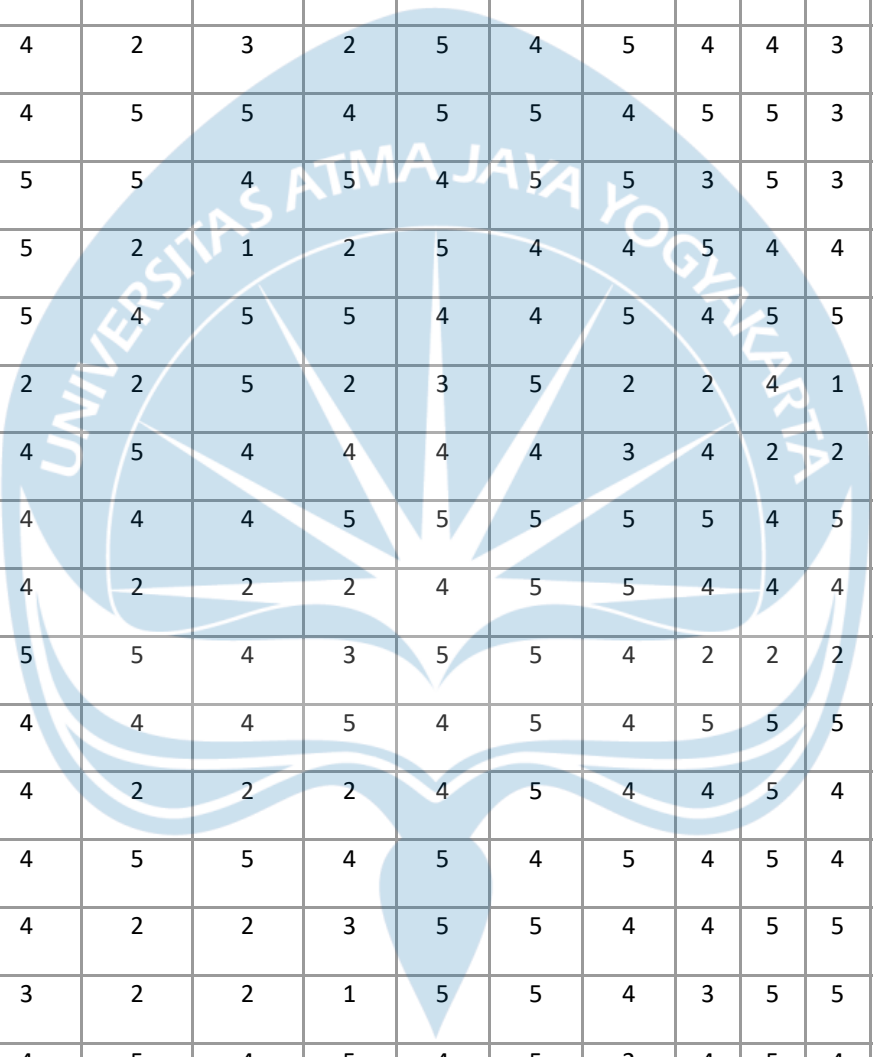
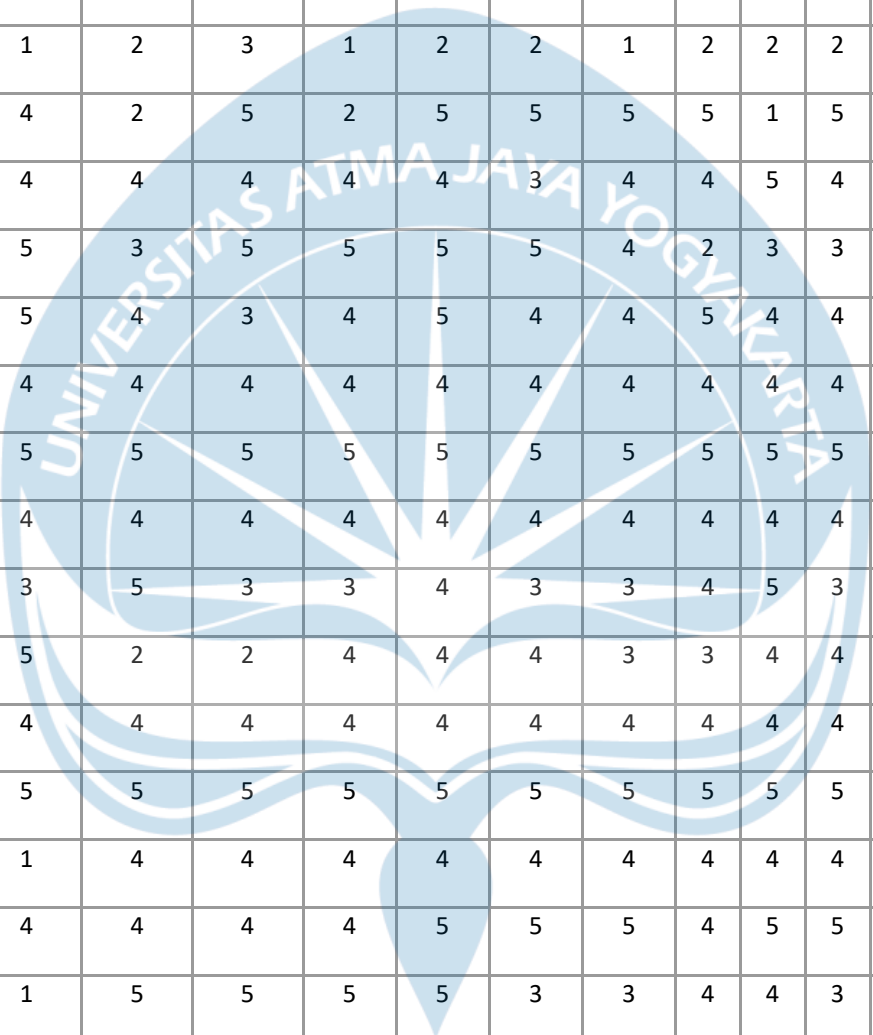




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[illegible]

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HASIL SMART PLS

Outer loadings - Matrix

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	Attendance Intention	Curiosity	Electronic Word of Mouth	Social Media Marketing	Transmedia Adaptation
AI1	0.795				
AI2	0.846				
AI3	0.892				
AI4	0.838				
CS1		0.750			
CS2		0.824			
CS3		0.850			
CS4		0.875			
EWOM1			0.850		
EWOM2			0.851		
EWOM3			0.712		
SMM1				0.738	
SMM2				0.829	
SMM3				0.874	
TA2					0.821
TA3					0.823
TA1					0.871

Construct reliability and validity - Overview

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	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Attendance Intention	0.865	0.872	0.908	0.712
Curiosity	0.844	0.848	0.896	0.683
Electronic Word of Mouth	0.733	0.764	0.847	0.651
Social Media Marketing	0.757	0.815	0.856	0.665
Transmedia Adaptation	0.789	0.793	0.877	0.704

Discriminant validity - Fornell-Larcker criterion

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	Attendance Intention	Curiosity	Electronic Word of Mouth	Social Media Marketing	Transmedia Adaptation
Attendance Intention	0.844				
Curiosity	0.772	0.826			
Electronic Word of Mouth	0.445	0.498	0.807		
Social Media Marketing	0.542	0.601	0.733	0.816	
Transmedia Adaptation	0.587	0.566	0.672	0.596	0.839

R-square - Overview

	R-square	R-square adjusted	
Attendance Intention	0.634	0.627	
Curiosity	0.429	0.420	

Collinearity statistics (VIF)

	VIF
AI1	1.538
AI2	2.330
AI3	3.102
AI4	2.354
CS1	1.599
CS2	1.931
CS3	2.633
CS4	2.846
EWOM1	1.643
EWOM2	1.514
EWOM3	1.333
SMM1	1.468
SMM2	1.629
SMM3	1.511
TA2	1.727
TA3	1.510
TA1	1.923

Path coefficients - Matrix

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	Attendance Intention	Curiosity	Electronic Word of Mouth	Social Media Marketing	Transmedia Adaptation	
Attendance Intention						
Curiosity	0.628					
Electronic Word of Mouth	-0.099	-0.048				
Social Media Marketing	0.092	0.433				
Transmedia Adaptation	0.243	0.340				

New audiences' theater attendance in China: the impacts of transmedia storytelling, fan economy and social media marketing

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Arts and the
Market

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Abstract

Purpose – With the rise of new generations of audiences, the marketing environment of theaters has undergone significant changes. The study investigates how transmedia storytelling, fan economy and social media marketing influence new audiences' curiosity and drive their attendance intention at theater performances.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilized an online questionnaire, collecting 1,032 valid responses from participants predominantly aged 18–30 (62.02%). Respondents from mainland China completed measures on five main variables.

Findings – The study reveals that curiosity played a mediating role in the influence of transmedia adaptation and social media marketing on attendance. Specifically, transmedia adaptation and social media marketing both positively impact attendance through curiosity. However, idol starring does not significantly affect either curiosity or attendance.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations include potential recall bias due to a high proportion of respondents with prior theater experience and preliminary measurement scales for idol starring. Future research could explore the interactions between transmedia adaptation and social media marketing and consider cross-cultural studies.

Practical implications – The study suggests that transmedia adaptation and social media marketing can effectively attract and engage new theatergoers.

Social implications – By targeting new audiences, this research highlights how modern marketing strategies can enhance audience engagement and accessibility of performing arts in China.

Originality/value – This research provides novel insights into new audiences' decision-making process of their first visit to the theater. It offers a unique perspective on attendance behavior, addressing gaps in understanding audience engagement in performing arts.

Keywords Theater, Audience, Transmedia storytelling, Social media marketing, Fan economy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Nowadays, theaters have become a vital space for urban public cultural life. Particularly after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, professional theaters in some countries around the world have resumed normal operations and gradually recovered to pre-pandemic levels. For instance, in mainland China, the China Association of Performing Arts reported that the number of audiences in professional theaters in 2023 reached over 30 million, an increase of nearly 35% compared to 2019 [1].

While this data are encouraging on its own, a comparative analysis with other performance industries reveals a different perspective. In 2023, the number of audiences at various large and medium-sized pop concerts and music festivals in mainland China surged by 200% compared to 2019, reaching nearly 35 million. [2] Meanwhile, due to factors such as home quarantine during the pandemic and the rise of live broadcasting and short video platforms, digital performing arts have also rapidly developed over the past three years. In 2023, on Douyin, one of China's largest short video platforms, the total number of live

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performance broadcasts reached 73.12 million, an increase of 47%, with an average of 4,263 viewers per broadcast [3]. It suggests that despite the rapid development of pop concerts, music festivals and digital performances, the market vitality of professional theaters, which primarily feature live performances such as dramas, operas and dance dramas, is relatively lacking.

At the same time, the marketing environment of theaters is undergoing significant changes. As Generation Z and Generation Alpha gradually emerge as new consumer forces, the consumption demands and behavior patterns of audiences are also noticeably shifting. Young audiences heavily rely on social media for information, leading to a marked stratification in cultural dissemination and making it easy for them to fall into “information cocoons”: “communications universes in which we hear only what we choose and only what comforts and pleases us” (Sunstein, 2006). Big data algorithms further facilitate the delivery of homogeneous information tailored to individual preferences. Online social networks gather people with shared interests or viewpoints, which reinforce the echo chamber effect. Professional theaters typically offer live performances like opera, drama, dance, etc., some of which are considered high art and inherently catering to niche rather than mass markets. In this evolving dissemination environment, a major challenge for theater managers will be how to break through the public’s information barriers and to attract and cultivate new audience groups.

Although numerous previous studies have provided deep insights into understanding audience attendance behaviors, there is currently a lack of investigation into the intrinsic motivations of young audience when they first enter the theater. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies linking these motivations to some common contemporary phenomena in theater marketing, such as transmedia storytelling, fan economics and social media marketing. Therefore, this study focuses on new theater audiences in mainland China and aims to explore whether or not the phenomena mentioned above can effectively stimulate their curiosity about the performance and subsequently generate their willingness to attend.

Literature and hypotheses

Antecedent variables of theater attendance

Researchers have generally categorized the influencing factors of audience attendance into two broad aspects: marketing factors and audience factors.

Research on marketing factors primarily explores how marketing activities affect audience attendance. For instance, Currim *et al.* (1981) analyzed the impact of the renown of performers, seating priority, season discounts and driving time on the demand for subscription series to performing arts events. They found that the renown of performers and driving time were crucial attributes, with seating priority being more significant than discounts. Borgonovi (2004) examined the effects of art education and prices on audience attendance for performing arts events. The study discovered that art education was highly correlated with participation but not equally associated with the frequency of attendance. Additionally, despite substantial differences among art forms, prices and geographic concentration were generally unrelated to attendance. Akdede and King (2006) found that the level of urban development affects the sensitivity of demand to price changes, subsequently influencing theater attendance. Akdede and Binatli (2017) classified attendance based on ticket types (discounted tickets vs single tickets) and location, revealing that factors such as whether the playwright was local or renowned and whether the performance was a season premiere influenced the sales of discounted and single tickets in different ways.

Research on audience factors refers to analyzing the needs and preferences for attending performing arts from the perspectives of audience demographics and intrinsic motivations. Numerous studies have found that audience income is closely related to their attendance (e.g. McCarthy *et al.*, 2001; Borgonovi, 2004; Manolika and Baltzis, 2022). Education is considered a potentially better predictor than income (e.g. Gray, 1998; McCarthy *et al.*, 2001;

Swanson *et al.*, 2008). Borgonovi (2004) demonstrated that artistic experience is crucial for predicting attendance at performing arts events. Ateca-Amestoy (2008) utilized the concept of cultural capital to further highlight that participation in art education is more significant than other types of general education. Additionally, factors such as gender (e.g. Ateca-Amestoy, 2008; Christin, 2012), age (e.g. van Eijck and Knulst, 2005; Mastandrea *et al.*, 2009), occupation (e.g. Lefklin, 2003) and race (e.g. DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1992) are also considered influential factors on attendance.

In addition to demographic characteristics, an increasing number of studies are exploring the role of intrinsic needs in audience attendance. Hirschman (1983) and Slater (2007) examined the relationship between entertainment needs and attendance at art performances, finding that attending cultural events provides pleasurable emotional experiences. Miniello *et al.* (2014) further commented that entertainment is not only a key predictor of visitors' satisfaction but also influences their recommendations. Swanson *et al.* (2008) summarized that people attend live art performances for six main reasons: aesthetics, education, escape from reality, recreation, self-esteem enhancement and social interaction. They discovered that aesthetics, education, recreation and self-esteem enhancement were significantly related to the frequency and number of attendances, while escape and social interaction motivations were not significantly associated with purchase and attendance behaviors. Manolika and Baltzis (2022) also found that entertainment and interest in the arts are effective predictors of attendance.

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Transmedia storytelling

Jenkins (2006) coined the term "transmedia storytelling," which refers to the process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium contributes uniquely to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, 2007). Phillips (2012) also defined transmedia storytelling as "the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats, including but not limited to games, books, events, cinemas and television." In this process, social media, connectivity, fan cultures and online information exchange play significant roles (Schiller, 2018).

In fact, transmedia storytelling is not a novel phenomenon exclusive to the digital age (Scolari *et al.*, 2014). This practice, involving multiple authors and artists creating and interpreting story worlds across various media, existed long before the advent of digital media and social networks, with roots tracing back at least to ancient Greece and possibly even earlier (Ryan, 2013). However, the rise of digital media has significantly increased the prevalence and complexity of transmedia practices and technologies (Mittell, 2015; Gambarato, 2015).

Malone *et al.* (2008) described transmedia storytelling as a "cultural attractor drawing together and creating common ground between diverse communities," suggesting that it blurs the distinctions between "authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpreters," forming a "circuit." Jenkins (2010) viewed this process as a "cultural activator": for instance, a moviegoer living outside New York or London might not have quick access to a musical, but the story told through both the movie and the musical allows for some dialog between the two communities, merging different conversations into one when sharing the same experience. More importantly, this process enhances the popularity of the story (Jenkins, 2010). Through the concept of "convergence," Jenkins and Deuze (2008) noted that content flows across multiple media platforms, and collaboration between media industries encourages audiences to migrate in search of their desired entertainment experiences. Consequently, "media audiences must not simply buy an isolated product or experience, but rather, buy into a prolonged relationship with a particular narrative universe, which is rich enough and complex enough to sustain their interest over time and thus motivate a succession

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Theater, according to [Jenkins and Deuze \(2008\)](#), as an old medium, never dies; what dies are simply the tools we use to access media content. Just as television did not replace film but instead significantly promoted the development of DVDs, film did not replace theater but rather told stories alongside the stage. Importantly, the functions of old media change with the introduction of new technologies. [Elberse \(2013\)](#) posits that humans are inherently social beings who enjoy participating in social activities that others are engaged in. When a story (such as a film or a book) becomes popular and is widely discussed in the media, audiences have more reasons to become part of the social phenomenon surrounding that popular interest. Mass media such as books, films, television and streaming content can reach the public more effectively and quickly than theater. Through transmedia storytelling, public attention can easily be directed toward theater by the same story or characters, thus creating a spillover effect that makes young audiences who have never set foot in a theater curious about the content of plays that interpret the same story world. This phenomenon is also observable in practice. For example, the Hugo Award-winning science fiction novel *The Three-Body Problem* was adapted into a stage play in China and performed in theaters. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1. Transmedia adaptation prompts audiences to enter theaters by stimulating their curiosity.

Fan economy

Here, fans are defined as individuals who persistently engage with a particular subject or object, typically celebrities, sports, TV shows, etc. Fans represent a subculture of like-minded individuals, characterized by a sense of intimacy with others who share the same interests and the use of subject-specific jargon ([Thorne and Bruner, 2006](#)). [Grossberg \(1987\)](#) used the concept of “affective economy” in fan studies to conceptualize the ways in which audience loyalty overlaps with other social and economic benefits, describing fanaticism as an extension of pure pleasure, love or affinity. [Ahmed \(2004\)](#) similarly explored affective economy to clarify how objects and practices gain meaning and value through emotional circulation, recognizing that emotions are not merely personal feelings but represent something collective and evolutionary. [Jenkins \(2006\)](#) explicitly defined affective economy as a “new configuration of marketing theory,” aiming to understand the emotional basis of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions.

Early marketing scholars primarily segmented consumer decision motives from the perspective of cultivating long-term customer assets ([Tao and Kim, 2022](#)). Over the past 2 decades, an increasing number of scholars have highlighted that intrinsic consumer decision motives consist of both rational and emotional components ([Gilliland and Bello, 2002](#)). Emotional motives refer to consumption motivations driven by deep-seated emotions such as joy, anger, sadness, pleasure and moral standards. When consumers are influenced by emotional motives during their decision-making process, they tend to experience curiosity and are more affected by the uniqueness of a product rather than focusing on its cost-effectiveness ([Teixiera and Palmeira, 2015](#)). Emotional motives arise from psychological activities related to friendship, group identity, moral sense and aesthetics during the consumption or experience process. This is specifically manifested as a sense of familiarity and dependence developed through prolonged exposure to a company and its products, leading consumers to harbor a strong desire to maintain a long-term relationship ([Bansal et al., 2004](#)). Therefore, emotional motives generally have a positive impact on businesses.

Sports fan studies represent a focused area within fan research. A key observation in this field is that sports fans invest significant time, energy and resources into specific interests and derive pleasure from these interests ([Dickerson and Gentry, 1983](#); [Kozinets, 2002](#)). They typically engage more extensively in their areas of interest compared to non-fans ([Melnick and Wamm, 2004](#); [Aiken and Campbell, 2005](#)). Moreover, the desire of fans is often cyclical; the pleasure derived from participating in fan activities enhances their willingness to continue engaging in these activities ([Belk et al., 2003](#)). This fan phenomenon has also been discussed

in the theater domain. According to Fishzon (2012), as early as the mid-19th century, with the widespread commercialization of music and the expansion of concert life, opera stars already existed. She also pointed out that modern opera stars are scrutinized in novel ways within the burgeoning entertainment press and are more available to their admirers. According to a Chinese producer, theater productions featuring celebrities or idols as cast members can see ticket prices increase by 45–88% compared to regular performances [4]. This highlights how star power can effectively drive ticket sales and audience interest, particularly among younger demographics. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H2. Fans' curiosity about the stage performances of their favored actors motivates them to attend theater performances.

Social media marketing

The financial stability of cultural organizations, including theaters, is often threatened by crises caused by reduced public funding, highlighting the importance of marketing methods in theater management. In the long term, marketing methods not only aid in resource allocation but also promote the involvement of various stakeholders (Bollo, 2012; Kolb, 2013). Media, as the most critical channel for distributing information in theater marketing, has been a fruitful area of exploration in theater and performance studies (Dixon, 2007; Salter, 2010). Hadley (2017) identifies several aspects of the relationship between theater and media, including building intermediary performances, disseminating performances, developing audiences, engaging with the public through critics, recording and archiving and so on.

With the rapid development of social media, they are playing an increasingly significant role in theater marketing. Boyd (2010) observes that elements external to the performance, such as audience conversations, promotional materials and artist profiles, have become more persistent and searchable due to the affordances of social networks, making them increasingly important in the audience's meaning-making process. Researchers have also noted the democratizing potential of social media, particularly in reaching marginalized audiences excluded from contemporary mainstream theater (Sant, 2014; Walmsley, 2019). Balme (2014) suggests that social media can broaden the "closed circuit of subscriber audiences, professional reviewers, and theater unions." Walmsley (2016) analyzed the use of digital platforms in dance audience engagement, finding that these platforms enhance critical exchanges among audiences.

Besana *et al.* (2018) approached the relationship between theater and social media from the perspective of attention economics. Simon (1971) pointed out that attention is an inherently scarce resource in situations of information overload. In an information-saturated economy, managing attention is crucial for theaters – whether it is the attention of audiences, funding bodies, sponsors, public administrators or any other stakeholders who might support the theater and contribute to the sustainability of the performing arts (Farchy, 2011; Besana *et al.*, 2018). Capturing their attention can potentially turn both theatergoers and non-theatergoers into loyal audiences (van Steen and Lievens, 2009; Ciceo, 2012; Sonneveld and Stokmans, 2013). Compared to traditional media like newspapers and magazines, social media and other online communication tools are evidently more effective in reaching ordinary theatergoers and new consumer groups (Di Maggio and Mukhtar, 2004; Peterson and Rossman, 2007). Studies have shown that theatergoers who use the Internet are more likely to find information that suits their tastes, leading them to suitable performances (Ciceo, 2012; Turrini *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, online engagement has been proven to effectively retain existing audiences and attract "inexpert drama lovers" (Turrini *et al.*, 2012), educating new audiences through their active participation. Hollebeek *et al.*, (2014) also found that social media helps increase interaction with audiences: theaters share information with customers, thereby enhancing "customer engagement." In mainland China, various theaters are actively using social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin and Bilibili to release content and engage with audiences. The official accounts of theaters on these platforms have become crucial virtual

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spaces that require careful management, playing an essential role in attracting new audiences, especially younger ones, in a way that traditional media cannot. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Social media marketing stimulates the curiosity of new audiences, thereby encouraging them to attend theater performances.

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Methods

Participants and procedure

This study was conducted through an online questionnaire. Data collection lasted for 20 days, from February 7 to February 27, 2024. A service with 540 eligible samples was purchased on www.wjx.cn, one of the largest online questionnaire survey platforms in China. We also distributed online questionnaires through social networking platforms such as RED and Wechat and offered cash draws to attract participants. All respondents were informed about the research objectives, privacy protection measures and instructions for completing the questionnaire. A total of 1,052 questionnaires were collected, with 1,032 being valid, resulting in a validity rate of approximately 98.10%. The majority of respondents were aged between 18 and 30 years, accounting for 62.02%. Of these, 58.04% were female and 41.96% were male. Over two-thirds of the respondents (67.64%) held a bachelor's degree or higher. About one-third (33.43%) were from first-tier cities in mainland China, such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou. Most respondents (62.98%) had previously attended a theater performance, while 37.02% had not. For those who had attended performances, we asked them to recall the circumstances prior to their first attendance and base their responses accordingly.

Measures

In the survey, participants provided demographic information and answered questions designed to measure the variables of transmedia adaptation, idol starring, social media marketing, curiosity and attendance intention. Table 1 shows the measurement items for all the above variables. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale. The reliability coefficients for the five variables exceed 0.8, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the items.

Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for each variable. Except for demographic variables, all variables have relatively high mean values (greater than 3.6 on a 5-point Likert scale). Significant correlations are observed among all variables, except for gender and age (<18); idol starring, social media marketing, age (18–30) and transmedia adaptation; curiosity and attendance intention and age (31–50) and curiosity.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis indicate that the model's CMIN (Chi-Square Minimum) is 508.399, with a DF (Degrees of Freedom) of 125, and a CMIN/DF ratio of 4.067, which is not very ideal but still acceptable (less than 5). The root mean square error of approximation is 0.055 (less than 0.08), and the goodness-of-fit index, comparative fit index, normed fit index and incremental fit index indices are all greater than 0.9. Overall, these indicators meet the criteria, suggesting that the model has a good fit.

Path analyses were conducted using structural equation modeling. As shown in Table 3, after controlling for the effects of demographic variables, the standardized path coefficients for "transmedia adaptation-curiosity" and "social media marketing-curiosity" are, respectively, 0.414 ($t = 7.123, p < 0.001$) and 0.318 ($t = 5.750, p < 0.001$), indicating that transmedia adaptation and social media marketing both have a significant positive impact on new audiences' curiosity. However, idol starring has no significant impact on curiosity. The

Table 1. Measurement items and reliability coefficients for key variables

Variable	Items	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Transmedia adaptation	1. I am aware that some of my favorite literary works have been adapted into theater performances 2. I know that some of the literary works I enjoy have been adapted into stage productions 3. I am aware that some theater performances are adapted from my favorite literary, film or TV works	0.834
Idol starring	1. Actors/actresses I like sometimes perform in theaters 2. I know that some theater performances feature actors/actresses I adore 3. I am aware that some performances include artists I admire	0.848
Social media marketing	1. I follow some theater's official social media accounts 2. I frequently read theater-related posts on social media 3. I have noticed marketing information about theater performances on social media 4. I pay attention to information about theater performances that my friends share or comment on social media	0.865
Curiosity	1. I am very curious about theater performances 2. I have a desire to explore theater performances 3. I am eager to learn about theater performances 4. I actively seek information about theater performances	0.824
Attendance intention	1. I plan to attend a theater performance 2. I really want to go to a theater performance 3. I am considering attending a theater performance 4. I am waiting for a suitable opportunity to go to a theater performance	0.839

Source(s): Authors

standardized path coefficients for “transmedia adaptation-attendance intention” and “social media marketing-attendance intention” are 0.169 ($t = 3.250, p = 0.001$) and 0.265 ($t = 5.399, p < 0.001$), respectively, indicating that both transmedia adaptation and social media marketing have a significant positive impact on audiences’ attendance intention. However, idol starring still has no significant impact on attendance intention. The standardized path coefficient for “curiosity-attendance intention” is 0.434 ($t = 9.962, p < 0.001$), showing that curiosity also has a significant positive impact on audiences’ willingness to attend.

A bootstrap method with 2,000 bootstrap samples was also employed to test the mediation effects at a 95% confidence level. Table 4 shows the results of the mediation effect tests. It is evident that there is a significant mediation effect in the path of “transmedia adaptation-curiosity-attendance intention,” with transmedia adaptation having a significant effect on attendance intention, indicating a partial mediation effect. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. In contrast, there is no significant mediation effect in the path of “idol starring-curiosity-attendance intention,” so Hypothesis 2 is not supported. However, there is also a significant mediation effect in the path of “social media marketing-curiosity-attendance intention,” with social media marketing having a significant effect on audiences’ attendance intention, indicating a partial mediation effect. Hence, Hypothesis 3 is also supported.

Discussions and conclusion

This study investigates how transmedia adaptation, idol starring and social media marketing stimulate curiosity among new audiences and encourage their first-time attendance at theatrical performances. The findings indicate:

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results

	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender (male)	—	—								
2. Age (<18)	—	—	0.057							
3. Age (18–30)	—	—	–0.091**	–0.209**						
4. Age (31–50)	—	—	0.068*	–0.093**	–0.728**					
5. Transmedia adaptation	3.886	0.780	–0.065*	–0.173**	–0.039	0.000*				
6. Idol starring	3.756	0.844	–0.038	–0.147**	–0.142**	0.146**	0.638**			
7. Social media marketing	3.605	0.865	–0.033	–0.130**	–0.118**	0.149**	0.599**	0.653**		
8. Curiosity	3.789	0.762	–0.099**	–0.142**	–0.031	0.056	0.565**	0.522**	0.567**	
9. Attendance intention	3.832	0.745	–0.054	–0.138**	–0.059	0.119**	0.600**	0.575**	0.626**	0.651**

Note(s): $N = 1,032$ * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed

Source(s): Authors

Table 3. Standardized path coefficients for the mediation model

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Estimate	Std	S.E.	z (C.R.)	p
Transmedia adaptation	Curiosity	0.419	0.414	0.059	7.123	***
Idol starring	Curiosity	0.045	0.050	0.057	0.792	0.428
Social media marketing	Curiosity	0.285	0.318	0.05	5.75	***
Transmedia adaptation	Attendance	0.175	0.169	0.054	3.25	0.001
Idol starring	Attendance	0.084	0.091	0.049	1.712	0.087
Social media marketing	Attendance	0.242	0.265	0.045	5.399	***
Curiosity	Attendance	0.442	0.434	0.044	9.962	***

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$ **Source(s):** Authors**Table 4.** Mediation effect testing results

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Bias-corrected (95%)		p	Conclusion
			Lower bounds	Upper bounds		
Transmedia adaptation → Curiosity → Attendance	0.175 (0.001)	0.185	0.122	0.286	0.001	Partial mediation
Idol starring → Curiosity → Attendance	0.084 (0.087)	0.02	-0.033	0.081	0.493	N.S.
Social media marketing → Curiosity → Attendance	0.242 (***)	0.126	0.068	0.206	0.001	Partial mediation

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$ **Source(s):** Authors*The appeal of a story both familiar and unfamiliar*

Among the three mediation paths, the mediating effect size of the path “transmedia adaptation-curiosity-attendance intention” is the largest, reaching approximately 51.4%. It indicates that transmedia adaptation is a crucial antecedent variable for understanding new audiences’ attendance intentions. Although there has been considerable discussion on how transmedia adaptation drives the development of the film and TV industry (Cliff, 2017; Hasri, 2020), its role in theater marketing has been relatively understudied. Our findings expand research in this area, suggesting that transmedia adaptation may also be a key to the success of commercial theater productions.

With the continuous enrichment of media types and the proliferation of participatory culture, a single story experience can be “replicated” into alternative content provided by different media. Transmedia storytelling allows various media to retain their unique capabilities and advantages: films may have the most diverse audience, while games may have a narrower audience range (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008) but stronger interactivity (Jenkins, 2018). The story’s presentation across different media forms a complementary and enriched story universe (Jenkins, 2018), with each medium contributing uniquely to the story’s development (Jenkins, 2007), offering audiences more comprehensive sensory stimulation and a broader imaginative space. Therefore, audiences who have read the novel are more likely to look forward to the film adaptation, and those who have watched the film may be curious about the more intimate and immersive atmosphere of the stage play, leading them to attend the theater performance.

Meanwhile, theater tickets are usually more expensive than the costs for a film or a book; therefore, the appreciation threshold is higher. For new audiences, a familiar story universe provides a stronger sense of “security,” so that they will not be rash with “trial and error,”

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which makes them more willing to enter the theater. This finding also has important implications for creators and managers of commercial theater, namely, that the principle of “content is king,” which is enshrined in the film and TV industry, is also valid in the field of stage art.

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The strong boost of social media marketing

The mediating effect size for the path of “social media marketing-curiosity-attendance intention” is approximately 34.2%, indicating that social media marketing is another important antecedent variable of attendance. The finding is consistent with previous research (Turrini *et al.*, 2012; Sant, 2014; Balme, 2014; Besana *et al.*, 2018; Walmsley, 2019).

As the most prevalent information dissemination channel today, social media serves as the primary source of information for Gen Z and Gen Alpha. When theaters post relevant content about performing arts or theatrical productions on social media, these contents can easily be diffused to a larger audience through the interpersonal network of followers, and once some kind of suitable opportunity arises among these new or non-audiences, such as looking for an opportunity to try a new kind of entertainment or to enter into a new social circle, it may probably stimulate their curiosity, which in turn drives them into the theater.

This finding also holds significant implications for theater managers. It suggests that social media is no longer just a platform for announcing or promoting new information, but it has become an essential tool for audience cultivation. Traditionally, theater education relied heavily on physical theater spaces, such as conducting tours or lectures within the theater or in specific educational settings outside the theater, like schools. However, the proliferation of social media provides theaters with a virtual, round-the-clock and also barrier-free educational space. This space offers unique advantages over physical theater spaces or specific educational venues, particularly for new audiences with no prior theater experience. The openness and accessibility of this virtual space are unparalleled, making it an invaluable resource for engaging and educating new theatergoers.

The unexpected failure of fan economics

In this study, the direct effect of idol starring and the indirect effect through curiosity are both found to be non-significant. This may be attributed to the following reasons.

Firstly, although fan economics appear to be prevalent in fields like film and TV industries (Liang and Shen, 2016; Barbas, 2016), the composition of the current theater audience is still different from the composition of the audience of mass media such as film and TV, which in turn determines that their behavioral patterns may also be different from those of film and TV audiences.

Jenkins and Deuze (2008) have noted that “a medium content may shift, its audience may change and its social status may rise or fall.” Despite the fact that the boundaries between the so-called high culture and mass culture constantly “shift and dissolve” (Jay, 1984), when analyzing the changing divide between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” in the United States of America at the turn of the 20th century, Levine (1990) observed that some theater disciplines such as Shakespearean drama and Italian opera were labeled as symbols of elite culture, while movies, radio and popular comedy were culturally relegated to the “nether world.”

A similar phenomenon is happening in China today. Theaters are deemed as “sanctuaries” of high art, and those who enter them are expected to behave appropriately and may be criticized if they step out of line. And it seems that fans’ expressing their strong feelings for their beloved actor or show is also seen as inappropriate, as we can see in many Chinese contemporary art criticism articles that people have strong concerns about the potential damage that fandom may cause to theater culture [5].

Fan enthusiasm, as a form of irrational cultural consumption, is often rejected by the elite who seek cultural refinement and uniqueness. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, different forms of cultural capital determine the tastes of various social classes, shaping distinct class identities.

Members of different classes, constrained by their class habitus, enter different cultural fields and adopt various lifestyles to signify their social identity and distance from other classes. Thus, the very different attitudes of social groups towards fandom may be an important reason why the potential effects of idol starring did not manifest in this study.

Secondly, since the establishment of the star system in early 20th-century Hollywood, it has developed into a highly refined operational model in entertainment industries. Idols have become entertainment commodities with clear market positioning. In order not to have their positioning blurred, thus compromising their brand value, idols usually don't act in works or roles that don't fit their positioning, which means that the predictability of the works in which the idol stars is higher and consequently the curiosity of the audience is reduced.

Additionally, this finding also coincides with some industry insights from Mainland China. The impact of star power on theater has been considered limited compared to other entertainment sectors. There is no NG (No Good, means "bloopers" in movie or TV shooting process) or post-editing in the theater performance, which most truly reflects the professional quality and comprehensive strength of actors. Therefore, theaters should ultimately draw audiences based on the quality of the work and performance, not the popularity of the actors [6].

In conclusion, findings in this study indicate significant mediating effects along the paths from both transmedia adaptation and social media marketing to curiosity and then to attendance intentions. However, idol starring neither influences new audiences' curiosity nor their intention to attend, which may imply the complexity of the role of fan economics. While not all hypotheses are supported, the paper still expands the research on new audience attendance behavior, and the findings could provide practical implications for the theater industry.

Limitations and perspectives

This study still has some limitations. First of all, although quantitative research usually plays an irreplaceable role in collecting and analyzing data to discover potential relationships between variables, the explanation of cause and effect still requires in-depth insights from relevant qualitative research. This paper obviously focuses more on quantitative research, which is an unavoidable limitation brought about by the choice of epistemology. Second, a large portion of the respondents in the survey already had theater-going experience, and responses made through recall may have led to biased data. Last but not least, the non-significant mediating effect of idol starring may also stem from the limitation in the way this variable was measured. Due to the lack of well-established scales to refer to, we developed our own measurement items, which have not been more rigorously tested for reliability and validity.

For future research, we believe that further qualitative research can be conducted to construct a more elaborate theoretical framework for the failure of the fan economy to trigger new audiences' curiosity and then enhance their attendance as predicted in the hypothesis. For example, the variable of familiarity can be introduced, and the antithesis between curiosity and familiarity can then be explored further. A deeper link could also be established between antecedent variables such as transmedia adaptation and social media marketing to explore how they work together to influence new audiences' intention to attend. In addition, as the data in this study are mainly from mainland China, a cross-cultural comparative study could be conducted in the future to explore the differences in attendance behaviors and intrinsic motivations among audiences from different cultural backgrounds. We believe it will provide a broader reference for theater marketing on a global scale.

Notes

1. The data on theater attendance in mainland China for 2023 are sourced from the 2023 National Performance Market Brief published by the China Association of Performing Arts. This report highlights a significant recovery in theater audiences post-pandemic, with over 30 million attendees

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recorded, marking an increase of nearly 35% compared to 2019. Available online: https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202404/content_6943899.htm

2. The surge in attendance at pop concerts and music festivals, as well as the rapid growth of digital performing arts in China, is documented in the same report by the China Association of Performing Arts as in the first note. The report notes a 200% increase in audience numbers for these events in 2023, reaching nearly 35 million attendees.
3. Additional data on the development of digital performing arts are provided by Douyin in their 2023 Annual Live Performance Data Report (2024). According to this report, Douyin hosted 73.12 million live performance broadcasts in 2023, with an average of 4,263 viewers per broadcast. Available online: <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20240228A06ANH00>
4. The data cited are from an article by Wenhui Net. Available online: <https://www.whb.cn/commonDetail/284781>
5. Some of China's mainstream newspapers, such as Jiefang Daily and Beijing Daily, have fiercely criticized the damage fandom has caused to theater and other art forms. Available online: <https://www.shobserver.com/statics/res/html/journal/index.html?date=2023-09-19&page=05>
6. These opinions are from industry insiders, highlighting the limited role of fan economics in theater success. Available online: <https://www.whb.cn/commonDetail/284781>

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