

Communicating Chinese Immersive Musicals on Social Media: The Role of User-Generated Content

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Abstract. In recent years, Chinese immersive musicals, as a niche culture form, have experienced rapid development in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and some other cities, cultivating a stable audience base. This group of audience is highly active on social media and has become a new force in promoting musicals. In July 2025, a user-generated content (UGC) post by the official account of the Chinese immersive musical The Art Supply Store of Xinjilu on Rednote sparked controversy among audiences. The study employs questionnaires and in-depth interviews to explore the impact of social media communication on the theater attending behaviors of Chinese immersive musical audiences, as well as the motivations behind their creation of related UGC. The study demonstrates that consuming and creating related UGC on social media can stimulate audience attendance, while the number of attending times, the number of works watched, the frequency of attendance, and satisfaction with the works also influence audiences' consumption of related UGC. The officials should encourage audiences to create related UGC on social media and enhance the immersive quality of published content to boost participation and engagement.

Keywords: Participatory culture, user-generated content (UGC), social media, Interaction Ritual Chains, Chinese immersive musical

1. Introduction

According to the report from the China Association of Performing Arts, the Chinese musical theater market has experienced rapid development since the broadcast of Super Vocal in 2018, with a growing number of Chinese immersive musicals gaining popularity among audiences. Currently, a stable group of audiences has emerged for Chinese immersive musicals in China, primarily composed of young, female-dominated demographics. This segment is highly active on social media platforms, with Rednote becoming a key promotional arena for Chinese musicals. Compared to proscenium musicals, immersive musicals are characterized by greater diversity and stronger interactivity. Concurrently, promotional efforts of the production team for such productions on social media also exhibit more diversified and interactive features. In July of the year 2025, the Chinese immersive musical The Art Supply Store of Xinjilu launched a campaign on social media, inviting audiences to share their artworks related to the production on Rednote or Weibo, explicitly permitting the use of AI for creation. Due to the controversial nature of AI-generated artwork

copyright issues, this campaign sparked dissatisfaction and anger among the audience, drawing strong opposition from a significant number of viewers. They argued that the activity conflicted with the values represented in the original musical *The Art Supply Store of Xinjilu* and called for rectification. This study focuses on the aforementioned context and explores, from the perspective of social media communication, strategies to promote the development of Chinese immersive musicals. Currently, researches on Chinese musicals predominantly focus on the arts, examining aspects of drama and performance art or studying the translation and adaptation of foreign musical works. Studies within the field of communication remain relatively scarce and can be broadly categorized into two types: summarizing the development and dissemination of Chinese musicals, and analyzing the communication and operation strategies of specific proscenium musical productions. There is a relative lack of research on the communication of immersive musicals in China. Although existing studies on the dissemination of Chinese musicals have mentioned the role of online and mass media, these works were conducted during a period when social media was either absent or not yet flourishing. As a result, there is a notable absence of research focused specifically on social media-based communication strategies for musical theater. The study holds significant value for the communication of Chinese musical theater, serving as an important exploration within the field of communication studies in China.

This study aims to investigate the impact of social media communication on audiences of Chinese immersive musicals from a communication studies perspective and to explore how social media can be utilized to promote theater attendance. Employing questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, the research analyzes the effects of social media dissemination on viewers of Chinese immersive musicals, identifies factors influencing their consumption and creation of related UGC, and examines audience preferences regarding UGC, motivations for creating UGC, as well as the impact of UGC creation on their attendance. The questionnaire survey method can demonstrate the correlation between social media communication and audience attendance through large-scale sample statistics, verifying the universality of hypothesized relationships. In contrast, the flexible nature of interviews allows for a more detailed and in-depth exploration of viewers' perspectives on the dissemination of Chinese immersive musicals through social media.

2. Research methods

When Jenkins first proposed the theory of participatory culture, he pointed out that fan communities transform individual behaviors into group interactions. The encounter between self-expression by audiences of Chinese immersive musicals and social media gives rise to a new participatory culture [1]. Simultaneously, Jenkins noted that participatory culture continually renews itself through expressions of diverse individuals, forming an effective cycle [2]. According to the research by Min Qin et al., UGC stimulates consumers' purchasing behavior. As attending musicals constitutes a paid cultural experience, it is likewise influenced by UGC [3]. Therefore, UGC, which represents a form of participatory culture, drives audience theater attending behavior. Meanwhile, the lowered threshold for expression and creation has blurred the line between communicators and recipients, making the transition between these roles increasingly effortless. Audiences of Chinese immersive musicals thus act as both recipients and disseminators [1]. They not only consume related UGC on social media but also proactively create it. Therefore, on one hand, this study seeks to investigate the impact of social media communication on audiences, examining whether exposure to relevant UGC on these platforms stimulates their intention to attend performances. On the other hand, it aims to explore the motivations behind audiences' creation and dissemination of related UGC, as well as the effects of such UGC production on the viewers themselves.

In addition, audiences of Chinese immersive musicals who are active on social media inhabit the same virtual space, share a common focus on these productions, and experience collective emotions. They employ specific linguistic symbols, which foster the formation of a stable and somewhat exclusive community. This aligns with Collins' theory of Interaction Ritual Chains, wherein audiences complete interaction rituals through consuming and creating UGC on social media. Within the framework of Interaction Ritual Chains, individual actions can catalyze collective emotions [4]. The unique nature of social media positions musical theater official accounts as a distinct entity—they serve as both a collective focal point for audiences and a participant within the community. This dual role enables production teams to leverage their official accounts to influence audience emotions and behaviors on social platforms.

Based on this, the author designed a questionnaire and distributed it on Rednote, the most active social media platform among audiences of Chinese immersive musicals. Additionally, an in-depth interview was conducted with two audience members who frequently publish related UGC about these musicals on the platform. The study aims to provide production teams with actionable recommendations for social media communication.

2.1. Hypotheses and questionnaire design

Following the theories above, the author proposes the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is a positive correlation between users' consuming behavior and their willingness to create related UGC on social media, and the number of times they have attended Chinese immersive musicals.

H1b: There is a positive correlation between users' consuming behavior and their willingness to create related UGC on social media, and the number of Chinese immersive musical productions they have watched.

H1c: There is a positive correlation between users' consuming behavior and their willingness to create related UGC on social media, and the frequency with which they attend Chinese immersive musicals.

H1d: There is a positive correlation between users' consuming behavior and their willingness to create related UGC on social media, and their satisfaction with Chinese immersive musical productions.

H2: Exposure to relevant UGC can promote theater attending behavior among audiences.

H3: Creating UGC can enhance audiences' impression of and affinity for Chinese immersive musical productions.

For H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d, the questionnaire categorizes audiences into three to four tiers based on four dimensions: the number of attending times, the number of productions watched, the frequency of attendance, and satisfaction with Chinese immersive musicals. Given that satisfaction is difficult to quantify, it is differentiated based on whether respondents have productions they are willing to watch again. Simultaneously, consuming behaviors are classified according to the degree of initiative, in descending order: actively searching and consuming, only consuming when encountered on the homepage, and not consuming at all.

2.2. Interview design

To further explore the specific impact of creating related UGC on social media on audiences, as well as their views and preferences regarding official-led creation campaigns, the study selected two active viewers of Chinese immersive musicals on Rednote for in-depth interviews. The interviews

were conducted in three directions, exploring respectively the reasons behind audiences' fan creations, the factors that motivate their desire to create, and their preferences regarding official-led campaigns.

The research by Jiayu Xie and Xi Li suggests that immersion can enhance emotional synchrony within groups, thereby further strengthening the virtuous cycle in interaction ritual chains [5]. The theaters of Chinese immersive musicals construct an immersive environment. Similarly, on social media, official musical accounts can enhance audience immersion by building virtual scenarios, thereby increasing their interest in creative campaigns. For instance, when launching online activities, they could devise plot-related introductions inspired by the musical to invite the audience to join the narrative. To validate the effectiveness of this recommendation, the author incorporated it into the interviews to explore the interviewees' perspectives.

3. Research results

3.1. Questionnaire

The study collected 248 questionnaire responses, all of which were deemed valid.

After data collection, the study conducted a correlation analysis by SPSS. The results indicated that the number of attending times, the number of productions watched, and the frequency of attendance all showed a significant correlation with audiences' consuming behaviors on social media at the 0.01 level, with correlation coefficients ranging between 0.2 and 0.4. This suggests a positive, though generally weak, relationship between these factors and the initiative level of consuming related UGC. The correlation between satisfaction with the musical productions and consuming behaviors on social media was significant at the 0.05 level, though the correlation coefficient was below 0.2. This indicates a positive yet weak relationship between audience satisfaction and their initiative in browsing related UGC on social media.

No correlation was observed between the number of productions watched, the number of attending times, or satisfaction levels and the willingness to create related UGC on social media. Only the frequency of attendance showed significance at the 0.05 level, with a correlation coefficient not exceeding 0.2, indicating a positive yet weak relationship between frequency of attendance and audiences' willingness to publish related UGC on social media.

The data confirmed the relationship between the number of attending times, productions watched, frequency, and satisfaction with audiences' consumption of related UGC on social media. However, aside from attendance frequency, no correlation was observed between the other factors and audiences' willingness to create related UGC on social platforms. The data revealed that the vast majority of respondents expressed willingness to create related UGC on social media. The questionnaire also investigated reasons for unwillingness to post. Most audiences cited personal factors—such as infrequent social media usage or reluctance to share such content with friends and family—as their primary reasons. Some respondents indicated that they rarely post such content because they themselves seldom consume related UGC. Based on these findings, the study suggests that the willingness to create related UGC is associated with the quantity and frequency of UGC consumption or individual social media usage preferences. Factors such as the number of attendances, productions watched, frequency of attendance, and satisfaction with the productions may influence the actual behavior of create UGC rather than the intention to do so.

The questionnaire also surveyed audiences' motivations for attending Chinese immersive musicals. The largest proportion of respondents reached 58.64%, indicating that they became

interested in and started watching these musicals after consuming related UGC on social media, which validates Hypothesis H2.

Similarly, during the process of creating UGC related to Chinese immersive musicals, 70.21% of audiences reported an increased affinity for the productions, and nearly half of them indicated a corresponding rise in motivation to attend performances, which aligns with the content of Hypothesis H3.

The questionnaire also explored audiences' willingness to participate in creation campaigns initiated by official account. Only nearly a quarter of respondents expressed willingness to take part in such campaigns. Among those willing to create related UGC on social media but who had not participated in official activities, nearly half cited lack of time as the reason, while the remainder primarily attributed their non-participation to perceived lack of ability or lack of interest in the campaigns.

3.2. Interviews

Among the two interviewees, Interviewee A primarily engaged in related UGC through drawing, while Interviewee B participated via various other forms, demonstrating greater diversity in creative expression (e.g., collaborative videos, cosplay, etc.). Interviewee A stated that the primary factor influencing her creation of related UGC on social media was her personal creative desire, followed by the pursuit of visibility on the platform, and lastly, the need for social interaction—that is, communicating with fellow fans through her creations. Interviewee B indicated that her motivation for creating related UGC was driven primarily by personal emotional needs. For her, such creation also serves as a form of entertainment, through which she derives positive emotions. Simultaneously, her social needs are fulfilled—specifically, the desire to collaborate on related UGC with existing friends within her social circle, rather than to communicate with new fellow fans. Both interviewees agreed that narrative open-endedness in musical productions stimulates their desire to create. The more open-ended the characters and plot, the stronger their urge to engage in creation, as they wish to explore possibilities for the characters beyond the script. Conversely, a more detailed and comprehensive worldview provides them with greater creative inspiration. If the worldview is incomplete, they may lose their creative direction. Interviewee A stated that the immersive setting of environmental theater enhances her sense of identification with the storyline, deepens her understanding of the production's worldview and narrative background, and thereby stimulates her creative desire. In contrast, Interviewee B indicated that the immersive setting has limited impact on her sense of engagement. Instead, her personal affinity for the work plays a more decisive role in shaping her emotional connection.

When referring to the plot-related introductions inspired by the musical, both interviewees consistently expressed a desire to see more extended content derived from the productions in official campaigns. They indicated that they would be more willing to participate if the activities incorporated story-based scenarios related to the musicals. They hope that such official activities could strengthen their connection with the narrative and enhance their experience of the story's authenticity through these engagements.

When discussing the recently controversial campaign for The Art Supply Store of Xinjilu, both interviewees expressed strong disapproval. They believed the concept behind the activity conflicted with the values of the original production and felt that the production team, through this initiative, had shown a lack of respect for the work itself and its dedicated audience. Although they attributed the incident to the actions of certain staff members, it nevertheless negatively impacted their overall impression of the production team and reduced their trust in its operations. They also mentioned that

such impact is not permanent, noting that if the production team rectifies this campaign or demonstrates improvements in future activities, their trust in and impression of the team would recover accordingly. The study by Chunnian Liu, Ling Xiang, and Lan Yi suggests that audience trust can enhance immersion, thereby stimulating consumption behavior [6]. Evidently, the misstep in the recent campaign for The Art Supply Store of Xinjilu has damaged audience trust. When creating UGC on social media, production teams must maintain consistency with the original work, preserve audience trust, and better foster immersion to facilitate positive collective emotional synchrony—thereby more effectively motivating audiences to create UGC.

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that consuming UGC can promote audience attendance, while creating UGC improves viewer attendance. Therefore, production teams can attract audiences to the performances by organizing online campaigns that encourage the creation of UGC. Currently, campaigns inviting audiences to create performance reviews in exchange for rewards attract the highest participation. According to questionnaire data, the most likely reason is the low barrier to entry for such activities. Participation remains limited in other fan creation activities with higher thresholds. Production teams could adjust campaign formats appropriately—for instance, by setting up different participation tracks—to encourage broader audience involvement. For instance, production teams could solicit fan-created stories alongside artwork submissions, allowing audiences to participate through written content alone. Additionally, incorporating story-based introductions related to the production into campaigns can enhance audience immersion and boost participation. Production teams may shed their institutional identity and instead adopt in-character perspectives to describe activities, constructing virtual scenarios tied to the musical. For example, when The Art Supply Store of Xinjilu launches an art collection campaign, it could frame the initiative not as a celebration of the production's anniversary, but as Kalu (the protagonist in the story and owner of the art supply store) requesting fans to submit drawings depicting stories about himself and Xinji (another main character), with rewards offered in character. Meanwhile, production teams must ensure that campaigns align consistently with the expression and values of the production. Failure to do so may undermine audience trust in both the production team and the work itself, as well as diminish their sense of immersion.

According to scholar Xu Zhang, immersive culture is characterized primarily by the following features: sensory participation, integration of virtual and real elements, uniqueness and personalization, interactivity and a sense of involvement, educational and inspirational value, emotional resonance and personal transformation, as well as dynamism and real-time interaction [7]. The interaction between official accounts and audiences on social media shares similarities with the theater experience, likewise fulfilling the aforementioned characteristics. In the future, the social media practices of Chinese immersive musical production teams may extend their stage-based formats. Not only do they create immersive environments in the theater, but they may also construct virtual scenarios online, offering audiences extended immersive experiences beyond the physical venue. When social media—a space for creating with greater freedom—becomes an extension of the theater, audiences can participate more deeply in the creation of immersive musicals. In the future, the boundary between audiences and performers may become increasingly blurred. However, the most significant distinction between the experience of immersive musicals and interaction on social media lies in the multi-sensory engagement possible within the theater, whereas current social media platforms primarily facilitate only visual and auditory participation. Currently, the primary challenge in constructing theater-extended immersive experiences on social media lies in the limitations of

existing platforms, which lack diverse sensory engagement and may thereby hinder audiences from attaining full immersion. Haj-Bolouri and Amir noted that embodied sensation is a crucial concept in immersive virtual reality [8]. Therefore, integrating virtual reality-related technologies into social media could offer audiences more deeply immersive interactive experiences on these platforms.

5. Conclusion

This study validates the positive influence of the number of attending times, productions watched, frequency of attendance, and satisfaction with the productions on the consuming and creating of related UGC by audiences of Chinese immersive musicals on social media. It also confirms the promotive effect of both consuming and creating UGC on theater attending behavior. Furthermore, the study concludes that production teams can promote audience attendance by publishing related UGC on social media. Additionally, framing UGC within virtual scenarios tied to the musical can better stimulate audiences' willingness to participate in creating UGC. This study extends Jenkins' theory of participatory culture by offering a more nuanced exploration of its impact in the contemporary era and the motivations driving its emergence. It also provides valuable insights for research on musical theater within the field of communication studies, primarily offering directional guidance on how musicals can be effectively disseminated through social media. This study represents the first exploration of how production teams of Chinese immersive musicals should create UGC on social media. However, due to the lack of existing research in this area, some of the findings regarding audience behaviors offer directional insights rather than validated universality. Future research should focus more on the practical initiatives of production teams on social media—specifically, how to leverage participatory culture to drive user behavior—conducting in-depth investigations into these mechanisms.

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