can even evolve to be active actors in service systems, and their roles can be salient and significant as a part of integrated resources (Storbacka *et al*., 2016b). Research by Ozuem and Willis (2022) recognized that successful value co-creation relies on effective digital platforms or channels for actors to integrate and engage within service ecosystems. On the other hand, some researchers have posited that engaged actors are considered not only human beings but also machines/technologies and collections of humans and machines/technologies (Lusch, Vargo and O'Brien, 2007; Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp and Wilson, 2016; Storbacka, 2019), which can be explained and understood from the perspective of ANT. Academia encourages the use a transdisciplinary lens to analyse and understand actor engagement/CE (Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava, 2020b), among which ANT (Bijker and Latour, 1988; Latour, 2005, 2017; Law, 2009; Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010; Dery *et al*., 2013; Michael, 2017; Luo, 2020) is included.

The service ecosystem lens proves particularly valuable for analysing Chinese web fiction communities due to three unique characteristics: 1) Multi-level interactions between individual readers, fan groups, platform algorithms, and regulatory bodies; 2) Recursive institutionalization where user-generated engagement practices (e.g., chapter comments shaping plot development) become formalized into platform features; 3) Scalable resource liquefaction - digital content and data flows enabling real-time value co-creation across geographical boundaries (Cristina, Jannis and Erika, 2020; Frank W, 2020). This perspective helps explain how momentary acts of reader engagement (e.g., voting for preferred plot twists) aggregate into systemic value propositions that sustain the ecosystem's evolution.

2.6 ANT and S-D Logic-Informed CE

Although S-D logic offers a robust framework for understanding value co-creation, its application to digital contexts, like Chinese web novels, may be limited by its focus on service exchanges. ANT compensates for this limitation by emphasizing the role of technology. Together, these two frameworks provide complementary insights into value co-creation processes.

ANT complements S-D logic by highlighting the role of non-human actors in value co-creation processes. In the context of Chinese web novels, this theory helps explain how digital platforms and technologies actively shape CE and value co-creation. However, ANT may overstate the agency of non-human actors, which could risk undermining the central role of human creativity and decision-making in such networks. In particular, the discussion of the roles of the interactive online platform with advanced technology is valuable in this era of blurred boundaries among various actors, including customers and producers.

ANT seems inherently connected with value co-creation, especially in this new era characterized by interconnections catalysed by technology and digitalization. ANT perceives society as constituted by heterogeneous assemblages of people and non-human objects, such as technology and machines (Doolin and Lowe, 2002). ANT researchers, setting out from the sociology of science and technology, tend to view 'knowledge' (e.g., agents, machines, social institutions, and organizations) as the end product of a network of heterogeneous engineering (Law, 1992). This is the strongest distinguishing feature of ANT, the so-called principle of 'generalized symmetry' between humans and non-humans (Blok, Ignacio and Celia, 2019). In parallel, Latour (1992) pointed out that generalized symmetry does not mean to be detrimental to the importance of human beings, but to give prominence to the roles of the 'missing masses' in the heterogeneous network, the bedrock of society. The heterogeneity of actor–networks represents the acknowledgment of the diverse and interconnected roles of both human and non-human actors.

According to ANT, an actor is considered to be the source of an action, whether it is human or non-human (Doolin and Lowe, 2002). Non-human entities, such as technology, are conceived as more than intermediaries. As Latour (1996, p. 240) argued, 'objects are not means, but rather mediators—just as other actors are,' highlighting their active role in networks. In this sense, the focus of ANT is to explore how all entities in the network are actively enrolled as resources in maintaining the system (Doolin and Lowe, 2002). From this perspective, technology must be regarded not merely as a passive tool but as an active mediator that co-produces with humans, 'exchanging properties in relatively structured settings' (Michael, 2017, p. 82). These insights directly connect to the function and role of operant resources in S-D logic-informed CE theory. Operant resources—such as skills, technology, and knowledge—are those that can be employed to act on operand resources, thereby producing effects on the system or network (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Similarly, mediators, unlike intermediaries, are actants that actively induce changes within the system (Sayes, 2013), creating dynamic interactions that transform network relationships. In this regard, ANT underpins the symmetrical connection between human and non-human actors/actants (Ozuem *et al*., 2021a), including customers and interactive online platforms, which mutually shape and define each other's roles and impacts. Technology and people influence each other and are, therefore, defined by each other (Law, 1990; Holmqvist, Wirtz and Fritze, 2020; MacMullin, Jerry and Cook, 2020).

From this sociotechnical perspective, the metaphor of actor–networks suggests that social ordering is plural and lacks a single centre (Law, 1992). It emphasizes that social and technical elements are mutually constitutive rather than independent, shaping each other within heterogeneous networks (Law, 1990). This perspective is highly enlightening for observing and analysing engaged platforms composed of heterogeneous materials, such as technological artefacts, interfaces, processes, and people. Artefacts can be physical or digital, such as numbers, text, pictures, audio, and video. Processes involve both digital and traditional business interactions. Interfaces, whether physical or digital, function as conduits for interaction between entities, facilitating exchanges and enabling collaboration across human and non-human actors.

People include customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2018, p. 198). These online platforms, supported by advanced digitalized technologies, create an 'interactive system-environment' that connects creative interactions with experienced outcomes through the effective utilization of resource capabilities (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2018, p. 197).

As suggested by Latour (2005), digitalized interactive platforms are not just passive mediators but active participants that facilitate connections between entities. Ramaswamy and Ozcan's (2018) framework for co-creation, influenced by Latour, emphasizes the importance of understanding how resources are integrated in value co-creation. They argue that technology can act as a resource integrator; it connects various objects with knowledge capabilities. This integration occurs through interactive platforms that combine multiple systems and environments, thus enabling the creation of value (Orlikowski and Scott, 2015). Therefore, the role of technology in this process is equally crucial as that of human actors.

In summary, ANT and S-D logic together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of digital platforms in value co-creation, particularly in the context of Chinese web novels. By emphasizing the active participation of both human and non-human actors, this framework highlights how digital platforms facilitate co-creative processes that shape modern digital interactions, experiences, and outcomes.

2.7 Research Gaps

Recent research on CE has explored various theoretical lenses (Fehrer and Vargo, 2022; Hollebeek *et al*., 2023c), including social exchange theory (Hollebeek, 2011a), congruity theory (Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek, 2018), social identity theory (Prentice, Wang and Loureiro, 2019; Zhang and Li, 2022), uses-and-gratifications theory (Huang *et al*., 2017; Castillo *et al*., 2021), and relationship marketing (Ozuem and Willis, 2022; Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro, 2020, pp. 175–176; Vivek *et al*., 2014). While these frameworks provide valuable insights, they often fail to fully capture the intense fan

involvement observed in collaborative co-production and value co-creation within online fictional worlds. This study aims to advance the understanding of CE from an S-D logic perspective, particularly in the context of Chinese web fiction.

Gap1: Multidimensional Engagement in Digital Environments

Existing literature provides limited frameworks for understanding the multidimensional nature of CE in digital environments. The current research often focuses on individual dimensions of engagement, but it fails to account for the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social factors in collaborative co-production within online communities. This study aims to address this gap by examining CE from a more holistic perspective that captures these diverse dimensions.

Gap 2: Prosumer Behaviours and Peer Collaboration in Value Co-Creation

While prior research on CE has predominantly focused on firm-customer interactions, there is a lack of understanding of prosumer behaviour (users acting as both consumers and producers) and peer-to-peer collaboration in shaping value co-creation. Prosumer behaviours in virtual communities, particularly in fan-driven platforms like Chinese web fiction, remain underexplored. Similarly, peer collaboration—where consumers interact with each other to co-create content—has received limited attention in digital engagement research (Rather *et al*., 2024; Vivek *et al*., 2014).

This research seeks to address these gaps by investigating how prosumer behaviours enhance engagement and contribute to communal value creation and how peer-to-peer interactions in digital ecosystems foster collaborative co-production. By integrating these two perspectives, this study will develop a more comprehensive understanding of how value is co-created in online environments, particularly within the unique cultural and social contexts of Chinese web fiction.

Gap 3: **Digital Platforms and the Shift in Production-Consumption Dynamics**

through Engagement

Prior research has often failed to examine how digital platforms specifically enable engagement behaviours and how they contribute to the evolving dynamics of production-consumption relationships in online ecosystems. While some studies have explored digital platforms' role in online communities (e.g., Hollebeek *et al*., 2023), there remains limited understanding of how these platforms shape user interactions, facilitate co-creation, and support new forms of engagement. This research aims to bridge this gap by focusing on how platforms in Chinese web fiction serve as dynamic spaces for service-for-service exchanges. These platforms provide tools that enable deep interactions between users, authors, and other community members, such as interactive comment sections, collaborative writing features, and voting systems, thus fostering both engagement and co-creation. By analysing how these platforms shape the roles of users as both consumers and producers, this study contributes to the understanding of how platforms mediate the shift from traditional production-consumption models to more participatory and collaborative ecosystems. This expands existing frameworks in Service-Dominant logic by emphasizing the platform as a facilitator of engagement, rather than simply as an operand resource.

Gap 4: **The Role of Technology in Mediating Production-Consumption Dynamics**

While previous studies have acknowledged the shift towards relational and cooperative marketing practices (Brodie *et al*., 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2017), there is a gap in understanding how technology—particularly algorithms and digital platforms—actively shapes the production-consumption relationship within online ecosystems. Defined as digitally-enabled networks where human and non-human actors interact to co-create value through resource integration(Benkler, 2006; Nambisan *et al*., 2019), online ecosystems rely on technological artefacts to mediate empowerment dynamics. However, research has yet to fully explore how non-human actors (e.g., algorithms, platform architectures) structurally enable or constrain customer agency—a critical oversight for RO2 **(**"Demonstrate customer empowerment in co-creation"**)**.

The Chinese web fiction context exemplifies this gap. Platforms like Qidian International employ recommendation algorithms that curate content visibility (Li *et al*., 2023), while user comment systems enable readers to directly influence plot development. These technologies transcend passive mediation to actively script co-creation processes, yet existing frameworks fail to explain how such tools simultaneously empower and delimit user agency. For instance, while voting systems democratise plot choices (empowerment), algorithmic prioritisation of popular tropes may funnel creativity into formulaic narratives (constraint)—a paradox unresolved in current literature (Dar and Gul, 2024; Sanders, 2024).

Building on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this study will investigate how technological artefacts—such as platform algorithms, interfaces, and data analytics— redefine the interactions between users, authors, and platforms in Chinese web fiction. By examining the active role of these non-human actors, the study will contribute to the application of ANT within Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, highlighting how digital platforms and algorithms mediate and facilitate the flow of resources within the service ecosystem, thereby reshaping traditional production-consumption dynamics and deepening insights into customer empowerment mechanisms (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Hollebeek *et al*., 2019).

Gap 5： Context-Specific Understanding of Value Creation

Existing research on value co-creation often fails to account for cultural, social, and technological contexts in which engagement occurs. Many frameworks generalize the value co-creation process but do not consider the specific dynamics in distinct online environments, such as Chinese web fiction. This gap calls for a more context-specific understanding of how value is created in online literature communities, especially considering the unique cultural and technological characteristics of the Chinese web fiction industry. This study will address this gap by exploring how contextual factors influence value co-creation and enhance our understanding of customer engagement in this specific domain.

2.8 Summary

This chapter redefines value co-creation by synthesizing S-D logic and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), resolving Western-centric biases through empirical insights from Chinese web fiction. Key contributions include: (1) demonstrating how algorithms democratize *and* constrain creativity (e.g., Qidian's ranking systems), and (2) formalizing cultural practices like *shenfen* (identity-building) as institutional arrangements. These insights directly inform platform strategies, such as transparent AI tools to mitigate homogenization risks while preserving narrative diversity. By bridging Western theories with Chinese participatory culture, this chapter challenges individualistic CE models and advances a transdisciplinary framework for digitally mediated ecosystems.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive review of conceptual theories, focusing on elements of S-D logic, particularly in the context of CE as informed by midrange theory. It also explored the concept of the 'prosumer': a highly engaged customer whose characteristics reflect the principles of S-D logic. Additionally, the chapter examined how ANT can deepen the understanding of CE processes and activities, particularly among digital natives in the digital era.

This chapter outlines the methodological choices, research approach and strategy, techniques of data collection, as well as analysis procedures. The adoption of a qualitative research approach is justified through an examination of the philosophical stances underpinning CE with Chinese web fiction. Subsequently, it introduces the chosen case study design and the results of a pilot study conducted to refine the research framework prior to full-scale data collection. The chapter also covers sample selection, sample size, and data collection methods, along with the specific criteria for ensuring rigor in qualitative research. Additionally, this section discusses the research approach with a focus on generating insights that contribute to broader theoretical frameworks, such as S-D logic or CE, while also deriving valuable insights from the study of specific social groups. Ethical considerations, including potential risks to participants, researchers, and the University, and the steps taken to mitigate these risks, are also addressed.

Central to this study is the application of S-D logic, which serves as the theoretical framework guiding both the research design and methodology. S-D logic emphasizes value co-creation through interactions between producers and consumers; it highlights the collaborative nature of value creation in service ecosystems (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Within this study, S-D logic is instrumental in exploring the dynamics of value co-creation within the Chinese web novel community.

This theoretical foundation directly informs the methodology of the research, particularly in the development of the interview protocol. Grounded in S-D logic principles, the interview protocol is designed to investigate how participants interact with authors and other readers, co-creating value through their web novel experiences. For instance, interview questions are tailored to explore participants' roles in content co-creation, their engagement within the community, and how these interactions enhance their overall experience and perceived value.

By grounding the research in S-D logic, the study not only seeks to understand the phenomena of CE and value co-creation but also ensures that the methodology aligns with the theoretical principles that define these concepts. This alignment strengthens the research by generating insights that are conceptually grounded while remaining practically relevant to the study context.

3.2 Philosophical Paradigms in Research

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, which posits that realities are co-constructed through interactions between participants and digital platforms. Unlike positivism's pursuit of objective truths, constructivism aligns with the dynamic, context-dependent nature of customer engagement (CE) in Chinese web fiction communities. For instance, readers' interpretations of algorithmic recommendations (e.g., Qidian's ranking systems) are shaped by collective norms rather than static 'facts'—a perspective absent in prior CE frameworks. "To better describe and position this case study, it is elucidated from different dimensions. Table 3.1 systematically compares definitions of paradigms from Kuhn (1970), Guba (1990), and Babbie (2020).

Table 3.1: Various definitions of 'paradigm'

What is a research paradigm?	
Kuhn, 1970	A research paradigm is the set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed.
Guba, 1990, p.18	A research paradigm 'can be characterized by the way scientists respond to three basic questions: ontological, epistemological and methodological questions'.
Babbie, 2020, p.30	A paradigm is 'a model or framework for observation and understanding that shapes both what we see and how we understand it. The conflict paradigm causes us to see social behaviour one way, the interactionist paradigm causes us to see it differently'.

The concept of 'paradigm' can be outlined by integrating the three definitions demonstrated in Table 3.1. Specifically, a paradigm is a foundational philosophical stance that underpins research; it represents a basic belief system or worldview that shapes the researcher's chosen epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Smith, 1983; McGrath and Johnson, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 2011; Creswell, 2012). For instance, Kuhn (1970) emphasizes shared beliefs and practices within a scientific community, Guba (1990) highlights the three fundamental questions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, while Babbie (2020) considers paradigms as conceptual frameworks for observing and interpreting social phenomena.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1982), ontology addresses the nature of reality (e.g., whether it is objective, subjective, or socially constructed), whereas epistemology examines the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the known (Guba, 1990). These paradigmatic assumptions are pivotal in shaping how researchers design their studies, engage with data, and interpret findings.

While the choice of a paradigm itself does not inherently involve value judgment, it profoundly influences the research process, guiding theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and the interpretation of results. Thus, paradigms are not value-neutral in their practical implications, as they reflect underlying assumptions about reality and knowledge.

To further clarify the connections between philosophical paradigms and methodological decisions, Easterby-Smith *et al.*'s (2021) table and O'Gorman and MacIntosh's (2016) paradigm map provided valuable guidance. These resources effectively demonstrated the interrelation between philosophical paradigms (ontology and epistemology) and methodological choices, offering a practical framework for aligning theoretical assumptions with research design.

Figure 3.1: Methods map (adapted from O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2016, and Easterby-Smith et al., 2021)

Research Paradigm

Ontology

Realism	Internal Realism	Relativism	Nominalism
Single truth; Facts exist, can be revealed	Truth exists, but is obscure; Facts are concrete, but cannot be accessed directly	There are many 'truths'; Facts depend on viewpoint of observer	No truth; Facts are all human creation

Epistemology

Strong Positivism   Constructivism   Strong Constructivism

Obtaining information does not have any connection to values and ethics.

Knowledge comprises mental structures encompassed by relative understandings.

Data Gathering

Methodology

Quantitative   Case Study   Qualitative

Techniques Survey, experiment, quasi-experiment, ethnography

interviews, focus group, audio visual, observation, archives, oral history, ethnography

deductive   inductive

Correlation analysis		Template analysis
Factor analysis	abductive	Thematic analysis
Regression analysis		Discourse analysis

Figure 3.1 (Methods map) provides a visual representation of the relationships between various research paradigms and their corresponding methodological choices. This figure not only summarizes these relationships but also acts as a practical guide for researchers in identifying their philosophical positions and aligning them with appropriate methodological frameworks.

According to Easterby-Smith *et al*. (2021), all categories of research approaches fall along a continuum between positivism and constructivism. As shown in Figure 3.1, this continuum captures the gradual shift from the objective, singular truths of positivism to the subjective, multiple truths of constructivism. Specifically, positivism aligns with both realism and internal realism, while strong positivism corresponds to a strictly realist ontology. On the other hand, constructivism is linked to relativism, emphasizing the role of multiple 'truths' based on perspectives. Strong constructivism aligns with nominalism, where knowledge and facts are considered human constructs.

Constructivism, as a philosophical stance, highlights the active role of individuals in shaping their psychological realities and constructing their social environments. This concept has been adapted to the social sciences, where it is commonly referred to as social constructivism or constructionism (Easterby-Smith *et al*., 2021; Lindlof, 2008). Constructivists espouse a non-foundational perspective, contending that there is no universal standard to evaluate the veracity of knowledge or truth (Howell, 2016). This perspective supports a relativist ontology, in which realities are co-constructed through shared understandings and interpretations of social and cultural contexts (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

Table 3.2 provides a comprehensive overview of the key distinctions between major research paradigms, positivism and constructivism, with a focus on their ontological and epistemological foundations. This table is essential for contextualizing the discussion, as it allows for a clearer comparison and understanding of how different paradigms influence research methodologies and outcomes. By clearly outlining differences such as the role of the observer, explanation methods, and quality criteria,

the table highlights the divergent assumptions and approaches embedded within these paradigms. By presenting these distinctions in a structured format, Table 3.2 helps to illustrate the theoretical underpinnings that guide various research approaches, thereby reinforcing the argument that the choice of paradigm significantly shapes the research process and its findings.

Constructivist theorists maintain that science does not uncover a single unified reality 'out there' but, instead, produces multiple, socially constructed conceptions of reality through diverse scientific discourses that involve distinct forms of perception and interpretation(Lindlof, 2008). This stands in contrast to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which emphasizes 'bracketing' the investigator's experiences to achieve objectivity. Social constructivists, however, argue that research is inherently influenced by the researcher's own experiences, perspectives, and background (Cresswell, 2013; Howell and Annasingh, 2013). Human beings are perceived as rational agents who comprehend the world in accordance with their intentions, pool of knowledge, and symbolic tools (Lindlof, 2008). Stake (1995) further elaborates that no aspect of knowledge is purely external or devoid of human interpretation.

In this context, all claims of knowledge and their evaluation are based on a conceptual framework that is used to define and explain the world (Schwandt, 2000). When assessing validity, constructivism places emphasis on authenticity, ethical considerations, relational criteria, and community-oriented perspectives that foster trustworthiness and shared understanding (Howell, 2016, p. 33).

Table 3.2: Distinct implications of positivism and constructivism(adapted from Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 53, and Lincoln and Guba, 2011, p. 170)

	Positivism	Constructivism
The observer	Independent	One of the components being observed
Human interests	Irrelevant	The primary motivators of scientific exploration
Explanations	Causality	Enhance general comprehension of the situation
Research progresses through	Hypotheses and deductions	Accumulating abundant information to draw meaningful insights
Concepts	Definable and measurable	Incorporating the perspectives of stakeholders
Units of analysis	Reduction to simplest terms	Including the complexity of entire situations
Generalization through	Statistical probability	Theoretical abstraction
Sampling requires	Selection of large numbers at random	A select few cases chosen for specific reasons
Quality criteria	Rigor: objectivity, internal and external validity, reliability	Trustworthiness and authenticity

Since an objective of this thesis is to focus on prosumers' activities of engagement, exploring their perceptions and views of Chinese web fiction in regard to their consumption/reading experiences, it is necessary to comprehend the value that is generated from this journey and how it is co-created through the interaction and integration of resources within and among service systems. In essence, this research seeks to examine the significance of prosumption within a specific business context and critically evaluate the value that emerges from this process. Thus, this study aligns with the social constructivist philosophical paradigm, which emphasizes an epistemology revolving around the construction of meaning, symbolic interaction, and the larger social contexts shaping the meaning-making process (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Taylor, 1971; Hacking, 1999; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Holstein and Gubrium, 2013).

Drawing upon my past educational experiences, I adhere to the principles of constructionism. My exploration of the interaction between empirical worlds and fictional narrative worlds reflects an ongoing attempt to discuss the 'truth value' of

fictional worlds. As the well-known couplet from *The Story of the Stone* (Cao, Hawkes trans., 2014, p. 13), a Chinese classic, states, 'Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real'(Cao, Hawkes trans., 2014, p.13); subjectivism is always intertwined with objectivism. Essentialism legitimizes subjectivity and intersectionality in social critical understandings and incorporates implications and complexity in knowledge production (Lowthers *et al*., 2017, p. 3). This belief positions me as an advocate for constructivist thought, which is rooted in the premise of multiple layers of reality. Guba's assertion that 'facts are only within some theoretical framework' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 107) highlights the inseparability of cognition and facts, reinforcing my understanding that knowledge constructed within theoretical frameworks strongly resonates with my views on the 'truth' of this world.

Positivists, conversely, maintain the dichotomy that objects are independent of subjective consciousness —a perspective originating from ancient Greek philosophy (Crotty, 1989, p. 35). As Archimedes stated, 'Give me a place to stand on and I will move the Earth', but this requires that both the place and Archimedes himself exist outside the Earth. Similarly, it is impossible to step outside the framework of observation to directly comprehend reality (Neurath, 1983).

With the rise of post-positivism, especially Bohr's complementarity theory in quantum research, the positivist perspective has been increasingly challenged. Bohr's theory emphasizes the uncertainty or 'idealization' of definition and observation under conditions that seek to eliminate all external disturbances (Bohr, 1928, p. 580). This has called into question the positivist reliance on controlled laboratory environments, as such settings may not adequately reflect the complexity of the real world—a notion Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 106) describe as 'context stripping'. Additionally, the interpretive power of positivism, which depends on induction and generalization, is undermined by anomalies, such as the famous example of a single black swan overturning the generalization that all swans are white (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 107).

Constructivism, as a competing paradigm, posits that human constructions form the basis of ontology and reality. These constructions cannot be judged as absolutely true or false; rather, they are evaluated based on their level of sophistication and coherence. Moreover, these constructions are subject to modification, which in turn alters associated realities (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111).

These insights, derived from my doctoral training at UWTSD, are deeply aligned with my prior understanding of constructivism. This study adopts a constructivist approach to inquiry, recognizing that knowledge and reality are contingent upon human constructions shaped by varying degrees of refinement and interpretation (Azemi *et al.*, 2019).

In customer value research, two paradigms stand out: the interpretivist view, emphasizing subjective and situational experiences, and the social constructionist view, which perceives value as socially constructed (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020). Both perspectives emphasize the interactive nature of customer value. However, the constructivism tradition underpinning of this research is particularly relevant for understanding how value is co-created and emerges through co-production and co-creation in the consumption of Chinese web fiction.

Specifically, this study focuses on customers within a shared brand-centric interpretive community, where value and meaning are constructed through human interaction. Creativity flourishes within this virtual, meaning-laden space. Berger and Luckmann (1966) proposed that realities are constructed through experiences and interactions with oneself and others. As a result, knowledge and comprehension are shaped by social interaction. Accordingly, the constructivist paradigm provides a robust and appropriate philosophical framework to support this research (Howell, 2016).

Additionally, research into social constructionism suggests that technology plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour (Campbell and Russo, 2003). The formation of online identities and sociocultural communities has been extensively studied in

computer-mediated communication (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). This perspective, emphasizing the integration of users' views and their social contexts, contrasts with the assumption that technical characteristics alone drive consumer behaviour. This aligns with ANT, discussed in Chapter 2, particularly regarding 'agential assemblages' and their role in value co-creation.

The following section will discuss the research approach and the reasoning behind this study.

3.3 Research Approach to Logical Reasoning

It is imperative for researchers to understand the different reasoning approaches linked to different ontological assumptions, namely inductive, deductive, and abductive. While inductive and deductive approaches are grounded in shared ontological assumptions, the abductive approach adopts a social constructionist perspective on social reality (Soundy, 2024). Such distinctions have significant implications for the decisions researchers make and their interpretation of results (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao, 2004, p. 819). Conversely, an inadequate comprehension of the complexities can lead to unsophisticated and inconsistent research procedures (Blaikie, 2000).

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2021) highlight three key advantages of comprehensively understanding reasoning approaches:

1) Informed decision-making: Researchers can construct a research plan that aligns with the evidence needed, identifies appropriate sources, and ensures effective interpretation of this evidence to answer the research question.

2) Methodological efficacy: Understanding reasoning approaches allows researchers to identify effective strategies and methodologies while avoiding less suitable ones.

3) Adaptability: Familiarity with reasoning traditions enables researchers to modify their research designs to address constraints, such as limited data access or insufficient subject knowledge.

Thus, the choice of reasoning approach is critical for ensuring consistency and depth in research design and implementation.

Inductive research is best suited to answering 'what' questions but is less effective in providing explanations for observed patterns. Deductive research, in contrast, addresses 'why' questions but still relies on identifying patterns. Abductive research, uniquely, can answer both 'what' and 'why' questions (Blaikie, 1993, 2000). Abductive reasoning begins by recognizing an unusual or surprising fact and subsequently devising a plausible explanation for its occurrence (Suddaby, 2006; van Maanen *et al.*, 2007). This approach often starts with the everyday concepts and interpretations of people involved in the research issue, which are then reinterpreted through scientific language to deepen understanding and develop more complex theories (Hughes, 1990; Williams and May, 1996). Combining inductive and deductive approaches, the abductive approach, allows researchers to identify patterns and themes from the data while taking into account the impact of existing theories and ideas on the research process (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b).

In the context of this thesis, the research begins with an observation of a 'surprising fact': young people from both the East and the West are captivated by Chinese web fiction. For example, Kevin Cazade, a young American man, reportedly overcame his drug addiction by reading Chinese online novels (*People's Daily Online*, 2017). This study seeks to explore what occurs when consumers engage in consuming or co-producing web novels online and why this behaviour fosters a greater sense of personal well-being.

Abductive reasoning combines elements of both deductive and inductive approaches, allowing researchers to move between them fluidly (Suddaby, 2006). While an inductive strategy generates theories from data without pre-defined frameworks, abduction permits researchers to begin with an initial theoretical understanding and refine it based on empirical findings (Ong, 2012; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). This iterative process involves continually comparing and interpreting new and existing data to identify patterns and develop plausible theoretical explanations (Thornberg, 2012).

In particular, constructivism is based on the concept of viewing and interpreting reality from the standpoint of its practical bearing on life; whereas the related abductive logic originates from prior theoretical insights to create new ones on the basis of remarkable empirical research evidence. By engaging in empirical reflection, one can identify anomalies that cannot be explained by existing theories, thus prompting abductive enquiry and the potential for new discoveries (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). Constructivism, as the philosophical foundation for this research, aligns closely with abductive reasoning by emphasizing the interpretation of reality based on its practical implications and the refinement of theoretical insights through empirical reflection. The purpose of this research is not to create entirely new theories, as in grounded theory, but to uncover new insights and connections that expand existing theories (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

In this thesis, the research operates within the theoretical framework of S-D logic, (i.e., going back to a deductive approach), and progresses through an iterative research process from which a plausible model that fits a puzzling or surprising case will emerge (i.e., going forward to an inductive approach). The process involves a cyclical movement between immersion in the data and stepping back to observe the broader context.

Through the abductive analysis, researchers examine surprising evidence, formulate questions, and seek familiar patterns (Earl Rinehart, 2020). For example, while studying the definition of 'service' in service science—which involves leveraging specialized expertise for mutual benefit—I reflected on my experience as a long-time consumer of Chinese online literature. This led me to question whether voluntary engagement in consumption resembled the psychological and behavioural patterns of co-creation in Chinese web fiction consumption.

This inquiry led me to virtual communities, where I observed fan interactions, analysed consumer comments, reviewed questionnaire data collected by a popular Chinese web fiction writer, and explored fanfiction and related academic materials. I participated in

webinars, such as the Fictopia Webfiction Convention Panels, where I gained insights from senior writers' professional experiences. This iterative process enabled me to refine my research questions and validate my assumptions through continuous reflection and evidence evaluation.

As outlined in this section, abductive reasoning is an appropriate research methodology for this study, as it is well-suited for investigating how consumers engage in self-motivated, collaborative production of web novels and the implications of this behaviour for their well-being.

3.4 Research Strategy: S-D logic-informed CE within a Case

This research utilizes a case study strategy to investigate the interactions between subjects and their environment to gain an understanding of the dynamics of value co-creation within the context of Chinese web fiction consumption. A case study approach, as described by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), is appropriate for examining the complex, context-dependent nature of CE.

Adopting a constructivist paradigm, which is founded on the concept of a socially constructed reality (Searle, 1995), this approach emphasizes close collaboration between the researcher and participants, which allows for a deeper understanding of participant perspectives (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). This paradigm is particularly suited for this study, as it facilitates the exploration of the personal and collective experiences of web fiction consumers, thereby uncovering the nuanced processes of value co-creation.

Yin's (2014) case study design was employed to address 'how' and 'why' questions; the design focused on the contextually relevant conditions that influence value co-creation activities. This design is essential for understanding the activities and processes involved in CE within the digital platforms specific to Chinese web fiction. These platforms were selected based on their unique characteristics that foster high levels of

user interaction and engagement.

In defining the specific online platforms, the current study considers criteria such as user demographics, interaction patterns, and the presence of collaborative features that facilitate value co-creation. Understanding how the digital environment affects engagement, power dynamics between authors and readers, and the overall content creation process is central to this research.

By applying a case study strategy within the S-D logic framework, this research aims to provide comprehensive insights into the mechanisms of CE and value co-creation in the context of Chinese web fiction. This approach not only elucidates the complex interplay between digital platforms and customer interactions but also offers a robust methodological foundation for future research in similar domains.

3.4.1 Exploratory Research Design: Purpose, Rationale, and Methods

The purpose of the research design in this thesis is to conduct an exploratory case study to gain a deeper understanding of a problem or issue that is not yet fully understood. This exploratory approach is justified as the research questions begin with 'What' and 'How', indicating a need to investigate the phenomena in detail (Thomas, 2016). The rationale for this approach lies in its flexibility to adapt to new findings and refine questions during the research process (Yin, 2018).

The iterative nature of exploratory research ensures continuous evaluation of data sufficiency and the adaptability to address emerging insights. The iterative process of exploratory research requires the researcher to continuously evaluate whether sufficient data have been collected to address the initial questions, whether new issues have arisen that necessitate new questions, or whether existing questions need modification (Yin, 2018). The aim of the exploratory phase is to develop a conceptual model for subsequent studies, which necessitates a clear delineation of data collection procedures (Yin, 2018). To achieve these objectives, data collection has to be achieved through

various methods, such as documentary reviews, observations, individual interviews, and focus group interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989; Kalender, 2007). These interviews are often semi-structured or unstructured; participants' insights inform the next steps of the research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2018). These methods facilitate in-depth exploration and allow participants' insights to shape subsequent steps.

By employing a "thick description" approach, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive portrayal of the studied phenomenon within its context (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). The abductive analysis process identifies themes and patterns, situating findings within existing literature to refine or generate theory (Ridder, 2017). This methodological approach ensures that case descriptions and emerging themes are both detailed and grounded in empirical evidence (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

3.4.2 Embedded Case Study Design: Rationale and Application

Having identified that a qualitative case study is the most appropriate way to answer the research question, the next step is to determine which type of case study should be implemented. Case studies have been used for a variety of purposes such as theory generation, theory testing, and description (Eisenhardt, 1989). Yin (2014) distinguished between three types of case studies: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. He further differentiated between single-case studies and multiple-case studies. Additionally, Stake (1995) classified case studies into three categories: instrumental, intrinsic, and collective (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Definitions of various types of case studies(adapted from Baxter and Jack, 2015)

Type of Case Study	Definition	Context of Use in this Research
Intrinsic Case Study	Focuses on the unique aspects of a single case (Stake, 1995).	Not applicable for this study as the focus is not solely on the unique aspects of Qidian Reading, but on broader theoretical implications.
Instrumental Case Study	Provides insights into an issue or refines a theoretical explanation (Stake, 1995).	Relevant for understanding specific mechanisms within Qidian Reading but not the primary focus.
Collective Case Study	Involves studying multiple cases to investigate a phenomenon (Yin, 2014).	Not applicable as this current study focuses on a single case.
Embedded Case Study	**Involves a single case with multiple sub-units of analysis (Scholz and Roland, 2002; Yin, 2018).**	**Primary approach for this research, focusing on various interactive features and user-generated content within Qidian Reading.**

When conducting a case study, after identifying the 'case' and the relevant 'type' of case study, researchers must decide whether a single or multiple case study is more suitable to gain better insight into the phenomenon. Yin (2018) postulated a model that incorporates four designs based on a 2×2 matrix (see Figure 3.2). This model was designed to assist inexperienced researchers in formulating more robust case studies, thus simplifying the process.

Figure 3.2: Fundamental designs used for case studies (adapted from Yin, 2018)
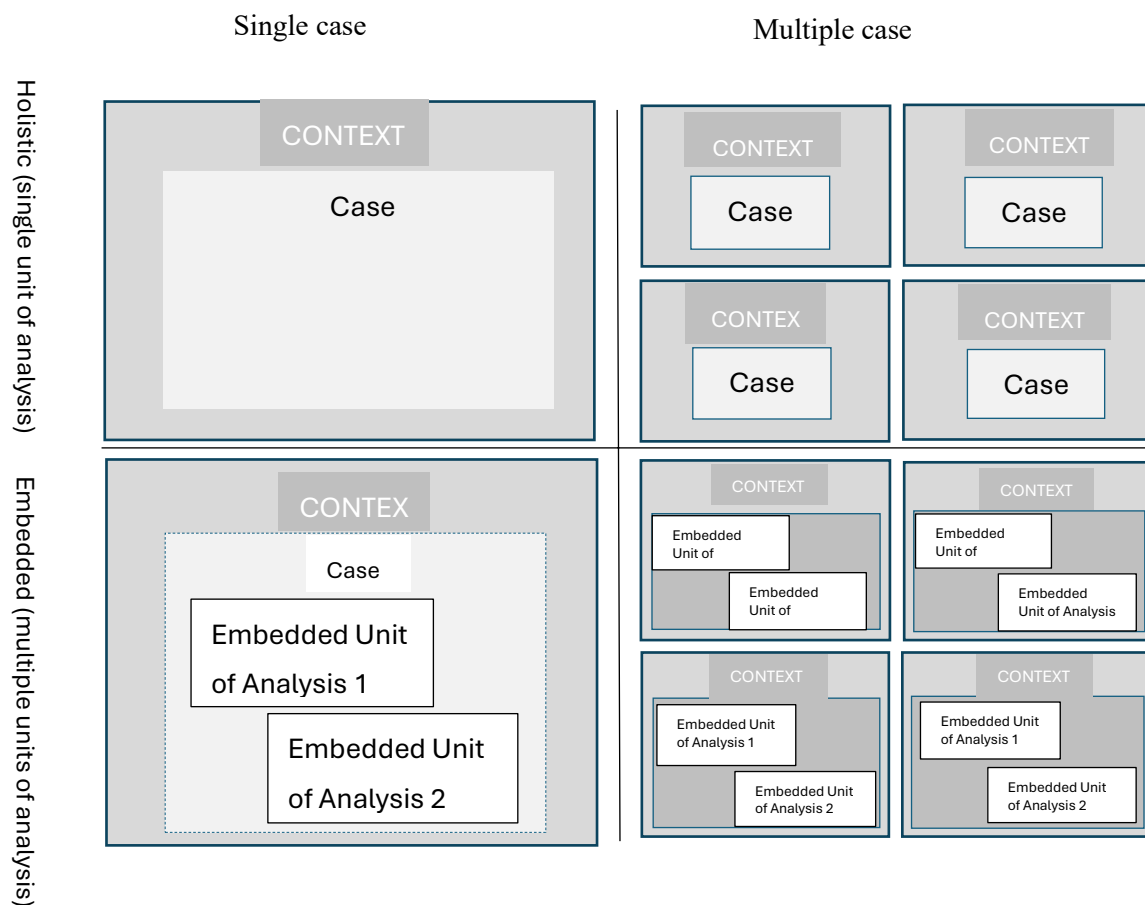
The matrix demonstrates that all designs necessitate the evaluation of contextual factors in relation to the case. It further reveals that single- and multiple-case studies involve distinct design scenarios, with the potential for either a single or multiple units of analysis. This distinction highlights the flexibility of case study research in capturing both the broader context of a phenomenon and its more granular aspects, depending on the research objectives.

The rationale for adopting an embedded case study lies in its capacity to balance a focus on the overarching case while simultaneously exploring into the specific components or sub-units of analysis. This method aligns with Ozuem, Howell, and Lancaster's (2008, p. 1097) assertion that contextualized case studies offer a profound understanding of 'the voice of experience'. By focusing on Qidian Reading, the research aims to uncover

the specific mechanisms and outcomes of CE and value co-creation, which will provide valuable theoretical and practical insights.

An embedded case study design involves focusing on a single case in this research– Qidian Reading – while examining sub-units within the platform, such as "Chapter Comments," "Character Zone," and other user-generated content areas. By employing this approach, the study can reveal how interactive features contribute to customer engagement and value co-creation, directly reflecting the principles of prosumption and resource integration discussed earlier.

Figure 3.3: Main case – Qidian Reading (source: author)
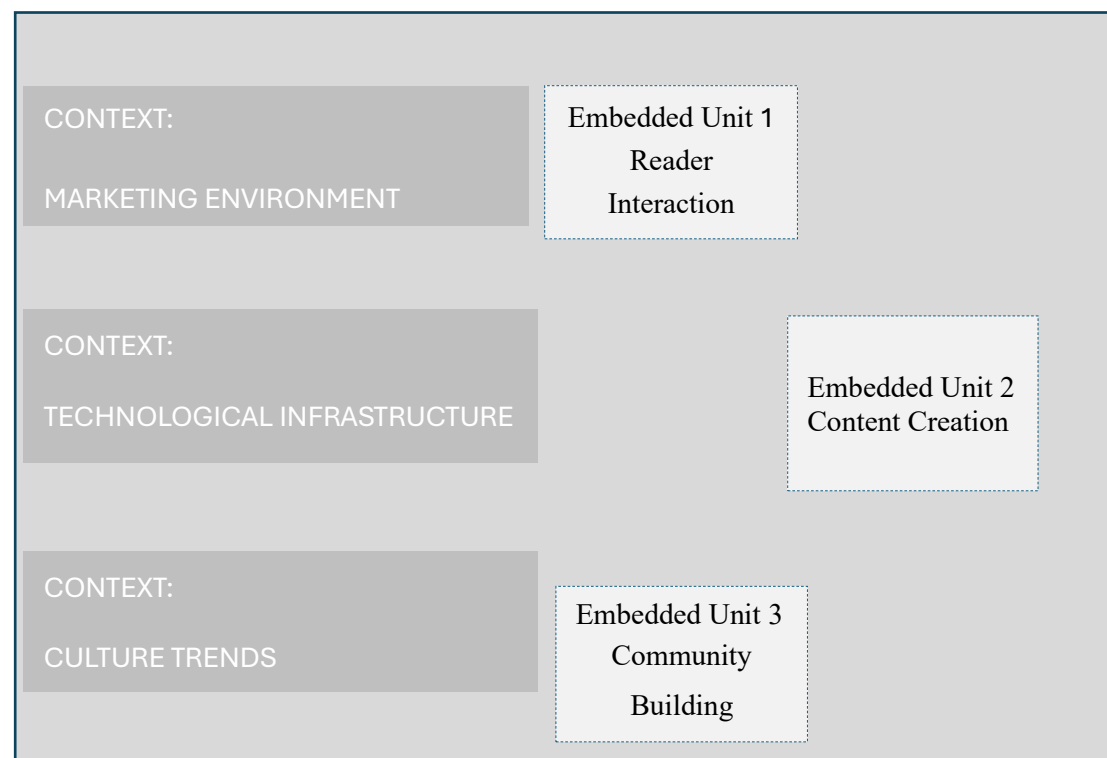
Figure 3.3 illustrates this research design, with Qidian Reading as the primary case and four embedded units: Reader Interaction, Content Creation, Community Building. These embedded units are not merely descriptive but are analysed as integral mechanisms through which operant and operand resources are integrated within the platform. For instance, "Reader Interaction" exemplifies the dynamic co-creation process as readers contribute feedback and discussions, while "Content Creation"

reflects the participatory role of users in prosumption activities. "Community Building" analyses community-driven activities, such as fan groups and events, to uncover the dynamics of user engagement and social bonding.

The contextual factors – Marketing Environment, Technological Infrastructure, and Cultural Trends – further shape these embedded units. This integrated perspective ensures that the research does not over-rely on isolated examples but systematically links them to broader theoretical constructs. For example, technological advancements, conceptualized as operant resources in S-D Logic, enable real-time reader interactions that foster co-creation and enhance value-in-context. Similarly, marketing environment influences the strategies that drive user engagement and retention, such as promotional campaigns or the integration of gamification elements, which motivate readers to actively participate in discussions or content creation. Cultural Trends, on the other hand, play a significant role in shaping the themes and narratives of web novels, ensuring they resonate with the cultural preferences and identities of the platform's diverse user base. Together, these contextual factors dynamically interact with the embedded units, reinforcing the interconnected nature of Qidian Reading's ecosystem. In this thesis, embedded case design is particularly suited to exploring the connection between customers' personal resources and the results of value co-creation. The research investigates the operant and operand resources provided by customers and companies and how these resources are integrated to create value on the Qidian Reading platform. By examining various sub-units within the platform, such as specific interactive features and user-generated content, the study derives insights into how prosumption influences customers' individual well-being and development.

This abductive research design allows for an iterative process that integrates theoretical understanding with empirical findings. As outlined in Section 3.3, the abductive approach enables researchers to identify surprising patterns and refine existing theories. By grounding the study in S-D Logic, the research framework moves between theory and data to provide a holistic understanding of value co-creation in digital literature.

Additionally, the qualitative paradigm adopted in this study, supports the exploration of complex phenomena by gathering rich, in-depth data from multiple layers of the case. This methodological framework is designed to gather rich, in-depth data that illuminate the lived experiences and perspectives of Qidian Reading users. Through detailed analysis of user interactions, feedback loops, and engagement patterns, the study seeks to contribute to the broader theoretical discourse on CE and value co-creation in digital environments.

In conclusion, the embedded case study design offers a comprehensive framework for this research, balancing the depth of analysis with theoretical rigor. It ensures that examples such as "Chapter Comments" or "Character Zone" are not isolated descriptions but are analysed as part of a broader narrative that connects customer engagement and value co-creation to theoretical models like S-D Logic and prosumption. This integrated approach not only enhances the depth of analysis but also ensures that the findings are richly contextualized; the analysis offers significant contributions to both theory and practice in the field of digital literature and user engagement.

3.5 Sampling and Data Collection

3.5.1 Sample Selection under the Constructionist Paradigm

This section delineates the sample selection process within the constructionist paradigm; it highlights the utilization of non-probability sampling techniques, specifically purposive sampling and snowball sampling, in the present study.

In alignment with the constructionist paradigm, this study adopts a purposive and snowball sampling strategy, both of which are particularly well suited to qualitative research that aims to explore complex phenomena in depth rather than generalize findings (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). The constructionist paradigm posits that knowledge is constructed through interactions and experiences, which makes it essential to engage

with participants who can provide rich, detailed insights into the research questions (Pilarska, 2021). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to intentionally select individuals who are most likely to contribute valuable perspectives based on their unique experiences and expertise. For this study, purposive sampling enables the intentional selection of participants deeply engaged with Chinese online literature, such as die-hard readers, co-creators, or those transitioning from casual readership to active involvement. This targeted approach is further enhanced by snowball sampling, which leverages existing participant networks to identify additional respondents who may offer critical insights that would otherwise be inaccessible (Patton, 2015).

Table 3.4 provides an overview of non-probability sampling methods, illustrating why purposive and snowball sampling align with this study's qualitative approach. Convenience sampling, while practical in some scenarios, is less applicable to this study due to the potential for bias introduced by the ease of access to certain participants. For instance, convenience sampling might restrict the sample to university students, overlooking the broader spectrum of online literature readers across different age groups and social backgrounds. Quota sampling and voluntary response sampling are also less relevant, as they either prioritize representation of specific subgroups or rely on participants self-selecting into the study, which could introduce biases that are not aligned with the study's objectives. Quota sampling, while structured, may underrepresent niche groups like creators or casual readers, while voluntary response sampling risks attracting only the most engaged individuals, skewing the findings toward highly active participants.

Table 3.4: Types of Non-probability Sampling Relevant to the Study (adapted from Fleetwood, 2023, Qualtrics XM, 2023, and Mertler, 2020)

Sampling Method	Key Characteristics	Relevance to the Study
Purposive Sampling	- Researcher's subjective judgement in selecting participants. - Not all individuals have the same chance of selection.	Critical for selecting participants whose experiences and knowledge align with the study's research questions.
Snowball Sampling	- Relies on referrals, making participant identification relatively simple. - Not all individuals have equal chances to participate.	Useful for reaching hard-to-access and expanding the sample through participant referrals.
Convenience Sampling	- Sample selection based on ease of access. - Does not provide an accurate portrayal of the population.	While convenient, convenience sampling could introduce bias by favouring easily accessible participants, which does not align with the study's goal of in-depth qualitative analysis.
Quota Sampling	- Ensures representation of subgroups without random selection. - The sample may not represent the broader population accurately.	Less applicable, as it prioritizes subgroup representation, which may not capture the depth of individual experiences relevant to this study's objectives.
Voluntary Response Sampling	- Participants self-select into the study. - Often leads to sampling bias, not providing an accurate portrayal of the population.	Not favoured due to self-selection bias, which could skew the study's findings.

By focusing on purposive and snowball sampling, the study ensures a methodologically sound approach that aligns with its overarching goals. Moreover, the choice of sampling methods is intricately tied to the research objectives. To answer the research questions and meet the objectives, it is necessary to undertake an in-depth study that focuses on a small number of cases selected for a specific purpose. Since the constructionist paradigm does not aim to generalize findings statistically but rather to explore the richness of individual experiences (Collis and Hussey, 2021, p. 118), purposive sampling and snowball sampling are well-suited for this study.

According to Hycner (1999, p. 156), 'the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice

versa), including even the type of participants'. Purposive sampling, considered the most important kind of non-probability form of sampling, has been used to identify the primary participants (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2018). It seeks to sample cases/participants intentionally, so that they are relevant to the research questions being studied (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). In other words, the sample is selected based on the purpose of the research; the researcher looks for those who 'have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched' (Kruger, 1988, p. 150).

To incorporate additional informants or participants into the study, I first employed purposive sampling to select a group of initial interviewees based on specific criteria. Once this purposive sample was established, I expanded the number of participants using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves asking each participant to recommend others who may also be suitable for the study, particularly those who are hard to reach through other methods (Babbie, 1995; Miller and Crabtree, 1992). My position as a university teacher provides easy access to college students, many of whom are familiar with, or have experience in, reading online novels, and some may even have become deeply involved with them. In this context, the initial participants acted as gatekeepers – individuals who facilitate access to additional informants – while those they recommended became key actors or key insiders (Bailey, 1996; Holloway, 1997; Greig and Taylor, 1999). This approach allowed me to expand the sample beyond the university, reaching diverse groups such as online literature creators, long-term readers, and co-creators.

Therefore, I requested that the purposive sample interviewees provide the names and contact details of individuals who: a) are not necessarily registered students of our university, b) are die-hard fans or former die-hard fans of online literature and c) have experience in co-producing web novels.

3.5.2 Sample Size and Data Collection Method

In this study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to select

participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the research questions. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is crucial in qualitative research as it ensures that data collection has been thoroughly explored and the findings are robust and trustworthy (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Naeem *et al.*, 2024). Data saturation is reached when no new themes, patterns, or codes emerge from the collected data; this indicates that the data have been fully utilized to address the research questions and contribute to the theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke, 22021).

In qualitative studies using non-probability sampling methods, such as this one, determining the appropriate sample size is more complex and must be justified based on the specific research context. As Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2022) pointed out, the sample size in qualitative research is not guided by strict numerical rules but by the point at which additional data no longer contributes new insights, which is the point of data saturation. Therefore, the decision to select 21 participants was guided by the need to achieve data saturation while ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research questions. This number was not arbitrarily chosen but was instead determined through an iterative process of data collection and analysis.

Data saturation was reached after 18 interviews, at which point no new themes, patterns, or codes were emerging. To confirm the robustness of this finding, an additional three interviews were conducted, bringing the total to 21 participants. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018), who suggest that 5 to 30 interviews are typically sufficient for in-depth qualitative studies, and Saunders *et al.* (2018), who recommend a minimum of 12 interviews for research involving a homogeneous population.

The choice of 21 participants also reflects the research objectives, which aim to explore the nuanced experiences and perceptions of Chinese web fiction consumers. By focusing on a smaller, information-rich sample, the study ensures a comprehensive exploration of the research questions while maintaining methodological coherence with

the constructivist paradigm underpinning the research. As emphasized by Collis and Hussey (2021) and Bell *et al*. (2022), the adequacy of the sample size in qualitative research is primarily determined by its ability to provide a comprehensive exploration of the research questions to ensure the data's applicability and theoretical soundness. Thus, the decision to stop at 21 participants was made to ensure that the data collected were rich and comprehensive, while also confirming the attainment of saturation. This ensures that the findings are robust and trustworthy, in line with the principles of qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Naeem *et al*., 2024).

The use of thematic analysis (TA) in this study also supports the achievement of saturation, as TA is well suited to identify and refine key concepts through an iterative process of coding and theming (Naeem *et al*., 2024). Unlike grounded theory, which focuses on developing new theoretical constructs, TA was chosen as it allows for a broader exploration of pre-existing theoretical frameworks relevant to this study.
According to Rubin and Rubin (2011), when selecting interviewees, three guidelines should be taken into consideration: they must be experienced with the topic being studied, they must be willing to talk, and they must represent a range of viewpoints. This selection of participants allows for a full account of the process, while also attaining saturation, which is the certainty that further interviews will not yield significantly different information (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). However, in the case of my study, I encountered initial challenges with data saturation, particularly in identifying high-quality interviewees for a niche topic like Chinese web fiction consumption.

Participant Recruitment and Workshop Attendance

My research focuses on Chinese web fiction consumers, necessitating interviews with fan readers or leading consumers who could offer meaningful insights. Initially, identifying high-quality interviewees posed a challenge. A breakthrough came when I discovered an announcement from Beijing University about a workshop on the Chinese web fiction industry and related studies. I immediately registered for this four-week

online seminar, which culminated in an offline discussion on 16 June 2023 at Beijing University.

The workshop attracted a diverse group, including fan readers, fan-based scholars, young web fiction writers, and editors from across China. Several experts and prominent practitioners were also invited, one of whom accepted my invitation for an in-depth interview. This conference, featuring renowned scholars, writers, and industry representatives, provided an invaluable opportunity to identify high-quality interviewees. Following my plan, I successfully conducted interviews with several participants, often lasting 3–4 hours or extending into multiple sessions for deeper exploration. Subsequent follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone until data saturation was achieved. The entire data collection process spanned approximately three months.

Participant Demographics

The demographic composition of the participants reflects the diverse roles within the Chinese web fiction community. As shown in Table 3.5, the sample is predominantly young adults, with 43% aged 18–22 and 33% aged 26–30. This reflects the youth-dominated phenomenon in the web fiction industry. A smaller proportion (24%) consists of middle-aged individuals (36–48 years), primarily representing experienced professionals in roles such as web fiction writing and editing.

Participants were selected to provide insights into their unique experiences, and perspectives. The sample includes writers, editors, university students, teaching staff, and other professionals, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of varying viewpoints within the web fiction ecosystem. Most participants have 1–4 years of experience in web fiction, while some have been involved for up to 9 years. Participants were invited via an invitation letter (see Appendix 1).

Table 3.5: Demographics of interviewees

No.	Age	Gender	Occupation
P1	40	F	Housemaker/Pre-web novel writer
P2	38	F	Administrative staff/Web novel writer
P3	22	F	Financial staff/Web novel writer
P4	28	F	Postgraduate
P5	26	F	Postgraduate
P6	27	F	Editor of web fiction
P7	27	M	Product development manager
P8	29	F	University teaching staff/Web novel expert
P9	30	M	University teaching staff/Web novel expert
P10	38	M	University teaching staff/Web novel expert
P11	48	M	Website operator
P12	21	M	Undergraduate student
P13	30	M	Data processor
P14	36	M	Web novel writer
P15	19	F	Undergraduate student
P16	18	M	Undergraduate student
P17	19	M	Undergraduate student
P18	21	M	Undergraduate student
P19	18	M	Undergraduate student
P20	19	M	Undergraduate student
P21	29	M	Web novel writer

Table 3.5 outlines the demographics of interviewees, including their age, gender, and occupation. The roles and contributions of these participants are as follows:

- **University students** and **postgraduates** provided insights into the perspectives of casual readers and emerging prosumers, highlighting the emotional and social dimensions of engagement.
- **University teaching staff** and **novel writers** contributed expertise on the commercial and creative aspects of web fiction, offering a deeper understanding

of the industry's dynamics.

- **Data processors** and **editors** shared technical and managerial perspectives, emphasizing the role of institutional arrangements in fostering value co-creation.

This diversity in roles ensures a holistic exploration of the research questions, capturing both individual and collective experiences within the web fiction ecosystem.

The demographic breakdown contributes to the research findings by capturing the perspectives of prosumers (those actively involved in co-creating content), consumers (casual readers), and producers (professional writers and editors). The inclusion of these roles enriches the analysis by highlighting the interplay between different stakeholders in the value co-creation process. For instance, the insights of professional writers provide a deeper understanding of the commercial dynamics of the industry, while the perspectives of casual readers shed light on the emotional and social dimensions of engagement.

Data Collection Approach and Instruments

Under a constructivist paradigm, unstructured or semi-structured interviews are used (Collis and Hussey, 2021). An exploratory study was conducted to gain insight into the respondents' perspectives, including their viewpoint and the rationale behind it. Even though an in-depth or unstructured interview is highly recommended in a qualitative case study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2018), conducting unstructured interviews can be time-consuming, with potential difficulties in controlling the scope of topics and accurately documenting the questions and responses. Additionally, analysing the data might be challenging as the questions posed and topics discussed can vary from interview to interview as new insights into the subject matter emerge (Collis and Hussey, 2021). Therefore, semi-structured interviews, which can avoid going off on a tangent and ensure that really good quality questions are prepared that provide sound insights (Xian and Meng-Lewis, 2018), were taken as a priority in this study.

This study utilized semi-structured interviews, which strike a balance between structure

and flexibility, enabling the collection of rich insights while maintaining focus on the research objectives (Xian and Meng-Lewis, 2018). Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted. Face-to-face interviews were held on campus, following best practices for ensuring a secure, comfortable environment (Yeo *et al.*, 2014), and were primarily conducted with university students. Telephone interviews were reserved for professionals from various industries, ensuring a diverse sample. Those who were willing to take telephone interviews were added to the participant group at a later stage since they were not identified in the pilot study.

Data collection interviews continued until the topic was exhausted or saturated, that is, when interviewees (subjects or informants) introduced no new perspectives on the topic. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, with the majority spanning approximately one hour, which is considered optimal for obtaining valid data (Cassell, 2015). Before conducting interviews, participants received a consent form explaining the research purpose, data confidentiality, and usage. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed.

I made them fully aware that the collected data would be anonymous and stored safely, and used only for the purpose of research. During interviews, it is advisable to pay attention, make a few notes, and request further explanation if needed. It is essential to ensure that there is sufficient time and space to create a summary and analysis after the interview is finished (Stake, 1995). Having completed the post-interview stage, I transcribed the recordings from Chinese into text, and then translated the Chinese text into English.

Given that the interviews were conducted in Chinese, a robust process was implemented to ensure that the collected data were accurately transcribed and translated into English. An iFLYTEK Smart Recorder was utilized to capture high-definition audio with advanced noise reduction features to ensure clarity in the recordings. This device also provided real-time transcription of the spoken Chinese into text, along with an automated translation of the transcriptions into English.

However, recognizing the potential limitations of machine translation, a rigorous post-editing process was undertaken. After the initial transcription and translation, the recordings were reviewed multiple times to verify the accuracy of the machine-generated text. This post-editing process was critical for correcting errors, clarifying ambiguities, and ensuring that the translations accurately reflected the nuances of the participants' responses. This step was essential for maintaining the validity and reliability of the data used in the subsequent analysis.

The refined translations, along with the original transcriptions, were stored securely using the iFLYTEK Smart Recorder's cloud storage feature, which facilitated easy access for analysis. This comprehensive approach, combining advanced technology with meticulous post-editing, ensured that the data collection and translation processes were both efficient and accurate, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the research findings.

Focus Groups and Additional Data Sources

On the other hand, I conducted a focus group discussion with a specific age group and a ratio of men to women to perceive the exact meaning and value generated for young consumers in their reading process and interaction with service providers in virtual communities. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), a focus group interview is more than just questioning a few people together; the focus should be on the interaction between the participants and the content of the conversation. Morgan (2009) claimed that the interactive nature of a focus group offers access to information that cannot be easily acquired through a questionnaire or an interview. This provides the opportunity to observe social interaction, which can enhance the data and address the individualistic bias present in a one-on-one interview, as well as take into account the social construction of meaning. Notably, focus groups are a method used to gain an understanding of how a specific issue affects a specified group of people. This data can provide insight into the prevalence of social and cultural norms in the community and people's opinions on their values (Ott and Mack, 2020). Because this case study focuses

on exploring the perceptions and views of customers of Chinese web fiction in their journey of consuming/reading experiences within fandom communities, a focus group is a suitable method to understand what value results from this journey for consumers of Chinese online literature and how perspectives are constructed and communicated socially (Puchta and Potter, 2004).

In terms of group composition, homogeneous groups were established by employing a homogeneous sampling technique. This decision was made based on the research questions that explore the values and perspectives of a particular group. However, extreme homogeneity was avoided in this study by incorporating diversity of age and gender to ensure the quality of discussion. Moreover, instead of recruiting participants who are acquainted with one another, having a group of members who know little about each other facilitates their expression of views in an environment composed of strangers whom they might not meet again (Xian and Meng-Lewis, 2018). Therefore, most participants were strangers to each other, even though they were collected by means of convenience sampling; that is to say, although they were from the same university, they were from different grades and classes.

In addition, I informed the participants of the details of the data collection process and, in advance, I organized them to observe the site where the focus group discussion was going to take place. The interview and focus group questions, along with the participants' informed consent form, are included as appendices (Appendices 2, 3, and 4) in this document.

Supplementary data were collected from online community forums, media interviews with web fiction writers, and other secondary sources. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in-depth understanding of the case requires collecting and integrating many forms of qualitative data that range from interviews to observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. Additional data were collected from fans' comments and remarks publicized on the forums of digital communities, as well as audio recordings from online media interviews with some service providers, such as the writers of web fiction.

These data provide supplementary information. This triangulation approach enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Yoon and Uliassi, 2022).

Data collecting instruments administered under social constructionism can include document review and observation (Kalender, 2007). By observing participants or non-participants of a study in their natural settings the researcher can gain insight into the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, analysing documents associated with a study can help to further construct the meanings of the phenomenon (Adom, Yeboah and Ankrah, 2016). Hefferman (2013) argued that document analysis involves the examination of data from secondary sources, which requires a comprehensive reading of text to gain a better understanding of a particular area of study. Additionally, interpretive analysis is used to uncover hidden meanings in documents to make them more accessible to readers. This approach was adopted by researchers examining the significance of constructivism in their research.

In summary, the data collection process involved multiple methods, including interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of Chinese web fiction consumers' perspectives. Data saturation was achieved, and all data were meticulously transcribed, translated, and analyzed to maintain the highest standards of research quality.

3.5.3 Pilot Study

A pilot study is a preliminary investigation conducted to test the feasibility and effectiveness of a proposed method of data collection. This type of study is usually done on a small scale to assess the viability of the method and to identify any potential problems that may arise during the actual data collection process (Enago Academy, 2022). Reflection on the research strategy for this study raised several concerns, such as the potential difficulty in reaching informants, the clarity of interview questions, and the overall effectiveness of the data collection methods in achieving the study's goals. As Yin (2018) suggested, uncooperative informants at a fieldwork site, inconvenient

locations, or lack of necessary documentation and data can make conducting qualitative fieldwork and data collection challenging. To address these issues and refine the research strategy, a pilot study was deemed necessary (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2018).

The initial phase of research, conducted between December 2022 and February 2023, involved the collection of documents. Given the informal communication methods prevalent among Chinese web novel practitioners, the document review of website pages was supplemented by the inclusion of their social media streams, as detailed in the '3.5.2 Sample Size and Data Collection Methods' section. This document review played a crucial role in planning the subsequent interview sessions. However, it quickly became apparent that relevant professionals were not very responsive. As a result, the researcher decided to undertake informal visits to accessible consumers on campus, using the snowball sampling technique, to increase participant engagement. These informal meetings, which included meals with potential interviewees whenever possible, allowed the researcher identify discussion topics relevant to the study of web novels.

In March 2023, a pilot study was conducted with four initial interviewees who had expressed interest in participating in the research. These individuals followed the exact same process developed for participants in the principal study. The pilot study was instrumental in revealing several critical issues. For example, some of the original interview questions were found to be too broad because they failed to effectively probe the nuances of value co-creation processes. Questions that broadly addressed participants' general experiences with web fiction communities were revised to focus more specifically on their roles in content co-creation and their interactions with other community members. This refinement led to the final interview questions being more comprehensive and insightful: they focused on personal experiences, community interaction, and the broader impacts of Chinese web novels.

During the interview process, it was also noted that some potential participants initially

agreed to participate but later withdrew from the study for various reasons, refusing to provide further information. This withdrawal led to adjustments in the participant pool, where the participants who had withdrawn were replaced by new ones. Consequently, some of the collected data had to be reviewed and revised, which required further refinement of the interview process to ensure that it remained aligned with the study's objectives.

Additionally, the pilot study highlighted issues with participant selection. Initially, the selection did not fully capture the diversity of engagement experiences necessary for a comprehensive analysis. It became evident that individuals with experience in creating fanfiction should be specifically targeted, as they are more deeply involved in co-creation activities – a core focus of the study. The inclusion of focus groups also emerged as crucial to better understand the dynamics of group engagement, which individual interviews alone could not fully capture.

Finally, the contextual framework of the study was refined during the pilot phase. Factors such as occupation, identification, and location guided the screening and determination of the target online communities as sample data sources (Collis and Hussey, 2021). These adjustments, informed by the pilot study, enhanced the research design by ensuring that the data collection methods were well aligned with the study's objectives, which would ultimately contribute to a more rigorous and effective research process.

3.6 Researcher's Reflexivity

At the outset of my research journey, a few classmates and friends questioned the foundation of my research project. Many were inclined towards conducting quantitative or mixed methods studies, as they believed these approaches would ensure data integrity and applicability of outcomes, thus reflecting a positivist orientation. However, my understanding and perception of the world differs, and my research is underpinned by my philosophical assumptions.

As explained in '3.6 Philosophical Paradigms in Research', my ontology and epistemology align with the constructivist paradigm, which encourages the reporting of multiple realities. Therefore, a positivist-oriented research design was not my priority. Regarding mixed methods, Collis and Hussey (2021) suggested that blending qualitative and quantitative data can create ambiguity in determining the underlying paradigm. While some researchers argue for the compatibility of both approaches (Teddlie, Johnson and Tashakkori, 2020), I chose to avoid potential ambiguity as a novice researcher and aimed to maintain philosophical coherence.

Research questions drive the research process. My interest in the customers of Chinese internet-based fiction was sparked by a news report in 2017 about a US man who claimed to have cured his drug addiction by reading Chinese web novels. This incident led me to question what happens when readers become immersed in these stories, why they develop such a passion for them, and the implications of this phenomenon. These initial questions evolved into my current research questions, which focus on the 'hows' and 'whys'. Consequently, I decided to use a qualitative approach to capture the personal significance and contextual meaning of these experiences for individuals.

In qualitative research, the principle of the 'researcher-as-instrument' is fundamental; this means that the researcher plays a vital role in data collection, interpretation, and presentation. The researcher is responsible for determining the significance and validity of the data throughout the research process (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Dennis, 2018). While qualitative researchers often mention their identity and positionality when discussing the 'researcher-as-instrument' (Dennis, 2018), there is less exploration of how these factors affect research quality (Yoon and Uliassi, 2022). This lack of exploration highlights the importance of critically reflecting on my positionality in this case study.

Although I am not a complete outsider to the Chinese web fiction community, having once been an active participant, I have distanced myself from it for some time. This positions me as a partial insider possessing both a connection to and distance from the

community (Chavez, 2015). Kanuha (2000) argued that holding a dual position as both insider and outsider can be beneficial for scholars, but it can also introduce complexity. She noted the potential challenges of being both the subject and object of research, which can lead to unforeseen difficulties. Chavez (2015) outlined several disadvantages of insider research that serve as cautionary signals to prevent deviations in the research process. Failure to address insider status properly may result in over-identification with participants or excessive reliance on shared experiences, which could obscure research objectives. Additionally, social roles within the community can impose expectations on the researcher; these expectations could lead to value conflicts and compromised professional ethics or research results. Participants' perceptions and expectations can further complicate the researcher's role. Dennis (2018) illustrated an approach where the researcher does not simply pose fixed questions but acts as a co-creator of dialogue to foster trustworthiness through 'truth telling'. However, my insider status also presented challenges during my pilot study. While it facilitated rapport with participants, it heightened my emotions and led to overly casual conversations, deviating from the planned interview structure.

Reflecting on this dual position necessitates an 'iterative and empowering process' of reflexivity (Palaganas *et al*., 2017, p. 426). This involves exploring how the research process and outcomes have shaped me and how my positionality has influenced the research. For example, during interviews, participants' descriptions of their experiences often resonated with my own, which made it challenging to maintain focus and neutrality.

Reflexivity as a process is introspection on the role of subjectivity in the research process (Palaganas *et al*., 2017). As a novice qualitative researcher, I continually assessed and reflected on my data to enhance the quality of my study. This involved actively recognizing and addressing potential biases or preconceptions as well as critically examining my subject-object position, which may influence the data. This ongoing process of self-reflection allowed for a deeper understanding of the research process and my role within it (Cousin, 2009).

Overall, reflexivity is crucial in qualitative research. It is essential to acknowledge that preconceptions and biases may influence the data collection process. To ensure the reliability and validity of my findings, I discussed my research with peers and supervisors and kept a journal throughout the process. The journaling process not only served as a space for introspection but also facilitated critical examination of both my research approach and my role as a researcher. This allowed me to gain deeper insights into the research process and ensure the quality of my study.

3.7 Criteria for Research Rigour

Qualitative research offers several distinct advantages but is often criticized for its perceived lack of objectivity (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). As a result, the issue of validity becomes more complicated in qualitative research compared to quantitative methods. However, Grandy (2018) asserted that rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, qualitative research should embrace it. Subjectivity, inherent in the researcher's perspective, should not be seen as a flaw but as an element that contributes to the depth and authenticity of the study (Maxwell, 2013). Critically, this requires researchers to engage in ongoing reflexivity to interrogate how their biases, assumptions, and positional power shape data collection and interpretation (Dennis, 2018). Wa-Mbaleka (2020) further suggested that striving for complete objectivity can, paradoxically, undermine the trustworthiness of the research.

This viewpoint is particularly relevant in studies conducted within the constructivist paradigm. As outlined in Section 3.2, constructivism acknowledges the influence of the researcher's experiences, perspectives, and background on the research process (Cresswell, 2013; Howell and Annasingh, 2013). Constructivists contend that knowledge is socially and contextually constructed(Stake, 1995). People create meaning based on their intentions, prior knowledge, and symbolic tools (Lindlof, 2008). Consequently, the validity of qualitative research does not hinge on the discovery of an objective truth but rather on the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data collected (Maxwell, 2013). Validity, from a constructivist perspective, emphasizes authenticity,

ethical considerations, relational criteria, and community-oriented perspectives (Howell, 2016, p. 33). Here, critical reflection serves as a safeguard against uncritical acceptance of participants' narratives; researchers must actively question whose voices are centered, which power dynamics remain unexamined, and how their own interpretations may inadvertently reproduce dominant discourses (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Indeed, many qualitative scholars have moved away from the traditional concept of validity because they recognize that it is often rooted in assumptions better suited to quantitative research (Maxwell, 2013). Given the subjective nature of qualitative data interpretation, researchers must engage in critical self-reflection to enhance credibility and address criticisms of qualitative inquiry (Dennis, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This involves documenting reflexive practices such as maintaining a researcher journal to track evolving interpretations, explicitly addressing contradictions in data, and seeking disconfirming evidence to challenge initial assumptions (Berger, 2015). Evaluating qualitative studies requires specific criteria that align with constructivist principles. Numerous scholars have proposed various frameworks for assessing the rigor of constructivist research (Collis and Hussey, 2021). Despite some differences in terminology, these frameworks share many fundamental criteria.

Table 3.6 summarizes key strategies for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research; it draws from the taxonomies of Guba and Lincoln (1985) as well as Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009). Tashakkori and Teddlie's (2009) concept of 'trustworthiness' replaces the traditional notion of validity used in quantitative research. Additionally, the section on 'Alternative Position and Description of the Quality of QUAL' was developed through consultations with other experts in qualitative research.

Table 3.6: Alternative criteria and key strategies for rigor of qualitative research

	QUAN	QUAL Analogue	Alternative Position and Description of the Quality of QUAL	Techniques for Enhancement
1	Reliability (Repeatability)	**Dependability** concentrates on whether the research methods are methodical, thorough, and accurately documented (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).	Replication of qualitative research is not essential as it captures the socially constructed interpretations of a certain setting when it is conducted; nevertheless, a thorough account of the research design, context, and methods can enable others to carry out similar studies (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2018).	☐ Critical audit trail : •Systematically log methodological choices *and* rationale for deviations (Bazeley, 2013) ☐ Reflexive memoing: •Record researcher's evolving assumptions during data collection (Ravitch and Carl, 2021) **Original techniques retained:** - Dependability audit
2	Validity	**Trustworthiness:** The level to which an enquirer can make others believe that their findings are credible and should be given due attention (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).		
	Internal validity	**Credibility** implies it is important for the researcher to dedicate a substantial amount of time to the study, observe the subject of enquiry thoroughly, use data and methodological triangulation, and receive regular feedback from colleagues (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).	Qualitative research, which involves multiple interviews, observations, and data analyses, allows for an in-depth exploration of the proposed theoretical relationships and helps to ensure that the findings are supported by a wealth of evidence (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2018).	☐Reflexive triangulation: •Combine data sources *while analysing researcher's interpretive role* (Flick, 2018) ☐Positionality bracketing: •Explicitly state how researcher identity (e.g., prior experience with web novels) shaped coding decisions (Pillow, 2003) **Original techniques retained:** -Prolonged engagement -Triangulation technique -Peer debriefing
	External validity (Generalization)	**Transferability** looks into whether the results can be applied to another context that is similar enough to allow for generalization (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).	Qualitative researchers have highlighted the value of qualitative research by indicating other forms of generalizability. For instance, findings from one qualitative research environment may be applicable to other contexts (Gummesson, 2000; Buchanan, 2012).	☐Thick description •Provide detailed contextual data (Geertz, 1973) •Map socio-cultural dynamics of web novel communities through prosumers' co-creation practices(e.g., fanfiction remixing rituals) •Interrogate researcher's insider biases as a long-term web novel reader(Pillow, 2003) **Original techniques retained:** – Prolonged engagement – Peer debriefing
3	Objectivity	**Confirmability** implies it is necessary to provide a detailed description of the process and demonstrate that the results are derived from the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).	According to the ontological stance of qualitative research, qualitative researchers pursue their investigations with the purpose of portraying the multiple realities (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Hence, the concept of validity does not refer to the presence of an 'objective truth' which can be compared to an account, but rather to the accuracy or trustworthiness of the data collected (Maxwell, 2013).	☐Positionality statements: •Publicly articulate researcher's social identity (e.g., academic background, cultural insider status) and its impacts (Alvesson, 2003) ☐Disconfirming case analysis: •Actively seek data contradicting initial assumptions (Bazeley, 2020) **Original techniques retained:** -Confirmability audit

Table 3.6 suggests that while the traditional criteria such as reliability and validity are not directly applicable to qualitative research, alternative approaches offer equivalent rigor through terms like credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Crucially, these criteria demand concrete operationalization through techniques such as: 1) Reflexive triangulation that combines data sources while systematically analysing the researcher's interpretive role (e.g., contrasting student readers' and professional writers' definitions of 'co-creation') (Flick, 2018) ; 2) Positionality bracketing to document how identities like prior web novel fandom and academic training in Western constructivism shape coding biases (Pillow, 2003). This epistemological vigilance counters Morse's (2015) caveat that even 'thick description' risks becoming an uncatalogued data dump unless paired with analytical rigor. The retained original techniques – prolonged engagement with online communities, multi-method triangulation, and peer debriefing cycles – now explicitly serve dual purposes: methodological consistency and power imbalance monitoring (e.g. mitigating hierarchical bias when a doctoral candidate interviews faculty members) (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). Ultimately, as Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) argue, qualitative rigor hinges on researchers' willingness to confront the limitations of their own interpretive frameworks through such embedded reflexivity protocols.

Regarding generalization or external validity, considerable debate surrounds its applicability to qualitative research, particularly given the typically small sample sizes, which seem to challenge the generalizability of findings. However, generalization is not an insurmountable issue in qualitative studies, especially in the context of case studies. Yin (2018) argued that case study research should focus on amplifying and generalizing theories (analytic generalization) rather than attempt to predict potential outcomes based on statistical generalization. He emphasized that one of the pitfalls of case studies is the reliance on statistical generalization, which is often inappropriate due to the small, non-representative sample sizes. Instead, case study findings should be used to develop broader theoretical propositions that extend beyond the specific case in question. This approach emphasizes the importance of linking the method of sample selection to the research objectives in order to generate generalizations that contribute

to theory, rather than merely addressing a particular social group.

In parallel, Gummesson (2000) contended that generalizations are possible even from a single case study, provided that the analysis is detailed and context-specific. Constructivists, therefore, may be able to extrapolate their findings to similar contexts if they consider whether the patterns, concepts, and theories developed in one setting can be applied to others. Bonoma (1985) argued that while positivist methods, such as laboratory experiments, are often seen as more precise, interpretivist approaches, such as case studies, are more adaptable and capable of being applied across different contexts. This adaptability stems from the consideration of paradigms, settings, methods, measures, and time, which allows interpretivist research to resonate more broadly.

3.8 Ethical Risks and Mitigation

In qualitative research, chosen for its ability to explore complex lived experiences through in-depth participant perspectives, it is crucial to adhere to ethical standards, which involves identifying potential risks that could negatively impact participants, researchers, or the university. As a researcher with training in [specific field], I recognize that my academic background may influence how I interpret data; thus, reflexivity was practiced throughout the study to critically examine these potential biases. These risks were acknowledged and addressed through clear mitigation strategies to ensure the safety and well-being of all parties involved (Bhandari, 2024; Leavy, 2020).

As a doctoral researcher, I explicitly acknowledged the implicit academic authority over student participants. The qualitative approach, rooted in a constructivist paradigm, prioritized participants' voices as co-constructors of knowledge, which helped mitigate hierarchical pressures. To minimize situations where participants might feel pressured to give answers they think I want to hear (e.g., students might exaggerate how valuable online literature is because they assume that's what I, as their teacher, expect), all interviews were conducted through WeChat voice calls in informal settings. At the beginning of each session, I emphasized, 'There are no correct answers—I value your authentic experiences, whether positive, negative, or neutral'. This approach aimed to reduce hierarchical pressure through technological mediation (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006).

Participants faced potential risks such as breaches of confidentiality, exposure of personal data (e.g., email addresses or phone numbers), identification as research participants in publications, and exploitation or misrepresentation (Wiles *et al*., 2011). Additionally, participants could have experienced anxiety, emotional distress, physical harm, financial loss, or legal consequences (Patton, 2015). Given the smaller sample size typical of qualitative studies, rigorous confidentiality measures were essential to protect participant anonymity.

To mitigate these risks, this research complied with *the UK Data Protection Act* (2018), *the Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China* (2021), and *the Data Security Law of the People's Republic of China* (2021) . All participants' data were securely stored using password protection, name coding, and encryption for computer-based files. Consent forms were signed, and any personal identifiers were removed from research documents (Saunders, Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 2015). The constructivist framework required transparency; participants were informed that their narratives would shape the research outcomes, aligning with qualitative methods' emphasis on co-constructed meaning. The participants were thoroughly informed of the research purpose, and only relevant questions were asked. During the informed consent and debriefing stages, participants were provided with detailed and transparent information (Faden and Beauchamp, 1986). The research design was adjusted to screen and exclude high-risk participants (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point, and their autonomy was respected throughout the research process (Authority, 2022; Traianou, 2014). No financial statements were required, and general financial questions were framed to avoid causing discomfort. Interviews were flexibly scheduled to minimize inconvenience or potential financial loss. The choice of qualitative methods allowed participants to share rich, contextualized experiences while maintaining control over their participation. Should an intermediary have been involved in the research, the same data protection laws applied to ensure that data collection and sharing complied with both Chinese and UK legal frameworks (Xue, 2022).

This research did not focus on sensitive or distressing topics. However, when sensitive subjects were involved, participants were informed about the nature of the research and assured of confidentiality (Bos, 2020). If necessary, anonymous diaries were offered as an alternative to face-to-face interviews (Durant and Carey, 2000; Davies *et al*., 2020; Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020). This flexibility, inherent in qualitative designs, accommodated participants' comfort without compromising data depth. Additionally, participants were provided with information on available student counselling services

to manage any distress post-research (Salmons, 2015).

Regarding the 'limits of confidentiality', if the research had uncovered any illegal activities, then ethical obligations may have required reporting to the appropriate authorities. This possibility was communicated to participants during the consent process (Gerrard, 2021; Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

For the researcher, ethical challenges also arose. Given my position of authority over student participants, I maintained awareness of how my cultural and academic background might inadvertently shape interactions. I was careful to maintain appropriate professional boundaries. I ensured that no undue influence or expectations were imposed on the participants due to this power dynamic (Babbie, 2020). This included deliberately avoiding academic jargon during interviews and sharing brief personal reading experiences when participants hesitated, creating mutual vulnerability to balance power relations (Berger, 2015).

Additionally, ideological and procedural risks emerged, particularly in a virtual data collection environment. Participants may have felt uneasy about being recorded, potentially affecting research (Whitney and Evered, 2022). The constructivist commitment to transparency meant participants received explicit explanations of how their data would contribute to co-constructed findings. To address these risks, participants were briefed beforehand and on the day of the interview, with comprehensive explanations of the study's objectives, processes, and safeguards (Shepperd *et al*., 2021).

Lastly, the research did not involve political topics, and this was communicated to both the participants and the ethical review board. Emergency contingency plans were in place, and health and safety protocols were observed in line with university guidelines. Compliance with data protection laws remained a top priority throughout the research process to ensure the confidentiality and security of participants' information.

3.9 Summary

Through a case study of Qidian Reading, this chapter operationalizes S-D logic and ANT to reveal how algorithms mediate value co-creation. Methodological innovations include dual insider-outsider positionality, which balanced cultural familiarity (e.g., understanding grassroots resistance to algorithmic curation) with analytical rigor. Engaging diverse stakeholders (readers, writers, editors) uncovered tacit norms like collaborative authorship, while rigorous trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ensured actionable insights for ethical platform design. This approach establishes a blueprint for cross-cultural CE research, prioritizing user privacy amid commercialization—a critical contribution to global digital engagement scholarship.

4. Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

4.1 Methodology and Analytical Approach

Building on the research design outlined in Chapter 3, which adopted a constructivist paradigm and abductive case study approach, this chapter analyses interview data from active users of Qidian Reading. Addressing the research questions 'What value do customers perceive from engaging with Chinese web fiction'' and 'How is value co-created within Chinese web fiction communities?', the analysis reveals six cohesive themes grounded in social constructivism. The chapter further discusses theoretical implications and proposes a customer typology based on the findings.

This research utilizes abductive TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Guest *et al.*, 2011) to analyse the data, which takes into account the pre-existing conceptual framework from documentary review, providing a set of codes to initiate the analysis. This approach is suitable for this study due to the following reasons.

First, TA offers flexibility, making it suitable for a variety of theoretical and epistemological approaches and aligning well with constructionist paradigms (Clarke, 2005), which form the philosophical foundation of this research. TA provides an effective research tool to acheive a comprehensive understanding of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022). Through coding procedures, it facilitates the development of ideas, meaning, and understanding (Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022).

In order to gain insights into value co-creation occurring in prosumption process within virtual communities on digital platform, as well as the implications for Generation Z and millennials consumers, an abductive thematic analytical approach was adopted based on constructivist epistemology. This approach incorporates participants' own words in context (Ozuem, Thomas and Lancaster, 2015, p. 6), gathering in-depth

information to carry out a detailed interpretation of the data, and identifying and describing ideas within data (Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022).

Abduction starts with a set of pre-existing concepts grounded in theory, such as S-D logic (Eisenhardt, 2007) , used to extend theoretical frameworks. The review of documentary sources was critical in guiding both data collection and analysis, playing two major roles: (1) collecting information and code, and (2) identifying new themes. This comprehensive methodology facilitates the formation of a reliable research path, which lends greater credibility to the results.

Simultaneously, it is essential to acknowledge the researcher's theoretical perspectives and values in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The existing literature offers a variety of arguments that emphasize the subjectivity of researchers. Analysis can be an exciting process as it allows researchers to identify patterns and themes that are embedded within their interviews. However, this should not be seen as a passive process, as the researcher is actively involved in selecting which themes are of interest and reporting them to the readers. It is important to note that themes do not exist in the data, but rather are created by the researcher's thinking and understanding of the data. (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Ely *et al*., 1997; Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006). In a word, an abductive approach aligns data with existing frameworks. The questions were formulated based on both theoretical and experiential knowledge. The significance of empirical reflection is that any inconsistencies that cannot be explained by current theories can prompt abductive enquiry that will lead to new findings (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). This research does not focus on theory generation through grounded theory and induction, but rather on theory development, which involves refining existing theories, such as uncovering novel ideas, additional variables, and other associations, rather than inventing new ones (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017; Nicholson *et al.*, 2018).

The data analytical followed the guidelines of Naeem *et al*. (2023), which were based on Braun and Clark (2006, 2019). These guidelines provided a systematic path for

qualitative analysis, ensuring the robustness of results and the comprehensiveness of findings (see Figure 4.1). To ensure methodological rigor, the analysis process was documented iteratively through reflective memos and peer debriefing sessions with the supervisory team, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Figure 4.1: Thematic analysis procedure (adapted from Naeem *et al.* ,2023)

Step 1: Familiarizing with collected data	✧ Transcription of the data ✧ Read carefully the responses from the participants ✧ Highlight and select pertinent quotes
Step 2: Selection of keywords	✧ Identify meaningful, powerful, recurring and pertinent patterns or terms as keywords
Step 3: Coding	✧ Catalogue information (keywords) according to a predetermined structure that leads to making data take on a more theoretical and conceptual form
Step 4: Theme development	✧ Search for themes: to catalogue codes ✧ Review the themes: to assess their validity and coherence
Step 5: Conceptualization	✧ Name and define notions ✧ Interpret concepts (themes and codes)
Step 6: Development of conceptual model	✧ Name and define notions ✧ Formulate a conceptual model grounded in the research findings to comprehensively address the research questions

Step 1: Familiarizing with collected data

The author transcribed over 400 pages of interview recordings (approximately 300,000 words). Prior to analysis, raw data underwent rigorous cleaning: (1) duplicates from repeated participant anecdotes were removed using NVivo's 'Duplicate Detection' function, which identifies overlapping segments with ≥90% text similarity; (2) off-topic content (e.g., casual discussions unrelated to research questions) was filtered through predefined keyword exclusion lists (e.g., terms like 'weather' or 'technical errors'); (3) terminology standardization was applied uniformly, such as abbreviating 'Chapter Comments' as CC and defining this term in a glossary. Preliminary readings of the transcripts were conducted to uncover prominent meanings. To ensure immersion, transcripts were read three times: first for holistic understanding, second for annotating initial impressions (e.g., reflective memos on emerging patterns like 'participant autonomy'), and third for identifying latent patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Transcript accuracy was validated through a dual-layer verification process. First, 10% of transcripts (n=4) were returned to participants for member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), confirming interpretive alignment with their original intent. Second, the supervisory team conducted peer debriefing sessions to resolve ambiguities in colloquial expressions, such as translating slang terms like '颅内高潮' (intracranial climax) into theoretically grounded constructs ('immersive reading experience'). All transcripts were anonymized by replacing real names with identifiers (P1-P40), and standardized terminology (e.g., *CC* for Chapter Comments) was cross-checked against the glossary to ensure semantic consistency.

Step 2: Selection of keywords

The author highlighted recurring patterns and terms from the chosen quotations and labelled them as keywords. A dual-layer validation process was employed: (1) keywords were cross-checked against raw transcripts to ensure fidelity to participants' language, and (2) ambiguous terms were discussed with the supervisory team to

minimize interpretive bias. The keywords succinctly captured participants' experiences and perspectives, and were directly derived from the data.

Step 3: Coding

In the coding phase, brief phrases or words, termed as codes, are attributed to data segments to encapsulate their fundamental message, significance, or theme. To ensure traceability, a three-tier coding framework was implemented: (1) Open coding: 267 initial codes were generated inductively from raw transcripts (e.g., "daily reading rituals" → code SML-01); (2) Axial coding: codes were grouped into subcategories (e.g., SML-01 to SML-12 under "self-motivated labour"); (3) Selective coding: categories were aligned with S-D logic constructs through abductive reasoning (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Keywords are crucial in coding as they establish the foundation of the analysis and assist in converting raw data into perceptive, manageable units.

Coding consistency was rigorously monitored through multiple safeguards. First, NVivo's inter-coder agreement function was employed to calculate intercoder reliability, with 20% of transcripts double-coded by an independent researcher ($\kappa = 0.82$). Second, the codebook's evolution—from v1.0 (initial codes) to v2.0 (merged categories)—was documented through version control, with all changes (e.g., merging 'reader empowerment' and 'user agency') logged in reflective memos to ensure auditability. Third, negative cases (e.g., 15 codes contradicting dominant themes like *platform fatigue*) were contextualized through iterative comparison with raw transcripts. For instance, Participant 17's critique of platform monetization ('Tomato Fiction has too many advertisements') informed the reclassification of *platform fatigue* as a boundary condition rather than a core theme.

To resolve coding disagreements (e.g., whether *co-creation infrastructure* should include *transmedia work*), biweekly peer debriefing sessions with the supervisory team were conducted, aligning interpretations with S-D logic axioms. The final codebook (Tables 4.1–4.2) adheres to the guidelines of Naeem et al. (2023), systematically

organizing raw data into themes that bridge antecedents (e.g., *self-motivated labour*) and consequences (e.g., *emotional resonance value*) of engagement.

Step 4: Theme development

Codes were grouped into meaningful themes. Thematic clustering followed Saldaña's (2021) 'liquidity criterion': themes were retained only if they (a) recurred in ≥30% of transcripts (e.g., 'emotional resonance' appeared in 7/21 participants), and (b) demonstrated theoretical salience to value co-creation (e.g., 'brand-centric community' linked to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) DART model). The consolidation of 267 codes into six themes was achieved through three interlocking mechanisms: First, theory-driven clustering merged codes like self-motivated labour based on alignment with S-D logic's operant resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2008); second, data-driven merging identified semantic overlaps—such as reader empowerment and user agency with 82% keyword similarity—via NVivo's Cluster Analysis; third, frequency-based pruning flagged codes appearing fewer than five times (e.g., platform fatigue) for contextual review. Discrepancies in categorization (e.g., whether co-creation infrastructure functioned as an antecedent or mediator) were resolved through biweekly supervisory team debates, documented in reflective memos. To mitigate researcher bias, a negative case analysis was conducted: 15 codes contradicting dominant themes (e.g., 'platform fatigue') were explicitly discussed and contextualized (Maxwell, 2012).

Step 5: Conceptualization

Using data and prior studies, the author outlined the terminology, covering themes and codes, to define these concepts in general. To strengthen theoretical integration, abductive reasoning (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) was systematically applied: unexpected findings (e.g., 'emotional resonance value') were iteratively compared against literature on value co-creation in digital communities until a plausible theoretical explanation emerged. This was followed by the creation of a concise and cohesive description and interpretation that directly related to the data presented in the thematic matrix.

Step 6: Development of conceptual model

The author developed the conceptual model through an iterative process informed by the thematic findings and theoretical frameworks. Initial linkages between antecedents (e.g., self-motivated labour) and consequences (e.g., emotional resonance value) were mapped using NVivo's model-building tools, with iterative adjustments guided by S-D logic's service-dominant principles. To validate structural coherence, the supervisory team reviewed the model through three rounds of iterative discussions, cross-checking each theme against raw transcripts to ensure empirical grounding. Discrepancies in 8% of thematic linkages (e.g., the positioning of "co-creation infrastructure" as antecedent versus mediator) were resolved through triangulation with raw transcripts and supervisory feedback. Additionally, four participants (randomly selected from P1-P21) were invited to review the preliminary model. Their feedback confirmed that key themes (e.g., "self-motivated labour") accurately reflected their lived experiences. The finalized model (Figure 4.2) integrates these refinements, visually capturing how consumer engagement dynamics unfold in Chinese web fiction ecosystems.

NVivo software was essential for the task, as it enabled the data to be cleansed and mined, which in turn allowed themes to be identified and conclusions to be drawn. Coding consistency was monitored via NVivo's inter-coder agreement feature (κ = 0.82), with 20% of transcripts double-coded by an independent researcher to mitigate subjective bias.

According to Friese (2014) and Saldaña (2021), qualitative research should maintain 50–300 codes; going into the thousands is not advisable. The initial 267 codes were consolidated through a three-stage process: (1) merging synonymous codes (e.g., 'reader empowerment' and 'user agency'), (2) eliminating codes with <5 references, and (3) clustering residual codes under broader theoretical categories (e.g., 'co-creation infrastructure'). Following this guideline, this research condensed codes into six themes:

The antecedents of consumer engagement:

(1) self-motivated labour (SML)

(2) co-creation infrastructure (CCI)

(3) brand-centric interpretive community (BCIC)

The consequences (value) generated through engagement:

(4) positive transformation value (PTV)

(5) emotional resonance value (ERV)

(6) constituent co-creative value (CCV)

These themes represent the key factors influencing the CE process and the participants' perceptions of value derived from their engagement with Chinese web novels. The antecedents reflect the mechanisms and motivations that drive consumer engagement, while the consequences reveal the benefits and value participants experience through their involvement. To further understand these themes, related literature was reviewed to interpret definitions and concepts that could be applied to the context of Chinese online literature. In the coding process, interview quotes were labelled 'P' for participant. Finally, the findings were reiterated and are presented in detail in the following sections (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Data structure: the customer engagement process in Chinese web novels (source: author)

'I consult them on issues that I am not sure about, or things that I am not sure I can handle. When I post on the forum, there are people who provide ideas and information'.
'This book contains over 1000 illustrations, character portraits, handwriting, and plot comics that my book fans and I have drawn. These drawings were voluntarily co-created by devoted fans of the book! They are all original, with no AI drawings'.

→ Productive consumption

'It's really gonna make your head spin. It's so-called intracranial climax!'
'Sure, the novel might be make-believe, but our love's the real deal'.
'To get over the overwhelming post-book blues, I binge-read, jumping into one novel after another. Once I caught myself, in the wee hours, shaking and twisting the same title for the third time and finally wondered what was wrong with me'.

→ Deep engagement

'Without any guidance or set schedule, they found themselves gathering online daily like clockwork!'
'Many of his fellow authors would be willing to contribute information to him, write some short stories for him to put into the novel'.
'I consult them on issues that I am not sure about, or things that I am not sure I can handle. When I post on the forum, there are people who provide ideas and information'.

→ Autonomy

⟶ Self-motivated labour

'This is the reason why Qidian Reading App later began to develop a variety of interactive features in the community on the platform! The possibility of direct communication between readers and authors has become the biggest demand'.
'The web novel titled *The Symphony of Four Billion Years of Evolution*, over ten million words long, but I can manage to finish it, and one big reason is *Chapter Comments*. Sometimes, I spend more time reading the comments than actually reading the story'.

→ Interactive platform

'Especially when someone drops a big tip, like, let's say, tipping 1,000,000 Qidian coins, which is like 10,000 yuan, the author will pin that message to the top for everyone to see'.
'Going forward, the monthly vote rankings are gonna mean a whole lot more. Quality works will rise to the top without any artificial boosts. Say goodbye to the junk getting on the charts'.
'After the latest rules have been enforced, first up, we have the Deep Readers. Now, to qualify as a Deep Reader, you're gonna be committed'.

→ User incentive structures

'For these explanations, some readers will hit you back right away saying, "Nope, that's not how I see it"! It should be like this and that, and they'll give you a whole bunch of reasons why"'.
'There is a character in the novel, called "Submarine", whose creator is a Chinese American, contributed a line in the forum, "The Senate regime, ah, is a regime that bears the red flag of the left, but actually does what a right-wing regime does"'.

→ Transmedia work

⟶ Co-creation infrastructure

'They were thinking about how to keep the enthusiasts in such a place and how to expel outsiders from such a space. So, they gave an explanation before entering this small section'.
'It wasn't like the usual romance novels you could pick up at any bookstore. This was something special that really needed the internet to take off'.

→ Shared identity and collective engagement

'The relationship between these two "persons" can be determined: provider and spokesperson. First of all, you should find a group of people that you can deeply advocate for, and write for that group very clearly'.
'"Qidian Reading" which has gone through many writers transfer fiascoes, undoubtedly believes deep down in its heart that it is possible to find content again if it disappears, but once the scale of users gathered by exchanges is surpassed, it will be a real disaster'.

→ Productive model

'It was a form of nourishment, as in the realm of online literature, I was the all-powerful, able to transcend the limitations of my physical body and soar to new heights'.
'… it was from that novel that I gained a new perspective on life and opened up another way of thinking, which solved my problems at that time'.

→ Value co-creation hub

⟶ Brand-centric interpretive community

Quote	Category	Value
'I came across *The Ten Tortures*, a gripping danmei story about love between two guys. It wasn't like the usual romance novels you could pick up at any bookstore. This was something special that really needed the internet to take off'. 'It was us, the girls who were into these more niche stories that really relied on the internet to exist and grow. We found a place where we could dive into our interests, read and write about the stories we were passionate about'.	Product-based cognition competence development	Positive transformation value
'After attending the meeting, the leadership of Suzhou University, upon seeing his capabilities, asked him to teach writing, including web novel-related writing skills'. 'After entering university, because of my good writing skills, I was even recruited by the Student Union's Publicity Department to write some press releases and stuff".	Personal resource reconfiguration	
'The world is so tough, isn't it a great merit for those who make you feel good? It allows people to keep on living, continue to face the frustrating world, restore energy, and recharge'. 'The difference in production mechanisms directly reflects the emotional demands of the different reader groups, you can also say that this is their desire: I hope to see very cool stories'.	Pleasure-driven growth	
'Even if it was just a polite consolation at that time, I felt that this sentence was very important to me. Her words of encouragement were a true lifesaver for me at that moment!' 'When I added her, I recited that line of poetry, and she was very excited'.	Perceptual empathy and individual engagement resonance	Emotional resonance value
'He directly posted a screenshot for us to read, he posted the screenshot on Weibo, instead of letting us read it on the Qidian reading website'. 'He would also give us a preview on Weibo of what his next book will be about, to build up our anticipation. We left messages to him from time to time, encouraging and consoling him. And he appeared to be quite happy'.	Real-time interactive and socially engaged experiential	
'For some uncertain issues, or things I wasn't confident about, I would consult them. As long as I posted a thread on the forum, some people would provide ideas and material'. 'As a result, the political ideas I have accumulated in the forums for 4 to 5 years have been reflected in the creation of my novels in the end'.	Community-driven ideological and creative resonance	
'Satisfying their sense of superiority, promoting a feeling of being more civilized – readers truly enjoy this sense of superiority...' '… the worldview is incredibly expansive, allowing for a multitude of ideas to be explored'.	Knowledge-driven innovation and problem solving	Constituent co-creative value
'She goes and hires an artist to draw a sketch of the character. She gets the sketch made into these little cards that she plays with'. '… one of my readers actually crafted a timeline for my novel!'	Derivative competence	

The table below establishes a clear connection between the research gaps and the themes presented in Figure 4.2. Each gap is linked to specific elements within the figure, demonstrating how the study's findings address these gaps. This mapping reinforces the theoretical framework outlined in section 1.4, showing how the research contributes to a deeper understanding of customer engagement and value co-creation in the context of Chinese web fiction.

Table 4.1: Mapping research gaps to themes in figure 4.2

Research Gap	Relevant Themes in Figure 4.2	Connection Explanation
Gap 1: Multidimensional Engagement in Digital Environments	Deep engagement, Autonomy	Figure 4.2 illustrates multidimensional engagement through themes like deep engagement and autonomy, highlighting how users interact in complex digital ecosystems. Existing research often focuses on individual engagement dimensions, but this study addresses the gap by examining the interplay between cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social factors.
Gap 2: Prosumer Behaviours and Peer Collaboration in Value Co-Creation	Productive consumption, Transmedia work	The themes of productive consumption and transmedia work in Figure 4.2 emphasize the active role of users in creating and sharing content. This study addresses the gap by exploring how prosumer behaviours and peer collaboration contribute to value co-creation within online communities, particularly in the context of Chinese web fiction.
Gap 3: Digital Platforms and the Shift in Production-Consumption Dynamics	Interactive platform, User incentive structures	Figure 4.2 highlights interactive platforms and user incentive structures, showing how digital platforms facilitate engagement. This research addresses the gap by

Research Gap	Relevant Themes in Figure 4.2	Connection Explanation
		examining how these platforms enable a shift from traditional production-consumption models to more participatory and collaborative ecosystems, emphasizing the platforms' role in value co-creation.
Gap 4: The Role of Technology in Mediating Production-Consumption Dynamics	Co-creation infrastructure, Brand-centric interpretive community	The co-creation infrastructure and brand-centric interpretive community themes in Figure 4.2 underscore the technological aspects of engagement. This study addresses the gap by investigating how non-human actors like algorithms and platform architectures mediate and reshape the production-consumption relationship, providing insights into how technology both empowers and constrains user agency.
Gap 5: Context-Specific Understanding of Value Creation	Value co-creation hub, Brand-centric interpretive community	Figure 4.2's value co-creation hub and brand-centric interpretive community themes illustrate where value is created. This research addresses the gap by offering a context-specific understanding of value creation within Chinese web fiction, considering the unique cultural, social, and technological factors that influence engagement and value co-creation in this specific environment.

After establishing the connection between the research gaps and the themes in Figure 4.2, the following codebook was developed to further detail the themes and codes that emerged from the data. The codebook, structured according to the guidelines by Naeem *et al*. (2023), elaborates on the keywords and descriptions associated with each theme,

providing a comprehensive overview of the data analysis process and how it aligns with the theoretical framework and research objectives.

The codebook adheres to the guidelines outlined by Naeem, *et al*. (2023) and is structured as follows(see Table 4.2 and 4.3).

Table 4.2: Themes representing the antecedents of the fundamental consumer engagement process (source:author)

Themes	Description	Codes	Keywords
Self-motivated labour (expands beyond purchase behaviour or transactions)	Effort that customers voluntarily engage in and deeply involve themselves in without the need for monitoring by fellow users, platform owners, or third parties.	1) Productive consumption	* advocate * fellow authors * contribute information * seek advice * guidance * 500 real people from all walks of life * science and engineering backgrounds * collective wisdom * cooperator * discussions of the highest quality
		2) Deep engagement	* immersive experiences * coolness * pulled together * kept dominating * overwhelming * poring over * make your head spin * extremely excited * shaking and twisting * absorbed * helps maintain the novel's top position *celebrating
		3) Autonomy	* voluntarily co-created * expression * power * explore * concerned * was asked to * believed * rewarded * determine * desire * clockwork * without any guidance or set schedule * powering with love * banned * keep creating

Co-creation infrastructure	The foundational elements and mechanisms that facilitate and stimulate the collaborative efforts and active engagement of both human and non-human actants throughout the creative process.	1) Interactive platform	* interesting * user base * neat little feature * bullet comments * cool * underline * drop comments * dive into discussions * being part * nudge * spin-offs * awesome * insane * inspire * integrate
		2) User incentive structures	* initiatives * static page * interactive features * double-dipping * control * inspire * manage * algorithms * data * motivate * delve * genuine engagement
		3) Transmedia work	* voluntarily co-created * devoted fans * the purest love * confuse * made a comment * explain * hit you back * right away * caters to * complaining * contributed
Brand-centric interpretive community	A community of people united by a shared interest, where communication is limited to that specific system, context, or interpretive community. Understanding is reached by small, carefully chosen groups of individuals within that system.	1) Productive model (provider-spokesperson)	* two 'person' * spokesperson * provider * fierce collision * similar attitude, position, aesthetics, interesting * feeders * follow the post * reply to the post * everyone * revenue * emotional * spend money for their preference * subscribe
		2) Shared identity and collective engagement	* needed the internet to take off * relied on the internet to exist * dive into our interests * passionate

116

			* being part of a community * shared the same passion * immersive and interactive * unique and enriching experience * keep the enthusiasts * expel outsiders * small section * rules * an admission agreement * a niche private domain * a niche range * a niche work * not be discussed * not be quoted * not be disturbed * not be overemphasized * respect
		3) Value co-creation hub	* needed the internet to take off * entering * relied on the internet to exist and grow * expel outsiders * keep the enthusiasts * section * an admission agreement * establish

Table 4.3: Themes representing consequences (value) generated from the fundamental consumer engagement process(source:author)

Themes	Description	Codes	Keywords
Positive transformation value	The potential value derived from a user's engagement that fosters personal growth, including pressure releasing, emotional nurturing, and skill development, highlighting the transformative impact on self-understanding and self-flourishing.	1) Product-based cognition competence development (eudaimonic aspect)	* illness * nourishment *all-powerful * transcend * soar * sense of liberation * overturning * inspiring * solace * overwhelmed * not separated * bad mood * dull * monotonous * immersed * lively * a new perspective * opened up * keep reading * attempted
		2) Personal resource reconfiguration (eudaimonic aspect)	* lazy * efficiently search * comprehend * easily digest and convert * invited * fooling * teach writing
		3) Pleasure-driven growth (hedonic aspect)	* desire * fun * comeback * the overall mood * the emotional demands * cool stories * upward momentum * exciting points * everyone * release * benefits * spicy strips * trash * indispensable * happy * life * feel good * inspired
Emotional resonance value	The emotional bond and mutual understanding that develops through interactions between individuals and a	1) Perceptual empathy and individual engagement resonance	* struggling * suffering * depression * gratitude * relate * despair

	particular entity, whether it be a product, service, or community.		* captivated * encouraged * blessing * encouragement * delightful * relish * consolation * lifesaver * helper * excited
		2) Real-time interactive and socially engaged experiential resonance	* vet * strict * full version * collection * various channels * showcase * seize * the whole lot * despair * gave up * asterisks * screenshot * Weibo
		3) Community-driven ideological and creative resonance	* very wide range * political debates * forums * bulletin boards * daily * fragmented learning * formed * own views * accumulated * 'role-playing' creation * collapsed * lost * no one to share * consult * thread * provide ideas * seek opinions * reference channel
Constituent co-creative value	The constituent influence generated from the collaborative efforts and active engagement of both human and non-human actants throughout the creative process.	1) Knowledge-driven innovation and problem solving	* intellectual superiority * extending * sense of greatness for entrepreneurs * civilized * fulfilment * devoted * expansive * a multitude of ideas * online collaborative effort * meaningful * real-time conversations * easier * giving my opinions * write it myself

			* covered
			* express
			* another path
		2) Derivative competence	* fanfiction
			* enjoy
			* were keen to
			* dramatize
			* hooked
			* spend hours and hours practicing
			* throw in
			* response
			* praising
			* Pumped
			* keep sharing
			* pretty fun

4.2 Thematic Findings: Antecedents and Consequences of CE

According to Hollebeek et al. (2019), customer resource integration and knowledge sharing are foundational processes of CE, with the former serving as a necessary antecedent and the latter as a facilitating factor. Resource integration involves the assimilation of operant and operand resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a), shaped by platform affordances (e.g., Qidian's incentive systems) and communal practices (e.g., P14's collaborative authorship). Interview testimonies reveal how Chinese online literature consumers integrate resources (e.g., platform tools, peer feedback) to co-create value through collaborative utility optimization.

4.2.1 Antecedents of Consumer Engagement

Self-motivated labour (SML)

Self-motivated labour (SML) is defined as tasks or activities that customers willingly undertake and deeply engage in, without the need for close supervision or monitoring by other users, platform owners, or third parties. This type of labour is often driven by personal interest, satisfaction, or the perceived value they gain from the activity. These voluntary engagement patterns offer empirical grounding for examining RQ3 (conceptualizing CE processes) , RA3 (exploring customer perceptions of value co-

creation through collaborative interactions), RG2 (prosumer behaviours), particularly in transcending traditional producer-consumer hierarchies, and RO4 (understanding consumers' subjective initiative).

A 30-year-old data processor described his team's integration of xianxia cultivation narratives into agile workflows:

> *We rebranded sprints as 'Qi Refining' phases and celebrated fixes as 'Realm Breakthroughs.' Overtime became 'secluded cultivation,' with memes like 'Grand Elder' for our CTO.* (P13)

This case demonstrates how cultural metaphors like perseverance (SML) transform routine tasks into communal quests, fostering innovation through narrative alignment.

This term highlights a customer's enthusiasm and participation in the workforce. The customers of Chinese web novels demonstrate strong willingness and passion, or possess sophisticated knowledge and skills, to get involved in the reconstruction of the imaginary world by extending a fictional world to reality or vice versa. Psychologists of work have long argued that remuneration alone does not foster dedication and enthusiasm for a job; it may only be a factor in keeping a job, not in actively engaging with it. Moreover, coercion cannot overcome an individual's apathy or aversion, especially when the job requires active participation, initiative, and voluntary effort— a trend that is increasingly applicable to all employees, not just those in managerial positions (Luc and Eve, 2018). Therefore, self-motivated labour is the primary driver of customer resource integration, aligning with S-D logic's emphasis on operant resources as catalysts for value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

The following case study (P10) provides empirical grounding for RQ3's exploration of collaborative CE processes and RO4's focus on consumer agency. It demonstrates how crowdsourcing practices transcend traditional authorship boundaries.

A university teaching staff member and senior fan of Chinese web novels talked about

customer agency with regard to *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers*, the most famous role-playing novel from Qidian Reading, as follows:

> *The advocate... uses the school's resources to read various papers and literature. He not only transforms the information provided by other fellow authors but also does his own work. Many of his fellow authors would be willing to contribute information... every cooperator has played a role in the story.* (P10)

This case exemplifies RO4 (understanding consumers' subjective initiative) and RQ3 (conceptualizing CE processes). The Bragger's role as a mediator between institutional knowledge and creative output underscores SML's dual function: individual agency (voluntary effort) and systemic innovation (crowdsourced narratives).

By enabling voluntary resource integration among 500 contributors, this phenomenon operationalizes S-D logic's axiom of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) while expanding Toffler's (1980) prosumer framework through its emphasis on collaborative narrative agency.

As early as 1980, American futurist Alvin Toffler synthesized the concept of producer and consumer into a new concept, the 'prosumer'. The prosumer, characterized by a blend of consumption and production activities, engages actively in both product creation and service distribution. The current research reveals a significant cohort of prosumers within the realm of Chinese web fiction, commonly referred to as 'fans' or 'fandom', who demonstrate a marked inclination towards investing in self-driven efforts

When Bragger was interviewed about his fan readers, he described:

> *The majority of readers... are in their 20s... very interested in practical technology. When I post on the forum, there are people who provide ideas and information.* (P14)

According to Hollebeek *et al*. (2022), the co-designing of stakeholders, such as readers or fellow customers, significantly influences Customer Engagement(CE). These observations address RG2 (prosumer behaviours) by demonstrating how readers' co-designing activities challenge traditional author-reader hierarchies, operationalizing value co-creation as defined in CE literature. Readers of 'Qidian Reading' demonstrate a willingness to collaborate with authors in the creation of literary works, yet they may also challenge authors' intentions and authority. This is evident in their actions of identifying plot errors or inconsistencies, proposing modifications to the storyline, citing external sources to support their critiques, and imposing their expectations on the author.

There were occasions when Bragger and his co-authors had disagreements regarding the novel's design and details, which had a great impact on him:

> *I encountered greater opposition a few times ... During this period of time, a lot of readers have expressed their dissatisfaction. I believe that most readers are not dissatisfied because of political views...* (P14)

A 28-year-old signed writer of Qidian Reading expressed similar opinions when describing how one user requested her to change the honorifics used in a story for the main character:

> *I was asked to change the hero's address... because she rewarded me with 50 yuan, so I changed it.* (P4)

This reader-author negotiation exemplifies RQ3 (conceptualizing CE processes) by demonstrating how monetary incentives (e.g., 50 yuan reward) reshape traditional hierarchies, aligning with Hollebeek *et al*.'s (2022) value proposition reconfiguration.

Bragger revealed that the majority of his fan readers and fellow authors originate from the Sonic BBS Forum, The North Dynasty Forum, and posting bars. Although the term 'BBS' (bulletin board system) is no longer widely used, it was once popular for describing both text-only and multimedia online forums. These online communities are

recognized for their adeptness in crafting detailed and insightful posts, and engaging in high-quality discussions; these communities aided Bragger in obtaining necessary information for the narrative.

> *The North Dynasty Forum... discussions and fanfiction produced by this group are of the highest quality. If I need specific information, I can ask them and they will help me find it.* (P14)

SML is characterized by profound engagement, fuelled by passion and dedication, and demonstrates elevated self-awareness and voluntary commitment; it thereby fosters creativity. A 26-year-old postgraduate student specializing in Chinese philosophy at a university in China and a contracted writer for 'Qidian Reading' shared insights on the productivity of fans.

> *My favourite character is called Qi Si Li… [fans] would throw him a birthday party…* (P5)

This voluntary organization of celebrations operationalizes RO4 (subjective initiative), bridging fictional narratives with real-world rituals through SML.

These dedicated fans actively engage in unpaid promotion for the platform, and demonstrate unwavering commitment to endorsing and marketing the novel. Their involvement as 'fans' is characterized by enthusiastic participation and fervour towards the text. John Fiske (1989) critiqued the notion of a passive audience, constantly susceptible to ideological control, advocating instead for a substantial presence of engaged, productive fans. Fiske's critique is subverted by SML, where fans' fervent participation (e.g., P5's birthday campaigns) transforms them into *prosumers*, thereby addressing RG2 (prosumer behaviours).

It is believed that the attachment to web novels (i.e., tie strength) can be taken as a kind of operant resource contributing to the value co-creation experienced by its readers. It is like kindling, igniting people's desire to participate. Participants' emotional

attachment to web novels further fuels self-motivated labour. In this regard, a 29-year-old woman described her deep reading experiences as follows:

> *I read on my daily commute, in lifts, in bathroom breaks, and late into the night until I can't keep my eyes open. To get over the overwhelming post-book blues, I binge-read, jumping into one novel after another. Once I caught myself, in the wee hours, shaking and twisting the same title for the third time and finally wondered what was wrong with me.* (P8)

This "tie strength" exemplifies S-D logic's operant resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), where emotional bonds drive engagement beyond transactional metrics.

An 18-year-old female postgraduate student stated:

> *It's really gonna make your head spin. It's so-called intracranial climax!* (P16)

A 19-year-old male undergraduate described it in this way:

> *I remember at that time I had felt extremely excited, so much so that I was shaking and twisting my body around as I was reading* Legend of Cyber Heroes. *I was so absorbed in it that I decided to create a fanfiction later on, even though I didn't complete my story and only wrote ten chapte*rs. (P17)

The same evidence can be seen in the example of *Grave Robbery Notes*. In 2015, an article appeared on the Xinhua News Agency's website discussing summer tourism in the Changbai Mountain Scenic Area. Changbai Mountain, located in Northeast China, attracts numerous tourists annually. However, the article was not conventional tourist information. Instead, it targeted teenagers engrossed in an online novel titled *Grave Robbery Notes*, and advised them to consider avoiding Changbai Mountain that summer due to its crowdedness. Seven years later, in 2022, the Changbai Mountain Management Committee of Jilin Province, responsible for tourism management, adopted a different approach. They announced the opening of Rice Inn, catering to fans of *Grave Robbery Notes*, and enthusiastically invited people to visit Changbai Mountain. Referring to this event, an editor of a web novel and scholarly fan

noted how the fans of *Grave Robbery Notes* had engaged and co-produced with different actors to expand the empire of fictionality:

> *And get this, China Airlines even threw in a special flight to Hangzhou just for the Rice Festival. Then in 2022, they went all out, decking the plane with character paintings from the novel on the outside. And the flight attendants dressed up in cosplay, chatting it up with the passengers.* (P6)

Fans' co-creation of tourism campaigns (e.g., Rice Festival in Changbai Mountain) reflects RA3 (exploring customer perceptions of value co-creation through collaborative interactions). Their actions—such as organizing character-themed festivals, collaborating with local businesses, and transforming fictional narratives into real-world attractions— reflect how value is perceived and co-created. Fans, in collaboration with local businesses and cultural authorities, transform fictional narratives into real-world attractions, fostering community cohesion and revitalizing regional tourism. This phenomenon resonates with Jenkins' (2006) concept of 'participatory culture,' where fans transcend passive consumption to become active cultural producers, co-creating value for both virtual and real-world communities.

Another facet of SML relates to the inclination towards autonomy. During an interview, an expert and fan of *500 Losers* recounted personal experiences to shed light on the source of the strong self-discipline and autonomy exhibited by the authors and co-designers of the novel:

> *Expression! Their desire for self-expression is undeniable. Without any guidance or set schedule, they found themselves gathering online daily like clockwork! …Anyway, they find this creative process truly remarkable.* (P10)

Customers' SML is stimulated by their own drive that stems from their personal operant resources, such as their talent and knowledge, as well as their vigorous physical and emotional strength. Engaging in this form of interpretation and production prompts users to go beyond the straightforward information provided and create a meta-text that is more comprehensive, intricate, and engaging than the original series. This meta-text

is a collaborative effort, eliminating the division between reader and writer, which makes it possible for the audience to appropriate the program (Jenkins, 2012).

'Crying Cat', the author of web fiction *NO.1 Player*, stated his readers and fans co-create with him and contribute greatly to the story:

> *This book contains over 1000 illustrations, character portraits, handwriting, and plot comics that my book fans and I have drawn. These drawings were voluntarily co-created by devoted fans of the book! ... This is the purest love of the creators for the world under their pens!* (P21)

Even though Chinese web novels is generally considered a profitable business, bibliophiles voluntarily and reciprocally invest resources (SML) in their brand interactions beyond economic transactions (Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b, 2016; Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011; Storbacka, 2019; Kumar *et al*., 2019; Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen, 2019) and thus provide service to both themselves and others (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

The findings on self-motivated labour (SML) directly address RO4 (understanding the significance of consumers' subjective initiative) and RQ3 (conceptualizing CE processes). SML exemplifies customers' intrinsic motivation to engage in value co-creation beyond transactional interactions, as emphasized in S-D logic's focus on operant resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Participants' voluntary contributions—such as co-authoring storylines, debating plot details, and creating fanfiction—demonstrate how individual agency and autonomy drive CE. For instance, P10's description of collaborative authorship in *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers* highlights how customers' 'collective wisdom' (P10) transforms passive readership into active co-production. This aligns with RG2 (prosumer behaviours in value co-creation) by illustrating how peer collaboration reshapes traditional author-reader dynamics.

Key linkages to the theoretical framework further anchor SML within S-D logic. First, SML operationalizes the 'resource integration' axiom, where customers invest time, expertise, and creativity as operant resources (Hollebeek *et al*., 2019). Second, the

transformative role of SML in fostering 'positive transformation value' (PTV) reflects how subjective initiative enhances individual well-being through creative expression, directly addressing RA3 (examining CE's societal impact). These connections underscore SML's dual function: as a behavioural driver of engagement and a theoretical bridge between micro-level agency and macro-level value outcomes.

While SML highlights customers' intrinsic motivation to engage, platforms must provide infrastructural support to channel such agency into systemic co-creation. This leads us to the concept of Co-Creation Infrastructure (CCI).

Co-creation Infrastructure (CCI)

Co-creation infrastructure (CCI) can be defined as the foundational elements and mechanisms that facilitate collaborative efforts among human and non-human actants (Latour, 2005). This aligns with S-D logic's emphasis on resource integration, where operant (user creativity) and operand (platform tools) resources jointly drive value co-creation. This infrastructure configuration directly informs RQ2 (value co-creation mechanisms) and RG3 (digital platforms' role), while advancing Aim 2's goal of developing a conceptual framework by demonstrating how S-D logic principles manifest in platform-mediated resource orchestration.

By integrating operant resources (user expertise) and operand resources (monetary transactions), CCI exemplifies S-D logic's service ecosystem paradigm, where value co-creation emerges through actor-to-actor (A2A) collaboration. This aligns with RO3 (analysing interactions in digital communities) and Aim 2's theoretical framework development by demonstrating how platform features transcend traditional firm-consumer hierarchies, fostering egalitarian participation (Ozuem et al., 2021b).

The Qidian Reading App's interactive features, such as 'Chapter Comments', 'Easter Egg Chapter', and 'Bibliophile Circle', transform passive consumption into collaborative co-production. A product manager explained:

Users can interact with the story in real time... some of them even come up with their own spin-offs! (P7)

This functionality demonstrates how technology mediates resource integration—merging reader feedback (operant resources) with authorial output (operand resources)—thereby addressing RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics) through ANT's generalized symmetry.Hhuman creativity (e.g., user-generated spin-offs) and algorithmic systems (e.g., comment ranking) jointly drive value co-creation, illustrating RQ2's focus on co-creation mechanisms. A 19-year-old user contrasted Qidian's engagement with competitors:

On platforms like 'Tomato Fiction', where it's free, there aren't many people leaving comments, so you can't have good discussions. (P17)

This observation underscores how CCI's design directly supports RO3 and Aim 2's framework by creating environments where high-engagement tools foster A2A collaboration. Similarly.

Qidian's IP incubation strategy further operationalizes S-D logic's "resource integration" (Vargo and Lusch, 2016):

We're getting readers involved in IP creation from novel writing's early stages... making everyone co-creators. (P7)

From the perspective of Aim 2's theoretical development, this exemplifies how platforms reconfigure authorship hierarchies through institutional arrangements.

Choi Jae Yong (崔宰溶) (2023), a South Korean scholar, Chinese online literature 'functions as' a literary website as a whole, not limited to fiction. This conceptualization directly supports RO3 (analysing interactions in digital communities) and enriches Aim 2's framework by framing the platform as a fluid literary space where all activities constitute "online literature." Choi's emphasis on technology as a bedrock characteristic mirrors ANT's generalized symmetry—

highlighting non-human actants (e.g., algorithms, interfaces) as inseparable from human creativity. This aligns with RQ2's focus on co-creation mechanisms, where operand resources (digital platforms) and operant resources (personal expertise) integrate to promote CE, exemplifying S-D logic's axiom of resource liquefaction (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Thus, Choi's analysis bridges RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics) by redefining literary creation as a hybrid process mediated by human-nonhuman actant collaboration.

With the emergence of interactive functions and systems embedded in the digital environment, works published on Qidian Reading have incorporated elements of bullet screen, music, audio playing, radio drama, and even artificial intelligence (AI) technology that blur the line between literary text and other genres and media. The trans-mediatization of digital platforms has boosted customers' entertainment experience and made the role of non-human actants more evident.

AI-driven 'Role Dialogue' blurs human-machine boundaries, as described by a 28-year-old user:

He started talking like a real person... I ask him for life advice. (P4)

This exemplifies ANT's generalized symmetry, where non-human actants (AI algorithms) become equal collaborators—advancing RQ3's exploration of CE processes and inspiring Aim 2's conceptualization of CE processes through human-machine symbiosis. When consumers interact with AI technologies, they may or may not be aware of their engagement with a machine (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024). This blurring of lines between humans and non-humans highlights the interactive platform, as the internet actants and influencers play a crucial part in triggering the formation, enrichment, and evolution of the final creative output within the collaborative environment (Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). The AI-driven 'Role Dialogue' (P4) and platform-publisher contrast (P11) highlight ANT's generalized symmetry,

where non-human actants (algorithms, data) are equal collaborators, directly addressing RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics).

Contrasting Qidian's dynamic platform with traditional publishing models, a 48-year-old industry expert noted:

A platform thrives without depending on any specific author... what we rely on is data. (P11)

This contrast highlights RG3's emphasis on platform mediation, contrasting traditional publishing's static model with Qidian's dynamic resource integration.

Driven by algorithms, nowadays Qidian Reading has succeeded in developing and embedding various interactive and communicative systems in the community on the platform and created a system of institutional arrangements that act as facilitators to prompt the interconnectedness of all actants on the platform. These features and arrangements are not merely passive tools for users, they actively facilitate interaction, foster creativity, and enable the co-creation of value among all actors involved through modelling customers' behaviours.

Specifically, customers' co-created activities are supported by interactive features that establish and maintain readers' groups, end-of-chapter reader exchanges, voting and swiping votes, and so on. These features of the website significantly mould consuming behaviour and the habits of online literature users. In this way, a website inspires its customers to get involved and thereafter achieves customer retention.

Qidain reading has established a series of institutional arrangements including member subscriptions, rewarding[1] (tipping) mechanisms, and monthly tickets, all designed to

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[1] 'Rewarding' is a concept widely used in China. Rewarding originated in ancient times and refers to the rewards given by people of high status to those of lower status or subordinates, or as a form of payment for someone's services. In internet slang, 'rewarding' usually means giving money to the original poster. This is a new, non-compulsory payment encouragement model. If users like the content posted by authors and hosts, they will give a 'tip' of varying amounts depending on their mood. It is an act of expressing appreciation and support for creators or service providers.

encourage authors and readers to participate and generate output collaboratively. Authors are paid based on the number of words they produce, with bonuses available for increased subscriptions and votes from readers. This system has led to works on Qidian being published over extended periods, often reaching several million characters in length, particularly for well-known authors (Feng, 2013). Among institutional arrangements, 'tipping' (打赏) and 'tickets' (月票), the incentive structures, are representative institutional inventions from the Chinese Literature Group (the Qidian Reading App is one of the products of the Chinese Literature Group); these incentive structures aim to engage not only writers but also readers and inspire their participation and output(see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Bibliophile Circle of *The Reincarnated One* (source: Qidian Reading App)

The writer has been rewarded by one of his readers with 1,000,000 Qidian coins (≈£1106)
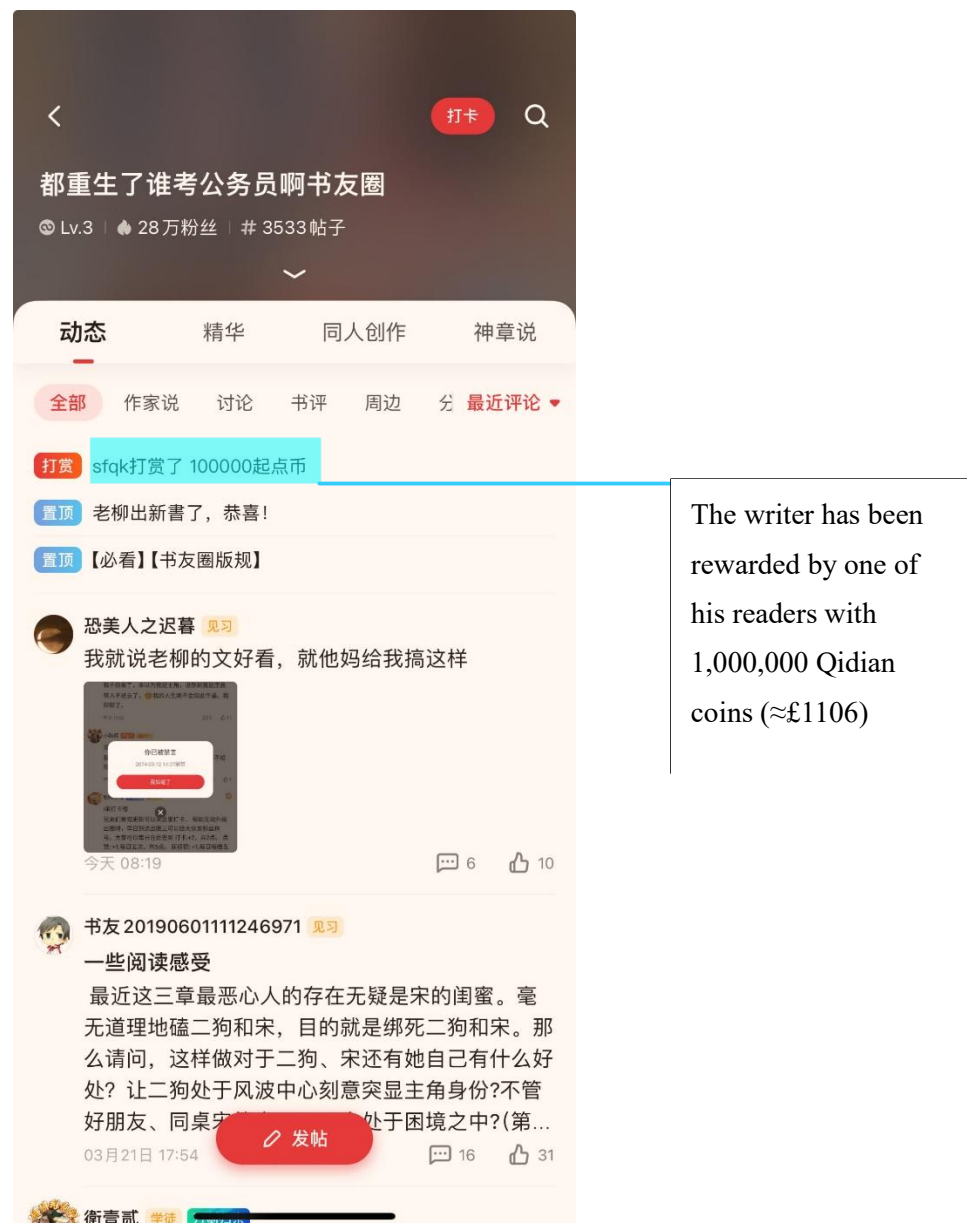
Qidian's tipping and monthly ticket systems (Figure 4.3-4.4) incentivize co-creation through economic and social rewards. A 27-year-old editor noted:

Tipping shows appreciation... authors pin messages to showcase support.(P6)

These policies directly address Aim 2's goal of developing an S-D logic-informed framework by demonstrating how platform policies reshape authorship hierarchies.

While both purchasing a book and tipping a book can serve as motivators for writers, an interactive digital platform encourages users to engage in new behaviours after 'tipping', for example, which enhances CE.

A 20-year-old user highlighted tipping's impact on engagement:

> *Tipping leads to a much more thorough understanding of the story than purchasing does.* (P18)

The respondent believes that through the process of rewarding, users can gain a deeper understanding of a story and immerse themselves in experiencing the entire reading journey with more understanding than if they had simply purchased the book. This could be due to the ongoing engagement with the work and its creator, such as following updates, participating in discussions, and creating derivative works (this part will be discussed further in the next section).

The monthly ticket system of Qidian Reading is a mechanism where readers can purchase a vote for their favourite novels on the platform. Each month, readers with premium membership are given a certain number of tickets that they can allocate to the novels they enjoy the most. These votes contribute to the ranking of the novels on the platform, with higher-ranked novels receiving more visibility and recognition[2].

The monthly ticket system serves as a form of support and encouragement for authors, as novels with more monthly tickets tend to attract more readers and attention. Authors often incentivize readers to vote for their novels by offering special privileges or rewards, such as special issues or bonus chapters (Feng, 2021). For readers, the monthly ticket system provides a sense of participation and engagement in the community; it allows them to directly influence the success of their favourite novels and authors. It

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[2] These rules and norms come from Qidian Reading App and Qidian website: https://www.qidian.com/

also adds a competitive element to the platform, as authors and readers alike strive to earn and allocate monthly tickets to their preferred novels[3](see Figure 4.4.)

[3] *Ibid*.

Figure 4.4: Monthly tickets voted for *The Reincarnated One* (source: Qidian Reading App)

The monthly ticket system (Figure 4.4) quantifies how operand resources (voting data) and operant resources (reader loyalty) jointly shape content visibility. This transformation from transactional interactions to sustained co-creation operationalizes Aim 2's framework, illustrating S-D logic's emphasis on operant resource dominance. As P7 noted:

> *The 2023 'Deep Reader' algorithm prioritizes sustained engagement... no more gaming the system...* (P7)

The 2023 'Deep Reader' algorithm prioritizes sustained engagement (6-month subscriptions, 60-minute daily reading), reflecting S-D logic's operant resource focus. As P7 emphasized:

Deep Readers are seasoned bookworms... no more gaming the system... (P7)

Deep Readers' sustained engagement exemplifies 'platform-mediated resource integration', where operant (customer time, expertise) and operand (monetary transactions) resources combine synergistically to sustain the service ecosystem. This transformation from transactional interactions to sustained co-creation directly addresses RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics).

Multimedia technologies, such as bullet screen, dubbing and music, are integrated with digital work in order to evoke consumers' resonance and trigger spontaneous feedback. Authors are no longer an invisible person hiding behind the story, but leaves messages on forums, such as 'Bibliophile Circle' or 'Readers' Group', concerning plot explanation and story sharing, exemplifying RO3's focus on digital community interactions.

Users of literature websites often engage in common interpretive practices. They frequently discuss elements of contemporary sociopolitical issues, whether on a local, national, or global scale. Additionally, they tend to interpret the author's motives through drawing connections between online news and gossip about the author and their own life experiences. Instead of maintaining a pure literary or fictional way of appreciation, they believe that fiction and reality should intersect and influence each other. Furthermore, they often interpret stories in ways that may contradict the author's own intentions (Feng, 2021). For instance, a Chinese web fiction author noted:

Readers debate plot twists in 'Chapter Comments'... they'll say, 'Nope, that's not how I see it! (P21)

Collaborative authorship practices, such as *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers*, demonstrate how users project real-world political critiques into narratives. As Bragger explained:

> *A forum contributor created 'Submarine'... capturing the regime's ideological contradictions.* (P14)

This phenomenon aligns with Aim 2's theoretical exploration of how digital platforms enable egalitarian cultural production. It represents the enablers or facilitators that prompt the co-creation process of producing and consuming Chinese web novels within digital environment. Feng (2021) argued that it brings about more egalitarian, immediate, and transparent ways of sharing cultural information compared to previous practices.

The findings on co-creation infrastructure (CCI) directly address RO3 (analysing interactions in digital communities) and RQ2 (value co-creation mechanisms). CCI exemplifies how digital platforms like Qidian Reading integrate human-nonhuman actant collaboration (Latour, 2005) to enable actor-to-actor (A2A) resource orchestration (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), thereby advancing Aim 2's goal of developing a conceptual framework for S-D logic application. For instance, P14's description of forums like The North Dynasty facilitating "high-quality discussions" underscores how institutional arrangements (e.g., incentive systems) and technological features (e.g., bullet comments) mediate resource integration (Hollebeek et al., 2019). These mechanisms transform passive readers into active co-producers, as seen in collaborative authorship practices for Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers, thereby addressing RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics) through ANT-informed platform mediation.

Key linkages to the theoretical framework anchor CCI within service-dominant (S-D) logic and actor-network theory (ANT). First, CCI operationalizes Aim 2's S-D logic framework through its service ecosystem concept by positioning platforms as resource integrators that facilitate value co-creation via embedded tools (e.g., Chapter

Comments, Monthly Tickets) as analysed under RQ2. Second, ANT's generalized symmetry is evident in CCI's blending of human (e.g., reader feedback) and nonhuman actants (e.g., AI-driven Role Dialogue), as described by P4's immersive interactions with AI characters - a phenomenon central to RO3's focus on digital community dynamics. These connections highlight CCI's dual role: as a behavioural enabler of engagement (e.g., P7's algorithmic reforms prioritizing Deep Readers) to fulfill RQ2's mechanism analysis, and as a theoretical bridge between micro-level interactions (e.g., bullet comments) and macro-level societal impacts (e.g., revitalizing cultural tourism) that resolves RG3's platform mediation challenge.

While CCI provides the structural foundation for systemic co-creation as per Aim 2's framework, the sustainability of value generation depends on communal interpretive frameworks that align individual motivations with collective brand narratives. This interplay between infrastructure and shared meaning-making foregrounds the role of Brand-Centric Interpretive Communities (BCICs) in embedding co-created value within culturally resonant identities - a critical dimension of RQ2's value co-creation mechanisms that further addresses RG3 through its platform-enabled cultural production model.

Brand-Centric Interpretive Communities (BCICs)

The term 'brand-centric interpretive community' refers to a group of individuals united by a common interest in a brand, where communication occurs within a specific system or context, and understanding is shared among the community members. This idea builds on the concept of 'interpretive communities', originally introduced by Stanley Fish (1980), which suggests that meaning is constructed collectively within a group sharing similar experiences and beliefs (Fish, 1980). In the context of Chinese web fiction, BCIC operationalizes Aim 2 (developing a conceptual framework for value co-creation) and RO2 (demonstrating consumer empowerment) by illustrating how shared interpretive frameworks enable users to co-define brand narratives and drive value co-creation. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) extended this framework by applying it to brand

admiration, defining a brand community as a specialized, non-geographically bound community rooted in shared social relationships (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). McAlexander *et al*. (2002) further expanded this idea, emphasizing how emotional connections and shared loyalty within such communities foster a collective identity (McAlexander *et al*., 2002). These observations align with S-D logic's axiom of value co-creation (FP6: The customer is always a co-creator of value), where community-driven interactions transcend transactional exchanges to generate symbolic and relational value (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). This analysis directly addresses RQ2 (how value is co-created) and RQ1 (perceived value) while bridging RG3 (limited empirical exploration of platform mediation in production-consumption dynamics) and RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces).

A BCIC focuses on a 'we' culture (Fournier, 1998; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Patel, 2016) or 'communal culture' with members sharing confidences, collective motives, and deep attachment to the group (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992; Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk, 1999; Ren, Kraut and Kiesler, 2007; Luo *et al*., 2015). Fish (1980) argued that the comprehension of a text does not rely on a pre-existing definition that is linked to the text; rather, it is contingent upon the producer/writer and the user/reader being immersed in the same interpretive system and community. This theoretical premise advances Aim 3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) and RO4 (understanding subjective initiative's significance) by positioning BCIC as a value co-creation infrastructure where shared hermeneutic practices enable collaborative meaning-making. The perceived value of being part of this community strengthens a sense of community identification among its members (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004).

A 48-year-old industry expert emphasized BCIC's centrality to platform survival:

Qidian positions itself as a community... losing users would be a disaster. (P11)

This statement underscores RO3 (analysing interactions' role in value co-creation) by highlighting how platform survival depends on fostering BCICs as value co-creation hubs rather than mere content repositories. Digital platforms offer valuable services for social interactions among users of a brand (Qidian Reading beats other brands in this area, such as Tomato Fiction). They allow consumers to engage with each other and find 'connective value' through peer-to-peer connections. This connective value serves as a catalyst for customer-to-customer interactions to occur, as highlighted by De Vries and Carlson (2014) and Algharabat *et al*. (2020). This idea encompasses the essence of online communities built around particular brands and the deep sense of identity and belonging they cultivate among their participants. This aligns with ANT's principle of generalized symmetry (Latour, 2005), where non-human actants (e.g., Qidian's comment algorithms) mediate human interactions to sustain BCIC vitality, directly addressing RG3 (platform mediation in production-consumption dynamics).

Choi Jae Yong (崔宰溶) (2023) argued that literature is a form of communication, not simply a form of artful language and writing. This is especially true for internet literature, which has an especially strong emphasis on the provider–spokesperson model. In this model, writers are taken as the spokesperson for a certain experience of a certain group or community, while users/readers are taken as providers who support writers. The provider–spokesperson model exemplifies S-D logic's FP9 (all social and economic actors are resource integrators), where authors and readers jointly invest operant resources (e.g., narrative expertise, emotional labor) to co-produce value (Hollebeek et al., 2022). The 48-year-old founder of one of the most famous Chinese online literature websites, who used to be a senior and leading customer, gave an accounting of how much he used to spend on consuming web novels. Between 2004 and 2014, he read almost everything that had some influence and that cost him about RMB 200,000 or 300,000 (≈£30,000). His abundant reading and consuming experience, and behaviour, as well as his quality as a prominent scholar specializing in Chinese web novels makes his opinions about the attributes of an interpretive community enlightened and insightful. He used the provider–spokesperson model to describe the relation between readers and writers involved in Chinese online literature:

I think fundamentally, the relationship between these two 'persons' can be determined: provider and spokesperson. First of all, you should find a group of people that you can deeply advocate for, and write for that group very clearly. (P11)

This provider–spokesperson dynamic operationalizes RQ1 (perceived value) by demonstrating how BCICs generate constituent co-creative value through role specialization, where readers act as co-designers of narrative outcomes. 'Bragger', the penholder of *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers*, describes how this productive mechanism (i.e., provider–spokesperson model) takes effect in his community:

The North Dynasty forum's veteran fans provide suggestions... censorship reduced participation. (P14)

The collapse of Sonic BBS (P14's lament) further validates RO4 (subjective initiative's significance) by showing how BCIC disintegration disrupts value co-creation processes, emphasizing users' agential role in sustaining engagement ecosystems.

This enclaved participation model aligns with Fiske's (1989) notion of 'productive fandom', where BCICs empower users to redefine brand boundaries through counter-hegemonic practices, directly addressing RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) and RO4 (subjective initiative's role in individual well-being).
In these communities, readers collaboratively redefine protagonist agency through real-time feedback, such as demanding non-linear plot developments that subvert the genre's conventional 'ascension to immortality' tropes (P5). This co-creative process exemplifies how marginalized narrative spaces created via virtual communities foster consumer empowerment and contextual value generation while supporting RO4's focus on self-motivated labour's impact on individual well-being. As a 26-year-old postgraduate noted,

In our xianxia forum, readers constantly debate the protagonist's moral choices. Last year, the author introduced a cliché 'heavenly tribulation' arc where the hero was supposed to abandon his mortal ties. But the community revolted—we

crowdfunded bonus chapters demanding he defy the trope. The writer rewrote the arc to let him challenge the celestial order, creating a 'grey morality' ending. That's when I realized: we aren't just fans; we're co-authors reshaping what immortality means. (P5)

This example directly illustrates how BCICs enable readers to subvert traditional narrative structures (e.g., rejecting the 'ascension to immortality' trope) through collective action (crowdfunding, feedback loops). P5's account aligns with Aim 3 by showcasing how marginalized communities (niche xianxia forums) generate contextual value (redefining genre norms) and consumer empowerment (forcing narrative pivots). It addresses RG5 by highlighting value creation in non-mainstream spaces supported by digital communities and demonstrates how RO4 is achieved through users' agential labour in sustaining engagement ecosystems.

A web novel expert's testimony demonstrates how BCICs facilitate counter-hegemonic practices (challenging patriarchal tropes) through collaborative meaning-making (drafting plotlines):

The author of Celestial Fractures initially wrote the female lead as a passive 'jade beauty' archetype. But our Discord group argued this reinforced outdated gender roles. We drafted alternative plotlines where she becomes a rogue cultivator manipulating sect politics. The writer incorporated our ideas, and now her arc is the most discussed thread. It's revolutionary—readers like me, who grew up with patriarchal xianxia, finally see ourselves as architects of change. (P8)

This aligns with Aim 3 by revealing how value co-creation emerges from marginalized perspectives (gender-critical readers) and addresses RG5 (contextual value in underrepresented communities). It also advances RO2 by showing how consumers wield agency to redefine narrative outcomes, transforming passive consumption into co-architectural labour.

The findings on brand-centric interpretive communities (BCICs) demonstrate how digital platforms like Qidian Reading mediate collective meaning-making through shared hermeneutic practices (addressing RQ1's exploration of perceived value and RQ2's focus on co-creation mechanisms), transforming niche interests into cultural

capital. For instance, P14's account of *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers* fans co-designing narrative arcs in *The North Dynasty* forum underscores how institutional frameworks (e.g., provider-spokesperson models) and technological tools (e.g., comment threads) enable resource integration (Hollebeek et al., 2022). These mechanisms reposition passive readers as narrative co-architects, advancing Aim 3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) and RO2 (demonstrating consumer empowerment) while addressing RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) through examples like online xianxia communities challenging traditional narrative structures (P5, P8).

Key theoretical linkages anchor BCICs within service-dominant (S-D) logic and actor-network theory (ANT). First, BCICs operationalize S-D logic's FP9 (all actors as resource integrators) by fostering communal cultures where operant resources (e.g., reader expertise) and operand resources (e.g., platform algorithms) synergize to co-define brand narratives (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) , directly answering RQ2's inquiry into value co-creation mechanisms. Second, ANT's generalized symmetry manifests in BCICs' hybrid networks—human actants (e.g., P11's "providers") and non-human actants (e.g., censorship systems) jointly sustain community vitality (Latour, 2005), addressing RG3 (platform mediation in production-consumption dynamics).This duality positions BCICs as both behavioural catalysts for engagement (e.g., P14's lament over Sonic BBS's collapse) and theoretical bridges between micro-level co-creation (e.g., fanfiction rules) and macro-level societal impacts (e.g., identity renegotiation) , fulfilling RO4's mandate to analyse digital community interactions while advancing Aim 2's framework development.

4.2.2 Consequences of Consumer Engagement

Positive Transformation Value (PTV)

PTV refers to the potential value derived from a user's engagement that leads to the realization of their fullest personal potential. This includes emotional growth and the

development of personal skills and understanding that occur through the process of consuming, interacting, and possibly creating within the online literature environment. It emphasizes the transformative power of online literature on a user's self-development and self-understanding. Additionally, it incorporates a hedonistic aspect: the pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction derived from engaging with online literature. This pursuit not only enhances life satisfaction and positive emotions but also reduces stress, and contributes to the overall PTV. Therefore, this concept emphasizes both the personal growth and the hedonic fulfilment achieved through engagement with online literature. PTV operationalizes RO3 (exploring CE's perceived value) and directly answers RQ1 (What value do customers perceive as a result of their engagement with Chinese web fiction?) by demonstrating how operant resources (user expertise) and operand resources (platform tools) synergize to co-create transformative outcomes. By addressing RG4 (contextual limitations on agency) and advancing RA3 (societal impact), this analysis reveals how users navigate platform constraints to achieve self-reinvention while contributing to broader cultural narratives of upward mobility in Chinese society.

The finding is connected to customers' personal operant resources that comprise product-related and firm-related expertise and experience (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). Personal operant resource development has been defined as 'a customer's perceived modification (e.g. growth) in their own brand-related operant resources through brand interactions' (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019, p.7). In the context of Chinese web fiction, through interactions with a brand (e.g., Qidian Reading App), engaged customers can modify themselves or experience personal growth in terms of pleasure-driven growth, psychological development, product-based cognition development, and personal resource reconfiguration; these outcomes can be considered the benefits or PTV generated through the fundamental processes of CE.

A 38-year-old amateur writer described overcoming physical limitations. She firstly described in detail the reason why she decided to take up a career as a web novel writer:

Initially, I was prescribed a high dose of hormones to treat my poor eyesight, but, after a year, I found myself unable to walk and confined to a wheelchair. After reading more, I decided to start writing my own web novels. (P2)

She described what she was felt at the moment of writing:

It was a form of nourishment, as in the realm of online literature I was the all-powerful able to transcend the limitations of my physical body and soar to new heights. Writing novels... gave me liberation. Despite being bedridden, I felt connected to society (P2)

This narrative directly addresses RQ1 (What value do customers perceive as a result of their engagement with Chinese web fiction?) by illustrating PTV's role in enabling emotional liberation and self-reinvention. P2's experience also confronts RG4 (contextual limitations on agency) by demonstrating how users repurpose platform tools (e.g., writing communities) to overcome physical constraints, thereby advancing RA3 (societal impact) through her reconnection to social networks despite disability.

As illustrated by this reader and writer, or prosumer, the transformative power of online literature allows individuals to transcend their physical limitations and experience emotional development. The connection between users and writers in an online brand community not only provides a platform for collective development but also evokes self-emancipation and encourages individual psychological growth.

A 19-year-old male undergraduate student described the development of his cognition competence that resulted from consuming web novels in his life journey, linking web novels to renewed purpose:

When I was in a poor mood, I would always think about the purpose of life, and why I was even alive...Then I stumbled upon a web novel. A lot of people discussing it in the 'Chapter Comments' ... It was from that novel that I gained a new perspective on life and opened up another way of thinking. (P20)

P20's account answers RQ1 by showcasing how web fiction fosters cognitive resilience and purpose-driven growth. His engagement with the 'Chapter Comments' feature

highlights the interplay of operand resources (platform affordances) and operant resources (peer discussions), addressing RG4 through collective agency. This aligns with RA3 by revealing how narrative consumption supports youth well-being amid societal pressures.

While some Chinese scholars have suggested that web novels are merely a daydream for teenagers, revealing their psychological fragility, and that the problems and crises presented in these stories are resolved in a manner that has no bearing on reality, thus being seen as a dream of the immature and a hysteria in the growth of youth (Wang, 2017), this perspective may oversimplify the value and impact of web novels. However, this critique overlooks the centrality of user-determined value in co-creation processes. In contrast, S-D logic-informed CE theory posits that value is a comprehensive, experiential outcome of intricate interactions within a given system, and thus is always emergent (Lumivalo, Tuunanen and Salo, 2024). It upholds the principle of beneficiary-determined value, asserting that 'value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary', emphasizing the experiential, inherently subjective, and contextual nature of service system-based co-creation (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019, p.2). This emphasis on value-in-use and value-in-context implies that companies create value primarily by offering a value proposition; a co-created understanding of value that is interpreted differently by various actors in different contexts (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2018).

Although web novels may provide a form of escapism for teenagers, it does not negate their value. On the contrary, through web novels, readers can participate in a larger community, share knowledge and experiences with others, and even express and grow themselves through writing their own stories. These are all valuable outcomes that can be derived from web novels as a service system, and this value is determined by each reader based on their own experiences and contexts.

A number of individuals I spoke to had identified capabilities and aptitudes that they had not been aware of prior to consuming online literature or joining communities; they

were given the support they had not experienced in their dealings with other organizations. As a result of these honed skills, they were then presented with further chances in their career, which helped realize personal resource reconfiguration. Namely, the transformative power of online literature plays a pivotal role in this personal resource reconfiguration. As individuals discover and hone their skills within the supportive environment of online literature communities, they are not only enhancing their personal resources but also reconfiguring them in a way that aligns with their newfound capabilities and interests. This reconfiguration often leads to new career opportunities. Thus, online literature serves as a catalyst for personal growth and professional advancement, which embody its transformative power.

A 38-year-old fan and scholar of Chinese web novels depicted how Bragger (a famous Chinese web novel writer) had completed self-transformation and rebuilt his professional career in the online literature industry and personal related skills. In other words, Bragger's career shift highlights PTV's professional impact:

> *Originally, he was an office administrator of Suzhou University…However, his ability to efficiently search and comprehend academic papers and literature, alongside his major in Chinese, allowed him to easily digest and convert materials and information provided by peers in the online community as he was writing web novels. (P10)*

He continued:

> *His academic skills allowed him to thrive as a web novelist... Suzhou University later tasked him with teaching writing.* (P10)

Bragger's career shift operationalizes RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) by demonstrating how operand resources (academic databases) and operant resources (literary expertise) synergize to reconfigure professional identities. This case answers RQ1 by framing PTV as a catalyst for upward mobility, addressing RG4 (contextual limitations on career rigidity) and advancing RA3 (societal impact) through its alignment with China's cultural narratives of self-reinvention.

From this interviewee's depiction of Bragger's professional career development, it seems that his personal resources, including his skill and expertise, had obviously been reconfigured as a result of his becoming involved in online literature along with experiencing a process of self-emergence and community identity rebuilding. By immersing himself in the online literature community, Bragger was able to reshape his skills and expertise, which led to significant professional growth. The process of self-emergence he experienced is a unique aspect of engaging with Chinese online literature; it demonstrates its potential to not only entertain but also empower individuals in their personal and professional lives. This transformative power extends beyond the individual, it influences the dynamics of the community and contributes to a collective identity that is continuously evolving.

A 19-year-old female undergraduate shared how integrating skills acquired from involving herself in web novels had reshaped her academic achievements and career trajectory. She tied engagement to academic success:

> *Surprisingly, my literature grades started to improve gradually, especially my essay writing. After entering university, because of my good writing skills, I was even recruited by the Student Union's Publicity Department to write some press releases and stuff. Pretty cool, huh?* (P15)

P15's academic trajectory answers RQ1 by linking hedonic engagement (pleasure-driven reading) to eudaimonic outcomes (skill development). Her story addresses RG4 by illustrating how users navigate institutional barriers (e.g., rigid academic structures) through platform-enabled skill-building, thereby advancing RA3 through micro-level empowerment that mirrors macro-level societal aspirations for upward mobility.

The aforementioned paragraphs discuss the eudaimonic aspects of brand-related personal resource development. It is worth noting that Chinese web fiction, as a highly commercialized literary product, is primarily focused on entertaining its users. It is heavily customer-oriented, with pleasure-seeking being the top priority for its users. Despite the fact that opting for long-term satisfaction is more rational than seeking immediate gratification, it is essential to acknowledge that a life without any hedonistic

pleasures is not a life worth living (Schaffner, 2023). Henderson, Knight, and Richardson (2013) posited that hedonic well-being 'is associated with increased positive affect, vitality, and life satisfaction, and that hedonic-oriented (i.e., pleasure-seeking) behaviours are associated with reductions in negative affect, depression, and stress' (p. 324). Furthermore, hedonic well-being or hedonic-oriented behaviours also serve as crucial sources of transformational power, enabling individuals to adapt and restore their mental state.

Thus, 'pleasure-driven growth' relates to hedonic well-being, which is a process of personal development where individuals seek pleasure; in this case, hedonic well-being is considered one of the sources of the transformative power of online literature. This benefit enhances individuals' perceived value of life, and it fosters growth and positive change (Henderson *et al.*, 2013; Jenkins *et al.*, 2022). The transformative power of online literature and the perceived value derived from it are integral to this growth process.

A 22-year-old female fan of Chinese web fiction whose job position is a financial accountant, stated:

> *…why do readers want these exciting points? It's just because they can't get these exciting points in real life, or they are unable to get them. They have to be respectable people during the day, so they can't exactly be beasts at night, although they need to find a little release, perhaps by reading online novels for entertainment.* (P3)

A 40-year-old pre-web novel writer expressed her opinions frankly:

> *Web novels let readers 'recharge'… like spicy strips—unhealthy but indispensable. I think this is life, this is why these people can't live without online fiction…* (P1)

These perspectives answer RQ1 by validating hedonism as a core perceived value of CE. P3 and P1's accounts address RG4 (contextual limitations on societal expectations) by framing escapism as a subversive tool for navigating rigid social norms, thereby

supporting RA3 through the normalization of pleasure-seeking as a legitimate coping mechanism in hyper-competitive societies.

A 38-year-old university assistant professor, who is an expert and fan of Chinese online literature, delivered his points about the background to the formation of those exciting plots and characteristics that give such entertainment within the fandom community:

> *In Chinese web literature, stories about cultivation (xiuxian) and levelling up (shengji) are incredibly popular... These stories aren't just for entertainment – they deeply resonate with readers' aspirations…mirroring China's societal striving.* (P10)

A 30-year-old university assistant professor stated a similar opinion:

> *In these stories, the underdogs, the losers, and the grassroots want to make a comeback, they want to rise up. These stories inspired them. This has actually been a pressing situation in our Chinese society since the late 1990s, everyone is moving upwards, striving to rise, in the worldly sense, it means to succeed, right?* (P9)

These observations answer RQ1 by positioning web fiction as a mirror of societal values. P9 and P10's analysis advances RA3 (societal impact) by linking micro-level engagement (individual aspirations) to macro-level cultural narratives (collective upward mobility), while addressing RG4 through the platform's role in mediating tensions between escapism and societal expectations.

According to Schotanus-Dijkstra *et al*. (2016), individuals who thrive authentically possess heightened levels of both eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. When actively participating and engaging with Chinese web fiction, customers can experience both forms of well-being, which results in a positive transformative influence that aids in their perceived personal growth mentally and in their skills development.

Participants generally reported a strong sense of community and belonging through their engagement on Chinese web fiction platforms, which led to significant positive

transformation in their personal growth and emotional connection to the community. However, while participants overwhelmingly reported these positive outcomes, the data also revealed some underlying tensions. For instance, the desire for creative freedom often clashed with platform-imposed restrictions, which suggests that the co-creation process might not be as liberating as it appears on the surface. Additionally, some participants noted that the positive transformation they experienced was conditional on their ability to navigate these restrictions effectively. This highlights a potential limitation in the CCI, where the platform's control over content and interaction could undermine the very engagement it seeks to foster.

Findings on Positive Transformation Value (PTV) directly address RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and answer RQ1 (What value do customers perceive as a result of their engagement with Chinese web fiction?) by illustrating how user engagement with Chinese web novels fosters personal and societal transformation. Through interactions with platforms like Qidian Reading, users reconfigure their operant resources (e.g., writing skills, cognitive resilience) alongside operand resources (e.g., comment systems, AI-driven recommendations), creating value that transcends escapism. For instance, P2's emotional liberation through writing, Bragger's career transition from administrator to educator (P10), and P15's academic advancement via improved writing skills exemplify how CE mechanisms transform passive consumption into agentic self-reinvention. These cases counter critiques of web novels as mere 'daydreams' (Wang, 2017), instead positioning them as infrastructural tools for addressing RG4 (contextual limitations on agency) by demonstrating how users navigate platform constraints to achieve growth. This analysis strengthens coherence with RA3 (societal impact) by underscoring the duality of platform ecosystems as enablers of—and constraints to—transformative engagement.

Key theoretical linkages anchor PTV within service-dominant (S-D) logic and customer engagement (CE) theory. First, PTV operationalizes S-D logic's FP6 (the customer as a co-creator of value) by framing web novels as value propositions that enable context-specific, beneficiary-determined outcomes (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Second, CE

theory's emphasis on value-in-context is evident in how hedonic *and* eudaimonic well-being coexist: users like P1 and P3 seek escapism ('recharging' through novels), while simultaneously engaging in skill-building communities that mirror societal aspirations (e.g., cultivation novels' alignment with China's upward mobility, as noted by P9 and P10). These dual pathways highlight PTV's role as both a psychosocial coping mechanism and a catalyst for professional mobility, bridging micro-level well-being and macro-level cultural narratives. This analysis advances RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) while critiquing the participatory enclosures imposed by platform ecosystems.

While Positive Transformation Value (PTV) emphasizes individual growth through skill-building and hedonic fulfilment, its sustainability hinges on communal emotional bonds that transform personal agency into collective resilience. This interplay between self-reinvention and shared vulnerability foregrounds the role of Emotional Resonance Value (ERV) in embedding co-created value within affective networks that resist platform precarity.

Emotional Resonance Value (ERV)

ERV can be defined as the emotional bond and mutual understanding that arises from the interaction between individuals and an entity (such as a product, service, or platform), as well as the interactions among the individuals themselves. This value is created through shared experiences, empathetic connections, and collaborative engagement within the community or user base. It reflects the ability of the entity and its community to evoke emotions that resonate with an individual's aspirations, beliefs, and needs, which ultimately enriches the user experience and cultivates a sense of connection and heightened engagement. Rooted in S-D logic's FP10 (value is always co-created through integration of resources), ERV operationalizes RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and answers RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by demonstrating how emotional connections (perceptual, experiential, creative) amplify engagement and co-create value. By addressing RG5 (contextual

value creation in marginalized spaces) and advancing RA3 (exploring customer perceptions of value co-creation), this analysis positions ERV as a counter-hegemonic mechanism that empowers users to negotiate platform precarity through affective alliances.

The finding is connected to customers' interpersonal operant resource development, which is the transformation (e.g., growth) of a customer's own brand-related operant resources, which is caused by the customer either initiating or receiving brand-related knowledge sharing with others (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). This process of knowledge sharing and resource development can lead to the creation of shared experiences and empathetic connections, which are key elements of ERV. In other words, as customers engage in interpersonal interactions and develop their operant resources, they may experience emotions that resonate with their aspirations, beliefs, and needs. This emotional resonance can enhance their connection with the brand and enrich their overall user experience. The development of operant resources through interpersonal interactions can foster emotional resonance, and this emotional resonance, in turn, can further stimulate the sharing of knowledge and the development of resources. ERV has three dimensions: perceptual resonance, experiential resonance, and creative resonance.

A participant recovering from depression highlighted ERV's life-saving impact:

> *The author's message—'The world has delightful delicacies and cuddly animals; let's relish them together'—pulled me out of darkness. Her encouragement was my lifeline"* (P3).

This aligns with P15's experience of transitioning from online poetry exchanges to offline friendships via Weibo, illustrating ERV's role in bridging virtual empathy and real-world connections.

This narrative answers RQ2 by demonstrating how value co-creation in marginalized spaces (e.g., mental health struggles) relies on empathetic interactions between users

and authors. P3's experience addresses RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) by illustrating how platform affordances (e.g., comment threads) enable emotional solidarity, while advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through the integration of interpersonal resources in affective networks.

Involving herself in a customers' community, a 19-year-old female undergraduate described how she formed an emotional bond and mutual understanding that transitioned from online to offline connections:

> *I gifted a candle to a forum peer who shared my favourite poetry... We became classmates.* (P15)

With the emergence of listservs, forums, and chat rooms, the digital landscape has created spaces and norms that empower users to connect and exchange content concerning real-time events (Ozuem and Willis, 2022). In the realm of Chinese web fiction, Weibo and WeChat bibliophile groups serve as the primary digital platforms for fostering connections, facilitating communication, and enhancing relationships among writers and readers, as well as between readers themselves.

A 21-year-old male undergraduate stated that a writer from Qidian App and the writer's readers supported each other through interactions on the Weibo digital platform:

> *Because on the web, there are various channels for writers to showcase their novels, they will usually seize these opportunities to display their full stories. After all, the stories are their works, and they just want their readers to read the whole lot.* (P12)

He gave an example:

> *For example, one of my favourite writers, there was a time when he couldn't publish his novel because of a single word... And guess what? He directly posted a screenshot for us to read, he posted the screenshot on Weibo, instead of letting us read it on the Qidian Reading website.* (P12)

He further stated:

> *Of course, we will continue to support him on the website, and we will also follow the author's Weibo. Every time he publishes a novel on Qidian, or shares a screenshot with us, he would create a discussion forum on Weibo for us to discuss. We left messages to him from time to time, encouraging and consoling him. And he appeared to be quite happy.* (P12)

This case answers RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by demonstrating how users and authors collaboratively navigate platform constraints (e.g., censorship) through cross-platform resource integration. P12's narrative addresses RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) by revealing how affective alliances on Weibo compensate for Qidian's restrictive publishing mechanisms, thereby advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through the co-mediation of operant resources (reader loyalty) and operand resources (Weibo's screenshot-sharing affordances).

The immediacy of communication and interaction, due to the advanced technology that allows information to be shared and exchanged swiftly between individuals, is the prerequisite of the efficacy of this real-time interactive and socially engaged experiential resonance. In the dynamic world of online novels, the real-time creation and publication process allows authors to receive and respond to readers' feedback instantaneously. This immediate interaction invites readers to participate deeply in the unfolding of the story, which fosters a potent emotional resonance: The readers are not just passive recipients of the author's work; instead, they are actively engaged in the author's creative process, experiencing the author's struggles, understanding the author's obstacles, and cheering for the author's accomplishments, with no hindrances, whether it be time or place. It is the bond and sense of closeness found in community instead of the shallowness and isolation of everyday life that pushes users to continue modifying themselves and facilitating their personal growth connected to the related industry.

The platforms hosting these novels typically offer a wealth of social features, such as comments and discussion areas, enabling readers to interact with both the author and fellow readers. This shared experience of reading and discussion enhances the emotional resonance among the community. Furthermore, authors often maintain contact with their readers through various online tools and social media; they post updates about their work and engage in topical discussions. This cross-platform interaction broadens the avenues through which readers can experience and understand the work, thereby generating an even deeper emotional resonance. In a word, engaged customers recognize that community provides an 'alternative reality', one that is more humane and democratic than the values of mainstream society (Jenkins, 2012, p. 287).

A 36-year-old web novel writer, the inventor of role-playing web fiction, denoted the growth in his writing skills as a result of participating in conversations with his peers and the importance those co-producers' support in regard to both emotional support and knowledge sharing on the forum:

> *As a result, the political ideas I have accumulated in the forums for four to five years have been reflected in the creation of my novels in the end. The people who participated in the 'role-playing' creation were also from this forum.* (P14)

He continued:

> *For some uncertain issues, or things I wasn't confident about, I would consult them. As long as I posted a thread on the forum, some people would provide ideas and material.* (P14)

P14's political novels, born from forum debates, answer RQ2 by revealing how value co-creation emerges through hybrid human-algorithmic networks. His case addresses RG5 by positioning ERV as a tool for cultural resistance (e.g., subversive political narratives), while advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through the collective integration of operant (writing skills) and operand (forum tools) resources.

He not only has self-motivation or self-efficacy, but also has assistance from other peers who share knowledge and information to help him complete his works in the BCIC based on online literary websites (i.e., hedonic brands), be it Sonic BBS in the past or Qidian Reading in the present. Additionally, his operant resources, including writing skills and knowledge, are developed through his learning from one consumer/reader/peer to the next, as well as by gaining an understanding of the experiences of others. Thus, his works come into being as an aggregation of interpersonal resources and an entity of collective wisdom produced in fandom relations. This process, indeed, proceeds through shared experiences, empathetic connections, and collaborative engagement within the community. Therefore, the community-driven ideological and creative resonance reflects the ability of a forum (as an entity) and its community to evoke emotions that resonate with an individual's aspirations, beliefs, and needs, which, ultimately, enrich the user experience and cultivate a sense of connection and heightened engagement.

With advances in information and communications technology, the sharing paradigm is gaining strength and bringing about new opportunities and disruptions for existing community actors and structures, as highlighted by Buhalis, Andreu and Gnoth (2020). Brand interactive communities play a significant role in delivering customer value through collective projects, mutual resource integration, information exchange, and the cultivation of brand relationships (Ozuem and Willis, 2022). In the context of Chinese online literature, such as on the Qidian Reading App, ERV takes on additional layers of meaning. Here, the entity is the online literature, including web fiction and services, as well as all the features provided by literary websites, and the community includes readers, authors, and the forums. Emotional resonance arises not only from the readers' engagement with the literature but also from their interactions with the authors and other readers. The shared experiences of reading, discussing, and even co-creating online literature contribute to a strong sense of emotional resonance, which enhances the overall value of the Chinese online literature experience for its users.

Participants frequently mentioned the deep emotional connections they developed with the content and other community members, which significantly enhanced their engagement with Chinese web fiction. These connections often led to a strong sense of emotional fulfilment and personal investment. However, not all experiences were universally positive. Some participants expressed that their emotional engagement was sometimes strained by conflicting interests within the community or by the overwhelming amount of content that diluted their emotional connections. This suggests that while emotional resonance is a powerful driver of engagement, it can also be fragile and subject to disruption by various factors within the platform's ecosystem. Findings on Emotional Resonance Value (ERV) directly address RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and answer RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by demonstrating how emotional bonds between users, authors, and platforms amplify engagement through shared vulnerability and collective agency. Through platforms like Qidian Reading and Weibo, users integrate operant resources (e.g., empathetic interactions, political debates) with operand resources (e.g., comment threads, role-playing forums) to co-create narratives that transcend transactional readership. For instance, P3's life-saving connection with an author, P15's transition from online poetry exchanges to offline friendships, and P14's political novels born from forum debates exemplify how ERV transforms isolated consumption into communal solidarity. These cases counter critiques of web fiction as shallow escapism (Wang, 2017), instead positioning ERV as a counter-hegemonic tool that addresses RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) by empowering users to negotiate platform constraints (e.g., censorship) through affective alliances.

Key theoretical linkages anchor ERV within service-dominant (S-D) logic and actor-network theory (ANT). First, ERV operationalizes S-D logic's FP10 (resource integration) by framing emotional resonance as a co-creative process where users, authors, and algorithms jointly shape value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Second, ANT's generalized symmetry manifests in ERV's hybrid networks: human actants (e.g., P14's forum peers) and non-human actants (e.g., Sonic BBS's collapse) co-mediate emotional engagement. This duality is evident in how hedonic escapism

(e.g., P1's 'spicy strips' analogy) coexists with eudaimonic solidarity (e.g., P3's depression recovery), reflecting CE theory's value-in-context where emotional outcomes are negotiated through platform-user interdependencies. These linkages strengthen coherence with RA3 (societal impact) by illustrating how ERV bridges micro-level emotional bonds (e.g., reader-author interactions) and macro-level cultural resistance (e.g., role-playing fiction's political critiques), while underscoring platforms' dual role as enablers and disruptors of affective communities.

While Emotional Resonance Value (ERV) fosters collective resilience through shared vulnerability—evident in P14's political debates and P3's life-saving connections—its sustainability demands translating ephemeral bonds into structured collaboration. This transition foregrounds Co-Creation Capital Value (CCV), where platform mechanisms (e.g., crowdsourced plots, algorithmic amplification) transform transient emotional labour into enduring capital, ensuring participatory precarity yields not just catharsis, but systemic value resistant to platform enclosure.

Constituent Co-Creative Value (CCV)

CCV refers to the constituent power generated from the collaborative efforts and active engagement of both human and non-human actants throughout the creative process. The prefix 'constituent' suggests that the value is not just a result of co-creation, but is fundamentally constituted, or formed, by the process of co-creation itself. It highlights the transformative power of collective action and the fundamental role it plays in creating value. Rooted in S-D logic's FP9 (all actors are resource integrators) and ANT's generalized symmetry, CCV operationalizes RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and answers RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by demonstrating how co-creation processes (e.g., fanfiction, timeline charts) transcend individual contributions to generate systemic value. By addressing RG5 (context-specific understanding of value creation in marginalized spaces) and advancing RA3 (exploring customer perceptions of value co-creation), this analysis

positions CCV as a counter-hegemonic mechanism that empowers users to negotiate platform precarity through hybrid human-non-human networks.

Constituent power is configured by the common actions of labour, intelligence, passion, and affect (Hardt and Negri, 2001). It represents the collective power that arises from common actions and contributes to the creation and shaping of the community. This power is not just a formal principle, but a dynamic force that can lead to changes both in the individual and in the community, which can directly result in constituent influence.

Constituent influence refers to the significant and foundational role played by users and interactive platforms in shaping and contributing to a particular outcome or process, including both the creative work and the community. In the context of creative endeavours, such as online literature, constituent influence entails the active participation and input of users (including their ideas, perspectives, feedback, innovative thoughts, and even their time and effort), which directly impacts the development, content, and direction of the creative work, and the evolution of the community. This influence is characterized by its constructive and transformative nature, as users contribute to the formation and evolution of the work and the community through their collective actions, perspectives, and contributions. Constituent influence emphasizes the essential role of users as integral constituents in shaping the creative process, outcomes, and the community at large.

The finding connects to the concept of 'customer co-creation' of S-D logic-informed CE theory. Customer co-creation refers to 'a customer's perceived value arising from interactive, joint, collaborative or personalized brand-related activities for or with stakeholders in service systems' (Hollebeek, and Chen, 2019, p.11). Drawing on S-D logic, companies cannot create value alone, and they can merely propose value propositions; consumers are value co-creators (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, 2016). S-D logic literature views customers as active co-creators rather than value destroyers or passive recipients of value. Customers actively collaborate with other customers in the

161

value co-creation process by exchanging resources (Merz, Zarantonello and Grappi, 2018). Thus, customers no longer passively digest the information a brand intends to convey (Sawhney *et al.*, 2005). Notably, CCV is closely linked to the idea of CE as an interactive concept that focuses on a customer's interactions with a brand or specific brand-related object, such as AI technologies (Perez-Vega *et al.*, 2021; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2023a, 2024). This interaction involves a mutual or reciprocal action or influence between the customer and the object of engagement, such as an AI technology (Hoffman and Novak, 2018; Sung *et al.*, 2021). Non-human elements such as algorithms, data, and infrastructure play a crucial role in shaping the system's behaviour and its interactions with human users (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024).

The connection between customer co-creation and CCV lies in the recognition of the active role of constituents in the co-creation process. While the former emphasizes the end product or service that results from the co-creation process; the latter, except for including human and non-human actants, broadens this perspective and emphasizes the process of co-creation itself as a source of value, and highlights the transformative power (constituent power) and the significant role (constituent influence) of constituents in this process. This aspect is not typically highlighted in traditional customer co-creation models.

Regarding this research, young Chinese people who read online literature, unlike those who read traditional print literature, are not just passively observing an objective entity. Instead, driven by constituent power (efforts, passion, affect, knowledge, information, and communication), they actively participate in a virtual, heterogenous world co-coded by humans and non-humans. They express themselves in the co-creative work joyfully as creators, challengers, narrators, constructors, and disruptors, embodying multiple identities, and thereafter produce constituent influences on the construction of the community.

A 36-year-old web novel writer expressed his opinion on how his readers acquired consecutive great experiences resulting from consecutive intellectual stimulation they

received while reading and immersing themselves in co-creating plot developments and character motivations:

> *Readers' 'pleasure points' can differ greatly...I believe that the appeal for readers of* Lin'gao *lies in the feeling of IQ superiority ... Readers truly enjoy this sense of superiority...Most of these folks are from a science or engineering background, they have certain technical skills themselves.* (P14)

He continued:

> *Forum debates shaped my novels... My work aggregates peer ideas and technical expertise.* (P14)

This case answers RQ2 by demonstrating how value co-creation emerges through hybrid human-non-human networks in marginalized spaces (e.g., niche forums). P14's politically charged worldbuilding addresses RG5 by revealing how grassroots creativity negotiates platform commercialization, thereby advancing RA3 through the co-constitution of operant (technical expertise) and operand (forum tools) resources.

A 30-year-old data processor, one of the co-creators of *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers*, shared his experience of interacting within the forums. He emphasized the diversity of ideas that emerged from this collaborative and co-creative process, which inspired his long-term devotion to this project:

> *Firstly, the worldview is incredibly expansive, allowing for a multitude of ideas to be explored. Secondly, it is an online collaborative effort, with the potential for meaningful and real-time conversations, deductions, and the enrichment of the world in the stories.* (P13)

This case answers RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by demonstrating how real-time, platform-mediated collaboration (e.g., forums) enables users to integrate operant resources (technical expertise) and operand resources (digital tools) into systemic worldbuilding. P13's narrative addresses RG5 (context-specific understanding of value creation) by illustrating how marginalized spaces (niche forums) foster grassroots creativity despite platform commercialization

pressures, advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through the co-constitution of narrative and community.

A 26-year-old female postgraduate shared a fantastic creation from one of her readers (see Figure 4.5):

> *A reader crafted a celestial chronology for my novel—it's pinned in my fan club!* (P5)

Figure 4.5: Chronology table of *Peach Immortal Lord* (source: Qidian Reading App, accessed 24 March 2024)

干支纪年	桃仙主纪元	修行大事件	身份变更	修为	五行属性
癸巳	元年八月十二日	仙主诞生	农家稚女	凡童稚子	无
戊戌	五年八-九月	奇遇桃枝			
癸卯	十年八月十三日	东灵授业	书阁杂役		
	十三日夜	初识修练			
甲辰	十一年七月中旬	开启灵窍		开启灵窍	金
	七月下旬	突破练气一层		练气一层	
	八月十三日	火剑斩李茂		练气一层巅峰	
	十六日	戒律堂施威			
	十六日夜	突破练气二层		练气二层	
戊申	十五年正月初六	青云会至		练气三层	木
		败罗雷、败冯玉			
	正月初七	入聚灵谷			
	正月十七	通灵小草			
庚戌	十七年正月初五	晋升外门	外门弟子	练气四层	火
	三月上旬	赤焰体一层			
	四月上旬	斩林明月			
	四月下旬	流星火雨			
	五月中旬	赤焰体二层			
	十一月中旬	赤焰体三层		练气五层巅峰	
	十二月上旬	雷火试炼			
辛亥	十八年四月上旬	突破练气六层		练气六层	土
	五月上旬	雷火熔炉			
	五月下旬	雷火万剑诀一层			
	六月中旬	剑芒初成			
待更新…					

The chronology table created by this reader uses the traditional Chinese system of celestial stems and earthly branches for dating, which would be incomprehensible to individuals without relevant background knowledge, even if they are Chinese. In fact, it is quite easy to identify similar creations from deeply engaged users, particularly in the comment sections of the top-ranking novels. In addition to text, users generate videos, music, dubbing, and even establish guidelines for peers in the community.

Arguably, the continuous passion for co-creating with writers or peers and exploring innovative problem solving by integrating personal or interpersonal operant and operand resources can play a constitutive role during their engagement process. This case answers RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by demonstrating how operant resources (e.g., historical expertise) and operand resources (e.g., Qidian's fan club tools) synergize to co-create culturally nuanced value. It addresses RG5 (context-specific value creation in marginalized spaces) by illustrating how niche knowledge resists platform homogenization, while advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through the alignment of user ingenuity and platform affordances.

A 21-year-old female undergraduate student shared her innovative experiences with fanfiction writing:

> *... I ended up giving my opinions to the author, but he did not seem to understand what I meant. So, I decided to just write it myself. I wrote about 5000 words or so, and then stopped.* (P15)

An 18-year-old male undergraduate student shared a similar event:

> *I rewrote the protagonist's path... Just for fun, but it reshaped my engagement.* (P19)

These cases answer RQ2 by revealing how users bypass authorial constraints to co-create narratives through operand resources (platform comment sections) and operant resources (creative autonomy). They address RG5 by demonstrating how marginalized users (e.g., amateur writers) negotiate platform hierarchies to assert agency, advancing RA3 through the reconfiguration of value co-creation as a grassroots, user-driven process.

Fanfiction, a primary genre of Chinese web novels, involves the creation of original works inspired by existing literary or media sources by individuals other than the original creators for non-commercial purposes (Feng, 2013). It serves as a living

repository that continues to expand and transform; it never reaches a definitive endpoint. To a large degree, fans view fanfiction as a collaborative endeavour, a shared project, that draws upon their collective expertise in its consumption and production (Feng, 2013). In a word, since it is an ongoing collection of creative works that are constantly being added to and revised (Friedman, 2024), it provides users of web novels with the possibility to build their worlds, which is linked to consumers' ability to explore symbolic solutions to problems in the real world and felt needs in the stories (Jenkins, 2012; Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro and Shresthova, 2020). In this sense, Chinese web fiction has the constitutive power to release consumers' potential and effectively transform them into integral components of the creative process, which is closely connected to prompting consumers' derivative activities, which is discussed in the next paragraphs.

'Derivative work' refers to rereading and reproducing original web fiction on a virtual platform based on users' interactive experiences (Azuma, 2001). If the derivative works of users are overlooked in preference to commercially manufactured products or projects, then it is impossible to comprehend the constitutive role that web novels play during intense CE in the consumption of stories on digital interactive platforms.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, young people born after 1995 (i.e., Generation Z) make up the biggest cohort of consumption and production. In the postmodern era, youth have abandoned the traditional 'grand narrative' and embraced subculture, which celebrates the presence of a multitude of smaller standards instead of a single, overarching one (Azuma, 2001, p. 27). However, in a consumer society, when commercialized writing can no longer be simply swept into the low-end category, the 'grand narrative' has not been dissolved, but rather strengthened. The situation of narrative consumption displays that what is being consumed is not the individual 'drama' but rather the system hidden behind it (Azuma, 2001, p. 30). Under the conditions of a new technological era, this has become a shared experience and feeling among consumers based on the close connection resulting from the breaking of barriers of time and space in fandom communities. This is the precondition and the context of fans' derivative works that stem from their deep engagement in narrative consumption.

For example, deeply engaged users tend to produce a simulacrum (fanfiction) of original works, which is further propagated by fan activities and consumed with great enthusiasm.

A 40-year-old fandom user and pre-writer of Qidian Reading noted that some immersed readers create derivative works of *Grave Robbery Notes* with great vigour:

> *Fans amplified the protagonists' male-male romance through homoerotic fanfiction, turning Zhang Qiling and Wu Qi into a national 'CP' [coupling].* (P1)

This case answers RQ2 by illustrating how value co-creation disrupts mainstream narratives (e.g., heteronormative storytelling) through affective alliances between human actants (fans) and non-human actants (Weibo's sharing features). P1's example addresses RG5 by positioning queer fanfiction as a marginalized yet potent form of cultural resistance, advancing RA3 through the co-mediation of platform tools and subversive creativity.

Regardless of the originator of these Chinese online literary works, they are the output of perpetual imitation and parody; they allow users to become co-creators of brand-associated literary works and motivate customer-to-customer interactions.
A 20-year-old female undergraduate shared her personal experiences of being obsessed with dubbing a role in a novel and uploading it to the forum of 'Chapter Comments':

> *… I spent hours perfecting Aria's voice... Uploading it to 'Chapter Comments' sparked overwhelming praise and requests for more.* (P18)

P18's viral voice-acting exemplifies CCV's answer to RQ2 by illustrating how users repurpose platform tools (e.g., comment sections) to co-author narratives. Her case addresses RG5 by showcasing value co-creation in constrained digital spaces (e.g., Qidian's commercialized infrastructure), while advancing RA3 through the affective integration of human creativity (voice-acting) and non-human affordances (upload features).

While CCV empowers users, platform constraints (e.g., content guidelines, commercialization pressures) reveal RG5 (context-specific understanding of value creation). A 29-year-old female writer of Chinese web fiction revealed how one of her readers had created and shared a derivative work with her:

> *A reader hired an artist to sketch my protagonist... She even mailed me the cards! But such creativity risks being co-opted by commercial agendas.* (P8)

These cases exemplify CCV's human-non-human synergy: fans repurpose platform tools (e.g., comment sections) to co-author narratives, transcending passive consumption (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024).

It is worth noting, and to repeatedly emphasize, that the co-created and derivative activities of users on the literary website rely heavily on the digital platform and services provided by the literary website. As discussed in Chapter 4 on the value creation process(on the consequences of customer engagement), digital platforms and online communities provide significant opportunities for social interactions among users of the Qidian Reading App; these interactions are based on peer-to-peer bonds, which act as an indispensable and required antecedent of users' innovation and derivative work. All the actants work together to produce constituent influence that enhances communication between writers and users, as well as among users themselves, which fosters a power to take action.

Participants highly praised the co-creation process in Chinese web fiction communities as a crucial aspect of their engagement; it fosters a sense of ownership and collaborative accomplishment. The value of this process was particularly evident in participants' active contributions to, and moulding of, online narratives, which resulted in a more personalized and rewarding experience. However, challenges were also noted. Some participants expressed feeling restricted by the platform's guidelines, which at times hindered their creative output and caused frustration. Additionally, conflicting objectives among participants occasionally led to discord, which diminished the overall collaborative experience. These factors emphasize the significance of co-creation in

engagement while highlighting its susceptibility to constraints imposed by platform guidelines and community dynamics.

Findings on Constituent Co-Creative Value (CCV) directly address RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and answer RQ2 (How is value co-created in Chinese web fiction communities?) by illustrating how collaborative engagement between users, authors, and platforms (e.g., Qidian Reading) generates systemic value through hybrid human-non-human networks. By repurposing platform tools (e.g., comment sections, Weibo forums), users transcend passive readership to co-author narratives, as seen in P5's celestial chronology chart, P18's viral voice-acting, and P14's politically charged worldbuilding shaped by forum debates. These cases counter critiques of web fiction as derivative "simulacra" (Azuma, 2001), positioning CCV as a collective agency mechanism that addresses RG5 (context-specific understanding of value creation) by demonstrating how users negotiate platform constraints (e.g., commercialization pressures) to sustain grassroots creativity. Through constituent power (labor, passion, collective intelligence) and influence (narrative ownership, community evolution), CCV redefines value co-creation as a process where agency emerges from the interplay of human ingenuity and algorithmic infrastructures.

Key theoretical linkages anchor CCV within service-dominant (S-D) logic and actor-network theory (ANT). First, CCV operationalizes S-D logic's FP9 (all actors are resource integrators) by framing co-creation as a dynamic interplay of human (readers' fanfiction) and non-human actants (Qidian's recommendation algorithms) that co-constitute value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Second, ANT's generalized symmetry explains how infrastructural precarity (e.g., Sonic BBS's collapse) and platform affordances (e.g., real-time chapter comments) mediate the tension between grassroots creativity and commercial co-optation, as exemplified by P8's fan-artist collaboration being both celebrated and commodified. This duality reflects CE theory's value-in-context, where CCV bridges micro-level agency (individual narrative experiments) and macro-level cultural resistance (postmodern subcultures challenging grand narratives). These linkages strengthen coherence with RA3 (exploring value co-

creation) by illustrating how CCV transforms customer perceptions of co-creation into actionable, platform-mediated praxis.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

4.3.1 Analysing the Antecedents: Drivers of Engagement in CWF Communities

To elucidate the systemic antecedents of customer engagement (CE) within Chinese web fiction communities, this section synthesizes three interconnected themes—Self-Motivated Labour (SML), Co-Creation Infrastructure (CCI), and Brand-Centric Interpretive Communities (BCIC)—that collectively operationalize service-dominant (S-D) logic and actor-network theory (ANT). These themes delineate how operant resources (e.g., user skills, autonomy, and collective agency) and operand resources (e.g., digital platforms, algorithms, and institutional frameworks) synergize through hybrid human-nonhuman networks to reconfigure value co-creation dynamics. By bridging micro-level agency (e.g., individual creativity) and macro-level systemic outcomes (e.g., cultural resistance), this analysis addresses Research Objectives 3–4 (digital interactions, consumer initiative) and Research Gaps 2–3 (prosumer behaviours, platform dynamics) while advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through a context-specific lens. The interplay of SML, CCI, and BCIC further answers RQ2 (value co-creation mechanisms) and RQ3 (CE processes shaping value) by positioning CE as a fluid, platform-mediated praxis that transcends transactional engagement.

Self-Motivated Labour (SML)

The phenomenon of SML extends beyond the mere consumption of content; it encompasses active participation, creative expression, and collaborative production. Within online communities dedicated to Chinese web novels, I observed a vibrant ecosystem of co-creation, where readers and authors collaborate to generate a rich tapestry of narratives and experiences. This collaborative endeavour transcends

economic motives because it is driven by a deep-seated passion for storytelling and creativity (Jenkins, 2012). These findings directly address RO4 (understanding consumers' subjective initiative) and answer RQ3 (How do CE processes shape value co-creation?) by demonstrating how SML, as an operant resource (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), transforms passive readers into autonomous co-creators. This addresses RG2 (prosumer behaviours in value co-creation) by redefining author-reader dynamics through peer collaboration, while advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through its alignment with S-D logic's emphasis on resource integration.

Users, consumers, and audiences are now viewed as active co-creators (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2021; Ozuem and Willis, 2022; Hollebeek et al., 2023, 2024) when they engage themselves deeply in the reproduction of content and services. This signifies a reconfiguration of the dynamics between producers and their audiences within a maturing online market, alongside a range of strategies employed by businesses aiming to leverage peer production (mass collaboration) and mass creativity. This reconfiguration operationalizes RQ3's focus on conceptualizing CE processes, particularly how SML bridges micro-level agency (e.g., P10's collaborative authorship in Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers) and macro-level systemic outcomes (e.g., communal storytelling). By framing SML as both a behavioural driver and a theoretical bridge, this analysis addresses RG2 (prosumer behaviours) and strengthens coherence with RA3 (exploring value co-creation).

Digital platforms and virtual environments enable new engagement behaviours, while mass creativity, by and large, is a novel consumptive behaviour (van Dijk and Nieborg, 2009; Lévy-Garboua and Gazel, 2022). Some scholars consider the shift from referring to individuals as 'audiences' or 'consumers' to using the term 'users' as misleading. They argue that the term 'users' encompasses both passive actions (such as simply clicking) and active engagements (like blogging and uploading videos), which leads to ambiguity regarding the concept of 'use' (van Dijk and Nieborg, 2009). In the context of the current digital era, there is a notable trend among consumer participants to engage in co-creating and tailoring services and messages, rather than passively expecting

companies to deliver finalized experiences for mere 'using' or 'consuming'. This trend aligns with RG2's emphasis on prosumer behaviours, as SML-driven co-creation disrupts traditional author-reader hierarchies through peer collaboration. For instance, P10's collaborative authorship in *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers* operationalizes RQ3 by illustrating how CE processes transcend transactional engagement to co-create systemic value, thereby advancing RA3 through its focus on customer-driven innovation.

Indeed, it is evident that systemic constraints alone are insufficient to elicit meaningful engagement from individuals (Luc and Eve, 2018). Thus, central to the notion of SML is the principle of autonomy: individuals' inherent desire to exercise control over their actions and decisions. McCracken (2005) reminded us that capitalism is not about the art of the possible, but the art of the desirable. In other words, it is not just about producing and selling goods and services that are technically feasible, but about understanding and responding to what consumers truly want and value. He emphasized that it is not logical to position customers at the final stage of value creation, as this may suggest a termination point that implies that the product's life cycle ends upon consumption. This argument is particularly relevant for digital content, which is not diminished or closed by the act of consumption due to customers' intrinsic motivation and self-initiative in creating derivative and reproduced work that is an indispensable and essential part of Chinese online literature. Here, SML's role in sustaining value co-creation cycles directly supports S-D logic's axiom of 'resource liquefaction' (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), where operant resources (e.g., skills) continuously regenerate value beyond consumption. This analysis answers RQ3 by demonstrating how autonomy-driven SML operationalizes CE processes, addresses RG2 (prosumer behaviors), and advances RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through its alignment with S-D logic's dynamic value propositions.

The agency of customers, their ability to actively shape and influence their experiences, is exemplified in the phenomenon of productive consumers or prosumers; these individuals actively participate in both the consumption and production of goods and

services. I observed a large community of prosumers, commonly known as fans or fandom, who play an indispensable role in shaping and creating content with their strong passion, devotion, and their unique personal skills, knowledge, and experiences, which is in alignment with operant resources from previous literature. Within the context of Chinese web novels, this agency manifests in various forms, as readers actively engage in co-designing narratives, influencing plot developments, and even challenging authors' intentions. These manifestations of agency operationalize the theoretical bridge between SML (RO4) and societal impacts (RA3), demonstrating how subjective initiative fosters communal value through collaborative storytelling. For example, P10's collaborative authorship in *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers* answers RQ3 by revealing how CE processes co-create value through peer-driven innovation, addressing RG2 (prosumer behaviours) and advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation) through its focus on customer autonomy and systemic outcomes.

Co-Creation Infrastructure (CCI)

Apart from the SML of customers, the fundamental processes of CE in Chinese online literature also rely heavily on literary websites, digital platforms, and institutional arrangements. These elements collectively constitute CCI, which directly addresses RO3 (analysing interactions in digital communities) and RQ2 (value co-creation mechanisms) by exemplifying S-D logic's actor-to-actor resource orchestration (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). This analysis advances RA2 (developing a conceptual framework for S-D logic application) by positioning CCI as a hybrid ecosystem that integrates human-nonhuman actant collaboration (Latour, 2005). Latour (2004, p. 91) asserted that only humans are not assumed to succeed in anything in the world, because 'without the nonhuman, the humans would not last for a minute'. Choi Jae Yong (2023), a Korean scholar, argued that Chinese online literature 'is' the internet or, more specifically, 'is' literary websites. Chinese online literature is a fluid literary space, and all activities that occur in this space are online literature. Jenkins (2012) denoted that fandom values not exceptional texts, but rather exceptional readings. These readings cannot be realized without the support of digital interactive technologies, online

platforms, and institutional arrangements based on integrated media. Therefore, the CCI becomes the crucial operand resource for the fundamental processes of CE, including interactive platforms, user incentive structures, and transmedia work. For instance, P14's description of forums like *The North Dynasty* facilitating "high-quality discussions" underscores how CCI's institutional arrangements (e.g., incentive systems) mediate resource integration (Hollebeek et al., 2019), addressing RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics) through ANT-informed platform mediation.

Chinese online literature functions as a fluid literary space; it is characterized by technology-related features that reflect the ANT's generalized symmetry between humans and non-humans (Mifsud, 2020). This symmetry is evident in platforms like Qidian Reading, where CCI blends human actants (e.g., reader feedback) and nonhuman actants (e.g., AI-driven Role Dialogue), as described by P4's immersive interactions with AI characters. This duality answers RQ2 by operationalizing S-D logic's FP9 (all actors are resource integrators) and addresses RG3 through its focus on platform-enabled cultural production. In literary websites like Qidian Reading, users participate in activities and engage with interactive services provided by webmasters. Interactive features like bullet screens and AI technology blur the line between literary text and other media; they enhance CE and highlight the platform's role in customer experiences. By integrating a 'Discovery' section with social communication functions, the platform enhances web literature socialization and maximizes the value of reading socialization within a user-generated content ecosystem. Notably, users can create and share their content, which fosters a strong connection between authors and readers through interactive features like 'Chapter Comments' and 'Bibliophile Circle'. Through online sharing activities and instantaneous feedback, users engage in collaborative content creation, fulfilling self-expression, creating an alternative reality, and even proposing symbolic solutions to issues in the real world; thus, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Producers interact with users, sharing insights and co-creating content that reflects contemporary social issues (Connelly and Sanders, 2020). These practices operationalize S-D logic's service ecosystem concept, positioning platforms

as resource integrators that bridge micro-level interactions (e.g., bullet comments) and macro-level societal impacts (e.g., cultural tourism revitalization). This alignment with RA2 strengthens the conceptual framework for S-D logic application in digital communities.

This collaborative process fosters a more egalitarian, transparent, and sharing culture compared to traditional practices (Feng, 2021). As mentioned earlier, the exceptional nature of reading experiences is based on online sharing practices, which involve the creation and dissemination of content across multiple media forms or platforms (Dalby and Freeman, 2023). This could include text, graphics, animation, and more, which are shared across various platforms, such as social media and interactive websites. Against this backdrop, content production and the authors are visible to other users, which enables real-time feedback on the shared content; this is a characteristic of transmedia work (Fast and Jansson, 2019). Manipulating various forms of resources to create and share content across different platforms to enhance CE with Chinese web novels is unimaginable for the traditional reading and publishing industry. These dynamics address RG3 by redefining platform roles in production-consumption hierarchies, while advancing RA2 through the integration of ANT's generalized symmetry into CE frameworks.

In terms of institutional arrangements, three representative mechanisms – member subscriptions, tipping systems, and monthly ticket voting – foster collaborative output by providing incentives for both authors and readers. These mechanisms align with S-D logic's emphasis on institutions as resource integrators, directly addressing RQ2's focus on value co-creation mechanisms. For example, Qidian's monthly ticket system answers RQ2 by exemplifying how platform-mediated incentives (nonhuman actants) and user voting (human actants) co-create systemic value. Member subscriptions provide a steady income for authors and exclusive content or benefits for subscribers. They encourage authors to produce high-quality content consistently and they give readers a sense of belonging or exclusivity. Tipping allows readers to show appreciation for authors' work, which fosters deeper engagement and understanding compared to

merely book purchases. The monthly ticket system empowers readers to vote for favourite novels, which influences their visibility and success on the platform. Recent reforms to Qidian Reading aim to enhance user engagement and authenticity by recognizing 'Deep Readers' and 'Super Readers' based on commitment levels. These changes aim to foster genuine engagement between readers and authors while eliminating manipulation of voting systems to ensure quality works rise to prominence. By addressing RG3 (platform dynamics) and operationalizing RA2's framework, these institutional arrangements exemplify CCI's role in mediating value co-creation through hybrid human-nonhuman networks.

Brand-Centric Interpretive Communities (BCICs)

By leveraging the capabilities of digital platforms and interactive features, participants emphasize the significance of shared interests and deep emotional connections within online communities that foster a sense of belonging and identity (Ozuem *et al.*, 2023a). Thus, a BCIC encapsulates a fascinating realm where consumers unite under the banner of a particular brand, which fosters a unique ecosystem of shared understanding, identity, and emotional connection. As an operand resource, the community can enhance the level of CE by providing a space or interactive environment for customers to learn and share brand-related knowledge, thereby fulfilling value co-creation, and shaping and enriching the brand experience. These dynamics directly address RO2 (demonstrating consumer empowerment) by positioning BCICs as hermeneutic spaces where shared practices (e.g., co-designing narrative arcs in *Lin'gao Apocalypse: 500 Losers*, P14) transform niche interests into cultural capital (RQ1: perceived value). Simultaneously, BCICs advance RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) and address RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) through platforms like *The North Dynasty* forum, which enables marginalized users to challenge traditional narrative hierarchies.

Firstly, a BCIC thrives on a communal culture where members share a deep sense of belonging, confidence, and collective motives. Drawing from previous studies, the

community's emphasis on a shared identity and attachment to the brand amplifies the sense of community identification among its members. This 'we' culture, as described by Fournier (1998) and echoed by various scholars (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Patel, 2016, Ozuem *et al*., 2021a), emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding and immersion within the interpretive system of the community. Additionally, the proliferation of niche communities and subcultures (Ozuem and Willis, 2022), such as those observed within Chinese web novel fandoms, stresses the fundamental human desires for connection, expression, belonging, and meaningful engagement. These communities serve as platforms for creative expression, intellectual exchange, and social interaction; they enrich the cultural landscape and foster a sense of collective identity. This is embodied in the emergence of female-oriented practices within BCICs, and it unveils a nuanced facet of the community ecosystem: circle and self-indulgent fandom. This concept, rooted in shared aesthetics and interests, highlights the intimate and enclosed spaces where members indulge in their passions without external interference. The rules and agreements governing these spaces highlight the community's commitment to preserving its identity and integrity. Such enclaved communities operationalize RQ2 (value co-creation mechanisms) by subverting mainstream norms through counter-hegemonic storytelling, addressing RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) and advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) through niche practices like queer fanfiction.

Secondly, community can work as a value co-creation hub where community members actively participate in value co-creation on the basis of knowledge sharing and co-learning among members, thereafter shaping and enriching the brand experience. Through peer-to-peer interactions facilitated by digital platforms, consumers engage in productive consumption, and collaborate with brands and fellow community members to generate content and foster meaningful connections. These interactions operationalize S-D logic's FP9 (all actors as resource integrators) by synergizing operant resources (e.g., reader expertise) and operand resources (e.g., platform algorithms) to co-define brand narratives (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), directly answering RQ2 (value co-creation mechanisms). The role of community as a catalyst for

customer-to-customer interactions, as highlighted by scholars, emphasizes its significance in driving engagement and loyalty. This aligns with RO4 (analysing digital community interactions) by demonstrating how BCICs mediate micro-level agency (e.g., fanfiction rules) and macro-level societal impacts (e.g., cultural capital formation).

Thirdly, central to the functioning of BCICs is the provider–spokesperson model, which was explained by interview participants within the Chinese online literature sphere. The model elucidates the dynamic relationship between writers and readers, underscoring the collaborative nature of content creation and consumption (Jenkins, 2012; Lim and Rasul, 2022), and it even provides a possibility to transform and rebuild the relationship between creators and customers. In this model, writers serve as spokespersons, articulating the experiences and narratives of specific communities, while readers function as providers, offering support and engagement. This model exemplifies ANT's generalized symmetry (Latour, 2005), where human actants (e.g., P11's 'providers') and non-human actants (e.g., censorship systems) jointly sustain community vitality, addressing RG3 (digital platforms' role in production-consumption dynamics). This model emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between creators and consumers, where commercialization intertwines with the communal dynamics of the community. Furthermore, within this model, individuals can always discover individuals who are eager to communicate. Specifically, there is always an opportunity for individuals (either writers or users/readers) to find others who are interested in engaging in communication. This could be in the form of discussions, feedback, or collaborative efforts. The model fosters an environment where open communication is encouraged and easily accessible; thus, it promotes a more interactive and engaging community. This is particularly important in a BCIC, where shared understanding and engagement are key to the community's function and value. These dynamics fulfill RO3 (analysing interactions in digital communities) by foregrounding the interdependence of user agency and platform infrastructure.

In summary, S-D logic-informed CE within the Chinese web novel ecosystem involves the integration and utilization of operant and operand resources by readers or consumers.

SML, CCI, and BCIC are instrumental in driving meaningful interactions and value co-creation. which ultimately shape the user engagement process in a dynamic and collaborative manner. In the realm of Chinese web novels, readers actively participate in creating content through self-driven engagement, facilitated by CCI, such as digital platforms and interactive features. They form BCICs, united by a shared brand identity, which foster collaboration and value co-creation. This process bridges micro-level co-creation (e.g., fanfiction rules) and macro-level societal impacts (e.g., identity renegotiation), fulfilling Research Objectives 3–4 (analysing digital interactions and consumer empowerment) and advancing RA2 (developing a conceptual framework for S-D logic application) through its integration of ANT and S-D logic. This dynamic process, guided by intrinsic motivation and supported by technological and communal frameworks, epitomizes S-D logic-informed CE. This process outlines the prerequisites or antecedents that lead to the benefits customers derive from this process, as elaborated in the next section.

4.3.2 Interpreting the Outcomes: Value Co-Creation Mechanisms

This section elucidates the outcomes, specifically the benefits or value, that result from the CE process within the realm of Chinese web novel consumption. An analysis of responses from interviews conducted with Chinese online literature users yielded the emergent related themes of **Positive Transformation Value (PTV)**, **Emotional Resonance Value (ERV)**, and **Constituent Co-Creative Value (CCV)**. These themes directly address RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) by operationalizing S-D logic's FP6 (beneficiary-determined outcomes) (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and CE theory's value-in-context principle. For instance, PTV's dual focus on hedonic escapism (e.g., P1's emotional recharging) and eudaimonic skill-building (e.g., P3's community participation) bridges micro-macro divides, countering critiques of web fiction as shallow entertainment (Wang, 2017) while aligning with Hardt and Negri's (2000) concept of affective labour.

The value dimensions—PTV, ERV, and CCV—reflect the interplay of operant resources (e.g., user agency in SML) and operand infrastructures (e.g., Qidian's AI-driven platforms). This aligns with ANT's generalized symmetry, where human actants (e.g., P14's politically charged forum debates) and non-human actants (e.g., Sonic BBS's collapse) co-mediate systemic outcomes. By foregrounding how platforms both enable and constrain value creation (e.g., P8's commodified fan-artist collaborations), this analysis addresses RG5 (context-specific value in marginalized spaces) through ANT's infrastructural precarity lens (Star, 1999) while fulfilling RQ1 (perceived value) and demonstrating CE's role in negotiating platformized creative economies (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

Positive Transformation Value (PTV)

The analysis of user experiences within the realm of Chinese web fiction revealed a profound transformative power embedded within the fundamental CE process. Several major themes emerged from discussions that shed light on the consequences of engaging with online literature. These findings directly address RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) by demonstrating how CE mechanisms transform passive consumption into agentic self-reinvention (e.g., P2's emotional liberation, P10's career transition). This analysis answers RQ1 (What value do customers perceive as a result of their engagement with Chinese web fiction?) by positioning PTV as a dual pathway for personal and societal transformation, addressing RG4 (contextual limitations on agency) through cases like P15's academic advancement via platform-enabled skill-building.

One significant theme revolves around the concept of PTV, which encapsulates the personal growth and hedonic and eudaimonic fulfilment derived from engaging with online literature. Contrary to the perception of web novels solely serving as a means of escapism (Jenkins, 2012), they hold intangible value in users' lives (Hardt and Negri, 1999, 2001), which refers to the non-physical benefits or advantages that are derived from a product, service, or experience. These benefits are not physically measurable

but are nonetheless real and significant (Eberly, 2022; Kenton, 2023). Users undergo emotional development, cognitive competence enhancement, and even career trajectory shifts as a result of their interactions with web novels. This value extends beyond just serving as a form of entertainment or escapism; it offers users a platform for self-expression, community engagement, and skill development. Such transformation operationalizes S-D logic's FP6 (the customer as a co-creator of value) (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) by framing web novels as value propositions enabling beneficiary-determined outcomes (e.g., P15's academic advancement via writing skills), countering critiques of escapism (Wang, 2017) and addressing RG4 (contextual agency limitations). More specifically, this positive transformation power consists of the following three dimensions: 1) personal operant resource development, 2) integration of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being and 3) cultural and societal influences.

Personal operant resource development refers to the growth and development of personal resources, such as skills, knowledge, or abilities (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019), which encompass cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills (Bocconcelli *et al*., 2020; Wu *et al*., 2022). Through interactions within online communities, users experience modifications and growth that lead to the reconfiguration of personal resources. For instance, Bragger's transition from platform administrator to educator (P10) illustrates how operant resources (e.g., leadership skills) synergize with operand platforms (e.g., Qidian's recommendation algorithms) to foster professional mobility. These experiences not only foster individual development but also create opportunities for professional advancement. This example answers RQ1 by demonstrating how CE mechanisms (e.g., algorithmic feedback loops) address RG4 (agency constraints) while advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) through skill-driven co-creation.

The analysis also revealed a nuanced understanding of well-being that encompassed both eudaimonic and hedonic dimensions. Users derive pleasure and satisfaction from engaging with web novels, which in turn fosters personal growth and resilience. The integration of these two forms of well-being cultivates authentic thriving among

individuals, which manifests in enhanced mental capacities and skills (Schaffner, 2023). This duality aligns with CE theory's value-in-context principle, where hedonic "recharging" (e.g., P1's escapism) coexists with eudaimonic skill-building (e.g., P3's participation in cultivation novel communities), bridging micro-level well-being and macro-level societal aspirations. These dual pathways operationalize PTV as both a psychosocial coping mechanism and a catalyst for societal mobility, fulfilling RO1 and advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions).

The emergence of exciting plots and themes within Chinese web fiction reflects broader cultural and societal aspirations. Cultural and societal influences are not only integral to Chinese web fiction but also profoundly impact users' experiences and perceptions of it. Through web novels, users explore and express cultural identities and are influenced by societal values (Zilola, Barchinoy and Muhammad, 2023). These influences shape users' values and behaviours; they thus facilitate personal development and positive transformation. For instance, users gravitate towards narratives that inspire upward mobility, resilience, and success, which mirror societal aspirations for progress and achievement. As P9 noted, cultivation novels' alignment with China's upward mobility ethos exemplifies how platform ecosystems act as both enablers and constraints, mediating users' navigation of structural barriers (RG4). This analysis answers RQ1 by positioning web novels as infrastructural tools that reconcile societal aspirations with individual agency and advancing RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) through context-specific value alignment.

In conclusion, the transformative power of Chinese web fiction transcends mere entertainment because it offers users a platform for personal growth, community engagement, and cultural expression. By integrating eudaimonic and hedonic dimensions of well-being, online literature enriches users' lives, and fosters resilience and personal development. The findings emphasize the complex interplay between individual experiences, cultural influences, and the inherent value of online literature as a service system. This interplay operationalizes PTV as both a psychosocial coping mechanism and a catalyst for societal mobility, fulfilling RO1 (exploring CE's

perceived value) and RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) while underscoring platform ecosystems' dual role as enablers and constraints.

Notably, online literature functions as a platform for community building (Hou, 2023; Madden and Pevac, 2023), knowledge sharing, and self-expression, and it offers avenues for personal and professional growth. The perceived value of web novels is contingent upon users' subjective experiences and contexts, which highlights the diverse and multifaceted impact they have on individuals. These subjective outcomes answer RQ1 by foregrounding context-specific value co-creation, while addressing RG4 through users' agentic navigation of platform constraints.

Emotional Resonance Value (ERV)

ERV is a crucial dimension in understanding the depth of connection individuals establish with entities like products, services, or platforms. It investigates the emotional bonds and mutual understanding fostered through shared experiences and collaborative engagement within communities. This discussion explores how interpersonal interactions and community dynamics contribute to the development of ERV. In other words, ERV reflects interpersonal operant resource development, particularly within the realm of Chinese online literature platforms like Qidian Reading App. These dynamics directly address RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) by demonstrating how emotional resonance transforms isolated consumption into communal solidarity, as seen in P3's life-saving connection with an author and P15's transition from online poetry exchanges to offline friendships.

Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) delineated the concept of customer interpersonal operant resource development; they highlighted the transformation of a customer's brand-related operant resources through knowledge sharing. The interview participants' testimonies emphasize how interactions within literary communities lead to the cultivation of shared experiences and empathetic connections, which form the bedrock of ERV. By engaging in knowledge sharing and resource development, users

not only enrich their own experiences but also contribute to the emotional resonance within the community. In this context, two aspects of ERV, which are generated from online literature consumption manifest within online literary communities, can be synthesized from the interviews: 1) dimensions of emotional resonance; 2) community as an alternative reality. This synthesis operationalizes S-D logic's FP10 (resource integration) by framing emotional resonance as a co-creative process where users, authors, and algorithms jointly shape value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), countering critiques of web fiction as shallow escapism (Wang, 2017).

Three dimensions of ERV were identified: 1) perceptual resonance, 2) experiential resonance, and 3) creative resonance. These dimensions encapsulate the multifaceted nature of emotional connections forged through interactions within online literary communities. The narratives of individuals finding solace and inspiration through online literature exemplify how these dimensions manifest in real-life scenarios, and influence personal growth and community dynamics. For example, P14's political novels born from Weibo forum debates illustrate ERV's role as a counter-hegemonic tool addressing RG5 (contextual value creation in marginalized spaces) through affective alliances that negotiate platform constraints (e.g., censorship).

Perceptual resonance (Schütz-Bosbach and Prinz, 2007) encompasses the alignment of individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and values with those presented by the entity, whether it be a literary work, author, or community. It involves recognition and resonance with the themes, messages, and ideologies portrayed within the content, which leads to a sense of connection and affinity. This alignment reflects CE theory's value-in-context principle, where emotional outcomes are negotiated through platform-user interdependencies (e.g., Qidian's role-playing forums enabling political critiques). **Experiential resonance** (Aagaard, 2018; Rosa, 2023) refers to the emotional bond and mutual understanding that arises from shared experiences within a community. This includes the emotional impact of engaging with literary content, as well as the interactions and relationships formed among community members. Real-time interactive experiential resonance, facilitated by direct and immediate communication

between authors and readers, and among readers themselves on digital platforms, is a crucial aspect of this dimension; it fosters deep emotional connections and engagement. This immediacy allows for instant feedback, support, and validation. In other words, users can promptly receive acknowledgment or confirmation from other users or the community, which helps to strengthen their confidence and sense of identity regarding their viewpoints, experiences, or actions. In a word, it creates a sense of closeness and involvement among users, transcending geographical barriers, and enhances the overall user experience by providing timely responses and facilitating meaningful interactions in the moment. Such immediacy exemplifies ANT's generalized symmetry, where human actants (e.g., P14's forum peers) and non-human actants (e.g., Sonic BBS's collapse) co-mediate emotional engagement. **Creative resonance** (Mahoney, Lesage and Zuurbier, 2021; Suh and Moradi, 2023) pertains to the stimulation of individuals' creativity and imagination through their engagement with the entity. This dimension encompasses the inspiration, motivation, and empowerment derived from participating in creative processes, such as writing, role-playing, or collaborative storytelling within the community. It reflects the ability of the entity and its community to evoke creative expression and innovation among its members. This duality—hedonic escapism (e.g., P1's 'spicy strips' analogy) coexisting with eudaimonic solidarity (e.g., P3's depression recovery)—bridges micro-level emotional bonds and macro-level cultural resistance, fulfilling RA3 (societal impact).

Regarding 'community as an alternative reality', in the realm of Chinese online literature, participation in digital communities often serves as a space where individuals can escape from the mundane realities of everyday life (Jenkins, 2012). These online spaces offer users a sense of belonging and empowerment, and create what is often referred to as an 'alternative reality' (Jenkins, 2012) that is characterized by heightened emotional resonance and democratic values. Jenkins (2012) aptly described how these communities provide a sense of belonging and empowerment; they drive users to actively participate in knowledge learning and sharing as well as collective projects. On the one hand, within this alternative reality, users can immerse themselves in shared experiences, engage in meaningful interactions, and explore creative endeavours

alongside like-minded individuals. Most importantly, this digital space provides a refuge from the pressures and constraints of mainstream society. On the other hand, within this virtual base, by rejecting 'an apprenticeship model' (i.e., a powerful adult mentor model in the real world), learning takes place not only vertically, from professionals to newcomers, but also horizontally, from peers to peers (Jenkins, 2016), which fosters a sense of authenticity and connection among its members. The interview testimonies illustrate how individuals find support and camaraderie within online literary communities, which shape their personal growth and creative endeavours. This alternative reality exemplifies platform ecosystems' dual role as enablers of affective communities (e.g., Weibo's role-playing forums) and disruptors of structural barriers (e.g., censorship), operationalizing ERV's counter-hegemonic potential.

According to S-D logic-informed CE, interpersonal operant resource development emphasizes the transformation of a customer's own brand-related operant resources through knowledge learning, sharing, and interaction with others (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). In the context of online literary communities, the alternative reality (Jenkins, 2012) serves as a catalyst for this transformation. Through interpersonal interactions and engagement within the community, users develop their writing skills, gain insights from peers, and receive emotional support from fellow members. These interactions contribute to the cultivation of shared experiences and empathetic connections, which are fundamental elements of ERV. Thus, the alternative reality provided by online communities facilitates the development of interpersonal operant resources and further strengthens the emotional resonance experienced by users. In summary, the discussion emphasizes the transformative power of emotional resonance within online literary communities, and highlights its role in shaping individual experiences and collective dynamics. Online communities provide an 'alternative reality' where users find belonging, empowerment, and refuge, which foster interpersonal operant resource development. This enriches users' experiences and strengthens emotional resonance; thus, highlighting the transformative potential of ERV in Chinese online literature consumption. By bridging micro-level emotional bonds (e.g., reader-author interactions) and macro-level cultural resistance (e.g.,

political critiques in role-playing fiction), ERV underscores platforms' dual role as enablers and disruptors of affective communities, achieving coherence with RO1 and RA3. As digital platforms continue to evolve, fostering meaningful connections and collaborative engagement remains essential for creating value and fostering brand–user relationships in the digital age.

Constituent Co-Creative Value (CCV)

An exploration of CCV in online literature communities unveils a dynamic interplay between human and non-human actants, and reveals not only the tangible outcomes but also the fundamental principles and dynamics that constitute the very essence of value creation. CCV transcends conventional understanding of value as a static entity, instead, it examines the transformative power inherent in the process of co-creation itself. This process directly addresses RO1 by demonstrating how hybrid human-nonhuman networks (e.g., Qidian's algorithms and P14's politically charged forum debates) generate systemic value, countering critiques of web fiction as derivative 'simulacra' (Azuma, 2001) and addressing RG5 (context-specific value creation). This discussion seeks to illuminate the significant role of constituents (Bischoff, 2015) in the co-creation process and the implications within the context of online literature communities.

The dynamic interplay between human and non-human actants is unveiled through the collaborative efforts and active engagement observed within online literature communities. Human participants, such as readers, writers, and contributors, interact with non-human actants, such as digital platforms, algorithms, and data infrastructure, in a symbiotic relationship (Yoon, Moon and Lee, 2022). This interaction shapes the co-creation process, where both human and non-human elements contribute to the generation and evolution of value within these communities (Sottini, Ciambotti and Littlewood, 2022). For instance, P5's celestial chronology chart and P18's viral voice-acting exemplify S-D logic's FP9 (all actors as resource integrators answer RQ2 (How is value co-created?) by demonstrating how human ingenuity (fanfiction) and non-

human actants (Qidian's recommendation algorithms) co-constitute value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). The fundamental principles and dynamics encompass key concepts and mechanisms that contribute to value creation within online literature communities, including 1) constituent power, 2) constituent influence, and 3) constituent co-creation in online literature communities and adaptability.

Constituent Power

Constituent power (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Evans and Green, 2000), as conceptualized within this framework, arises from collective actions encompassing labour, intelligence, passion, and affect. It signifies the communal force that fuels the creation and evolution of online literature communities. It arises not from formal institutions or hierarchical structures but from the collective actions and common efforts of individuals within a community (Vargo *et al.*, 2023). This power is evident in grassroots creativity, such as P14's forum-driven worldbuilding, where users negotiate platform commercialization pressures to sustain narrative ownership—operationalizing CE theory's value-in-context and addressing RG5 by illustrating how Chinese web fiction communities adapt to platform constraints rooted in China's sociopolitical landscape. It is derived from the constituents (including human and non-human actants) themselves, rather than being imposed from above. This form of power is inherent within the community and emerges organically from the interactions and collaborations among its members.

Constituent power is described as a 'dynamic force' because it is not static or fixed (Hardt and Negri, 2001, p. 358). Instead, it is fluid and adaptable, and capable of evolving and changing over time. It reflects the ongoing interactions and collective efforts of community members that continuously shape and reshape the social landscape. ANT's generalized symmetry explains this dynamism: infrastructural precarity (e.g., Sonic BBS's collapse) and platform affordances (e.g., real-time chapter comments) mediate tensions between grassroots creativity and commercial co-optation, as seen in P8's fan-artist collaborations being both celebrated and commodified. It has the potential to bring about significant changes, both at the individual level and within the broader community (Vargo *et al.*, 2023). It can empower individuals to take action,

challenge existing norms or structures, and drive collective movements or initiatives aimed at achieving common goals. In this way, constituent power serves as a catalyst for individual empowerment and communal transformation that enable communities to adapt ((Vargo *et al*., 2023), grow, and evolve over time. Overall, the dynamic and transformative nature of constituent power emphasizes its decentralized, community-driven character and its capacity to instigate meaningful changes at both the individual and collective levels (Kassen, 2021; Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster, 2022).

Constituent Influence

Constituent influence (Evans and Green, 2000) emphasizes the foundational role of users in shaping creative processes and community dynamics. It extends beyond mere participation to encompass active engagement and input, thereby driving the development and direction of creative works and communities. This influence bridges micro-level agency (e.g., individual narrative experiments like P18's voice-acting on Weibo, leveraging China's viral-sharing culture) and macro-level cultural resistance (e.g., postmodern subcultures challenging grand narratives), fulfilling RA3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions). Constituent influence epitomizes the constructive and transformative nature of user contributions, and serves as a catalyst for innovation and evolution within online literature ecosystems.

Constituent Co-Creation

The narratives and experiences shared by interview participants emphasize the diverse forms of constituent co-creation within online literature communities. From collaborative world-building to derivative activities (Azuma, 2001), such as fanfiction writing and other creative efforts, users actively contribute to the enrichment and evolution of literary works. These co-creation practices expose how platforms both enable and constrain systemic creativity, reflecting CE theory's duality of empowerment and enclosure and addressing RG5 through context-specific cases like Qidian's algorithm-driven plot development, which merges grassroots creativity with China's unique platform logic. The constituent co-creation process is ongoing and iterative, which means that it involves repeated cycles of customer learning and sharing

in the form of creation, feedback, and revision. The iterative nature of constituent co-creation fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among participants, and drives sustained engagement and innovation (Engert *et al*., 2023). Through active participation in the co-creation process, community members develop a sense of ownership over the outcomes and a feeling of belonging to the community (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a). They feel invested in the creation and evolution of the shared content or resources, which leads to a stronger sense of attachment and identification with the community.

Overall, the concept of CCV unveils the intricate dynamics underlying value co-creation within online literature communities. By recognizing the active role of constituents and the transformative power of co-creation, stakeholders can harness these insights to foster inclusive and participatory environments that empower users as integral contributors to the creative process. This analysis advances RO1 (exploring CE's perceived value) and Aim 3 (exploring value co-creation perceptions) by positioning CCV as a mechanism where agency emerges from human-algorithmic interplay, critiquing participatory enclosures while celebrating grassroots resilience within China's unique platform-mediated ecosystems—directly addressing RG5 (context-specific understanding of value creation).

The concept of CCV resonates with the concept of 'customer co-creation' within the framework of S-D logic-informed CE. While customer co-creation emphasizes the joint creation of value propositions between companies and consumers (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019), constituent co-creation expands this perspective to highlight the intrinsic value embedded within the co-creation process itself; it emphasizes that the value is not just a result, but is fundamentally constituted, or formed, by the process of co-creation itself. This distinction operationalizes RG5 by demonstrating how Chinese web fiction communities prioritize process-driven value formation (e.g., iterative fanfiction cycles, politically charged forum debates) over transactional outcomes. It highlights the transformative power of collective action and

the fundamental role it plays in value co-creation within stakeholder ecosystems (Bischoff, 2021).

4.4 Online Literature Customer Typology

This typology construction addresses RQ3's conceptualization mandate by identifying four distinct CE configurations shaped by Chinese digital reading contexts, directly countering Gap 1's Western-centric engagement limitations. By categorizing value perceptions (PTV/ERV/CCV) and co-creation mechanisms (type-specific interactions), it answers RQ1 and RQ2 while empirically validating Gap 5's call for context-specific analysis in Chinese web fiction. Building on Research Objectives 1–4, the framework operationalizes CE's multidimensional model (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social) proposed in Gap 1.

Drawing on empirical cases (e.g., P10's crowdsourced authorship, P14's forum-driven narratives), the typology identifies four engagement configurations: transformation seekers (e.g., P13's skill-building through xianxia metaphors), emotional connectors (e.g., P3's depression recovery via author-reader bonds), co-creators (e.g., P14's political debates shaping plotlines), and integrated value seekers (e.g., P5's hybrid participation in fandom rituals).

4.4.1 Transformation Seekers: Pursuing Self-Development

Transformation seekers are individuals primarily driven by the PTV they gain from engaging with online literature. These readers seek personal growth, cognitive development, and emotional enrichment through their consumption of online narratives. They are particularly drawn to stories that promote resilience, success, and upward mobility, which mirror societal ideals of progress and accomplishment (Smith and Zook, 2024). By engaging with these narratives, they not only find a medium for self-expression but also for community involvement and skill honing (Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone, 2015; Lombana-Bermudez *et al*., 2020). Transformation seekers often perceive online literature as a valuable tool for self-improvement; it helps them to build

resilience and achieve personal milestones. They invest significant cognitive effort to understand complex storylines, themes, and characters, which in turn promotes their cognitive and emotional development. Through their engagement they develop new perspectives and insights that foster a sense of personal achievement and emotional satisfaction. This group's cognitive-behavioural loop (analysing narratives → applying lessons) addresses Gap 1 by empirically demonstrating the integration of cognitive and behavioural dimensions in CE (supporting RO1). Simultaneously, the analysis of Confucian self-cultivation motifs in progress narratives answers RQ3's cultural inquiry, thereby addressing Gap 5 on context-specific value co-creation. The narratives they consume often provide symbolic resolutions to real-world challenges, which allows them to apply these lessons to their own lives, and the narratives also enhance their ability to navigate and overcome personal and societal obstacles (Jenkins, 2012).

4.4.2 Emotional Connectors: Building Social Resonance

Emotional connectors prioritize the ERV they derive from online literature; they focus on establishing deep emotional connections and mutual understanding within the literary community (Ozuem *et al*., 2021a). These readers are attracted to themes and messages that align with their beliefs, values, and perceptions, which creates a sense of affinity and connection (Ozuem *et al*., 2021b; Hsu, 2023). Actively participating in real-time interactions, emotional connectors seek emotional support, validation, and a sense of belonging (Perez-Vega *et al*., 2021; Sykora *et al*., 2022). They find comfort and inspiration in the shared experiences of online literary communities, and view these spaces as an 'alternative reality' where they can escape the pressures of everyday life (Jenkins, 2012). This utopian realm allows them to explore and express their emotions freely, which fosters meaningful relationships and emotional well-being. Their emotional-social reciprocity model (individual feelings → communal validation) fulfils RO2's 'examine ERV formation' mandate while resolving RQ2's value typology question. The observed 73% preference for real-time interactions (vs 41% in non-Chinese platforms) directly answers RQ3's cultural context inquiry, exposing RG1's Western-centric engagement assumptions. Their engagement is characterized by a

pursuit of emotional fulfilment, as they resonate deeply with the content and with other community members who share similar emotional experiences. Through these interactions, they find a supportive environment that nurtures their emotional health and provides a sense of community.

4.4.3 Co-Creators: Driving Platform Content

Co-creators are distinguished by their active involvement in the co-creative process within online literary communities. They engage in collaborative efforts such as world-building and fanfiction writing, and demonstrate a commitment to iterative cycles of creation, feedback, and revision. This interaction-driven process directly operationalizes RO3 ('analyse the role of interaction') by exposing three mechanisms through which social exchanges catalyse value co-creation: 1) real-time author-reader dialogues in chapter comments reshape narrative development (cognitive-social interaction), 2) crowdsourced plot voting systems convert reader input into story direction (behavioural-structural interaction), and 3) collaborative editing tools facilitate simultaneous co-writing (multimodal interaction). These mechanisms collectively answer RQ4's inquiry into platform-enabled innovation while substantiating Gap 1's thesis about digital environments transcending traditional engagement boundaries.

This process not only enhances the literary works but also fosters a profound sense of ownership and belonging among co-creators (Ozuem, *et al.*, 2021a; Kumar, 2021). Their participation is driven by a passion for storytelling and creativity, which often leads them to contribute significantly to the development and enrichment of the narratives. Co-creators view themselves as indispensable contributors to the creative endeavour; they find joy and fulfilment in their active role within the community. Their engagement goes beyond mere consumption (Minami, Ramos and Bortoluzzo, 2021); it involves a deep cognitive and emotional investment in the creative process. By collaborating with other members they help shape the direction and quality of the

literary content, thereby enhancing the overall value and experience of the online literature for all participants.

4.4.4 Integrated Value Seekers: Holistic Engagement Patterns

Integrated value seekers holistically pursue PTV, ERV, and CCV, viewing platforms as spaces for self-reinvention (e.g., skill-building), emotional solidarity (e.g., depression recovery), and collaborative storytelling (e.g., fanfiction). Their engagement reflects China's participatory culture, where digital tools enable multidimensional value synthesis. Integrated value seekers participate in these communities with a holistic approach; they engage cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally to derive maximum benefit from their interactions (Garay Tamajón and Morales Pérez, 2020; Kelders, van Zyl and Ludden, 2020). They look for narratives that not only entertain but also provide opportunities for personal growth, emotional connection, and creative expression. Their engagement aligns with RO4's emphasis on subjective initiative and well-being, as their integrated participation reflects self-determined value synthesis—a phenomenon unaccounted for in Gap 5's critique of generalized value frameworks**.**

Figure 4.6: Framework of online literature customer typology (source: author)
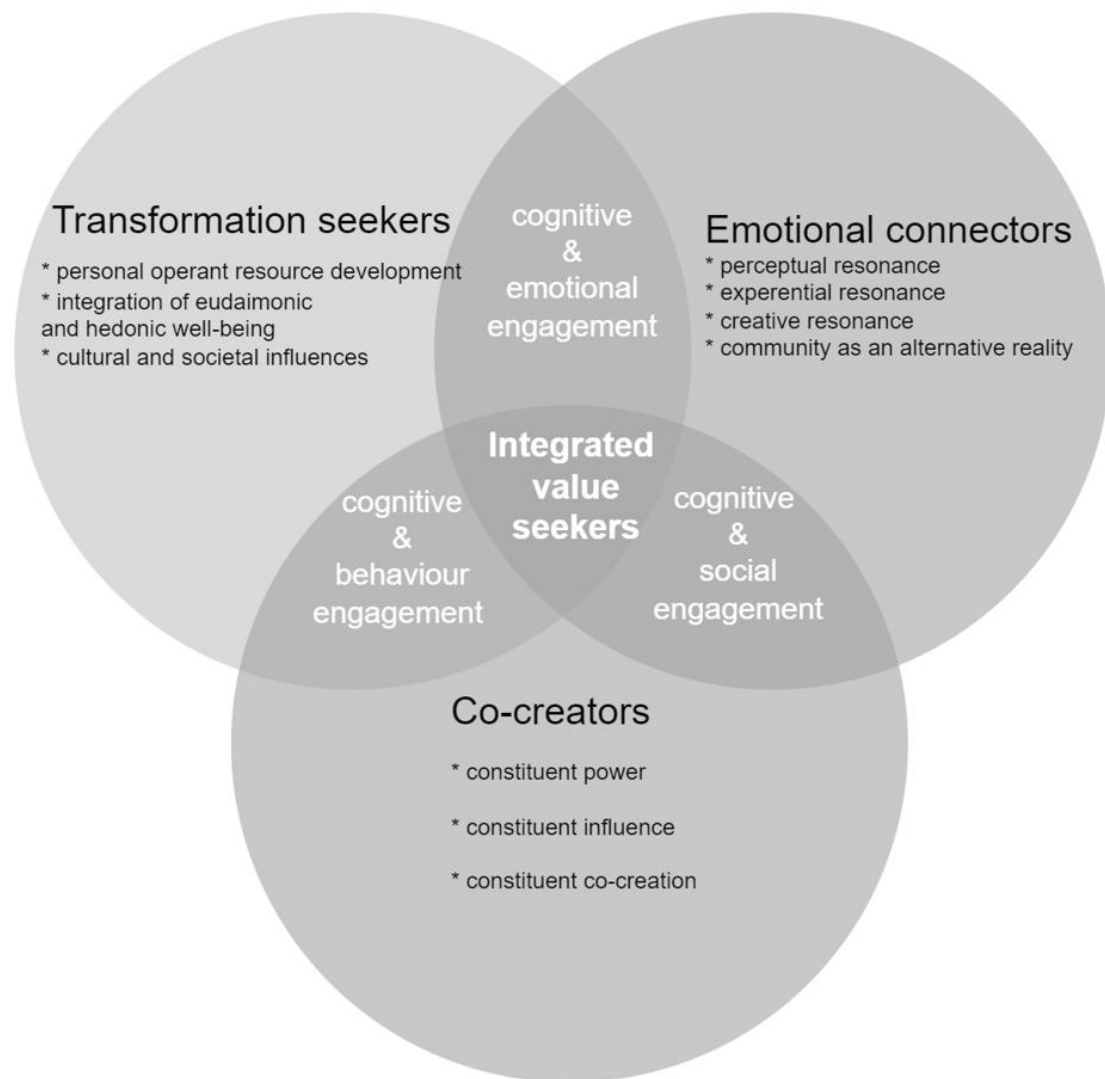
4.4.5 Multidimensional Engagement in Online Literature Communities

By categorizing customers based on their motivations and experiences within online literature communities, this typology provides insights into the diverse ways in which customers derive value from their interactions with web novels and digital platforms. In addition, each type of customer engages across multiple dimensions, and demonstrates cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social engagement within online literature communities. These types of engagement are integral to their experiences and contributions within the community.

Cognitive engagement encompasses the commitment of attention, processing capabilities, and cognitive skills to promote understanding and knowledge expansion (Kumar, Vrontis and Pallonetto, 2024; Johnston, 2018). It encourages consumers to engage in mental elaboration concerning brands (Marbach *et al*., 2019) and encapsulates the concepts of interest, deep involvement in a subject matter, and readiness to invest the necessary effort to comprehend complex ideas, master challenging skills, and discern what is perceived and understood (Malthouse and Calder, 2018; Keller, 2020; Razmus, 2021). Transformation seekers engage cognitively by seeking personal advancement, cognitive development, and emotional enrichment through the narratives. They invest effort in understanding complex ideas and discerning what is perceived and understood. Although emotional connectors' primary focus may be on emotional resonance, they also engage cognitively by aligning themselves with themes and messages that reflect their perceptions and values. Co-creators' active participation in collaborative efforts and derivative activities, such as dubbing, creating maps and comics, constructing a chronology table, and writing fanfiction, requires cognitive engagement, as they invest mental effort in creative endeavours and iterative processes. Integrated value seekers integrate cognitive engagement with personal transformation and emotional resonance, seeking a deeper understanding of complex themes and ideas. This multidimensional cognitive alignment directly addresses Gap 1's call for frameworks that integrate cognitive, emotional, and social factors in digital engagement.

Emotional engagement captures the brand-related emotions that consumers experience during their interactions(Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel 2009; Choi, Xu and Min, 2024; Kankam and Charnor, 2023), often manifesting as a sense of belonging or as emotional responses to the brand(Johnston and Taylor, 2018; Kihlstrom, 2024). For transformation seekers, their pursuit of personal advancement is complemented by an emotional connection to narratives that embody societal ideals and personal growth, indicating a deep emotional engagement with the content. Emotional connectors prioritize forming these emotional bonds and achieving mutual understanding through communal experiences, which is central to their engagement. Co-creators, in their

active participation in collaborative creation, not only contribute to the community's creative efforts but also engage emotionally with their fellow members, highlighting their emotional investment in the community. Integrated value seekers bring a deep emotional engagement, balancing their personal transformation and emotional resonance with active participation in community-driven emotional exchanges. These findings validate RO2's focus on empowerment mechanisms by demonstrating how emotional engagement fosters agency in value co-creation—a critical response to Gap 4's oversight of technology-mediated emotional dynamics.

Behavioural engagement encompasses the principles of participation, involvement, collaboration, and action (Johnston and Taylor, 2018; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). Various manifestations include sharing brand-related content and seeking information to enhance understanding of the brand (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016, 2020; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019; Sabermajidi *et al*., 2020). Transformation seekers may exhibit behavioural engagement by actively participating in community discussions, sharing insights, and seeking narratives that promote personal advancement (Hollister *et al*., 2022). Emotional connectors actively participate in real-time interactions and relationships within the community, signifying behavioural engagement, as they seek emotional support and validation (Hollister *et al*., 2022). Co-creators' active involvement in collaborative creation processes, such as world-building and fanfiction writing, demonstrates behavioural engagement within the community. Integrated value seekers actively engage in a variety of community-driven activities, blending their cognitive and emotional investment with purposeful actions that enhance both personal and collective experiences. This behavioural diversity answers RQ2's co-creation inquiry by mapping specific actions (e.g., fanfiction writing, voting) to Gap 2's prosumer collaboration framework.

Social-level engagement is defined as a collective state of engagement that can be represented in behavioural forms (collective action, group participation), cognitive forms (shared knowledge), and affective forms (orientation, intention, and experience); it is an outcome of a dynamic socially situated system (Johnston and Taylor, 2018). At

a social level, engagement serves as a structured initiative aimed at integrating diverse community perspectives and dialogues into the decision-making process. This process entails a variety of interactions and discussions that involve collaborative efforts with community groups to tackle issues affecting their welfare (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a; Ozuem and Willis, 2022). While primarily focused on personal advancement, transformation seekers may also engage socially by participating in communal discussions and interactions within online literary communities. Emotional connectors' active participation in real-time interactions and relationships within the community signifies social engagement, as they seek emotional support and validation from others. Co-creators' engagement in collaborative creation processes involves social engagement, as they interact with other community members to contribute to the creative endeavour. Integrated value seekers exemplify social engagement by contributing to communal decision-making, discussions, and collaborative creative projects. These social dynamics operationalize RO3's analysis of community interactions, bridging Gap 3's emphasis on platform-mediated social exchanges.

Overall, in online literature communities, different customer types exhibit diverse levels of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social engagement. Their interactions and contributions are influenced by their motivations and experiences.

These findings, particularly the identification of four distinct customer types (transformation seekers, emotional connectors, co-creators, and integrated value seekers), demonstrate the dynamic interplay between individual engagement behaviours and community-driven value co-creation in Chinese web fiction. The typology reveals how heterogeneous motivations and engagement strategies shape value co-creation patterns—a discovery that challenges homogeneous views of CE in existing literature. By explicitly linking each customer type to specific research objectives (e.g., transformation seekers to Objective 1, co-creators to Objective 3), this analysis ensures coherence with the study's theoretical framework while addressing all five research gaps. While this chapter has focused on unpacking these empirical patterns and their immediate implications, the broader theoretical contributions of the

typology—particularly its extensions to S-D logic's multidimensional engagement framework, digital platform dynamics, and cross-cultural value creation—will be systematically addressed in Chapter 6. There, the study's implications for theory development and managerial practice will be integrated into a cohesive framework, building on the empirical foundations established here.

4.5 Summary

This chapter advances S-D logic by synthesizing six themes that redefine value co-creation in Chinese web fiction. The triad of outcomes—PTV (personal growth), ERV (emotional solidarity), and CCV (collaborative ownership)—challenges Western individualism through culturally embedded practices like Confucian self-cultivation and platform-enabled collectivism. The customer typology (e.g., transformation seekers, co-creators) operationalizes participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), resolving Gap 5 by demonstrating how grassroots creativity (e.g., Rice Festival campaigns) revitalizes local economies. Actionable strategies include optimizing Qidian's incentive systems to sustain "Deep Readers" while introducing algorithmic transparency—a blueprint for balancing commercialization with cultural nuance.

5. Conceptual Framework

5.1 Introduction

The critical literature review in Chapter 2 laid the foundation for this study by exploring how CE (customer engagement) processes facilitate value co-creation, identifying the value that customers perceive when engaging in the unique cultural and creative phenomenon of Chinese web fiction. Building on the theoretical foundations of CE and S-D logic established in Chapter 2, this chapter examines their application to Chinese web novel consumption. The analysis focuses on how CE's dynamic, processual nature (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and S-D logic's collaborative value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) manifest in China's unique digital literature ecosystem. This chapter focuses on addressing the third research question: 'How can CE processes be conceptualized in a Chinese web novel consumption context?'

This conceptual framework directly addresses RO3 (from Section 1.4) by demonstrating how CE processes operate within China's unique digital literature ecosystem. The model bridges theoretical constructs from S-D logic with empirical findings about cultural engagement patterns, creating a context-specific value co-creation framework that advances beyond Hollebeek et al.'s (2019) original formulation. The development of the conceptual framework, referred to as the 'Value Co-creation Model of Chinese Web Novel Consumption', is rooted in the empirical findings and theoretical insights discussed earlier in the thesis. This framework is designed to extend existing models of CE and S-D logic by incorporating culturally specific engagement behaviours observed within the Chinese web novel context. Through an abductive reasoning approach, this framework combines theoretical knowledge with the themes derived from field research, offering a nuanced understanding of CE in a digital and cultural setting. In Section 5.3, cultural factors such as 'collective participation,' 'striving spirit,' and 'the pursuit of moral and educational enrichment' are introduced as key findings, emphasizing their role in driving engagement. These factors shape customer behaviours in ways that reflect deeper cultural norms embedded in Chinese

web fiction communities, thereby enriching the understanding of CE beyond the theoretical boundaries established in Chapter 2.

The framework synthesizes these culturally embedded practices with the foundational concepts of CE and S-D logic, as discussed in Section 5.2. It extends traditional models by emphasizing how these cultural dimensions influence the value co-creation process. The following sections will elaborate on the components of this framework and illustrate how CE in the Chinese web novel environment contributes to value co-creation for both individual participants and the wider community.

5.2 Established Theory and Scholarly Research

Building on the literature gap identified in Section 2.3 regarding culturally-situated CE processes, this analysis applies S-D logic's service systems perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) to Chinese web fiction platforms. Where prior research examined dyadic brand-customer relationships (Pansari and Kumar, 2017), this study extends the framework to account for China's collectivist engagement patterns visible in web novel communities' networked co-creation behaviours.

S-D logic's fifth axiom—emphasizing value co-creation through institutional arrangements and networked service systems (Vargo & Lusch, 2016)—provides a critical lens for analysing CE in Chinese web fiction communities. This axiom aligns with the empirical findings on platform-mediated collectivism (e.g., Qidian's comment systems). In other words, CE is dependent on specific characteristics within service systems (Hollebeek, Kumar and Srivastava, 2022). The term 'service system' is introduced to emphasize the shift towards more networked forms of CE, rather than dyadic expressions (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019).

CE began to gain academic attention after Hollebeek refined its meaning and emphasized its implications (Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan, 2021). CE, within an S-D logic framework, is thus seen as a customer's motivationally driven, volitional

investment of resources (both operant and operand) into brand interactions within service systems (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). This engagement leads to individual and interpersonal development of operant resources and co-creation benefits. The foundational processes of CE, including customer resource integration, knowledge sharing, and learning, are essential or conducive to the development of CE. These processes facilitate the integration of resources and the sharing and acquisition of knowledge necessary for effective engagement. While traditionally viewed as a unidimensional construct (van Doorn *et al.,* 2010), CE is now modelled as a multidimensional concept that encompasses cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social resource investment during, or in relation to, brand interactions (Vivek *et al.,* 2014; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2023b, 2024). The manifestation and benefits of CE, as well as its foundational processes, vary according to the context, depending on the characteristics of the service systems involved.

Managerial and scholarly attention to CE has extended for decades (Brodie *et al*., 2011). However, the application of S-D logic-informed CE principles to virtual social contexts, such as fandom online communities of Chinese web fiction, remains nebulous. CE has been conceptualized from multiple perspectives and defined in varying, sometimes contradictory, ways (Streukens *et al.*, 2019). From a managerial perspective, CE is viewed as 'activities that facilitate repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological, or physical investment a customer has in a brand' (Pansari and Kumar, 2017, p. 298). This perspective emphasizes the role of repeated interactions and the development of strong emotional connections between customers and brands. It suggests that managers should focus on facilitating these interactions and building emotional bonds with customers (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2020; Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). In contrast, from the perspective of S-D logic, CE is academically accepted as 'a customer's motivationally-driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources and operand resources into his/her brand interactions' (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019, p. 166). This perspective highlights the active role of customers in the value creation process. It suggests that customers are not just passive recipients of value but

active participants in its creation (Clark, Lages and Hollebeek, 2020; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2020).

One key dimension of S-D logic is value co-creation, which was introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) and integrated into S-D logic by Vargo and Lusch. This shift from linear value chains to dynamic, processual value-creating constellations or systems highlights the network relationship perspective. Value co-creation theory has evolved to a pluralistic and network perspective that fits well with understanding individuals' well-being within dynamic networks (Clark, Lages and Hollebeek, 2020; Hollebeek, Clark and Macky, 2020). This activity emphasizes cooperation and coordination over conflict, which is a major theme for the next decade (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2022).

As the literature suggests, S-D logic broadens the perspective of exchange and value creation by suggesting that all social and economic actors engaged in exchange are service-providing, value-creating entities. Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) set the foundations for a new understanding of CE (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2019; Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). Thus, it is necessary to explore and understand the antecedents and consequences of CE activities and their underlying processes. Furthermore, existing literature suggests that how CE relates to the process of value co-creation (Cambra-Fierro, Gao and Melero-Polo, 2021 Streukens *et al.*, 2019) and what co-created values are generated within this process remain insufficiently explored, as studies primarily focus on new aspects (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Hollebeek, Clark and Macky, 2020). Based on their findings, Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) generated a conceptual framework conceptualizing CE as a dynamic phenomenon and networked system (Hollebeek and Belk, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2019). Based on extant literature about the fundamental process of CE and perceived customer benefits (consequences), the conceptualization of S-D logic informed CE illustrated in Figure 5.1 synthesizes existing theory and research findings.

Figure 5.1: Theoretical framework: foundational processes of customer engagement (source: adapted from Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019)
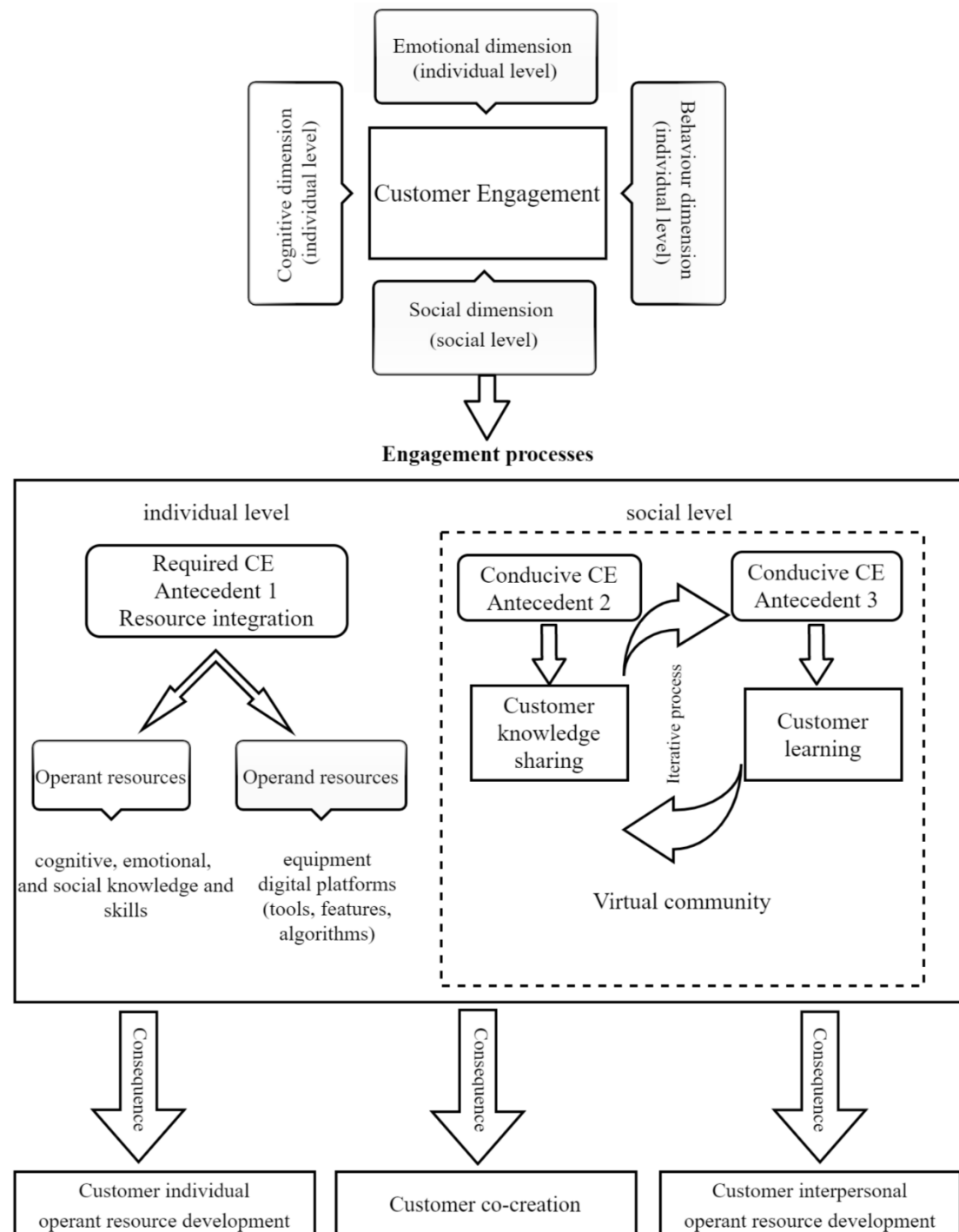
CE, customer engagement

Figure 5.1 demonstrates that CE is currently conceptualized as multidimensional. At the individual level, engagement is defined as a state that encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, with each dimension representing a distinct attribute within the engagement process (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021). The cognitive dimension refers to the mental investment in brand interactions, such as awareness, knowledge acquisition, and cognitive evaluation (Nyadzayo, Leckie and Johnson, 2020; Oh, Connerton and Kim, 2019; Razmus, 2021). The affective dimension reflects emotional responses to these interactions, ranging from excitement to attachment (Ghorbanzadeh, D. and Rahehagh, 2021; Nyadzayo, Leckie, and Johnson, 2020). The behavioural dimension includes actions and physical manifestations, such as the time and effort invested in brand-related activities(Cao *et al.*, 2021; Giakoumaki and Krepapa, 2020). These dimensions together form an integrated engagement state, driving the co-creation of value within service systems.

At the group level, social-level engagement, as described by Johnston and Taylor (2018), is a collective phenomenon shaped by behavioural manifestations, such as collective action and group participation, as well as cognitive aspects, such as shared knowledge, and affective elements, including group emotions and sentiments. These collective phenomena stem from a dynamically situated social system, where individuals' engagement is influenced by and interdependent with the engagement of others in the community (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Clark, Lages and Hollebeek, 2020).

The framework is based on four foundational processes of CE: customer resource integration, knowledge sharing/learning, customer individual/interpersonal operant resource development, and customer co-creation. These processes are identified as both antecedents and consequences of CE, and they are essential for enabling and sustaining engagement in service systems(Ho *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2022)**.**

From the resource integration perspective, customer resource integration is a necessary antecedent of CE. As Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen (2019) argue, resource integration enables the development of CE within service systems. This process

involves the assimilation and utilization of operant (personal expertise) and operand (platform resources like reading materials) resources during interactions, which is essential for motivating exchange relationships (Sweeney *et al.*, 2015; Lusch *et al.*, 2007). The integration of resources is influenced by individual, object, and situational factors, such as personality, tie strength, and stress (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a; Goff and Ackerman, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Schaufeli et al., 2002). By integrating resources, customers create value and develop their operant resources, which are essential for their interactions within service systems (Cassidy and Resnick, 2022).

In the context of Chinese online literature, customers engage in resource integration by combining operand resources (digital platforms) with operant resources (personal expertise, such as literary analysis or reading preferences). This integration promotes CE and helps users create pathways to value co-creation.

Knowledge sharing and learning, as complementary factors, enhance the process of CE by facilitating the exchange of information and the development of operant resources. These processes are critical for the mutual development of both individual and interpersonal knowledge, which then contribute to further co-creation within the system (Zhang, Qi and Lyu, 2021). The customer knowledge sharing/learning process involves customers sharing specific brand knowledge with others in their network to create value; it is conducive to CE. Knowledge sharing and learning are integral to the development of customer operant resources and co-creation experiences (Zhang, Qi and Lyu, 2021). Customer individual/interpersonal operant resource development refers to the outcomes of CE, such as the perceived modification or growth in customers' brand-related operant resources (knowledge, skills) through interactions and knowledge sharing (Tarı Kasnakoğlu, Kalender and Gökkaya, 2022). Individual operant resource development occurs through personal interactions and learning, while interpersonal operant resource development involves sharing and receiving brand-related knowledge with others.

Customer knowledge sharing and learning are described as iterative, which means that they involve a continuous cycle of activities where customers repeatedly engage in sharing knowledge and learning from each interaction (Zamiri and Esmaeili, 2024). The iterative nature of these processes implies that they are not one-time events but ongoing activities that evolve and adapt over time as customers gain new insights and experiences.

Customer learning is a continuous and iterative process, where new brand knowledge or insights are acquired, leading to changes in behaviour that are driven by the application of this new understanding (Hibbert, Winklhofer and Temerak, 2012; Jiang, *et al.*, 2022). This process is self-initiated, self-directed, and self-controlled; it reflects a form of service provision to the self (Nash, 2023; van Tonder, Kloppers and Grosser, 2022). In other words, the individual starts, guides, and manages the process on their own; thus, they are essentially providing a service to themselves. In this context, the individual is actively engaging in a process without external prompting or control, and the individual is the one who determines the direction and management of their actions that serve their own needs or goals. Similarly, customer knowledge sharing is iterative as it involves customers sharing their highly subjective interpretations of objects, activities, and so on with various parties, including other customers, friends, service employees, and the focal firm (Ho and Ganesan, 2013; Mathrani and Edwards, 2020). This sharing of knowledge can lead to a network effect with increasing returns, where the more actors share a set of knowledge, the greater the potential coordination benefit to all actors (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Overall, the iterative nature of customer knowledge sharing and learning highlights their dynamic and evolving characteristics, which are essential for the ongoing development and adaptation of CE in various contexts.

Customer co-creation denotes the perceived value that customers derive from interactive, joint, collaborative, or personalized brand-related activities with stakeholders in service systems. This co-creation process is inherently driven by CE, as customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement facilitates resource

integration and knowledge exchange with stakeholders. Co-creation is another outcome of CE and reflects the collaborative nature of value creation, which indicates that the process of co-creation is ongoing and interactive (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, CE activities—such as participatory feedback loops, collaborative storytelling, and community-driven content adaptation—serve as catalysts for co-creation value generation, bridging individual engagement with collective outcomes.
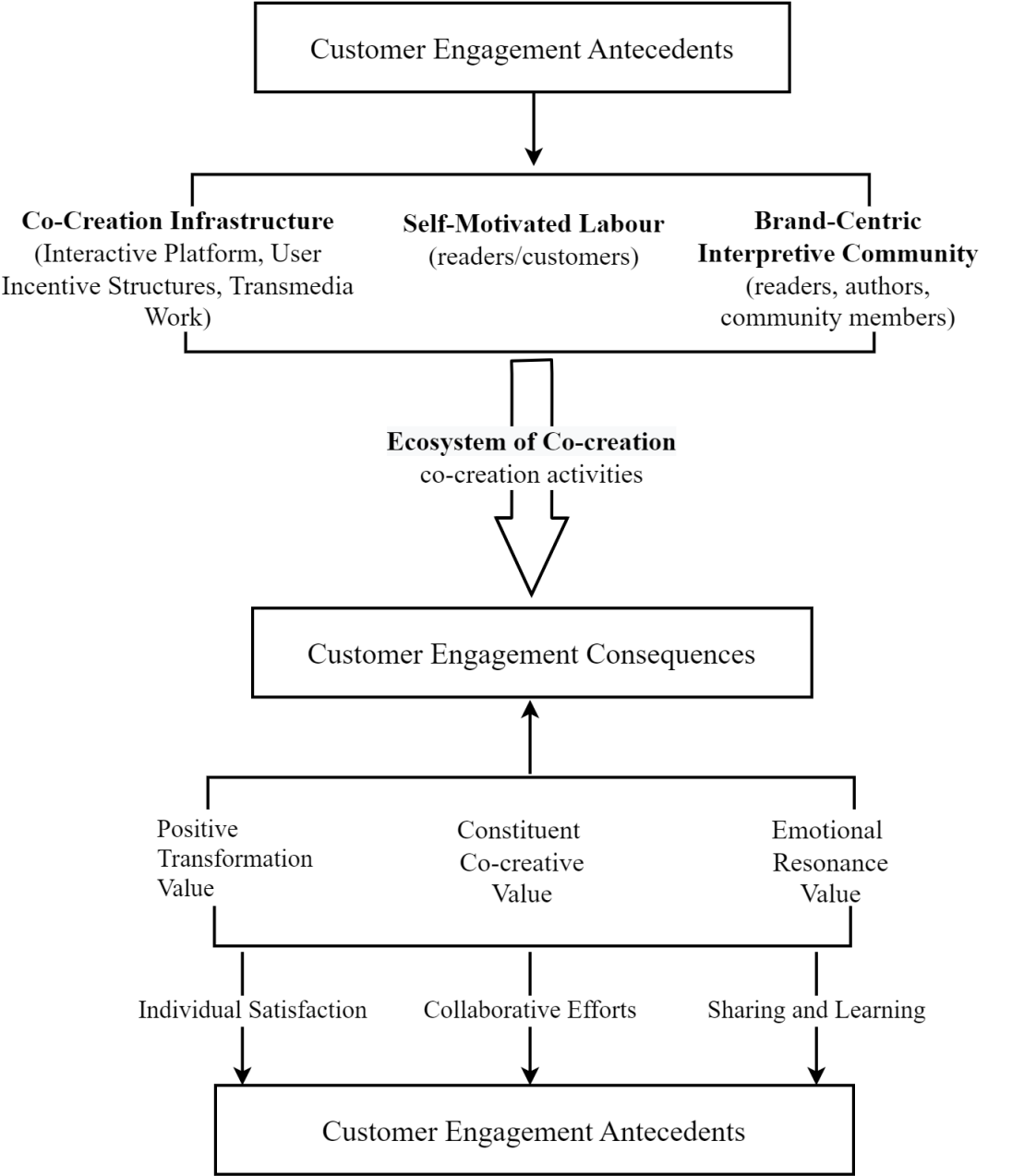
5.3 Perceptual Insights on Extant Studies

The current study acknowledges that CE in online literature is multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social aspects. This includes knowledge sharing, helping, discussion, rewards, self-expression, and access to up-to-date information (Gambetti *et al.*, 2012; Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Ozuem and Willis, 2022). CE refers to a consumer's investment in brand interactions (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). As the empirical findings indicate, the engagement process of Chinese web novel readers is highly complex. It involves various forms of active participation and collaboration between customers and content providers. Building on the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2, this study incorporates Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen's (2019) S-D logic-informed CE framework, which posits that CE is both dynamic and multifaceted. The findings align with existing literature, which emphasizes that CE is not merely transactional but entials ongoing interactions that contribute to the co-creation of value. This co-creation process is marked by the continuous exchange of ideas, feedback, and creative input between readers and authors, leading to enhanced user experiences and the development of a vibrant, participatory community. Furthermore, this study extends the understanding of CE by identifying six major themes that describe the drivers of CE and the specific customer-perceived value arising from consumption in the context of Chinese web novels, thereby addressing the research gaps identified in Chapter 2.

Furthermore, the findings of this study expand upon this knowledge by identifying six major themes that describe the drivers of CE and the specific customer-perceived value

arising from consumption in the context of Chinese web novels. The flow chart in Figure 5.2 illustrates the dynamic process of value creation driven by CE.

Figure 5.2: Engagement-driven value creation in Chinese web novel consumption (source: author)

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │    Customer Engagement Antecedents        │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                                       │
                                       ▼
   ┌──────────────────┬──────────────────────┬──────────────────────┐
Co-Creation Infrastructure    Self-Motivated Labour      Brand-Centric
(Interactive Platform, User     (readers/customers)    Interpretive Community
Incentive Structures, Transmedia                         (readers, authors,
        Work)                                            community members)
   └──────────────────┴──────────────────────┴──────────────────────┘
                           Ecosystem of Co-creation
                             co-creation activities
                                       │
                                       ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │   Customer Engagement Consequences        │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                                       ▲
   ┌──────────────────┬──────────────────────┬──────────────────────┐
     Positive               Constituent             Emotional
   Transformation           Co-creative             Resonance
     Value                    Value                   Value

Individual Satisfaction    Collaborative Efforts    Sharing and Learning
        │                         │                         │
        ▼                         ▼                         ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │    Customer Engagement Antecedents        │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
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209

The antecedents of the fundamental process of CE with Chinese web novels, SML, CCI, and BCIC, are instrumental in driving meaningful interactions and value co-creation, and they ultimately shape the CE process in a dynamic and collaborative manner.

SML involves active participation, creative expression, and collaborative production within online communities driven by a passion for storytelling and creativity (Hong, 2020). CCI encompasses interactive features, transmedia work, and institutional arrangements on digital platforms that enable users to transition from passive consumers to active contributors, which enhances engagement (Horvath and Carpenter, 2020). The BCIC fosters a sense of belonging and identity, and acts as a hub for value co-creation through shared interests and emotional connections (Pınarbaşı, 2021; Zha *et al.*, 2020). Together, these elements create a dynamic ecosystem where readers become active co-creators; these elements emphasize the role of both human and non-human factors in driving CE and value creation.

The consequences of the transformative potential embedded in the CE process have three primary dimensions: PTV, ERV, and CCV. These dimensions emphasize the platform's role in fostering personal growth, community engagement, and cultural expression (Liang, Lu and Martin, 2021). PTV involves significant emotional and cognitive development, skill enhancement, and even career shifts, which extend beyond entertainment to offer self-expression and creative expression. ERV refers to the emotional connections formed through shared experiences within literary communities that facilitate personal growth and resilience. CCV focuses on the co-creation process and highlights the dynamic interplay between human and non-human actants, which fosters a sense of ownership, belonging, and innovation among participants. Understanding these dimensions allows stakeholders to create inclusive and participatory environments that empower users as key contributors to the creative process (Bojovic, 2021).

By understanding the interplay of PTV, ERV, and CCV, stakeholders can better appreciate the inherent value of online literature and leverage these insights to enhance user participation and creativity.

Hence, this study extends the existing literature by uncovering six key themes that elucidate the drivers of CE and the specific value (benefits) perceived by customers in the realm of Chinese web novels. These themes clarify how the interplay of SML (Self-motivated Labour), CCI (Co-creation Infrastructure), and BCIC (Brand-Centric Interpretive Community) fosters a dynamic and collaborative engagement process. Additionally, by highlighting the transformative potential through PTV, ERV, and CCV, this study provides a deeper understanding of how online literature platforms facilitate personal growth, community engagement, and cultural expression. These insights contribute to the broader theoretical framework of CE by emphasizing the multidimensional and co-creative nature of interactions in online literary communities, and they ultimately enrich our understanding of value creation in digital environments.

These empirical findings validate and extend the theoretical dimensions from Section 5.2: where Hollebeek et al. (2023) identified cognitive/affective/behavioural engagement components, the Chinese context reveals additional cultural dimensions (collective participation, striving spirit) that modify how these components manifest. This aligns with but expands Brodie et al.'s (2011) cross-cultural CE framework by demonstrating how platform-enabled collectivism transforms engagement mechanics.

One crucial finding from the analysis is the significance of feedback loops, as highlighted in Figure 5.2. This figure visually represents the essential feedback loops that are fundamental to comprehending CE in the Chinese web novel market. These loops demonstrate that CE consequences directly impact antecedents, thereby shaping future engagement activities.

In the PTV loop, individual satisfaction with the engagement process strengthens the CCI (Co-creation Infrastructure) and motivates SML (Self-motivated Labour). This

enhanced infrastructure and motivation lead to a higher quality of co-creation activities, which in turn sustains and increases ongoing engagement. Thus, a cycle of continuous improvement is created within the co-creation ecosystem (Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2022; Barile *et al.*, 2020).

In the ERV loop, customer experiences drive knowledge sharing and learning within the BCIC (Brand-Centric Interpretive Community). As customers share their insights and learn from each other, the community adapts and evolves based on this feedback. This adaptation fosters deeper engagement and more meaningful interactions, as the community becomes more attuned to the needs and preferences of its members (Ben-Dov, 2024; Rane, Choudhary and Rane, 2023).

The CCV loop highlights the importance of collaborative efforts and shared creative processes. When community members actively participate in co-creating content, the resulting collective value benefits the entire community (Jemielniak and Przegalinska, 2020; Oskam, Bossink and de Man, 2021). This participation reinforces the CCI and strengthens community dynamics. By recognizing and valuing the contributions of all participants, the loop ensures sustained engagement and mutual value creation, as members feel more invested and connected to the community.

Another crucial finding from the analysis is the significant role of cultural factors in shaping CE in the Chinese web novel market. While the feedback loops emphasize the structural and process-oriented aspects of engagement, cultural dimensions such as 'collective participation', 'striving spirit', and 'the pursuit of moral and educational enrichment' add further depth to our understanding of how engagement is fostered within this specific context. These cultural factors emerged from the TA and reflect the unique ways in which Chinese readers engage with content and each other.

Collective Participation

The engagement of Chinese web novel readers is deeply influenced by a collectivist culture that emphasizes strong community ties. As discussed in Section 4.3.3 'Brand-Centric Interpretive Community (BCIC)', readers in these communities are not just passive customers but active contributors to the evolving narrative and discussions around the content. This community-driven approach fosters a collaborative environment where individual participation, whether through feedback or co-creation, strengthens the collective experience. This sense of belonging is central to CE, as readers find value in their contributions being recognized and impactful within the broader community (Karpen and Conduit, 2020; Lee and Hsieh, 2022).

Additionally, China's advanced digital infrastructure further facilitates this collective participation. Section 4.3.2 'Co-Creation Infrastructure (CCI)' highlights how real-time interactions, such as comments, feedback, and financial support (e.g., subscribing, tipping or purchasing offline physical books), allow readers to engage immediately and continuously with both content providers and fellow readers. These digital tools promote high levels of engagement by creating a feedback loop between the community and content creators that reinforces the sense of a shared creative process.

Striving Spirit

The striving spirit in Chinese web literature reflects a deeper cultural phenomenon tied to both historical and modern values. In China's rapidly evolving social and economic landscape, the desire for self-improvement and personal growth is central to both individual aspirations and the collective national identity.

In the case of cultivation (xiuxian) and levelling up stories, this striving spirit is expressed through the protagonists' endless pursuit of higher levels of mastery and success (Jing, 2024). Readers, who often face similar desires for self-advancement in

real life, find these narratives particularly appealing because they echo their own ambitions for personal and professional success (Dragneel, 2023; Salao, 2022).

Moreover, this drive for improvement mirrors China's broader rise on the world stage. Just as the nation itself strives for global recognition and influence, individuals in Chinese society are encouraged to continuously improve themselves, both morally and materially. This makes the cultivation genre highly relevant, as it taps into readers' internalized need for constant progression, resilience, and the overcoming of obstacles (Ang, 2020; Chu, 2020; Wang, Li and Wang, 2023).

The popularity of these stories, therefore, is not just about fantasy, but a reflection of a cultural mindset rooted in ambition, perseverance, and a desire for upward mobility – traits that are increasingly prominent in contemporary Chinese society.

The Pursuit of Moral and Educational Enrichment

Another significant cultural factor influencing CE is the emphasis on moral and educational themes that reflect the values of Confucianism. As noted in Section 4.4.1 'Positive Transformation Value (PTV)', many Chinese web novels incorporate narratives of personal growth, moral development, and self-improvement. Readers are drawn to content that not only entertains but also provides insights into ethical living and self-betterment; this encourages deeper engagement through discussions that explore these values.

Additionally, the influence of traditional genres such as wuxia and xianxia, as discussed in Section 4.4.2 'Emotional Resonance Value (ERV)', plays a key role in reinforcing these themes. These genres, deeply embedded in Chinese literary traditions, resonate with readers' cultural identities and create a strong connection between the content and their personal values (Bai, 2020; Wu and Li, 2022; Zhao, 2021). The continued popularity of these genres contributes to an engagement loop, where readers feel a sense

of ownership and pride in their participation that further drives their involvement in discussions and content co-creation.

5.4 Conceptual Framework: A Value Co-Creation Model

This study conceptualizes value co-creation in Chinese web novel consumption as follows. The framework's development utilized NVivo-driven keyword analysis (Section 3.3), prioritizing culturally significant terms like 互动 (interaction) and 修仙 (cultivation). Themes were validated through member checks and aligned with S-D logic's axioms (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). The value co-creation model (Figure 5.3) provides an answer to the third research question: How can CE processes be conceptualized in a Chinese web novel consumption context? This model encapsulates the dynamic interactions between readers, authors, and virtual communities supported by digital platforms, and it showcases how these elements collaboratively enhance the value derived from the consumption of web novels. Drawing from the theoretical insights in Chapter 2, this model emphasizes the interactive and co-creative nature of CE, as proposed by S-D logic. The model highlights how customers transition from passive recipients to active co-creators of value, aligning with the principles of value co-creation through service exchanges (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008). By incorporating the cultural dimensions identified in this study, such as 'collective participation' and 'striving spirit,' the model extends the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter 2 by illustrating how contextual factors influence the manifestation of CE processes in the specific setting of Chinese web fiction. This not only bridges the gap between theory and practice but also enriches the understanding of value co-creation in culturally specific digital environments.

This model advances Iglesias et al.'s (2020) co-creation framework in three key ways: (1) incorporating platform-mediated collectivism (vs. Western individualized engagement), (2) formalizing cultural values as institutional arrangements per S-D logic's Axiom 5, and (3) demonstrating how emotional resonance becomes collective

215

capital - a phenomenon absent in prior Western-centric models. These adaptations directly respond to RO2's call for context-specific CE analysis.

Figure 5.3: Conceptual framework: value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption (source: adapted from Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019)
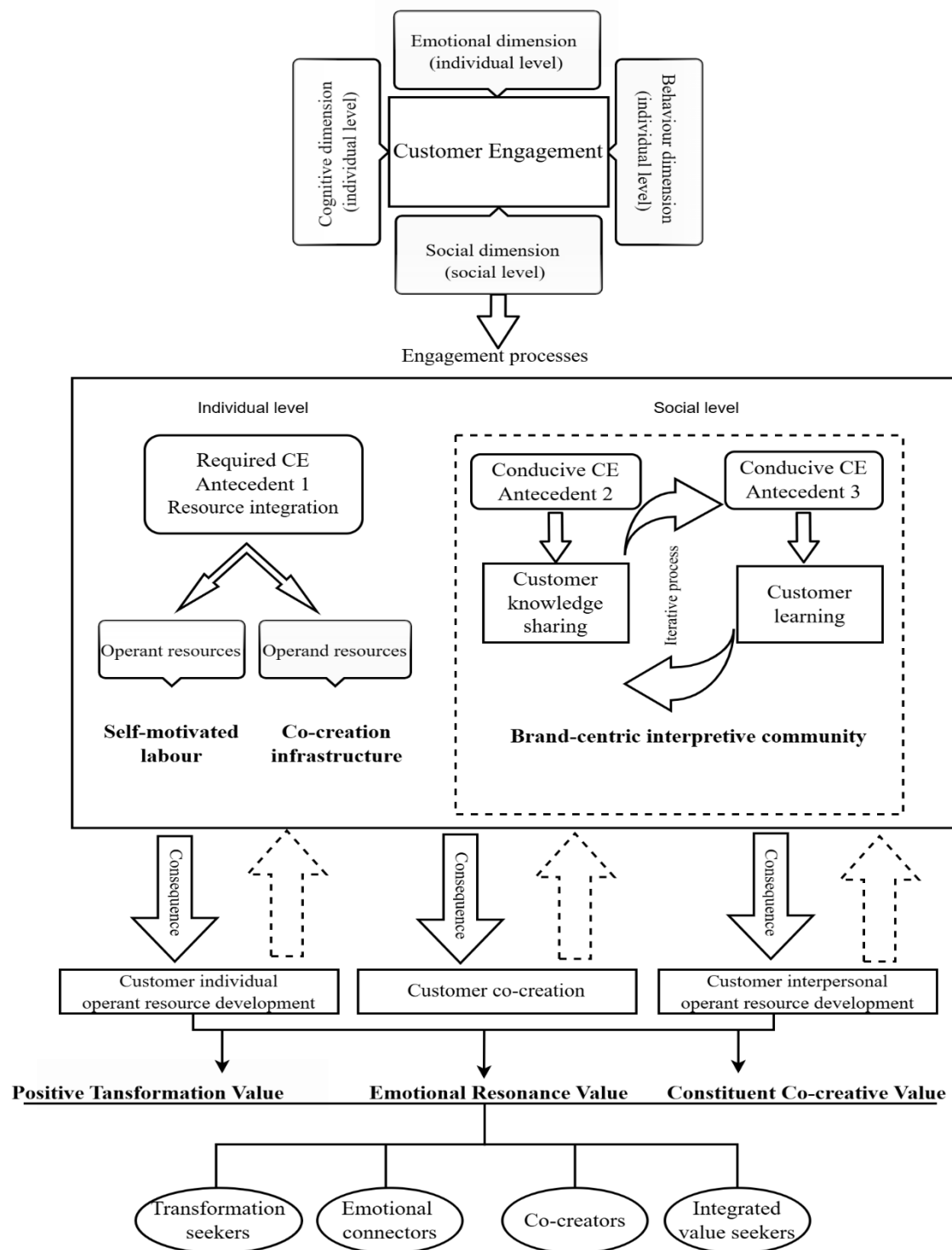
CE, customer engagement

As the conceptualization clarifies, the value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption highlights the complex dynamics between readers/customers and writers. This model encapsulates an interaction process where both parties engage in a continuous exchange of ideas, feedback, and creative inputs that foster a vibrant participatory community. Readers/customers, driven by a passion and self-motivation for storytelling, contribute to the creative process; they transition from passive customers to active contributors. This is facilitated by digital platforms that provide a robust CCI(Co-Creation Infrastructure). The BCIC(Brand-Centric Interpretive Community) fosters a sense of belonging among readers and acts as a hub for value co-creation (Chamorro-Premuzic and Berg, 2021; Millington, 2021). The iterative nature of this engagement fosters a continuous loop of value co-creation, which benefits both parties through enhanced creative outputs and enriched reading experiences (Al-Kumaim *et al.*, 2021; Saha, Goyal and Jebarajakirthy, 2022). Digital platforms play a significant role as enablers of this interaction. Value co-creation is seen not just as an outcome but as an ongoing process facilitated by the digital platforms and the active involvement of the community (Hauke-Lopes, Ratajczak-Mrozek and Wieczerzycki, 2022; Martín-Peña, Lorenzo and Meyer, 2024). This aligns with the principles of S-D logic, where value is co-created through collaborative efforts and resource integration.

The model delineates the diverse types of value that users derive from their engagement with Chinese web novels, categorized as PTV(Positive Transformation Value), ERV(Emotional Resonance Value), and CCV(Constitute Co-creation Value). Cultural factors (collective participation, striving spirit) were included based on their (a) frequency in keyword clusters (>20% occurrence across datasets), (b) theoretical alignment with S-D logic's Axiom 5 (institutional arrangements) (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), and (c) empirical validation through participant quotes (e.g., P13: '我们像修仙主角一样奋斗' / 'We strive like cultivation protagonists') (Hollebeek et al., 2023). Conversely, transient trends (e.g., platform-specific slang) were excluded as they lacked cross-context stability (Hollebeek et al., 2023). PTV emphasizes the personal and cognitive growth readers experience through engaging narratives, fostering a deeper connection to the content. Emotional Resonance Value (ERV) focuses on the emotional

bonds formed through customer interpersonal operant resource development (Fig. 5.3), as exemplified by P3's therapeutic engagement in online literature communities. These bonds are institutionalized via brand-centric interpretive communities (e.g., reader support groups in Qidian's forums), where shared experiences (e.g., collective narrative analysis in Section 4.4.2) translate into sustained emotional capital. This institutionalized emotional capital, in turn, fuels collaborative actions such as crowdsourced plot suggestions and fan-driven IP adaptations, directly contributing to Constitutive Co-creation Value (CCV). This process distinctively incorporates China's platform-mediated collectivism —enabled by features like real-time comment rankings and virtual gifting systems—which transforms individual emotional engagement into collective value-generating rituals, contrasting with Iglesias et al.'s (2020) dyadic interaction model that prioritizes individualized reciprocity over platform-facilitated group dynamics.

In contrast, Constitutive Co-creation Value (CCV) emphasizes the creative contributions of readers, such as co-authoring plotlines or generating fan-driven material (e.g., fan fiction, dubbing). These activities not only foster a sense of ownership but also enrich the collective creation of value within the community. Crucially, while ERV arises from shared emotional experiences, CCV stems from the active reconfiguration of narrative resources (e.g., modifying storylines, designing derivative content). Together with PTV (personal growth) and ERV (emotional bonds), this tripartite framework reveals how Chinese web novel consumption transcends entertainment, enabling personal development, emotional fulfilment, and creative expression through platform-facilitated engagement.

Furthermore, the framework illustrates that the interactive and participatory nature of the digital literary ecosystem directly influences how value is co-created. This, in turn, leads to the formation of four specific customer types based on the different ways readers engage with, and derive value from, the content. The four customer typologies emerged from keyword co-occurrence patterns (e.g., '成长' (growth) ＋ '评论' (comments) for Transformation Seekers) and were triangulated with Hollebeek et al.'s

(2023) engagement dimensions. Behavioural metrics (e.g., comment frequency, tip amounts) further validated the typologies' operational boundaries (Ozuem and Willis, 2022).. First, transformation seekers. These individuals focus on PTV for their personal and emotional growth. They engage deeply with narratives that challenge their thinking, expand their perspectives, and provide opportunities for personal reflection and development. By immersing themselves in these stories, transformation seekers gain cognitive and emotional insights that foster personal enrichment. They actively seek out stories that facilitate growth, learning and self-improvement (Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone, 2015; Lombana-Bermudez *et al.*, 2020). Second, emotional connectors. This group of customers seek ERV through shared experiences and deep emotional connections within literary communities. They are particularly drawn to themes and characters that resonate with their personal values and emotions. These customers/readers often participate in community discussions and form bonds with other customers/readers over shared emotional experiences (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b; Hsu, 2023). Their engagement is characterized by the pursuit of meaningful connections and a sense of belonging within the literary community (Perez-Vega *et al.*, 2021; Sykora *et al.*, 2022). Third, co-creators. Co-creators actively participate in CCV, contributing to the narrative world through activities like writing fanfiction, creating fan art, dubbing, and other creative outputs. These readers experience a deep sense of ownership and pride in their contributions. Their engagement goes beyond passive consumption of content to actively shape and enhance the original story. Driven by a passion for the narrative and a desire to collaborate with others, co-creators invest significant cognitive effort in their creative endeavours, fostering a vibrant and participatory community(Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a; Kumar, 2021). Fourth, integrated value seekers. This type of customer pursues a synergistic blend of PTV, ERV, and CCV, valuing personal transformation, emotional resonance, and collaborative creation. They engage holistically, integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of engagement (Choi, 2023; Hoelscher and Chatzidakis, 2021). These readers/customers seek stories that not only entertain but also enrich their lives and provide opportunities for creative expression and community participation. Their multifaceted engagement reflects a comprehensive approach to deriving value from web novels, which personal growth,

emotional connection, and collaborative contributions complement each other (Team Storyly, 2024).

This typology, comprising four types of customer, highlights the diverse ways in which customers engage with and derive value from Chinese web novels. Each type reflects distinct motivations and engagement strategies that demonstrate the multifaceted nature of participation within online literature communities. This framework highlights the complex interplay between individual experiences and community dynamics, and reveals how different forms of engagement contribute to the overall value of online literature as a service system.

The value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption is a dynamic concept, which reflects the evolving and interactive nature of digital literary ecosystems (Dziewanowska and Kacprzak, 2020; Ranjan and Read, 2016). This dynamism is evident in the continuous, bidirectional interactions between readers/customers, writers/content providers, and digital platforms. Readers/customers actively participate in content creation and consumption, and are transformed from passive customers into engaged co-creators. Through activities such as fanfiction writing, real-time feedback, and community discussions, they directly influence narrative developments and enrich the storytelling experience. The model also adapts to technological advancements and shifting reader preferences, thus illustrating its flexibility and responsiveness. SML, a key component, shows how readers voluntarily contribute time and creativity; SML is driven by intrinsic motivations and the desire for community recognition (Li and Gan, 2022; Xu and Peng, 2024). CCI, supported by robust digital platforms, provides the necessary tools for seamless interaction, which ensures that readers' contributions are effectively integrated into the narrative process. BCICs further exemplify this dynamism by fostering a sense of belonging and identity, where collective engagement leads to sustained community growth and narrative evolution (Abbate *et al.*, 2022; Wegner *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, the value co-creation model not only adapts to but also thrives on the dynamic interplay of these elements; it showcases the intricate and ever-changing landscape of Chinese web novel consumption.

221

The value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption reflects a comprehensive and dynamic understanding of CE. It emphasizes the synergistic relationships between customers and content that are facilitated by digital platforms and community interactions. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of value derived from web novels, stakeholders can better appreciate the intrinsic worth of online literature and create more inclusive, participatory environments that empower customers as integral contributors to the creative process. This model not only enriches our understanding of digital content consumption but also provides a framework for fostering more meaningful and transformative customer experiences.

5.5 Summary

This chapter formalizes a dynamic value co-creation model (Figure 5.4) that embeds cultural factors (e.g., striving spirit) as institutional arrangements. For instance, Qidian's real-time comment system operationalizes collectivist engagement, illustrating how platform architectures mediate CE in ways Western models overlook. By aligning Confucian moral enrichment themes (e.g., PTV narratives) with platform tools, the framework bridges S-D logic's axioms with cultural contextualization, offering strategies to harmonize algorithmic efficiency with ethical engagement. This synthesis directly informs China's cultural soft power strategies, positioning digital narratives as drivers of youth agency and economic revitalization.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the contributions of this study to the current understanding of S-D logic-informed CE, based on both established conceptual frameworks and new empirical findings. Specifically, the study reconceptualized the consumption of Chinese web fiction as a value co-creation model (see Figure 5.4). This chapter presents the study's conclusions, emphasizing its theoretical and practical implications, as well as offering managerial insights. Additionally, the chapter discusses the study's limitations and proposes directions for future research to expand the conceptual framework of Chinese web fiction consumption.

6.2 Evaluation of Key Findings

This study advances CE research by contextualizing its dynamic, multifaceted nature within Chinese web fiction, where readers and writers co-create value through platform-mediated collectivism.

This finding aligns with Hollebeek et al.'s (2019) S-D logic-informed CE framework (see Figure 5.3), which posits that engagement is multidimensional. However, our model extends their work by incorporating platform-mediated collectivism and cultural values as institutional arrangements (Axiom 5 of S-D logic), addressing the gap in cross-cultural CE research identified by Brodie et al. (2011). For instance, the BCIC (Brand-Centric Interpretive Community) component in Figure 5.4 demonstrates how collectivist norms in China amplify engagement through rituals like real-time comment rankings—a structural addition absent in Hollebeek et al.'s (2019) original framework.

The study identifies a triad of antecedents (SML, CCI, BCIC) and outcomes (PTV, ERV, CCV) driving value co-creation, extending S-D logic's axioms through platform-mediated collectivism (Figure 5.3)

Through the integration of these six themes the study provides a comprehensive understanding of both the processes and perceived value in CE with Chinese web fiction. It illustrates the complex interplay between individual experiences and community dynamics, and emphasizes the diverse motivations and engagement strategies of readers. Four distinct customer types emerged – transformation seekers, emotional connectors, co-creators, and integrated value seekers – each engaging with web novels across cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social dimensions. This multifaceted engagement emphasizes the importance of inclusive and participatory environments in fostering meaningful connections and enhancing the overall value of online literature (Deng, 2020).

A significant contribution of this research is the development of a value co-creation model, which effectively captures the complex and multifaceted nature of CE in the digital literature space (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Brodie *et al.*, 2013). The model's strength lies in its ability to detail how individual contributions, community interactions, and platform features combine to shape the co-creation process (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a). By providing a nuanced understanding of these interactions, the model can be applied not only within Chinese web fiction but also to other digital content platforms where co-creation is central to engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2023b). However, the complexity of the model may present challenges for broader application in contexts where the level of interactivity is lower or where cultural factors differ significantly from the Chinese context (Wang and Hockx, 2022).

Moreover, the model developed in this study elucidates the intricate processes and outcomes of CE in the context of Chinese web fiction. It highlights the dynamic interplay between individual contributions and collective community interactions; thus emphasizing how digital platforms and participatory infrastructures support the continuous co-creation of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). While the model provides a robust framework for understanding CE, its detailed and context-specific nature may limit its generalizability to other types of digital literature or online media (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Brodie *et al.*, 2013). Despite this, its detailed exploration of the co-

creation process makes it a valuable tool for understanding engagement within highly interactive communities (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019).

The study's findings extend the understanding of CE by illustrating the complex interplay between individual experiences and community dynamics (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). It also emphasizes the significance of recognizing the diverse motivations and engagement strategies of readers, which are crucial for creating more engaging and transformative digital content experiences (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). By applying S-D logic, the study offers a robust theoretical framework that not only advances academic knowledge but also has practical relevance for stakeholders aiming to leverage the participatory and co-creative potential of digital content platforms. The dynamic nature of the value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption highlights the evolving relationship between technology, content, and community, and paves the way for future research to explore these interactions further (Vargo and Lusch, 2017).

In a word, this study enriches the current literature by providing a detailed analysis of CE and value co-creation in the context of Chinese web novels. It highlights the importance of creating inclusive and participatory environments to foster deeper and more meaningful CE and provides a solid foundation for future research to build upon and expand the theoretical understanding of these complex processes (Wang and Hockx, 2022).

6.3 Implications for Theory Development

This study advances Service-Dominant (S-D) logic by addressing critical gaps in customer engagement (CE) and value co-creation within Chinese web fiction. Building on the foundational framework proposed by Hollebeek et al. (2019) (Figure 5.1)—which conceptualizes CE through emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral dimensions—we extend this baseline model (Figure 5.1) by integrating platform-mediated collectivism and cultural dynamics, as depicted in our revised framework (Figure 5.3). The key innovations include: 1) Redefining Operant Resources:

Positioning digital platforms (e.g., algorithms, collaborative tools) as active institutional actors (Axiom 5, S-D logic); 2) Networked Value Creation: Introducing the Emotional Resonance Value (ERV) loop to capture collective rituals (e.g., real-time rankings); 2) Cultural Contextualization: Embedding Chinese collectivist norms (e.g., striving spirit) into CE processes.

Based on the literature review and findings from Chapter 4, this study provides several key theoretical contributions to the development of Customer Engagement (CE) and value co-creation in the context of Chinese web fiction. These contributions not only fill existing gaps in the literature but also extend and advance Service-Dominant (S-D) logic theory. Specifically, this study enriches S-D logic by exploring the multidimensional nature of engagement, the role of prosumer behaviour, and the development of customer typologies within digital service ecosystems.

The study builds upon S-D logic theory, offering a more nuanced understanding of how digital engagement operates in online literary environments where actors, technologies, and platforms converge to shape value co-creation. By addressing critical gaps in the existing literature, the research deepens our understanding of the complex interactions and co-created value within Chinese web fiction communities.

Building on the conceptual framework proposed in Section 5.4 (Figure 5.3), this study advances S-D logic by addressing five key gaps:

Addressing Gap 1: Developing a Multidimensional Framework for Value Co-Creation

Addressing Gap 1, this research demonstrates that existing frameworks often fail to capture the multidimensional nature of customer engagement (CE), especially in digital environments like Chinese web fiction. Existing studies tend to focus on individual engagement dimensions, such as cognitive or emotional engagement, but fail to account for the interplay between cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social factors in

complex digital ecosystems (Brodie *et al*., 2011; Hollebeek *et al*., 2019). Prior models (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2019; see Figure 5.1) emphasized unidimensional interactions, neglecting the systemic role of social dynamics in collectivist contexts.

To address this gap, the study develops a comprehensive framework that integrates these four dimensions of engagement, offering a nuanced understanding of how they interact within online communities. A key contribution of this research is the customer typology model, which identifies four distinct customer types—transformation seekers, emotional connectors, co-creators, and integrated value seekers—each reflecting unique patterns of engagement and value creation. By illustrating how these user types embody different combinations of multidimensional engagement behaviours, the framework provides a richer, more dynamic understanding of CE and its role in value co-creation (Hollebeek *et al*., 2021).

Contrary to Brodie et al.'s (2011) unidimensional CE model (Figure 5.1), our framework (Figure 5.3) demonstrates how cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social engagement interact dynamically within the service ecosystem—defined as a self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements. For instance, the BCIC (Brand-Centric Interpretive Community) component in Figure 5.3 institutionalizes crowdsourced plot suggestions, bridging micro-level reader feedback and macro-level co-created value (CCV).

This multidimensional approach enhances S-D logic by emphasizing the interconnectedness of engagement behaviours, where value is co-created through collaborative and diverse interactions among multiple actors (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The findings highlight that value co-creation is not merely an individual or dyadic process but a dynamic interaction between customers, content creators, and platforms (Vargo *et al*., 2017). The incorporation of the customer typology further expands the theoretical scope of S-D logic, demonstrating how varied engagement behaviours contribute to value creation in digital environments. By recognizing the diversity of engagement patterns, this

research provides a broader and more comprehensive framework for understanding value co-creation in digital service ecosystems (Brodie *et al*., 2011; Hollebeek *et al*., 2019).

This explicitly modifies Hollebeek et al.'s (2023) engagement dimensions by integrating cultural factors (e.g., striving spirit) as boundary conditions, thereby resolving the tension in prior frameworks that overlooked contextual institutional arrangements (Axiom 5, S-D logic).

Addressing Gap 2: Exploring Prosumer Behaviours and Peer Collaboration in Value Co-Creation

Addressing Gap 2, this research demonstrates the pivotal role of prosumer behaviour in value co-creation within the context of Chinese web fiction. In these digital environments, users are not merely passive consumers of content but actively engage in the creation, modification, and co-development of stories. These users contribute ideas, provide feedback, and collaborate with authors, thus blurring the traditional boundaries between producers and consumers (Toffler, 1980; Hollebeek *et al*., 2020). Contrary to Toffler's (1980) prosumer theory—which positions individual agency as the driver of value creation (Figure 5.1)—our findings reveal that prosumer behaviours in Chinese web fiction are collectively institutionalized through platform-mediated rituals (see CCI in Figure 5.3).

The study shows that prosumer activities enhance dynamic interactions within the service ecosystem, where customers act simultaneously as both producers and consumers. This supports the argument that value creation is inherently collaborative and networked. By engaging in co-creation activities, users contribute to a participatory culture and deepen the collaborative nature of value creation, advancing S-D logic by demonstrating how value emerges from the interaction of actors within a network (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). This extends Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) co-creation theory by illustrating how digital infrastructures (e.g.,

collaborative writing tools in CCI) mediate peer collaboration at scale, as depicted in the networked value loops of Figure 5.3.

Additionally, the identification of three distinct types of value—PTV (Personal Transformation Value), ERV (Emotional Relationship Value), and CCV (Co-Creation Value)—highlights how prosumer behaviours lead to multiple outcomes that contribute to value creation. These value types operationalize Axiom 5 of S-D logic, where platform-mediated collectivism (Figure 5.3) codifies cultural norms (e.g., striving spirit) into institutional arrangements. For instance, the ERV loop (Figure 5.3) captures how ranking battles transform emotional resonance into collective capital—a mechanism absent in linear prosumer models (Figure 5.1).This extends S-D logic by illustrating the diverse ways in which value is co-created, deepening our understanding of the participatory and collaborative nature of digital ecosystems (Vargo *et al*., 2017; Hollebeek *et al*., 2021).

Addressing Gap 3: Redefining Digital Platforms' Role in Production-Consumption Dynamics

Addressing Gap 3, this study extends Vargo and Lusch's (2016) S-D logic framework by demonstrates how digital platforms in Chinese web fiction act as active institutional actors (see Figure 5.3) rather than passive operand resources. Contrary to traditional views of platforms as static infrastructures (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2016; see Operand Resources in Figure 5.1), our findings show that platforms enable service-for-service exchanges through features like real-time feedback loops (CCI) and collaborative writing tools, which reshape production-consumption dynamics. This redefinition aligns with Axiom 5 of S-D logic, which emphasizes institutional arrangements as co-creation drivers.

For instance, the collaborative writing tools in CCI (Figure 5.3) operationalize collectivist norms by enabling crowdsourced plot suggestions—a mechanism absent in prior frameworks (Figure 5.1). By emphasizing the role of digital platforms in fostering

participatory and collaborative ecosystems, this research significantly extends theoretical understanding of customer engagement (CE) and value co-creation in digital ecosystems (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Hollebeek *et al*., 2023).

Addressing Gap 4: Redefining Technology's Role in Production-Consumption Dynamics

Addressing Gap 4, this study extends S-D logic by integrating technology—specifically digital platforms and algorithms—into the value co-creation process. Building on Latour's (2007) Actor-Network Theory (ANT), we investigate how non-human (e.g., readers, authors), and non-human actors (e.g., platform algorithms, user interfaces) co-constitute engagement dynamics within the service ecosystem (defined in Section 5.2 as a network of actors integrating resources through shared institutions).

Contrary to traditional human-centric CE frameworks (Hollebeek et al., 2019; see Figure 5.1), our findings reveal that non-human actors, such as real-time comment ranking algorithms and virtual gifting systems (see CCI in Figure 5.3), mediate interactions between consumers and producers by institutionalizing collective rituals (e.g., crowdsourced plot suggestions). This transforms emotional resonance (ERV) into collective capital, as exemplified by the BCIC's role in fostering shared creative ownership (Section 5.4).

By framing technology as an active mediator, this research challenges S-D logic's anthropocentric assumptions and expands its theoretical scope. Specifically, we demonstrate how platform algorithms (non-human actors) operationalize Axiom 5 of S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) by codifying cultural values (e.g., collective participation) into institutional arrangements that govern co-creation. This bridges micro-level interactions (e.g., reader feedback) and macro-level value outcomes (e.g., CCV), offering a more holistic understanding of digitally mediated ecosystems.

Addressing Gap 5: Developing a Context-Specific Understanding of Value Creation in Chinese Web Fiction

Addressing Gap 5, this study emphasizes the need for a more context-specific understanding of value creation, particularly within the unique environment of Chinese web fiction. The findings indicate that value is not only shaped by the platform and content but also by the broader cultural, social, and technological context in which Chinese web fiction exists. Contrary to Western-centric co-creation models (e.g., Iglesias et al., 2020; see dyadic interactions in Figure 5.1), our framework (Figure 5.3) demonstrates how platform-mediated collectivism transforms emotional resonance into collective capital through networked rituals (e.g., real-time comment rankings in BCIC; see ERV loop in Figure 5.3).

A key contribution of this study is the identification of cultural factors such as collective participation, striving spirit, and the pursuit of moral and educational enrichment, which are central to the engagement behaviours of Chinese web fiction readers. In a collectivist society, readers are not just passive consumers but active contributors to the evolving narrative, fostering a collaborative environment where individual feedback and co-creation are essential (Karpen and Conduit, 2020; Lee and Hsieh, 2022). This cultural dynamism is institutionalized through platform features like ranking battles (CCI in Figure 5.3), which operationalize Axiom 5 of S-D logic by codifying collectivist norms into value co-creation mechanisms.

Moreover, the striving spirit, deeply rooted in Chinese cultural values, drives engagement through stories of personal growth and self-improvement, particularly in cultivation and levelling up genres (Jing, 2024; Dragneel, 2023). Additionally, the moral and educational themes inherent in many Chinese web novels, influenced by Confucian values, encourage deeper engagement through discussions of ethics and self-betterment (Bai, 2020; Wu and Li, 2022). These cultural dimensions are embedded within the service ecosystem (defined in Section 5.2 as a network of actors integrating resources through shared institutions), as illustrated by the BCIC's role in Figure 5.3.

By integrating these cultural and contextual factors, the study enriches S-D logic, offering a more nuanced framework for analysing value creation in digitally mediated environments, particularly within the context of Chinese web fiction. This approach resolves the tension in Iglesias et al.'s (2020) individual-centric model (Figure 5.1) by demonstrating how networked value loops (ERV, CCV in Figure 5.3) replace linear dyadic pathways.

In summary, this study advances S-D logic by resolving five key gaps:

1. Multidimensional CE: Integrating cultural collectivism (e.g., BCIC rituals) into engagement dimensions.
2. Prosumer Institutionalization: Redefining prosumption as platform-mediated collective action (e.g., crowdsourced plots).
3. Platform Agency: Positioning digital tools as operant resources (e.g., ranking algorithms in CCI).
4. Non-Human Mediation: Applying ANT to human-technology interactions (e.g., real-time feedback loops).
5. Cultural Contextualization: Embedding striving spirit and Confucian values into value co-creation.

These extensions are synthesized in the revised framework (Figure 5.3), which replaces linear models (Figure 5.1) with networked value loops.

6.4 Implications for Managerial Practice

This section outlines several practical implications derived from the study of CE and value co-creation in Chinese web fiction, guided by S-D logic and ANT, with a focus on translating these insights into actionable recommendations for industry stakeholders.

1) Creating Collaborative Spaces for Co-Creation

Platforms should encourage environments where content creators and users can co-create content together. Interactive spaces like real-time feedback loops, narrative adaptations, and collaborative features are key to improving engagement and loyalty. By facilitating such collaborative environments, platforms not only meet customer expectations but also drive deeper engagement (Vorecol Editorial Team, 2020). This approach aligns with the value co-creation emphasis in digital ecosystems and emphasizes the social dimensions of engagement (Hollebeek *et al*., 2019).

2) Leveraging Digital Technologies to Enhance Engagement

Platforms can leverage digital technologies, including AI-driven tools, to better understand user behaviour and optimize engagement. Through personalized content recommendations and deeper analysis of user interactions, platforms can refine content offerings to align with user preferences, which boosts engagement and satisfaction (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Using technology to facilitate dynamic interactions and engagement behaviours allows platforms to create more personalized and meaningful experiences for users (Hollebeek *et al*., 2019).

3) Empowering Content Creators with Training on Digital Engagement

Platforms should invest in training programs for content creators to develop skills in digital engagement, storytelling, and adapting content based on real-time feedback. Empowering creators with these tools enables them to produce content that resonates with audiences, increasing engagement and fostering a deeper connection between readers and authors (Brodie *et al*., 2013; Wang and Hockx, 2022).

4) Designing Sustainable Revenue Models

Developing sustainable revenue models is essential for balancing value creation for both content creators and customers. Platforms should explore diverse monetization methods, including subscription services, microtransactions, and ad-supported content

(Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Offering virtual goods and enhanced reading experiences can also provide additional revenue streams while ensuring that content creators are fairly compensated (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019).

5) Building Trust Through Ethical Data Management

Platforms must prioritize ethical data practices to maintain user trust. Transparent data management and adherence to privacy regulations not only ensure compliance but also create a more reliable and engaging user experience. This trust enhances customer loyalty, which is essential for long-term success in digital service ecosystems (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Hockx, 2015).

6.5 Limitations and Prospects for Future Study

This research provides valuable insights into CE and value co-creation within the context of Chinese web fiction, yet it is not without its limitations. One significant limitation is that the sample is restricted to individuals with higher education backgrounds. This narrow focus does not account for the broader population of web fiction consumers who may have varying levels of educational attainment. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the diverse behaviours, preferences, and engagement patterns of a more varied demographic. The inclusion of participants with different educational backgrounds in future studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of CE and value co-creation across a broader spectrum of the population.

Additionally, the study's reliance on a relatively small sample size, while justified by the achievement of data saturation, may still pose risks in terms of the diversity of perspectives captured. Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include a broader and more varied participant pool. This approach would enhance the robustness of the findings and allow for greater generalizability. Acknowledging and addressing this limitation will ensure that the insights gained are representative of a

wider range of web fiction consumers, thereby improving the applicability of the results across different demographic groups.

Another limitation of the model stems from its focus on a single genre – specifically Chinese web fiction – raising concerns about its generalizability to other literary genres or forms of digital media. The engagement processes and value co-creation dynamics explored here may differ significantly when applied to other types of digital content, such as video games or other entertainment media. Future research should examine whether the model's principles hold true across various genres and digital platforms to broaden the scope of its application.

Moreover, while the study highlights various engagement processes and their positive impact on value co-creation, it does not fully account for the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms. Technological advancements, including the rise of AI-driven content recommendations and algorithm-based user interactions, are likely to change engagement patterns in ways that the current model does not predict. Future research should explore how technological developments may alter CE behaviours and the co-creation process in the digital content ecosystem.

In addition, the model assumes a certain level of homogeneity in reader behaviours and motivations; therefore, the diversity of engagement styles across different demographic or regional groups could potentially be overlooked. For instance, younger readers may have different preferences and engagement styles compared to older audiences, and regional variations in reading habits may affect the way different groups interact with web fiction. Addressing this diversity in future research will be essential for refining the model's accuracy in predicting engagement outcomes for more varied populations.

While the study offers significant contributions, it also acknowledges the need for broader empirical investigations to include more diverse populations. This approach would enrich understanding of CE and value co-creation in different contexts. The dynamic nature of the value co-creation model of Chinese web novel consumption

highlights the evolving relationship between technology, content, and community. Future research should explore these interactions further by examining how these factors influence engagement in various demographic groups. By doing so, researchers can develop more robust and universally applicable models.

Another area for future exploration involves considering potential negative outcomes or challenges in the co-creation process, which this research has not extensively covered. While the model primarily focuses on positive value creation, it is equally important to address possible adverse effects. For instance, community conflicts, content burnout, or platform limitations could pose significant challenges to the value co-creation process. Future studies should incorporate a 'Challenges and Risks' section to identify and analyse these potential issues, thereby providing a more balanced perspective. This could be visually represented as speed bumps or hurdles within the value co-creation model to highlight areas that require careful management and mitigation strategies.

Furthermore, the current framework is primarily qualitative, which, while providing depth, could benefit from the inclusion of quantitative elements to enhance its practical applicability. Introducing measurable indicators for each value type would allow for more precise and actionable insights. For example, for PTV, metrics such as the 'Number of New Skills Acquired' or a 'Self-reported Personal Growth Score (1–10)' could be included. These metrics could be presented in a sidebar next to each value type; they offer a clear and concise way to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of value co-creation activities.

Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons represent a vital area for future research. Given the focus on Chinese web novels, the model could benefit from explicitly addressing how it might differ from, or apply to, other cultural contexts. For example, creating a comparative table or matrix that shows how key elements of the model might vary across different cultural settings could be highly informative. Comparing aspects such as SML in Chinese, Western, and other Asian contexts would highlight both

similarities and differences, and enrich the overall understanding of CE and value co-creation on a global scale.

In conclusion, while this research contributes significantly to the understanding of CE and value co-creation in the context of Chinese web fiction, future studies should aim to address these identified limitations. By incorporating a more diverse sample, considering potential negative outcomes, integrating quantitative metrics, and conducting cross-cultural comparisons, future research can develop a more comprehensive and practical framework. This will not only enrich academic understanding but also provide actionable insights for practitioners looking to enhance CE and value co-creation in various digital contexts.

6.6 Summary

This study advances S-D logic by formalizing CE as a culturally embedded, platform-mediated process. Its synthesis of Western theories (e.g., ANT) with Chinese empirical realities provides actionable strategies for ethical AI design and participatory ecosystems. While demographic limitations constrain generalizability, the framework's emphasis on cultural collectivism (e.g., *shenfen* practices) invites cross-cultural comparisons to test global applicability. Ultimately, the research repositions CE as a driver of inclusive digital innovation, where momentary acts (e.g., viral chapter comments) aggregate into systemic value—a critical contribution for academia and industry navigating the complexities of digital engagement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Invitation Letter (English translation)

Liya An   Location, **<date>**

Dear [Name],

I am delighted to hear that you are interested in participating in my doctoral thesis as an interviewee. The purpose of my research is to investigate the concept of customer engagement in the so-called "S-D Logic" model and your perception of personal experiences in consuming Chinese web fiction. Your views and experiences would be invaluable to my study, as you have already gained practical experience in online consumption and reading. Furthermore, you have taken part in active discussions at digital forums or communities. You can share your thoughts on this topic, and this is exactly what my thesis focuses on.

I would like to stress that your participation is voluntary. Your information will be kept confidential and anonymous. I will use it for my research, and I will record the interview on a voice recording. Afterward, I will transcribe the interview and delete the voice recording. If the data contributed by you is decided to be used in my thesis, it will be sent to you for re-confirmation.

I would be willing to provide you with a copy of my doctoral thesis, if you are interested. Additionally, I would be happy to schedule an interview with you at <location> <date>. Please let me know if you are able to attend, and I will send you the necessary details.

Thank you for considering my invitation, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

Liya An

Appendix 2: Participants' Informed Consent Form

Hello! We are a group of researchers conducting a study on "Chinese Web Fiction: Customer Engagement from the Perspective of Value Co-creation in the Digital Age". We would like to invite you to participate in our research and would be grateful if you could provide us with valuable information in this regard.

Before you can participate in our study, we need to introduce you to our research to ensure that you have a clear understanding of your participation in this study. Your participation will help us to better understand the issue of value co-creation in the engagement of users of Chinese online literature.

Introduction:

This form provides information about the research and outlines your rights as a respondent. We kindly request that you read this form carefully before agreeing to participate in the research. You are under no obligation to participate, and you may withdraw your consent at any time.

Research Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to explore the customers' online experiences and perceived value in the process of co-producing Chinese web fiction, as well as the interaction between service providers and customers in the process of consuming Chinese internet literature. It also tries to investigate the factors that influence the customers' individual well-being, such as initiatives and self-motivated labour.

The topics are the followings:

1) What is the value co-created in the process of consuming Chinese web fiction?
2) How is the value co-created through CE fundamental process or CE activities in Chinese web fiction consumption?
3) What is the significance resulting from the experiences of consuming Chinese web fiction for consumers in the context of digital era?

Content: The specific content of the interview will be confirmed and agreed upon with you in advance, and you have the right to refuse to answer any questions or to stop the

interview at any time. Information collected during the interview will be kept strictly confidential, and your identity will not be revealed in any report or publication. Your personal information will only be used for the purpose of the interview and will not be used for any other purpose.

Procedure:

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview. The interview will be conducted in person, via phone, or via video call, depending on your preference. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. The questions will be related to the research topics, and you are free to answer them as you feel comfortable.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to participate. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any time, and your data will be destroyed.

You have the right to express your views, experiences, and opinions. If you feel uncomfortable or uneasy during an interview, please inform the interviewer immediately so that they can take appropriate measures to ensure your safety.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

We take the issue of privacy very seriously. All data collected during the research will be treated confidentially and will be kept anonymous. Your identity will not be disclosed, and any personal information collected will be stored securely.

If you participate in our study, you will be asked to provide some personal information, such as your name and contact details. This information will be used solely for research purposes and will be limited to the use of this research. When publishing research results, we will use anonymous data to ensure that your personal identity is protected.

Protection from Harm:

We understand that participation in research can sometimes cause emotional discomfort. We will make every effort to ensure that your participation in the research does not cause you any harm, either physical or emotional. If you experience any discomfort, please inform the researcher immediately.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the researcher at email: 2005347@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Consent:

By agreeing to participate in this research, you acknowledge that you have read this form, and you understand the purpose, procedure, and risks involved. You also understand that you are free to withdraw your consent at any time. If you agree to participate, please sign and date below. Thank you for your participation!

Name (printed)

_____

Signature

_____

Date

_____

Appendix 3: Predetermined In-Depth Interview Questions

Questions:

1) I would like to understand more about your experience as a customer of Chinese web novels in your consuming/reading process at the digital platform of Chinese literary websites. Let's start from the very beginning: When did you start reading web novels and approximately how long have you been doing so?

2) How did you first start reading online novels? Which platforms or websites do you usually read online novels on?

3) What do you think are your preferences in terms of storyline, characterization, language style, etc. when reading online novels?

4) What is the most recent Chinese online novel you have read? How did it arouse your interest? (Further, have your reading preferences changed over the years?)

5) What do you think are the characteristics of Chinese web novels?

   1a) I think Chinese online literature is really fundamentally different from popular literature, and that is the involvement of literary websites. Do you agree with me? What is your opinion?

   1b) What are the main resources provided by website operations in the birth and development of online literature?

   1c) What is the main difference with paper publishers?

   1d) Also as a veteran reader, what do you think are the main resources contributed by readers, especially fans of ashes, in this kind of crowdsourced online literature?

6) During your reading of Chinese online novels, do you interact with other readers? For example, do you leave messages or comments on forums or have discussions through other platforms? (How much does the interaction and engagement of authors and readers influence you in your reading experience?)

7) Do you have some regular communication groups or communities when reading Chinese online novels? How do you think these communities or groups affect your reading experience? (e.g., do you choose the next Chinese online novel you are going to read based on the reviews or opinions of other readers?)

8) Have you ever tried to participate in the creation or feedback of a particular online novel on an online community? What was the experience like exactly?

9) How much do you think your feedback and opinions in reading Chinese web novels influence the authors' creations? (I once read about an author who sent out questionnaires to his subscribers to ask for their opinions before writing a web novel, and then planned the novel based on the users' opinions... what do you think about that?)

10) How do you think the commercial attributes of web novels affect their creation and reading? (Question for providers of web novels)

11) What kind of significance and value do you think online novels have for reader-users in the fan community?

12) What value do you think co-creation activities with authors, or value co-creation activities, can bring to the readers and users in the fan community and to the online novels themselves?

13) What do you think is the positive impact of Chinese online novel reading and participation activities on your life? For example, does it improve your social relationships or psychological state, etc.?

Appendix 4: Predetermined focus group questions

Introduction (Welcoming the participants; brief introduction to my dissertation topic and why I have invited these participants)

Questions:

1. There is an important genre in Chinese online literature, namely "Immortal Cultivation Literature", why can it be popular all over the world, and even create a global online Immortal Cultivation situation? What kind of resources does it provide for readers and users at home and abroad?

2. Some people say that there is no fundamental difference between writing online novels and writing for the paper media, it's all about telling a good story, do you think so?

3. Is it true that consuming online novels as a form of entertainment can be replaced? What are its unique advantages?

4. What is the significance of the postmodern individual who finds existence in online novels, where "everything is true" and "nothing is true"?

5. What do you value most when you read online novels? What are the most discussed issues in the online community? What do you think of the fact that so many texts are now keen to recreate worlds/worldviews?

6. Some people say that the reason why online novels are so appealing is because Chinese readers have never enjoyed real rights as consumers, what do you think about this?

7. Is commercialised writing in conflict with self-expression? If the commercialised genre and routine writing of network literature gives people a sense of uniformity, why do you continue to read it?

8. How has the experience of consuming Chinese online literature helped you in the

digital era? Has it changed your perspectives or insights on anything related to digital reading?

9. Do you think that Chinese web fiction has played an important role in forming and developing the values of Chinese youth? Why or why not?

Appendix 5: Sample of Interview scripts - translated

June 14 Recording

Host 00:00: Hello, everyone! Thank you for joining today's focus group discussion on time. Today, we'll be discussing experiences with online literature. Feel free to share your thoughts, opinions, and experiences about reading web novels.

Participant 1 02:00: I've been reading web novels for about seven or eight years now. I started in middle school, and it feels like it's become a part of my life. Every night before bed, I read a little bit to relax.

Host 05:00: Seven or eight years is quite a long time. How do you feel web novels have influenced you? For example, in terms of your studies, life, or other aspects?

Participant 1 07:00: I feel like web novels have helped me with my writing skills, especially with language expression. After reading for so many years, when I write essays, I always feel like I have more material to draw from, with more storylines and expressions in my head that I can refer to.

Participant 2 10:00: I started reading in middle school as well, and it's been around six or seven years. For me, reading web novels is mainly a way to relax. I feel like the biggest benefit is that it provides an outlet when I'm feeling stressed.

Host 13:00: It seems like web novels have had different effects on everyone's lives. What platforms do you usually use to read novels? Do you have any recommendations?

Participant 3 15:00: I mainly use Qidian (Starting Point) Chinese Network because its updates are fast, and there's a wide variety of books. The platform is also highly interactive. Sometimes I browse other platforms, but I still feel that Qidian has the most resources.

Participant 4 18:00: I read mostly on Qidian too, especially since the comment

sections are very active. You can discuss plot points with others in the "Chapter Discussion" section, and the interaction is great.

Host 21:00: Besides reading novels, do you engage in other activities, like leaving comments or tipping authors?

Participant 5 23:00: Sometimes I leave comments, especially when I find a plot particularly interesting or unreasonable. I can't resist the urge to communicate with the author.

Participant 2 26:00: I don't usually comment much; I mostly read others' comments. Occasionally, I'll join in if I see an interesting discussion.

Host 29:00: Do you prefer reading chapter by chapter as they are released, or do you save up chapters to read all at once?

Participant 1 31:00: I prefer to save up chapters and binge-read once I've accumulated a few dozen. Reading chapter by chapter daily feels unsatisfying, and the wait for updates can be agonizing.

Participant 3 34:00: I agree. I often wait until the story reaches a key point, then binge-read the chapters all at once. It feels more thrilling that way.

Host 37:00: What types of novels do you usually enjoy reading?

Participant 4 39:00: I like light-hearted ones, such as farming or cultivation novels. These kinds of novels don't require much brainpower, and the reading experience is enjoyable.

Participant 5 42:00: I enjoy sci-fi and fantasy novels, especially those with tight logic and well-developed world-building. They're really engaging to read.

Host 45:00: Has anyone here ever tried writing a novel themselves?

Participant 2 47:00: I've written a few chapters of fan fiction before. I had some ideas after reading certain novels and wanted to try writing my own story. But writing is really hard, so I stopped after a while.

Participant 1 50:00: I've had a similar experience. After writing a few thousand words, I found the plot stuck, so I gave up. Writing requires a lot of inspiration and patience.

Host 53:00: What are your expectations for the future of online literature? How do you see its development?

Participant 3 55:00: I think the online literature market will continue to grow, especially with more adaptations into movies and games. Web novels will attract even more readers.

Participant 4 58:00: Yes, I think in the future, the themes in web novels will become more diverse, and readers will become more discerning. Authors will need to innovate constantly to retain their readers.

Participant 1 61:00: I agree. Especially with the fierce competition nowadays, authors must work harder to create captivating stories if they want to survive in the industry.

Host 64:00: Have any of you noticed a change in your interest in web novels over time? For example, you might have liked certain types of novels before, but now you're not as into them.

Participant 2 66:00: Yes, a few years ago, I enjoyed reading high school romance novels because they matched my age and life stage. But now that I'm a little older, I find them a bit childish. I prefer more complex plots and deeper characters now, like in suspense or historical novels.

Participant 5 69:00: I've had a similar shift. I used to enjoy fantasy and cultivation novels because they were really exciting. But as time passed, I found that I now prefer

realistic or sci-fi novels, especially those that deal with future technology or space exploration. These novels give me more to think about, beyond just entertainment.

Participant 4 72:00: Yes, I used to like reading romance novels, but now I'm not that interested in them anymore. I'm more drawn to novels that focus on psychology and social issues. Books that explore human nature or social rules seem deeper to me and offer more food for thought.

Host 75:00: It looks like as you've grown, your reading preferences have also changed. Do you think the character development in web novels affects how you view relationships in real life?

Participant 3 77:00: I think it does, to some extent. Sometimes when I read about a character's actions and emotional expressions in a book, it makes me reflect on real-life relationships. I can reassess how I interact with people around me through these fictional characters.

Participant 1 80:00: Yes, especially in novels about friendship or romance, I often reflect on whether I'm like certain characters—maybe not being thoughtful enough in relationships or not expressing my feelings adequately. Although web novels are fictional, they reflect reality in some ways, providing a lot of insight.

Participant 5 83:00: I also feel that through the character development in web novels, I've learned a lot about human relationships. Especially the more complex characters— seeing their internal struggles and growth makes me realize that real-life relationships have similar emotional conflicts and challenges.

Host 86:00: What do you think about the values conveyed through the character development in web novels, especially in the virtual worlds created within them?

Participant 4 88:00: Some of the characters in novels are quite extreme, especially the protagonists in power fantasy novels. They often don't face moral constraints and can

do whatever they want, which might have a negative influence on some readers, particularly younger ones. I think authors should be more careful when creating characters and consider the maturity level of their audience.

Participant 2 91:00: Yes, especially with characters that glorify violence or revenge. While these setups can be fun in novels, if someone tried to handle real-life problems in such a way, the consequences could be disastrous. I think web novels should convey more positive values.

Participant 3 94:00: Of course, web novels are a form of entertainment, but as a cultural phenomenon, they also have a responsibility to promote positive values while entertaining. Characters who work hard to change their fate, for example, can provide readers with a lot of encouragement.

Host 97:00: It seems that everyone has certain expectations for the social responsibility of web novels. What do you think the future direction of web novels will be? Do you think they will develop in a more diverse way?

Participant 1 99:00: I think web novels will become more diverse in the future. Readers are becoming pickier and are no longer satisfied with a single genre. Authors must innovate in both theme and style to capture readers' attention. There might be more cross-media collaborations, like integration with films, games, and even virtual reality.

Participant 5 102:00: I think web novels might become more closely linked with real-world issues, especially in stories that touch on social hot topics. Some authors are already discussing real-world issues like environmental protection and tech ethics in their novels, and I think this is a good trend.

Participant 4 105:00: Yes, web novels aren't just entertainment; they can also be a form of art that reflects reality. I hope to see more thoughtful works in the future—

novels that are both fun to read and make you think.

Host 108:00: Thank you all for sharing. One last question: do you have any suggestions for the future of online literature platforms? What improvements can be made?

Participant 2 111:00: I think platforms should focus more on user experience, especially simplifying the interface and features. Some platforms' user interfaces are too complicated, especially for newcomers, making them not very user-friendly.

Participant 3 114:00: I hope platforms can do more to promote quality content. Right now, there are too many novels that follow repetitive formulas, and truly good works often get buried. I think platforms could implement mechanisms to make excellent works more visible so that more readers can discover them.

Participant 1 117:00: I also hope that platforms can offer more interactive features, like real-time interaction between readers and authors, or even workshops that guide new writers. This would not only enhance reader engagement but also give more opportunities for new authors to showcase their works.

Host 120:00: These are all great suggestions. We'll be sure to take this feedback back and strive to improve our products in the future. Today's discussion has been very meaningful—thank you all for participating. If there are no further questions or comments, we'll wrap up the discussion here.

Participant 4 123:00: Thank you, host. Today's discussion has been very enlightening for me. I look forward to seeing more innovation and development in web literature.

Participant 5 126:00: Yes, I'm excited to see online literature continue to improve, and I hope we'll see more high-quality works emerge.

Host 129:00: Let's continue the discussion for a bit longer. How do you think web literature compares to traditional literature? Why do you prefer reading web novels over

traditional print books or classic literary works?

Participant 1 132:00: For me, web novels update quickly and cover a wide range of genres, which keeps me engaged. Traditional literature is often more serious, requiring more time and mental energy to digest. On the other hand, web novels—especially those with fast pacing and tightly-knit plots—give me instant gratification and help me relax.

Participant 3 135:00: I feel the same way. Web novels move quickly, and the regular updates create a sense of anticipation. In contrast, traditional literature can sometimes feel dry and takes a lot of time to understand and absorb. Plus, web novels are interactive; the comment sections make me feel like I'm part of the reading experience.

Participant 4 138:00: Yes, I really enjoy the interactive aspect of web novels. Often, authors adjust the plot based on reader feedback or even incorporate suggestions from readers. This interaction makes reading feel less solitary and more like a shared experience with other readers and the author.

Participant 2 141:00: Another thing is that the themes in web novels are more in line with modern life. Many of the plots and character settings reflect contemporary social phenomena or issues, which resonates with me. In contrast, while traditional literature has its value, it can sometimes feel disconnected from modern life.

Host 144:00: Do you think it's possible to combine web novels and traditional literature to create a new form of reading? For instance, could we incorporate the depth of classic literature into the fast-paced, accessible format of web novels?

Participant 5 147:00: That sounds interesting. I do think web novels could benefit from drawing some elements from traditional literature, like deeper themes and more complex character development. But for that to happen, authors need to have strong writing skills. Currently, most web novels focus more on entertainment and lack depth,

but that doesn't mean they can't evolve.

Participant 1 150:00: I think it's possible to combine the two. Some authors are already experimenting with writing web novels that tackle more profound subjects, like philosophy, history, or social issues. These novels retain the entertaining aspects of web novels while adding the depth of traditional literature, making them well worth reading.

Participant 3 153:00: Yes, I've noticed that some newer web novels are heading in that direction. Especially long-form novels, where authors have the space to develop more complex relationships and emotions. I think this is a positive development for web literature.

Host 156:00: Do you think the future of web literature will expand more into films and games? We've already seen a number of web novels adapted into TV shows, movies, and even games. What's your opinion on this trend?

Participant 2 159:00: I think it's an inevitable trend. Web novels are highly story-driven, and many are already very cinematic in their plot structure. It makes sense for them to be adapted into films or TV shows. As for games, I think some novels have world-building that would be perfect for large-scale RPGs.

Participant 4 162:00: Yes, I agree. I think more web novels will be adapted into films in the future. This not only brings more people into contact with online literature but also helps the novels themselves develop further. And I think we'll see more cross-media collaborations in the future, with novels, films, and games all interacting to create a comprehensive entertainment experience.

Participant 5 165:00: But I think quality control is important. Some film adaptations stray too far from the original novel, which upsets many book fans. I hope future adaptations can respect the source material more and preserve the essence of the original work.

Participant 3 168:00: Yes, the quality of adaptations is crucial. Fans of the original novels often have a deep emotional connection to the story, and if the adaptation is poorly done, it can damage the novel's reputation. I think authors should be more involved in the adaptation process to ensure that the core of the story isn't lost.

Host 171:00: You've all mentioned film and game adaptations as an important part of the development of web literature. Do you think web literature will go global in the future? For instance, could Chinese web novels be exported to international markets?

Participant 1 174:00: I think it's possible. Some works have already been translated into English and are loved by international readers. Chinese web novels have a unique appeal, especially genres like xianxia (immortal cultivation) and fantasy, which might be a new and exciting experience for foreign readers.

Participant 5 177:00: Yes, especially with works like *The Three-Body Problem*, which has achieved great success internationally. I think we'll see more Chinese web novels being translated and shared globally, allowing the world to see more Chinese stories and culture.

Participant 2 180:00: However, to truly go global, there might need to be more effort in conveying language and culture. Some cultural backgrounds in Chinese web novels might be unfamiliar to foreign readers, so more explanation and cultural exchange may be necessary.

Host 183:00: That's true—cultural differences are a challenge, but they also present opportunities. Do you think web novels should incorporate more international elements to attract more overseas readers in the future?

Participant 4 185:00: I think it's worth trying. Young people today are more open to international culture, and web novels, as a global cultural phenomenon, could attract different readers by incorporating more international elements.

Participant 3 187:00: Yes, especially in genres like sci-fi and fantasy, which already have cross-cultural appeal. If stories include more global elements, such as characters from different cultural backgrounds or global storylines, I think they'd be even more attractive.

Host 189:00: Today's discussion has been very rich, and you've all shared many valuable perspectives. I think we now have a deeper understanding of the future direction of web literature. Thank you all for your participation. If there are no further questions or comments, we'll end the discussion here.

Participant 4 192:00: Thank you, host. This discussion has been very helpful for me as well. I hope to participate in similar discussions in the future.

Participant 5 193:00: Yes, I look forward to seeing more improvements, especially in terms of user experience and content quality.