

Research on psychological mechanism of weakened effect of online word-of-mouth marketing in the era of intelligent media – A case study of Douban and Maoyan Postprint

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Abstract

Since the development of the film industry, film reviews have been an important part of the industry, reflecting audience perception of films, and audiences are now increasingly dependent on film review platforms. With the gradual capitalization of the film industry, film reviews are increasingly monopolized by capital interests, among which word-of-mouth marketing behaviors such as “click farming” and “review deletion” impact audience trust. In the era of intelligent media, this paper adopts the method of in-depth interviews to study how word-of-mouth platform behaviors—that is, film online review platform behaviors—affect audience psychology and the effect of current word-of-mouth marketing on films.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Psychological Mechanism of the Weakening Effect of Online Word-of-Mouth Marketing in the Era of Intelligent Media: A Case Study of Douban and Maoyan

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Abstract: Since the inception of the film industry, film reviews have constituted an important component that reflects audience perception of films. Today, audiences are increasingly dependent on film review platforms. However, with the gradual commercialization of the film industry, film reviews are becoming monopolized by capital interests. Word-of-mouth marketing behaviors such as “click farming” and “review deletion” are impacting audience trust. Situated

in the era of intelligent media, this paper employs in-depth interviews to investigate how behaviors on word-of-mouth platforms—that is, online film review platforms—affect audience psychology and the effectiveness of current word-of-mouth marketing on movies.

Keywords: cognitive balance; network public opinion; film industry

1.1 Background Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of China’s film industry has enriched subject matter, making audience word-of-mouth particularly crucial in market competition. Influenced by the diversity of film genres, audiences increasingly rely on film rating platforms. In this context, film producers have begun influencing reviews by controlling word-of-mouth websites and film scoring platforms to boost box office performance. We have observed that as user numbers increase, audience trust in word-of-mouth websites gradually declines. Scores that deviate significantly from audience sensory values often fail to affect viewing decisions but instead undermine the reliability of word-of-mouth platforms. This raises several questions: Why do consumers reduce their trust in word-of-mouth websites? Why do audience reviews often skew in the opposite direction despite high platform ratings?

2.1 Literature Review on the Weakening Effect of Online Word-of-Mouth Marketing of Films

The gradual loss of audience recognition and trust in word-of-mouth websites has prompted academic research from multiple perspectives. Liu Yingqi conducted a detailed study on the current phenomenon of film rating public opinion analysis, examining the evolution of major domestic and international film rating communities. Her research reveals that online community film rating mechanisms have faced repeated credit crises in recent years, primarily manifested through online “click farming” disrupting film public opinion and raising questions about the rationality of scoring systems. In 2016, People’s Daily published a review article addressing large-scale malicious click farming on Douban following the release of domestic films such as *The Great Wall*, *See You Tomorrow*, and *Railway Tigers*. The article exposed the “water army click farming” phenomenon, noting that “using network cheating technologies such as ‘Credential Stuffing Attack,’ a team or even a few people can easily ‘click farm,’ causing a crisis of trust in online film review platforms.” Scholar Zhou Xu points out that online film review content is arbitrary, with fragmented, superficial, and private expression. Driven by consumerism and entertainment-ism, some online film and television critics even cater to cultural tendencies toward vulgarization and utilitarianism, losing the value standpoint and credibility of film criticism.

Some scholars have also analyzed the influence of film rating mechanisms on audience attitudes toward movies. In 2022, domestic scholars Ouyang Qingyi, Mo Junjie, and Zhang Zhicheng conducted a comprehensive analysis of how film

rating mechanisms influence audience movie-watching attitudes from the theoretical perspective of the “ABC attitude model.” They found that the quality of film ratings and the attitudes of followers positively impact users’ movie-watching intentions, while the quantity, perceivability, and weight of reviews have no obvious influence on users’ willingness to watch movies. Scholar Qi Wei, through combing and analyzing the development status of China’s main online film scoring systems, studies the potential impact on China’s film industry and points out that using Internet platforms for film marketing and promotion has become the norm, with the use of network film scoring effects being the most intuitive and prominent.

However, although these studies identify that audiences gradually lose recognition and trust in film evaluation platforms, they do not approach the issue from the perspective of cognitive balance theory.

2.2 Review of Cognitive Balance Theory

Cognitive balance theory, also known as the “P-O-X theory,” was proposed in 1958 by Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider in his book *The Psychology of Human Relations*. P represents the cognitive subject, O is another person related to P, and X is another arbitrary object that connects P to O. The theory assumes that the balanced state between P-O-X is stable, excluding external influence, while an unbalanced state is unstable and causes individual psychological tension. This tension can only be eliminated when the relationship between them changes and balance is restored. Since the theory’s proposal, scholars at home and abroad have paid close attention and produced numerous research achievements.

In 2016, foreign scholars Anne Berthold and Hartmut Blank proposed that memory distortion and attitude change are two ways to achieve cognitive balance. Scholar Anthony J. Smith summarized the development and changes of cognitive balance in 2012, proposing that in the Internet context, constructing social learning networks effectively strengthens interaction between learners and resource nodes and between learners and interpersonal nodes, thereby improving learning performance. Scholar Dong Hongxia published *A Brief View of Chinese Female Literature from Cognitive Balance Theory* in 2005, using cognitive balance theory to examine Chinese female literature and explore the relationship between cognitive balance theory and female literature in literary activities.

However, these studies did not investigate the phenomenon of the weakening effect of online word-of-mouth marketing in movies from the perspective of cognitive balance theory and therefore did not answer questions about how online word-of-mouth marketing in movies affects the psychological mechanisms of consumers.

2.3 Question Raising

Based on cognitive balance theory, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: Why does online word-of-mouth marketing reduce audiences' trust in the platform rather than in the particularity of movie-watching expectations? Why is there a serious separation between word-of-mouth platform ratings and audience comments? What other factors have changed audiences' trust in the platform?

3 Research Methods

This study employs in-depth interviews to address these questions. Specifically, the interview protocol is divided into four parts. The first part covers basic interviewee information, including age and occupation. The second part examines the use of relevant software and its subjective and objective factors. The third part translates research questions into interview questions. The fourth part prepares for possible follow-up questions. The entire research process strictly follows the ethical principles of scientific research, with each participant voluntarily choosing whether to participate after fully understanding the study. Researchers clearly understand their rights and obligations: adhering to the principle of responsibility to research subjects, respecting and treating each subject equally, and maintaining strict confidentiality of the research process and all original data. Additionally, interviewees may remain silent or withdraw at any time if dissatisfied. Interview materials that interviewees requested not be publicized are excluded from this study.

This study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 23 interviewees aged 18-28, each lasting 15 minutes. Fifteen valid interviews were completed between April 8, 2023, and April 17, 2023. The interviewees were primarily college students, including film majors. At the interviewees' request, all are uniformly marked as "students." Interviews were conducted one-on-one face-to-face, with results transcribed verbatim and some interviews recorded with permission. Interview content processing was completed by the investigator. The basic information of interviewees is shown in Table 1 .

4 Research Findings and Discussion Points

When we conducted further in-depth interviews on interviewees' use of and attitudes toward "word-of-mouth software," we found that people chose to trust their own feelings when evaluating movies, only referring to or even ignoring evaluations on word-of-mouth platforms. A primary reason is distrust of these platforms: "Many commercial films do increase their popularity by click farming and hijacking social media trends during the initial release and promotion stage, which affects my first impression of the film" (S1). Another interviewee noted: "(Factors in choosing a movie reference are) first, the genre and subject matter of the film; second, the public reputation of the film on Internet platforms and evaluations from people around me; third, the production team and IP selection

of the film; fourth, the artistry and story content of the film” (S2). The same interviewee added: “Actors, film directors, and genres are more important, and I am not likely to decide what movies to watch based on Internet trends” (S2). A third interviewee stated: “Now I don’t trust these platforms, because I think they are just click farming. Moreover, the platforms are not well managed, which makes me feel there is no formal platform” (S3). Another noted: “Not sure. I will consider whether they hired too many soldiers. I will refer to my friends’ evaluations, but they still don’t trust platforms” (S3). Finally, one interviewee remarked: “I’m not going to comment. I think there are so many nasty comments, it wouldn’t help if I did, you know” (S4).

4.1 False Reviews Affect the Audience’s First Perception of the Film

Producers or agency companies employ “water armies”—groups of Internet ghostwriters paid to post online comments with particular content—to publish fake reviews on online review platforms, thereby improving film ratings and word-of-mouth. Such behavior affects audiences’ first perceptions of films and prevents them from truly understanding film quality. When audiences discover that film ratings and word-of-mouth are false, they question and may even lose trust in the film, which is highly detrimental to box office performance and reputation.

Cognitive balance theory holds that when people receive new information, they automatically seek existing information for comparison and evaluation. If new information is consistent with existing information, people perceive it as credible, thereby increasing trust. If new information does not match existing information, people experience cognitive dissonance, leading to questioning and distrust.

Producers’ employment of click farms can impact audience cognitive balance. When audiences see numerous favorable reviews on online platforms, they may believe the film is good and develop trust. However, if they discover these positive reviews are false, they experience cognitive dissonance, causing them to question and distrust the film. This cognitive dissonance affects audience first impressions and trust, ultimately impacting box office performance and word-of-mouth.

4.2 How Much the Audience Likes the Actors in a Movie Affects the Credibility of the Movie

Through in-depth communication with 20 interviewees, we found that audiences choose movies based on multiple factors, including actors, genre, storyline, and others. These factors are more important to audiences, while Internet trends have minimal influence. Audiences prioritize their own tastes and preferences. When a film’s actors and genre align with their tastes, they choose to watch it regardless of online review platform comments. Based on cognitive balance theory, since audiences already possess established cognitions and preferences

regarding actors and movie genres, when they encounter movies matching these preferences on review platforms, they perceive them as credible and trustworthy. Consequently, comments on online review platforms have minimal impact on audiences.

4.3 The Credibility of the Platform Affects the Audience's Trust in the Platform

Our interviews revealed that 75% of respondents reported that irregular platform management affects their trust. Online review platforms are important sources for film reviews and word-of-mouth information, but if they cannot provide authentic and credible information, audience trust diminishes. When comments on these platforms are entirely false, audiences cannot determine authenticity, leading to complete loss of trust in the entire platform.

From a cognitive balance theory perspective, irregular platform behavior affects audience trust. When online review platforms engage in irregular behaviors such as deleting reviews, brushing reviews, or posting fake reviews, audiences experience cognitive dissonance toward the platform, generating doubt and distrust. This doubt and distrust affect audience trust in the entire platform, thereby impacting its reputation and credibility. Therefore, online review platforms must strengthen management and supervision to provide real and credible evaluation information, enhancing audience trust. Additionally, cognitive balance theory explains why audiences prioritize first perceptions and evaluations of movies. When watching a film, audiences evaluate its quality based on personal experience and knowledge. If film quality matches audience expectations, cognitive balance and trust are achieved. Conversely, if quality does not meet expectations, cognitive dissonance arises, generating doubt and distrust. Therefore, film producers must improve film quality to meet audience expectations and enhance trust and recognition.

4.3 The “Spiral of Silence” Reduces the Truthfulness of Reviews

Through in-depth interviews, we found that almost all respondents tend to remain silent when encountering comments differing from their own perceptions. A minority believe film criticism irrationality is irrelevant to them and choose silence. The majority feel their individual power is insignificant and cannot combat the massive team of fake critics. This phenomenon is what German scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann termed the “spiral of silence.”

Noelle-Neumann argued that when individuals sense their opinion is in the minority, they tend not to express it. When audiences see that most comments on word-of-mouth platforms differ from their own, they hesitate to post authentic comments. Consequently, fake comments proliferate while genuine comments dwindle, gradually reducing the authenticity of word-of-mouth websites.

5 Summary and Reflection

Currently, China's film industry faces a worsening environment. The fallibility and informality of word-of-mouth websites ultimately stem from heavy influence by capital interests. Platforms' original intentions gradually shift from genuine evaluation to profit-seeking. Consequently, film producers shift from thinking about "how to make a good film" to "how to make more money," resulting in uneven film quality. To attract audiences for profit, producers and investors choose to "buy reviews"—purchasing positive reviews for themselves and negative reviews for competitors—rather than accepting criticism and improving. Ultimately, the capital game costs audiences significantly: they spend money but do not enjoy a matching movie-watching experience.

Word-of-mouth platforms are the most direct channels for audiences to learn about movies. As platforms for audiences to express personal opinions and comments, they should be equal, open, and authentic. Therefore, word-of-mouth platforms must firm their position, reduce capital interference in the real network environment, and strictly investigate and manage unreasonable review deletion, review brushing, and fake reviews. The public should also reasonably exercise their right to free speech on the Internet, resist unhealthy competition in films, and jointly build a formal, authentic, and high-quality online review platform with word-of-mouth websites.

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