

Film Marketing in the Age of the Mobile Media How the Chinese Effectively Promote Their Films Through Douyin (Tik Tok)

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Abstract: Hailed as one of China's most profitable blockbusters to date, *Changjin Lake* is a film about the People's Volunteer Army fighting in North Korea. The combat troops on the eastern front pursued the enemy with iron-like will and heroic fighting spirit in a cold and harsh environment. They fought heroically and reversed the situation on the battlefield, showing their military strength and national prestige. Released in 2021, it has been reported that *Changjin Lake* underwent a box office gross of 5.694 billion nation-wide. Given its box office success, it is obvious that *Changjin Lake* has a pretty good audiovisual quality. However, its stunning audiovisual quality does not account for the only reason behind its domestic success. According to public information released by *Changjin Lake*'s publicity team in October 2021, the film's official Douyin account had 2.64 million fans, and its three Douyin videos had more than 100 million views in a single stream while the film was widely shown in cinemas. In total, Douyin videos about *Changjin Lake* has been viewed more than 11.25 billion times. As exemplified by *Changjin Lake*'s extraordinary market performance, with the popularization of short video genres, Douyin and other platforms in recent years have become an important publicity channel for the promotion of commercial films.

Keywords: social media, Douyin, film, publicity, propaganda

1. Introduction

To attract the audience into the cinema, filmmakers need to cooperate with the emerging media, which has the technological advantage. In addition, new media as an integrated marketing channel can provide a broader space for the dissemination and promotion of film-related information. One of the most revolutionary changes should be the use of mobile media. The portability of tablets and smartphones has given viewers unprecedented freedom in their choice of viewing time and space. At the same time, audiences in the screening room also have the potential to be transformed into countless video platform users across different ages, genders, regions, and times. The mass media campaigns carried out by the new media aims to spread certain commercial incentives through its diversified platforms, thus achieving an impact and even a change in the perception, attitudes, and behavior of the audience. These users are empowered to express themselves and communicate freely, developing new social relationships to share the experience of watching films. However, audience attention is a scarce resource. Due to dissemination of a tremendous amount of information regarding various films, many films often find themselves unable to reinforce an unforgettable impression in

the audience's mind. Therefore, film marketing's process of information dissemination must be concise, thematized, and accurate in order for the mobile platform users to grasp the rhythm of communication. The virtual space becomes the primary site of interaction among the mobile platform users. The websites may be silent and lonely for many users: the internet is a cold, heartless interface that cannot effectively convey people's feelings through its display of words and images. In other words, often internet-users are turned into participants who passively accept new knowledge and information. And the virtual space built on mobile apps in smart phones, on the contrary, strengthens the emotional connection as people interact with each other. With that being said, the film-watching scene changes from silence to noise, from fixed to moving, from passive to active. Film itself is a combination of technology and art. Changes of the film-watching scene also bring about the changes in the audience's watching behavior and how the aesthetic characteristics of them could be perceived by its viewers. In order to better convey the film's profound cultural relevance to, and present the visual effects in front of the audience, the development of film must make rational use of the new media environment, such as technical means, means of communication, and so on.

The emergence of new media has broken down the traditional barriers that are often associated with propaganda. Various new modes of communication, represented by Douyin for instance, have made the new content more and more convenient and fast to spread to the public. This provides many new types of platform for traditional media propaganda. Such a new media platform should also be understood as an advertising media. In this light, it is characterized by its comprehensiveness and specificity in regard to the transmission of market-related information among its viewers. That is to say, the short video marketing should construct the textual content which has the inner connection with the film so that the short video and the film have the "intertextuality." Douyin short video uses musical text, character dubbing, behavioral language, video images, and other symbols to build a concise, fragmented text story. In essence, this process of blending and coordination is the 'intertextuality' between texts. Film marketing is the marketing of artworks. Because of the non-standardized characteristics of artworks, workload for its media dissemination is enormous, and in the need of formulating a systematic, multi-level, multi-angle communication strategy. With that being said, on account of the related-professionals' collaborative effort, a certain film would thus have a greater impact, allowing it to have a stronger artistic appeal.

This article will take *Hi, Mom* as an example, analyzing its film content, marketing, and release time to explore the film's communication strategy. This article argues that, based on an extensive case study of this Chinese blockbuster, film marketing is proved to be inseparable from the new media publicity and audience recognition, and it is vital for the film marketing professionals to be conscious of how the film is positioned, its potential message and how it intends to impress the audience. Since *Hi, Mom* is in "a warm fantasy comedy film," warmth is its core value, and comedy is its genre. Jia Ling's goal in making this film is to heal the trauma of her mother's sudden death, to be grateful for her mother's upbringing, to make up for the regret and debt of not being able to be with her mother when Jia wants to be with her, and to overcome the guilt of not being able to bring her face to face because of her stubbornness and incompetence. Therefore, her intention to create this film is sincere and firm, and not just an external goal. This creative motivation is the premise of this work that can move people. In combination of the two, the fantastical aspect of a warm comedy brings light to the central characteristic of the story. Each of these elements is easy for the audience to understand. Still, together they need to give the audience enough information to gain recognition because the audience cannot imagine the feelings of warmth, fantasy, and comedy. In short, the film tells the story of Jia Xiaoling, the heroine, who travels back in time to touch young parents and their dreams after experiencing the grief of being unable to stay close while her son wants to support her [1]. The title character is Jia Ling's unexpectedly deceased mother based on the short story of the same name and Jia Ling's own experience. In the film, the young Li Huanying (played by Zhang Xiaofei) takes part

in the shooting process of that look, first to prepare the emotional ground for this look, polished for two hours. Throughout its release in China during the holiday season in 2021, *Hi, Mom* gradually became the most profitable film of the year.

2. Fandom, Special Effects and the Holiday Season: *Hi, Mom*'s Marketing Strategies on the Social Media

First of all, *Hi, Mom* opened on Oct. 29, 2020, with three short videos, followed by constant updates to promote the film and interact with the audience. As the leading propaganda platform for the film, the short video of Douyin in *Hi, Mom* takes the audience as the center, scrupulously abides by the law of the film propaganda and dissemination, and unifies the audience feedback and the audience guidance. It has thus made the correct demonstration for the successful release of the film propaganda and the widespread dissemination, as well as the audience guidance. In addition, the film also uses short video propaganda, from the theory of communication, to adapt to the vast audience "fragmented" reading habits, because of its visual, multimedia, full coverage of the mass cultural communication characteristics, so that the film Profession and the audience have a tremendous increase in contact rate. The content is the essential part of video communication, and the audience accepts the subject matter, which is the key to the success of short video communication. Many short marketing videos for *Hi, Mom*, released on Douyin, were based on the audience's logical needs. For example, the marketing team developed "Hi, Mom," a 1980s cross-dressing special effect, and it caused a wave of crossdressing videos featuring Jia Ling, Shen Teng, Zhang Xiaofei and Michael Chen, all famous Chinese comedians, whose Douyin accounts work in concert with the film's official accounts. Star communication is to attract the audience's attention with the help of the star effect to achieve the goal of communication. The most common way is to use the word of a star to release information about a film. The release is under the overall information management of the film and the star account of the film will draw the audience's attention during the promotion period, to bring a lot of exposure to the film. Known for its sophisticated casting of northeastern comedians including Shen Teng and Zhang Xiaofei, *Hi, Mom* is representative of the so-called "northeast taste of the Chinese comedic style." Originated from the northeastern regions in China, such a comedic style is most known for its warmth and delicate narrative techniques. Through the story of expression, *Hi, Mom* succeeded in delivering to the audience the core belief that "letting mother be happier" is essential to a healthy parent-child relationship.

Secondly, given that the film was only shown in cinemas, many behind-the-scenes tidbits are released through short videos posted on Douyin. The behind-the-scenes tidbits are an essential part of film production, reflecting the production process of the film, in which the highlights of the film and the highlights of the shooting process are not used, which will give the audience more insights into the story behind the film. More specifically speaking, the cultural charm of the director can be read as a "brand" of the film's market value. Through the entire film production process, the director is the core and soul of the team. Whether during the early film creation, mid-term filming or post-production process, the director plays a leading role. As a new director, Jia Ling's status as a comedian carries with it a certain amount of attention. In her works, she shows a new self, putting aside her humorous side and bringing a role full of warmth and positive energy to everyone. For example, as a behind-the-scenes tidbit has shown, Jia Ling, the director and leading actor of film, reveals her strong, personal connection with the film to the Douyin viewers: Because the film is based on Jia Ling's true story, it is overwhelmed by her personal emotions. During the shooting of a scene where her mother comes to say goodbye to her, Jia Ling again and again swings into a sad mood, bursting into tears. Moved by Jia's real emotions, Liu Jia, the actor who plays her mother also fails to complete her shot in this scene. By showing the Douyin viewers this behind-the-scenes clip, the new media marketing

team for *Hi, Mom* sought to let the audience know more about director Jia Ling's true feelings about this project. While touching many hearts, this particular short video received 27,000 likes.

Thirdly, the film tells the story of Jia Xiaoling, the heroine, who travels back in time to inspire young parents and their dreams after experiencing the grief of "having a child but not staying close to them. [3]" Based on Jia Ling's own personal story, the title character [Li Huanying] of the film actually refers to Jia's unexpectedly deceased mother. The short video shows Jia Ling's dedication to making the film and the seriousness and cuteness of her first collaboration with the actors as a director, allowing more netizens to learn more about the scenes, the story, and its filmmakers. Since its release on the first day of the Lunar New Year in 2021, the film's box office and reputation have skyrocketed. To show warmth, one must express the relationship between two specific people, and express one's fantasy toward the other. By telling a story about the passage of time, *Hi, Mom* is an interesting combination of family drama and comedy. More importantly, the success of such a genre combination (family drama and comedy) heavily relies on casting, character setting, and character relationships. Based on such logical thinking, the marketing strategy of *Hi, Mom* is established as "the story and moving of the tragic daughter and the dead mother traveling back to the 1980s". Under such a theme, the story, actors, and characters are organized around it at a deeper level. The short marketing video for *Hi, Mom*, released on Douyin, was based on the audience's sensible needs and developed "Hi, Mom," a 1980s cross-dressing special effect. It caused a wave of cross-dressing videos featuring Jia Ling, Shen Teng, Zhang Xiaofei, and Michael Chen, all comedy stars whose Douyin accounts work in concert with the film's official accounts, further deducing the film localization behind the content. These contents were also utilized to meet the demands of the Douyin platform. Star-marketing is to attract the people's attention with the help of stardom to achieve the goal of reaching a broader audience. Although there are not many celebrity actors in *Hi, Mom*, the film was still moving enough for its audience to be willing to recommend it to others after they watched it. As a result, the film's box office value increased significantly and it eventually reached the 5-billion-yuan mark. TV screens, internet media, and mobile phones have become the primary sources of information in today's society. Therefore, we invite famous stars to attend or endorse our products and use their fame to launch the product, spreading his consumer groups and consumption range. As one of the celebrity actors that have made an appearance in *Hi, Mom*, Michael Chen is said by many to be one of the most popular Chinese comedians in recent years since he has his own jokes and is easy to attract the audience. Chen enjoys an advantage in publicity and enjoys better entertainment resources because the indirect publicity of "Variety Show + Spring Festival Gala" laid the foundation for the pre-screening and post-screening campaign for *Hi, Mom*. The nature of the fan culture points out that certain groups of people would focus heavily, even excessively, on the stars they are attracted to. According to Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* [2], fan culture is "Fans should instead be viewed more positively as building their own culture out of media products and as selectively "poaching" meanings and interpretations from favored media texts" [3]. They tend to identify with the celebrities that attract them. For fans, the existence of idols can bring us relaxation and satisfaction. First, idols' personality charm, good deeds, and some positive words can inspire us; good idols help us establish the right values. Secondly, some people will learn a lot of extra-curricular knowledge and skills as they worship and will constantly improve themselves. The popularity of Jia Ling, Shen Teng, Michael Chen and others in the production team, as well as the huge fan body they have, also contributed a lot to the box office. The most common way is to use reply on the stars' own testimonies to share information about the film. Information shared through this channel is under the overall information management of the film team, and the accounts for these movie stars will help the film draw the audience's attention during the promotion period to bring a lot of exposure to the film.

3. Promoting a Comedy in the Middle of the Pandemic: The Impact of Covid-19 on Publicly

The COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 brought the film industry, which was in a period of rapid development, into the so-called “cold winter” by surprise. Not only were moviegoers prevented from going to the cinemas due to the epidemic, but many film and television producers were also tortured by this sudden freeze. The first is that the film that were in the production were forced to be interrupted, Hengdian and other film studios in China were closed, and film workers went out of business. Filming activities generally require a large number of staff members, which often cannot be carried out under the restrictions of domestic epidemic prevention measures. Therefore, the filmmaking period is prolonged, and the cost of shooting a film increases accordingly [4]. In addition, the epidemic has led the industry’s prospects for economic growth into a chaotic phase of development. While film shooting, investment, and production capacity have all been cut in half, capital has fled. In addition to the increased production costs, there is still the difficulty of tight investment, which makes the source of funds for film production even worse. Covid-19 has producers worried about the box office in the film market, with many films had canceled their planned release date due to the impact of the pandemic. Cinemas under the epidemic have become places where audiences are gradually turning away from, and the vagaries of the epidemic have also added uncertainty to the stable operation of these cinemas. With that being said, the most direct “destruction” of covid to the film and television industry is that it has pressed the pause button on the gradually expanding film market.

Under these restricted circumstances, film marketing gradually moved from offline to online so that short-form videos and the film industry could continue to deepen their process of technological integration. Within this period of time, publicity for a certain film is no longer limited as it was offline: its online spread of influence is expanding, and the social advantage and the commodity value brought by the short-form video are not declining but developing continuously in an innovative way. This transformation has led to the development of two industries. The market promotion of a certain film has become more diversified under the operation of new media and brought joy to the isolated people under covid-19.

First, short video platform offers its users a taste of the film in advance, promotes related social media topics, accelerates the flow of film-featured stars, and leads a pre-sale of film tickets online in the hope of trying to build the whole process of integrated marketing service framework. As early as January, Douyin established exclusive partnership as well as cooperation with seven major film companies that were active during the Lunar New Year season, giving out 400 million yuan in film benefits. As a result, Doujin went online eight days earlier (February 3-11 AM) with a specially designed search-bar AD (about one-third the size of the vertical screen) for the Lunar New Year event -- a combination of relevant searches and algorithms to filter recommendations, and with eye-catching red block attracting potential users into the Lunar New Year virtual interfaces. At the top of the page writes the topic: “400 million film subsidies- Douyin invites you to see a movie.” By stashing a film-centered, specially designed interface for the Lunar New Year season, Douyin offers the following insights with respect to tradition film marketing strategies: The epidemic has increased people’s concerns about the possibility of going to the cinema, but at the same time, it has also increased the audience’s requirements and standards for films. Only films that are applauded can reap the highest box office gross. In the post-epidemic era, if the film’s content is worthless, it will be challenging to gain audiences. That said, only truly high-quality works can stand out in the market and make the audience willing to consume them.

On the other hand, short video platforms also gain strength from the popularity of stars as these celebrities would attract more users. As a time-sensitive cultural product with a strong dissemination ability, film’s marketing strategies need to be constantly adjusted in the real time according to the

user-feedbacks. It goes without saying that it is necessary to prepare sufficient materials in advance to keep up with different user-hotspots at any time. In addition to promoting various film-related topics, short video platforms also, by relying on the celebrities, boost the pre-sale of film tickets. Whether it is in the form of coupons or cash subsidies, the redemption of 400 million ticket-coupons has been directly channeled to online ticketing-selling agencies such as Cat's Eye (Mao Yan) through short video platforms, promoting online pre-sales.

Second, the effect of live broadcasting is a prominent advantage for short video platforms: live broadcasting becomes a multi-faceted source of information circulation. Short video live broadcasting, as a solid, on-the-spot form of audio-visual interaction with the users, reflects the multiple values of promoting a certain film online. It is conducive to quickly gathering popularity, generating hot topics, helping enhance the audience's full-scale awareness of the film's release schedule. More importantly, it is conducive to online promotion and offline consumption through live streaming interaction altogether. In a nutshell, it's a great way to break out of socially reinforced online circles and bring audiences of all ages, interests, and levels of knowledge together into the same community. Aside from its promotion of film-related information, Douyin platform also offered many film-related short video templates. The background music in each short video is in line with the theme of the film so that users can watch while feel the atmosphere: as noted by many users, this atmosphere conveys a strong feeling of happiness. In terms of its audiovisual characteristics, users can use the speed of video shooting and original special effects, filters, scene switching, and other visual effects to make the video more creative, and turn it into one's own semi-blockbuster [5]. Moreover, the trendy electronic music soundtrack is dance-based so most of the short videos produced by its users convey a strong sense of rhythm, and it makes other users feel fabulous. Many people such as white-collar workers, stay-at-home mothers, school students, and other groups, because of audiovisual addiction, are constantly drawn to Douyin. One of the essential aspects of Douyin's success is that the team values user feedback. The team invites seed users early in the project to give feedback on the experience, as the Douyin team put it, "invite users to come and go to the users." Not only to analyze the data but also to communicate with users and keep users in close contact. Why is a sense of engagement important? A sense of engagement is explained in an internal handbook of word-to-mouth marketing in Xiaomi (a Chinese technology company), which talks about making friends with users. According to the Xiaomi internal handbook: "Value user feedback and let users feel that they are in control of the product. Let the user participate in the product, not only for the product optimization to increase the source of information but also to improve the user for the product stickiness. Of course, how to find these positive seed users is also essential. [6]" In addition to the above characteristics, Douyin also tried to highlighting the best part of the theme song. For instance, key features of short-video platform are most straightforwardly explained by Baidu, the search engine, as a music creative short video social software, a 15-second music short video community focused on young people [7]. This aligns with film marketing's emphasis on the audiovisual quality of their products— music-driven inspirational videos would allow more users to share the same feeling. On Douyin, a song that has the potential to become a hit is first noticed by the music gurus on the platform, who often promote the song as a cover or instrumental version, making it more popular with music accounts. Then, the song will be heard by the majority of users, and its chorus clip into BGM short video content to join the creation of interesting online videos, through the platform of personalized distribution recommendations, and its complete fission transmission. At the same time, when facing the potential of being able to find a hit song, Douyin as a platform will also launch a variety of innovative ways to further speed up the popularity of these songs. The film's promotion just hit this selling point- In combination with hot online songs and popular videos, short videos had enriched the content of the film itself, attracting consumers to the cinema.

The film's promotion on Douyin is not only limited to the production of film-related videos. As it was mentioned above, in addition to online users' re-editing of the film clips, audiences participating in the live broadcasting room had exceeded 10,000 during the day of the event. At the same time, the 80-minute virtual "roadshow (a Chinese term for film marketing campaigns)" attracted a total of 1.567 million people, with a total of 37,000 comments and 1.253 million likes [8]. Under the theme of Hi, Mom!, the day Douyin official account quickly had attracted "10W + hits". As a new form of film publicity, in Chinese, virtual roadshow ("yun luyan") is a common marketing expression that refers to a certain way to give a speech, demonstrate a product, promote an idea, and promote your company, group, and product in a public virtual place, enabling online remote interaction and the immersive experience of offline theaters to borrow from each other while integrating the advantages of the two scenarios to the extreme. In this way, Douyin enhances the interaction with the film audience. It highlights the ceremonial feeling of the theater scene, which has become a highlight of 2021's participation in the Lunar New Year publicity.

4. Conclusions

In general, the short video has a positive enthusiasm for 2021 and has gradually become the leading position for streaming media to promote films. Its advantages and experience lie in: leading interaction to screen consumption through ticket rebooking; enhancing the sense of ceremony through online roadshows to call on the audience to re-immense and return to the cinema; building popularity through live star broadcasting, breaking down the barriers of audience circles; supporting users' portraits through big data; targeting and serving movie Profession; enhancing the stickiness of life through audiovisual interaction; Further, extend the life cycle of slotting, promote the conversion of traffic from all sides. Finally, with the unique social attribute of a short video, the Spring Festival film has dramatically expanded the market fermentation potential in the early stage and the long tail effect in the late stage.

Most of the short marketing videos on Douyin follow this model, with distribution being the focus. According to the film's orientation, production quality, and audience's visual angle, the film distribution can be classified into the national film, the topic film, and the general type of film. In the mainframe of the short video of Douyin, two pieces of film theme music firmly grasp the hearts of the audience deeply touch the hearts of the audience.

In the traditional film marketing communication, most of the film is the weight of both ends, light in the middle of the "dumbbell" communication, the start of tremendous momentum, production period of understatement, release period of high play. As a significant source of information for the public and a significant link in social interaction, the epidemic has also accelerated the pace of integration and innovation. The new media dissemination way can obtain the broader development space. Among them, the short video is particularly remarkable. Comparing the 44th and 47th statistical reports on the development of the Internet in China, the author found that in June 2019, the number of short video users in China was 648 million, accounting for 75.8 percent of the total number of Internet users, by December 2020, that number had risen to 873 million, up 100 million from March 2020, accounting for 88.3 percent of the Internet population [9]. From the perspective of media convergence, a short video has become one of the most popular means of transmission; with its advantages of brevity, compactness, and strong appeal, the utility model, has the characteristics of comprehensive content, short production cycle, and high originality. The epidemic environment, which does not allow for traditional offline entertainment and social interaction, has provided a breeding ground for the rapid growth of short video. Hi, Mom focuses on this popular media channel through its high efficiency, high flow, high convenience, and other communication characteristics of the bombing-style marketing communication. The transmission rhythm decides the frequency of the

film's critical information reaching the audience. It needs to determine the total amount of information and communication scale in advance according to the budget to presuppose the transmission rhythm.

The appearance and wide use of short video platforms have changed the limitation of filmmakers in creation and theme to a certain extent. With the emergence of streaming media to lower the threshold of the film, more works have the opportunity to present in front of us. This is like the traditional paper media met from the media, survival environment is bound to be compressed. The concept of window periods in traditional cinemas has almost disappeared, with many films streaming online after 14 days in theaters, such as almost all of Netflix's award-season films. The films will be released immediately after 14 days in theaters in the Los Angeles area. This is the first to see an award-winning film, but the disadvantage is that such films are harder to see in cinemas.

The production, distribution, and screening of the traditional film industry is a set of long-term development of the film industry operation model, which implies: a mature system of interest distribution [10]. And the internet streaming media technology, technology on the film industry will undoubtedly be involved in this model and system, a structural rewrite. This is because the internet streaming media platform can directly with the audience and immediately analyze and cater to the audience's viewing and movie preferences, keeping the audience sticky. And grasp the audience, which means that the film industry can be a full range of upstream and downstream penetration and then control the establishment of profit distribution rules. But producers, distributors, and projectors are reluctant to cede that dominance to internet streaming and the tech companies behind it. They want to use internet streaming as an alternative distribution, a screening window, and an online channel to bring in audience traffic and capital. Especially for the theater, the direct impact of the internet streaming media is on the audience and even changes the younger generation of the audience's movie viewing habits [11]. This trend will only make more traditional film producers and distributors pay attention to the niche market offered by internet streaming media. After all, the film industry continued to develop the productivity and consumption of the expected target of young audiences.

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