

# Comparative Analysis of Online Distribution Channels of Publishing Houses in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Case Studies of Motie Books and People's Literature Publishing House (Postprint)

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## Abstract

With the development of Internet technology and the increasing number of Internet users, book distribution is no longer confined to traditional offline channels, and online distribution channels have gradually proliferated. Particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, publishing units have accelerated the deployment of online book distribution channels. While this has expanded the breadth and depth of distribution, it has also increased maintenance costs for publishing units. Therefore, it is particularly important to conduct comparative analyses of various online distribution channels to provide references for the integration of online distribution channels by publishing units.

## Full Text

### A Comparative Analysis of Online Distribution Channels for Publishing Houses in the Context of the Pandemic: A Case Study of Motie Books and People's Literature Publishing House

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## Abstract

With the development of Internet technology and the increasing number of Internet users, book distribution is no longer limited to traditional offline channels, and online distribution channels have gradually multiplied. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, publishing houses have accelerated

their deployment of online book distribution channels. While this expansion has broadened the reach and depth of distribution, it has also increased maintenance costs for publishers. Therefore, conducting a comparative analysis of various online distribution channels to provide a reference for channel integration has become particularly important.

**Keywords:** publishing houses; book distribution; distribution channels; online distribution

## 1. Literature Review

Book distribution constitutes a crucial component of publishing operations, and research on this topic has evolved alongside the growth and transformation of the publishing industry. In today's rapidly developing mobile Internet landscape, book distribution is no longer confined to offline scenarios; online distribution has grown into a mainstream channel that operates in parallel with traditional offline channels. The emergence of COVID-19 has dealt a blow to the real economy, and affected by the pandemic, many publishing houses have devoted greater attention to developing online distribution channels.

### 1.1 Pre-Pandemic Research on Online Book Distribution Channels

Pre-pandemic research on online distribution channels primarily focused on status quo analysis and risk forecasting. Jiang Hongwei and Jia Yanxiang (2012) analyzed the vital role of book sales information collection for publishers, identifying problems such as fragmentation and inconsistency in current practices. They argued that collecting book sales data not only facilitates sales and promotion but also helps publishers improve standardized management, and they examined the function and effectiveness of establishing an online book sales information sharing platform [1]. Li Ying (2015) analyzed book distribution channel risks from both internal and external perspectives, pointing out that developing online bookstore channels like Dangdang, JD.com, and Amazon represents an inevitable trend. Such channels serve not only distribution functions but also provide promotional benefits, though publishers must establish their own online voice to effectively control various risks in network channels [2]. Zhu Jingwen and Yi Jingbo (2015) examined the current situation, problems, and future development trends of China's book distribution enterprises under Internet impact, noting that on platforms like Dangdang and JD.com, books constitute just one product category among many and contribute relatively little to total e-commerce sales, with low-price promotions being the primary marketing strategy for these online bookstores [3]. Zhang Yang (2016) analyzed the status quo of the book distribution industry from a supply chain perspective, proposing future reform and development strategies. The study suggested that enterprises at each node of the supply chain should fully utilize Internet technology to build a comprehensive, unified information management system as technical support to facilitate communication among supply chain enterprises

[4]. Li Donghua (2018) analyzed new changes in book distribution models under network environments, pointing out that online distribution offers diverse channels but cannot interact face-to-face with customers, resulting in relatively poor service experience among various distribution channels. Enterprises can enhance competitiveness by improving user experience in online distribution [5]. Ta Na (2018), using Amazon's bestseller distribution as an example, analyzed future trends in online distribution channels, noting that under the trend of digital reading, online distribution channels have evolved to offer dual purchase channels for both print and e-books, and that multimedia marketing methods promote online distribution channels [6].

### 1.2 Pandemic-Era Research on Online Book Distribution Channels

Research conducted during the pandemic has recognized the necessity for publishing houses to integrate online distribution channels and proposed that publishers should transform toward more refined operations. Wang Zhenhui (2020) noted the contradiction between expanding distribution breadth and depth and cost constraints, arguing that publishing houses must systematically analyze various distribution channels to integrate the most suitable layout, mining their content and brand advantages to increase market share in segmented markets [7]. Meng Yuzhu (2020) analyzed opportunities and challenges facing general book distribution, pointing out that publishing houses have accelerated digital transformation and established digital publishing platforms, making online distribution advantages increasingly prominent. However, insufficient attention remains paid to book distribution, and effective management systems are still lacking, requiring reasonable market layout in the future [8]. Wang Hui (2020) identified problems such as inadequate risk information collection and missing risk response systems in publisher book distribution, arguing that only by formulating appropriate risk management strategies and establishing sound information management and communication mechanisms can publishers better address challenges in book distribution [9].

### 1.3 Characteristics and Shortcomings of Existing Research

Pre-COVID-19 research on online book distribution channels mostly remained at the macro level of status quo analysis and risk prediction, lacking specific case studies. Some studies from this period had begun to notice the effectiveness of using sales data collection to compare online sales channels but failed to propose further solutions. Moreover, as Internet technology evolves rapidly, online distribution channels continue to expand and change, no longer limited to traditional e-commerce platforms. The pandemic has particularly accelerated publishers' deployment of online distribution channels, rendering previous research on online distribution channels outdated. Pandemic-era research has recognized the necessity of integrating distribution channels but has not conducted comparative analyses of the various online distribution channels that publishers have developed. With the growth of mobile Internet, people are exposed

to an increasing number of network platforms and mobile applications, which during pandemic lockdowns provided venues for communication and relaxation while also creating business opportunities. Publishing houses have established online distribution on both traditional e-commerce platforms and emerging social media platforms. While channel integration represents the inevitable future direction, it must still be guided by specific cases that compare various online distribution channels to propose concrete integration solutions.

## 2. Research Objects and Objectives

### 2.1 Research Objects

This study selects two publishing houses as research objects: People's Literature Publishing House and Motie Books. Founded in Beijing in March 1951, People's Literature Publishing House is a national-level professional literary publishing institution that focuses on publishing high-end, high-quality cultural books, striving to comprehensively reflect outstanding literary achievements from China and around the world. With multiple books winning national book awards, it represents the highest level of literary publishing in China. As a representative of traditional established publishers, People's Literature Publishing House has accelerated its layout of online book distribution channels under pandemic impact, deploying not only on traditional e-commerce channels such as Tmall flagship stores, Dangdang, and JD.com self-operated stores, but also on social media platforms including Xiaohongshu, WeChat, and Douyin. Unlike People's Literature Publishing House, Motie Books primarily produces popular reading materials and is China's most influential private popular book company, having created numerous super bestsellers and super IPs. Its Motie Novels imprint focuses on youth romance, film/TV tie-ins, and suspense/mystery novels, maintaining a strong track record of producing ten editions of bestsellers annually. Like People's Literature Publishing House, Motie Books also maintains diverse online book distribution channels. Social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin serve as primary gathering places for young people whose user profiles highly overlap with Motie Books' target audience, functioning both as distribution channels and effective marketing platforms. As a renowned established publisher and China's most influential private book company respectively, these two entities represent different categories of publishers with high industry representativeness and comprehensive online book distribution channel layouts. Using these two publishers as research objects ensures both objectivity and sufficient cases and data for comparative analysis.

### 2.2 Research Objectives

The diversity of online distribution channels provides publishers with more options for channel layout, but simultaneously creates a conflict between broad online channel deployment and cost savings. Theoretically, the broader and deeper the sales channels a publishing institution controls, the wider the distribution network and coverage, enabling more readers to access book information.

However, greater distribution volume also leads to higher costs for first-print production, logistics, shipping, and warehousing [10]. To resolve this dilemma, the most effective approach is to integrate an appropriate online distribution channel layout. Comparing relevant data from publishers' online distribution channels can help identify the most suitable channels and those that should be abandoned, providing case support for publishers' online channel layout.

### 3. Research Approach and Methods

#### 3.1 Research Approach

First, we observe and analyze the layout and distribution of online distribution channels for People's Literature Publishing House and Motie Books, ultimately selecting their online book distribution content on three major traditional e-commerce platforms (Tmall flagship stores, Dangdang, JD.com self-operated stores) and three major social media platforms (Xiaohongshu, Douyin, WeChat) as the primary analysis objects. Second, we identify books common to each publisher across these online distribution channels as cases, collecting relevant comment volumes and sales data as empirical support for comparative analysis of each channel's effectiveness. Finally, we draw conclusions by comparing the best-performing online channels to provide references for publishing houses, mining effective information from consumer comments to propose recommendations for better online distribution channel layout.

#### 3.2 Research Methods

The primary research method is case analysis. First, we classify the online distribution channels common to both publishers: Tmall flagship stores, Dangdang, and JD.com represent traditional e-commerce distribution channels, while Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and WeChat represent social media-based online distribution channels. Since sales data displayed on traditional e-commerce channels only reflects the most recent three months and is not representative, and JD.com does not show specific product sales data, while comment volumes accumulate over longer periods, we use product comment volume as the metric for traditional e-commerce platforms. In contrast, showcase stores on Xiaohongshu and Douyin and WeChat Mini Program stores display total sales volumes, so we use product sales volume as the metric for social media-based online distribution channels.

#### Analysis of Traditional E-Commerce Distribution Channels (Tmall Flagship Stores, Dangdang, JD.com)

We identified the online distribution channels of both publishers on these three platforms, such as the People's Literature Publishing House Tmall flagship store and the Motie Books JD.com self-operated store. We selected 160-250 top-selling books from each publisher on each platform, identified 100 books common to all three platforms, and collected comment volumes for these 100 books

across the three platforms for comparative analysis. Additionally, since consumer negative reviews can also reveal problems, we collected negative reviews while gathering comment volumes.

By comparing comment volumes for the 100 samples across the three platforms for both publishers, we can clearly observe that Dangdang's comment volume is generally higher than that of Tmall flagship stores and JD.com, with the ranking being Dangdang > JD.com > Tmall. The People's Literature Publishing House Tmall flagship store shows a particularly large gap compared to the other two platforms, while Motie Books' Tmall flagship store comment volume is similar to JD.com. These differences relate to the types of books sold. People's Literature Publishing House focuses on high-quality literary works, many of which are expensive boxed sets. Consumers purchasing such books online prioritize quality and safe delivery, thus preferring Dangdang or JD.com self-operated stores with JD Logistics. Motie Books, however, focuses on popular reading materials with a younger target audience that uses Taobao and Tmall flagship stores more frequently.

The figure above shows comment volumes for People's Literature Publishing House's 100 samples, and the figure above shows comment volumes for Motie Books' 100 samples. Consumer negative reviews displayed on e-commerce platforms can also help publishing houses identify problems. Publishers have their own discourse power when facing end customers in the market, which plays a crucial role in controlling various risks in network channels [11]. Promptly addressing problems identified in negative reviews and responding to consumer needs is highly effective for publishers to bridge the distance with consumers and manage risks in online book distribution channels. The following two figures show the main reasons for negative reviews within the 100 samples for both publishers.

The figure shows reasons for negative reviews of People's Literature Publishing House, and the figure shows reasons for negative reviews of Motie Books. From these two figures, we can easily see that logistics, binding, and packaging are the main reasons for negative reviews for both publishers. Logistics-related negative reviews primarily concern slow delivery, shipping errors, and rough handling that damages books. Binding issues include missing pages, loose pages, and improper cutting. Packaging complaints mainly involve simplistic packaging and damaged packaging. Motie Books consumers pay more attention to packaging, as the packaging of popular novels serves as part of the merchandise, with many consumers collecting the airplane boxes used to package novels.

## Analysis of Social Media Online Distribution Channels

We identified the online distribution channels of both publishers on Xiaohongshu, WeChat, and Douyin, such as homepage stores on Xiaohongshu accounts, showcases within Douyin accounts, and WeChat book-purchasing Mini Programs. Observation revealed that both publishers have established online book

distribution channels on all three platforms. We identified books jointly listed by both publishers on the three platforms and analyzed and compared their sales volumes.

The figure shows book sales volumes of both publishers on social media platforms.

## 6. Research Conclusions

### 6.1 Publishers Should Selectively Layout Online Distribution Channels Based on Book Categories

Overall, in traditional e-commerce online book distribution channels, Dangdang and JD.com show significantly higher data than Tmall flagship stores, but the comment volumes of People's Literature Publishing House and Motie Books on Tmall flagship stores differ substantially. This primarily relates to the book categories each publisher specializes in. People's Literature Publishing House focuses on high-quality classic literary works, many sold as expensive boxed sets. When purchasing such books online, consumers prioritize quality and safe logistics, thus preferring Dangdang or JD.com self-operated stores with JD Logistics. Motie Books' bestsellers are mostly novels popular among young people, tied to current hot topics and film/TV adaptations, and come with various exquisite merchandise. With a young target audience, consumers of such books care more about binding aesthetics and the quantity and quality of complimentary merchandise. Since Taobao is also popular among young people and Motie's Tmall flagship store provides better merchandise services, this explains why Motie's Tmall flagship store comment volume exceeds that of People's Literature Publishing House.

Additionally, Douyin is undoubtedly the social media online book distribution channel with the largest sales volume, but the two publishers' sales on Xiaohongshu and WeChat differ. People's Literature Publishing House's WeChat sales exceed its Xiaohongshu sales, while Motie Books' Xiaohongshu sales exceed its WeChat sales. Xiaohongshu is a social media platform with primarily female users, mainly young women, which highly overlaps with the target audience for Motie Books' popular titles. Young female groups enjoy reading novels and are heavy users of the Xiaohongshu platform, naturally preferring to purchase novels on Xiaohongshu. People's Literature Publishing House's audience does not overlap with Xiaohongshu's user base, thus tending to prefer the more authoritative WeChat platform when choosing online book purchasing channels. This demonstrates that different book categories perform differently across various online distribution channels, and publishers should identify platforms with high audience overlap when laying out online distribution channels, conducting distribution with clear priorities to improve efficiency.

## 6.2 Douyin's Prominent Advantages in Social Media Online Distribution Channels

By comparing data from both publishers' social media platform distribution channels, we can see that Douyin's sales volume far exceeds that of Xiaohongshu and WeChat. This is primarily because, compared to WeChat, both Douyin and Xiaohongshu serve as both online book distribution channels and marketing platforms, where reaching users through promotion and marketing can trigger purchases and consumption within the platform. Compared to Xiaohongshu, which focuses on image-text content, Douyin's short-video format better aligns with current information consumption preferences and has a larger audience base. Publishers should pay attention to Douyin when deploying online book distribution channels, integrating book marketing with distribution to shape their brand image while increasing book sales.

## 6.3 Publishers Should Strengthen Consumer Interaction When Laying Out Online Distribution Channels

Offline book purchasing allows face-to-face contact with consumers, better enabling publishers to perceive consumer needs and preferences, while diverse offline purchasing scenarios also add ritual to the book-buying process. However, online book distribution lacks adequate consumer service. While online distribution offers tremendous advantages in terms of convenience, it lacks the personal touch of face-to-face transactions. The bridge between customers and sellers is merely an Internet connection, representing a clear service disadvantage [12]. Online order volumes are larger and more fragmented than offline distribution, lacking systematic organization, making it difficult for publishers to respond promptly to problems arising from consumer purchases. Publishers can integrate consumer interaction into the online book distribution process by responding to and resolving negative reviews in product comment sections and analyzing the main reasons for negative reviews. This not only helps stabilize the consumer base and enhance brand reputation and image but also enables publishers to identify and address their own problems promptly.

## 6.4 Publishers Should Pay Greater Attention to Packaging and Logistics Services for Online Book Distribution

Negative reviews of People's Literature Publishing House and Motie Books on traditional e-commerce book-purchasing platforms cover various aspects, including binding and packaging, with binding, logistics, and packaging ranking as the top three concerns. Among these, binding requires strict quality control on the production line, while logistics and packaging are closely related to book distribution. Analysis of negative reviews from the 100 samples reveals that logistics complaints mainly involve slow delivery, lost packages, and rough handling, with rough handling accounting for the majority. This requires publishers to pay greater attention to book damage during logistics, possibly by communicating with logistics companies in advance or preventing damage through packag-

ing. Packaging complaints primarily involve simplistic, unattractive packaging or improper packaging that fails to prevent transportation damage. Consumers purchasing Motie Books' popular novels pay more attention to packaging aesthetics, with many collecting the airplane boxes used to package novels. Publishers should note this demand when packaging such books, reducing damage to books and merchandise during transportation and improving consumer satisfaction.

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