

The Influence of Douban Reviews and Ratings on Chinese Audiences' Movie-watching Choices

Angyu Sun*

Western Michigan Institute, Marketing, Guizhou University of Finance and Economics, Guiyang, Guizhou, 550000, China

*Corresponding author: Sirius@STUDENT.KSUA.EDU.KG

Abstract. In the process of word-of-mouth, recurring social media ratings and strong reviews can influence viewers' perceptions of a film and result in changes in viewing choices. As the most authoritative movie review website in China, Douban's high score and popular movie reviews are a household name, and even the rating of a movie on Douban and whether the review is good or not become the reason for people to choose whether to watch the movie or not. This paper examines the influence of Douban's movie reviews and ratings on Chinese movie-watching choices through the use of questionnaires in the context of the media environment and media psychology, based on Douban's unique media culture. The results of the questionnaire show that in a film market surrounded by all kinds of information, Douban movies largely satisfy the needs and psychology of users' viewing guides, and in the eyes of a large proportion of people Douban's ratings and reviews have become the main measure of whether viewers will watch them or not.

Keywords: Douban movies; Movie Reviews and Ratings; media psychology.

1. Introduction

Douban is one of China's most prominent social networking sites, founded in 2005. Ever since its foundation, Douban's user base has grown steadily, reaching over 100 million users per month in 2012. Douban combines a taste system (reading, movies, music), an expression system (I read, I watch, I listen), and a communication system (crosstown, groups, friends, and neighbors) for users to record and share, discover and recommend, and meet and communicate with each other. Douban was initially designed as a platform to share and recommend books, movies, and music, but now the content has been upgraded to four distinct sections: Douban Movies, Douban Reading, Douban Music, and Douban Time. Furthermore, Douban Topics and Douban Groups are two long-standing ways users can communicate with others within the same city. Douban, as it is now, is a perfect tool for understanding the preferences and values the contemporary population sets and follows.

Douban Movie has the largest movie-sharing and reviewing community in China. Here, users can freely rate movies and television programs based on a 1-to-5-star system, add tags, and add their own comments in the form of long or short reviews. Ratings provide a reference for other users, tags facilitate connections to other tagged works of the same type, and long and short reviews allow access to an interactive user rating system where other users can comment on reviews or tag or useless options. The more comments a review receives, the more valuable tags will be placed on it, making it place higher and become more easily accessible on the film's introduction page, hence becoming more influential for people reading up on the movie. Douban movies also have a unique value and a wider reach due to the importance of personalization and originality. As a result of Douban's influence in this area, more and more people are basing their choice of which movies to watch on Douban's movie rankings, creating a 'list culture'. In the modern era of rapid information dissemination, it influences the viewing choices of audiences as people's perceptions of things are constantly compressed and abstracted under the influence of the media.

According to McLuhan, "the medium is the extension of the person" [1]. Douban films as a medium extend the human ability to disseminate and receive information. In this process, their content also influences and shapes customers' choices. According to Chinese researcher Peng Lan, "Douban is a kind of cultural warp and wool network that absorbs a lot of 'energy' (clicks, reviews, etc.) from community members, which radiates to others and influences their choices and judgments

about these cultural products, and even the likes and dislikes of a particular culture” [2]. This paper seeks to examine the influence Douban movie reviews and ratings have on Chinese audiences' movie-watching choices from the perspective of the audience.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the various functions of Douban, Zhang used “Use and Gratifications” and “help” as a guide, analyzed the site’s development and found that Douban relies on a unique cultural atmosphere to gather a more prominent audience, growing a niche interest as a carrier of the mass website, forming a slight polymerization of communication methods [3]. Yu conducted a study on Douban's online culture, which shows that the primary culture of Douban is primarily petty capitalism, literary youth, and small freshness. At the same time, the users share and exchange books, music, and movies on the site, and although there is a considerable gap between them and authentic art and culture, Douban has made a great contribution to the enrichment and development of online culture in a world full of entertainment and past-time activities [4]. Also, with regards to building the Douban brand culture, Zhang found that Douban adopts a bottom-up, interest segmentation and aggregation brand positioning, capturing the core user group of literary youth and focusing on a brand communication model that strengthens the self and the circle [5]. In a study conducted on the credibility of Douban ratings, Zhang explored the audience-perspective approach and found that the qualities of Douban movie ratings, the movie platform, users on the platform, and the perceptions associated with the hands all influence audience evaluation of the trustworthiness of individual movie ratings. He concluded that the quality of movie ratings has the most significant effect [6]. More importantly, while studying Douban and other movie review sites, Tang found that reading a review influences what others say about the film, sparking a strong public opinion effect [7]. She also pointed out that opinion leaders are an important element in making films acquire high-level word-of-mouth marketing. It is therefore apparent that Douban movie reviews and ratings form an influential part of movies’ evaluation. Zhuang found that Douban Movie has formed a systematic discourse in terms of critical modes and approaches, with relatively independent and wide-ranging subjects and a unique critical approach. This has an important impact on cinema and the film industry [8]. Huang found that the influence of online opinion leaders, the credibility of information, user preference, and user acceptance all have a positive impact on the word-of-mouth spread of films [9]. Xu proposed that viewer-created film reviews and dramas on the Douban community are mostly idol-centric, with a strong sentimentality of idol worship [10]. Mo found that Douban, Weibo, WeChat, and other social media websites that have reviews have become the dominant form of discourse transmission due to their massive, disorganized, and fragmented discourse nature [11]. Shen pointed out that the site's commercial nature is determined by the market environment and the disorderly nature of the comments on the site [12].

The first theory associated with this study is the “Use and Gratifications”, which assumes people are exposed to media in order to satisfy certain social and personal psychological needs, and whether the experience is satisfactory, the result will influence subsequent media exposure and people will modify their media impressions and change their expectations of media to varying degrees depending on the result of the satisfaction [13]. Another reference theory is the Spiral of Silence, developed by Noelle-Neumann, which emphasizes the presentation of opinions highlighted by the mass media being perceived as the majority or dominant opinion due to its public and widely disseminated nature [14].

Although many scholars have studied multiple characteristics of Douban and Douban Movie reviews, few articles have been written on the impact of Douban movie ratings and reviews on Chinese audiences’ movie-watching practices. The literature review shows Douban relying on niche aggregated interests and tastes to attract users and form a unique cultural atmosphere. However, in Jenkins' participatory culture users also turn into producers as consumers [15], and, therefore, the texts produced by users also influence those audiences who need to watch films. This paper attempts

to examine the influence of Douban reviews and ratings on Chinese audiences' movie-going choices from media psychology and environment perspectives.

3. Methodology

To better study the effect of Douban movie reviews and ratings on the audience, this paper takes the form of a questionnaire. Based on the rating culture and list culture of Douban movies, Questionnaire questions were designed around the basic features of Douban movies in terms of their impact on people's perception of word-of-mouth about the movies in question and on their choice of movies to watch. The questionnaire format is based on the Dichotomous, Likert, and Semantic Different scales to facilitate statistics and comparisons. And the questionnaire was created on www.wjx.cn and distributed to major social media outlets such as Weibo for a week of questionnaire collection. A total of 5,00 questionnaires were collected of which 428 were valid. In addition, statistics and analysis of the questionnaires are automatically generated by the wjx's back office.

4. Results

Based on the above valid questionnaires, this section delves into explaining the collected data results. When asked about channels through which they learn about Douban movies, social media browsing scored the highest with 38.79% of the votes. The second most popular option, with a 30.14% respondent choice, was encountering online ratings or reviews of a particular Douban work. Recommendations by friends and online advertising accounted for 21.26% and 9.81%, respectively. On whether they have their own opinion on film ratings, 66.12% have their opinion, while 33.88% do not. When asked if they had rated or written a movie review for any Douban movie before, 58.88% said no, compared to 44.12% who chose yes. The discrepancy is starker about whether participants are willing to share the reviews they agree with on social media, with 75.23% agreeing to do so while 24.77% refusing. Similarly, 85.38% of participants would use high Douban rating points as a basis for recommending movies to their friends, while 14.72% of participants would not. However, on the question of whether they would choose to go to the Douban movie list to find a movie to watch, 53.04% of participants said they would do so, which is very close in number to the 46.96% who would not do so.

The following questions were based on a Likert scale to derive the respondents' attitudes. On the question of whether they agreed that the high or low ratings of Douban movies would influence their decision to watch the movie, the percentages of those who strongly agreed, agreed, not necessarily, disagreed and strongly disagreed were 21.5%, 35.51%, 22.66%, 17.52%, and 2.8%, respectively. Whether they believe that the higher the Douban movie rating score is, the more worthwhile the movie is, over 54.38% agreed, while only 21.26% disagreed. As to whether the reviews of highly recommended or bad movies would affect the perception of the movie's reputation, 28.74% of the participants strongly agreed, 30.37% agreed, 19.29% said not necessarily, while only 21.59% disagreed in any manner. Furthermore, most respondents agree that, in general, Douban movies are informative, with only 21.03% disagreeing, while 25.93% strongly and 36.21% agree. The percentage of popular reviews that would cause participants to want to see the movie was 25.7%, 36.68%, 17.52%, 10.28%, and 9.81%, respectively. There was strong support among those who agreed that Douban's high rating list would alleviate the difficulty in choosing movies, with the responses scoring 24.77%, 36.45%, 17.52%, 10.51%, and 10.75%, respectively. Meanwhile, 27.57% strongly agreed, and 33.88% agreed that Douban's recommended films list could be used as a guide, while 18.46% were unsure, 10.51% disagreed, and 9.58% strongly disagreed. In terms of whether the popular recommendations of Douban movies would cause repeated use, the vast majority of participants still chose to agree (33.41%) and strongly agree (26.17%), while fewer opted for not necessarily (19.39%), disagree (11.45%), and strongly disagree (9.58%). Whether they agreed that reviews recommended in popular areas were more trustworthy and that the more useful, retweeted, and liked reviews of a

movie on Douban, the greater the trustworthiness, the greater the willingness of participants to agree, strongly agree, not necessarily, disagree and agree. Finally, 21.5% strongly agreed, and 37.85% agreed that the ratings and reviews of Douban movies were more informative than those of other movie review sites.

In the above questions about willingness, most participants, in terms of perceptions about the influence of Douban films on their own viewing choices and Douban film culture on their knowledge of film communication, strongly agree and agree, disagree and strongly disagree were a very small number of people. The final three questions were designed as a semantic difference scale about Douban movies and their ratings and reviews of them. Regarding how participants think Douban movies are rated, with 0 being untrustworthy and 7 being trustworthy, the average score was 3.48. The question enquiring about the professionalism of the reviews, where 0 represents unprofessional and 7 is professional, the average score was 3.4. Finally, in the rating questions 0 being unsatisfied with a Douban movie and 7 being satisfied, the average score was 3.5. These not-so-high average scores were not expected by the author.

5. Discussion

The results section demonstrates the merit of using Douban movie rankings for forming an initial opinion of a movie without having to watch it first. Douban movie ratings appear to be helpful for participants to make the final decision of whether to watch a given movie. This stems from the Douban culture and the popular Use and Gratification Approach. Douban, a social media with a strong literary atmosphere, has a variety of user opinions on films, ranging from reviews written by professionals and opinions added by keen, like-minded people, which is a unique communication culture formed by the gathering of users and their production of texts on Douban. In an era of rapid development of information and new media, people are overwhelmed by the flood of films and television productions, and they do not have the time and energy to decide which films are worth watching. At this point, Douban, a platform with absolute power and relative reliability in the film review world, attempts to fill the gap and help customers' decision-making. The high-rating charts, self-contained movie ratings, and accurate reviews readily provide people with a variety of movies to watch, so they do not have to spend time wondering which movies are worthwhile. However, judging from the participants' perception of the reviews, they do not seem very satisfied. Furthermore, a diminishing consequence could be people losing the ability to appreciate cinema as a form of popular art and only accepting those that meet the hard criteria.

From the viewpoint of The Spiral of Silence, the mass communication formed by the platform of Douban movies has a powerful social effect and impact. This explains why more than half of the participants strongly agreed and agreed that the rating of a movie on Douban influenced their perception of the movie's reputation, and, thus their choice to watch it. As the results showed, more positive reviews and reviews with a high number of likes encouraged them to watch the movie. The "opinion environment" and the social psychological mechanism created by Douban movies have led people to choose which movies to watch based on ratings and reviews. In an open space, users use ratings to decide which movies are more valuable, while likes and retweets decide which reviews get seen by more people. Reviews and ratings in this communication environment precipitate a herd mentality by influencing the word of mouth of the film and, thus, the audience's viewing choices.

The fact that participants were active in sharing their preferred reviews of Douban movies on social media and the vast majority of participants claimed that Douban movies or the ratings of a particular work are frequently featured on social media proves that the Douban community's opinion leaders are significant on social media platforms. As a consequence, people are more concerned about the rating of a film, which seems to be the main reason for measuring whether a film is worth watching or not, and in this age of ranking and rating everything, people's attitude tends to be authoritative, resulting in some quality films being buried. A low rating does not mean it is not a good film, nor

that it is not worth being watched, and there are still surprises in this genre. In this public-opinion-manipulated internet environment, Chinese audiences need an eye for beauty.

Nevertheless, there is a contradictory aspect to the Douban phenomenon. Although Douban movies manipulate the viewing choices of Chinese audiences, the survey results show that participants do not have a high level of personal care and respect for individual reviews. The reason behind this may be the inconsistency between the ratings given by Douban and the psychological ratings given by the viewers, or the existence of a water force in Douban, as well as the gradual commercialization and influence of social opinion that makes Douban unacceptable to the public. However, due to the small sample size and a possible polarization of people's opinions of the platform, this paper has limitations in determining the real influence of Douban movie ratings. The authors' findings lack the polarizing factors in Douban movie ratings and reviews.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the influence of Douban reviews and ratings on Chinese audiences' movie-watching choices by analyzing the questionnaire responses. This study identified that the unique rating mechanism and mixed reviews of Douban movies could subconsciously influence viewers' perceptions of films and thus lead to a change in their future movie-watching patterns. The first major finding was that in a fast-paced society, reviews and ratings provide viewers with a significant criterion for choosing a film without spending much time searching for it. An attractive review and a perfect rating alone would motivate people to want to see the film, while simultaneously, a film with a low rating will be blacklisted. Furthermore, movie buffs' need for information about a film creates an incentive for them to use Douban reviews and ratings, and the information they get by actively searching for relevant films satisfies their needs to choose movies. The research has also shown that as most people refer to Douban's list of high-rated movies and great reviews when choosing a movie, this has created a rating-only attitude among viewers. When there is a widely-used, authoritative review mechanism, viewers prefer to believe in authoritative statements rather than independently searching for movies they might enjoy. Douban's opinion environment controls people and thus has an overly one-sided perception of movies. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that the opinion leaders and the opinion environment created by Douban have greatly influenced Chinese audiences' movie-viewing choices, both psychologically and in terms of demand, due to the culture of communication created by Douban and the blindness and herd mentality of people in the media environment. When people tend to submit to opinion and authority in mass communication of cinema, it produces a not-so-conducive environment for the development of cinema as an art. What is more, the study provided a deeper insight into the influence of mass communication on consumer choice in the context of the communication environment and media psychology. However, a limitation is that the sample selection was not typical, and the sample size was too small due to constraints. Also, even though audiences tend to favor the Douban rating system, the reason people do not rate Douban as high is something the authors have not explicitly researched. For further research, investing reasons why people are dissatisfied with Douban movie reviews and rating mechanisms might prove useful.

References

- [1] M. McLuan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, The Commercial Press, 2000.
- [2] L. Peng, *Online Community Case Study of Douban*, *China Journalism and Communication Review*, 2007.
- [3] J. Zhang, *Research on Douban's small polymerization function*, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, 2012.
- [4] L. Yu, *Research on Douban's Cyber Culture in the Web 2.0 Era*, Nanjing Normal University, 2012.
- [5] Y. Zhang, *Research on Brand Construction of Interest Social Platform "Douban"*, Hunan Normal University, 2021.
- [6] W. Liu, *Factors influencing Douban Movie Rating Credibility*, Xiamen University, 2020.

- [7] W. Tang, Research on the opinion leader of word-of-mouth communication about movies in social media, Shanghai International Studies University, 2018.
- [8] X. Zhuang, Study on the Criticism and Model of Douban Movie, Hangzhou Normal University, 2019.
- [9] Y. Huang, A Research on the Influencing factors of the Effect of film Online word-mouth—Take Douban Films as an example, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, 2018.
- [10] Y. Xu, Research of Douban Community Fans in the age of Media Convergence, Yangzhou University, 2020.
- [11] D. Mo, A research on the current state of self-published film criticism from the perspective of communication science, Chengdu University of Technology, 2019.
- [12] Z. Shen, Research on contemporary Chinese film review websites, Nanjing University of the Arts, 2017.
- [13] Q. Guo, Communication Studies Course, China Renmin University Press, 2011.
- [14] E. Noelle-Neumann, The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion-Our Social Skin, Peking University Press, 2013.
- [15] H. Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, Peking University Press, 2016.