

Impact of Communication Strategy on Audience Intent to Watch: The Mediating Role of Audience Identification in the Case of the Chinese Animated Film *NeZha 2*

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the relationship between communication strategy, audience identification, and viewing intention by integrating Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory and Audience Identification theory. Taking *Nezha 2* as an example, the study examines how communication strategies influence audience viewing intention, directly and indirectly through audience identification.

Methodology: A quantitative research approach was adopted, employing standardized and validated measurement scales derived from prior scholarly studies to assess communication strategy, audience identification, and viewing intention. Data were collected through an anonymous online survey distributed via social media platforms, resulting in 487 valid responses. To analyze the data, Pearson correlation analysis and Baron and Kenny's (1986) stepwise mediation procedure were used to rigorously test the proposed hypotheses.

Findings: The results indicated that communication strategy had a significant positive effect on audience viewing intention (H1). Additionally, communication strategy positively influenced audience identification (H2), which in turn enhanced viewing intention (H3). Mediation analysis confirmed that audience identification partially mediated the relationship between communication strategy and viewing intention (H4).

Conclusion: This study enriched IMC and Audience Identification theories within film marketing research, demonstrating that effective communication strategies not only attract audiences but also foster emotional identification, leading to increased viewing intention. The

findings provided practical implications for film marketers, emphasizing the importance of multi-channel communication and emotionally engaging content. This research has high academic value both in terms of theoretical development and practical application, while also opening pathways for future research in communication and film marketing in the digital age. Future research should expand sample diversity and incorporate additional variables to further refine the understanding of film communication strategies.

Keywords: Communication Strategy; Audience Identification; Viewing Intention; Film Marketing; *Nezha 2*

Introduction

With the rapid evolution of digital media and internet technologies, the communication strategies of Chinese films have undergone significant transformation (Wang, 2021a; Li et al., 2023). Traditional one-way dissemination has given way to interactive, multi-platform engagement, with marketing expanding beyond conventional outlets to include social media, mobile applications, and short-video platforms (Guo, 2023; Wang, 2021b). The application of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory (Kitchen & Schultz, 2013) has enabled film promotion to evolve into a comprehensive framework integrating content creation, channel strategy, and audience interaction (Juska, 2021).

Within this changing landscape, China's animation industry has followed a distinctive developmental path (Jiang, 2024). Fueled by the resurgence of "Guochao" (national trend) culture (Lu, 2022), Chinese animated films have successfully modernized traditional cultural narratives and aesthetics through digital innovation (Fan & Feng, 2021). *NeZha 1* and its sequel *NeZha 2* exemplify this trend, achieving both cultural impact and commercial success, with cumulative box office revenues exceeding 10 billion RMB (Whyke & Mugica, 2022; CCTV News, 2025). These films demonstrate the powerful potential of integrating traditional mythology with modern communication strategies.

Among these, *NeZha 2* has garnered significant attention not only for its production quality and narrative innovation but also for its strategic communication approach. By leveraging multi-channel promotion, interactive fan engagement, and culturally resonant messaging, the film cultivated high levels of audience emotional connection and identification, contributing to strong viewing behavior and online discourse (China News Service, 2019; Yanan et al., 2025).

Despite increasing scholarly attention to film marketing and audience behavior (Afifah et al., 2022; Rubin et al., 2022), a clear research gap persists in empirically analyzing how communication strategies influence audience intent to watch, particularly through the mediating role of audience identification. Most existing studies are limited to qualitative or descriptive analyses and lack theoretical integration and quantitative validation of causal relationships (Tian & Wang, 2025). Moreover, the concept of audience identification remains inconsistently defined, with variation in its measurement and operationalization across studies (Tchernev, 2022). While frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior offer insights into audience intention (Kim & Kim, 2021), few studies apply these models to real-world film cases using structural analysis methods.

These limitations hinder a deeper understanding of film communication effectiveness and limit the development of evidence-based strategies for audience engagement. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do communication strategies influence audience intent to watch a film?

RQ2: What is the mediating role of audience identification in this relationship?

RQ3: How are these dynamics manifested in the case of the Chinese animated film *NeZha 2*?

By integrating theoretical models with empirical data, this research contributes to filling the current gap in understanding the mechanisms through which strategic communication affects audience behavior in the Chinese animation context.

Literature Review

Integrated Marketing Communications, IMC

The Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory advocates for the integration of various communication tools, such as television, the internet, and social media, to ensure message consistency and synergy, thereby enhancing brand image and consumer engagement (Kitchen & Schultz, 2013). In the film industry, this theory has been widely applied to the development of cross-platform communication strategies, where unified creativity and content contribute to increasing film awareness and box office performance (Abd Rahman et al., 2019). In television series promotion, integrated marketing strategies leverage multi-channel dissemination, emotional resonance, and storytelling marketing to strengthen audience loyalty and viewership ratings (Gilardi et al., 2018). Furthermore, Zhou and Yang (2024) have demonstrated that in the digital

era, cross-media integrated communication can effectively break through information silos and maximize communication effectiveness.

Identification Theory

Identification Theory posits that when audiences engage with film and television content, they connect characters with their own experiences through emotional resonance, character internalization, and value identification, thereby influencing their attitudes and decision-making behaviors (Lee & Eastin, 2021). In the field of media communication, this theory helps explain why audiences develop a deep identification with certain characters or narratives, ultimately affecting their viewing intentions. Meanwhile, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory, by integrating multiple communication channels such as television, the internet, and social media, ensures message consistency and creative delivery, effectively enhancing the brand influence and market performance of media productions (Graham & Wilder, 2020). Kubat Dokumacı (2024) emphasizes the role of creative content in stimulating audience emotional identification, while Setterstrom and Pearson (2019) highlight that cross-platform integrated communication significantly enhances audience engagement.

Communication Strategy and Audience Viewing Intention

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory suggests that by integrating various communication channels (such as television, the internet, and social media) and ensuring message consistency and synergy, brand image can be effectively constructed, and audience perception can be enhanced (Kitchen & Schultz, 2013). Baccarella et al. (2021) point out that integrated communication strategies enhance consumer perception through message consistency and creative packaging, thereby facilitating the formation of behavioral intentions. Roggeveen et al. (2021) further demonstrate the critical role of creative content in shaping brand image and driving consumer actions. Mishra et al. (2021) provide an in-depth discussion on the impact of multi-channel communication on consumer decision-making behavior, proving a significant correlation between effective communication strategies and positive behavioral intentions.

Meanwhile, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) states that an individual's behavioral intention is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. High-quality communication strategies can strengthen viewing intention by shaping positive attitudes. Finally, Fan et al. (2025) emphasize that multi-touchpoint interactions, which evoke consumer emotional resonance and engagement, serve as an effective approach to converting information into actual behavior.

Based on the above, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: The communication strategy of *NeZha 2* positively influences audience viewing intention.

Communication Strategy and Audience Identification

Xu (2023) argues that integrated marketing communication strategies, by utilizing diverse channels and delivering a unified message, not only enhance audience awareness of the brand but also create conditions for emotional engagement, thereby strengthening audience identification. Junzhe and Shuxian (2024) further elaborate on the identification process, stating that audience identification with media characters is achieved through information internalization and emotional resonance, which is closely related to the precise dissemination of information in communication strategies.

Jeswani's (2023) study demonstrates that creative and consistent communication content contributes to building a strong brand image, which in turn stimulates audience identity recognition. Mishra et al. (2021) emphasize that multi-channel communication strategies not only expand information coverage but also enhance audience emotional connections, providing favorable external conditions for audience identification. Finally, Fan et al. (2025) highlight that improving advertisement interactivity and message coherence through integrated communication effectively evokes consumer emotional resonance, thereby increasing brand identification.

Based on the above, as *NeZha 2* implements integrated marketing communication strategies, it can effectively foster audience identification with the film through creative and multi-channel information dissemination. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The communication strategy of *NeZha 2* positively influences audience identification.

Audience Identification and Viewing Intention

Identification theory further suggests that when audiences engage with media content, they develop a strong sense of identification if they find elements in characters, narratives, or cultural symbols that align with their own experiences and values (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). Kim and Kim (2021) have demonstrated a positive correlation between audience identification with media characters and subsequent behavioral intention—stronger identification leads to a more pronounced behavioral intention.

Rachmad (2024) found that creative and consistent communication messages enhance consumer emotional engagement, thereby stimulating positive behavioral responses toward a product or service. Mishra et al. (2021) emphasize that multi-channel and integrated

communication strategies help establish strong emotional bonds, directly influencing consumer decision-making processes and behavioral intentions. Additionally, Berger et al. (2021) provide empirical evidence that strong emotional identification plays a crucial mediating role in media consumption, significantly driving the transition from emotional identification to actual action.

Based on the above, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Audience identification with *NeZha 2* positively influences audience viewing intention.

The Mediating Role of Audience Identification

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory suggests that integrating multiple channels, such as television, the internet, and social media, to ensure message consistency and synergy can effectively enhance brand image and emotional connections (Kitchen & Schultz, 2013). Meanwhile, Identification Theory posits that when audiences perceive the fusion of traditional culture and modern aesthetics in a film and resonate with it emotionally and cognitively, they develop a strong sense of identification (Hudders & De Jans, 2022).

Baccarella et al. (2021) demonstrated that integrated marketing communication strategies effectively promote audience engagement and emotional involvement, laying a solid foundation for behavioral transformation. Kim and Kim (2021) highlighted that audience identification with media characters serves as a crucial psychological mechanism driving behavioral intentions. Liang (2021) provided empirical evidence that creative and consistent communication content fosters emotional resonance, which in turn enhances brand loyalty. Mishra et al. (2021) emphasized the profound impact of multi-channel integrated communication on consumer decision-making processes, effectively facilitating the transition from cognition to behavior. Additionally, Berger et al. (2021) validated the positive effects of integrated communication strategies in enhancing consumer emotional identification and behavioral intention.

Based on the above, this study argues that the communication strategy of *NeZha 2* influences audience viewing intention by fostering audience identification. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Audience identification with *NeZha 2* mediates the relationship between communication strategy and audience viewing intention.

Conceptual Framework

By integrating Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory and Identification Theory, this study proposes a research model in which a film's communication strategy (independent variable) influences audience perception through multi-channel, consistent, and creative message delivery (Kitchen & Schultz, 2013). Beyond its direct impact, the communication strategy also enhances audience viewing intention (dependent variable) indirectly by fostering emotional resonance and identification (mediating variable) (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

An effective communication strategy not only facilitates information dissemination (Azzaakiyyah, 2023) but also serves as a critical bridge in shaping audience identification with the film's underlying themes, ultimately influencing their viewing decisions (Handi & Noordin, 2024). Thus, this model examines both the direct effect of communication strategy on audience viewing intention and the mediating role of audience identification. It aims to reveal the underlying mechanisms by which integrated marketing communications, in the context of new media, strengthen audience emotional identification and drive their behavioral transformation. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

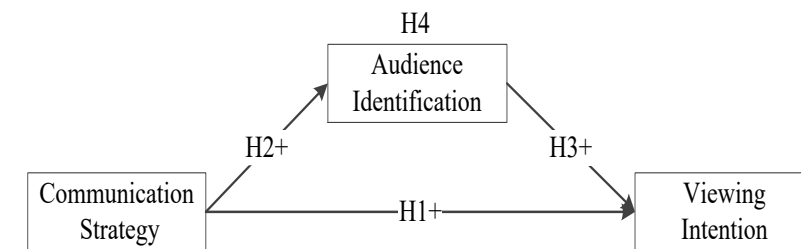


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Research Design

The target population for this study consists of adults in China who have watched *NeZha 2*. This group was selected because adult viewers typically possess higher cultural consumption capacity and more mature aesthetic judgment. Their viewing experiences and feedback can more accurately reflect the effectiveness of the film's communication strategy and its impact on audience identification and viewing intention.

This study adopts a questionnaire survey as the primary data collection method. The questionnaire consists of three sections: communication strategy, audience identification, and

audience viewing intention. The items in each section are designed based on Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory and Identification Theory, drawing on established measurement scales from previous studies. To ensure scientific rigor and reliability, the questionnaire design underwent a pre-test and expert evaluation, aiming to accurately capture respondents' emotional and behavioral tendencies in response to the film's communication strategy.

To ensure the statistical power and representativeness of the research data, the minimum sample size was calculated using the sample size estimation formula: $n = (Z^2 \times p \times (1-p)) / e^2$, where Z represents the critical value corresponding to the confidence level (set at 1.96 for a 95% confidence level), p is the population proportion (typically assumed to be 0.5 for a conservative estimate), and e is the allowable sampling error (set at 0.05). Substituting the values into the formula: $n = (1.962 \times 0.5 \times 0.5) / 0.052 = (3.8416 \times 0.25) / 0.0025 = 0.9604 / 0.0025 \approx 384.16$. Thus, the minimum required sample size is approximately 385. Considering potential invalid responses, the actual sample size was increased to ensure that the number of valid questionnaires meets or exceeds this minimum requirement.

For sampling, this study employs a convenience sampling method, collecting data through online platforms, social media, and on-site surveys targeting the selected audience. While convenience sampling has certain limitations in representativeness, it is practical and allows for the rapid collection of sufficient sample data, making it suitable for exploring relationships between variables. Additionally, by increasing the sample size and implementing strict data screening procedures, efforts were made to minimize sampling bias and enhance the credibility and applicability of the research findings.

Measurement

This study adopts the IMC (Integrated Marketing Communications) communication strategy scale developed by Kitchen and Schultz (2013), which consists of four dimensions: Clarity and Consistency of Information, Diversity of Channels, Interaction, and Creative Expression. Each dimension contains four items, totaling 16 measurement items. Reliability analysis shows that the Cronbach's α values for the subscales range from 0.688 to 0.872, while the overall scale has a Cronbach's α of 0.857. Model fit indices indicate $\chi^2/df = 2.852$, RMSEA = 0.048, GFI = 0.948, AGFI = 0.919, SRMR = 0.036, suggesting strong reliability and validity of the scale.

This study employs the Identification with Media Characters Scale, developed by Lee and Eastin (2021), which consists of three dimensions: Emotional Resonance, Perceived Similarity to Characters, and Sense of Identity. Each dimension contains four items, totaling 12 measurement

items. Reliability analysis shows that the Cronbach's α values for the subscales range from 0.803 to 0.865, with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.857. Model fit indices include $\chi^2/df = 2.022$, RMSEA = 0.044, GFI = 0.953, AGFI = 0.970, reflecting high reliability and validity of the scale.

For viewing intention, this study adopts Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)-based single-dimension scale, which consists of three measurement items. Reliability analysis confirms a Cronbach's α of 0.903. Model fit indices show $\chi^2/df = 2.620$, RMSEA = 0.041, GFI = 0.954, AGFI = 0.881, SRMR = 0.045, CFI = 0.923, indicating strong reliability and validity of the scale.

Sample

From February 17 to February 21, 2025, a total of 522 questionnaires were collected through an online survey. After screening out 35 invalid responses, 487 valid questionnaires were obtained, resulting in a validity rate of 93.30%. Among the respondents, 205 were male (42.09%) and 282 were female (57.91%). In terms of age distribution, 27.31% were aged 18–24, 30.18% were 25–34, 30.39% were 35–44, 8.21% were 45–54, and 3.90% were 55 or older. Regarding education level, 2.67% had middle school education or below, 11.91% had completed high school, 46.61% held an associate degree, 29.36% had a bachelor's degree, and 9.45% had a postgraduate degree or higher. In terms of income levels, 14.17% earned 0–3,000 RMB, 23.41% earned 3,001–6,000 RMB, 46.20% earned 6,001–10,000 RMB, and 16.22% earned above 10,000 RMB. Regarding movie-watching frequency, 29.57% watched movies monthly, 36.96% watched quarterly, and 33.47% watched occasionally.

Research Results

Common Method Variance

Common Method Bias (CMB) refers to the artificial covariance between variables that arises due to the use of the same measurement tools, data sources, or survey environments, potentially affecting the accuracy and validity of research results (Podsakoff et al., 2024). This bias is common in questionnaire surveys and self-reported data, potentially leading to overestimation or underestimation of relationships between variables. The Unmeasured Latent Method Construct (ULMC) approach is a statistical method used to test for common method bias, which is applied in this study. ULMC introduces an unmeasured latent variable to simulate the effects of common method bias and compares it with other variables in the model (Podsakoff et al., 2003). If the

latent variable significantly impacts the model results, it indicates the presence of common method bias. As shown in Table 1, the model's fit indices did not improve after adding the latent variable for common method bias, indicating that no significant common method bias was detected.

Table 1 Common method bias test model fit indices

Model	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1	2.701	.928	.922	.024	.044
2	2.708	.925	.928	.026	.045

Note: Mode1= Model without Common Method Bias; Model 2= Model with Common Method Bias

Correlation Analysis

To explore the relationship between *NeZha 2*'s communication strategy, audience identification, and viewing intention, this study conducted a Pearson correlation analysis. The results are presented in Table 2.

There were significant positive correlations among the three constructs. The mean score for communication strategy was 3.875, with a standard deviation of 0.861; the mean score for viewing intention was 3.991, with a standard deviation of 0.684; and the mean score for audience identification was 4.025, with a standard deviation of 0.530. These results indicate that respondents generally rated *NeZha 2*'s communication strategy, viewing intention, and audience identification at a high level. The correlation coefficient between communication strategy and viewing intention was significantly positive ($r = 0.490$, $p < 0.001$), as was the correlation between communication strategy and audience identification ($r = 0.447$, $p < 0.001$), and between audience identification and viewing intention ($r = 0.387$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide preliminary support for the study's hypotheses.

Table 2 Correlations Between Constructs

Variables	M	SD	CS	VI	AI
CS	3.875	0.861	1		
VI	3.991	0.684	.490***	1	
AI	4.025	0.530	.447***	.387***	1

Note: CS (Communication Strategy), VI (Viewing Intention), AI (Audience Identification), *** $p < 0.001$

Structural Model

This study employed the stepwise method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test the existence of a mediation effect. The stepwise method consists of four criteria: Criterion 1 requires that the independent variable has a significant effect on the dependent variable; Criterion 2 requires that the independent variable significantly affects the mediator; Criterion 3 requires that the mediator has a significant effect on the dependent variable; and Criterion 4 requires that after introducing the mediator, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable weakens.

As shown in Figure 2, this study applied Baron and Kenny's (1986) stepwise method by first constructing a direct model (Model a), which highlights the impact of the independent variable (communication strategy) on the dependent variable (viewing intention). Subsequently, an indirect model (Model b) incorporating the mediator (audience identification) was established. For Model a, the fit indices were $\chi^2/df = 2.861$, RMSEA = 0.030, GFI = 0.944, AGFI = 0.930, and SRMR = 0.044. For Model b, the fit indices were $\chi^2/df = 2.700$, RMSEA = 0.024, GFI = 0.931, AGFI = 0.924, and SRMR = 0.046. These indices indicate that both models exhibit a good fit with the empirical data.

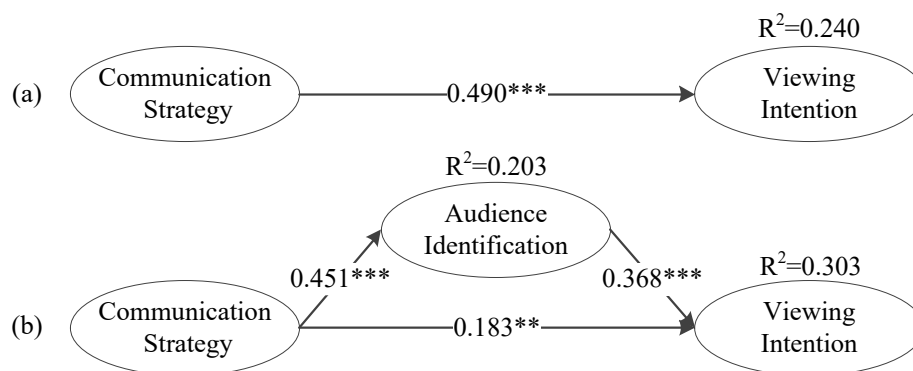


Figure 2 Mediation Test Model Results

Note: (a) Direct path model; (b) Indirect path model

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 3, the analysis of the direct path (Model a) indicates that the communication strategy has a significant positive effect on audience viewing intention ($\beta = 0.490$, $p < 0.001$, CI = [0.015, 0.163]). This suggests that the communication strategy of *NeZha 2* significantly enhances audience viewing intention, supporting Hypothesis H1.

In the indirect path (Model b), further analysis reveals how this effect is mediated by audience identification. The study finds that the communication strategy has a significant positive effect on audience identification ($\beta = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = [0.004, 0.130]$), while audience identification, in turn, has a significant positive effect on audience viewing intention ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = [0.017, 0.160]$). These significant relationships not only support Hypotheses H2 and H3 but also satisfy Baron and Kenny's mediation effect verification criteria, which require that the independent variable significantly affects the mediator, and the mediator significantly affects the dependent variable.

After introducing the mediator (audience identification), the effect of the communication strategy on audience viewing intention decreases from 0.490 in the direct path (Model a) to 0.183 in the indirect path (Model b). This change validates Hypothesis H4, indicating that the introduction of the mediator weakens the direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, thereby confirming the presence of a mediation effect. This result aligns with the fourth criterion of Baron and Kenny's (1986) stepwise method, which states that the introduction of the mediator leads to a significant change in the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

Discussions

This study employed *NeZha 2* as a case to develop an integrated model combining Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory and Audience Identification theory. The goal was to examine how communication strategy affects audience identification and viewing intention. Four hypotheses were empirically supported:

First, communication strategy had a significant positive effect on viewing intention (H1 supported), confirming that coordinated, multi-channel promotion can directly stimulate audience interest (Mishra et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2025). Second, communication strategy also enhanced audience identification (H2 supported), suggesting that emotionally resonant and culturally relevant messaging helps foster personal connections with a film's narrative and characters (Smith, 2022). Third, audience identification positively influenced viewing intention (H3 supported), highlighting the motivational power of emotional attachment in shaping audience behavior (Kim & Kim, 2021; Rachmad, 2024). Finally, audience identification mediated the relationship between communication strategy and viewing intention (H4 supported), indicating that strategic communication not only

directly encourages viewing but also strengthens it through emotional engagement (Baccarella et al., 2021; Hudders & De Jans, 2022).

Theoretically, this study contributes to integrating IMC and Audience Identification theories by demonstrating how marketing communication drives behavioral outcomes through both direct persuasion and emotional resonance. It helps fill a gap in explaining the psychological mechanisms through which communication strategies influence audience responses.

Practically, the findings offer strategic guidance for filmmakers and marketers in the digital age. Effective campaigns should ensure message consistency across platforms, leverage culturally significant symbols, and create emotionally engaging narratives to build audience identification. This is especially relevant for animated films like *NeZha 2*, where the fusion of traditional culture and modern digital storytelling enhances both audience connection and commercial appeal. These insights align with current digital marketing trends that prioritize personalization, community interaction, and emotionally driven content (Baccarella et al., 2021; Hudders & De Jans, 2022).

Nevertheless, the study has limitations. The sample was geographically narrow and skewed toward younger demographics, limiting generalizability. The cross-sectional design prevents tracking changes over time, and self-reported data may be influenced by bias. Future research should diversify the sample across regions and age groups, and incorporate additional variables such as influencer marketing, parasocial interaction, and audience engagement on short-video platforms. Longitudinal studies could also deepen understanding of how audience identification evolves throughout a film's lifecycle.

Knowledge from Research

The knowledge gained from this study contributes to both theoretical and practical approaches, which can be applied to develop more effective film marketing strategies in the digital age that align with consumer behavior. Theoretically, it validates the integration of IMC and Audience Identification theories, demonstrating how multi-channel communication strategies foster emotional resonance and drive viewing intentions. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of culturally resonant content, interactive engagement, and consistent messaging across platforms to enhance audience identification and behavioral outcomes. This study provides actionable insights for marketers to optimize promotional campaigns, leveraging emotional connections and digital tools to maximize film appeal and commercial success. Future research can expand on these findings by exploring diverse cultural contexts and longitudinal effects.

Conclusion

This study constructs an integrated framework combining Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory and Audience Identification theory to explore the relationship between communication strategy, audience identification, and viewing intention. Empirical analysis indicates that communication strategy not only directly influences audience viewing intention but also indirectly drives viewing behavior by enhancing audience identification. The findings provide a scientific basis for film marketing practices, highlighting how integrated communication strategies and effective audience emotional identification can enhance a film's market performance in the modern media landscape. However, this study has certain limitations, and future research could expand the sample scope and introduce additional variables to further investigate the impact mechanisms of film communication strategies.

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