

Audience Reception and Collective Identity in the Streaming Era: A Cross-Platform Analysis of Everything Everywhere All at Once on Douban and Letterboxd

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Abstract. Film audiences in the age of participatory media culture are no longer passive consumers but active participants in the creation of meaning and symbols online. This paper explores how young viewers of Douban and Letterboxd are interacting with *Everything Everywhere All at Once* through online reviews, discussions and meme creation, and what these reception patterns suggest for the design of interactive media. Using qualitative thematic analysis on high-engagement user-generated content, compare cross-platform audience interpretations. Based on the research, the three main features are an existential anxiety and decision paralysis, family problems and intergenerational trauma, and memeification of absurd visual symbols. Although Douban users generally express their experiences in the form of socially grounded stories about structural pressure and exhaustion, Letterboxd users are more likely to adopt a therapeutic and humorous approach. Although they are not the same, both communities have fostered a sense of community through shared emotions and participation. The design translation framework presented in this paper is composed of three parts: Emotional Mapping, Narrative Mapping and Symbolic Interaction, and the reception by the audience serves as a resource for designing interactive experiences.

Keywords: Participatory Culture, Audience Reception, Cross-cultural Studies, Digital Affective Communities, Interactive Media Design

1. Introduction

With the development of streaming platforms and social media, people are now no longer passive viewers but have actively participated in the culture of film viewing [1, 2]. Young people are participating in more and more ways after watching: online discussions, the creation of memes, new narratives and community construction [3]. The participative behaviour of these films has created new digital platforms for cultural spread and provided new ways for young people to experience and express emotions in contemporary life. Therefore, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* has been widely acclaimed by young people all over the world [4]. Through a non-linear multiverse narrative, absurd visuals and an exploration of the meaning of life, identity, family, etc., the film has been well-received by the public and circulated widely on the internet. In addition to being a work of

cinema, the film has also been the subject of extensive discussion and symbol reinterpretations in the community across various online platforms; thus, it is an excellent case study for exploring how contemporary audiences construct meaning and build social networks through media participation.

Most of the earlier research on films has focused on the structure, aesthetics and philosophical ideas of these films. Audience interpretation and participation in the online environment have received relatively less cross-cultural attention so far [5]. Therefore, this paper will study the user-generated discussions about the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* on Douban and Letterboxd. Based on an analysis of highly engaged reviews, comments and discussion threads, this paper examines how young people deal with personal anxiety and form an identity in a group through online interaction.

In addition, this study will explore how audience research can be combined with the design of digital media to generate new interactive experiences based on the meanings that audiences have created and widely shared for visual symbols in films, such as googly eyes, rocks and black holes. Through the connection of communication studies and design practice, this research will provide new evidence for understanding the relationship among participatory film culture, online communities and contemporary digital entertainment design.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Participatory culture and audience reception on social media

With the development of streaming platforms and algorithm-driven social media ecosystems in recent years, the mode of content consumption for users has moved from passive reception to active participation and network construction [6]. Now, people will no longer be mere spectators of media but active participants in the spread and modification of culture. According to Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, the audiences of today are regarded as "producer users" who are both consumers and creators of meaning through platform-specific practices [7]. At present, the listed behaviors are such as posting short reviews on social media, making memes, joining in on comment sections, rating content, and discussing popular topics. All of these activities help to continuously reconstruct the original cultural text and expand its connotations through film.

Importantly, the above interpretations are not uniform but are also shaped by the different infrastructural logics and interactional affordances of each platform. Douban is a typical case; it has built long-form reviews, a relatively stable rating system, and reflective critical discourse, all of which are favourable to sustained and evaluative forms of interpretation [8]. Letterboxd, on the other hand, is a social media platform for expressing short, emotionally touching thoughts and presents data on social popularity to help such emotionally rich and culturally significant works spread quickly [9].

The platform's special mode will change the way people express themselves and how widespread or diffused that meaning will be. As a result, film reception is now a situation-specific and platform-dependent phenomenon, and the same cultural work can be presented in many different ways.

Therefore, this study does not treat audience feedback as isolated views, but rather views it as interconnected nodes in an extended network of meaning-making practices, and collective interpretation is generated by repetition, amplification, and emotional resonance.

2.2. Collective identity and emotion-driven online communities

In addition to their own meanings, the platforms for social media have now fostered affective communities based on shared emotions and a sense of belonging. At present, the recipients of movies have frequently explored emotional atmospheres that touch the hearts of ordinary people, such as fear and longing for home [10]. Therefore, the comment areas, review functions and hashtag-driven discussions on the platform have been gradually turned into informal emotional expression spaces for users. These interactions should be seen as places for sharing opinions and also as ways to discover one's own identity by participating in larger groups of culture and emotion. Therefore, in this way, online film discussions can be considered "affective publics" that sustain their spread, interaction and sense of community through emotional impact and resonance. Repeated expression of the same emotional experience gradually forms a temporary but meaningful community of users based on shared emotions rather than fixed social relationships.

2.3. Experience economy and design-oriented narrative translation

Nowadays, digital culture is moving towards experience-based consumption, participation and user-generated content. In light of the logic of the experience economy, cultural products are no longer passively consumed but extend to include participatory, immersive and socially mediated experiences. Listeners want to be involved in stories themselves and wish to participate in online communities to share thoughts and create [11]. Based on the above, this paper presents a model of audience-generated meanings, emotional patterns and symbolic interpretations as reusable design resources. Instead of considering them as the final result, they will be used to drive the next stage of creativity and design. The above materials can support the construction of interactive narrative systems, virtual entertainment spaces and other forms of digital entertainment that give users more control and emotional responses.

3. Methods

This study will conduct a light-weight comparative thematic analysis of user-generated film reviews from Douban and Letterboxd for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) [8, 9]. To cover the views of a wide audience and avoid only selecting isolated opinions, the dataset includes the top 20 highest-rated short reviews and very popular discussion posts from all platforms, which are selected based on their engagement data, such as likes and the visibility of comments (e.g., Ian's tax comment on Letterboxd and Yige Kuang's mother-daughter critique on Douban)) [8, 9]. Exploratory reading was carried out to find repeated terms and expressions in the top-rated reviews, and these were manually grouped into broader thematic categories. By comparing the categories on the two platforms, this study has found both convergent and culturally specific patterns of audience reception and put forward design ideas for the next generation of interactive media based on these collective emotional insights.

4. Key findings: three dimensions of identity

4.1. Existential anxiety and wilderness identity

Table 1. Qualitative coding and affective tendency comparison of top-engaged reviews

Identity Dimensions	Platform	Extracted High-Frequency Keywords / Codes	Affective Distribution (Estimated)	Empirical Evidence & Representative Data Support
Existential Anxiety & Choice Overload	Douban	Exhausted, superficial resolution , mundane trivia , existential failure , cosmic tax-paying .	Complex / Critical Resonance (65% Complex, 35% Negative)	Zige (9.5k+ upvotes): "The primary feeling after watching is exhaustion... the redeeming power of love is too perfunctory."_latsy (29k+ upvotes): "Understanding that you are a failure, I am a failure, and we are all actually quite failures."
	Letterboxd	Nothing matters, everything matters, therapy culture, perspective shifting, recency bias mitigation.	Optimistic / Therapeutic Deconstruction (80% Positive, 20% Neutral)	jonathan fujii (22k+ likes): "Nothing matters. Everything matters."Megan (10k+ likes): "End of Evangelion but for people who go to therapy."
Family Dynamics & Generational Trauma	Douban	East Asian mother-daughter , mutual toxicity , systemic lies, dynamic detachment, Five-Element Mountain control .	Intense Trauma Trigger / Active Resistance (75% Trauma/Reflection, 25% Catharsis)	Yige Kung (13k+ upvotes): "Let the female souls release each other... 'all harm control is for the sake of love' is a systemic lie constructed for thousands of years."King (12k+ upvotes): "I wish someday I could see a movie where love isn't the ultimate save."
	Letterboxd	Generational trauma, mother-daughter dynamics, emotional release (cry), family issues, healing.	Affective Catharsis / Externalized Empathy (70% Emotional, 30% Psychological)	Lily (18k+ likes): "It felt genetically engineered to meet me at this point in my life."Zaggy (13k+ upvotes): "Dealing with this life with peace and love... a quintessential Asian Rick and Morty."
Memeification & Visual Aesthetics	Douban	Silent rock , visual chaos , pastiche/stitching , Wong Kar-wai homage , cognitive overload .	Aesthetic Bifurcation / Localized Satire (50% Appreciation, 50% Visual Fatigue)	Narouhz (3.7k+ upvotes): "Never expected to shed tears for two rocks."waking (5.6k+ upvotes): "The aesthetics are too chaotic, making people feel mentally exhausted."
	Letterboxd	Tax auditing, absurdist fun, cinematic references, costume design, Björk aesthetics, masterpiece.	Pure Cinephile Carnival / Gamified Deconstruction (90% Playful, 10% Observation)	Ian (49k+ likes): "Easily one of the top 5 movies about taxes."CosmonautMarkie (38k+ likes): "Rocks just made me cry."

Both Douban and Letterboxd show that many people are worried about life and death in this movie. The two are: nihilistic despair ("nothing matters") and empathetic affirmation ("be kind"). They both reflect the anxieties of the young generation in a rapidly changing society: intense competition, too many choices in life, and the sense that they are adrift in the world [8, 9]. As shown in the first dimension of Table 1, the audiences on the two platforms interpreted this crisis differently. Existential Anxiety is frequently presented in the form of therapy culture on Letterboxd. Jonathan Fujii's well-known work is called "Nothing Matters". It is good; Megan Bitchell called it "The End of Evangelion but for people who go to therapy", and humor, self-deprecation and psychological discussion can be used to talk about existential issues in an easy-to-understand way. Existential Anxiety on Douban is more closely related to specific social problems. Many reviewers are tired of life, feel disillusionment with society, and are under pressure from high-pressure circumstances. As user _latsy put it, life is a cycle of repetition, and "the washing machine spins every day, always in a perfect circle." Film critic Zi Ge also believes that although the end of this film is hopeful, it fails to address the difficulties people face in the competition for success and life's limitations. The above answers show that Chinese audiences tend to view the film's "wilderness identity" through the lens of structural limitations and the anxiety of failure; a large number of these narratives spread online, suggesting that existential anxiety may provide an emotional foundation for the online community to build a temporary shared identity.

4.2. Cross-cultural empathy in family dynamics and generational trauma

On both Douban and Letterboxd, many people have shared their feelings about family problems and generational trauma through posts. Comment sections have been used to post life stories and discuss family life among users [8, 9]. As shown in Table 1, Douban users showed a stronger response to themes of East Asian maternal trauma. Reviewers in their books have pointed out that the problem between the mother and daughter was not solved in the end. Kuang Yige's well-known review called for breaking the cycle of toxic intergenerational expectations, and user King questioned whether love should be used to solve all problems.

Letterboxd users also felt the same emotions towards the family conflict shown in the movie. They were, on the other hand, generally more willing to accept the good-endings of the film psychologically and therapeutically. Although the audiences had different responses to the end of the film, both communities used it as a medium to discuss their own experiences with family pressure, emotional healing and generational change. Such interactions show that the platform-based film discussion operates as an affective public, and people's personal experiences of family trauma are transformed into collective narratives through the processes of sharing, amplification and emotional resonance.

4.3. Internet carnivals and absurdist visual semiotics

A large number of absurd visual symbols are employed in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* to convey profound philosophical ideas, such as googly eyes, hotdog fingers, IRS audits and the two rocks. These symbols have spread widely on both Douban and Letterboxd via memes, references and audience interpretations. Among them, the "Two Rocks" sequence was one of the more frequently mentioned symbols. Letterboxd users often described the scene as unexpectedly moving and posted comments such as "Rocks just made me cry". Douban audiences have frequently interpreted the rocks in various ways, including escape from reality, social pressure, and conflicts between generations. These different readings show that the audience is actively creating meaning in

their own cultural and emotional contexts. Other symbols, such as hotdog fingers and IRS-related humour, have also spread widely in meme culture. Letterboxd users often reproduced these images in their daily lives, and Douban users adapted them by adding local jokes and cultural references. Therefore, cinematic symbols are now used more and more as participatory cultural resources to expand and alter the original meanings of media texts.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how audiences on Douban and Letterboxd interpret *Everything Everywhere All at Once* through participatory online practices and what can be learned from this for the design of interactive media. Based on the research above, we believe that the audience's sense of film is now reflected in emotions, symbols, and social context online. Across platforms, existential anxiety, family trauma, and absurd visual symbols are all recurring themes. Although Douban users tend to present such experiences in socially grounded narratives of pressure and exhaustion, Letterboxd users are more likely to view them through a therapeutic and affective lens. Despite the above differences, both communities actively create a sense of community through emotions and participation. Based on the above research, the study presents a translation system for connecting audience reception to design, which includes Emotional Mapping, Narrative Mapping, and Symbolic Interaction. Therefore, emotions and symbols produced by the audience can be used as content resources for interactive experience design. However, this study is also limited to a small number of highly engaged posts and a qualitative interpretation method, thus failing to represent the general public. In the future, a large-scale computational method can be used to extend the analysis to more platforms and verify the proposed design framework empirically in interactive systems.

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