Original Article

International TV series distribution on Chinese digital platforms: Marketing strategies and audience engagement

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Abstract

The relationship between online media platforms in China and fan groups is a dynamic one when it comes to the distribution of international TV series and other media content, as media platforms incorporate user-generated content to encourage or foster audience engagement. Through a series of case studies, this article investigates how international TV series are acquired, distributed, marketed and curated on Chinese online video platforms. This helps to identify specific strategies and themes used by these platforms to promote international content and engage users. These marketing techniques, however, are not always as successful as expected, suggesting the need for a closer examination of the types of engagement sought by media platforms, and the ways in which Chinese audiences have responded within their cultural context.

Keywords

Audience engagement, Chinese digital platforms, Chinese online marketing, international TV series, online video distribution

Introduction

According to Jiang (2015) and Chen (2016), the introduction to China of foreign media content before the 21st century was mainly managed by Chinese television stations. With the blooming of the Internet in the early 21st century, however, fan-subbing groups who added Chinese subtitles to

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unauthorised foreign media content took over this role by distributing them illegally through P2P sites (Lin, 2014). Today, fans continue to play a key role in the introduction and distribution of unauthorised content in China through groups such as ZiMuZu (*zi mu zu*). With 12,357 followers on Weibo, this fan-subbing group produces Chinese subtitles for English language series that are not officially distributed in China and promotes them on a daily basis (ZiMuZu, n.d.). However, these activities have been greatly reduced in number since the 2008 shutdown of the majority of BitTorrent-based online video platforms, following the implementation of the *Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Program Service* from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (hereafter SARFT) and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) (Zhao & Keane, 2013). This shift towards regulation also meant online media platforms that obtained an Information Dissemination Network Audio-Visual Service Permit (AVSP) would now become major players in foreign content distribution in China. According to the report *China Internet Video*,

> by December 2008, of the 332 companies that obtained the AVSP, only a few of them were private Internet video operators (the majority were state owned enterprises in the national broadcasting system) – the number of private Internet video sites declined from 200 to less than 40 within one year. (Macquarie, 2011, p. 8)

The state plays a major role in regulating the distribution of international content, by requiring the broadcasting companies to register their imported media content before airing as well as limiting their number through quotas. According to Article 2.3 of the *Notice on Launching the Registration Process for Overseas TV Series Online* (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (hereafter SAPPRFT), 2015), the number of imported TV series by a single platform should not exceed 30% of purchased domestic series. According to Chen (2016), as the SAPPRFT (formerly SARFT) continues to tighten its censorship, this imposes significant difficulties on Chinese media platforms to sign media contracts with foreign production companies before shooting and broadcasting are completed overseas. This effectively prevents them from releasing their content simultaneously with foreign distributors. International content in China is normally acquired in the international distribution market after it has been shot, broadcasted and proven to be successful (Chen, 2016). This unfortunately leaves a time gap between overseas and Chinese distribution, which in turn creates a window of opportunity for pirated content to reach Chinese audiences before they are officially streamed by licenced media platforms. As the Chinese market is becoming a key market for the distribution of international content, international producers interested in distributing their content in China should take into consideration this complex media regulatory environment that influences the way international content is acquired, distributed and curated by Chinese online video platforms.

Through a series of case studies and comparative analyses, this article provides insight into the different strategies in place to distribute international content in China, along with the relative successes of those strategies in engaging audiences. This could help to give a better understanding of not only the key elements in play, but also the challenges that Chinese platforms face in distributing international TV series.

The first section will establish the theoretical framework, to be followed by a description of the methodology used to conduct this research. Based on the results of different case studies and comparative analyses, the third section will then examine how international TV series are marketed and curated on Chinese platforms in comparison with foreign platforms. This will help us identify the key elements and themes Chinese platforms use to engage their audiences, which is presented in the fourth section. This is followed by a study to understand how audiences of Chinese media platforms

respond to different curation styles and to the content itself, through likes, views, comments, and social media discussions. We find that the marketing techniques by Chinese media platforms are not always as successful as expected and suggest there is a need for a more nuanced examination of the types of engagement sought by platforms as well as the ways in which audiences have responded within the Chinese context.

Theoretical framework

A clear motivation for the marketing strategies adopted by media platforms to promote the series is to encourage audience engagement. Yet, notions of engagement are often broadly applied in general discussions of how audiences relate to media texts (Scott & Craig-Lees, 2010); 'engagement' is often used interchangeably with other associated terms such as 'interaction' and 'participation' although they serve different aims when applied to different groups. For our present purposes, it is thus necessary to distinguish between different notions of engagement to enable an evaluation of the phenomena observed in the case studies.

Definitions of engagement

Writing about evaluating audience reaction to advertising campaigns, Jane Scott and Margaret Craig-Lees (2010) highlight the difficulty of identifying a singular definition to describe what audiences do with texts. Multiple terms are adopted as a result of differences in disciplines and research contexts, such that a range of terms including 'engagement, involvement, connectedness, engrossment, immersion, flow, and transportation' (Scott & Craig-Lees, 2010, p. 42) are applied to outline varying degrees of audience responses. In turn, each term potentially offers different interpretations that are influenced by the field of research under consideration. For instance, for sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), 'engagement' relates to emotional reactions generated as a result of social interaction, while marketing scholarship sees the term as denoting 'the degree of attention/effort accorded an advertising message' (Scott & Craig-Lees, 2010, p. 42). There is a significant difference between emotive and cognitive responses. As such, definitions of engagement need to take into consideration specific disciplines of study, as well as the anticipated 'role' of audiences that they presuppose.

Within media studies, audience research has primarily focused on two aspects of the audience/media relationship: physical engagement with media (including where and how texts are viewed) and conceptual engagement with media (including the generation and/or repurposing of meanings and ways in which media texts facilitate the formation of publics). The audiences are characterised (often simultaneously) as consumers (Bjur, 2009), active readers (Murray, 1997), content co-creators (Grey, 2010; Jenkins, 2006) and participants in the distribution and 'spreading' of media (Hutchinson, 2016; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This multitude of 'roles' reflects an array of imagined subject positions occupied by audiences within a media ecology, and this shapes corresponding definitions of audience engagement. In other words, audiences should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Therefore, to evaluate and measure audience engagement, the structure of the media ecology and the audience's anticipated function within it requires definition.

In their recent exploration of audience engagement in a social media environment, Moe, Poell, and van Dijck (2018) call for a rearticulation of audience engagement as a result of 'the integration of these [social] media in television production, distribution and reception … [which has] forced all media professionals and scholars to reconsider how they understand, stimulate and measure audience

engagement' (p. 100). As their focus mirrors the online distribution and networked reception context of this study, their theoretical framework is particularly pertinent. They outline two dominant paradigms for the conceptualisation of the audience in a social media ecology. The first is 'a form of audience emancipation' (Moe et al., 2018, p. 100) in which audiences are viewed as user-producers, and their engagement is characterised as participatory in nature. While they see this conceptualisation of audiences as 'overly optimistic' (Moe et al., 2018, p. 101) in its failure to account for changing 'business models, and governance structures', they are equally critical of the opposing paradigm, which replicates early media scholar's concerns of audience exploitation, noting

> Although this contrasting perspective alerts us to the ways in which audience engagement is entangled with evolving business models and commercial strategies of social media platforms, it, too, leaves something wanting … The intricate ways in which social media technologies and creative user/audience practices articulate each other are not captured by political economic research. (p. 101)

Acknowledging the complexity of media ecologies featuring different levels of public/private integration and technological infrastructure, they suggest a multi-dimensional approach to the study of audiences. They highlight the need to consider '(1) national media cultures, (2) public versus commercial television, and (3) evolving techno-commercial strategies' (Moe et al., 2018, p. 101) as a means to effectively evaluate and measure audience activity and engagement. This study adopts Moe et al.'s first and third dimensions in its exploration of Chinese audience reaction to imported television series, as the regulations imposed on imported media content directly influence the ways in which content is marketed and curated on Chinese media platforms. At the same time, the way in which the audience is characterised affects the type of engagement that is anticipated, along with markers of success.

In their exploration of responses to crisis photo journalism, Ahva and Hellman (2015) identify three levels of audience engagement which range from emotional/cognitive reactions to text, to practical and social outcomes. At the 'outermost level of engagement' is civic engagement, which 'proposes that at the same time as audiences engage with journalism, they also connect with the public realm in which political issues are being discussed' (Ahva & Hellman, 2015, p. 670). The middle level is termed 'interactive engagement', wherein audiences are considered as participants who respond to media texts within their networks: 'audiences are seen to engage with media interactively by contributing reader comments, tweeting, or participating in online discussions' (Ahva & Hellman, 2015, p. 670). Finally, emotional connections between audience and media are described as 'interpretative engagement' (Ahva & Hellman, 2015, p. 671), where audiences actively contribute to the generation of meanings associated with a text or indeed in the construction of the text itself. For our present purposes, the types of audience engagement anticipated in this study are situated at the 'interactive' and 'interpretative' levels, where engagement is measured by examining the frequency and variety of audience commentary and content creation.

Audience engagement

As aforementioned, this study considers audience engagement at the levels of 'interactive engagement' and 'interpretive engagement' (p. 670) as outlined by Ahva and Hellman (2015). The audience is thus anticipated to be characterised as follows: (1) viewers, wherein engagement involves awareness of the series and is measured through ratings; (2) participants, wherein engagement involves commentary and social media activity and is measured through comment volume; and (3)

Table I. Level of awareness among Chinese audience towards foreign TV series.

TV series	Country of origin	Degree of awareness	% of overall surveyed
Sherlock	UK	393	82.39
Game of Thrones	US	346	72.54
Downton Abbey	UK	230	48.22
步步惊心:丽	South Korea	209	43.82
Under the Dome	US	203	42.56
Orange is the New Black	US	180	37.74
主君的太阳	South Korea	161	33.75
Doctor Who	UK	151	31.66
Misfits	UK	129	27.04
Heroes	US	125	26.21
Madman	US	88	18.45
Blacklist	US	84	17.61
任意依恋	South Korea	81	16.98
The Wire	US	80	16.77
Orphan Black	US	76	15.93
Mother	Japan	56	11.74
Father Brown	UK	52	10.9
Wallander	UK	40	8.39
Other		5	1.05

co-creators, wherein engagement involves active construction of meanings and is measured through quality and proliferation of user-generated content (UGC).

The types of audience engagement in the case studies below will be examined through examining the marketing techniques of Chinese and international media platforms, as well as the online activity of audiences.

Methodological framework

To identify how different international content is marketed and curated by Chinese platforms, we focused specifically on the distribution of UK and US TV series by three different Chinese platforms as follows:

1. Youku (media platform): ITV's *Downton Abbey* and BBC's *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who*.
2. Tencent Video (media platform): BBC's *Planet Earth II* and HBO's *The Wire* and *Game of Thrones*.
3. iQiyi (media platform): Netflix's *Making a Murderer*.

We took into consideration the range of media platforms (both Chinese and foreign), the most popular foreign TV series in China, and widely recognised media platform brands from both United States and United Kingdom. In a pre-study online survey conducted with 477 participants, respondents reported awareness of *Sherlock* (82.39%, n=393), *Game of Thrones* (72.54%, n=346), *Downton Abbey* (48.22%, n=230), *Doctor Who* (31.66%, n=151) and *The Wire* (16.77%, n=80;

Table 1). Of the rest, *Planet Earth II* was selected as a representative of the documentary genre, and *Making a Murderer* was selected as an example of a joint distribution agreement between iQIYI and Netflix (Faughnder, 2017).

We conducted a comparative analysis between Chinese and Western distribution/media platforms to take into consideration their respective cultural contexts. We identified the marketing devices used by Chinese and Western platforms to promote specific series. Particularly, the marketing devices under consideration included materials from the series, promotional narratives and UGC constructed around the series.

We conducted content analysis of the various themes used to promote these TV series employed by Chinese media platforms on their official homepage and Weibo accounts, as well as the UGC that they have incorporated as part of their marketing strategy. Our codes were cultural stereotypes, localisation, linguistic puns, stardom and quality.

We then conducted an analysis of data such as numbers of likes, views, sharing, comments on the main webpage and official Weibo account of these platforms. In the case of the UGC, videos that were posted to both official and unofficial platforms were reviewed, where data on view count, comments, sharing and likes for the same video were gathered. Our aim was to understand whether the different themes identified were effective in establishing audience engagement when deployed on different platforms. In other words, whether the location where something is posted (either an official or unofficial platform) has an influence on the type of audience engagement elicited. For instance, of the three characteristics of audience identified in the theoretical framework, would audiences be more likely to be 'viewers' in official platforms and 'participants' and 'co-creators' in unofficial platforms, or would other forms of audience practice emerge? This would demonstrate that the heterogeneity of audience roles is in part shaped by the media platforms that they visit and use.

Marketing and curation

The three Chinese platforms involved in this research – Youku, Tencent Video and iQIYI – generally promote international TV series on their websites and social media accounts. When the series are popular, online banners are prominently displayed on the websites' homepage, and stills from the series are used as headline images, as is the case with Tencent Video's page for American dramas (Tencent, n.d.-a).

In addition, these platforms provide specific pages for each series, displaying general information such as release time, number of episodes, plot overview and trailers. As a means to increase VIP subscriptions, privileges are also associated with the series. For example, in the case of *Sherlock* on Youku, VIP members were able to access new episodes of the series 1 week earlier than ordinary users. Taking into consideration the time gap or window of opportunity mentioned earlier in the introduction due to the delay in airing overseas and locally in China, this incentivises fans of the TV series to subscribe. Similarly, Tencent Video advertises on its website that access to the episodes of *Game of Thrones* is reserved only for paying viewers (Tencent, n.d.-b).

As we will see in the following section, while such promotional information appears similar to that displayed on Western media platforms such as PBS Masterpiece, HBO and Netflix, there are nonetheless clear differences in the way Western and Chinese platforms curate and promote international content, in particular, the incorporation of UGC by Chinese media platforms.

Webpage and social media

There are two key differences between Chinese and Western media platforms in terms of marketing and curation of the TV series on their main webpage and social media. The first difference is found in the use of audience data. Chinese video-on-demand platforms include audience feedback such as likes and dislikes, number of views, audience rating of the series and/or episodes, and audience comments (iQIYI, n.d.) in their promotion strategies. Such audience feedback is generally absent in Western platforms; in the case of Netflix, audience reviews and voting options are available to subscribers only.

Scholarship has suggested that Chinese audiences rely more heavily on peer review than official information when deciding on the quality of productions (Elliott, Konara, Ling, Wang, & Wei, 2018). Thus, the use of viewer feedback as a promotional technique is understandable. Chinese platforms provide several ways to engage audiences in this activity. Besides 'shooting-comments' that appear directly on-screen while watching a video, there are other spaces to post comments and reviews. Those comments and reviews could then be used by the platform as a promotional tool. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, for example, viewers could watch clips from the next episode and comment live (see Tencent, n.d.-c). In addition, users' reviews were divided into two different kinds based on their length – short and long reviews. Those reviews that obtained more likes and replies were then featured by the platform as 'in-depth reviews' (Tencent, n.d.-d). By incorporating and publishing the reviews, the media platform offers greater legitimacy and authority to the audience in hopes of eliciting greater interaction and participation.

In addition to the promotion on main webpages, Chinese social media are another place for the marketing of international content, with Weibo being the most popular outlet. Broadcast notices and trailer links are often posted on the Chinese platforms' Weibo posts. Highlights of the story and ancillary information, including celebrity and award news, are also provided. While this kind of information is also available on the official Western social media pages such as the Facebook page for the British TV series *Sherlock* (Facebook, n.d.-b) or *Downton Abbey* (Facebook, n.d.-a), the Chinese video-on-demand services differentiate themselves by integrating UGC into the official webpage and social media account of the series (see, for example, Youku, n.d.-a). Meanwhile, Western platforms provide only professionally and officially produced content about the series such as interviews with actors, trailers and edited videos of selected material from the series.

In Chinese platforms, trailers or other official material are uploaded by viewers instead of being distributed by the platform. For TV series that are particularly popular such as *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey*, special strategies are also applied during marketing to foster audience communities. For instance, Youku developed a specific page for *Sherlock* (Youku, n.d.-b) where the audiences are able to upload their review articles and videos about the series. According to Zhao and Keane (2013), 'The importance of the user community cannot be emphasized enough in a social network market, where the nature of consumer choice and producer decision-making is based on others' choices' (p. 735). It is also worth noting that the TV series (e.g. *Sherlock/Game of Thrones/ Downton Abbey*) with higher levels of awareness from our survey have employed this method.

Integrating UGC in their marketing strategy is therefore arguably a deliberate strategy on part of Chinese media platforms to direct audiences to their media content.

We should not forget that it is only recently that international TV series have officially been distributed in China by online platforms. These platforms have a clear interest in engaging Chinese fan groups that, as mentioned above, played a key role in introducing international content to China at the beginning of the century. These fan groups are still key to providing Chinese audiences

access to international content that is not officially distributed in China due to government censorship or quotas on the distribution of international series. It is therefore essential for media platforms to attract and engage audiences that can easily find unauthorised material online otherwise. The availability of BBC's *Doctor Who* and *Planet Earth II* episodes on several pirate websites – kmeiju.net, pp63.com, MeiJuTT.com, cn163.net – at the time of writing this article is a case in point. As observed by Grainge and Johnson (2015),

> while the unruliness of user-generated content [UGC] has caused anxieties about copyright within media corporations, studios and networks have increasingly, although not uniformly, recognized the marketing value of such material, seeing UGC as a prospective site of promotional interaction with audiences. (p. 34)

This highlights a contradiction in that, alongside this exploitation of UGC, entertainment platforms are also targeting through their legal departments online fan communities' content for copyright violations. One of the most notable examples of this took place in 2014, when the website *Kuaibo* was closed down following legal action by media platforms including Tencent (Gu, 2018). At the same time, however, those same platforms depend on unauthorised UGC material to provide their viewers with additional content for marketing purposes. In the entangled commercial and legal landscape of the online media platform, it appears that media companies can have their cake and eat it too.

Common themes and audience engagement

By analysing the discourses used by Chinese platforms to market international TV series, we identified specific marketing discourses developed depending on the nature of each series, such as the use of hunger marketing for the promotion of *Sherlock*, emphasising its long production time. According to Liu and Yan (2015), this enhances audience expectation levels and thus attracts attention. The mention that 'Sherlock is finally back after a long time' appears very frequently in Youku marketing material (Youku, 2013b). Similarly, Tencent Video used a special hashtag titled #雪诺到底死没死# (IsSnowDeadorNot) when the death of Jon Snow in *Game of Thrones* raised social media attention globally (Tencent, 2015a). It also organised a series of offline activities such as meetings with celebrities, audience gatherings and themed exhibitions. An example is Tencent's partnership with fashion brand AK Club to bring actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau (the Kingslayer) to Shanghai for a fan meet-and-greet. Fans could win free tickets by reposting posts from Tencent (2017a) and Coster-Waldau (2017a); the former offering three tickets and the latter four. The event itself was streamed by Tencent's live streaming app, Tencent Live. Another example is the exhibition organised by Tencent at the Indigo Mall in Beijing which sought to engage audiences by promoting opportunities to take selfies with or photos of the Iron Throne (Tencent, 2017b).

In addition, we have also identified several common themes that are repeatedly used by these platforms to engage audiences.

Theme 1: cultural stereotypes

Chinese media platforms tend to emphasise the country of origin for international TV series, and in the process of doing so, employ cultural stereotypes and tropes to articulate the cultural difference as a way of appealing to local audiences. This is perhaps unsurprising given the general climate of censorship that exists in China. Censorship not only limits the forms of representation that

are deemed appropriate/acceptable but it also inadvertently limits the interpretative horizons that are possible to a local audience that is otherwise lacking in cosmopolitanism. What is clear from our observation is that the use of stereotypes is not intended to be derogatory or negative. Reducing what is culturally other to easily recognisable 'types' provides reassurance and familiarity to local audiences by taming or mastering any cultural differences (along with the values they may presuppose), so long as the recognition of those differences remains on a largely superficial level (thus not provoking further thought).

For instance, in one of the Weibo posts by Tencent Video to promote the American TV series *The Wire*, the idea that people watching the show had been exposed to authentic 'American urban accent' was utilised as an attractive point for the audience (Tencent, 2015b). Similarly, Youku frequently mentions elements such as 'British style' (英伦, literally translated as 'England-London'), 'Classical style' (古典 or 复古, mainly referring to historical British elements) and 'British Nobility' (英伦贵族) on its Weibo posts and dedicated page for *Downton Abbey* (Youku, 2013c). This is also the case for *Doctor Who* which was promoted by relating the character with British style and reducing it to the cultural stereotypes of 'gentleman', 'retro style' and 'vintage' (Tencent, 2013).

In addition, the emphasis on culture of origin is potentially due to two other factors. Writing on the performance of imported films in the Chinese market, Elliott et al. (2018) highlight the importance of perceived quality of production. Citing Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999, cited in Elliott et al., 2018, p. 73), they note that 'consumers in developing countries prefer foreign products/ brands from more developed countries or regions, because they are considered to be high-quality' (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 73). In addition, they note 'precedents in the marketing literature' that suggest Chinese consumers perceive products from 'the most advanced economies to be high quality' (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 73). Rather than viewing this as indicative of a lack in cultural confidence vis-à-vis more advanced economies (United States and United Kingdom), it might be more accurate to read in this an aspirational element among local audiences, given the positive connotations associated with the stereotypes of 'gentleman', 'authenticity' and 'nobility'. This in turn can help us understand why local audiences in China readily equate cultural products from United States and United Kingdom as being 'high quality'.

The second factor could be associated with a commoditisation of the 'foreignness' of the TV series. Previous scholars have noted a 'cultural discount' (Lee, 2006, 2009) or a 'loss in value' for products 'when moved across cultural boundaries' (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 74). This results from the distance between audience and culture of origin, wherein less knowledge and shared 'social values, historical perspective and context, and language' (Walls & McKenzie, 2012, p. 200) result in lower audience uptake and market success. Instead, we see a form of cultural inflation taking place when the markers of foreignness and difference are emphasised and foregrounded, even if it is unlikely that local Chinese audiences can fully understand the heavy esoteric slang used in *The Wire*, for example. Thus, the emphasis on 'British style', 'American urban accent', 'classic' and 'vintage' culture could be a means to appeal to audiences who are attracted by those cultural differences that make them impenetrable at the same time.

Theme 2: localisation

Elliott et al. (2018) identified foreignness as a liability, despite the fact some 'filmgoers [find] foreign films have novelty … the majority of consumers are more likely to identify with domestic' productions (p. 89). The use of positive stereotypes above may aid in cultural inflation by associating foreign media content with higher quality, as well as attracting viewership who are initially

drawn to visible markers of cultural difference and otherness as a form of social positioning in line with their rising affluence. In order for local audiences to relate to the foreign TV series, however, cultural analogies or proxies are drawn to further bridge or mitigate those remaining differences to widen their appeal. For instance, Youku compared *Downton Abbey* to *A Dream in Red Mansions*, which is itself a local TV series adaptation of the classic Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* depicting the family life of ancient Chinese nobility (Youku, 2013d).

Another example could be found in Weibo posts related to *Sherlock*, which invites the audience to find the hidden clue in the series which 'only Chinese can understand' (Youku, 2017). This attempt to relate foreign media content with Chinese cultural contexts to establish analogies is also a common theme within the UGC available in the official platforms. Chinese fans operate various approaches, including dubbing the scenes with Chinese accents (Gang, 2017) or adding Chinese background music to the clips (Shua, 2017). The consequence of such ethnocentric coping strategies is a kind of cultural echo chamber where otherness is simply glossed over as '文化差异' (trans. cultural difference) and accepted without further consideration.

Theme 3: narrative summaries and character pairing

UGC generally features narrative summaries and video that construct character pairings. The summary videos provide short introductions, comments and critique on the content and are edited using scenes from the original series with the addition of rhythmic or quirky background music. These summary videos are generally accurate reflections of the original plot. Pairing videos tend to change the plot to construct new relationships between characters. Chinese slangs and jokes, for instance, 'Tucao' (吐槽, making critical jokes, literally translated as 'spit groove') and Fu (腐, a connotation for gay-related contents, literally translated as 'rotten'), are often observed within these videos, as well as fan-made nicknames of the characters.

These fan-made nicknames, references to specific Chinese popular culture or Internet buzzwords, are used in the posts of the platforms' official social media account as well. In doing so, these platforms establish a rapport with their target audience by adopting UGC in their official discursive channels. For example, characters from the TV series Sherlock are referred to by their nicknames on Youku's Weibo posts: Sherlock as 'Juanfu' (Youku, 2014a), Watson as 'Huasheng' (Youku, 2014b) and Moriaty as 'Moniang' (Youku, 2014c). While some of the nicknames might be a transliteration of the character's name in English, others take a more playful tone by exploiting the homophonic possibilities in Chinese to create humorous puns.

As a media platform reaching out to its younger target audience, Youku demonstrates its cognisance of the zeitgeist in employing terms such as 'Jiqing' (Youku, 2013a) *when referring to the sub-textual homosexual relationship between the lead characters of Sherlock*. The word 'jiqing' can be taken to mean either 'passionate relationship' or 'gay relationship' due to the homophonic possibility afforded by the term 'ji'. The significance of this creative linguistic use lies in its subversive potential to evade word/character searches in the Chinese Internet. The use of homophone therefore enables discussion of 'the love that dare not speak its name' in the conservatism of Chinese culture. For the average Chinese fan, however, the linguistic nuances between the two are immediately apparent, thus functioning as a sort of code. This can be seen as an attempt by Youku to engage a younger demographic of the local 'fu subculture', which focuses on the homosexual potential/frisson between lead characters, without running afoul of the local authorities. According to Lin (2014), this was one of the main factors contributing to the popularity of *Sherlock* in China.

Theme 4: celebrity, quality and international popularity

The fourth theme identified is related to perceived reputation. Overseas series are often promoted by focusing on their celebrities, high quality and popularity, which is evidenced by their number of awards won and overseas viewing record. For instance, *The Wire* is presented by Tencent Video as the 'highest rating series in history' on its webpage (Tencent, n.d.-a). Apart from the superlatives employed, by adverting to the fact that a series has been well-received abroad, this encourages local audiences to watch in order to keep up with the zeitgeist.

Planet Earth II was described as the 'Best Animal Documentary in History' by Tencent (2016), which emphasised BBC's high-quality production on its social media for promotion. In Youku's marketing materials for *Downton Abbey*, the series' Emmy Award, Guinness World Record, viewership rating records and its 'global reputation' were frequently mentioned (Youku, 2013e) and according to Liu and Yan (2015), *Downton Abbey*'s marketing impact was effectively enhanced by the reputation of its awards record and high quality. As previously mentioned, scholarship suggests Chinese consumers perceive products from 'the most advanced economies to be high quality' (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 73), with audiences from developing countries attracted to content from developed countries as a result. The emphasis on the high quality of the television series at the centre of our case study reinforces the associations between quality and imported content. However, as Curtin (2012) and Fang (2010) note, Chinese audiences' tastes are becoming increasingly sophisticated (Curtin, 2012) and diversified (Fang, 2010) as global media markets converge and the Internet provides greater access to global content. Indeed, Xu and Guo's (2018) examination of the gratification received by audiences from reality television singing competitions shows that quality is an active factor. In the context of the singing competition, the professionalism of the singers and the production values of the show both contribute to a sense of higher production quality, which audiences seek as a form of gratification (Xu & Guo, 2018, p. 217). Thus, promoting the high quality of the series may be a means to appeal to a sophisticated audience seeking gratification from high-quality productions while also associating the content with an overseas point of origin.

Liu and Yan's (2015) findings on *Downton Abbey*'s marketing impact support the link with production quality. However, their attribution of marketing success to award record is contrary to scholarship that suggests a 'distrust [of] official information and … [reliance] on peer review' (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 89). The interaction between peer review and official information (such as number of awards won) is an area that requires closer investigation, as local audiences appear to favour peer recommendation over official sources. This hypothesis may be somewhat supported when examining the types of interactions evident on the platforms.

While the impact on views has probably been boosted by the awards and global reputation, we observed that the social engagement metrics from these kind of posts suggests a lack of audience social interaction with the platform and with other users. The above-mentioned post about *Downton Abbey*'s awards and reputation (Youku, 2013e), for example, collected 43 comments, 14 likes and was shared 150 times – with only 3 of them collecting 1 like each, 6 being shared once more and not shared again, and the others not accumulating any further sign of engagement. The ratio of engagement metrics to number of actual views is disproportionately low given the record level of viewership for this particular TV series and its degree of recognition by local audiences. It is therefore worth investigating the effectiveness of those strategies employed by media platforms to engage the audience.

Table 2. Examples of audience engagement on official and unofficial platforms.

Platform	Series	View count	Targeted platform activity	Platform function for audience engagement			
				View	Comment	Like	Share
Youku	Sherlock season 1	113,803,531	Weibo post: *Sherlock's hidden clue only Chinese can find*	NA	18	150	10
Youku	Sherlock season 1	113,803,531	UGC: *Watch Sherlock season 1–3 in 14 minutes*	147,000	131	NA	NA
Youku	Downton Abbey Season 1	63,447,124	Weibo post: *British nobility style*	NA	59	17	205
Bilibili	Sherlock season 1	113,803,531	Fan-made video: *Watch Sherlock season 1–3 in 14 minutes*	671,000	1244	NA	976

Source: Guamo (2016a, 2016b); Youku (2013c, 2017, n.d.-c, n.d.-d).

Effectiveness of audience engagement-related activities

The review of official platform's marketing strategies seems to suggest that specific content-related factors (such as the quality of production, fan-made terms and celebrity endorsement) are heavily emphasised in the promotion of international series. These strategies appear to be targeted at fostering audience engagement and discussion through the use of fan-specific language and strategies that directly address audiences. However, the low levels of audience response suggest that the strategies are not effective. One possible reason lies in the difference between assumed and active audience practice.

The strategies used by the platforms indicate that distributors assume the audience acts in a specific way. To adopt the terminology of our theoretical framework, audiences are anticipated to respond to the content on both 'interactive' and 'interpretative' levels (Ahva & Hellman, 2015, p. 60). By providing spaces for audiences to comment, and displaying their like and share volumes, platforms are anticipating interactive audience behaviour. Through the inclusion of UGC (which seems to originate from grassroots fan communities and which uses culturally specific terminology), platforms are anticipating interpretative behaviour. Here, new meaning could potentially be generated through the appropriation of UGC or through continued use in online discussions. However, the relatively low response to the metrics observed suggests that actual behaviour lies elsewhere.

Table 2 provides an overview of four examples of audience engagement from official (Youku) and unofficial (Bilibili) platforms. When mapped onto Ahva and Hellman's (2015) level of audience engagement, and our characterisation of audience 'roles' (Table 3), it becomes apparent that while audiences are assumed to be interactive and interpretative, they are in fact operating as passive viewers. Despite a high number of overall views for these series, the relatively lower comment and share counts indicate a lack of audience interaction (both with the platform and with other audience members).

Adopting Ahva and Hellman's (2015) 'interactive' and 'interpretative' levels of audience engagement, the theoretical framework for this study characterised audiences as viewers, participants or co-creators. Based on the review of content on both official and unofficial platforms, the audience were more likely to be viewers of content rather than participants or co-creators.

Table 3. Levels of audience engagement mapped to audience role and function.

Function (platform)	Corresponding audience role	Corresponding level of engagement
Viewing	Viewer	NA
Comment	Participant/co-creator	Interactive
Like	Viewer	Slightly interactive
Share	Viewer/participant	Interactive
UGC	Co-creator	Interpretative

UGC: user-generated content.

Despite some reaction to 'direct call[s] for engagement, in terms of a request to comment, like, or share the post' (Yulia & Damiani, 2018, p. 688), audience response to this type of participatory engagement remained low. In the aforementioned attempt for direct engagement from Tencent and Game of Thrones actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, despite the opportunity to win tickets to a celebrity meet-and-greet, the call resulted in less than 300 re-posts in total (Coster-Waldau, 2017a, 2017b).

The use of localising elements to attract audience attention could be viewed as an attempt to engage audiences at 'interpretative' levels. Here, the meaning of the text is recontextualised for a Chinese audience with the use of UGC videos that summarise narratives and pair characters using local music and fan terminology. However, while these texts demonstrate the prevalence of interpretative strategies in some sections of the audience, further evidence of audience co-creation is hard to discern. Given the low level of comments to the UGC videos, there is little evidence to suggest that audiences are continuing to rework meanings through ongoing communication with each other.

Rather, audiences are demonstrating high level of views for both UGC and official content. This indicates that audience preference when interacting with the content is simply to watch and not to actually interact. Despite technological affordances to the contrary, audiences are demonstrating practices associated with the 'traditional 'lean back' mode of television use' (Moe et al., 2018, p. 102), where they remain passive viewers. The lack of engagement emergent in the data can then be attributed to a lack of understanding by media platforms regarding the nature of their audience. While the distributors anticipate an interactive or interpretative audience and adopt measures to engage them, audience practice indicates otherwise. Whether a low level of interactive and interpretative engagement is a result of an inability to culturally engage with the international TV series – as previously suggested – cannot be confirmed in this study. Future comparative analysis of audience engagement with local and international series will provide further elucidation.

Conclusion

Chinese platforms tend to market international TV series by incorporating audience-related material on their official webpages, including audience information such as likes, ratings, comments and UGC. They also deploy fan-made content on social media.

Our study on curation and marketing pointed out that while there were certain strategies and marketing campaigns developed in line with the specific nature of the different TV series, there were also specific themes commonly used by Chinese platforms to promote international TV series. These are (1) cultural stereotypes; (2) localisation; (3) narrative summaries and character pairing; and (4) celebrity, quality and international popularity. Of these, themes 1 and 4 appear to be designed to attract audience attention to the series, aligning them with the role of 'viewers'.

Meanwhile, themes 2 and 3, with an emphasis on adopting local cultural references and fan termi-nology, align with a characterisation of (some) audience as 'co-creators' of meaning. However, the low levels of comment, sharing and likes suggest that audiences are not responding as 'partici-pants', nor are they engaging in any further co-creation of meaning through ongoing discussion.

Thus, our analysis suggests a lack of interactivity in the nature of the content used by Chinese platforms to engage audiences that is limited to written interaction, production of videos and the appropriation of fan-created terminology by the different platforms in their posts. While the use of UGC and terminology reflects the importance of Chinese audiences' participation in the process of distributing international content in China, the analysis of the responses to this content by audi-ences showed little engagement with it.

Some scholars argue (Zhao & Keane, 2013) that the integration and commercialisation of UGC is a consequence of the increasing costs of international copyright and that the use of UGC could help generate traffic at no cost, which is supported in our study through the prevalence of UGC on official platforms used to promote series. Others (Chen, 2016) see in this strategy a way to engage an audi-ence that, if not well directed, could easily have access to unauthorised content on pirated websites while platforms await the different government authorisations required to stream. While we do not deny the above, our research shows that the different techniques used to engage audiences by these platforms do not seem to be effective in engaging the audience as participants. Instead, audiences are more often assuming the role of passive viewers. We, therfore, suggest that a more nuanced explora-tion of the types of audience engagement in the Chinese context is required. In particular, the interac-tions between UGC content creators, official distribution platforms and unofficial video hosting sites are worth exploring as these 'cultural intermediaries' (Hutchinson, 2016) constitute a link between official and unofficial interaction with media content. The dynamic of the relationship that UGC content creators have with official platforms, audience and fan groups has the potential to reveal more about the nature of Chinese audience practices in an online and networked media environment.

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