

An Analysis of the Marketing Strategy of Domestic Art Films in the New Media Era: A Case Study of Only the River Flows

Anyu Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Journalism and Communication, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou City, 341000, China*

a. 211503021@gnnu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Chinese art films have been garnering increasing attention on the international stage; however, they are still facing challenges in terms of publicity and marketing within the domestic film market. Based on this background, this paper aims to examine the marketing strategy of the recent exceptional art film *Only The River Flows* through a case study approach, with the employment of text analysis and theoretical analysis to identify an effective marketing model for art films. In this era of new media, both social platforms and short video platforms have presented opportunities as well as challenges for film marketing. Through the analysis, it can be seen that domestic art films need to strike a balance between their artistic value and commercial viability while they should also pay attention to comprehending the commonalities along with individualities of different marketing approaches in order to achieve critical acclaim as well as box office success.

Keywords: Marketing strategy, domestic art films, new media era, *Only The River Flows*

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese films have achieved remarkable success on the international film stage. Young Chinese directors' work is becoming more diverse, and they are increasingly making their presence felt at international film festivals. Among them, art films hold a relatively significant position, with *Dwelling in The Fuchun Mountains*, *Journey to the West*, *The Cord of Life*, and other high-quality domestic art films continuously emerging.

Art films are characterized by their unique classification, lack of commercial appeal and entertainment value, which makes it challenging for them to compete with mainstream blockbusters and commercial films in the market. However, the inherent aesthetic characteristics of art films and their ability to reflect social issues give them distinct cultural and artistic value. Despite this, the current state of most domestic art films in terms of survival is concerning. Out of all the art films released in cinemas over the past five years, those that earned more than 15 million yuan accounted for 58% of the total market share. On the other hand, those who earned more than 100 million yuan only made up 14.9% of the total market share [1].

Since the emergence of new media, the landscape of media communication has been constantly evolving. With the advent of the Internet, it has presented novel opportunities for various industries, including the film sector. This is particularly true for niche art films seeking to expand their marketing

strategies. However, this advancement also brings along certain limitations and confronts with fresh challenges.

Only the River Flows stands out among many similar art-house films after its release following the National Day Holiday in 2023. It attracted a total audience of 7.208 million viewers and generated box office revenue amounting to 294 million yuan while having a production cost of only 30 million yuan - achieving remarkable success both financially and through word-of-mouth publicity. Given the challenging commercial prospects of art house films, it becomes even more crucial to explore an effective marketing strategy for this particular film - as it holds the key to unraveling the enigma behind its low production budget and high box office performance. How to effectively utilize new media platforms to bridge the promotional gap in film publicity has emerged as a prominent topic of discussion. Currently, numerous scholars are examining the realm of film promotion through the lens of new media, focusing on genres such as comedy, romance, family-oriented films, and others. However, there exists a contradictory understanding among many film researchers regarding the marketing strategies employed for "art films," which are often perceived as intentionally eschewing mass appeal and prioritizing artistic merit over box office revenue. This viewpoint is not reasonable when contrasting "art films" with commercially driven productions that prioritize box office success. The division between these two categories is blurred by factors such as a director's personal style and counterexamples like the successful box office performance of *Only the River Flows*.

In today's context, where domestic audiences possess an elevated level of cinematic awareness, art films are increasingly embraced for their profound meaning and societal insights. Consequently, it becomes crucial to explore how new media platforms can be leveraged to promote art films effectively. This paper aims to investigate art film marketing strategies through case studies, textual analysis, and theoretical examination while offering recommendations.

2. The Analysis of the Current Marketing Status of Domestic Art Films

2.1. The Assessment of the Present Marketing Situation of Domestic Art Films

2.1.1. The Disruption of Domestic Art Film Marketing

The disruption in domestic art films primarily arises from the disconnection between communication content and audience psychology. Low-budget art films exhibit distinct directorial styles that deviate from mainstream commercial market conventions. Drawing upon their unique personal experiences and humanistic concerns, art film directors demonstrate their individual understanding through creative methodologies. Consequently, it often proves challenging for audiences to grasp the themes of art films under normal circumstances, hindering the establishment of a connection between the director and the audience during the viewing process. While art films intentionally avoid content and emotional homogeneity, their alternative expressions render them less accessible to viewers.

Additionally, art films embody characteristics of "pioneering experimentation." The term "pioneer" refers to thought-provoking elements within film works that belong to metaphysical realms, while "experimentation" pertains to specific production techniques falling into physical categories [2]. For instance, *Journey to the West* (2023, directed by Kong Dashan) explores pioneering concepts by delving into existential questions about life's meaning through its depiction of universe exploration. This pseudo-documentary employs unconventional shooting methods that deviate from mainstream film language norms by adopting innovative and daring designs aimed at enhancing visual storytelling techniques. However, such pioneering experiments often result in ambiguity within the meaning construction within a film and its unconventional use of language, potentially leaving audiences perplexed and even uncomfortable with its artistic nature.

2.1.2. The "Aphasia" in the Marketing of Domestic Art Films

The deficiency in the distribution mode of domestic art films reflects an "aphasia" within the industry. China initiated its cinema system in 2002, establishing the cinema's central position and revitalizing a previously dormant film market. Currently, China boasts the highest number of screens worldwide [3]. To stimulate audience interest, movie distributors employ various promotional strategies such as special releases, on-set lighting, and preheating trailers for commercial films. Additionally, they carefully select optimal timing and screen numbers to maximize profits while some production teams embark on road shows across different cities. However, it is crucial to note that this integration of online and offline publicity models cannot be directly applied to art film promotion. For instance, promoting an art film like "Last Night on Earth" through a kissing scene would be inappropriate as it deviates from its artistic characteristics and relies solely on romantic film traffic instead. Furthermore, China has yet to establish a mature network of art theaters, unlike European or American markets where the film industry is still developing; there are limited options for showcasing art films apart from venues like the China Film Archive, which lacks scale and presence in third- or fourth-tier cities [4].

Overall, China's domestic art film marketing continues to face evident disadvantages, resulting in an aphasic state within the national film market that fails to adapt adequately to new media era developments.

2.2. The Marketing Landscape of Domestic Art Films in the Era of New Media

2.2.1. The Yield of Film Marketing in the Era of New Media

Currently, the primary target audience for Chinese films consists of individuals born in the 1980s and 1990s. In the era of new media, people increasingly rely on the Internet for consumption and social interaction. According to the "2022 China Film Industry Development Analysis Report," TikTok, a prominent social platform within new media, possesses a significant advantage in terms of user traffic pool. With over 700 million daily active users, predominantly young individuals, it serves as a major driving force behind movie ticket purchases [5]. The profound integration of film marketing with the Internet not only expands traditional film marketing boundaries but also broadens both development and consumption prospects for films themselves. This integration has led to an expansion in both the size and precision of film audiences. By utilizing TikTok's marketing platform, *Song of the Phoenix* (2016) successfully targeted audiences with bachelor's degrees or higher education levels, resulting in increased box office revenue.

Furthermore, within this new media era, everyone becomes an active participant where interactive and social aspects facilitate better communication between creative teams behind films and their audiences, thus establishing a bridge between viewers and producers. Popular movies like *Creation of the Gods* (2023) and *The Ex-Files 4* (2023) have utilized live broadcasts on platforms, allowing audiences to interact directly with actors while attracting more attention to these films, leading to increased box office success. The practice of these mainstream commercial films using short video platforms for publicity can also become a breakthrough for art films to enhance the box office.

Lastly, fierce competition among various platforms within this new media landscape promotes diversification, which ultimately aids in reducing marketing costs. Even small- to medium-budget films can allocate sufficient resources toward customized promotion strategies and distribution channels while accurately targeting specific audience segments.

2.2.2. Enhanced Marketing Collaboration Opportunities between Emerging Media Platforms and Domestic Art Films

With its unique advantages in publicity, new media platforms have brought new opportunities for development to the film industry. The distribution of art films is limited, whereas new media platforms suffer from a scarcity of quality content, the collaboration between the two parties can result in mutual benefits. The cooperation between new media platforms and film marketing is becoming increasingly sophisticated, typically divided into graphic propaganda, short video propaganda, and live broadcast propaganda. Graphic and short video propaganda are favored by many film distributors due to their low cost, wide reach, and quantity advantage. Live broadcasts introduce a novel mode of selling movie tickets through interactive features.

Among these modes of promotion, short videos possess characteristics similar to meme transmission; a popular short video work can recreate itself by "creating a meme" via copying and adaptation techniques, enabling rapid diffusion and dissemination that is concise yet extensive [6,7]. After long-term commercial development, short videos have proven capable of consistently incubating content while contributing to the establishment of intellectual property (IP). Therefore, their exploitable value and predictable economic benefits should not be underestimated.

2.2.3. The Challenge of Domestic Art Film Marketing in the New Media Era

The surge of commercialization in the new media era has presented numerous challenges to domestic art films. The inclination towards commercialization renders film and television work more commercially driven and popular rather than pursuing artistic autonomy and aesthetic expression. The impact of commercialization has somewhat constrained the creation of art films, making it arduous for certain independent and avant-garde art films to garner attention and recognition amidst this wave of commercialization. The demands imposed by commercialization on the content and form of films have limited the creative direction and expressive forms of art films, thereby impeding some thought-provoking works with an independent style from standing out.

Furthermore, the new media era brings the trend of media flow. Media flow refers to the process of media content spreading in the global market. In the 21st century, media imperialism does exist, but the concept of media flow seems to be gradually becoming mainstream. (7) The new media era has also pulled domestic art films into the background of globalization, and domestic art films are also facing the challenge of cultural export. The difference between domestic and foreign film censorship systems may lead to the difficulty of domestic art films gaining wide recognition and dissemination in the international market. At the same time, some film works involving local culture and values are often unable to be effectively promoted and disseminated in the international market due to the restrictions of the censorship system, which makes domestic art films face many challenges and difficulties in the process of internationalization. In addition, domestic art films often need to consider the audience's cultural identity when they are disseminated, and the influence of censorship on cultural identity may lead to certain restrictions on the expression of local cultural characteristics and concepts in film works. This conflict between cultural identity and censorship makes it difficult for domestic art films to fully display the unique charm of local culture in communication, thus affecting their competitiveness and influence in the market.

3. The Analysis of the Marketing Strategy for *Only the River Flows*

Only the River Flows was released on October 21, 2023, and achieved a staggering box office success by surpassing the 100 million mark within just two days. As an esteemed domestic art film, its final box office earnings exceeded 300 million yuan, outperforming numerous films during the highly competitive National Day period and emerging as an unexpected blockbuster. Directed by Wei

Shujun and featuring Zhu Yilong in the lead role, this cinematic masterpiece is a remarkable adaptation of Yu Hua's renowned novel bearing the same title. The film garnered significant attention through a total of 18 official marketing campaigns conducted before and after its release. Notably, special promotions accounted for the highest proportion at an impressive rate of 44.4%, followed by trailers at 16.7%, while other promotional activities included press conferences and road shows (data sourced from Lighthouse Professional edition).

The creative team of *Only the River Flows* has established an official account on platforms such as TikTok and Weibo, where they promote the film through short videos. Based on the content of these videos, the film's topics are centered around three aspects: its main creator, plot, and artistry.

The primary creator primarily emphasizes the leading actors themselves, with the film featuring popular actor Zhu Yilong, making it a high-quality subject within the attention economy. The concise promotional video showcases the actors on set and their stellar performances in the campaign, effectively capturing audience attention through fan economy and star power, thereby shifting the conversational focus towards Zhu Yilong and his portrayed characters.

The concise promotional video primarily showcases the film's storyline through a selection of revealing clips and highlights preview.. It strategically employs meticulous details to evoke emotional responses from the audience and harness their inherent value. For instance, by featuring 1990s backward case handling technology in the promotional footage, it captivates viewers' curiosity towards uncovering the truth without relying on scientific or technological support. Additionally, significant props within the film are revealed as a common tactic in such promotional films; for example, the woman's wig and Ma Zhe's enigmatic disappearing puzzle that resurfaces only in his memory. These meticulous details accentuate the suspenseful nature of the movie while subtly bridging any perceived gap between its artistic background and audience engagement.

The marketing video of art focuses on the discussion of the film itself. In recent years, China's art film market has gradually expanded. *Only the River Flows*, an outstanding domestic art film, will be featured in the official unit "One Kind of Attention" at the 76th Cannes Film Festival as a selling point in the international version of its trailer on the first day of publicity. Additionally, with its suspenseful temperament, it attracts countless fans, and 62.5 percent of them come from first- and second-tier cities, while 77.2 percent hold a bachelor's degree or above. Furthermore, to enhance exposure and broaden viewership, the film invites Yu Hua, the original author of the novel it is based on, for an interview. As a popular figure sought after by contemporary literary youth, Yu Hua's personal influence also translates into increased attention to this film.

The dissemination of short marketing videos featuring the main creator, plot, and art on the TikTok platform is not limited to one-way communication. User-generated content (UGC) significantly enhances users' presence and sense of participation while also adopting a "user perspective". Market-oriented film products are crucial as their box office performance, reputation, and discussion heat depend on the audience's reception [8]. Each TikTok user serves not only as a recipient but also actively contributes to the continuous fermentation of marketing content. Through comment functionality, marketers and audiences can effectively communicate and promptly rectify promotional information during the promotion process to attract more traffic and attention. The success of "Mistake by the River" in its marketing campaign sufficiently demonstrates that TikTok, among other emerging media platforms today, can provide valuable guidance for film marketing strategies. As a short video social platform with strong public opinion fermentation capabilities, audio-visual dominance, and social attributes, TikTok offers comprehensive advantages for promoting and distributing art films.

4. Countermeasures for Marketing Domestic Art Films

4.1. The Pursuit of Achieving a Harmonious Integration between Artistic Expression and Commercial Viability

In the fiercely competitive market environment, art films must strive to strike a delicate balance between artistic expression and market demand. Art film creators should be mindful of audience acceptance and market feedback while maintaining their unique artistic style in order to achieve a mutually beneficial relationship between art and business. This places higher demands on the abilities and market sensitivity of art film creators and marketers.

Simultaneously, in the era of new media, the diversification of audience needs also presents new challenges for positioning art films in the market. Marketers of art films need to pay greater attention to emotional resonance with audiences and their spiritual pursuits, catering to different groups' requirements. This raises higher expectations for artistic expression and market positioning.

Therefore, reconciling the contradiction between artistic expression and market demand is an important challenge faced by domestic art films in this age of new media. It necessitates constant exploration and balancing by the creative team behind these films.

4.2. Leverage Word-of-Mouth Strategically

Word-of-mouth marketing is a crucial strategy for small and medium-sized budget film promotion, directly impacting the overall marketing effectiveness [9]. Firstly, prioritizing content excellence is paramount; enhancing the production quality of the film and engaging with influential figures to seek their pre-release feedback and endorsement. Additionally, proactive promotion before and after the film's release is essential in establishing a favorable reputation, leveraging new media platforms to generate positive buzz and enhance audience attention and exposure. Lastly, post-release utilization of social media should be continuous to create compelling discussions surrounding the film by aligning it with current societal trends, thereby fostering effective communication benefits. Often commencing from unveiling captivating narratives behind the movie or highlighting remarkable intricacies within it can captivate viewers' interest in watching.

4.3. Pay Careful Attention to the Customization and Diversification of Marketing Strategies

The development of domestic art films is a challenging task, and the marketing of Chinese art films in the film market should fully leverage new media marketing strategies, implement innovative marketing approaches, and integrate the unique characteristics of domestic art films to offer personalized marketing experiences for film audiences [10]. By combining the distinctive features, profound humanistic concerns, and diverse cultural contexts of various art films, it is essential to utilize user-friendly, interactive, and cost-effective trial-and-error new media platforms for tailored and diversified publicity campaigns. Exploiting influential algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok and Weibo enables audience segmentation for targeted promotion while accurately delivering information to potential users.

5. Conclusion

Domestic art films are also considered commodities in the field of art. In the era of new media, the success and prosperity of art films rely heavily on scientific and rational marketing strategies. While there has been a significant improvement in both the quantity and quality of domestic art films in recent years, not all of them manage to achieve effective publicity, gain a good reputation, or generate substantial box office revenue. Only a few exceptional domestic art films can truly stand out in the

competitive Chinese film market. In this internet age, film marketing increasingly depends on leveraging new media platforms' technological capabilities. Therefore, devising well-planned marketing programs centered around these platforms has become an essential consideration for every practitioner involved in promoting art films.

Only the River Flows sets an exemplary standard for other films due to its exceptional quality and remarkable box office earnings. The film's creation has successfully struck a balance between artistic integrity and commercial viability in its marketing approach, effectively leveraging new media social platforms to actively shape public opinion and generate positive word-of-mouth. Furthermore, it has tailored a distinctive marketing strategy that aligns with its unique identity as an art film. While art film marketing may not be universally applicable, the triumph of this film underscores the boundless potential for collaboration between new media platforms and domestic art film promotion.

This paper examines the challenges faced by domestic art films in marketing and analyzes their underlying causes. Additionally, it utilizes *Only the River Flows* as a case study to explore successful marketing strategies for domestic art films, assesses the potential of art film marketing in China, and provides relevant recommendations. In the future, both domestic and international film practitioners will continue to explore the potential of marketing art films within the context of the new media era. They will leverage advanced technologies offered by modern new media platforms to enhance public awareness and appreciation for art films, thereby ensuring that their unique qualities and profound social value are duly recognized.

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