

## Dissemination Status and Evaluation System of Audiobooks: A Postprint Literature Review of Audiobook-Related Journal Papers

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### Abstract

With the surge in China's internet user population and expanding internet coverage, research on audiobooks by domestic scholars has experienced explosive growth. This study employs journal literature analysis to examine and organize relevant journal articles on audiobooks from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), aiming to comprehend the current state of audiobook research in Chinese academia. Building upon previous studies, this research categorizes contemporary research content into various dimensions, including the definition of audiobooks, audience types, audiobook applications, and narration evaluation systems. By systematically reviewing the current research landscape of audiobooks by domestic scholars and integrating it with the actual development of the present audiobook market, this paper expounds upon existing problems in audiobooks, proposes solutions, and addresses issues concerning audiobook narration evaluation systems. The objective is to provide valuable references for future research on audiobook marketing strategy formulation, product quality standards, brand building, promotional strategies, and narration evaluation systems, thereby further advancing audiobook research in China.

### Full Text

#### The Communication Status and Evaluation System of Audiobooks: A Review of Journal Papers on Audiobooks

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**Abstract:** With the surge in China's internet user population and expanding internet coverage, domestic experts and scholars have produced a torrent of research on audiobooks. This paper employs journal literature analysis to examine and organize relevant journal papers on audiobooks from CNKI, providing insight into the current state of audiobook research in Chinese academia.

Building upon previous studies, this research categorizes contemporary studies into different dimensions, including the meaning of audiobooks, audience types, audiobook apps, and performance evaluation systems. By reviewing the current research status of domestic scholars on audiobooks and combining it with the actual development of the current audiobook market, this paper elaborates on existing problems, solutions, and issues related to audiobook performance evaluation systems. The aim is to provide references for future research on audiobook marketing strategies, product quality standards, brand building, promotional strategies, and audiobook performance evaluation systems, thereby further advancing audiobook research in China.

**Keywords:** audiobooks; audiobook audience; audiobook apps; performance evaluation system

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Traditional audiobooks refer to those accessed by the public through radio, television, accompanying cassette tapes, and CDs, featuring relatively monotonous content and audiences. Traditional audiobooks primarily consisted of English teaching materials and children's books, with audiences correspondingly concentrated among children, visually impaired individuals, and other specific groups, resulting in limited coverage and slow development. With the advent of computers, internet coverage, smart terminals, and rising public demand for reading, new audiobooks have emerged as audio-visual works that use sound as the primary display form, require storage on specific carriers, and are decoded by playback devices for auditory consumption [1]. As the scale of internet users continues to expand and internet penetration rates climb rapidly, new audiobooks have demonstrated diverse and pluralistic development trends in carrier forms, varieties, and content. The daily companion attribute of audiobooks has gradually become a new interest point for the public to acquire knowledge and seek entertainment during "fragmented" time.

However, as audiobook types proliferate endlessly, domestic experts and scholars in China have begun to extend the definition of audiobooks, breaking away from the previous view of audiobooks as mere "recording products." Scholars have summarized audiobooks as "audio-visual works that use sound as the primary display form, require storage on specific carriers, and are decoded by playback devices for auditory consumption," elevating audiobooks to the status of "audio-visual works." Audiobooks represent a new industry that not only satisfies the universal psychological needs of audiences in the digital new media era but also serves as an effective pathway for expanding new markets during the transition from traditional media to intelligent digital new media. To date, China's audiobook market has flourished with thriving growth. However, compared to the 1990s, the pace of development is immeasurable. In this regard, relevant perspectives from Chinese experts and scholars on audiobooks can be summarized into four main aspects.

## 1. The Meaning of Audiobooks

Regarding the definition of audiobooks, the definition provided by the American Audio Publishers Association is recognized by most domestic scholars in China, specifying that it contains no less than 51% text content and is packaged and sold as cassette tapes, compact discs, or pure digital files. This recognition stems from two reasons. First, audiobooks originated during World War II in some European countries and the United States, where they began to replace “visual reading” with “listening books” to provide cultural and spiritual sustenance for soldiers blinded in the war. Fortunately, the United Kingdom established the first national-level “audiobook library” in the 1930s, opening to the general public with “visual reading” difficulties. Since then, it has received strong support from general audiences, and audiobooks have become one of the daily habitual reading methods for the public. Second, economic development levels determine the matching of corresponding cultures. Many families have made cars a necessary means of daily transportation, which has correspondingly led to the public developing the habit of listening to audiobooks while driving, creating an auditory “dependence” on audiobooks.

Given the above, Chinese experts and scholars have not yet reached a unified conclusion regarding the definition of audiobooks. Both the definitions summarized by domestic scholars and the definition by the American Audio Publishers Association have certain limitations. The author argues that, first, defining audiobooks as “recording/audio-visual works” is outdated. Against the backdrop of new media and self-media development, various audio formats emerge endlessly, including “record-first-broadcast-later” and “live streaming” formats. More excitingly, hosts and listeners can engage in real-time interaction, narrowing the distance between communicators and audiences. Second, audiobook themes are rich and diverse, including outdoor live streaming, “voice book works,” storytelling, skits, talk shows, and other abundant audio products. The reason why a consensus on the definition of audiobooks has not been reached lies in their diversity and breadth. Therefore, future research on audiobooks should conduct scientific and meticulous categorization based on audio work types, different audience needs, and different audience experiences.

## 2. Audiobook Audience Classification

Audiobooks belong to “auditory spiritual and cultural products,” reflecting social functions that enrich audiences’ spiritual and cultural lives and economic functions that generate profits for publishing (group) companies and cultural (group) companies. Currently, Chinese experts and scholars have summarized the classification of audiobook audiences into two major categories.

The first category comprises people who have specific free time but lack conditions for text reading [2]. With continuously improving economic strength, urban modernization construction, higher quality of life, population growth, and traffic congestion, various office workers have increased their idle time spent

squeezing onto buses, subways, and waiting in cars. Activities such as watching short videos, reading online novels, playing mobile games, and browsing blogs, Weibo, WeChat, and friend circles have exhausted available time for the eyes, but the ears are different—they have “development” potential. The second category refers to people with deficient text reading abilities. Most researchers and scholars in China recognize this classification, noting that such groups include children, the elderly, and visually impaired populations. Due to the weak text reading abilities of the elderly, children, and visually impaired individuals, they primarily obtain relevant information through listening to audiobooks. With the rapid development of the era and ubiquitous networks, audiobooks will have even broader development prospects in the future.

Based on the above research, we can conclude that current Chinese academic research on audiobook audience classification stagnates at the stage of how to classify audiences and into which categories, lacking detailed relevant data on users’ listening content, preferences, duration, and feedback on their listening experience. The main reasons are as follows: domestic audiobook platforms, considering the protection of platform user data privacy and maintenance of their core competitiveness, generally do not disclose relevant data to the public. This causes scholars and experts to lack accurate and reliable relevant data materials during research. China has a vast territory, audio programs are instantaneous, and users utilize them frequently. Research on audiences can only conduct data analysis and statistics on users in a certain region, unable to provide comprehensive and extensive data, leading to difficulties in researching audiobook content, audio production, audience needs, and feedback.

### 3. Audiobook Apps

The development and progress of audiobook projects have proceeded unimpeded because policy dividends provide guarantees. According to relevant media reports, in 2016, the Ministry of Finance’s special fund for supporting the development of cultural industries reached 4.42 billion yuan, benefiting 944 cultural industries—nearly 100 more than in 2015. The audiobook field both meets application standards and possesses tremendous market development potential, receiving attention from all levels and sectors of the state.

With the rising number of multi-functional smartphone users, the great development of internet technology, and continuous innovation in smart terminal technology, the audiobook market has gradually emerged [6]. The public has shifted their medium for obtaining information and entertainment from traditional paper and TV broadcasting media to smartphones, making mobile audio an essential element. First, regarding content production for audiobook apps, Chinese scholars and experts divide audiobook content production subjects into “content producers” and “platform operators,” which can be further subdivided into UGC (User-generated Content) and PGC (Professionally-generated Content).

Second, regarding app profit models, domestic audiobook app profit models mainly fall into three categories. The first category is content payment. In the social media era, the “celebrity effect” plays a decisive role. The representative is Luo Zhenyu’s “Luo Ji Si Wei,” characterized by producing large amounts of excellent programs to attract a massive loyal audience, turning loyal audiences into members. Membership provides priority benefits, including shared good books and articles, as well as organizing offline meetups and fan gatherings. The second category is advertising push [3]. To achieve mutual benefits and win-win situations between audiobook app platforms and sponsoring merchants, precise advertising must be delivered based on effective data, thereby simultaneously improving accuracy, reach rates, and product sales. The third category is developing smart hardware [4]. Ximalaya FM has taken cooperation with hardware manufacturers to the extreme, developing various devices such as reading pens, story machines, and in-vehicle “walkman” smart hardware. They have developed their own smart chips, which when installed in commonly used furniture and home appliances, enable those appliances to have audio playback functions. Successfully developed smart products now include refrigerators, lamps, and so on.

Based on the above academic research, we find that research methods on audiobook app operation models are relatively singular. The possible reasons are that, first, work quality needs improvement, and second, promotional strategies are inadequate.

Given the 梳理 of the above research status, the author predicts the future development direction of the audiobook market: first, content is king; second, knowledge payment will become mainstream. For example, Ximalaya’s content polishing focuses on three aspects: hosts, IP resources, and basic content. The platform provides detailed introduction to host growth systems while offering recording guidance and operational promotion strategies, effectively driving the entry and growth of audio hosts and providing guarantees for high-quality content output. From three levels—funding, traffic, and entrepreneurship incubation—it comprehensively supports audio content entrepreneurs. This strategy sufficiently demonstrates that host cultivation has become key to precipitating high-quality content. In addition, cooperating with multi-field manufacturers offline and implanting content into more hardware, including audio equipment, smart homes, and automobiles. Ximalaya FM continuously expands its market boundaries through deep content cultivation and multi-scenario access. Nowadays, it is no longer a pure mobile audio service provider but a full-scenario entertainment platform with audio as the main form. In the future, if more resources intervene, Ximalaya may transform into a comprehensive platform with multiple content forms, including text, video, audio, etc. Comprehensiveness means multi-industry cross-cooperation, covering publishing, media, entertainment, smart hardware, and more fields. We can easily see that Ximalaya FM’s market space is larger than that of single mobile audio. According to a *21st Century Business Herald* report, Ximalaya’s platform has reached 470 million activated users, with at least another 300 million user space yet to be explored.

As multi-functional smartphone user volume increases, Ximalaya' s user scale will continue to grow.

#### 4. Performance Evaluation System

Audiobooks are imported products. Audiobooks began to be issued in China in the 1990s. With the great development of the internet and the emergence of smart terminals, people' s possibilities for obtaining knowledge and seeking entertainment through audiobooks have increased. The user population of audiobooks is primarily male, with users under 30 accounting for more than half, indicating a trend of younger future users. Zeng Zhihua points out that analyzing from the perspective of audiobook performance alone, problems exist such as chaotic and arbitrary creative titles, overly casual and low thresholds, uneven performance levels, and rough and vacant evaluation standards. She simultaneously proposes that the value of text content and the level of performance quality are important factors in audiobook evaluation, and that audiobooks are a complex integrating cultural, material, artistic, communicative, and knowledge attributes. Consequently, she outlines Table 1 –Evaluation Indicators for Audiobook Performance Systems.

To date, no consensus has been reached on the audiobook performance evaluation system. However, Zeng Zhihua and Lu Bin in their article “Research on the Construction of China' s Audiobook Performance Evaluation System” (*Modern Communication*, 2018, Issue 7) provide recommendations: “First, establish a professional audiobook performance committee under the guidance of ministries and commissions such as the National Press and Publication Administration and the National Radio and Television Administration in accordance with relevant regulations. Second, regularly hold annual audiobook award activities. Third, implement the audiobook performance evaluation system in audiobook production and dissemination institutions. Fourth, stimulate producers' creative enthusiasm and guide and encourage more audiobook works to improve their ability and level of innovation and excellence” [5]. This work is systematic, artistic, professional, and highly operational, requiring the improvement of relevant procedures, methods, and content of the comprehensive evaluation system in audiobook performance practice.

Therefore, to make the performance evaluation system applicable and scientific, comprehensive and scientific evaluation indicators are needed as guidance. Chinese research scholars have devoted painstaking efforts and achieved fruitful results in audiobook research. CNKI contains a total of 604 journal papers on audiobooks, with the earliest being Liu Zhaoqing' s paper titled “Audiobooks Are Popular in the United States” published in the *International Problem Materials* journal on May 25, 1981, which opened the precedent for audiobook research in China. As of August 2020, China' s audiobook research has focused on audiobook definitions and audience classification, audiobook marketing, development, measures to address various problems, and audiobook development and construction. Research on audiobook marketing strategies, product quality

standards, brand building, promotional strategies, and audiobook performance evaluation systems remains to be further explored. However, gratifyingly, since 2018, journal paper research on audiobooks has begun to focus on children, though audiobooks developed for the blind are few. Many papers have been published from the producer's perspective, while aspects such as audience listening satisfaction, what content is needed, and what strategies can be used to make more people use audiobooks require greater attention. In summary, papers that raise questions about audiobooks are plentiful, while those that truly solve problems are scarce. How to make this imported product of audiobooks better conform to China's national conditions and bear abundant fruit on Chinese soil requires further research.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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