

Enhancing User Stickiness in Digital Reading Platforms from an Interactive Marketing Perspective: A Case Study of Tomato Novel

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Abstract. In the rapidly evolving digital reading market, Tomato Novel—a core platform under ByteDance—faces the critical challenge of improving user stickiness. This study explores the current status and issues of Tomato Novel in terms of user engagement, real-time feedback, personalized recommendations, and sense of community belongingness from an interactive marketing perspective. Findings reveal improvement opportunities in Tomato Novel's interactive features, feedback mechanisms, personalized algorithms, and community culture. For instance, its comment and rating systems lack interactivity, feedback channels are obscure, personalized recommendation accuracy needs enhancement, and strategies to foster community belongingness are ineffective. To address these, the study proposes: integrating with platforms like Douyin to elevate user interaction; leveraging AI to optimize feedback mechanisms; refining personalized recommendation algorithms for precision; and adopting WeChat Reading's 'Co-Reading' feature to create a Tomato-Douyin user book circle, thereby strengthening community ties. These actionable pathways offer key strategies for Tomato and other digital reading platforms to optimize interactive marketing.

Keywords: Interactive marketing, Online literature, User stickiness, Tomato Novel, Digital reading

1. Introduction

In today's digitally driven society, the digital reading market's rapid growth has created a homogenized competitive landscape. As ByteDance's flagship platform, Tomato Novel must differentiate itself to attract consumers and enhance user stickiness—a pivotal strategic focus. Over the past decade, Chinese reading app research has primarily targeted platforms like Fangshu, WeChat Reading, Yuewen Group, Yuedu APP, Duokan Reading, and Baidu Literature (7Cat Novel). Studies span diverse directions: Wang Ailian and Feng Rui reviewed interactive marketing theories in the big data era [1]; Liang Shaobo and Li Jinling investigated user migration behaviors in mobile digital reading platforms [2]; and Zheng Fangqi et al. employed Perceived Affordance Theory to evaluate platform interfaces, constructing a 14-criterion framework for comparing NetEase Cloud Reading and QQ Reading [3].

However, despite this diversity, existing research lacks in-depth exploration of user stickiness enhancement pathways for Tomato Novel specifically from an interactive marketing lens. This study aims to fill that gap by applying interactive marketing theory to analyze Tomato's current user stickiness strategies, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and proposing targeted optimizations.

The study will address the following research questions (structured as thematic sections in the body):

1. What interactive features and methods currently exist for Tomato users, and how can they be expanded to boost participation and stickiness?
2. How effective are Tomato's real-time feedback mechanisms for user engagement, and what optimizations are needed?
3. How does Tomato deliver personalized services, and where can algorithmic improvements enhance user experience?
4. Has Tomato successfully cultivated a brand community culture? What is the strength of user belongingness, and how can it be strengthened?

Methodologically, this study employs case and comparative analysis of Tomato's interactive marketing model, examining features like comment systems and ad strategies. By comparing Tomato with WeChat Reading, Pop Mart, and Bilibili, it identifies improvement opportunities in user interaction and community building. Quantitative data contextualizes Tomato's market performance. This research provides practical stickiness-enhancement strategies for Tomato and other digital reading platforms, amplifying traffic and market competitiveness while offering insights for ByteDance's ecosystem optimization.

2. User stickiness analysis

2.1. Analysis of Tomato Novel's user stickiness issues from the "user participation" perspective

Tomato Novel has achieved remarkable compound annual growth rates in user scale and stickiness in previous years, but its subsequent momentum has waned [4]. The reason why mobile reading APPs have achieved rapid development is mainly that they conform to the development trend of the 'digital economy'. Mobile reading platforms have taken the lead in the field of digital reading by virtue of their own advantages. However, as users' reading deepens, their requirements for the content quality of mobile reading platforms and their demand for platform function services are constantly increasing [5]. Free-reading platforms primarily offer extensive reading resources at no cost, quickly attracting significant user segments previously excluded by low payment willingness. As free-reading platforms proliferate and user options expand, ensuring a stable user base for sustainable growth presents a challenge for all such platforms [6]. Therefore, it is very necessary for the platform to analyze the factors affecting user stickiness and growth rate and adopt optimization strategies.

2.2. Analyzing Tomato's user stickiness from a "real-time feedback" perspective

Examining the visual design and placement of the feedback and help interface in the Tomato Novel app (as shown in the figure above), we find that user feedback icons are concealed in inconspicuous locations. Survey results show that consumers rarely utilize the feedback and help functions. Considering consumer reading habits, users seldom complete questionnaire-style feedback for books they dislike. This analysis reveals that Tomato Novel's feedback function is both hidden and complex, making its design unfriendly to users. Additionally, Tomato Novel lacks online customer

service for real-time assistance and fails to implement measures like “Feedback and Suggestions” pop-up windows in book comment sections to provide readers with convenient channels for submitting suggestions.

2.3. Analysis of Tomato Novel’s user stickiness issues from the “personalization” perspective

Yin Xicheng, Li Jing, and colleagues, through their research on advertising in short-video platforms, found that leveraging moments of user distraction to deliver ads in short-form videos (SFVs) provides a novel touchpoint for attracting potential consumers. Short-video platform ads primarily capture user attention by triggering their willingness to delay ad closure, thereby reducing defensive judgments toward ads and stimulating latent passive demand [7].

Advertising serves as one of the primary revenue streams for the Tomato Novel platform. As a successful free-reading app, Tomato has adopted an in-book ad strategy combining mandatory viewing with skip options: users encounter an ad every 10–30 pages of reading, with a mix of non-skippable and skippable ads. Additionally, the shopping interface accessed via in-book ads features relatively low-priced products, achieving the dual goal of ad delivery and traffic diversion. In practice, however, the frequency of ad loading on Tomato falls into a precarious middle ground—between the threshold of “user intolerance” and the requirement to “meet minimum ad exposure duration standards.” Users in this middle segment, while annoyed by mandatory ads, often choose one of three paths: enduring the semi-free reading experience (accepting ads without switching platforms), immediately abandoning Tomato for other entertainment options, or compromising by subscribing to a membership (averaging nearly ¥1/day) to remove ads. Given that this profit mechanism is unlikely to change in the short term, the method of ad delivery becomes critically important, with an optimal approach ensuring that ad placement does not negatively impact user growth or stickiness.

A significant portion of Tomato authors’ income derives from direct ad sponsorships and partnerships with advertisers. However, observational research reveals a longstanding issue: a subset of ads commissioned by Tomato authors are aesthetically unappealing, poorly produced, and fail to generate browsing interest—some even border on vulgarity, contain inappropriate content, or display visually discomforting imagery. Specific examples of non-compliant ads include: pick-up artist slogans, gaming ads promoting gender antagonism, gaming ads featuring unattractive character designs, foot-care ads showing diseased feet, and pest-control ads displaying cockroach eggs. While Tomato’s official team has recently made rapid improvements to mitigate these issues, the platform still struggles to ensure that all ads are visually pleasing and unlikely to cause reader discomfort.

Beyond ad quality, for digital reading platforms, delivering personalized recommendations through refined algorithms is another critical factor in enhancing user stickiness—a challenge that remains unresolved even for top-tier apps, including Tomato.

2.4. Analysis of Tomato Novel’s user stickiness issues from the “community belongingness” perspective

2.4.1. Comparative analysis with WeChat Reading

Yang Zhao, Xie Dan, and colleagues emphasized the importance of enhancing application usability and accessibility, continuously iterating system updates in response to dynamic user needs, and improving product performance through technological upgrades [8]. Among existing “community

belongingness” marketing success stories, several strategies merit adoption by the Tomato Novel app.

For instance, WeChat Reading has successfully built a tightly-knit reading community by leveraging social interaction and user-generated content (UGC), thereby strengthening user belongingness and interactivity. The platform inherently incorporates social features, enabling users to view friends’ reading activities, book reviews, and recommendations, as well as engage in discussions. Furthermore, WeChat Reading has developed a “Co-Reading” function, allowing users to read the same book with friends while sharing real-time progress and insights. This feature not only fosters deeper user interaction but also boosts engagement and community identity.

WeChat Reading’s community-building is further amplified by its integration with the broader WeChat ecosystem, which facilitates user interaction and personalized feature development. In contrast, Tomato Novel has yet to introduce a “social reading” or “co-reading” function linked to Douyin’s (TikTok’s) social capabilities. This represents a critical area for improvement, as leveraging Douyin’s vast social network could similarly enhance Tomato’s community cohesion.

2.4.2. Comparative analysis with Pop Mart

Pop Mart’s official Douyin account employs high-frequency “live-selling” streams—showcasing products while selling them—making its broadcasts nearly omnipresent on the platform. Users can access these streams by clicking on the account’s profile. Beyond persistent live-streaming, Pop Mart’s official account also releases short videos (e.g., “Bubble Theater” skits, host vlogs, behind-the-scenes content, DIY workshops, and new product launches) to stimulate user participation and emotional resonance [9].

Such “live-accompaniment” marketing, a component of Pop Mart’s interactive strategy, aims to increase brand visibility, enhance activity, and deepen consumer interaction. In comparison, Tomato Novel maintains minimal presence on short-video and live-streaming platforms like Douyin, resulting in weak exposure and marketing impact.

To address this, Tomato could expand its presence on live-streaming platforms by launching “Tomato Book Live” sessions to promote high-quality books and strengthen its brand identity. Customized production tailored to the unique characteristics of live-streaming channels and consumer preferences has become an inevitable trend in “knowledge commerce” (i.e., selling educational or cultural products via live-streams). Leading publishing houses have already begun creating book selections and content specifically for live-stream audiences. For example, Huawen Publishing House designed *One Hundred Years of the Forbidden City* exclusively for historian Yan Chongnian’s Douyin live-stream audience. This initiative not only attracted significant fan participation in the book’s online launch event but also led to the rapid sell-out of 1,000 signed copies of the original-priced book [10].

Building on this trend, “Tomato Book Live” could offer exclusive products and invite renowned authors, internet celebrities, and influencers to interact with viewers during broadcasts. While many celebrities (e.g., Liu Yan, Liu Tao, and Wong Cho-lam) and guest stars have joined live-streaming sales, such collaborations often generate only transient traffic and revenue, failing to cultivate stable user loyalty or sustainable business models. In contrast, Key Opinion Leader (KOL)-driven live-streaming—operationalized through MCN (multi-channel network) agencies—can establish a stable and efficient commercial framework [11]. Accordingly, once Tomato initiates live-commerce, it should focus on nurturing its own proprietary KOLs to amplify the reach and effectiveness of its book live-streams.

2.4.3. Comparative analysis with Bilibili

Liu Haopeng traced Bilibili's evolution from its initial focus on Japanese anime (vertical content) through the pan-second-generation ACG (anime, comics, games) era to its current “pan-entertainment” community phase [12]. The platform's business model spans four core segments: gaming, value-added services, advertising, and e-commerce. Bilibili is undergoing a strategic transformation, expanding its scope both vertically (deepening niche content) and horizontally (broadening into adjacent domains). Horizontally, Bilibili has intensified its presence in the ACG space (e.g., anime, games) while extending into emerging areas like eSports and live-streaming, enriching its ACG content ecosystem.

An analysis of Bilibili's developmental trajectory, content expansion strategies, and current business composition reveals a pattern of continuous growth and diversification. In contrast, Tomato Novel has also pursued horizontal expansion strategies in recent years—diversifying into sectors such as AI audiobooks, comics, short dramas, and e-commerce. However, the scale and breadth of Tomato's expansion remain relatively limited compared to Bilibili's comprehensive and dynamic growth.

3. Optimization recommendations for the Tomato Novel app

3.1. Recommendations from the “user participation” perspective

From the “user participation” dimension of interactive marketing, the following suggestions are proposed: Tomato Novel currently features a user comment and rating system, enabling readers to interact through comments, likes, and ratings. This mechanism not only enhances user engagement but also enriches the platform via user-generated content (UGC). However, based on surveys of users' experiences with Tomato's interactive features, the comment and rating system exhibits room for improvement. For instance, some consumers—given that Tomato and Douyin (TikTok) are both under ByteDance's umbrella—have called for integrating the emoji interaction functions already available in Tomato's reading comment sections with those of Douyin. Specifically, users advocate linking the comment features across both platforms, allowing Tomato readers to use the same emojis and commenting tools as they do on Douyin. Such integration would reduce the learning curve for app usage, improve user retention and satisfaction, and ultimately strengthen user stickiness.

3.2. Recommendations from the “real-time feedback” perspective

From the “real-time feedback” dimension of interactive marketing, the following suggestions are proposed: It is recommended to implement “feedback and suggestion” pop-up windows in sections such as the comment area at the end of each book, providing readers with convenient and prominently displayed channels to submit input. Additionally, given the cost constraints associated with adding human customer service, the platform should establish an AI-driven feedback collection and analysis system. This system would enable timely responses to user needs and suggestions, offering effective solutions to enhance the overall user experience.

3.3. Recommendations from the “personalization” perspective

From the “personalization” dimension of interactive marketing, the following suggestions are proposed:

First, to address ad quality concerns, Tomato Novel should enforce stricter review and modification protocols for ads displayed within books that have reached a certain traffic threshold. Establishing a more standardized and comprehensive ad review system would improve the reading experience and boost user stickiness. The platform should prioritize accepting advertisements from official, high-profile brands and intellectual properties (IPs) to ensure superior ad quality, enhance visual appeal and engagement, and reduce user attrition caused by low-quality or inappropriate ads—thereby elevating user satisfaction and loyalty.

Second, beyond ad management, the platform must refine its personalized recommendation mechanisms through detailed user profiling analysis and the creation of user feedback channels. For example, Tomato could introduce customizable recommendation toggles on its user interface, such as switches to “Enable/Disable Personalized Recommendations” or “Enable/Disable New Book Recommendations.” These options would empower users to tailor their content feeds according to individual preferences, increasing engagement and satisfaction.

3.4. Recommendations from the “community belongingness” perspective

From the “community belongingness” dimension of interactive marketing, the following suggestions are proposed:

To foster a stronger sense of community, Tomato should develop a dedicated “Tomato-Douyin User Book Circle.” This feature would enhance usability and participation by providing readers with seamless tools for sharing and interacting around their favorite books, thereby amplifying engagement and connection.

Additionally, Tomato is advised to launch “companion-style” live-streaming sessions across major platforms (e.g., Douyin), integrating its existing “Tomato Books” and “Tomato Mall” ecosystems to drive book-related sales. These livestreams should focus on promoting best-selling novels (from Tomato and partner platforms), high-IP-value comics, classic literature, and youth-oriented books. For both books and derivative products, the “Tomato Book Live” initiative could offer exclusive merchandise (e. g. , themed peripherals inspired by popular novels), premium gift-box editions of books, and IP-authorized exclusive products (covering novels, comics, and hit dramas). These offerings would be showcased and sold during live broadcasts.

To further enrich the livestream experience, Tomato should invite renowned authors, internet celebrities, and influencers to participate in real-time interactions. Collaborating with top-tier book-streaming hosts on Douyin and cultivating proprietary Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) would ensure strict product curation and thoughtful design, attracting consumers and enhancing user stickiness and loyalty. In the long term, this approach could establish a harmonious platform ecosystem, simultaneously driving business expansion and optimizing the overall ByteDance group ecosystem.

4. Conclusion

This study investigates the pathways to enhance user stickiness in digital reading platforms, focusing on the Tomato Novel app as a case study to explore the application effectiveness of interactive marketing models in improving user retention. The research systematically analyzes the current status, challenges, and optimization strategies of Tomato Novel across the four core dimensions of interactive marketing—user participation, real-time feedback, personalized recommendations, and community belongingness. Overall, the interactive marketing model provides multi-dimensional pathways to elevate user stickiness for the Tomato Novel app. By optimizing

existing features and introducing new functionalities, Tomato Novel has the potential to further strengthen user stickiness, enhance user satisfaction, and foster greater loyalty.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, data accessibility constraints: Due to the unavailability of internal data from the Tomato Novel app, the research primarily relies on publicly available data and user surveys. This approach may not fully capture the complexity and diversity of user behaviors. Future studies could collaborate directly with the platform to obtain more granular user behavior data, enabling deeper and more precise analyses. Second, case study limitations: While Tomato Novel is a representative player in the digital reading market, its user demographics and operational strategies differ significantly from those of other platforms. Future research should expand the scope to include multiple digital reading platforms, conducting comparative analyses to derive more universally applicable conclusions.

In summary, through systematic investigation and analysis, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the application of interactive marketing theory within digital reading platforms. The insights and recommendations provided offer a robust theoretical foundation to guide industry practices, thereby supporting platforms in their efforts to optimize user engagement and achieve sustainable growth.

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