

Marketing Evolution and Path Reshaping: A Study of TikTok Short Video Marketing Communication in Chinese Domestic Films

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Abstract:

At present, the Chinese domestic film industry is experiencing a prosperous development. Fueled by robust policy guidance, continuously rising consumer levels, and the vast consumer market, the marketing communication of Chinese films is ushering in new platforms, new methods, and new opportunities. "Film marketing", as a crucial component of the film industry, is receiving unprecedented attention. Simultaneously, the continuous innovation and development of new media technologies are bringing significant changes to the marketing models of Chinese films. To align with the developments of the new media era and attract, retain, and monetize traffic to the maximum extent, the traditional commercial marketing model of films has transformed into a more diverse, sophisticated, and precise Internet-integrated marketing model in the era of new technology. Representing mobile new media, TikTok short videos have rapidly accumulated a large user base since their launch, thanks to their precise market positioning, user-friendly operation, and characteristics such as accurate data-driven content delivery. TikTok has also become an essential channel for marketing communication of domestically produced films. Numerous films have achieved dual success in box office revenue and audience engagement through marketing on TikTok. The new media marketing model, represented by TikTok, is not only contributing to the continuous professionalization and integration of marketing methods, forms, and content in the Chinese film industry but is also bringing higher demands and challenges to the marketing communication of Chinese films.

Keywords:

Chinese Domestic Films, Marketing Communication, Marketing Evolution, Path Reshaping

1. Introduction

The success or failure of a film depends on factors such as creative thinking, filming techniques, artistic quality, and thematic depth. It also relies on effective post-production promotion, packaging, and marketing. However, for a considerable period,

the Chinese film industry has operated under a model of “emphasis on production, neglecting marketing.” This has led to a situation where many outstanding films with significant market potential are unable to effectively reach the consumer market, ultimately resulting in their obscurity, dismal box office performance, or even being lost and overlooked. In 2002, the Chinese film “Hero” gained enormous acclaim and economic value through outstanding promotional methods, marking the beginning of film marketing communication in China. Since then, the Chinese film industry has realized the crucial significance of the marketing communication phase for the overall development of the film market. Today, Chinese film marketing communication has continuously evolved with the development of society and technology. Rational and effective new media marketing strategies have become essential for the widespread dissemination of excellent film works, simultaneously achieving the cultural value and economic benefits that films, as commodities, should attain.

In the context of a media-dominated society, the influence of media has achieved all-encompassing penetration into society. With the rapid development of network technology and continuous innovation in various mobile internet applications, new technologies are actively participating in and changing our daily lives, profoundly impacting and revolutionizing the development of China’s film marketing models. According to the 50th “China Internet Development Status Statistical Report” released by the China Internet Network Information Center in 2022, as of June 2022, the scale of Chinese internet users reached 1.051 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 74.4%. Notably, the user base of short video platforms has shown the most significant growth, reaching 962 million, an increase of 28.05 million from December 2021, constituting 91.5% of the overall internet users. [1] These data indicate that short videos have truly become a phenomenal national application. Leveraging the massive traffic dividends, TikTok short videos have also become a crucial platform for new media marketing in the Chinese film industry. However, it is evident that, while TikTok contributes to the successful marketing and dissemination of domestic films, issues such as excessive marketing hype, lack of innovation in marketing strategies, and the proliferation of fake online accounts (water armies) exist. Due to the constant evolution of technology, the field of film marketing communication faces different problems and new methods and ideas almost every day. In this regard, film marketing communication is a constantly evolving topic, and when faced with new trends and changes in the new media environment, it is essential to promptly assess and summarize the current development status and existing problems of domestic film marketing communication and propose relatively reasonable measures and suggestions.

2. Overview of Research on Marketing of Chinese Domestic Films

2.1. Current Research Status at Home and Abroad

The development of the foreign film industry is relatively early and well-established. Taking the example of the U.S. film industry, it has already formed a relatively complete film marketing system, encompassing discussions on model exploration, experience summarization, development strategies, and theoretical research in film marketing. In the verification and summarization of film marketing experience, for instance, Lampel analyzed the capability evolution process of different eras in the Hollywood film industry and argued that this evolution plays a decisive role in the ultimate box office success of films. [2] Johnson used Marvel as an example to

explore the relationship between the integration of comics and the film industry in the era of media convergence. [3] In the investigation and research of audiences and industry institutions in film marketing, Dellarocas conducted research on online audience reviews of films. [4] Simultaneously, he conducted research on film revenue prediction from the perspective of audience evaluation. [5] Additionally, there is research on film marketing in the digital age, such as Chuck's analysis of the film industry, suggesting that digital technology has brought profound changes and impacts to film production and consumption practices. In terms of research on film industry theory, Robert and others discussed film industry structure, operational mechanisms, technological changes, and other propositions from the perspective of film history. [6] Tino explored issues related to film production, market strategies, socio-economics, and entertainment company structure around the U.S. film industry. [7] Overall, due to the earlier development of industrial technology and film in foreign countries, achievements in film marketing research are more in-depth and have formed a relatively complete research system. Moreover, foreign research in film marketing emphasizes the cross-validation of theory and practice, practice and theory. It excels in summarizing experiences from quantitative data and practical cases, forming corresponding theoretical outcomes, and using theoretical models and data to support specific marketing practices.

Research on film marketing in China started relatively late and has mostly focused on foundational theoretical exploration and practical studies. Firstly, in terms of the basic concepts and theoretical research of domestic films, Peng Kaihan and others analyzed the marketing strategies of the Chinese film industry based on the 4P theory of product, place, promotion, and price. They argued that the Chinese film industry is in a crucial transitional period and needs to quickly introduce professional marketing mechanisms and strategies. [8] Zhang Xiaosha, starting from the "narrowcasting theory," analyzed issues such as the marketing background and strategies of Chinese domestic films. They believed that only more targeted "narrowcasting" marketing could generate the most and hottest topics, thus achieving the best publicity effects. [9] Zhang Xu, guided by the innovation diffusion theory, formulated the important concept of "film market diffusion" and preliminarily constructed the theoretical framework of film market diffusion from a static factor system, enriching the theoretical perspective of film marketing and distribution research. [10] Secondly, research has been conducted on marketing strategies for specific categories of Chinese domestic films, such as art films, animated films, and films with female themes. For instance, Li Jun analyzed and summarized the marketing strategies of current Chinese children's films, [11] while Qian Yidi analyzed the new media marketing status of Chinese art films and summarized three marketing models: "social platforms, online videos, online communities." [12] There is also research on specific film cases such as "Hello Li Huanying," [13] "My Ex and Whys," [14] and "Detective Chinatown," [15] exploring their marketing strategies. Finally, research has been conducted on the marketing channels of Chinese domestic films. This involves studying specific communication channels such as Weibo, WeChat, Tieba, Douban, as well as the transformation from traditional film marketing models to new media marketing models in the Internet era. For example, Jin Xiaonan analyzed the Weibo marketing strategies of Chinese films in the era of big data, constructing a Weibo marketing strategy factor analysis model and a hierarchy selection model, and matching different strategies based on different films. [16] Maoliangbin, using the film "Wolverine 2" as a specific case, analyzed and summarized the marketing strategies and success experiences of the film on the social media site "Douban." [17] Zhao Fangyi

summarized the changes in the form of film marketing channels in the era of all media, from limited to “unlimited,” from one-dimensional evolution to two-way interaction, and from single-function evolution to multi-function, while also pointing out new problems such as vulgar content and unbridled channel technology development in the marketing process. [18]

From the review, the current main topics in the research on the marketing of domestic films in China generally include the basic concepts and theoretical research of marketing, marketing strategy research, marketing channel research, new media film marketing, and the current status and issues of film marketing. These discussions primarily involve disciplines such as journalism and communication, film studies, and marketing. Currently, academic research on film marketing is mainly centered around specific cases, conducting research analysis based on certain theories and applying them to specific marketing cases. There is a relative lack of theoretical development and innovation based on local experiences. However, at the same time, although research on domestic film marketing started relatively late, the achievements in this field are characterized by staying up-to-date, constantly renewing, and having strong practical guidance.

2.2. Conceptual Definition

2.2.1. TikTok Marketing

TikTok, launched by ByteDance in September 2016, is a mobile short video social application. The app supports one-click editing and sharing of images, videos, music, text, tags, and more. It also features social functions such as following local friends, address book friend connections, sharing, likes, comments, live streaming, and video calls. With low entry barriers, strong timeliness, diverse content formats, and the promotion of live streaming for e-commerce over the past few years, TikTok has gained strong social and commercial attributes. In just a few years since its launch, TikTok has attracted a large number of ordinary users, public figures, and brand enterprises, becoming a phenomenal national application. According to official data from TikTok, as of 2020 (data for 2021-2023 not disclosed at the time of translation), it has a staggering 600 million daily active users and an average of 400 million daily video searches. [19] These figures indicate that TikTok has a traffic advantage and market resources that are difficult for similar platforms to match. With a vast user base spanning all age groups, dynamic operational strategies, continually evolving application features, and powerful algorithmic recommendation technology, TikTok provides an excellent commercial environment for various “TikTok + Marketing” approaches.

2.2.2. Film Industry

Film, as a type of “media product,” possesses both “cultural” and “economic” attributes of media products. The film industry is also a part of the cultural industry. In terms of industry composition, the film industry includes major components such as pre-production scriptwriting, shooting and production, marketing and distribution, screening and broadcasting. It also encompasses related aspects in the post-production phase, such as entertainment management, advertising, and peripheral products. The operational outcomes of the film industry are directly manifested as “films”, which serve as cultural products conveying cultural values and satisfying people's spiritual needs. Simultaneously, films play a crucial role in representing the ideological stance

of a nation, profoundly influencing people's thoughts, attitudes, and societal behaviors, reflecting the cultural attributes of the film industry. Furthermore, as a "media product" itself, a film holds economic exchange value. Each stage of the film industry contributes to objective socio-economic benefits, underscoring the economic attributes of the film industry. The film industry is unique, and for stable development, it is essential to strengthen a professional and standardized marketing path for films.

2.2.3. Film Marketing

Film marketing encompasses two aspects. Firstly, it involves promoting and marketing corporate brands through embedded sponsored advertisements within films. Secondly, it involves the marketing of the films themselves, encompassing the management and sales of the films. This is a crucial component within the film industry chain. [20] This article primarily focuses on discussions related to film marketing in the second sense. Specifically, film marketing includes the promotion and advertising of the entire creative process, such as film script creation, launch ceremonies, formal shooting, behind-the-scenes footage, premieres, and peripheral products. This process aims to achieve box office success upon the film's official release and broadcast, realizing the economic value of the film as a media product.

2.3. Theoretical Foundation

2.3.1. 4i Theory

Marketing theories have evolved with the development of time, and the 4i Marketing Theory is an evolution from the 4P Marketing Theory of the 1960s and the 4C Theory of the 1990s. The 4P theory emphasizes four factors influencing enterprise marketing: product, price, place, and promotion. The 4C theory focuses on the subjective role of enterprises in the marketing process, representing a business-centric marketing theory. With the development of time and internet technology, users are no longer passive recipients of marketing information but have become active collectors of such information. The subjective desire of users to receive information has grown stronger, and the channels have become more diverse. This led to the emergence of the 4i Theory, emphasizing content interaction and a user-centric approach. The 4i Theory advocates using internet technology to implement marketing strategies that are interesting, arouse interests, involve interaction, and are personalized. [21] This theory places importance on marketing content and adopts an approach that aligns with user needs, making it a marketing theory suitable for the current internet era.

2.3.2. STP Theory

STP theory is the core of modern marketing theory, comprising three elements: market segmentation, target market, and market positioning. It was further developed and refined by the American marketing scholar Philip Kotler based on the theory of Wendell Smith, eventually forming the mature STP theory. The essence of this theory is that, based on a certain market segmentation, a company determines its target market and ultimately positions its products or services in a specific location within the target market. [22] This theory suggests that the consumer market is a comprehensive, dynamic, and complex entity, and no company can cater to all consumer needs in the market. Therefore, it is necessary to segment the market according to different criteria based on the diverse consumption needs of different users. Subsequently, companies should select a target market based on differences in

consumer styles, behavior, and habits. At the same time, emphasis should be placed on the comprehensive use of the target market and positioning, highlighting the differentiation characteristics of their products. Only through this approach can a company achieve a competitive advantage in the marketing of similar products.

2.3.3. Integrated Communication Theory

Integrated marketing communication theory was proposed by Schultz and others in the 1990s. Schultz once stated that before integrated marketing communication, the message was “consumers, please pay attention,” but now it has been replaced by “pay attention, consumers.” [23] This replacement reveals a shift in the communication relationship between businesses and consumers. Companies no longer view consumers as singular, passive information recipients. To prevent consumers from being overwhelmed by a vast amount of information, companies need to focus on the consumer, use various interactive modes in a coordinated manner, and establish a more comprehensive brand image and a mutually beneficial two-way interactive relationship with users.

3. Early Marketing Models and Limitations of Chinese Domestic Films

3.1. Traditional Chinese Film Marketing Model

In the early days of the People’s Republic of China, the development of Chinese cinema was within the framework of a “unified purchase and exclusive distribution” model. Aspects such as film type, production, quantity, and distribution were all centrally planned by the higher authorities of the film studios. Under this model, although films did not require corresponding marketing strategies, it greatly constrained the development of the Chinese film industry. In 1993, China released reforms for the film industry mechanism, gradually breaking the original “unified sales and purchase” model. The film industry was required to seek development and take on its own financial responsibilities. Consequently, film marketing began to gain attention within the industry. After years of development, it was not until 2002, with the release of the film “Hero” directed by Zhang Yimou, that the curtain officially rose on film marketing in China. Leveraging the director’s reputation and employing various grand promotional methods such as commercial TV advertisements and luxurious premiere locations, the film achieved a box office success of 250 million yuan shortly after its release, realizing a win-win situation for both commercial success and popularity. It was during this period that the Chinese film industry began to realize the importance of film marketing.

To understand why the film industry has increasingly embraced marketing on the TikTok platform, it is essential to comprehend the traditional film marketing models and their limitations. Through an examination, it is evident that the early Chinese film marketing model primarily encompassed the following three aspects:

3.1.1. Cinema Slot Marketing Model

The cinema slot marketing model is the most common marketing approach, where film producers collaborate with cinema chains for screening slots. The key to successful screenings lies in the scheduling of slots. After years of exploration, cinema slot scheduling has established peak periods such as the “Spring Festival New Year Slot”, “National Day Golden Week Slot”, and “May Day Holiday Slot.”

Cinemas promote films to the audience before release, providing screening information, including cast lineup, film genre, duration, exciting plot points, ticket prices, purchasing channels, promotional interactions, etc. This promotional information is primarily displayed inside the cinema venue. Additionally, some cinema chains utilize methods like posters, billboards, flyers, and television advertisements for corresponding promotions.

3.1.2. Print Media Marketing Model

In the era of traditional media, due to the high cost of television advertising, print media such as newspapers, magazines, outdoor billboards, and flyers became the primary platforms for film marketing. In newspapers, film marketing primarily took the form of film production reports and film reviews. Journalists and critics with high cultural literacy and sharp writing skills played a crucial role in effectively promoting films through their materials published in newspapers. Magazines, especially entertainment and literary magazines, are noteworthy in this context. Magazines offer effective layout and design, allowing for series reports on film materials, image inserts, cover advertisements, and other means for efficient film promotion. Lastly, outdoor billboards and flyers serve as the most economical and straightforward promotional methods, acting as the “business card” for the film. Film posters or flyers, through artistic layout and design, can convey the film’s theme, plot, content, cast, and pricing—the fundamental elements—in the most direct and intuitive manner.

3.1.3. Offline Roadshow Marketing Model

The film offline roadshow marketing model refers to activities initiated by film producers, including directors and lead actors, such as press conferences or fan meetings targeting fans or potential market users. Film press conferences mainly consist of news reporters, entertainment journalists, and a small number of market users. This offline marketing model primarily utilizes a “Q&A” interactive format, which may be challenging to liven up the atmosphere and is considered relatively conventional, making it difficult to attract high attention. In contrast, the offline roadshow or fan meeting model is more down-to-earth. The creative team conducts promotional tours in different locations and cities, engaging in close and intimate interactions with their fans. This approach is highly favored by a large audience of young users and can significantly stimulate their interest and consumer desires.

3.2. The Limitations of Early Film Marketing Models

3.2.1. Constraints of Communication Platforms

During the era of traditional media, constrained by technological developments, films could only be promoted through means such as cinema schedules, television, print media, offline roadshows, etc. Although user loyalty to traditional media was relatively high during this period, these marketing models required significant human, material, and financial resources. They were also time-consuming and slow to yield results. Additionally, there were high barriers between different communication platforms, making it challenging to achieve effective integrated marketing communication. However, in the era of new media, film production teams can leverage social media for film marketing, which offers fast turnaround, low costs, and the ability to achieve cross-platform integrated marketing. This not only significantly reduces marketing costs but also expands the reach of information dissemination,

breaking down the barriers between different communication platforms through cross-platform sharing and interaction.

3.2.2. The Unidirectionality of Interaction Methods

In the traditional film marketing model, audiences could only passively receive information. This was a static, superficial marketing model that neglected the subjective needs of the audience. Except for offline roadshows, other marketing methods had difficulty providing interactive experiences with the production team. It was challenging to stimulate audience interest and consumer desires. In the era of new media, various mobile social media platforms possess characteristics such as fast dissemination, wide reach, and strong interactivity. Audiences can engage in real-time interaction with the production team through online sharing, forwarding, commenting, etc. This not only enhances the interactive experience for the audience but also increases audience loyalty. Simultaneously, these characteristics greatly alter the unidirectional communication pattern of traditional film marketing.

3.2.3. Ambiguity in Audience Positioning

Historically, film audiences have been vast and diverse, with different groups having distinct individual needs. The longstanding unidirectional communication pattern has made it challenging for traditional film marketing models to interact with and understand this extensive, complex, and ever-changing audience base. This difficulty in conducting reasonable “market segmentation” leads to the ambiguity of audience positioning. In the era of new media, film producers can leverage big data technology to create accurate “user profiles” of the audience, understanding their personal preferences, consumption habits, and spending capacity. This allows for precise audience positioning and personalized recommendations. Real-time data analysis also enables continuous adjustment of marketing strategies based on changes in audience behavior.

4. The Current State of TikTok Marketing Communication for Chinese Domestic Films

4.1. Strategies Employed in TikTok Marketing Communication

4.1.1. Seizing the Traffic Dividend, Initiating “Interactive Marketing”

The core theory of marketing has evolved from the initial 4P theory to the 4C theory and, more recently, to the 4I theory. The most significant change in this evolution is the emphasis on placing the user at the center and engaging in interactive marketing to enhance audience loyalty and cohesion with the enterprise. Currently, the most notable feature of the marketing communication strategy for Chinese domestic films is the timely capture of the era's traffic dividend, leveraging social new media platforms to engage in diverse interactions with the audience.

Before major film official teams started TikTok marketing communication, the promotion of films on TikTok was primarily carried out through the accounts of some internet celebrities, film audiences, and lead actors, where they would release short video clips related to the movies. This marketing approach was relatively scattered and one-sided, making it challenging to generate a coordinated promotional effort. It wasn't until 2017 that the team behind the movie “The Ex-File 3” was the first to register an official TikTok account for marketing communication, achieving success.

Subsequently, films like “Hi, Mom”, “The Eight Hundred”, “Dying to Survive”, and others followed suit, opening official accounts on TikTok for film promotion and achieving commendable results.

In the early stages, most of the film marketing and promotion on TikTok relied primarily on superficial interactive modes such as releasing video clips and responding to comments. After a period of development, the TikTok interactive marketing strategies employed by film official teams became more diversified. For example, in collaboration with TikTok, the official team of the film “Hi, Mom” created special effects resembling the protagonist Li Huanying. Through the technical combination of hairstyles, clothing, hot scenes, and behind-the-scenes footage, along with the creative use of stickers and the film’s background music, users could experience being part of the movie scenes with a “similar appearance.” In addition, live interactive methods gained favor among many film teams. For instance, the cast of the film “Beneficiary”, including actors Da Peng and Liu Yan, personally conducted live streaming sessions for e-commerce, where users could not only purchase discounted movie tickets for 0.1 yuan in the live stream but also engage in real-time interaction with the main cast. All these marketing and promotional methods deployed on the TikTok platform enhance audience interaction experiences in a more timely, effective, and entertaining manner.

4.1.2. Keeping up with the hot trends and advocating "entertaining marketing"

As the TikTok platform's features continue to evolve, film official teams can utilize various technical means to engage in more entertaining marketing and communication modes. In addition to the aforementioned techniques, such as creating special effects resembling the protagonist, the official teams have also employed a series of entertaining editing techniques for homepage works. This includes closely following hot trends by incorporating current social hotspots, entertainment highlights, and popular editing trends into their TikTok promotional works. They enhance the users’ “video-scrolling” experience through popular background music (BGM) editing, behind-the-scenes collage editing, transformation editing, trendy humorous captions, and brainwashing music, among other methods. Moreover, the film official teams have utilized marketing methods imitating “famous scenes” from the films. For example, in the film “Man Jiang Hong”, there is a famous scene where the “chief detective team” urgently runs throughout the city to the grand tune of “domineering Henan opera.” The film official team wrote in the TikTok caption, “Seen the way characters walk after watching ‘Man Jiang Hong’?! Join the challenge and walk together!” This quickly inspired numerous netizens to imitate the scene, with 6113 people participating in the challenge on that day, and the related topic generating 230 million views. Many netizens also expressed that the scene was “magical and brainwashing” and that “the aftertaste is too strong, I can’t walk normally anymore.” [24] Similar approaches include the marketing use of film theme song covers, voiceovers for film character dialogues, film detail question-and-answer challenges, lucky fan draws, and various other entertaining marketing methods. These highly amusing and participatory marketing strategies not only fully stimulate audience interest and curiosity but also increase user engagement and ultimately boost the desire to watch the film.

4.1.3. Utilizing agenda-setting for “topic marketing”

The agenda-setting perspective was initially introduced in the book “Public Opinion” by Walter Lippmann and was formally proposed as a theory by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. This theory suggests that the mass media cannot influence how people think but can influence what people think about. Therefore, the topics provided or set by the mass media can significantly impact people’s understanding of important matters. In the context of domestic film marketing on TikTok, the most common application of agenda-setting is through “setting labeled topics.” Throughout the film’s release process, to attract audience attention and discussions, film official teams often create hot topics through various means such as behind-the-scenes revelations, shipping character pairings, and catering to current hot trends. Additionally, a more direct approach is to generate hot topics by combining videos, captions, and hashtags. These topics often leverage trending themes to significantly increase the views, comments, and shares related to the work. In addition to the aforementioned “imitation of famous scenes” topic setting for the film “Man Jiang Hong”, another example is the film “The Wandering Earth2.” In the early stages of its release, the film’s official team utilized TikTok’s hashtag feature to set various topics such as “#The Wandering Earth2”, “#The Wandering Earth2 Is Too Touching”, and “#The Wandering Earth2 Aftermath”. The related videos for these topics garnered 9.74 billion views, 430 million views, and 180 million views, respectively. In the topic “#The Wandering Earth2 Is Too Touching”, the official team paired a heartwarming segment from the movie, where the character played by Sha Yi, Zhang Peng, decides to protect unmarried young people to save humanity. He assigns the “no return” mission to team members over 50, saying, “China Aerospace Flying Squadron, those over fifty, step forward!” This emotional scene combined with the labeled topic instantly sparked widespread discussion among netizens. Many users posted content with the “#The Wandering Earth2 Is Too Touching” hashtag, expressing sentiments like “Our years are peaceful because people are carrying the weight for us” and “This line instantly broke my defenses; quickly, let’s go and support it.” [25] It’s evident that setting such topics and sparking discussions has brought significant heat and traffic to film marketing and promotion.

4.1.4. Unearthing Film Sentiment, Implementing “Emotional Marketing”

Emotional marketing is a common approach in marketing that primarily aims to fully tap into and leverage the audience’s deep-seated emotions, thereby engaging the audience and eliciting strong emotional resonance. This marketing strategy is also prevalent in the TikTok film marketing and promotion of domestic films. For instance, before the release of the movie “Me and My Hometown”, numerous emotionally nuanced and nostalgic snippets related to hometown were shared through TikTok videos. These works depicted simple family members, and serene and beautiful hometown scenes, devoid of the bustling cityscapes. Simultaneously, the hashtag “#Me And My Hometown” was set as a discussion topic. These works and topics touched the deep-seated hometown emotions of many netizens. Among these netizens were young students studying away from home, migrant workers who spent years working elsewhere, and expatriates living in foreign lands. Many users, through comments, topic-related posts, and other means, shared their stories about their hometown, reminisced about scenes from their memories, and expressed their inner sentiments. This also sparked discussions on various topics related to hometown, such as “#Me And My Hometown Food” (topic video views: 16.86 billion), “#Me And My Hometown Water” (topic video views: 220 million), “#Me And My Hometown Specialty” (topic video views: 17.17 million), [26] and more. Moreover, there are

examples of marketing that tap into the romantic and love-related emotions of the audience. For instance, the movie “The Sorrow That Cannot Shed Tears” was scheduled to be released on Valentine’s Day in 2023. The official TikTok account homepage introduced the film with the caption, “The first Valentine’s Day after liberation, I want to spend it with you!” (“Liberation” refers to the gradual improvement in the COVID-19 situation.) The promotional video on the homepage primarily featured keywords related to “secret love”, “confession”, “long-distance relationship”, “Valentine’s Day”, and more.[27] There are also instances where the audience's patriotic emotions and national sentiments are mobilized for marketing. For example, the movie “Man Jiang Hong” is themed around promoting the patriotism of the renowned general Yue Fei. In their TikTok works, the official team often uses captions like “eyes filled with warm tears”, “heart filled with a sense of justice”, “patriotic feelings”, “reciting poems”, and “full of enthusiasm”. They also introduced TikTok-specific activities, such as the “Man Jiang Hong” red-themed sticker special effects and a Yue Fei poem recitation challenge. [28] This marketing model reaches deep into the emotional core of the audience, triggering strong emotional resonance, and bridging the psychological distance between information dissemination and reception. It enables the audience to actively and willingly engage in interactions, receive information, and contribute to the promotion and publicity of the film.

4.1.5. Utilizing Platform Features for "Viral Marketing"

Simply put, viral marketing refers to marketing information that, like a “virus”, can rapidly replicate and spread, infecting as many target audiences as possible in a short period. Viral marketing has two main characteristics: firstly, before the audience is even aware, marketing information has spread to every corner, showing exponential growth trends. Secondly, viral marketing is generally based on social media platforms. [29] Due to the timeliness, fragmentation, and cross-temporal characteristics of social new media, the current information dissemination speed and range are faster and broader than any previous era. On the TikTok platform, the official film team can use various technical means such as sticker effects, background music, editing techniques, topic setting, TikTok homepage cover recommendations, pre-search in the search bar, popular rankings, algorithm recommendations, etc. They can also employ marketing activities like scene collaboration, imitation of famous scenes, theme song cover, scene dubbing, dialogue recitation, activity lotteries, etc., to achieve “viral marketing” of marketing information. In this marketing and communication model, the audience has “nowhere to hide”. For example, the box office success of the film “The Ex-File 3” owes much to its outstanding viral marketing communication strategy. In the movie, there is a famous scene where the protagonist eats mangoes after a breakup. The official account operators seized the opportunity to initiate the “Eat Mango Topic” and “Eat Mango Challenge”. In just a few days, users opening TikTok to watch videos found that the comment section, popular rankings, and recommended video content were almost dominated by topics related to “eating mangoes”. Many users joined the challenge camp to shoot videos. The videos were set to the theme song of the movie “Decent”, featuring scenes of crying while eating mangoes. The campaign also involved reposting, sharing, interactive comments, and even various creative challenges based on the original content. In a certain sense, this viral marketing significantly expanded the film's marketing and promotion reach.

4.2. Highlights and Advantages of TikTok Marketing Communication

Through the above analysis, it can be observed that Chinese domestic films have achieved a win-win situation in terms of box office and popularity by employing various marketing methods on the TikTok platform, such as “Interactive Marketing”, “Entertaining Marketing”, “Topic Marketing”, “Emotional Marketing”, and “Viral Marketing.” It is evident that utilizing TikTok for film marketing is indeed an operational, replicable, and successful marketing strategy. In addition to the advantages mentioned above, the TikTok marketing communication for Chinese domestic films includes three other aspects of advantages:

4.2.1. Effective Use of Online Resources, Lowering Marketing Costs

Compared to traditional marketing models, various TikTok marketing communication methods today only require leveraging the platform and existing traffic, greatly reducing the marketing costs for films. However, the prerequisite is that the official operators of the film need to possess professional skills in new media operations and expertise in marketing. Only with these capabilities can they achieve success while lowering marketing costs.

4.2.2. Diverse Marketing Methods for Broader Audience Coverage

In traditional marketing approaches, the audience is characterized by wide-ranging, complexity, and dispersion, making it challenging to conduct effective market segmentation and implement targeted marketing strategies. On the TikTok platform, however, the audience spans various age groups and is relatively concentrated, providing a clearer view of the audience and marketing market. Additionally, leveraging big data technology for user profiling is possible, facilitating the implementation of more targeted and goal-oriented marketing methods.

4.2.3. Comprehensive Support from TikTok Official Channels with Strong Assistance

TikTok continuously upgrades and innovates its technological methods, introducing new and entertaining stickers, effects, background music (BGM), AI face-swapping, immersive playback, interactive collaboration, creative live streaming, and other engaging features in line with current trends. Simultaneously, the platform continually optimizes its built-in functions. Users can search for movies through the search bar, and popular films currently in theaters may offer online discounts for ticket purchases or online viewing on TikTok. Furthermore, TikTok Official Channels support Chinese domestic films extensively through various measures, such as software splash screen ads, organizing movie challenges, collaborating with multiple enterprises for joint marketing, and providing exposure through traffic, demonstrating substantial and multifaceted assistance to domestic film marketing.

5. Misconceptions in the TikTok Marketing of Chinese Domestic Films

5.1. Excessive Marketing Leading to Backfired Effects

In the era of new media, where everyone has a voice, many believe that only high-frequency and high-intensity information dissemination, sharing, and interactive behaviors can generate traffic and capture attention. This has resulted in characteristics such as fragmented and overwhelming information. In terms of content production for the marketing of Chinese domestic films, numerous film teams start

releasing content from the preparation phase, continuing until the end of the film's screening. The marketing content can reach several hundred pieces, and various internet celebrities and self-media accounts join the marketing campaign for business cooperation and traffic riding. A plethora of challenges, collaborative works, hot topics, imitations of famous scenes, and other marketing content saturate the platform, spreading comprehensively like viral replication. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that many video works contain ineffective marketing content. Some topic-related works garner millions of views and participation, while others struggle with only a few thousand views and engagements. Often, the excessive intensity, high frequency, and overly dense marketing approaches tend to decrease audience favorability, triggering a backlash and resistance among viewers. Consequently, this can lead to the unintended consequence of the marketing efforts working against their intended goals.

5.2. Similar Means Resulting in Aesthetic Fatigue Among Marketing Audiences

Through observation, it is evident that most teams conducting film marketing on TikTok almost uniformly employ methods such as riding on hot topics, creating sensationalism, setting trends, using special effects, organizing competitions, and establishing topics. When a social hot topic or trending discussion emerges, teams often promptly create corresponding topics to ride the wave and capture attention. When a film achieves success due to a particular marketing method, other teams quickly follow suit, eager to imitate. Few teams genuinely focus on creating high-quality marketing content based on the content quality, core characteristics, and distinctive highlights of their own film. Instead, they adopt a practice of using monotonous interactive forms and similar marketing content and methods. While these marketing methods may attract audience attention in the short term, taking a long-term perspective reveals that it is challenging to genuinely resonate with the audience and evoke a lasting impact. Over time, this approach is prone to causing aesthetic fatigue among the audience.

5.3. Premature Spoilers Leading to Loss of Marketing Mystery

Movies are consumable content, and audiences mostly pay for the story and plot of the film. This consumption experience is filled with mystery, anticipation, and fulfillment. However, many film marketing works are inundated with behind-the-scenes footage, production details, climactic scenes, and theme interpretations. While these contents to some extent can attract audience attention and discussion, they also have the potential to prematurely reveal plot details. Viewers can deduce the general plot themes and core content through most video clips, especially the officially released climax scenes. This significantly diminishes the mystery of the movie, reducing the audience's desire to consume by going to the cinema.

5.4. Proliferation of Paid Commentaries Leading to Chaotic Marketing Environment

Stimulated by commercial interests, a large number of "internet water armies" flood various social media platforms. The comment sections of many TikTok marketing videos are filled with a plethora of homogeneous information or malicious evaluations by self-media accounts, aiming to create negative impressions. Some film teams, driven by the pursuit of short-term economic benefits, engage in false marketing, exaggerated marketing, data fabrication, and price wars. They may also employ

extensive hiring of internet celebrities, self-media accounts, or internet water armies to flood the platform, manipulate opinions, and maliciously undermine competitors. While the emergence of online marketing could have contributed to the positive development of China's film industry by creating better marketing methods and environments, the use of these improper marketing tactics not only makes it difficult for high-quality films to enter the public eye but also disrupts industry order. This leads to a more serious vicious cycle of competition, causing the overall market environment to deteriorate.

6. Reshaping the Path of Chinese Domestic Film Marketing and Promotion on TikTok

6.1. Leveraging Big Data Algorithm Mechanism for Precision Marketing

If the audience is likened to fish, then in the traditional marketing market, the audience is scattered in the "ocean", making it challenging to grasp. In today's TikTok online marketing market, the audience is relatively concentrated in this "pond". However, this does not mean that the traditional "casting a wide net" approach is still suitable for the current marketing situation. While TikTok's audience has a large base, broad coverage, and strong aggregation, there are still internal differences in terms of comprehensiveness, complexity, and variability. Therefore, when Chinese domestic films engage in TikTok marketing and promotion, they should not blindly pursue the quantity of works or view short video audiences as a single entity. In the process of TikTok short video marketing, traditional marketing practices such as market research, product analysis, and user analysis remain essential. During this process, it is crucial to fully utilize big data technology by analyzing backend data such as comments, likes, and shares on works. This analysis aims to create user profiles considering factors like user characteristics, media habits, style preferences, and purchasing power. This approach enables a more personalized and precise marketing strategy.

6.2. Integrating Innovative Marketing Methods to Create Series Brand IP

The current TikTok marketing model for Chinese domestic films needs to fully leverage the characteristics of the internet, integrate innovative marketing methods, and avoid blindly following the trend by using homogenized marketing approaches just to ride on trends or attract attention. It is essential to continually innovate marketing methods by fully exploring and integrating the unique features, highlights, and meanings of the films. This involves releasing marketing content that is short, concise, rich in content, and well-produced. Timely use of big data analysis to understand audience feedback, optimize algorithm recommendation mechanisms, and dynamically adjust marketing strategies is crucial. Additionally, creating a brand image through serialized, high-quality, and distinctive marketing methods is important. This approach aims to build a series of brand IPs, providing audiences with more personalized, three-dimensional, and diverse marketing content.

6.3. Strengthening Industry Self-discipline and Optimizing the Marketing Environment

In the increasingly competitive market environment, many marketing teams resort to unethical and even illegal competition methods for short-term economic benefits. Practices such as false marketing, exaggeration, data fabrication, price wars, hiring internet trolls for malicious comments, flooding comments for influence, and steering

public opinion are rampant. These behaviors severely suppress the survival and development space of conscientious works, disrupt industry order, and damage the healthy development ecosystem of the industry. It even poses a serious hindrance to the overall development of China's film industry. While national regulatory bodies need to strengthen supervision and governance, there is also a need to enhance industry self-discipline awareness. Legal advocacy should be strengthened, encouraging relevant films to exercise reasonable rights protection and imposing heavier penalties for violations. Implementing a multi-level industry supervision model involving top-level governance, social participation, and internal industry oversight is crucial. Adopting multiple measures will promote the healthy development of the Chinese film industry and film marketing.

Conflicts of Interest

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