

The Impact of Information Discrepancy on Users' Selection of Theatre Art Programs Through Social Media

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Abstract: Social media has become an essential tool for modern theatre promotion and audience interaction. Through these platforms, theatres can engage with their audiences in a more direct and vivid manner, particularly attracting younger demographics. This not only provides a space for showcasing productions but also offers a new platform for brand building. By analyzing audience data and behavior, theatres can make more precise adjustments to their promotional strategies. Based on the context of China's rapidly growing theatre industry and the emergence of outstanding original productions, this paper explores the relationship between social media information and the selection of theatre art programs. Utilizing survey methods and the collection of social media data, a correlation analysis was conducted, and the texts were analyzed using ROSTCM6 software. The study finds that video platforms are more effective at attracting emotionally driven viewers, while image-text platforms are better suited to engage more rational, decision-making audiences. User-generated content primarily influences emotional-driven audience choices and social circle selection, whereas official content plays a more significant role in rational decision-making and professional recognition.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the performance market in China has experienced positive growth. In 2023, the national market reached a total value of 73.994 billion RMB, with an unprecedented growth rate of 29.30%. By June 2024, the scale of the performance market had nearly reached the total level of 2023, demonstrating strong development momentum. A wealth of excellent original theatrical works continues to emerge, and an increasing number of young audiences are actively attending theaters, contributing to the growing audience base. Not only have young people become the primary consumers of theater, but audiences from other demographic groups, such as children and middle-aged individuals, are also gradually rising in importance.

According to the "2024-2028 China Theater Industry Market Panorama Research and Development Forecast Report," the development of theaters is expected to remain strong in terms of the number of performances, box office revenue, and audience attendance. However, China's performing arts industry is still in its early stages and has a significant gap compared to regions with more mature theater markets, such as North America, where the

market size reached \$24 billion in 2022. This indicates a potential for market expansion through marketing strategies to enhance influence and broaden audience reach. Additionally, new performance modes such as immersive and mobile performances are emerging, aligning with the current trend of all-media content proliferation. Therefore, theaters must integrate various types of social media to target different forms of works, engage in specific promotional campaigns based on audience interests, identify audience pain points, and create content that can quickly garner audience feedback.

This study will employ a survey method to gather the authentic reactions of social media users to the promotion of artistic programs. It aims to provide an initial understanding of users' interests and preferences, while also performing word frequency and sentiment analysis on social media comments to ensure the comprehensiveness and authenticity of the data sources. The study will focus on identifying how users engage with different types of social media content across various platforms, taking into account the nature of the content and the type of medium.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of "marketing" was expanded in a 1969 article by Kotler and Levy, in which they argued that marketing is not solely about promoting the sale of goods, but also about sensitively serving human needs (Kotler & Levy, 1969). The article addresses the challenges faced by cultural organizations in marketing, particularly in devising marketing policies during special periods to leverage national funding for cultural promotion. However, drama, being an aesthetic product with ideological characteristics and no physical form, presents unique challenges. Hirschman (1983) discussed the limitations of traditional marketing strategies for cultural products (Hirschman, 1983). Since each product is unique, marketing strategies based on "similar" or "isomorphic" factors are not suitable for this field. Macdonald also argued that the best form of marketing is the word-of-mouth reputation of the work itself, suggesting that innovative marketing strategies should be introduced to theaters (MacDonald).

In the post-Internet era of the 21st century, theaters have transitioned from using traditional media such as newspapers to digital and visual content on the web for promoting theatrical works. This shift in media platforms has both advantages and disadvantages. Besana and other researchers applied the theory of attention economics to argue that the Internet enables theaters to reach a wider pool of potential consumers, though they also highlighted the challenge of capturing users' attention (Besana et al., 2018). By using cluster analysis, they confirmed that theaters active on social networks are able to increase audience engagement. As a result, advertising spending on social media has become an essential strategy. Warne and colleagues compared the authority and persuasive power of theater reviews published in newspapers and blogs, showing that works with higher visibility, such as the musical *Les Misérables*, are more likely to encourage ticket sales via social media. However, the generalizability of their findings is limited due to the use of virtual social media accounts and a small sample size (Warne & Deake-Brooks, 2016).

Regarding the influence of social media content on audience decision-making, Baldin and others examined content and reviews posted by the Royal Danish Theatre on Facebook using a VAR model. Their study found that the number of likes had the greatest impact on purchase decisions, reducing users' time spent browsing information, and exhibiting a snowball effect (Baldin et al., 2024). However, their

research was limited to official content, and this study will expand the investigation to include user-generated content (UGC). The role of social media in the promotion of theatrical works by theaters has grown increasingly significant, with certain common trends emerging across different regions. Pontelandolfo and colleagues analyzed the strategies used by the official Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok accounts for *Hamilton* in the Broadway district. They affirmed that social media plays a crucial role in attracting younger audiences, especially for productions with high attendance rates.

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Regarding the influence of social media content on audience decision-making, Baldin et al. used methods such as the VAR model to study content reviews posted by the Royal Danish Theatre on Facebook. They found that the number of likes had the greatest impact on purchase decisions, reducing users' time spent browsing information and exhibiting a snowball effect (Baldin et al., 2024). However, their researches were limited to official content. This study will expand the discussion to include user-generated content (UGC). The role of social media in promoting theatrical works by theaters has grown significantly, and certain common patterns have emerged across different regions. Pontelandolfo et al. analyzed the strategies employed by the official social media accounts of *Hamilton* in the Broadway district on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. They confirmed that social media plays a crucial role in generating interest and enthusiasm among younger

audiences, particularly for high-attendance and high-engagement art forms such as theater (Pontelandolfo, 2022). Similarly, the *In the Heights* production team established a fan community on YouTube, resulting in a box office revenue of \$93 million (Craft, 2011).

The National Centre for the Performing Arts in China has explored various methods of integrating online and offline platforms through its classical music programs. Zhang Jialin cited opinions from international media, describing the program as a new exploration and approach to expanding artistic influence in the era of new media (Zhang, 2023). Yao Jinfen and Ma Shuzhi provided an empirical summary of the current operational status of traditional theaters and small theaters (Yao, 2018; Ma, 2020). In China, research on the impact of social media content on theatrical arts programs remains limited, with a lack of valuable data to support such studies. This paper will explore, from a Chinese perspective, the potential for local theater to spread through social networks.

Based on the existing research, this paper proposes two research questions: (1) The differences in the presentation of theatrical arts program information across different social media platforms, and how various media (text, images, video) and content formats, along with interactive features, influence users' reception and attitudes toward theatrical arts program information. The study will explore the differences in content presentation strategies and audience engagement across platforms, assessing the appeal of the content and its impact on user decision-making. (2) The differences between user-generated content (UGC) and official-generated content (OGC) in influencing users' choices of theatrical arts programs. This research will define the distinction between the two types of content, conduct sentiment analysis, and examine the advantages and limitations of each, as well as their interactive effects on social media platforms.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

The primary research method employed in this study is the questionnaire survey, supplemented by social media data collection.

3.1 Questionnaire Design

As the research focuses on the differences in user feedback, the questionnaire survey method is suitable for quantifying the relationship between social media content and theater program selection. It allows for

the collection of a large data sample in a short period, making it well-suited for large-scale target populations. This method provides clear, multidimensional data on user behavior, attitudes, and other relevant factors. Additionally, it enables a comparison of differences in theater arts program viewing across users of different platforms. Standardized questions will be used to minimize data bias, and a variety of analytical methods will be employed flexibly to analyze the data.

During the distribution of the survey, careful consideration was given to the diversity of the respondents' sources and the size of the theater audience, while ensuring data validity. The survey was distributed simultaneously on public social platforms (Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili) and within community groups (WeChat groups, Douban groups) where theater enthusiasts gather.

In terms of the questionnaire design, respondents were asked about the frequency and experiences of viewing promotional content in text-image and video formats, exploring the impact on their willingness to choose and make purchase decisions. The survey also assessed their trust in and personal reference to UGC (user-generated content) and OGC (official-generated content) accounts, analyzing the differences in promotional effectiveness between the two types of content creators. A total of 254 responses were collected, all of which were valid. The geographic range covered 29 provinces and autonomous regions, with a focus on the southeastern coastal areas, ensuring a geographically representative sample. Over 70% of the respondents had watched at least one theater arts program, with a gender ratio of approximately 1:2, and the majority of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 45. This demographic distribution aligns with the audience profile and traditional theater distribution analysis presented in the 2024 China Musical Theater Market Annual Report, confirming the validity of the sample.

The collected survey data were analyzed using frequency and correlation analysis on the SPSS platform. Regarding social media platform usage, 45.2% of respondents selected text-image and video integrated platforms as their primary choice, followed by 29.2% who preferred short video platforms. Long video platforms accounted for 23.8%, while the remaining respondents primarily used WeChat official accounts.

Table 1: Correlation analysis of social media platform types and viewing of theatre arts programs

		drama	musical	drama drama	concert	Others (please list)
Graphic platforms (Weibo, Zhihu, Douban, Twitter, etc.)	Pearson correlation	0.209**	-0.025	0.129	-0.073	0.035
	Significance (double tail)	0.007	0.754	0.101	0.35	0.652
	Number ofcases	164	164	164	164	164
Graphic and video platforms (Xiaohongshu, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.)	Pearson correlation	-0.016	0.063	.168*	-0.064	-0.105
	Significance (double tail)	0.844	0.425	0.032	0.417	0.181
	Number ofcases	164	164	164	164	164
Short video platforms (Kuaishou, Tiktok)	Pearson correlation	-0.07	-0.053	-.153*	0.088	-0.01
	Significance (double tail)	0.37	0.501	0.05	0.262	0.903
	Number ofcases	164	164	164	164	164
Long video platforms (bilibili, iQiyi, Youtube, etc.)	Pearson correlation	-0.111	0.012	-0.111	0.082	0.008
	Significance (double tail)	0.156	0.881	0.159	0.294	0.919
	Number ofcases	164	164	164	164	164

According to Table 1, there is no statistically significant correlation between the types of musical theatre, concerts, and social media platform usage. However, within the category of drama viewing, a significant correlation is observed at the 0.01 level, with theatre audiences who have watched at least one drama performance being more likely to use text-and-image platforms. Ballet audiences, on the other hand, tend to use text-and-image video platforms more frequently, while less often opting for short video platforms.

Social media users with a habit of using long-video platforms have the most extensive theatre viewing experience. Among them, 78.4% of users who primarily use long-video platforms have watched at least one theatre performance, followed by 74% of users on text-and-image video platforms. Analyzing the correlation between nine categories of social media content and theatre viewing experience

reveals that the more content related to entertainment celebrities users browse, the greater the likelihood of watching theatre performances. When breaking down theatre programs into five categories, a significant correlation is observed at the 0.01 level between concert program viewing and content browsing. Concert audiences are more likely to browse educational and scientific content videos, while showing less interest in entertainment celebrity news or film montages. Based on eight adjectives with distinct meanings used to describe the characteristics of social media platforms, an evaluation of the relationship between users' perception of platform features and their likelihood of watching theatre performances shows that musical theatre audiences tend to prefer content-oriented platforms focused on entertainment, while showing less interest in authoritative, educational platforms. Ballet audiences, in contrast, exhibit a preference for

platforms with a fashionable style. Meanwhile, concert audiences are less likely to describe their platforms as "entertainment" oriented. Theatre companies, in their promotional efforts, can tailor their content to the expected platform style preferences of different audiences to better align with their audience's characteristics.

There are differences in the influence of text-and-image content versus video content on the audience's selection of theatre performances, but the gap is only between 5% and 10%. Among users who have browsed theatre promotional content on social media, 64% most often watch videos, while 33% more frequently view text-and-image content. The impact of promotional content on theatre decision-making is divided into four dimensions: 1) providing a preliminary understanding of the performance, 2) sharing the information with others, 3) continuing to search for additional content, and 4) generating a desire to purchase tickets. Text-and-image promotional content is more suitable for the initial phase of promotion, helping the audience move from unfamiliarity to awareness. A total of 151 survey respondents indicated that text-and-image content sparked a desire to learn more about the performance. On the other hand, video content, especially longer videos and short videos, has a stronger social sharing appeal. Forty-three respondents reported that they were motivated to purchase tickets after viewing video content, highlighting its effectiveness in driving ticket sales.

In terms of information acquisition channels, the top three sources for obtaining official content are the theatre's official website, WeChat official accounts, and Xiaohongshu accounts. For user-generated content, the top three sources are WeChat official accounts, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin accounts, which collectively account for over 75% of the responses. This indicates that the theatre's promotional efforts and strategies on these platforms are well-established and effective. Regarding trustworthiness, respondents were asked to rate the importance of user-generated content and official content in their decision-making process, on a scale from 5 (extremely important) to 1 (not important at all). The results are as follows: The average score for official content was 3.39, with a median of 3 and a variance of 1.092, suggesting that official content, such as theatre programs and cast information, does influence the decision to purchase tickets. In contrast, the average score for user-generated content was 3.72, with a median of 4 and a variance of 0.098. This indicates that users have a higher and more stable level of trust in user-generated content, such as audience reviews and

experiences. When it comes to ticket purchasing, there is a notable difference in influence between official and user-generated content. User-generated content, such as recommendations from friends and social media comments, is the most trusted source, with 35.32% of respondents indicating it as their preferred source of information. The second most trusted category, with 32.77%, includes both user-generated and official content. Trust in official content alone is relatively low, at 24.68%. Additionally, 7.23% of respondents expressed distrust in all sources of content.

3.2 Social Media Data Collection

This study collects content published by official theatre accounts and fan-driven marketing accounts or theatre enthusiast KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) across various social media platforms for frequency and sentiment analysis. The goal is to quantify the differences in positive and negative emotional impacts of content from different types of accounts and analyze content variations for the same theatre performance across different social media platforms. As social media content is dynamic and continually evolving, this data category captures changes in sentiment and topics during information dissemination, allowing for analysis of how these changes influence user decision-making.

On the text-and-image platform Xiaohongshu, representative individuals from both official and non-official social media account camps were selected, with promotional content being controlled for consistency. The official "Beijing Tianqiao Arts Center" account, with 23,000 followers, ranks in the median range among major national theatres and is on par with regional representatives such as the Shanghai Cultural Square and the Guangzhou Grand Theatre. The "Jingluo" account, focused on in-depth theatre audiences in Guangdong, has accumulated approximately 20,000 likes for its posts. For this study, similar content regarding the ticket release for the musical The Phantom of the Opera was selected from both accounts. The official account received 109 comments, while the non-official account garnered 367 comments. After general data processing, the ROSTCM text analysis tool was used to conduct sentiment analysis and generate word cloud summaries for the collected content. This analysis will help to identify emotional trends and key topics related to the musical across different account types (Table 2 and Table 3).



Figure 1: UGC and OGC Content Comment Word Cloud (Photo Created: Original).

Table 2. Correlation analysis of social media platform types and viewing of theatre arts programs.

Emotional type	Sample size	proportion	Emotional level	Number	proportion
Positive	40	36.7	Normal (0—10)	32	29.36
			Medium (10—20)	6	5.5
			Height (20—)	2	1.83
Neutral	52	47.71			
Negative	17	15.6	Normal (-10—0)	17	15.6
All	109	100			

Table 3. Sentiment analysis of OGC content comments.

Emotional type	Sample size	proportion	Emotional level	Number	proportion
Positive	119	32.43	Normal (0—10)	92	25.07
			Medium (10—20)	20	5.45
			Height (20—)	7	1.91
Neutral	216	58.86			
Negative	32	8.72	Normal (-10—0)	29	7.9
			Medium (-20—-10)	3	0.82
All	367	100			

As shown in Figure 1, keywords such as "Ahhhh, go on sale, ticket" appear frequently in the comment sections of both official and non-official accounts. On the official account, the focus is more on the differences in ticketing policies after the release, such

as those related to different websites (e.g., WeChat Official Accounts and Damai ticketing platform) and user identities (e.g., regular users vs. different membership levels). In contrast, comments under the non-official account express more surprise and

anticipation surrounding the ticket release itself. In the sentiment analysis, neutral emotions make up the largest proportion of the responses. However, the official account exhibits 8% more positive sentiment than the non-official account, while negative sentiment is 7% higher on the non-official account. This suggests that the content on the official account tends to evoke a stronger emotional response in the audience, with more expressions of excitement and surprise. Additionally, the official account seems to attract more comments from audiences in different regions expressing anticipation for the introduction of the performance to their local theatres.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Platform Preferences

In terms of platform selection, musical theatre audiences are more inclined towards short-video and text-and-image video platforms that offer entertaining and light-hearted content. These audiences seek quick, engaging experiences and enjoy content that is fun and accessible. Ballet audiences, on the other hand, prefer comprehensive platforms with a strong emphasis on creativity and fashion, highlighting the visual and artistic aspects of the performances. Drama audiences tend to favor traditional text-only platforms, valuing depth and intellectual engagement in the content. Concert audiences are more inclined to use long-video platforms or professional art platforms, where cultural and knowledge-driven content takes precedence.

4.2 Content Format Preferences

In terms of content format, text-and-image content is more effective in attracting the audience's initial attention and generating interest in a performance. It helps users transition from unfamiliarity to a desire to learn more about the performance, offering a quick overview of the content. In contrast, video content, with its dual impact on both visual and auditory senses, is more adept at conveying the emotional atmosphere, actor performances, and key moments of a show. Due to its strong social sharing component, video content can prompt viewers to share the experience or take the next step of purchasing tickets. Thus, video content is better suited to deepen the impression and stimulate action once the audience has already developed some level of interest in the performance.

4.3 Trust and Influence of User-Generated vs. Official Content

For audiences, user-generated content (UGC), such as recommendations from friends or social media reviews, is trusted more, as it tends to have a stronger emotional resonance and is more likely to influence ticket purchasing decisions. UGC not only spreads rapidly but also offers a more authentic and relatable emotional connection, making it more effective in driving engagement. On the other hand, official-generated content (OGC) plays a crucial role in providing authoritative, rational information about performances and ticket purchasing, which helps audiences make informed decisions. However, the emotional impact and trust in OGC are relatively lower compared to UGC. The advantage of OGC lies in its credibility and professionalism, especially when it comes to accurate information about performance schedules, cast details, and ticket policies. These aspects can evoke excitement and anticipation among certain audiences, but they tend to be less emotionally compelling compared to the personal, heartfelt nature of user reviews or recommendations.

In conclusion, while both UGC and OGC contribute to the audience's decision-making process, UGC holds a stronger emotional influence and plays a pivotal role in driving audience behavior, particularly in terms of sharing experiences and purchasing tickets. Official content, with its authoritative and factual nature, offers a complementary role, guiding audiences through the logistics of attending a performance but with less emotional appeal.

For different theater art programs, the crew officials can make full use of social media platforms for differentiated marketing and publicity. Musical repertoires release highlights, celebrity interviews, and relaxed and interesting interactive content through short video platforms to increase entertainment and participation. Dance drama repertoires choose comprehensive social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo to encourage audiences to share their viewing experience and promote the widespread dissemination of content. Concert content shows more academic and artistic discussions on long video platforms to avoid excessive marketing of entertainment star information. Drama audiences pay more attention to the accuracy of content and the clarity of information. Therefore, in the graphic content, attention should be paid to details to convey the depth and thought of the repertoire. Theater officials should focus on the

diversification and emotionalization of content, increase interactivity and audience participation, and enhance trust and influence. For example, through questionnaires, voting, comment interaction, and cooperation with some KOLs, affinity can be enhanced.

The limitation of this article is that the number of samples in the questionnaire survey is limited, and most of them are from southern China, so the universality is poor, and there may be deviations caused by memory and social expectations in user filling. When selecting data from social platforms, we took into account the quantity requirement for comment samples and selected musicals with a large number of audiences today for analysis. Therefore, there may be differences for other categories.

5 CONCLUSION

The results of this paper are that video content is more likely to attract audiences to buy tickets and share with friends, while graphic content is more suitable for preliminary understanding and interactive communication of art programs. Under OGC content, since official repertoire promotion content is often the first release, it is easier to drive the audience's emotions, and UGC content is more suitable for interaction and communication among audiences. Further conclusions can be drawn: video platforms are suitable for attracting audiences who are easily driven by emotions, and graphic platforms are suitable for attracting rational audiences who make decisions about watching dramas. User-generated content has more influence on the audience's emotional drive and choice of social circles, while official content affects rational decision-making and professional cognition. It provides a refinement and classification of audience types for future research, and can deeply explore the psychological characteristics, consumption behavior and platform preferences of these audience types, providing support for platform content production and marketing strategies. We can continue to explore the matching of platform and content forms, reveal the interactive relationship between platform characteristics, content presentation methods and user experience, and attract specific types of audiences through the choice of content forms.

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