

The Paradox of Platform "Gatekeepers" under Regulatory Intensification: The Sustainable Boundaries of Quality Governance in Live-Streaming E-commerce

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Abstract

After experiencing explosive growth, live-stream e-commerce has continued to face frequent issues regarding product quality and transaction order. Platforms, entrusted with a gatekeeper role by regulation, repeatedly fail in their oversight duties, creating a structural dilemma that urgently requires explanation. This paper introduces the concept of the "gatekeeper paradox" and analyzes the underlying logic behind platforms' failure to act as effective gatekeepers through three mechanisms: interest structures, power asymmetry, and institutional design. The study finds that platforms' reliance on top streamers weakens their willingness to enforce standards; the misalignment between algorithmic power and quality review capabilities limits their effectiveness; and distorted incentive structures in current regulatory frameworks provide the institutional space for these two problems to persist. These three mechanisms reinforce each other, making "stricter regulation" unlikely to result in "more effective gatekeeping." Based on this analysis, the paper advocates shifting from command-and-control regulation toward a model of "controlled self-regulation," aiming to reconstruct the platform's gatekeeping incentives by reducing structural dependencies, enhancing algorithmic accountability, and activating multi-stakeholder reputational pressures.

Keywords

Live-Streaming E-Commerce; Gatekeeper Paradox; Platform Governance; Controlled Self-Regulation; Governance Sustainability

1. Introduction

In 2025, China's live-stream e-commerce transaction volume surpassed 5 trillion yuan, accounting for nearly one-third of the country's online retail sales, with the industry's user base reaching 660 million [1]. This figure marks a transformation of

live-stream e-commerce from an emerging business model into a core driver of consumer growth. However, alongside this rapid expansion has come persistent concerns over product quality. Complaints about false advertising, mismatched goods, and material fraud continue to recur in live-stream sales. Although the year-on-year increase in complaints and reports filed with national market supervision authorities declined from 52.5% in 2023 to 19.3% in 2024, the absolute number of such cases has not fundamentally reversed its upward trend [2].

A phenomenon worth deeper examination is that despite increasing regulatory intensity and growing platform compliance investments, quality-related chaos has not abated as expected. The "Administrative Measures on the Supervision of Live-Stream E-Commerce," implemented in February 2026, systematically defines platforms' responsibilities and obligations—such as qualification verification, tiered classification management, and handling of violations—in a dedicated chapter, marking a shift from a "safe harbor" to a "gatekeeper" institutional framework [3]. Yet, institutional empowerment does not automatically equate to effective implementation. Platforms effectively control access, traffic distribution, and disciplinary actions against live-stream operators, hosts, and MCN agencies, yet repeatedly fail to enforce gatekeeping duties when they should.

This situation points to a deeper theoretical question: When platforms serve both as transaction facilitators and governance enforcers, what structural conditions constrain their gatekeeping behavior? This paper introduces the concept of the "gatekeeper paradox" to capture this dilemma—platforms are institutionally designed as gatekeepers, but due to their own commercial interest structures, algorithmic power dynamics, and ecological dependencies, they systematically lack or lose the will and capacity to perform effective gatekeeping, thus creating a vicious cycle of "being required to guard—unable to guard—gatekeeping failing."

The gatekeeper theory has evolved from Lewin's classic formulation to the domain of platform governance. In antitrust law, the EU's Digital Markets Act designates large platforms as "gatekeepers," focusing on their market power threatening competitive order [4]. In platform governance research, the gatekeeper concept has broader implications, referring to platforms' role in monitoring information flow, transactional order, and product safety. Ma Jiujiu et al., from a value chain perspective, argue that platforms and streamers exercise entry control and maintain order through dominance over distribution channels, but "may lose gatekeeping motivation and capability due to inappropriate incentive structures and incomplete reward mechanisms" [5]. This insight reveals the inherent tension within the gatekeeper role, though their analysis focuses primarily on agricultural product safety and does not systematically treat the "paradox" itself as a theoretical object.

In the field of live-stream e-commerce governance, existing research mostly approaches the issue from legal regulation, responsibility allocation, or technical governance perspectives. Zhou Hui et al. analyze how complex, multi-stakeholder

ecosystems challenge traditional governance models, but focus mainly on idealized institutional designs [6]. Liang et al. employ an evolutionary game model to show how interdependence between platforms and top-tier streamers may trigger "passive supervision behaviors" by platforms, providing a game-theoretic foundation for understanding gatekeeping failure [7]. However, single-dimensional analyses fall short in fully explaining the paradox's persistence and systemic nature. This paper contributes by advancing the gatekeeper theory from normative discussion toward structural diagnosis, using the "paradox" as an analytical tool to systematically uncover multiple mechanisms behind gatekeeping failure. Building on this, it introduces the paradigm of "controlled self-regulation" to offer a systematic institutional logic for sustainable governance [8].

The study adopts a combined approach of normative analysis and case studies, taking the Administrative Measures on the Supervision of Live-Stream E-Commerce as the core institutional text [9], supplemented by representative platform governance data and typical violation cases to conduct bidirectional validation between institutions and practices. The paper consists of five chapters: Chapter 2 analyzes the institutional construction and structural tensions of the platform gatekeeper role; Chapter 3 dissects the internal mechanisms of the paradox from three dimensions—interest structures, power asymmetry, and institutional design; Chapter 4 explores institutional pathways toward sustainable governance; and Chapter 5 summarizes key findings and policy implications.

2. Platform Governance and the Tension of Gatekeeper Roles

2.1. The Institutional Evolution of Platform Roles

The role of platforms in the governance of live-streaming e-commerce has undergone a fundamental institutional transformation. Under the early framework of e-commerce laws, platforms were regarded as transaction intermediaries subject to the "notice-and-takedown" safe harbor rules, with relatively limited liability boundaries [10]. The underlying logic of this arrangement was that platforms lacked the capacity to conduct substantive reviews of vast numbers of transactions and should not be required to assume review obligations beyond their capabilities.

However, the unique characteristics of live-streaming e-commerce have disrupted this premise. The Administrative Measures for the Supervision of Live-Streaming E-Commerce dedicate an entire chapter to defining the responsibilities of platform operators, requiring them to establish mechanisms for live-stream account registration and cancellation, transaction behavior standards, product quality assurance, consumer rights protection, and content review [3]. Platforms are now required to verify and register identity information of live-stream room operators and marketing personnel, updating such verification at least every six months, and to implement dynamic real-identity verification systems. In terms of enforcement, platforms are granted authority to take measures against violators, including issuing

warnings, suspending live streams, ordering temporary shutdowns, or placing entities on blacklists [11].

At its core, this institutional shift transforms platforms from "spectators of rules" into "enforcers of rules." Platforms are no longer merely obligated to comply with regulations but are also entrusted with quasi-public governance powers. As Ma Jiuji and others have pointed out, platforms and streamers, leveraging control over distribution channels, play key roles in access control and order maintenance, effectively becoming "digital gatekeepers" within the live-streaming e-commerce value chain [5]. Yet, this power allocation creates deep tensions with the platforms' commercial identities.

2.2. The Structural Tension of the Gatekeeper Role

The core tension in the platform gatekeeper role lies in the inherent conflict between commercial logic and governance logic. A platform's primary revenue comes from transaction volume growth and traffic monetization, whereas effective quality control—such as raising entry thresholds, restricting top streamers' lenient product selection, or imposing stricter reviews on high-traffic items—can suppress transaction scale in the short term. When platforms simultaneously act as both "market operators" and "governance enforcers," this clash becomes internalized as a central contradiction in their governance decisions.

This tension is not unique to live-streaming e-commerce, but it manifests particularly sharply within this context. The reason is that transaction decisions in live-streaming commerce heavily depend on the personal credibility of streamers and real-time audience interaction; consumer trust is built upon identification with the streamer rather than independent evaluation of products. This means that quality control cannot rely solely on traditional post-event sampling and qualification verification, but must be embedded into real-time monitoring during live streams. Yet, there is a direct conflict between the costs of real-time monitoring and the pressures of traffic competition.

Xiao Mengli's analysis of digital gatekeepers' "relational governance" offers a valuable perspective: platform gatekeeping is not a one-sided "allow/deny" decision, but a strategic action embedded within complex multi-party market relationships [12]. Platforms must balance multiple relationships among streamers, MCN agencies, merchants, and consumers, making their gatekeeping decisions highly strategic and context-dependent. Consequently, analytical focus should shift from asking "whether the platform has fulfilled its gatekeeping duties" to examining "how the platform's gatekeeping capacity and willingness are shaped by its ecological position."

3. The Failure of Gatekeeping in Live-stream E-commerce Scenarios

This chapter analyzes the internal mechanisms underlying the gatekeeper paradox from three dimensions: interest structures, power asymmetry, and institutional design. These three mechanisms do not operate independently but rather reinforce one another, collectively forming the "structural conditions" for gatekeeper failure.

3.1. Top Streamers' Reliance and Regulatory Capture

The platform's reliance on top streamers is the primary dimension in understanding the breakdown of gatekeeping. Although, by 2025, the share of GMV driven by top streamers had declined to 10.66%, while that of mid-to-small streamers rose to 89.34%, top streamers still play an irreplaceable role in traffic aggregation, user engagement, and platform brand influence [1]. Liang et al.'s game-theoretic analysis reveals a key mechanism: the mutual dependence between platforms and top streamers triggers "passive supervision behavior" on the part of the platform—when top streamers adopt lenient product selection strategies, the platform tends to tolerate rather than correct them, as strict oversight could damage the collaborative relationship with top streamers, thereby affecting the platform's transaction volume and market share [7]. The study clearly concludes that "reducing the platform's dependence on top streamers can enhance its regulatory autonomy," indicating that the current dependency structure itself is a critical condition contributing to the failure of gatekeeping.

The transformation mechanism from dependence to capture warrants further scrutiny. Platform reliance on top streamers manifests not only economically but also through a form of "reverse capture" in governance capacity. In areas such as product review and quality control, platforms effectively outsource certain gatekeeping functions to the product selection teams of top streamers. To protect their own reputations, top streamers typically establish rigorous product vetting processes, which objectively help the platform perform initial quality screening. However, this outsourcing comes at a cost: the platform's supervision over top streamers often becomes merely formalistic, as deep monitoring lacks sufficient information basis and risks provoking resistance from streamers. When top streamers violate rules, the platform faces a dilemma—strict enforcement may lead to loss of top-tier traffic, whereas leniency might trigger regulatory accountability. In practice, the platform often leans toward the former option.

3.2. The Mismatch Between Algorithmic Power and Gatekeeping Capacity

The platform uses algorithms to distribute traffic, recommend content, and identify risks. Algorithms serve not only as technical tools for gatekeeping but also as the vehicle through which the platform's business logic is executed. When algorithmic optimization focuses on user engagement and transaction conversion, a systemic conflict arises between traffic-driven logic and quality-driven logic. On platforms

like Douyin, content with higher traffic undergoes more frequent and stricter evaluations during the review process—any instance such as video reports, concentrated criticism in comment sections, or sudden traffic spikes may trigger review [13]. This mechanism indicates that platforms are not lacking in technological capacity for gatekeeping; rather, they prioritize allocating review resources to high-traffic content, making their gatekeeping intensity traffic-oriented rather than quality-oriented.

A deeper issue lies in the structural intensification of information asymmetry. Platforms possess algorithmic and data resources, yet their quality assessment capabilities are constrained by limited understanding of vast numbers of product listings (SKUs). In live-stream e-commerce, where "people, products, and scenes" are highly separated, rapid product turnover and the real-time nature of live streams make traditional qualification verification and post-event spot checks inadequate for capturing actual risks. This "insufficient gatekeeping capability" is not merely a technical problem but results from the platform's trade-off between governance investment and commercial returns. When the marginal return on governance investment falls below that of traffic operations, platforms rationally allocate resources toward the latter.

Structural barriers to consumer rights protection further weaken the incentive effect of reputational pressure on platform gatekeeping. During live streams, information is delivered at a high density, making it difficult for consumers to provide effective evidence after impulsive purchases, and their claims are likely to be dismissed [10]. High costs and low success rates severely undermine consumers' role as "reputational overseers." While Liang et al.'s research highlights that consumer proactive defense behaviors can generate reputational pressure, they also emphasize that this effect "requires sustained public participation to maintain" [7]. Without institutional safeguards, such continuity is unlikely to emerge naturally.

3.3. Incentive Distortion and Formalistic Compliance

The institutional design of the Measures for the Supervision and Administration of Live-Streaming E-Commerce has achieved notable progress in consolidating platform accountability, yet its incentive structure arrangement still harbors in-depth issues that merit critical examination. The Measures mandate platforms to establish systems such as hierarchical and category-based management, dynamic monitoring, and three-year record retention, while designating live-streaming room operators with "large user followings, high transaction scales, and strong influence of live-stream marketing personnel" as key regulatory targets [3]. However, whether these institutional requirements can be translated into substantive gatekeeping effects hinges on the actual alignment between platforms' enforcement willingness and capacity.

The command-and-control regulatory logic centered on outcome-oriented direct

intervention confronts the predicament of "ontological mismatch" in the digital ecosystem [14]. Regulatory rules rely on static behavioral checklists as tools, yet the operational characteristics of live-streaming e-commerce—rapid iteration of product categories, real-time nature of live-stream scenarios, and complexity of multi-stakeholder legal relationships—render any pre-established behavioral checklist insufficient to exhaustively cover actual risks. Platforms may fulfill formal requirements by establishing "compliance ledgers," simplifying hierarchical and category-based management into label-based operations, while ceding substantive quality control to the market logic of traffic competition. The risk of such formalistic compliance does not stem from platforms' "moral deficiency," but from institutional designs that fail to effectively respond to platforms' interest structures.

A more fundamental institutional dilemma lies in the paradox of independence of platforms' internal supervision bodies. If a platform's compliance review body is dependent on the platform's management in terms of funding and personnel, its supervisory effectiveness will inevitably be constrained by commercial objectives [15]. This issue has been repeatedly discussed in the platform governance literature, yet no effective solution has been found within the current institutional framework. The independence of independent supervision is inherently a governance structure issue, which cannot be resolved merely by increasing the number of provisions on compliance obligations.

The mutual reinforcement of the three mechanisms constitutes the persistent foundation of the paradox: interest dependency weakens gatekeeping willingness, depriving platforms of intrinsic motivation to proactively strengthen supervision; power asymmetry limits gatekeeping capacity, making it difficult for platforms to achieve effective coverage even if they have the willingness; and incentive distortion in institutional design provides institutional space for the persistence of the first two, making formalistic compliance a rational strategy for platforms under regulatory pressure. To break this cycle, efforts should start with reconstructing the incentive structure.

4. From Command-and-Control to Controlled Self-Regulation

4.1. Analytical Framework for Governance Sustainability

"Governance Sustainability" encompasses three core dimensions: First, the sustainability of governance outcomes, meaning that governance effectiveness does not wane with fluctuations in regulatory cycles. Second, the adaptability of governance structures, signifying that institutions can respond to business model innovations and technological shifts. Third, incentive compatibility among governance participants, ensuring that all stakeholders are motivated to engage in sustained governance efforts rather than passively comply.

The logic from paradox diagnosis to pathway construction is as follows: The root cause of the gatekeeper paradox does not lie in platforms' "moral deficiency," but in

institutional designs that fail to effectively address platforms' interest structures and role tensions. The key to sustainable governance lies in reconstructing gatekeepers' incentive structures, such that "effective gatekeeping" is aligned with platforms' long-term interests.

4.2. The Institutional Logic of Controlled Self-regulation

The "controlled self-regulation" paradigm provides a theoretical framework for addressing this need. Its core argument is that governance of digital gatekeepers should not center on outcome-oriented direct interventions, but instead establish a dual structure where "gatekeeper autonomy takes precedence and state meta-regulation serves as a fallback mechanism." This framework differs from the command-and-control model of the EU's Digital Markets Act by emphasizing guidance through a meta-rule framework to encourage platform self-governance, rather than constraining dynamic digital ecosystems with static lists of prohibited behaviors.

In the context of live-stream e-commerce, the role of state regulation should shift from "dictating what platforms must do" to "setting meta-rules for platform self-governance." Specifically, these meta-rules should encompass three levels: first, requiring platforms to establish auditable quality control processes to ensure traceability in gatekeeping practices; second, requiring platforms to disclose the basic logic behind their traffic allocation rules, thereby enhancing the explainability of algorithmic gatekeeping; and third, requiring platforms to build independent and accountable internal compliance systems to ensure effective oversight. Under these meta-rules, platforms can design specific gatekeeping mechanisms tailored to their own operational characteristics. The institutional advantage of this arrangement lies in its recognition of platforms' comparative strengths in information and technology, while simultaneously embedding their self-governance within an accountable procedural framework.

4.3. Key Nodes of Institutional Embedding

Reducing platforms' structural dependence on top-tier streamers is a fundamental prerequisite for enhancing regulatory autonomy. Feasible pathways include fostering an ecosystem of mid-to-mid-level streamers to diversify traffic sources, promoting cross-platform sharing of supply chain quality information to mitigate informational disadvantages for individual platforms, and establishing mutual recognition mechanisms for cross-platform blacklists and credit records so that the costs of violations are not diminished by platform switching [7]. Existing practices show that Beijing, Zhejiang, and Shanghai have established collaborative mechanisms for online market regulation, guiding the five major platforms—JD.com, Taobao, Pinduoduo, Douyin, and Kuaishou—to jointly sign self-regulation agreements on compliant operations, providing initial institutional infrastructure

for cross-platform governance [16].

Algorithmic transparency and external accountability are key institutional tools for addressing power asymmetry. The "Regulations on the Supervision and Administration of Live-Streaming E-commerce" has already incorporated traffic control into its regulatory toolkit, requiring enhanced algorithmic transparency—an important step toward responding to power imbalances at the technical level [17]. Building on this, platforms could be further required to disclose the core logic of traffic allocation in understandable ways to both regulators and consumers, and to incorporate quality metrics into algorithm optimization objectives. Algorithmic transparency should go beyond mere publication of technical documentation and instead become an auditable, verifiable institutional arrangement.

4.4. Sustainable Conditions for Multi-Actor Collaborative Governance

The activation of consumer reputation pressure requires institutional safeguards. Research shows that consumers' proactive defensive behaviors can generate reputational pressure, incentivizing platforms and streamers to change lax practices; however, this effect depends on sustained public engagement [7]. Therefore, consumer education, convenient complaint mechanisms, and transparent disclosure of enforcement outcomes are essential for maintaining the sustainability of such reputational pressure. The integrated regulatory mechanism proposed by the State Administration for Market Regulation—"online detection, offline investigation"—provides a systemic pathway for transforming consumer complaints into actionable enforcement leads [18].

Substantive industry self-regulation is equally indispensable. Industry self-regulatory organizations should go beyond mere formal agreements and instead take on concrete functions such as establishing quality standards, facilitating compliance information sharing, and issuing internal notifications about violations. Concepts like the "product quality traceability and brand credit file" for live-stream e-commerce proposed by Shanghai municipal deputies, along with practical models of coordinated supervision among Beijing, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, offer feasible directions for making industry self-regulation more effective [13][19].

5. Conclusion

This paper takes the "gatekeeper paradox" as its core concept, systematically analyzing the structural challenges faced by live-streaming e-commerce platforms within their governance systems. The study reveals that gatekeeping failure is not a result of regulatory intensity but rather stems from structural conditions. Platforms simultaneously assume dual roles as commercial operators and governance enforcers, with their gatekeeping behaviors shaped by three interrelated mechanisms: interest dependency, power asymmetry, and institutional incentives. Under current institutional arrangements, "stricter regulation" does not necessarily

lead to "more effective gatekeeping," and may instead foster superficial compliance. Theoretically, this paper advances gatekeeper theory beyond the traditional binary analysis of "capacity-will" toward an analysis grounded in "structural conditions," identifying the institutional root of gatekeeping failure as the inherent contradiction between the institutional design of the gatekeeper role and its ecological position. Using live-streaming e-commerce as a concrete case, it offers an applied institutional analysis for the paradigm of "controlled self-regulation."

In terms of policy implications, the key to sustainable governance lies not in continuous pressure, but in restructuring the incentive framework for platform gatekeeping. Specifically, by reducing structural dependence on top-tier streamers, enhancing algorithmic accountability, and activating multi-stakeholder reputational pressures, effective gatekeeping can be integrated into platforms' long-term interests rather than positioned as a conflicting force. This requires a transformation of the regulatory paradigm from command-and-control to meta-regulation, guiding platform self-governance through procedural requirements and auditable standards.

Primarily based on normative analysis and case discussion, future research could employ empirical analysis of platform governance data to test the differential manifestations of the gatekeeper paradox across different platform types and product categories, and further explore specific design parameters for meta-rule frameworks.

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