

# Research on Operation Strategies of Trade Publishing Knowledge Service Platform Based on the SICAS Model: A Case Study of CITIC Academy\*

WANG Jun

Shanghai Publishing & Printing College, Shanghai, China

ZHOU Xiaoyi

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Amidst evolving user behavior driven by the development of the internet, enhancing the operational quality of trade publishing knowledge service platforms has become a significant challenge for publishing institutions. To address this issue, this paper employs a combined approach of theoretical analysis and case study, introducing the SICAS (Sense-Interest-Connection-Action-Share) user consumption behavior analysis model and selecting “CITIC Academy” as the case study subject. It systematically examines and summarizes the platform’s operational practices and specific strategies, aiming to offer strategic insights and practical references for the operational improvement and sustainable, high-quality development of trade publishing knowledge service platforms.

*Keywords:* trade publishing knowledge service platform, SICAS model, operation strategy, CITIC Academy

Since the emergence of the knowledge payment model in 2016, China’s internet content consumption has experienced significant growth. Platforms such as “IGET” and “Himalaya FM” have pioneered innovations in knowledge production, shifting the creation, dissemination, and consumption of knowledge toward greater commercialization, inclusivity, and service-orientation. This transformation has been facilitated by the widespread adoption of mobile payment systems and high-speed mobile networks, while also aligning with the national policy direction of “building an inclusive digital society”. Within this context, leading traditional publishers—including CITIC Press Corporation and LIFE WEEK Magazine—have taken proactive steps toward publishing integration. Through proprietary platforms such as CITIC Academy (a trade publishing knowledge service platform launched by CITIC Press Corporation) and Sanlian Zhongdu (launched by LIFE WEEK Magazine), they have repurposed existing content into knowledge service offerings designed for general audiences. However, following periods of rapid expansion, these platforms have encountered operational bottlenecks, marked by issues such as content homogenization, low conversion rates to paid services, superficial deployment of technology, and declines in both daily active users and user retention. These challenges indicate

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WANG Jun, Lecturer, Master’s Supervisor, Department of Publishing and Communication, Shanghai Publishing & Printing College, Shanghai, China.

ZHOU Xiaoyi, Master’s student, School of Publishing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

a need to transition from a strategy of “extensive traffic acquisition” to one of “refined service operation”. Leveraging the scenario-shaping potential of technologies like AI and VR could enable more differentiated strategies, helping to address the public’s seemingly contradictory demand for content that is both accessible and substantive. Nevertheless, research in this area remains limited. Existing studies predominantly examine the issue from the perspective of publishing convergence or focus narrowly on marketing (Liu, 2019), often lacking a user-centered, in-depth analysis of full-chain platform operation strategies. To address this gap, this study adopts the SICAS (Sense-Interest-Connection-Action-Share) user consumption behavior analysis model as its theoretical framework and selects “CITIC Academy” as a case study. By dissecting the user behavior cycle within the trade publishing knowledge service context, the research aims to explore innovative business model strategies to overcome current industry challenges, thereby offering insights to support the sustainable and high-quality development of trade publishing knowledge service platforms.

### **SICAS User Consumption Behavior Analysis Model and Its Application Advantages**

The SICAS model, developed by the DCCI Internet Data Center, constitutes a user consumption behavior analysis framework tailored for the digital marketing era. It delineates the nonlinear, multi-point, and bidirectional interaction mechanisms between marketing entities and audiences, representing a systematic advancement beyond traditional linear models such as AIDMA and AISAS. This evolution is driven by fundamental shifts in user behavior within the mobile internet ecosystem: Information touchpoints have become distributed and fragmented, while consumption decisions have transitioned from linear progression to dynamic, interactive networks characterized by multi-platform engagement. By transcending the linear constraints inherent in earlier models, the SICAS framework effectively captures users’ complex decision-making trajectories across discontinuous platforms and multi-touchpoint interactions. Consequently, it offers a robust explanatory tool for analyzing contemporary user behavior in contexts shaped by social media, algorithmic recommendation systems, and real-time interactive environments.

The SICAS model comprises two overarching phases: “psychological perception and initial interaction” and “deep connection and value transformation”. As illustrated in Figure 1, it is further broken down into five sequential yet interconnected stages: Sense, Interest & Interaction, Connect & Communication, Action, and Share. The first phase (S-I) corresponds to the user’s psychological activation period, during which platforms attract attention through omni-channel content dissemination and stimulate participatory interest via personalized and context-aware interactions, thereby establishing an initial affective linkage. The second phase (C-A-S) involves the externalization of user behavior and the deepening of user-platform relationships. This stage emphasizes the cultivation of stable connections through sustained and engaged communication, driving purchase behavior and encouraging users to share their experiences. Sharing not only initiates a renewed communication cycle but also reinforces prior perception and connection in a feedback loop, ultimately forming a cross-platform, cross-stage dynamic ecosystem. By transcending the linear interpretive logic of earlier models, the SICAS framework constructs a behavioral ecosystem capable of multi-point reach, bidirectional interaction, and real-time responsiveness. It thus offers a comprehensive depiction of the closed-loop pathway from initial user perception to sustained value co-creation.

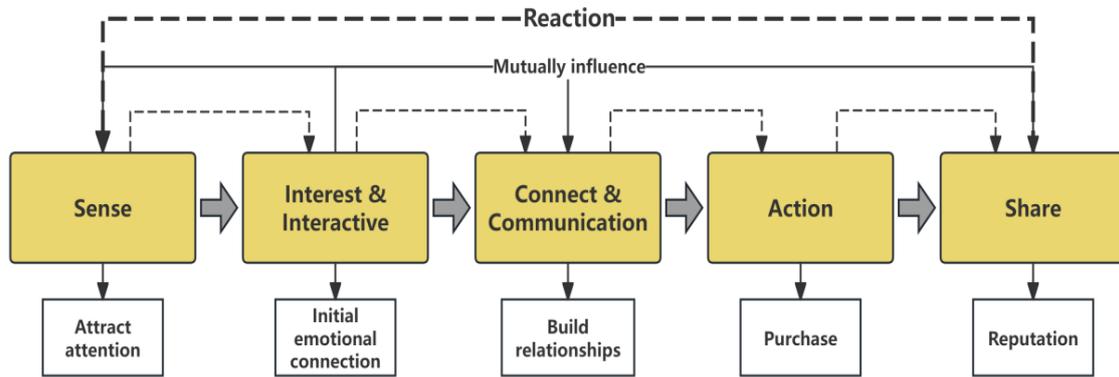


Figure 1. SICAS model communication roadmap.

The SICAS model exhibits three principal adaptive advantages in the context of trade publishing knowledge service platforms. First, at the level of user behavior, the model effectively traces the cross-platform and fragmented behavioral pathways characteristic of digital-age users, thereby overcoming the limitations of traditional linear models, which struggle to capture such discontinuous and non-sequential trajectories. Second, regarding the platform ecosystem, the model underscores the necessity of constructing a multi-agent collaborative network—involving authors, users, and technology providers—particularly during the “connection-communication” stage. This emphasis offers methodological support for platforms to integrate internal and external resources and advance ecosystem-based operations. Third, in terms of technological empowerment, technologies such as AI and 5G can be deeply embedded throughout each phase of the SICAS model. This integration enables precise perception through user profiling, sustains user relationships via intelligent interaction systems, optimizes conversion processes through cross-platform payment solutions, and enhances social dissemination by leveraging user-generated content (UGC).

### Operational Strategies for the Trade Publishing Knowledge Service Platform—Based on the Analysis of CITIC Academy

Launched in 2017 by CITIC Press Corporation, CITIC Academy is a trade publishing knowledge service application dedicated to trade publishing. Operating under a dual technology- and user-driven strategy, the platform delivers a range of content services—including digital reading, audiobooks, and audio-video courses (Yin, 2021). Following CITIC Press Corporation’s public listing in 2019 and in response to evolving industry trends, the company adopted a dual-wheel development model centered on “knowledge service + cultural consumption”. Within this framework, CITIC Academy has emerged as the core platform for building the corporation’s knowledge service ecosystem. Distinguished by its focused positioning in “deep financial knowledge services”, CITIC Academy occupies a unique niche among knowledge-focused applications. In 2020, the platform reported a monthly active user (MAU) base exceeding 1.2 million, a paying-user conversion rate of 18.7%, and an average transaction value of 286 yuan. These metrics reflect substantial market recognition and acceptance of its financial knowledge offerings, thereby establishing CITIC Academy as a relevant and instructive case for research. Accordingly, this study adopts CITIC Academy as a representative case to examine operational strategies for trade publishing knowledge service platforms through the lens of the SICAS model. The operational stages outlined in the model are interrelated and dynamically interactive; consequently, the formulation of specific marketing strategies should be guided by a holistic perspective and systems thinking.

While tailored and adaptive tactics are necessary, the theoretical guidance and logical operational efficiency afforded by the SICAS framework must be fully leveraged to ensure coherent and effective platform management.

### **Operation Strategies in the Sense Stage**

During the platform-user perception phase, users initially encounter knowledge service products, brand initiatives, and related promotional information through diverse touchpoints—including mobile applications, social media, partner platforms, and offline scenarios—thereby developing a preliminary inclination to browse and engage. To achieve effective reach, fully activate potential user awareness, and foster meaningful perceptual “encounters”, a trade publishing knowledge service platform must construct an integrated communication matrix that spans online and offline environments and incorporates multiple scenarios. Leveraging technologies such as intelligent recommendation, behavioral tracking, and contextual sensing enables the real-time capture of user needs and accurate content matching, thereby cutting through information clutter and promptly capturing user attention.

Relying on its omni-channel architecture—encompassing mini-programs, its dedicated APP, social media, and a cooperative ecosystem—CITIC Academy actively extends its user reach. Online, beyond its self-operated APP and WeChat mini-program, the platform distributes content through audio platforms such as Himalaya FM, Xiaoyuzhou, and NetEase Cloud Music, and collaborates with content communities like Zhihu and Bilibili to achieve cross-platform traffic convergence. Offline, CITIC Academy explores scenario-based service integration. For example, in 2023 it partnered with Shenzhen Shipping Group to establish the “Maritime Digital Reading Space”, offering passengers free audio-listening services via QR-code scanning, thereby embedding knowledge services into travel contexts and attaining organic user reach. Furthermore, the platform consistently generates trending topics, publishes curated book lists, and organizes author dialogues through its social media matrix on Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, combining algorithmic recommendations to increase exposure and attract target audiences.

In technology-driven product development and precision outreach, CITIC Academy employs user behavior analytics and tagging systems, supported by big data and semantic technologies, to collect frequently queried keywords and page-view data. This enables the proactive creation of high-quality content aligned with user interests and its targeted delivery, achieving an intelligent linkage between content and demand (Huang & Chang, 2020). By the end of 2025, its podcast “The Theory of Intellectual Capital”—launched in 2023—had released over 130 episodes, markedly enhancing the accessibility of financial policies and business knowledge through stylized narrative formats. Recognized in 2025 as one of the top 20 innovative teams in economic reporting and converged communication, the program demonstrates efficacy in disseminating high-value content and fostering user connections.

Overall, CITIC Academy’s operational approach in the mutual-perception stage can be summarized along three dimensions: first, building an integrated online-offline communication network that spans multiple touchpoints to expand user contact scenarios; second, leveraging data analytics and content creativity to develop distinctive brand campaigns and product formats that enhance content visibility and topic resonance; third, through sustained brand exposure, contextual embedding, and user interaction, gradually cultivating user cognition and affective bonds, thereby laying a foundation for subsequent interest stimulation and deeper interactive engagement.

Through systematic channel orchestration, technology-driven content distribution, and scenario-integrated service innovation, CITIC Academy has strengthened the perceptual efficiency between its knowledge products and target users, offering a referential pathway for the cold start and sustained growth of trade publishing

knowledge service platforms. Nevertheless, in its cross-platform content distribution, CITIC Academy has often adopted a uniform “one-size-fits-all” approach, publishing identical promotional materials across different social platforms—such as unaltered video covers and copies on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. While superficially reducing production costs, this practice risks resource misallocation due to suboptimal engagement. Over the long term, such a strategy may incur negative repercussions, particularly in user acquisition and brand--building effectiveness.

### **Operational Strategies for Generating Interest and Interaction Stage**

In an era characterized by attention scarcity, the success of trade publishing knowledge service platforms hinges on their ability to actively stimulate user interest and cultivate sustained, meaningful interactive relationships. As users evolve from passive recipients into active participants, disseminators, and even co-creators, platforms are required not only to deliver content but also to construct multiple resonant touchpoints that encourage engagement. This challenge is particularly pronounced in the age of self-media, where users demonstrate greater willingness to pay for content that is highly entertaining, fragmented, and stimulating—attributes often at odds with the inherent seriousness and professionalism of trade knowledge content. To compete effectively, a platform must first adopt a user-centric perspective to identify and leverage users’ underlying interest anchors. Once interest is ignited, the platform must further bridge the psychological distance, ensure effective content delivery, and establish an emotional connection that transcends transactional supply and demand.

As a representative case of digital transformation within trade publishing, CITIC Academy’s operational strategy systematically illustrates how to place users at the center, develop high-quality content products as a foundation (Lu, 2018), and harness 5G technology—with its ultra-high-speed transmission, low latency, and broad coverage—to facilitate networked content distribution, mobile cloud computing, and contextualized perception, thereby effectively stimulating user interest and fostering efficient interaction.

CITIC Academy prioritizes the creation of compelling and resonant content products and presentation formats as the cornerstone of interest activation. Moving beyond conventional audiobooks, the platform repackages knowledge into discussable and shareable topics through personalized and contextualized formats such as “Good Book Quick Listen”, author livestreams, and thematic interpretations. For instance, hosting a live dialogue with Ray Dalio, author of the bestseller *Principles*, elevates content consumption into a participatory knowledge-sharing event. Data indicate that over 57.5% of the Top 10 audiobooks in each category are accompanied by “Good Book Quick Listen” clips—lightweight, supplemental content that lowers the barrier to entry and effectively stimulates exploratory interest (Ren, 2023).

Secondly, the platform converts initial interest into deep engagement and long-term retention through carefully designed membership systems and benefit structures. CITIC Academy offers tiered and flexible payment options, emphasizing member “perceived value” and “exclusivity”. Benefits extend beyond extensive content access to include entry into exclusive communities, participation in live interactions, and discounts on book purchases.

In developing interactive mechanisms and a community ecosystem, CITIC Academy focuses on shifting users from observers to participants, actively integrating online and offline scenarios to create immersive experiences that deepen interaction. In collaboration with lifestyle platforms such as LIFE WEEK Magazine’s “Songguo Life”, the platform organizes cultural lectures and new book sharing sessions in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, embedding knowledge services into real-world social settings. These offline initiatives not only

channel traffic to digital content but also strengthen emotional bonds through face-to-face communication, guiding users from interest-based recognition toward community identification and brand affiliation.

### **Strengthen the Connect & Communication Operational Strategy**

Once user behavior transitions from “interest and interaction” to “connection and communication”, the core focus of platform operation shifts from stimulating isolated points of interest to fostering sustained, stable, and affectively warm long-term relationships with users. This shift aligns closely with the theoretical construct of “parasocial relationships”. The theory posits that through continuous, personalized interactions with media figures (or personified platforms and brands), users develop a one-sided emotional bond akin to real social relationships—termed parasocial relationships. Distinct from transient “parasocial interactions” limited to singular content consumption, parasocial relationships represent a more enduring and profound sense of emotional attachment and belonging (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Within the SICAS framework, the “connection and communication” phase is pivotal for transforming short-term “interaction” into a durable “relationship”. Platforms must employ consistent, warm, and personalized communication strategies that make users feel valued, understood, and respected. This approach converts users from transient content consumers into emotional identifiers of the brand, community advocates, and product loyalists, thereby laying a robust psychological foundation for subsequent paid conversions (Action) and active sharing (Share).

In operationalizing this stage, CITIC Academy deliberately cultivates parasocial relationships by establishing a multi-layered and personalized connectivity system. First, it strives to project a personified image as a “knowledge companion” rather than an impersonal content aggregator. For instance, its flagship podcast *The Theory of Intellectual Capital* not only features dialogues with leading scholars such as Kevin Kelly and Lu Ming but also incorporates listener Q&A segments, directly addressing community feedback. This fosters a sense of collaborative partnership—“thinking and growing together”—with its audience. Such frequent, high-quality interactions continually reinforce users’ emotional trust in both the host and the platform, facilitating the development of parasocial relationships (Li & Hu, 2021). Second, CITIC Academy actively constructs integrated online-offline “communities of shared interest”. Beyond introducing a unified “Xinxiang Membership” system that bridges digital and physical benefits, the platform channels online-accumulated engaged users into physical spaces through offline initiatives like the “Glowing Reading Club” and the Reading Life Festival. Face-to-face communication and in-depth discussions around common reading topics significantly enhance social ties among users and reinforce their sense of platform belonging, thereby affirming and strengthening parasocial relationships through real-world social interaction.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that CITIC Academy exhibits notable shortcomings in managing fan communities on certain mainstream social platforms. For example, its fan groups on Douyin and Xiaohongshu are often inactive or lack strategic content planning and interactive guidance, resulting in low community engagement. This failure to effectively convert publicly attracted traffic into privately held assets with strong emotional connections leaves a large pool of potential users at a superficial level of interaction. Consequently, establishing solid parasocial relationships becomes difficult, potentially leading to user attrition and disruption in the conversion funnel.

In summary, within the “Connection and Communication” stage, the critical success factor for trade publishing knowledge service platforms lies in their systematic capacity to cultivate and deepen parasocial relationships with users. CITIC Academy’s practices demonstrate that by shaping a personified brand image,

fostering sustained high-quality interactions, and building integrated online-offline communities, users can be effectively guided from “interest” toward “belonging”. This significantly enhances user stickiness and brand loyalty. Moving forward, platforms must strengthen their capability for refined, segment-specific community operations, transforming each interaction into an opportunity to deepen relational bonds. The ultimate objective is to establish a lasting, stable emotional community that transcends mere transactional exchanges, thereby seamlessly propelling the user journey forward into the Action and Share stages.

### **Operational Strategies for the Purchase Action Stage**

Within the SICAS model, the “Action” stage represents the critical transition from users’ emotional identification and sustained connection to tangible consumption. For a trade publishing knowledge service platform, operational success at this phase hinges on effectively lowering the barriers to payment decisions and converting accumulated interest and trust into actual purchasing behavior. This requires the construction of seamless, diversified, and compelling conversion pathways. Beyond offering competitively positioned products and pricing, the platform must optimize the user experience across multiple dimensions—including payment convenience, psychological incentives, and contextual integration—to minimize friction throughout the conversion process.

CITIC Academy’s strategy in this regard demonstrates a holistic consideration of user decision-making psychology and behavioral ease. First, in terms of payment model design, the platform provides highly flexible options tailored to varied user consumption habits. Users may opt for direct purchase of individual premium content (priced between 2 and 169 yuan) or subscribe to tiered membership programs such as “Union Membership” (from 298 yuan), “Rui Du Membership” (1,999 yuan), and “Xin Xiang Membership” (28 yuan), each offering distinct and personalized benefits. For individually sold content, the platform typically supplies preview chapters (e.g., 15 chapters of the bestseller *Principles*) accompanied by prominent discount indicators (e.g., 50-60% off). This approach effectively employs “experience-based risk reduction” and “price anchoring” strategies to guide users from preview to purchase.

Membership benefits extend beyond core audiobooks and e-books to include value-added services such as exclusive audio launches, author live streams, book-purchase discounts, and access to members-only communities, substantially elevating the perceived value of paid content. The “Trust Membership” further provides a 7-day free trial, lowering initial trial costs and reducing long-term commitment pressure. This combination of “targeted premium access” and “unlimited listening” accommodates both users’ immediate demand for high-value, specific content, and their ongoing desire to explore extensive material.

In addition to integrating a fluid payment system within its own APP and mini-program, CITIC Academy distributes content through partnerships with major audio platforms such as Himalaya FM and Dragonfly FM. This allows users to complete transactions within familiar consumption environments, mitigating the risk of user loss due to cross-platform redirects.

In summary, throughout the purchasing process, CITIC Academy has systematically reduced users’ decision-making costs and behavioral resistance by implementing a tripartite strategy encompassing a flexible payment model, omni-channel payment convenience, and heightened perception of benefit value. These measures effectively channel the user awareness, interest, and connection established in the preceding SICAS stages toward the final realization of commercial value, thereby providing a replicable pathway for the sustainable monetization of trade publishing knowledge service platform products.

### **Operational Strategies for the Share Stage**

Within the closed-loop framework of the SICAS model, the “Share” stage represents both the culmination of the user behavior journey and the initiation of a new cycle of communication. Through sharing, users transform personal consumption experiences into social assets, facilitating the viral dissemination of the brand and enabling organic user base expansion. For trade publishing knowledge service platforms, establishing an effective sharing mechanism not only reduces customer acquisition costs but also reinforces brand trust through word-of-mouth effects, thereby fostering a sustainable “member-get-member” growth model.

CITIC Academy’s approach in this regard integrates product-function incentives, community-interaction design, and online-offline scenario blending to effectively stimulate users’ willingness to share and amplify dissemination dynamics. At the product-function level, the platform embeds a systematic sharing-incentive mechanism. Upon completing a reading or listening session within the app, users can seamlessly share content directly from the interface to social platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. Successful referrals that lead to new user registrations or purchases are rewarded with coupons or a 31-day “Xinxiang Membership”. Simultaneously, the platform ties users’ daily activities—including check-ins, reading duration, and content plays—to point accumulation and coupon distribution. This design psychologically links “usage behavior” with “immediate benefits”, effectively motivating continued engagement and proactive sharing.

In terms of community and interaction design, CITIC Academy focuses on cultivating highly cohesive and actively engaged sharing spaces. The platform maintains multiple fan groups, each exceeding 400 members, on mainstream social media platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, using them as hubs for daily content distribution and topical discussions. More significantly, it regularly hosts “online private sessions” centered on financial trends, new-book interpretations, and related themes, inviting authors, scholars, and core members to participate in in-depth, closed-door exchanges. These interactions, built on trust and exclusivity, substantially enhance core users’ sense of belonging and prestige, encouraging them to voluntarily promote the brand within their communities and personal networks, thus acting as “seed users”.

Offline scenarios further solidify online connections into stronger emotional bonds. The platform frequently organizes offline book clubs and author seminars in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, transferring the recognition cultivated online into deeper offline engagement. These events not only deliver distinctive experiential value but also generate rich social content, with participants naturally becoming nodes of word-of-mouth diffusion for the brand across social networks.

### **Conclusion**

In the digital era, characterized by information overload and attention scarcity, competition among trade publishing knowledge service platforms has evolved beyond mere content provision toward the deep cultivation of users’ limited cognitive and emotional engagement. To foster a fundamental shift in user roles—from “passive consumer” to “active participant” and ultimately “brand co-creator”—platforms must meticulously orchestrate each phase of the SICAS model. The key catalyst for this transformation lies in the platform’s ability to consistently deliver emotional value and social capital that extend beyond the intrinsic content. Looking ahead, the advancement of trade publishing knowledge service platforms will increasingly prioritize data-driven user insights, seamless cross-scenario experience integration, and the development of a collaborative value-creation ecosystem in which authors, platforms, users, and related stakeholders collectively participate and thrive.

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