# 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

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Abstract: Since the development of the film industry, film review has been an important part of the film industry, which reflects the audience's perception of the film, and now the audience is increasingly dependent on the film review platform. With the gradual capitalization of film industry, film reviews are gradually monopolized by capital interests, among which word-of-mouth marketing behaviors such as " click farming" and "review deletion" have an impact on the audience's trust degree. Based on the era of intelligent media, this paper adopts the method of in-depth interview to study how the behaviors of word-of-mouth platform Word-of-mouth platform -- that is, film online review platform affects audience psychology and the effect of current word-of-mouth marketing on movies.
Keywords: cognitive balance; network public opinion; film industry

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of Chinese film industry, subject matter has become rich, so in the market competition in the market competition, audience word-of-mouth is particularly important. Influenced by the diversity of film types, audiences increasingly rely on film rating platforms. In this context, it is beginning to appear that film producers influence film reviews by controlling word-of-mouth websites, film scoring and evaluation platform to increase the box office. We have observed that with the increasing number of users, the audience's trust in word-of-mouth websites gradually decreases. A score that deviates significantly from the audience's sensory values often do not affect the audience's decision, but will affect the reliability of word-of-mouth websites. Thus, questions are proposed: why do consumers reduce their trust in word-of-mouth websites? Why is it often the case that the reviews of audience are skewed in the other direction although the movies may have high ratings on platforms?

## 2 the review section

### 2.1 Literature review on the weakening effect of online word-of-mouth marketing of films

That the audience gradually does not recognize and trust the word-of-mouth websites has caused the academic research from many perspectives. With the development and changes of major film rating communities at home and abroad, Liu Yingqi to conduct a more detailed study on the current phenomenon of film rating public opinion analysis and reflection phenomenon. Her research shows that the film rating mechanism of online community has faced repeated credit crisis in recent years, which is mainly manifested as the phenomenon of online "click farming" disturbing the film public opinion, and the rationality of the scoring system is questioned. In 2016, People's Daily published an review article, aiming at Douban large scale vicious click farming after the release of the The Great Wall, See You Tomorrow, Railway Tigers and other domestic films. exposed the "water army click farming" phenomenon, "using the network cheating technology such as' Credential Stuffing Attack ‘, a team or even a few people can easily 'click farming', causing a crisis of trust in online film review platforms. Scholar Zhou Xu pointed out that the content of online film reviews is arbitrary, andthe expression is fragmented, superficial and private. Driven by consumerism and entertain mentalism, some online critics of film and television even cater to the cultural tendency of vulgarization and utilitarianism, losing the value standpoint and credibility of film criticism.

Some scholars also analyze from the perspective of the influence of film rating mechanism on audience's attitude towards movies. In 2022, domestic scholars Ouyang Qingyi, Mo Junjie and Zhang Zhicheng made an overall analysis of the influence of film rating mechanism on audience's movie-watching attitude from the theoretical perspective of "ABC attitude model", and pointed out that the quality of film rating and the attitude of followers can have a positive impact on users' movie-watching intention. However, the quantity, perceivability and weight of reviews have no obvious influence on users' willingness to watch movies. Scholar Qi Wei, by combing and analyzing the development status of the main domestic network film scoring system, studies the potential impact of China's film industry and points out that the use of Internet platforms for film marketing and promotion has become the norm, especially the use of network film scoring effect is the most intuitive and outstanding.

However, although these studies point out that audiences gradually do not recognize and trust film evaluation platforms, they do not carry out research from the 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 Heide in his book The Psychology of Human Relations. P represents the cognitive subject, O is another person with whom P is related; X is another arbitrary object that P relates to O. The theory assumes that the balance state between P-O- X is stable, excluding the influence of the outside world. The unbalanced state is unstable and will cause individual’s psychological tension. The elimination of this tension can only be accomplished when the relationship between them changes and the balance state is restored. Since the theory of cognitive balance was put forward, scholars at home and abroad have paid close attention to it and made many 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. It is proposed that in the context of Internet, the construction of social learning network is an effective method to the construction of social learning network is to strengthen the interaction between learners and resource nodes, learners and interpersonal nodes, and thus improve learning performance. Scholar Dong Hongxia published A Brief View of Chinese Female Literature from Cognitive Balance Theory in 2005, using cognitive balance theory to perspective Chinese female literature, to explore the relationship between cognitive balance theory and female literature in literary activities.

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

### 2.3 Question Raising

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

## 3 Research methods

This study adopts the in-depth interview method to answer the above questions. Specifically, this study divides the interview questions into four parts. The first part mainly involves the basic information of the interviewees, including their age and occupation. The second part is to understand the use of relevant software and its subjective and objective factors. In the third part, the research questions are reduced to interview questions. In the fourth part, preparation is made for possible deeper questions. The whole research process strictly follows the ethical and moral principles of scientific research, and each research object voluntarily choose whether to participate in the research under the condition of full understanding of the research. The researchers clearly understand their rights and obligations: in line with the principle of responsibility to the research subjects, respect and equal treatment of each research subject, the research process and all the original data are strictly confidential. At the same time, if the interviewees have any dissatisfaction during the interview, they can keep silent or quit. The interview materials that the interviewees stated that they do not want to publicize are not included and quoted in this study.

In this study, 23 interviewees aged 18-28 are interviewed for 15 minutes in semi-structured in-depth interviews. 15 valid interviews were conducted from April 8, 2023 to April 17, 2023. The interviewees are mainly college students, including graduates majoring in film. At the request of the interviewees, "students" are uniformly marked. The interview is conducted by one-to-one face-

to-face interview. The interview results are arranged into verbatim transcripts, and some agreed interviews are recorded. The processing of the interview content is completed by investigator. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in the table 1.

**Table 1 Basic information of interviewees**

| Serial number | Age | Occupation |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 23 | student |
| 2 | 21 | student |
| 3 | 22 | student |
| 4 | 21 | student |
| 5 | 22 | student |
| 6 | 21 | student |
| 7 | 23 | student |
| 8 | 22 | student |
| 9 | 26 | freelance work |
| 10 | 18 | official |
| 11 | 21 | student |
| 12 | 22 | student |
| 13 | 22 | student |
| 14 | 19 | student |
| 15 | 20 | student |

## 4 Research findings and discussion points

When we conducted further in-depth interviews on the interviewees' use of "word-of- mouth software" and their attitudes towards "word-of-mouth software" to try to get answers, we found that people chose to believe their own feelings when evaluating a movie, but only referred to the evaluation in word-of-mouth software, or even turned a blind eye to it. One of the most important reasons is the distrust of word-of-mouth software:

"Many commercial films do increase their popularity by click farming and hijacking social media trends at the initial release and promotion stage, which will affect my first impression of the film." (S1)

"(Factors in choosing a movie reference are) First, the genre and subject matter of the film; Second, the public reputation of the film on the Internet platform and the evaluation of people around it; Third, the production team and IP selection of the film; Fourth, the artistry and story content of the film "(S2)

"Actors, film directors and genres are more important, and I am not likely to decide what

movies to watch based on the Internet trends" (S2)

"Now I don't trust these platforms, because I think they are just click farming. What is more, the platforms are not well managed, which makes me feel there is no formal platform" (S3)

" Not sure. I will consider whether I hire too many soldiers. I will refer to the evaluation of my friends. But they still don't trust platforms "(S3)

" 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 army, a group of Internet ghostwriters paid to post online comments with particular content, to publish fake reviews on online review platforms to improve ratings and word-of-mouth of films. Such behavior will affect audiences' first perception of films and make them unable to truly understand the real quality of films. If the audience finds that the ratings and word-of-mouth of a film are false, they will question the film and even lose their trust. This is very unfavorable to the box office and reputation of the film.

Cognitive balance theory holds that when people receive new information, they automatically seek out existing information to compare and evaluate. If the new information is consistent with the existing information, people will perceive the information as credible, thus increasing their trust in the information. If the new information does not match the existing information, people will experience cognitive dissonance, which leads to questioning and distrust.

The act of a producer scrolling through comments can have an impact on the cognitive balance of the audience. If audiences see a large number of favorable reviews on online review platforms, they will think the film is a good film and develop trust in it. However, if the audience finds out that the positive reviews are false, they will have cognitive dissonance, which will cause them to question and distrust the film. This cognitive dissonance will affect the audience's first impression and trust of the movie, which will affect the box office and word of mouth of the movie.

**4.2 How much the audience likes the actors in a movie affects the credibility of the movie**

Through in-depth communication and interview with 20 interviewees, we find that audiences choose movies based on many factors, including actors, movie types, story lines, etc. These factors are more important to the audience, while the Internet trend has little influence on the audience. Audiences attach more importance to their own tastes and preferences. If the actors and types of a movie meet their tastes, they will choose to watch it instead of being influenced by the comments on online review platforms. Based on the cognitive balance theory, since audiences already have their own cognition and preference for actors and movie types, when they see movies in line with their cognition and preference on online review platforms, they will think these movies are credible and have trust in these movies. Therefore, comments on online review platforms have little impact on audiences.

**4.3 The credibility of the platform affects the audience's trust on the platform**

Through the interview, we found that 75% of people will affect their trust in the platform because of the irregular management of the platform. Online review platforms are important platforms for providing film reviews and word-of-mouth information. However, if these platforms cannot provide authentic and credible information, the audience's trust in these platforms will be reduced. If the comments on the online review platform are all false, the audience will not be able to determine the authenticity of these comments, which will lead to the loss of trust in the entire online review platform.

Based on the cognitive balance theory analysis, on the one hand, the platform's irregular behavior affects the audience's trust in the platform. If there are irregular behaviors in the online review platform, such as deleting reviews, brushing reviews, fake reviews, etc., then the audience will have cognitive dissonance towards the online review platform, and thus have doubts and distrust towards the platform. This kind of doubt and distrust will affect the audience's trust in the whole online review platform, thus affecting the reputation and credibility of the platform. Therefore, online review platforms need to strengthen their own management and supervision, and provide real and credible evaluation information to enhance the audience's trust in the platform. On the other hand, cognitive balance theory can also explain why audiences attach more importance to the first perception and evaluation of movies. When audiences watch a movie, they will evaluate the quality of the movie based on their own experience and knowledge. If the quality of the film is in line with the audience's expectations, then the audience will have a cognitive balance and trust in the film. On the contrary, if the quality of the film does not match the audience's expectations, then the audience will have cognitive dissonance and have doubts and distrust of the film. Therefore, the film producer needs to improve the quality of the film to meet the audience's expectations and enhance the audience's trust and recognition of the film.

### 4.4 The "spiral of silence" reduces the truthfulness of reviews

Through in-depth interviews, the author found that almost all people tend to choose silence when they see comments that are different from their own perception. A small number of people think that the irrationality of film criticism has nothing to do with them, and they will choose to remain silent. The other majority of people think that their own power is insignificant and cannot fight against the huge team of fake critics.

This is what the German scholar Elisabeth Noel-Neumann called the “spiral theory of silence”. Elisabeth Noel-Neumann argued that if a person senses that his opinion is in the minority, he will tend not to express it. When audiences see that most of the comments on word-of-mouth platforms are different from their own, they are reluctant to post their own authentic comments. As a result, there are more and more fake comments and fewer and fewer real comments on Koubei platform, and the authenticity of word-of-mouth websites is gradually reduced.

## 5 Summary and reflection

Now, film industry is facing worse environment in our country. The fallibility and informality

of word-of-mouth websites, in the final analysis, is that it is heavily influenced by capital interests. The original intention of the platform gradually turns to profit rather than real evaluation□As a result, film producers turned from thinking about "how to make a good film" to thinking about "how to make more money", and eventually the quality of films is uneven. In order to attract more audiences to watch films for profit, producers and investors chose to "buy reviews", that is, to buy good reviews for themselves and bad reviews for their partners, rather than accept criticism and improve them next time. In the end, the game of capital and capital cost audiences a lot -- they spend money but did not enjoy the movie-watching experience that matched it.

Word-of-mouth platform is the most direct platform for audiences to know about movies. As a platform for audiences to express their personal opinions and comments, it should be equal, open and authentic. Therefore, word-of-mouth platform should firm its position, reduce the interference of capital to the real network environment, strictly investigate and manage unreasonable review deletion, review brushing, fake reviews, etc.; The public should also reasonably make full use of the right of freedom of speech on the Internet, resist the bad competition behavior of films, and jointly build a formal, real and high -quality online review platform with word-of-mouth websites.

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