How Viral Short-Video Film Marketing Has Reshaped Film Audiences

-------A Study on Douyin's Marketing Influence

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Abstract. This thesis examines the impact of viral short-video film marketing on audience engagement, using the marketing strategy of the 2024 Chinese comedy-drama film "*YOLO*" on Douyin as a case study. This study explores how Douyin's short video marketing alters traditional film spectatorship, engages audiences emotionally, and influences their decision-making processes. Utilizing a questionnaire to gather data, the research reveals that Douyin's strategy not only effectively promotes films but also transforms viewers into "prosumers," who produce and share marketing content, thus reshaping the dynamics of film marketing and audience interaction.

Keywords: marketing; media; short video marketing; film marketing; Chinese film, spectatorship

1   Introduction

The concept of the audience is pivotal in understanding the social and cultural significance of films, as a 2012 report commissioned by the UK government on *A Future for British Film* subtitled: "It begins with the audience"[2]. Historically, audiences were seen as passive recipients of film narratives, gathering collectively in darkened theaters to dream and escape into the world of cinema, awakening only as they left the theater[2]. However, the advent of digital media and the rise of interactive platforms have shifted this dynamic, positioning the audience as active participants in the marketing and consumption of films.

Film marketing encompasses any activity that facilitates a film's reach to its target audience throughout its lifecycle, including production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption[1]. The evolution of film marketing, from signs and newspapers to lanterns, posters, and trailers, reflects the industry's adaptation to shifting entertainment landscapes and technological advancements[1].

In the digital age, the Internet has revolutionized film marketing by extending the film experience beyond traditional theaters to online platforms, where viral marketing campaigns have become integral to promotional strategies[1]. Viral marketing, defined

as "forms of promotion that rely on consumers sharing information or materials with their networks"[1], contrasts with traditional marketing by involving audiences in actively discovering and disseminating content. Through word-of-mouth or digital channels like social media, viral marketing not only generates buzz but also deepens audience engagement by fostering a sense of insider involvement[1]. This participatory approach transforms the audience into active contributors to the film's marketing narrative, thereby significantly enhancing the film's visibility in a competitive market[1].

As a key platform for viral marketing, social media—websites and platforms that emerged with Web 2.0, the second generation of online content creation[3]—has transformed audiences into active participants who both generate and share content. This shift has given rise to the concept of "produsage," a blend of production and consumption[3]. Social media platforms undergo a dual commodification process: they attract audiences to sell access to advertisers while also generating value from user-created content. This process underscores the dual role of social media users as providers of unpaid labor and as sources of data, which is either sold for profit or used to generate profit[3]. Ironically, the once-celebrated "participatory culture," which was believed to empower collective and individual decision-making and enhance self-expression[9], has been co-opted as a capitalist tool to further commodify and control audiences.

Short video platforms, as popular social media channels, are particularly well-suited for viral marketing due to their low barriers to entry and high engagement potential. These platforms offer opportunities for more experiential and interactive marketing strategies, effectively narrowing the gap between audiences and films. By increasing audience knowledge of film-related content and encouraging ticket purchases, short video platforms can guide audience participation in a way that is both entertaining and expansive, thereby enhancing a film's exposure and influence. Marketers can engage audiences by organizing events and creating compelling topics, while users can boost their own content's visibility and popularity by participating in these discussions. This creates a feedback loop that benefits both the film's marketing efforts and the audience, whose role as both consumer and producer—or "prosumer"—bridges the gap between creators and consumers in film promotion[20].

However, mismatched marketing or over-marketing might also lead to severe consequences. In their essay *Hollywood Meets Madison Avenue: The Commercialization of US Films*, Wasko et al. examined cases where successful promotional campaigns have not translated into satisfactory box office results[16]. Meanwhile, this is not only happening in Hollywood, but also in the current Chinese film market. Li Fanyu and Hou Kai summarized the marketing strategies that have led to the success of film promotion campaigns in the Chinese film market, including misplacement marketing, leveraging marketing, and overstepping marketing[11]. These strategies create intentional and mismatching hype to increase popularity, which can lead to audiences finding the film "not as advertised" upon release, thus potentially turning film promotion into a negative public relations event and an online dispute, even causing long-term damage to the film market environment.

In the current Chinese film marketing environment, the most common film marketing strategies on the Douyin platform include: highlighting exciting parts of the film to stimulate viewers' desire to watch in a short time; using behind-the-scenes content to

showcase the hard work of the cast, and thus encourage consumers to appreciate the difficulty of the filming process and the sincerity of the production team, thus improving the film's reputation; and selecting hot tags and emotional values that resonate with the target audience for promotion[4]. By examining a case study of the 2024 Chinese comedy-drama film *YOLO*, this research aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which the emotional resonance and perceived authenticity of Douyin's short video marketing redefines spectatorship, fundamentally altering the audience's traditional viewing experiences and expectations. The study poses key research questions: How does short-video marketing on platforms like Douyin influence film audiences' decision-making process and viewing experience? What impact does short video marketing have on the film? What are the broader cultural implications of this shift?

2   Case Study: *YOLO*

2.1   Basic Introduction of *YOLO* and Its Marketing Statistics

YOLO (Chinese: 热辣滚烫; pinyin: Rè là gǔntàng, meaning 'Hot, Spicy, Boiling, Burning [Life]') is a 2024 Chinese comedy-drama film directed by and starring Jia Ling, alongside Lei Jiayin. The film is a comedic adaptation of the 2014 Japanese movie *100 Yen Love*, following Du Leying, a long-time homebody who embarks on a new journey after meeting boxing coach Hao Kun. Jia Ling revealed that filming took over a year and required five shoots, during which she lost over 50 kg (110 lb) to authentically portray a boxer. Released during the Lunar New Year, *YOLO* quickly became a box office sensation, grossing over $479.4 million worldwide, and becoming the highest-grossing Chinese film of early 2024. Sony Pictures acquired international distribution rights, and the film premiered in Singapore and Malaysia on March 21, 2024[17].

The marketing strategy for *YOLO* was ingeniously crafted, but since I began this analysis two months after its cinema run, some platform data has lost its timeliness. I will use data up to February 13th from an article on Digitaling to elaborate on *YOLO*'s marketing data and strategies[6].

On January 11th, Jia Ling posted on Weibo about finishing filming and revealed her 100 kg weight loss for the role, garnering over 1 million shares, 87,000 comments, and 1.27 million likes, capturing widespread attention. She had been absent from the public eye for nearly a year, missing even the major annual CCTV New Year Gala on February 9th, heightening anticipation for her transformation.

After the film's release on February 10th, *YOLO*'s daily WeChat index exceeded 1 billion each day through February 13th, dwarfing competitors like *Article 20* (540 million) and *Pegasus 2* (450 million). Detailed WeChat data showed keywords like "Jia Ling + *YOLO* + Weight Loss" peaking on February 11th, with "Jia Ling" surpassing 3 billion, "*YOLO*" over 1 billion, and "Weight Loss" at 890 million.

Videos of Jia Ling's interviews with major state media were prominently featured on Douyin and WeChat Channels, marking her post-weight loss image's first appearance outside the film. For example, two videos posted by People's Daily's Douyin account, with 170 million followers, amassed 8.69 million and 7.34 million likes, respectively.

Douyin data shows *YOLO*'s official account received 120 million likes, 1.949 million followers, a peak live view count of 11.61 million, and posted 156 videos. In contrast, *Pegasus 2* received 55.36 million likes, 720,000 followers, and a peak live view of 7.25 million from 283 videos, while *Article 20* had 65.25 million likes, 1.024 million followers, and a peak live view of 6 million from 222 videos.

In Douyin's "Weekly Top" (February 5th-11th), *YOLO* claimed eight of the top 30 videos by likes, including the top three positions. On Weibo's hot search total chart (February 10th-13th), "Jia Ling's Livestream" topped the list, followed by "Jia Ling's Full Weight Loss Record," with "Jia Ling's Abs" in fourth place, and "The Current Jia Ling" in fifth.

YOLO, with its female protagonist and themes of women's self-growth, attracted a substantial female audience. Female fans comprised 75.8% of the followers on *YOLO*'s official TikTok account. On Xiaohongshu, where over 70% of users are young women, *YOLO*'s popularity significantly outpaced other films, with the hashtag #*YOLO* receiving 510 million views and more than 80,000 notes, compared to #Pegasus 2 with 277.57 million views and 30,000+ notes.

On February 13th, Douban (a Chinese rating app similar to IMDb) released its New Year film season scores (out of 10.0): *YOLO* scored 8.0, *Pegasus 2* scored 7.9, *Article 20* scored 7.8, and *The Film Emperor* scored 6.8. While these scores reflect subjective audience opinions, they are indicative of the film's eWOM.

2.2   Research Methodology (Questionnaire)

To evaluate the effectiveness of *YOLO*'s short video film marketing on Douyin, this study employed a questionnaire-based research design, collecting 223 responses over two weeks. The goal was to understand how these platforms and their content impact audience awareness, interest, and emotional response to films marketed through short videos.

The choice of a questionnaire was deliberate for several reasons. First, questionnaires enable the direct collection of qualitative data on audience attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors, which are essential for understanding the nuanced effects of short-video marketing. Unlike quantitative metrics like views, likes, and shares, questionnaires capture the underlying motivations and emotional responses of the audience. Second, questionnaires offer flexibility in data collection, allowing for tailored questions that directly address the research objectives. This method provides a comprehensive exploration of spectatorship, emotional engagement, and decision-making processes influenced by short video marketing. Additionally, questionnaires are a cost-effective and efficient way to gather data from a broad and diverse audience, ensuring a wide range of perspectives.

In terms of design, the questionnaire included several key sections. Respondents were first asked about their most commonly used social media platforms, with options including Douyin, Kuaishou, Weibo, WeChat, and others. This multiple-choice question helped identify where respondents are most likely to encounter film marketing content. They were also asked about their exposure to film marketing on social media, with options ranging from "Frequently seen" to "Rarely seen," to assess the visibility

and reach of such marketing efforts. Another question focused on film-watching habits, offering options from "Watch new films as soon as they come out" to "Don't really like watching films." This helped contextualize respondents' potential interest in new films advertised on social media.

Respondents' familiarity with *YOLO* was also assessed, with options like "Heard of it and have watched it" and "Never heard of nor watched it." Those who had seen the film were asked in an open-ended question about their reasons for watching, while those who hadn't were asked why they chose not to. These questions provided insight into the factors influencing viewing decisions and potential shortcomings in the marketing approach.

Questions 7-22 linked to four *YOLO* marketing short videos on Douyin, each accompanied by a set of four questions. These asked about the video's relevance to the film, which aspects of the film it highlighted (plot, context, cast, etc.), whether it influenced their interest in the film, and their mood toward watching similar short videos. These questions were crucial for understanding the effectiveness of individual content pieces in shaping viewer perceptions and intentions. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question inviting broader perspectives on the role of short video marketing in film culture and its psychological impact on audiences.

2.3   Findings

Regarding the question about the social media platforms most frequently used by the respondents (multiple-choice, data overlaps to some extent), the top three are WeChat (88.34%), TikTok (62.33%), and Xiaohongshu (44.84%), presented in Fig. 1. These three social media platforms are precisely the key marketing platforms for "*YOLO*." The fact that many respondents frequently use TikTok also provides a certain basis for the reliability of this survey data. At the same time, platforms like WeChat, Kuaishou, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and QQ also have short video features, so even if respondents do not use TikTok, it does not mean they are not exposed to a short video environment in their daily lives. This survey does not discuss the effects of short video marketing on other platforms.

The degree of respondents' exposure to film marketing content on social media is presented in Fig. 2, which indicates that film marketing content on social media is very common and has high exposure.

The frequency of watching films of the respondents is presented in Fig. 3, which shows that at least 83.38% of respondents (or their friends and family) are likely to be exposed to short video film marketing and be influenced by it.

The familiarity with *YOLO* of the respondents is presented in Fig. 4, which indicates that while *YOLO* has a certain level of awareness, the actual viewing rate is not high.

Respondents who chose "Heard of it and have watched it" were asked why they watched "*YOLO*." Among the 92 respondents, 78 completed this open-ended question effectively. The responses included (data overlaps to some extent due to keyword collection): 24 "Encouraging story"; 24 "Weight loss"; 16 "Promotion"; 30 "Jia Ling"; 13 "Others". After further detailed analysis, I found that 5 mentioned both "Jia Ling" and

"Promotion"; 11 mentioned both "Jia Ling" and "Weight loss"; among the 13 "Others," 6 mentioned being invited by friends or family.
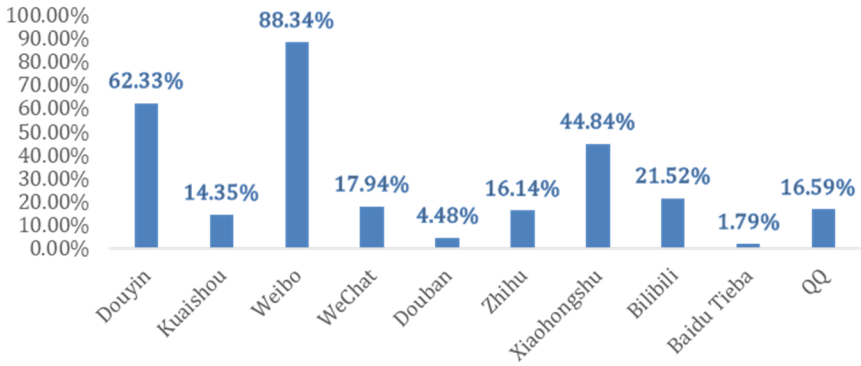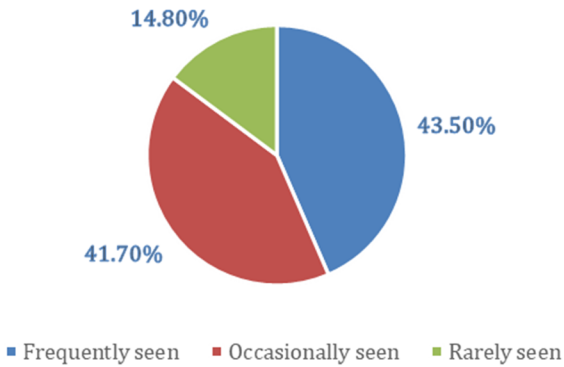
Fig. 1. Frequently used social media
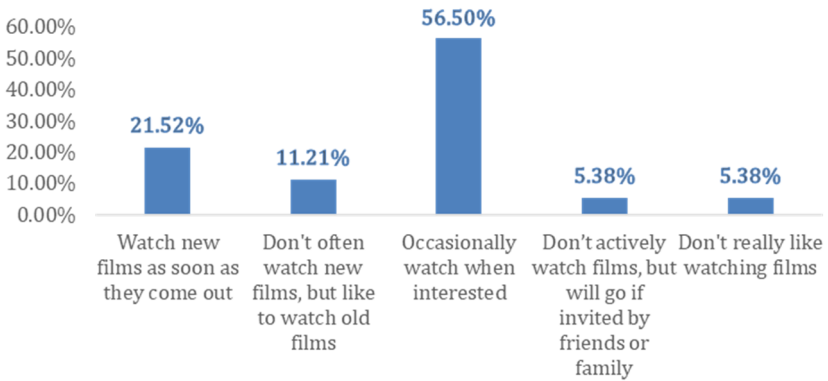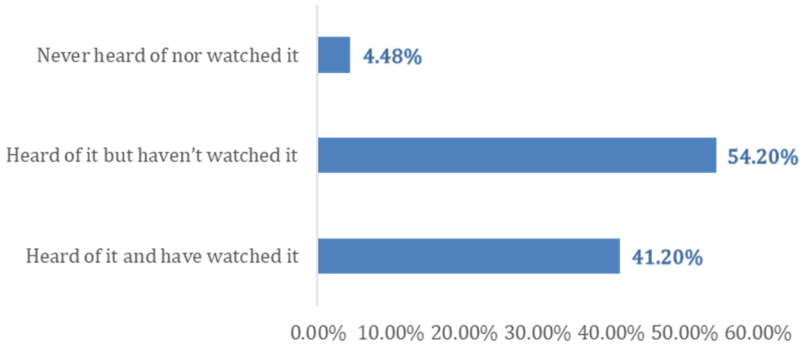
Fig. 2. Exposure to social media film marketing

Fig. 3. Frequency of film watching

Never heard of nor watched it   4.48%

Heard of it but haven't watched it   54.20%

Heard of it and have watched it   41.20%

0.00% 10.00% 20.00% 30.00% 40.00% 50.00% 60.00%

Fig. 4. Familiarity with *YOLO*

These data indicate that Jia Ling, as the lead and celebrity, played a significant role in attracting the audience, and that the audience also has a high interest in inspirational stories and health themes. Therefore, the marketing strategy of "promoting Jia Ling's inspirational weight loss story" created a strong synergistic effect, attracting 83.33% of respondents to watch "*YOLO*." Although the reasons for the remaining 7.69% watching the film due to social influence from their friends and family were not investigated, it is difficult to assert that they were not influenced by "*YOLO*'s" marketing strategy.

Respondents who chose "Heard of it but haven't watched it" were asked why they didn't watch "*YOLO*." Among the 121 respondents, 88 completed this open-ended question effectively. The reasons included: 9 "Already spoiled"; 28 "Not interested in '*YOLO*'" with 2 mentioned "there are more interesting films released in the same season"; 2 "Don't like watching films"; 7 "Prefer watching at home"; 3 "Annoyed by excessive marketing"; 2 "Friends didn't recommend"; 32 "No time to go to the cinema"; 5 "Others", with some mentioned "liked Jia Ling's previous look" or "disagree with the skinny-beauty standard". In collecting data for this question, no duplicate counts were chosen because most respondents did not provide detailed reasons for not going to the cinema to watch *YOLO*, with 64 lightly stating reasons such as "no time," "not interested," or "just okay," while only 5 explicitly mentioned other reasons.

The above feedback reveals that the reasons for not watching the film are more varied than the reasons for watching it. Excluding those who lacked time, disliked films, or avoided cinemas, 13.64% of respondents chose not to watch the film due to the marketing content, citing spoilers and excessive promotion as deterrents. Another 31.82% were simply uninterested in "*YOLO*." Further analysis shows that those who specified their lack of interest often mentioned the "theme," "plot," or "adaptation," indicating that *YOLO* may not be particularly distinctive, thus failing to capture some viewers' attention. Two respondents mentioned that their friends did not recommend the film, suggesting they might have also found it unimpressive. Additionally, respondents in the "other" category, who cited liking Jia Ling's previous works or disagreeing with the thin-beauty standard, reflect a lack of acceptance of Jia Ling's new image or the film's theme.

Then short video watching started. The content of the first video shows Sha Yi, another actor as well as Jia Ling's friend, was amazed by her transformation after the weight loss, also felt a lot of compassion and hugged the smiling Jia Ling who was saying, "It's okay." This video was posted on the official TikTok account of *YOLO* on February 9, 2024, with a duration of 20 seconds. It received 9.012 million likes, 274,000 comments, 342,000 favorites, and 1.929 million shares (as of May 25, 2024). Unfortunately, I still cannot trace back the data from three months ago to determine how much of this engagement came before or after the film's release. After watching this video, respondents were asked about the relevance of the video content to the film content, which is presented in Fig. 5; the information provided by the video about the film, presented in Fig. 6; their interest in the film after watching the video, presented in Fig. 7; and their emotional response to the video content, presented in Fig. 8.

The second video is a film clip showing Du Leying (played by Jia Ling) feeling ashamed about her appearance when she sees couples on her first date after being financially dependent on her family for ten years. This video was posted on the official TikTok account of *YOLO* on January 14, 2024, with a duration of 20 seconds. It received 6.698 million likes, 185,000 comments, 369,000 favorites, and 554,000 shares (as of May 25, 2024). After watching this video, respondents were asked about the relevance of the video content to the film content, which is presented in Fig. 9; the information provided by the video about the film, presented in Fig. 10; their interest in the film after watching the video, presented in Fig. 11; and their emotional response to the video content, presented in Fig. 12.

The third video is also a film clip where Hao Kun (played by Lei Jiayin) talks about his dreams while drunk, expressing his unwillingness to compromise with reality. The subtitles reveal that Hao Kun, who has always fought for his boxing dream, later agrees to participate in a fixed match for 30,000 yuan. The video breaks the fourth wall, transitioning from the film clip to Lei Jiayin's silence after filming, with subtitles asking the audience when they gave up on their dreams due to reality. This video was posted on the official TikTok account of *YOLO* on March 14, 2024, with a duration of 23 seconds. It received 246,000 likes, 11,000 comments, 21,000 favorites, and 30,000 shares (as of May 25, 2024). After watching this video, respondents were asked about the relevance of the video content to the film content, which is presented in Fig. 13; the information provided by the video about the film, presented in Fig. 14; their interest in the film after watching the video, presented in Fig. 15; and their emotional response to the video content, presented in Fig. 16.

The fourth video shows Jia Ling undergoing training from Day 1 to Day 300, not only improving her skills and losing weight but also becoming more focused. This video was posted on the official TikTok account of *YOLO* on February 9, 2024, with a duration of 17 seconds. It received 9.363 million likes, 299,000 comments, 686,000 favorites, and 1.07 million shares (as of May 25, 2024). After watching this video, respondents were asked about the relevance of the video content to the film content, which is presented in Fig. 17; the information provided by the video about the film, presented in Fig. 18; their interest in the film after watching the video, presented in Fig. 19; and their emotional response to the video content, presented in Fig. 20.
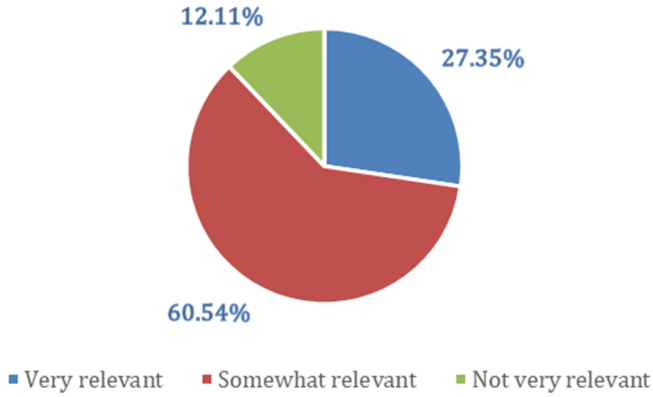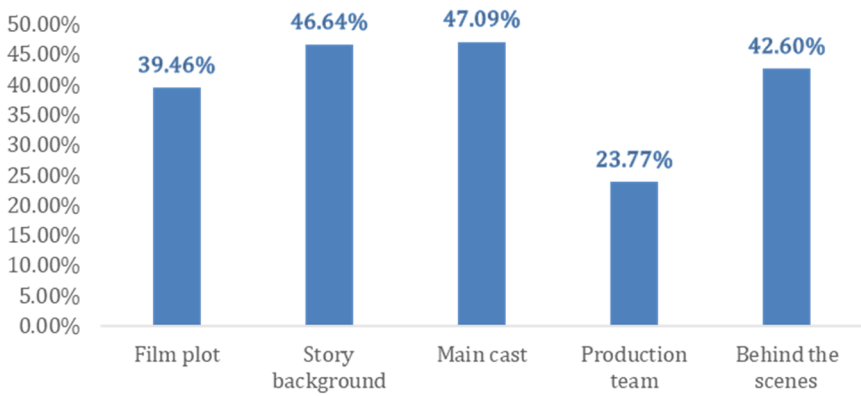
Fig. 5. Relevance with the film content of Video 1
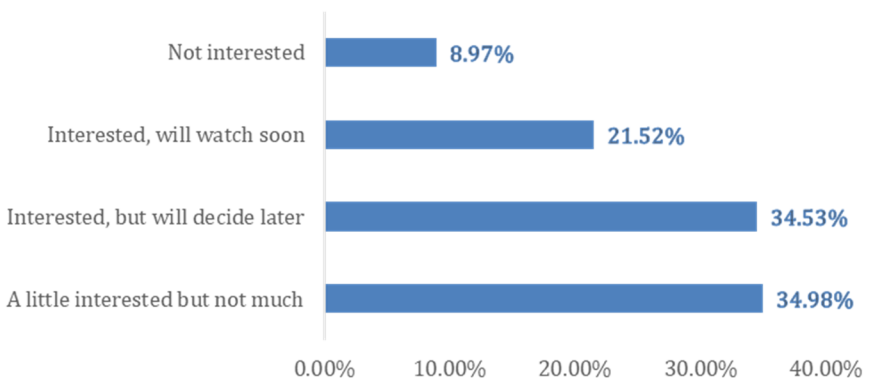

Fig. 6. Perceived information provided by Video 1
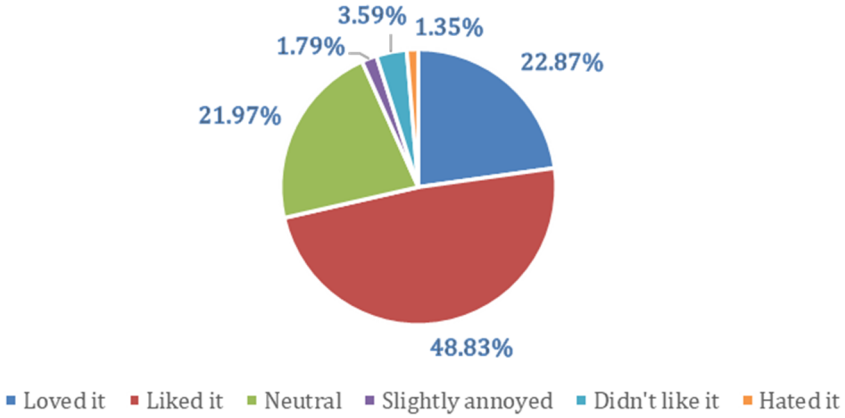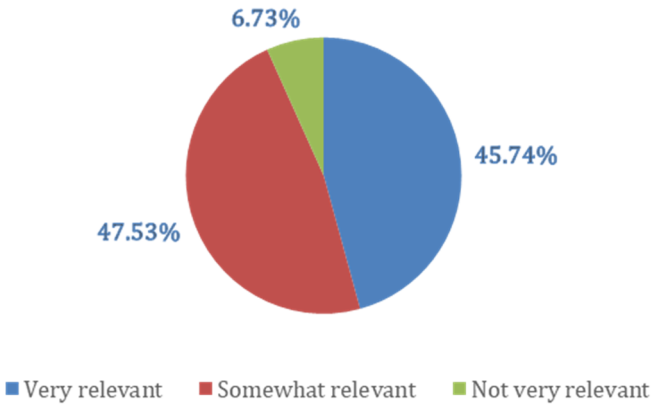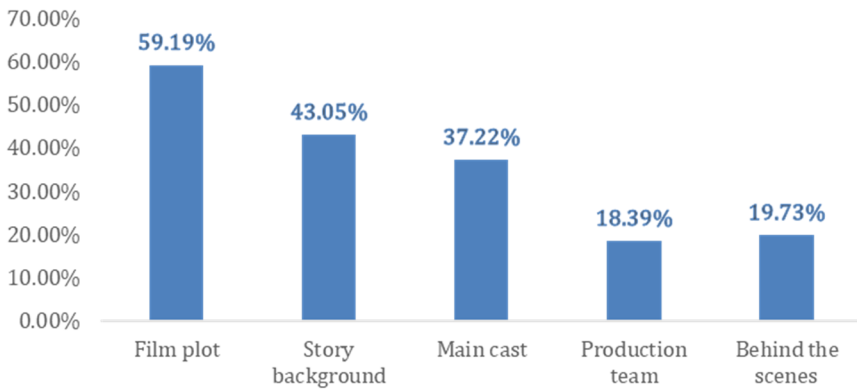

Fig. 7. Interest in the film after watching Video 1

3.59% 1.35%

1.79%

22.87%

21.97%

48.83%

■ Loved it   ■ Liked it   ■ Neutral   ■ Slightly annoyed   ■ Didn't like it   ■ Hated it

Fig. 8. Emotional response to Video 1

6.73%

45.74%

47.53%

■ Very relevant   ■ Somewhat relevant   ■ Not very relevant

Fig. 9. Relevance with the film content of Video 2

70.00%

59.19%

60.00%

50.00%

43.05%

40.00%

37.22%

30.00%

20.00%

18.39%   19.73%

10.00%

0.00%

Film plot   Story background   Main cast   Production team   Behind the scenes
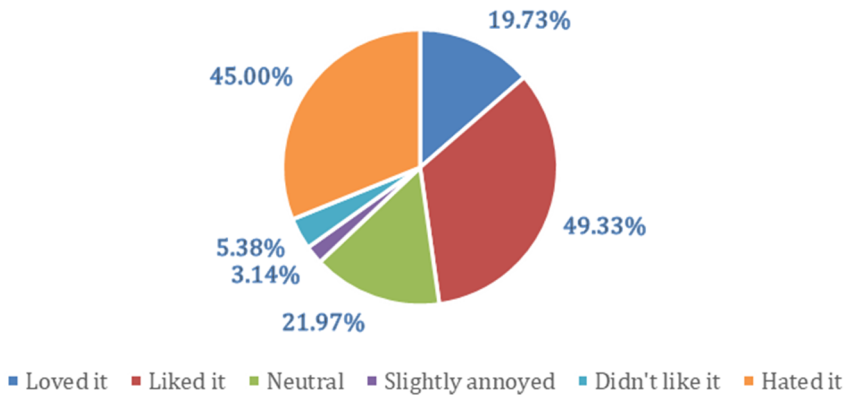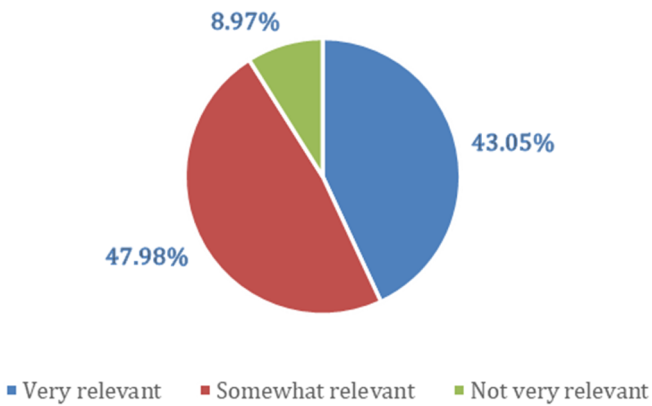
Fig. 10. Perceived information provided by Video 2
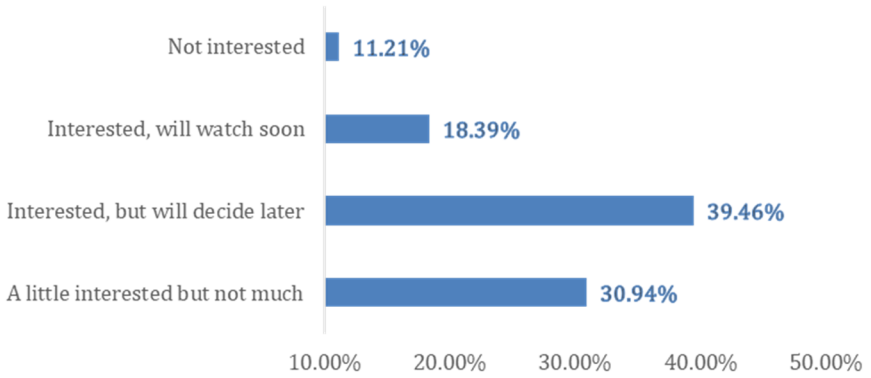
Fig. 11. Interest in the film after watching Video 2

Fig. 12. Emotional response to Video 2

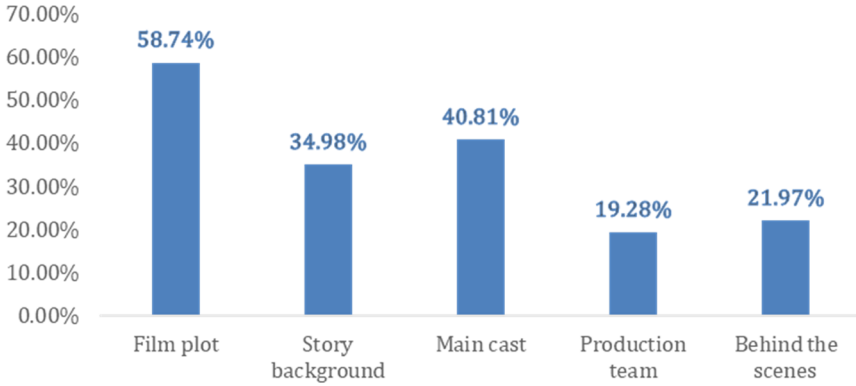**Fig. 13.** Relevance with the film content of Video 3
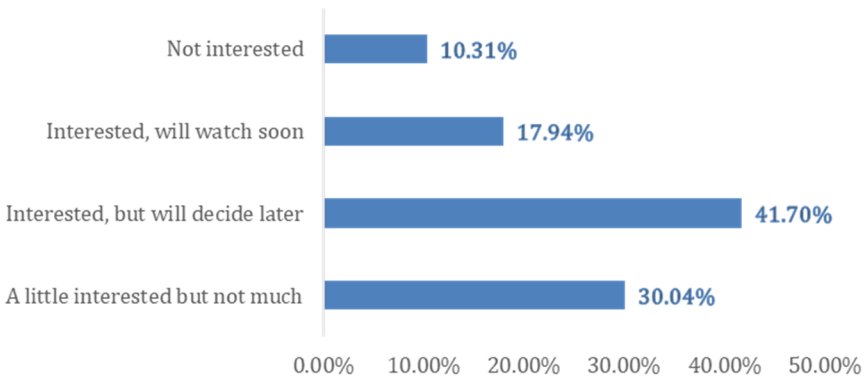
Fig. 14. Perceived information provided by Video 3

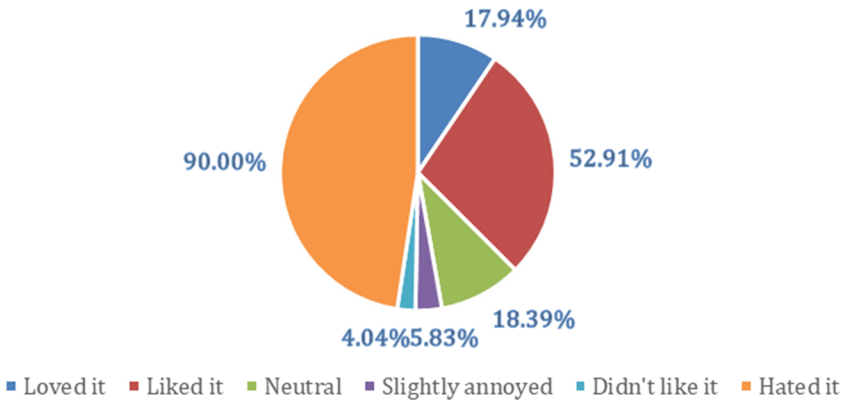**Fig. 15.** Interest in the film after watching Video 3

Fig. 16. Emotional response to Video 3

Among the four videos, the first, second, and fourth are pinned on *YOLO*'s official TikTok account and are the most popular. Videos 1 and 4, which highlight Jia Ling's inspirational weight loss journey and behind-the-scenes training, received significantly more likes, comments, favorites, and shares than Videos 2 and 3. This content resonates with the audience, sparking interest and positive emotional reactions. Released the day before the film's premiere, these two videos maximized audience attention and heightened anticipation and discussion. Video 2, released 27 days before the premiere, has higher interaction metrics than Video 3 but lower than Videos 1 and 4. It helps build a connection with the main characters and hints at potential plot twists, piquing audience curiosity and encouraging them to follow *YOLO*-related content in the weeks leading up to the release. Video 3, released 32 days after the premiere, shows significantly lower interaction data due to the film's waning popularity. However, its purpose is to extend the film's relevance, maintain audience interest, attract new viewers, and prompt discussions among those who have already seen the film, thereby enhancing its long-tail effect.

Video 2 has the highest relevance (93.27%), followed closely by Video 3 (91.03%) and Video 4 (90.59%), while Video 1 has the lowest relevance (87.89%), possibly because it focuses on Jia Ling's personal transformation rather than directly introducing the film's plot. The perceived information largely centers around the film plot and main cast across all videos, and videos that effectively communicate the film plot are more likely to be perceived as relevant. Video 2 (59.19%) and Video 3 (58.74%) have the highest recognition of the film plot, which correlates with their higher relevance scores.

Video 1 (21.52%) and Video 4 (21.08%) have the highest percentage of respondents who are ready to watch the film soon, while Video 2 (39.46%) and Video 3 (41.70%) show higher percentages of people who are undecided but interested. This probably indicates videos that strongly communicate the plot (Video 2 and Video 3) seem to leave viewers in a more contemplative state, needing more time to decide, while Videos 1 and 4 prompt a more immediate decision to watch, likely because they showcase the long-term effort and transformation of Jia Ling, a real-world celebrity, providing a stronger engagement influence on the audience.
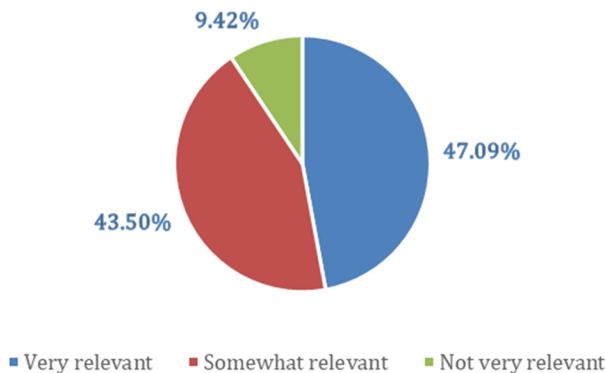

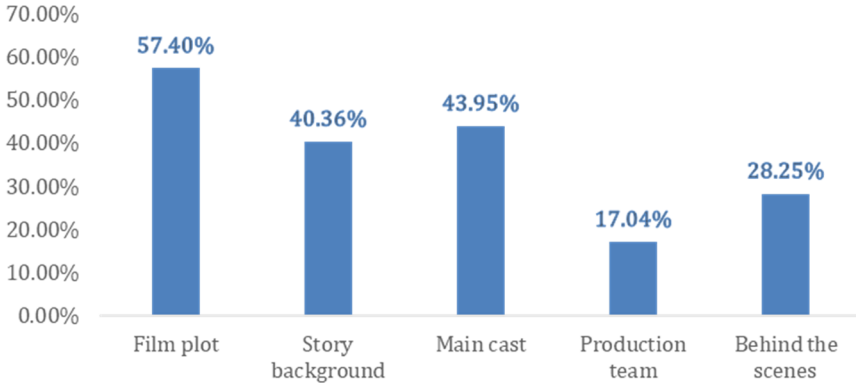**Fig. 17.** Relevance with the film content of Video 4

Fig. 18. Perceived information provided by Video 4
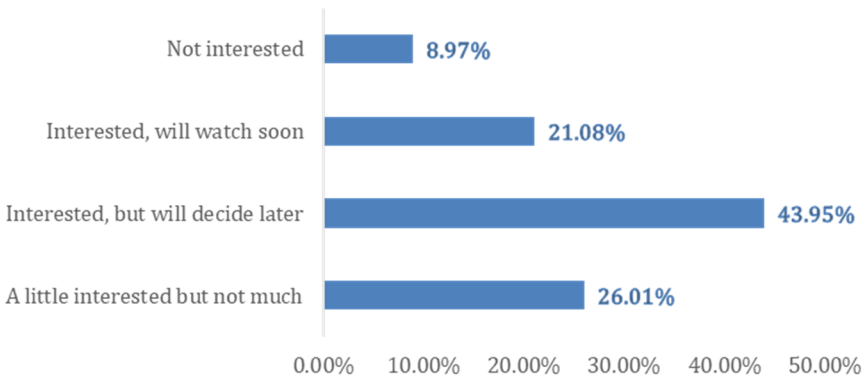

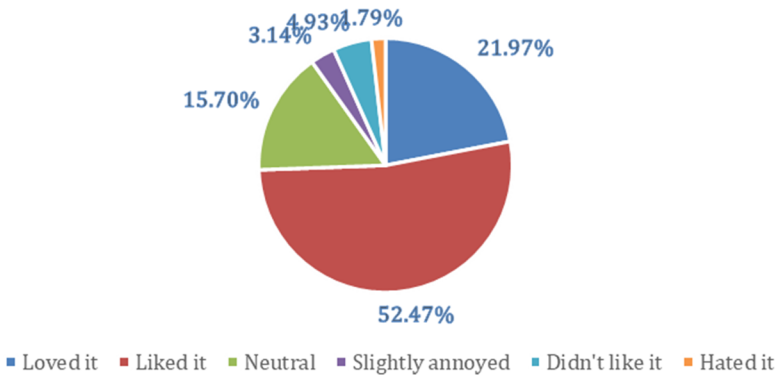**Fig. 19.** Interest in the film after watching Video 4

Fig. 20. Emotional response to Video 4

"Liked it" is the most common response across all videos, with the highest percentage in Video 3 (52.91%). Video 4 also performs the best in terms of emotional response (74.44%), indicating that the audience highly appreciates and enjoys behind-the-scenes effort and growth stories. The emotional responses to Videos 1 and 2 are similar, both around 70%, showing that the audience reacts positively to inspirational stories and film In the final open-ended question about social media short video film marketing, respondents expressed mixed views, with most displaying a level of acceptance or neutrality. This suggests that short video marketing has become a significant part of viewers' lives. However, 12 respondents explicitly disliked this form of marketing. One respondent stated, "Short video marketing that reveals film content in advance acts as a spoiler. When people pay for a 120-minute film but lose part of the experience due to pre-watched clips, it fragments the viewing experience." Another mentioned, "Film marketing often focuses on unrelated content, like the director's dedication to an actor, rather than authentic behind-the-scenes footage. The quality of films has declined, while marketing has become overwhelming, leading to suspicions of deceptive capital operations. Nearly the entire plot is often spoiled on short video platforms." A third respondent commented, "Malicious competition in marketing has severely impacted film culture. Excessive promotion by filmmakers to dominate the market, with promotional costs sometimes surpassing production costs, increases screening rates and suppresses genuinely good films, limiting viewers' choices. This needs to be resisted." Another remarked, "Good films don't need marketing, but boring ones use it to deceive viewers."

On the positive side, respondents mentioned, "Short video marketing perfectly fits the lifestyle of today's young people. If they like it, they search for more; if not, they just scroll up." Another mentioned, "Short video marketing reinforces impressions through repeated message pushing, thereby achieving the desired marketing goals." Lastly, "Short video marketing can quickly capture pain points, tear-jerker moments, and points of interest, attracting the audience's attention."

The findings suggest that in short-video marketing, achieving a strategic balance between emotionally engaging content and film-relevant material is crucial for maximizing audience engagement. Videos showcasing personal transformation and behind-the-scenes efforts can generate immediate interest and strong emotional responses, prompting quick viewer action. However, content centered on the film's plot and main characters is vital for fostering deeper engagement and sustained interest. Timing is also key, especially when content release coincides with significant events like a film's premiere. While short-video marketing is generally well-received, marketers should avoid over-marketing and spoilers, which can lead to viewer fatigue and a sense of deception. Striking this balance can result in a successful campaign that not only attracts viewers but also turns them into active promoters of the film.

2.4   Analysis Made from the Results

The survey results indicate that short-video film marketing has indeed altered spectatorship in significant ways. Firstly, short videos provide audiences with a wealth of information and emotional cues that are not typically available through traditional film

marketing, and this information is absorbed naturally and almost imperceptibly. For instance, a film poster can convey basic details such as the film's title, the main cast, the creative team, and hints about the genre, story background, and visual style. A trailer can build on this by offering insights into the plot's conflicts, twists, and key scenes, thereby generating curiosity about the film. However, short videos extend beyond these traditional methods.

Before the release of *YOLO*, its official Douyin account continuously shared a variety of short videos, including behind-the-scenes moments and numerous film clips. Although these clips were often unrelated to the film's main plot, they were accompanied by humorous, topical, or thought-provoking subtitles and exaggerated titles, which amplified their impact. This amplification, through emotional resonance and entertainment value, engages viewers and piques their interest in the film.

Take Video 2 as an example: the 20-second clip consists of a single shot, yet each second is enhanced with subtitles that interpret the content or guide the audience's thoughts. Key actions are emphasized through slow-motion effects and zoom, highlighting the emotional undertones intended to resonate with viewers. This deliberate guidance and amplification reduce the need for viewers to independently process the information, as the marketers have already spotlighted the key points, effectively "feeding" them to the audience. This quick and effortless consumption of information facilitates the absorption of the underlying messages within the short videos, leaving a subconscious impression that is reinforced through continued viewing of related content. For instance, Video 2 enables viewers to gain an understanding of the character "Du Leying" and speculate about her situation. For certain audiences, the emotions conveyed in the video may even resonate personally. This depth of information and emotional connection far surpasses what can be gleaned from posters and trailers alone, offering a more immersive and subtle engagement with the characters and narrative.

Although each individual short video reveals only a limited amount of information, the cumulative effect of 365 short videos (the current number on *YOLO*'s official Douyin account, possibly mirroring Jia Ling's year-long 100-kg weight loss) is overwhelming. As previously noted, some respondents mentioned that by piecing together these short videos, one could practically watch the entire film. The sheer volume of marketing videos, combined with the extended timeline of their release, increases the risk of audience fatigue, especially if the content becomes repetitive. Such repetition can lead to annoyance and even criticism from viewers. Therefore, even if two short videos originate from the same scene, they must offer distinct interpretations to avoid redundancy. Excessive disclosure not only occurs through visuals but also through subtitles, making it difficult to quantify the amount of information revealed across 365 short videos. This extensive exposure could lead to some potential viewers deciding not to watch the film, as indicated by nine respondents in this survey who felt they already knew the plot.

Regarding the impact of spoilers on a film's box office, Li et al. analyzed data from 465 films released between January 2015 and December 2017, finding that spoilers significantly negatively affect box office performance, particularly within the first six days after a film's release. However, after this initial period, spoiler content on short

video platforms like Douyin continues to proliferate, driven not only by official marketing accounts but also by personal accounts. While these short videos can contribute to the film's marketing, the negative effects of spoilers are more pronounced for narrative-based films compared to non-narrative ones[12]. For *YOLO*, an adaptation, this negative impact could be severe, as its core plot is already known from another film, and its unique elements may lose their appeal due to spoilers.

Another research by Yan et al. on 153 films released between 2014 and 2017 found that the impact of spoilers varies by genre and perceived film quality. Spoilers have a stronger negative effect on the box office for comedy and mystery films and films of higher perceived quality[19]. Conversely, spoilers may have a positive impact on lower-quality films[19]. Therefore, in *YOLO*'s case, where the plot may no longer be novel to the audience, those who choose to watch the film might be motivated by factors other than the plot—such as "Jia Ling's inspirational weight loss story," as indicated by the survey. This could mitigate the negative impact of spoilers on box office revenue.

It is important to acknowledge that, prior to making purchasing decisions, individuals often derive pleasure from anticipating and imagining the specifics of an experience, as well as from their emotional reactions to the prospect of an upcoming purchase. Kahneman and Tversky explain that this anticipation can take the form of an "inside view" or an "outside view."[12] The inside view involves specific details such as the cast, genre, and plot of a film—elements that can be considered spoilers. In contrast, the outside view relies on broader statistical data, such as historical box office performances and consumer reviews, to predict outcomes. In the context of film watching, when audiences are unfamiliar with a film and wish to make informed choices, they may actively seek out spoilers to determine whether the plot and ending align with their expectations[10]. This behavior prompts marketers to strategically use "marketing spoilers," a form of loophole marketing, where certain plot elements are deliberately promoted to attract the audience[10].

Jiang explores how marketing spoilers influence spectatorship, functioning as meta-texts. She argues that a complete work, such as a film, is presented to the audience as a text, defined as "a certain number of symbols organized into a combination, allowing the receiver to understand this combination as having a unified dimension of time and meaning"[10]. The party disseminating spoilers, by selecting and publishing key information about a work, becomes the sender of symbolic texts, while social media platforms serve as the venues for information dissemination[10]. Spoiler content often represents a one-sided expression of the work, with spoilers highlighting what they perceive as the "essence" of the content, while ignoring other aspects. This selective dissemination through social media not only attracts interpretation and commentary but also expands the work's influence and discussion through an ongoing process of signification. Jiang also draws on Barthes' mythic system of signification, arguing that this meta-text continually internalizes a specific "intended meaning" within the audience's understanding through repetition and derivation, gradually shaping public perception of the work's "traits" or "meaning"[10].

Even without considering user-generated content and personal spoilers from online users, short video marketing has already surpassed the "measured" spoilers that audiences traditionally expect from marketing. This shift significantly alters the historical

role of the audience, transforming the film from something primarily "played" in cinemas to a fragmented experience that undermines the collective cinema experience. It deprives the audience of the element of surprise and anticipation that traditionally accompanies the act of entering a dark cinema. The audience effect is diminished as moments that might have originally elicited strong reactions now often result in silence[8]. While silence is a form of response, it undeniably makes the viewing experience more mundane, diminishing the magic of film as the seventh art. This evolution represents not only a shift in spectatorship but also a cultural loss for cinema.

Additionally, behind-the-scenes (BTS) content serves a similar purpose. Social media and branding experts advocate for using BTS content to provide an authentic view of the production process, fostering transparency and increasing audience trust[15]. Survey data shows a positive correlation between a brand's authenticity rating and its perceived trustworthiness and credibility[15]. This type of content, often semi-unpolished, offers a more humanized glimpse into the "real life" behind a product, promoting personal connection and enhancing brand authenticity and engagement[15].

In the film industry, BTS content is frequently used as a marketing tool to generate hype—intensified publicity that establishes a strong product presence in a competitive market—and to sustain public interest leading up to a film's release[1]. Film studios like Columbia have been incorporating BTS elements since 1919, a practice that expanded in the 1930s through "making-of" featurettes, which introduced new actors or showcased technological advancements like color. This trend continued into the 1950s with programs like ABC's "Behind the Cameras," offering audiences a look inside Hollywood studios and interviews with stars like John Wayne[15]. Today, experts emphasize that BTS content not only benefits media creators by maintaining a broader and more loyal audience but also humanizes the brand, increasing engagement through likes, shares, and comments.

In film marketing, BTS videos often highlight the technical challenges and creative solutions involved in filmmaking, leading to a greater appreciation for the film as viewers become aware of the complexities behind the scenes that might otherwise be taken for granted[4]. Sharing stories from the set, challenges faced by the cast and crew, or fun moments behind the scenes can create an emotional connection, making audiences feel like part of the film's extended community. This, in turn, increases their investment in the film when they understand the personal efforts and stories behind it. Moreover, BTS content can attract fans of the actors who are interested in seeing their favorite stars not only in the film but also in the production environment.

BTS content complicates the decision-making process for audiences, as the abundant information provided introduces additional factors that can influence their choices. Consequently, BTS videos can be considered a type of meta-text, as they offer additional context, commentary, and insight into the main content. For example, by revealing how certain scenes were shot, the motivations behind narrative choices, or the historical and cultural research that informed the film's development, BTS content gives voice to various production team members, beyond the vision of the director and screenwriters. This allows audiences to understand not just what is presented but also why and how it was crafted, potentially altering their perception of the film. In film marketing, the meta-textual hints and guidance embedded by marketers can simplify

the decision-making process, raising questions about whether the audience's viewing decisions are entirely their own.

Owing to the interactivity of social media, short-video marketing not only promotes films but also encourages audiences to engage with promotional content and even participate in the marketing process. Between February 10 and February 21, the official Douyin account of *YOLO* released 11 short videos as part of a series titled "Leying's Diary of Becoming a Boxer," which amassed 770 million views. Despite its title, this series is not directly related to the character "Du Leying"; instead, it documents actress Jia Ling's behind-the-scenes fitness and weight loss journey. The series includes daily snippets and fitness challenges, inviting viewers to participate in the comments section. By emphasizing interactivity and shared experiences, the series effectively mobilizes audience enthusiasm and fosters an emotional connection with Jia Ling, which can then be projected onto the character Du Leying. The Meaning Transfer Model explains this phenomenon, as it describes how meaning is transferred from a celebrity endorser to a product or brand, and subsequently to the consumer, through the endorsement process[5].

Moreover, viewers who participate in the comment interactions or engage with the fitness challenges may spontaneously share these videos, integrate the content into their own creations, or use the hashtag #LeyingsDiaryOfBecomingABoxer in their posts. This approach allows the marketing team to achieve a dual purpose: promoting the film and drawing viewers directly to the promotional content, while simultaneously expanding the campaign's reach more organically and engagingly through audience sharing, which acts as unpaid online labor.

This is the essence of viral marketing: the content spreads through online communities like a virus, multiplying from one viewer to ten, from ten to a hundred. High-quality marketing content attracts likes, comments, favorites, and shares from viewers; due to Douyin's decentralized algorithm, videos that perform well in the initial traffic pool are pushed to a broader audience, as the platform recommends them to more users[20]. Consequently, higher engagement metrics like likes, comments, favorites, and shares further amplify the video's reach. Unbeknownst to them, viewers' casual interactions—likes, favorites, comments, and shares—become part of the film's free marketing efforts, effectively turning the audience into unpaid labor. As viewers engage in the marketing process in these ways, their role becomes less passive; they are no longer just consumers of the film but have become part of the marketing team, embodying the concept of "prosumers" in the new media era[3].

2.5   Further Evaluation of the Questionnaire

Nonetheless, several areas could be improved to make my questionnaire more robust and ensure that the data collected will provide a clearer picture of how effectively Douyin's marketing strategies are influencing audience behaviors and preferences. Currently, the questionnaire lacks demographic questions. I should have included queries about age, gender, and geographical location to clarify the degree of diversity of the respondents and the reliability of the results, and segment the data more effectively in

terms of the different levels of influences of this type of marketing on different demographic groups. At the same time, the survey primarily relies on binary or nominal options (e.g., yes/no, often/seldom). I could have introduced more quantitative measures such as rating scales to gauge the intensity of respondents' feelings or the effectiveness of different aspects of the promotional content, which would provide a more nuanced view of respondents' attitudes and behaviors.

To better understand the unique contribution of Douyin's marketing efforts, I should have included control questions that assess exposure to and perceptions of the film through other marketing channels as well. Also, regarding the complexity of the decision-making process, there is no way to isolate how much of their decision to watch the film was influenced by Douyin as opposed to other factors like recommendations from friends or other advertising channels. Asking the question of what portion of your decision came from Douyin marketing would also be useless, as this is forcing the respondents to explain their subjective motivation with quantitative measures.

Additionally, the assumption that all respondents will watch the videos through the links provided could lead to gaps in data if the links are not accessed, which makes the results less reliable, considering the possibility of respondents picking random or repetitive answers. I should have confirmed whether respondents have watched the videos and considered providing a brief description or alternative content delivery methods to ensure everyone can participate fully, regardless of internet access or technical issues. However, this might also make the respondents feel impatient - as there are already some respondents who left a comment when they were returning the results, that they don't like too many short-answer questions.

Likewise, several factors could potentially contribute to skewing the results according to the concept of response bias[7]. For questions asking respondents about their emotional reactions to videos or their cultural opinions on short video marketing, there's a risk of social desirability bias, where respondents might provide answers that they believe are more socially acceptable or favorable rather than what they truly think or feel[13]. For instance, they might overstate their interest in a film or their positive reaction to a marketing video to align with what they perceive as a more positive response. In addition, regarding the concept of selection bias[18], given that the questionnaire involves watching videos on Douyin, the sample might be inherently biased towards users who are more tech-savvy or regularly consume content on Douyin, which could limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population who might have different media consumption habits. Similarly, the questions about how the Douyin videos relate to the film and whether they increase interest in watching the film might lead respondents to look for and confirm their pre-existing beliefs about the effectiveness of such marketing, according to the concept of confirmation bias. If someone already believes that social media marketing is potent, they might interpret any promotional content as effective, skewing the responses to reflect a more positive assessment than is accurate[14]. Also, some of the questions, particularly those asking if the video content was related to the film and if it increased their interest in the film, as well as the title of the survey "Film marketing influence investigation" could be leading. These might prompt respondents to think about the content in a specific way, potentially leading to biased responses that do not accurately reflect their independent opinions.

3   Conclusion

Li and Hou highlight a significant distinction between the "mass audience" of the internet generation and traditional cinephiles: the former's obsession with and love for a film on new media platforms often stems from the refined, processed, and reinterpreted symbolic value of promotional materials rather than the film's actual content[11]. As a result, the impact of short video film marketing on Douyin is substantial. This marketing strategy represents a major evolution in film promotion. It significantly influences audience engagement and decision-making processes while cultivating viewer interest and emotional connections with the film and its characters. Through emotional resonance, information saturation, and interactive engagement, Douyin's short video marketing has successfully achieved viral dissemination, reshaping traditional spectatorship and positioning audiences in roles that extend beyond mere consumers.

However, this study has limitations. It did not fully explore demographic variations in responses, did not isolate the effects of Douyin marketing from other promotional channels, and did not effectively quantify the outcomes. Additionally, due to the three-month gap between *YOLO*'s release and this essay, many marketing statistics could not be accurately retraced, and the available data may not be as reliable as desired. The study also did not sufficiently consider the impact of user-generated content or the effects of celebrity endorsement. Future research should address these limitations, exploring the broader cultural implications of short-video film marketing. By collaborating with other fields of study, future research could delve deeper into the cognitive and psychological effects of short-video marketing on audiences, including how it influences their decisions and perceptions, impacts film culture, and raises ethical considerations. Additionally, further investigation could examine how short video platforms affect cultural consumption and identity formation, their role in the globalization of cinema, and their impact on traditional media and film industry dynamics.

On a personal note, I rated *YOLO* five stars on Douban after watching it. As a commercially-driven film, its cinematic techniques and choices surpassed my expectations, making it difficult to label it as a "bad" film. Setting aside marketing and commercial considerations, Jia Ling's commitment to losing 50kg for her role is commendable, and I attribute at least two-fifths of my rating to her dedication. As someone who has followed Jia Ling's career, witnessing her transition from a comedian to a more serious role was both surprising and gratifying. This transformation was not only for the film but also a personal journey for her. However, the fact that I knew "weight loss" was the primary selling point of *YOLO*, and that this awareness influenced my perspective on the film, left me frustrated. As a result, I had to reconsider my position while writing this essay, striving to maintain a neutral and critical stance.

The purpose of this essay is not to condemn short-video film marketing but to encourage readers to reflect on its impact, critiques, and underlying implications, and to decide whether to accept or reject it, consciously or otherwise. As I have noted, films are products, and products need to be sold, with marketing serving as the tool. Marketing is essential not only in the film industry but in all industries, and it permeates every aspect of our lives. While I choose to accept marketing as both a business tool and an art form, fully aware of what lies behind it, this acceptance does not have to be yours.

Acknowledgments

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