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THE ROLE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN SHAPING THE PROMOTION, EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT, AND VIEWERSHIP OF THAI FILMS IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF "HOW TO MAKE MILLIONS BEFORE GRANDMA DIES (LAANMA)"

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Abstract

This study examines the role of user-generated content (UGC) in promoting the Thai film How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma) within the Chinese market. It focuses on how UGC influences the emotional engagement of Chinese audiences with the film's themes and explores its impact on viewership patterns in the context of cross-cultural film promotion in China.

A quantitative research methodology was employed. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed to a stratified sample of 400 participants. Eligible participants were users of platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu who had engaged with or been exposed to content related to How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma). The sample was selected to ensure diverse demographic representation based on users' levels of engagement. Statistical analysis yielded significant insights into users' experiences and perceptions.

The findings highlight the pivotal role of UGC in enhancing the film's visibility and emotional resonance among Chinese audiences. Content shared on platforms like Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu significantly amplified audience exposure to the film. Moreover, UGC was found to deepen viewers' emotional connection with the film's themes and narratives, while also influencing their viewing decisions and behaviors.

Overall, user-generated content emerges as a crucial factor in cross-cultural film promotion, effectively fostering awareness, emotional engagement, and audience interaction.

Keyword : User-generated content, Shaping the promotion, Emotional engagement, Viewership of Thai films, how to make millions before grandma dies (laanma).

Introduction

In today's digital age, user-generated content (UGC) has profoundly transformed the global media landscape, influencing how media is consumed, promoted, and interacted with across cultures. UGC refers to content created and shared by users on social media platforms, blogs, and video-sharing sites. In particular, platforms like Douyin, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, YouTube, and Facebook have empowered users to become active participants in media production and distribution. These platforms shift the power of content creation from traditional media institutions to everyday individuals, fostering a participatory and decentralized media culture (Cunningham & Craig, 2021).

Modern digital tools and mobile technologies have made content creation more accessible, enabling users to express their views, share experiences, and influence public discourse on a global scale. Platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu not only allow users to create content, but also facilitate engagement through likes, comments, shares, and remixing—turning passive audiences into active contributors. This participatory model blurs the boundaries between content consumers and producers (Shao et al., 2022).

The viral nature of UGC allows media content to reach massive audiences. When users share content that resonates with them, particularly on platforms like Weibo and Douyin, it spreads rapidly through social networks, often with greater effectiveness than traditional marketing methods (Zeng & Wang, 2023). In this digital environment, audiences are not just end users; they are also promoters, co-creators, and meaning-makers.

This shift is especially evident in the global film industry, where UGC has become a powerful promotional tool. UGC can foster emotional engagement, generate word-of-mouth publicity, and even influence box office outcomes. For instance, fan-made videos, memes, reviews, and reaction clips shared on Chinese platforms like Bilibili and Douban contribute significantly to a film's visibility and popularity (Li, 2022).

The Thai film industry provides a compelling case of this phenomenon. Films such as Bad Genius and How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma) have achieved notable success in China, in part due to their effective integration of digital media strategies and reliance on UGC to drive international buzz. These films have resonated with Chinese audiences through universal themes, emotional storytelling, and high production values (Nation Thailand, 2024; Thaiger, 2023).

Beyond artistic merit, Thai cinema has become a tool of soft power, enhancing Thailand's cultural influence abroad. Initiatives such as the National Soft Power Development Committee have supported the global promotion of Thai films and increased their visibility at international film festivals (Thailand.go.th, 2024).

On Chinese platforms, audiences actively engage with Thai films by posting reviews, creating fan content, and participating in online discussions. This UGC helps localize foreign media and builds emotional connections between Chinese viewers and Thai narratives—particularly those centered on family, generational conflict, and societal issues (Chen, 2020; Wu, 2019).

Importantly, Chinese audiences often perceive peer-generated content as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertising. This credibility enhances the effectiveness of UGC as both a promotional and cultural adaptation tool, helping bridge cross-cultural divides (Shao et al., 2022).

Objectives of Study

1) To examine the role of user-generated content in contributing the promotion of the Thai film "How to Make Millions before Grandma Dies (Laanma)" in the Chinese market.

2) To analyze how user-generated content shapes the emotional engagement of Chinese audiences with the themes presented in the film How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma).

3) To explore the influence of user-generated content on viewership patterns of Thai films in the context of cross-cultural promotion in China.

Literature Reviews

1) Marketing Communication Theory

Marketing Communication Theory is applied to examine how user-generated content effectively captures attention, builds interest, and drives desire and action, positioning the film as a focal point of online discussion. Through surveys, this research gathers data on audience perceptions of recurring themes and messages in User-generated content related to the film, revealing which types of User-generated content are most effective in building emotional resonance and influencing viewing intentions. Analyzing survey responses will provide insights into how UGC shapes audience attitudes, reinforces brand associations, and ultimately impacts their decisions to watch the film.

2) Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory to explore how user-generated content on platforms such as Weibo, TikTok, and other Chinese social media channels influences public discourse, positioning "How to Make Millions before Grandma Dies (Laanma)" as a central topic of conversation. By examining survey data, this research identifies the most discussed themes in User-generated content related to the film, assessing how these themes shape audience perceptions and emotional engagement.

Through the analysis of audience responses, the study evaluates how User-generated content sets the public agenda, guiding audience interest and influencing their intention to view the film. The findings reveal how the film's emotional appeal and thematic elements are amplified through user-generated content, ultimately impacting its viewership patterns in the cross-cultural context of China.

3) Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory provides insights into how users' engagement with user-generated content helps them fulfill their emotional and entertainment needs, influencing their emotional connection with the film. In this study, this theory explains how Chinese audiences engage with User-generated content to fulfill various needs. Through User-generated content, users share their opinions about "How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma)" to satisfy their entertainment, emotional expression, and informational needs. For instance, they may watch fan reviews or create fan art to gain more insights into the film or interact with other fans to build social connections.

4) Theory of Planned Behavior

Theory of Planned Behavior is used to explain how User-generated content affects audience attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, thus shaping their intentions to watch "How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma)". Positive reviews in User-generated content may enhance viewers' attitudes toward the film, while social interaction within User-generated content increases the influence of subjective norms, making viewers feel that watching the movie is a socially endorsed behavior. Additionally, User-generated content provides information on viewing platforms or availability, improving perceived behavioral control by making the act of watching the film seem more feasible.

5) Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory is applied in this study to explain how social interactions and peer endorsements within User-generated content shape both audience behavior and emotional engagement. This study combines Social Influence Theory with Uses and Gratifications Theory to analyze how positive emotional reactions and endorsements about "How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma)" create a sense of belonging and group identification, fostering a deeper emotional connection with the film's themes. Additionally, it combines Social Influence Theory with the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain how social norms and peer influence affect viewers' intentions and behaviors regarding watching the film. When users see their friends or influencers recommending the film on social media, they may feel social pressure or be influenced by group norms, making them more inclined to watch. The high volume of discussions and recommendations within UGC further amplifies this influence, enhancing both emotional engagement and viewership participation.

Research Methodology

1) Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to systematically investigate the role of user-generated content (UGC) in the promotion, emotional engagement, and viewership behavior surrounding the Thai film How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma) among Chinese audiences. Specifically, the study sought to assess how UGC on platforms like Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu influenced user awareness of the film, emotional resonance with its themes, and decisions to view the film.

To guide this investigation, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is a significant relationship between the perception of UGC and awareness of the Thai film Laanma among Chinese social media users.

H2: UGC engagement positively influences emotional resonance with the film's content.

H3: UGC exposure is positively correlated with viewership behavior, including the decision to watch and the viewing platform selected.

In addition, this research is grounded in cross-cultural communication theory, particularly the Encoding/Decoding Model proposed by Stuart Hall (1980), which suggests that media messages are interpreted differently based on the cultural background of audiences. The study also considered Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) to understand how audiences use UGC to fulfill needs such as entertainment, social connection, and information seeking.

2) Population

The population for this study comprised Chinese social media users who were active on Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, and who had been exposed to or interacted with UGC related to the film How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma).

As of 2024, China had an estimated total population of 1.43 billion, with approximately 1.06 billion active social media users, representing 74.2% of the national population (The Global Statistics, 2024). This substantial user base provided a robust foundation for sampling, particularly those active in film-related discourse on popular video and content-sharing platforms.

3) Samples and Sampling Method

The sampling frame focused on users of Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu who had encountered or created UGC related to Laanma. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size calculation, a representative sample was determined based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The inclusion criteria for participants were:

1. Active users of Douyin, Weibo, or Xiaohongshu.

2. Individuals who had been exposed to or engaged with content related to the film Laanma (e.g., watched clips, read/wrote reviews, created fan content).

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to target users fitting these criteria, ensuring that respondents had relevant experience with the subject of study.

4) Research Tools and Measurement

The research instrument was a structured online questionnaire developed and distributed via Wenjuanxing, a widely used Chinese survey platform. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert scale questions (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) and was divided into the following key sections:

1. Demographic Information: Age, gender, educational background, and geographic location.

2. Social Media Usage Patterns: Frequency of use, preferred platform, and typical UGC interaction behaviors.

3. Perception of UGC: Trust, authenticity, and relevance of user-generated content related to Laanma.

4. Film Awareness and Exposure: Initial discovery of the film, number of times content was seen/shared, etc.

5. Emotional Resonance: Degree to which themes such as family, aging, or sacrifice resonated emotionally.

6. Viewership Behavior: Whether UGC led to watching the film, timing of viewing, platform chosen, and sharing behavior.

The questionnaire was validated through expert review and pre-tested with a small sample before full deployment.

5) Data Collection and Analysis Process

Data collection was conducted online via Wenjuanxing, where the survey link was shared through targeted groups and hashtags related to Thai films, family-themed dramas, and emotional storytelling on platforms like Douyin and Weibo.

After data collection, responses were exported and analyzed using SPSS software. The data analysis process included:

1. Data Cleaning: Removal of incomplete or duplicate entries.

2. Descriptive Statistics: Calculation of means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for all variables.

3. Inferential Statistics:

3.1 Correlation analysis to assess relationships between UGC perception, emotional resonance, and viewership behavior.

3.2 Multiple regression analysis to test the influence of UGC variables on dependent variables (film awareness, emotional engagement, and viewing decisions).

These statistical procedures provided robust evidence to test the study's hypotheses and to uncover the nuanced role of UGC in shaping cross-cultural media engagement.

Results of Research

The research sample comprised 400 participants with diverse demographic backgrounds. In terms of gender distribution, 216 participants (54%) identified as female, while 184 (46%) were male. The largest age group represented in the study was between 24 and 29 years old, accounting for 138 individuals or 34.5% of the sample. Regarding education level, the majority of respondents—261 people or 65.3%—held a bachelor's degree. Most participants resided in northern cities of China (208 individuals, 52%). When asked about social media platform preferences, Weibo emerged as the most commonly used platform among participants (n = 137, 34.3%), followed by Douyin and Xiaohongshu. The frequency of platform usage was also notable, with 149 respondents (37.3%) reporting that they accessed social media every day.

The first hypothesis (H1) posited that user-generated content (UGC) significantly contributes to the promotion of the Thai film How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma) in the Chinese market. The findings supported this hypothesis. Descriptive data revealed that 55.3% of participants reported first learning about the film through UGC on platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, and 60.0% indicated that they frequently encountered related content. To formally test this hypothesis, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between the frequency of UGC exposure and film awareness. The results showed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that increased exposure to UGC is strongly associated with higher awareness of the film. These statistical findings confirm that UGC plays a critical role in increasing the film's visibility and reach in the Chinese digital market.

The second hypothesis (H2) suggested that UGC positively influences the emotional engagement of Chinese audiences with the film's themes. The data provided compelling support for this hypothesis. A total of 62.3% of respondents agreed that UGC sparked their interest in watching the film, while 60.3% believed that UGC helped them understand and emotionally connect with the themes presented in the film.

Inferential statistical analysis further revealed a significant relationship between UGC engagement and emotional connection, as indicated by a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.587$ ($p < 0.001$). This result underscores the emotional resonance elicited by UGC due to its authenticity, relatability, and informal tone. Thus, the study confirms that UGC enhances emotional engagement, deepening the audience's connection to the film's narrative and cultural elements.

The third hypothesis (H3) proposed that UGC significantly influences viewership patterns of Thai films in the context of cross-cultural promotion. This hypothesis was also confirmed by both descriptive and inferential analyses. Approximately 63.8% of participants agreed that UGC influenced their decision to recommend the film to others, while 59.8% acknowledged that UGC shaped their viewing choices. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive power of UGC variables on viewing behavior. The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 42.76$, $p < 0.001$), and UGC engagement was found to significantly predict the likelihood of watching the film ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) and recommending it to others ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). These results validate the hypothesis by demonstrating that UGC not only affects audience exposure and emotion but also translates into concrete behavioral outcomes, such as viewing intent and peer recommendation.

In conclusion, the study provides strong empirical evidence that user-generated content is a key driver in the cross-cultural promotion of Thai films to Chinese audiences. By supporting all three hypotheses with formal statistical analysis, the research highlights UGC's powerful role in enhancing awareness, fostering emotional connection, and influencing behavioral responses. These findings offer valuable contributions to both theoretical discourse in digital media studies and practical strategies for international film marketing. Visual elements such as tables and charts summarizing key statistics, correlations, and regression outputs are recommended to further clarify and reinforce the reported results.

Discussion

User-Generated Content (UGC) has emerged as a transformative force in promoting the Thai film How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies (Laanma) among Chinese audiences, especially on platforms like Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu. Its capacity to amplify visibility aligns with the Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), as it directed audience attention and established the film as a cultural touchstone. More than mere amplification, UGC functioned as a conduit for cross-cultural connection, allowing diverse audiences to engage with the film on an emotional and cultural level. This reflects findings by Jiang and Xie (2020), who note UGC's power in tailoring global media to local sensitivities.

Furthermore, the study builds on Chen and Zhou's (2022) argument that UGC often surpasses traditional advertising by incorporating cultural relevance and peer endorsement—highlighting UGC as not just a promotional tactic but a strategy for transnational resonance. These insights support and extend Marketing Communication Theory (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), emphasizing that culturally adaptive, peer-driven messaging is central to effective media campaigns.

Emotional engagement also played a critical role in UGC's effectiveness. This study found that Chinese viewers frequently shared personal reflections, emotional reactions, and nostalgic connections through UGC. Such emotionally authentic content, including testimonials and expressive videos, fulfilled psychological needs and built trust—concepts grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) and the Emotional Response Model (Schultz & Schultz, 2004). Emotional resonance not only deepened individual connections but also created a sense of community, reinforcing previous findings by Liu (2020) and Zhang (2021) on the role of emotional storytelling in digital marketing. More importantly, UGC fostered shared digital narratives that influenced collective behavior, particularly through peer recommendations and community-driven promotion. This aligns with Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958) and the AIDA model (Zhao, 2020), reinforcing the idea that emotionally compelling UGC does more than engage—it persuades, converts, and sustains audience interest across borders. The integration of personal and collective emotional storytelling into marketing strategies offers a replicable model for other international films seeking entry into culturally distinct markets.

Finally, the impact of UGC on viewership behavior underscores its dual function as an informational and motivational tool. Rooted in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), peer-shared reviews and recommendations lowered perceived barriers and shaped intentions to watch the film by reinforcing subjective norms. This finding complements earlier studies by Papies and Clement (2009) and Liu et al. (2020), which emphasize the role of social cues in digital decision-making. Additionally, UGC's participatory nature enabled users to assume the role of active promoters—opinion leaders who influenced peers, echoing the two-step flow of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Unlike traditional advertising, which presents one-way messaging, UGC supports a cycle of engagement in which audiences become part of the promotional ecosystem. This participatory loop reflects the shift toward interactive marketing in the digital age, where consumers shape brand narratives in real time. Importantly, these findings reveal that UGC's impact is not limited to a single cultural or market context; rather, it suggests broader applicability across global entertainment industries seeking to harness organic audience engagement to navigate linguistic, cultural, and behavioral diversity.

Suggestions

1) Suggestions from This Study

1.1) Strategic Integration of UGC into Promotional Campaigns. UGC should be strategically integrated into promotional campaigns, utilizing platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu to maximize awareness and engagement. Campaigns that involve contests, challenges, and collaborative initiatives can incentivize UGC creation, allowing audiences to become co-creators in the promotion process.

1.2) Emphasizing Emotional and Relatable Narratives in UGC. Marketers should encourage the creation of fan reviews, memes, and interactive content, as these forms of UGC were shown to significantly enhance film awareness and influence viewing decisions.

1.3) Localization of UGC Campaigns for Cultural Resonance. UGC campaigns should align with the cultural nuances of the Chinese market, incorporating elements that resonate with local traditions and societal values.

1.4) Bridging Cultural Gaps through UGC. Marketers should view UGC as a tool for cross-cultural dialogue, enabling audiences to interact with foreign narratives while finding familiar elements that resonate with their own experiences. By fostering this cultural connection through UGC, Thai films can achieve greater visibility, engagement, and success in the competitive Chinese market.

2) Suggestions for Future Research

2.1) Expanding UGC Research to Other Cultural Contexts and Film Genres. Future studies could investigate how UGC operates in other international markets, particularly in regions with distinct cultural and digital media landscapes.

2.2) Longitudinal Studies on the Sustainability of UGC Engagement. Longitudinal studies are also essential to examine the sustainability of UGC-driven engagement over time. Future research could assess whether these effects translate into long-term brand loyalty and audience retention. Investigating the lifecycle of UGC campaigns and their influence on audience behaviors months or years after a film's release would provide insights into the enduring value of UGC in maintaining audience interest.

2.3) Exploring Advanced Technologies in UGC Campaigns Future studies could delve deeper into the psychological mechanisms through which UGC influences emotional and behavioral responses. Neurocognitive or experimental methods could be employed to uncover the underlying processes that drive audience engagement, such as how emotional tones in UGC activate neural pathways associated with trust and decision-making.

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