

To Explore the Reasons of the Surge in Sales of Picture Books during the COVID-19 Pandemic in China

Wangbei Tu^{1*}, Kavitha Ganesan², Rose Patsy Tibok², Erlong Tang³

¹Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia /Anqing Normal University, China

²Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

³Anqing Normal University, China

*Corresponding Author.

Abstract:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shutting down of schools and offices, and the enforcement of home quarantine and other measures have led to an increase in digital online reading, which has boosted digital publishing. However, several studies have reported that more “screen exposure” time might lead to higher rates of abnormal psychological problems in preschool children's mood, conduct, attention, peer interaction and other aspects. In China, as a response to this perceived risk and reduce screen exposure among preschool children, families, society and the publishing industry have concentrated promoting printed picture books in these ways: parent-child reading of picture books in the family; storytelling, performance and other promotional activities in public and private libraries; and audible platforms promoted by the publishing industry and We-media.

Keywords: *Picture book, Screen exposure, Digital, Audible platform.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the digital age has changed human life style and cognition. The global spread of COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of all industries, and traditional industries are facing great challenges. However, print sales, especially of children's picture books, have witnessed an unprecedented surge during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Data released by the Jingdong website showed that children's picture books saw a sharp increase with a year-on-year growth of 145% during the half day on June 18th, 2020, which was an online shopping feast in China. During the pre-sale period of the Jingdong website on November 11th, (another online shopping feast) in 2020, the sale of children's picture books increased by 8 times compared to 2019. According to Open Book Data of 2021, book sales in

the Chinese retail book market in the first half of 2021 were up 11.45% compared to the same period in 2020. Children's books which are heavily promoted through short videos on ecommerce platforms, were the largest sales channel and accounted for 58.5% of total sales. Through the investigation on the reading styles of Chinese preschoolers during the pandemic period, this paper intends to identify the reasons for the surge in sales of picture books in China.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Literature Review Method

In order to reduce contact and gathering of people during the COVID-19 pandemic, the enforcement of school and office closure, and other measures, have led to a surge in international reading demand and digital online reading has been unprecedentedly active. According to Amazon China's "2020 National Reading Report", 46% of readers chose to read both paper books and e-books in 2020, and 29% chose e-books as their main reading medium, accounting for 6% increase compared to 2019. The trend has also doubled children's screen time. 47% of preschool children spent more than 4 hours a day on the electronic screen in the province of Anhui, China[1].

Neil Postman[2] believed that the concept of "children" did not exist naturally, but came into being with the development of human civilization. With the spread of electronic media, childhood is "disappearing at a dazzling speed". Since then, scholars have begun to pay attention to the effects of screen exposure on children's physical and mental development. Although digital reading has the advantages of convenience and large storage, more screen exposure time is likely to lead to an increased rate of abnormal psychological problems in emotion, conduct, attention, peer communication and other aspects of children, especially preschool children. Wang X.'s group investigated the screen exposure of children aged 3-6 among 504 parents, and found the screen exposure resulted in abnormal detection rates of emotional symptoms (10.3%), conduct problems(25.8%), hyperactivity inattention(19.0%), peer communication(24.4%), prosocial behavior(11.1%) and total difficulty score were 15.7%[3]. Liu M. & Hua J. concluded through investigation that electronic screen exposure not only had a negative impact on children's sleep quality, time and rhythm, but also brought about negative influence on children's physical activity and motor coordination ability[4,5].

Picture book is a special style of children's literature, an art form combining words and pictures. The storytelling of picture books is completed by picture and words. *Orbis Sensualium Picturs* by Johannes Amos Comenius in 1658, was recognized as the first picture

book in the world. Picture, words, and narrative are three basic elements of picture books. The rich expression of the three elements and the various cooperation between each other constitute the diversified artistic features of picture books. The categories include illustrated story book, wordless picture book, game book and book for babies. According to the media, picture book could be divided as print picture book, digital picture book and audible picture book. In line with children's emotions, aesthetics and thinking mode, picture books were recognized as the most suitable books for children to read and promoted the healthy development of children with the exaggerated imagination, childlike strokes and perspective.

Cao D. pointed out that reading picture books was conducive to promote children's cognitive, emotional, social development and parent-child relationship[6]. Through previous literature research, Zhou J. & Liu J. found that picture book reading played a positive role in promoting children's academic, social, physical and emotional self-concept[7]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, families, society and publishing industry strive to rely on picture books to combat the harm of electronic media to children and build a three-dimensional reading promotion system to ensure the healthy development of children's body and mind.

2.2 Questionnaire Method

Preschool children are the children who have not yet reached school age. In the world, the age of children to start school varies from country to country, generally 6 or 5 years old. Therefore, the age limit for preschool children is not the same. The school age of children in China is 6 years old, so the preschool children in this study are 3 to 6 years old.

In this paper, the author designed two questionnaires for parents of preschoolers (3-6 years old) and employees of picture book libraries, and collected information through www.wjx.cn (an online questionnaire website in China).

In the questionnaire for parents, the following information were collected: the gender, age of the child, the location of the family, the ways to obtain picture books, the children's preference of the functions of picture books, the reading style and situation in family, and who had the real option to choose picture books. The second questionnaire investigated the information of public and private picture book libraries, like the location, the popularity of theme of picture books, and the relevant promotion activities.

A total of 263 feedbacks from parents and 78 from library employees were collected. The majority of participants were from Anhui, and some from Hunan, Ningxia, Shanghai, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and other provinces in China, except Xinjiang and Tibet. Generally, the

feedbacks covered the eastern, central and western parts of China, subjectively reflecting the reading situation of children in China to a certain extent.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the feedback, it was found that the vigorous development of picture books in China during the epidemic was mainly due to the following reasons:

3.1 Parent-child Reading in Families

3.1.1 The necessity of parent-child reading

According to the feedback, 89.4% of parents prefer reading picture book to electronic screen with the purpose of acquiring knowledge and entertainment. The main forms of reading were parent-child reading (61.7%) and independent reading (24.1%). Parent-child reading refers to the activity in which parents and children read, discuss, communicate and share reading materials in a cooperative way. It is the most important way of reading for preschool children.

To achieve the purpose of coordination, the sender of information (the parent) uses the interpersonal attraction of "similarity" as the intermediary to identify with the audience (the children) through communication[8]. Communication is an interactive process to maintain interpersonal relationship. The audience has common identity and interaction with the sender. Parent-child reading is essentially the interaction between the opinion leader audience and the non-opinion leader audience. With picture books as the link, parent-child reading can consolidate parent-child relationship, deepen mutual understanding and prevent the occurrence of parent-child interaction problem.

3.1.2 The influence of dual audience

Preschool children's reading, understanding and expression skills are still in the learning stage, self-awareness also needs to be further strengthened, so the reading activity should be completed under the guidance of adults. However, this also leads to the silent status of children in the process of reading. According to "two-step flow theory", the transmission of information is carried out in accordance with the two-steps mode of "media-opinion leader-audience"[9]. In real life, there is dual targeted audience when parent and child read picture books together, and the choice of picture books belongs to parents who act as the opinion leader audience in this situation. As a non-opinion-leader audience, children have been silent and ignored for a long

time.

The different opinions of parents and children as the audience have certain guiding significance for the publishing, management and even creation among the practitioners of picture books. As the table 1 shows, when parents choose picture books, they mainly focus on the functions of education (68.2%), knowledge (49.5%), rarely on entertainment (17.6%), while children mainly consider the factors of interest (86.7%) more and knowledge (25.4%) when choosing picture books in table 2.

Table I. The most important functions for parents when choosing picture books

Rank	Function	Rate
1	Moral Education	68.2%
2	Knowledge	49.5%
3	Personality Building	37.6%
4	Habit Fostering	31.2%
5	Language Training	30.4%
6	Imagination & Creativity	28.1%
7	Entertainment	17.6%

Table II. The most important functions for children when choosing picture books

Rank	Function	Rate
1	Fun & Interests	86.7%
2	Peer Interaction	57.3%
3	Oral and Written Expression	36.1%
4	Knowledge	25.4%

To improve the sales, all practitioners of writing, publication and sales take parents' preferences as the reference standards. The themes of many picture books for children are love, death, sex, etc., which children cannot understand. Publishers use words such as "master", "classic" and "award" to attract parents to buy them. Translators also use words such as "examination, communication", which children cannot understand [10]. In the survey, 67.33% of the owners of picture book shops would recommend books to parents, which also proves the overwhelming advantage of parents over children when choosing picture books. However, 72% of parents in the survey also consider their children's acceptance when choosing children's books, which identifies the importance of interaction between parents and children through parent-child reading.

3.2 Professional Promotion by Libraries

3.2.1 The increase of private picture book libraries

The libraries' reading promotion activities aim at cultivating children's reading interest and habits, guiding children's language development, and forming lifelong self-education. The reading promotion model based on picture books has become a global trend, and the children's reading promotion activities of public and private libraries in China are also in full swing. According to the survey, renting books from library (37.8%) is an importance way to get picture books, which shows that public and private libraries play an important role in the promotion of picture books. 58.3% of the parent participants mentioned that independent children's library has been separated from the public library in their cities, and independent reading promotion teams have been formed to carry out children's reading promotion activities.

What's more, with the policy of "second-child" was issued in 2016 and the popularity of picture books, the reading demand of picture books has outstripped the capacity of public libraries. Hence, private picture book libraries have sprung up across China with a momentum to overtake public libraries. In the survey of library employees, 26.7% of the participants worked public libraries and 63.6% in self-employed picture books. The public and private libraries are the heavy buyers of the picture books. 38.2% of private libraries and 21.9% of public libraries have a collection of over 10000 books, and purchased new books regularly. To a certain extent, the number and market share of private picture book libraries in China have formed a certain scale.

3.2.2 The Respective Advantages of Public and Private Picture Book Libraries

As the leading force of reading promotion activities, libraries should actively carry out all kinds of promotion activities. The traditional concept of early reading aims at helping reader to foster three abilities: the ability to read words, to connect words with hearing, and to understand. Accordingly, the storytelling is the traditional reading promotion mode when an adult uses books to explain to preschool children to help children understand the content of books. It is still popular now, accounting for 38.2% of the promotion activities in public libraries and 21.6% in private picture book libraries.

After the theory of "experience is the education" promoted by Prof. Liu Jingduo in China, "experiential education" developed vigorously. "Experiential education" advocates experience-centered learning mode and focuses on students' living world and unique needs to promote harmonious development of students' cognition, emotion, attitude and skills[11].

Immersive experiential education brings new ideas and perspectives to the promotion of picture books and produces more colorful forms of activities. In addition to storytelling events, private libraries also offered arts and crafts (15.3%), theater performance (16.7%), cooking education (13.8%), and other experiential activities (11.4%).

However, public libraries have strong official resources in terms of funds, personnel and cooperation channels, showing strong appeal and influence in organizing competitions (14.2%) and large gatherings (10.8%). Compared with public libraries, private picture libraries are more diversified in book promotion activities with richer forms and more intensive frequency, which has certain advantages to meet the diverse needs of parents and children.

3.3 Audible Transformation by the Websites

3.3.1 Children became the largest audience of audio books.

The progress and popularization of technology has provided fertile ground for the audio book market. With the popularity of smartphones, smartwatches, smart speakers and other smart devices, listening to books becomes a favorite way of life. The advantages of audio books have been brought into full play and developed rapidly during the pandemic, when policies such as home quarantine have increased the demand for children, leading to a surge of audible websites and apps. In the survey, 73.4% of parents would choose audio stories as an extension of picture books for their children on various platforms. Children and teenagers have become the largest audience for audio books. According to the 18th National Reading Survey Report released by The Chinese Academy of Press and Publication on April 24, 2021, 31.6% of Chinese adults listened to books in 2020, and 32.5% of minors aged 0-17 listened to books, with the highest reading rate among those aged 0-8, which is up to 33.5% .

3.3.2 The difference of content production

Audio book production modes are generally divided into PGC (Professionally -Generated Content) and UGC (User Generated Content). The difference between the two production models lies in the way content is produced, whether it is professionally or user-led. In the survey, the most popular audible platform is "Kai Shu Story", which also the only platform is focusing on PGC model, as it showed in table 3. In the four years since its establishment, "Kai Shu Story" has broadcast more than 8,000 stories, with a total broadcast volume of more than 3.4 billion times and a total playing time of 267 million hours, equivalent to 30,479 years, with more than 20 million users. It is recommended as "the complete Collection of Chinese children's stories and a parenting treasure for hundreds of millions of parents" (cited from its

official website). Based on the excellent content, especially of Chinese traditional literature works, the platform attracts huge users, and its product system includes training course, derivative hardware and publications.

Table III. Parents' favorite platforms of audible picture books

Name	Rate	Content generation model
Kai Shu Story”	30.7%	PGC
Ai Er Du Du	12.4%	PGC+UGC
Himalaya	23.9%	UGC
Dragonfly FM	18.5%	PGC+UGC
Penguin FM	8.9%	PGC+UGC
Others	5.6%	

Whether PGC or UGC, content is the key factor in the development of audio books, picture books provides ample content sources to the development of audio book. At the same time, relying on the diverse, interactive, convenient digital platform, picture books realized the digital transformation to develop the trend of diversification, socialization and modernity.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Through the online questionnaires, this paper investigates the reasons of sharp increase of picture books sales in the pandemic. In order to reduce screen exposure of preschool children, families, libraries and online media jointly promote picture book reading. As a result, during the pandemic period, the sales of picture books in China surged and children's audio book platforms developed rapidly. The extraordinary surge of sales of print picture books in China during the pandemic reveals the responsibility, attitude and rationality of parents, industry and the whole society. It is worth noting that the digital transformation of picture books is not in visual form, but in auditory form. Audio picture books have the advantages of digitalization, while avoiding the potential harm of screen exposure, and are the ideal form of digital transformation for preschool children. At present, the development and research of audio books are still in the exploratory stage, which is worth further study.

However, there are some limitation of the survey, which only focus on the 3-6 years old preschool children, and the 0-3 years old children have not been covered. Considering the participants living region, majority of them are urban residents, and rural children and parent participation is not high, so this survey cannot fully reflect the rural children's reading situation during the epidemic period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by The Humanities and Social Science Key Research Project in Colleges and Universities of the Department of Education of Anhui Province (No. SK2018A0316).

REFERENCES

- [1] Dai YY, Ye HS, et al. (2020) Study on the Factors Influencing the Screen Time of Children Aged 3 - 6 in Anhui Province during the COVID-19, *Journal of Anhui Normal University (Natural Science)*. 43(6): 607-612
- [2] POSTMAN N, Translated by Y.WU (2004) *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Guangxi Normal University Press. 15
- [3] Wang XN, Du W, et al. (2021) Screen Exposure and Mental Health of Preschoolers during the COVID-19. *Chinese Journal of Health Psychology*. 29(4): 564-568
- [4] Liu M, Hua J (2021) Research progress on the effects of electronic screen exposure on children's sleep. *Chinese Journal of Child Health* 2021(2): 18-23
- [5] Liu M, Hua J (2021) Research progress on the effect of electronic screen exposure on children's exercise. *Chinese Journal of Child Health*. (3): 30-36
- [6] Cao D (2017) The Influence of Picture Book Reading on Children's Development. *Journal of Nanchang University of Education*. 2017(6): 29-35
- [7] Zhou J, Liu J (2020) The Influence of Picture Book Reading on Self-concept of 3-6 Years Old Children -- Based on Literature Analysis. *Educational Academic Monthly*. (7): 54-60
- [8] Tong QY (2013) *Audience Research*. Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press. 6
- [9] Yang R (1994) *Modern Advertising Book*. Liaoning People's Publishing House. 173
- [10] Tang EL, Tu WB, (2017) On the Translation of Children's Picture Books in the Context of Dual Audience. *Journal of Suzhou University*. (12): 60-62
- [11] Zhao Y (2002) *Experience Education*. China Youth Press. 35