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Attention Economy and the Short-Drama Era: Digitalization Reshapes Consumption, Production, and Distribution in the Film Industry

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Abstract:
This study examines how digitalization and the rapid advancements of streaming platforms are reshaping the motion picture industry and consumer behavior. The research mainly focuses on the shift in movie mode, spending intention, and the industry's structure based on the digital environment, collaborating with consumer behavior theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the framework from the attention economy. Research approaches primarily concentrate on literature reviews and case analyses, including a comparison of distribution strategies employed by Netflix and Disney+, as well as the role of Chinese short-video platforms (Douyin and Kuaishou) in driving film promotion and distribution. The result shows that digitalization brings up the producer's big data and AI innovation the simultaneous release strategy of the distribution side, the KOL+UGC mechanism on the marketing side, coupled with consumers increasingly shifting toward subscription models and short dramas, enables maximized utility at lower costs and with greater flexibility. The study points out that digitalization has created new opportunities for the industry (immersive experiences, differentiated content, global distribution), but also created challenges (more covert piracy, conflicts of revenue between theaters and streaming platforms, and distraction). Therefore, film enterprises should maintain competitiveness through innovation in content and the integration of online and offline channels. Consumers need to improve their awareness of copyright protection and engage in rational consumption. At the policy level, it is important to strengthen the protection of digital copyrights and promote the digital transformation of cinemas.

Keywords: Digitalization, Consumer Behavior, Film Industry

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1. Introduction

In the era of digitalized and streaming media thriving development, thousands of short dramas and short videos begin flooding into major apps and video streaming platforms. Over 57% of videos clicked on YouTube are under 60 seconds [1]; numerous digital media platforms provide short films with more distribution channels, promotional methods, and click-through rates. Compared with the traditional film production, the cost of making short dramas has significantly declined due to AI enabling filmmakers to achieve outdoor effects in indoor shoots; big data algorithms help tailor short-form content to audience preferences, boosting click-through rates and appeal; meanwhile, with less stringent regulation on short dramas, content coverage expands...According to Duan et al., in China, more than 70% of Gen Z audiences watch short dramas, suggesting that this new form of storytelling is gradually taking over the market share of the traditional film industry.

Throughout its evolution from traditional theatrical releases to television and DVD distribution, and then into the streaming era, as well as the current popularity of short dramas, the film industry has continually evolved with the development of media technology. The rise of short-form dramas represents the latest chapter in this historical progression. These shifts have not only reshaped the consumer's viewing habits and entertainment consumption patterns but also reflect changes in consumer psychology and technological development. In this era of increasing life pressures and intensifying competition, when people feel overwhelmed by work, this new narrative format allows audiences to experience cinematic pleasure without stepping into a theater.

Of course, the industry's structure and operational methods are also quietly experiencing transformations. Many traditional film industries are being forced to rethink their production logic, distribution channels, and market positioning. The viral spread of Squid Game across TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube demonstrates how user-generated content and social platforms can amplify global reach without massive upfront marketing investments—from spontaneous cookie challenges to merchandise, and even the game's appearance in offline settings…These shifts not only challenge traditional film distribution and box office-driven models but also present new opportunities for content creators, marketers, and audiences to build value together.

Thus, in the era of streaming and short-form media, how are consumer behaviors and motivations being reshaped? What underlying theories drive these shifts? Simultaneously, focusing on the film industry, how did production, distribution, and marketing change for businesses and producers? These questions are essential for the future of cinema—how it can rapidly adapt to technological developments and sustain its traditional growth during transformative times.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In the attention-scarce market, films and short dramas meet needs beyond entertainment: quick, low-cost relief at home; belonging and esteem through social features; and identity expression via UGC and personalization. Feature films still deliver depth, spectacle, and shared rituals. Together, they form a complementary media ecology serving relaxation, security, connection, recognition, and creativity.

Talking about the economic extent, after experiencing the pandemic, the entire economy pressed the pause button, financial crisis and recession led low-income employers to suffer bigger losses than high-income employers, which significantly impacted the lives of this consumer base [2,3]. Based on the consumer behavior theory, consumers will rationally calculate their budgets and make a wise choice that aims to satisfy their utility to the maximum level when they are shopping and spending money. Thus, reducing the time to go to the cinema can be regarded as a consumption contraction. Data indicate that since 2019, the overall proportion of frequent moviegoers in the United States has decreased by 8 percentage points [3].

Even in the 2025 era, Simon's 1971 observation that "in an information-rich age, what information consumes is quite obvious—it is the attention of its recipients" perfectly captures the attention economy now implemented by advertising agencies. Consumers' attention has become a precious and scarce resource. Precisely because of this, many advertising agencies and film/TV marketing firms have made "how to capture and retain attention" their core KPI. When people scroll through short videos, watch the opening scenes of mini-series, or view posts on social media, they often encounter content or copy that deliberately appears to arouse curiosity—the goal being to boost click-through rates. This marketing approach is reshaping traditional film distribution, embedding it deeply within the foundations of the attention economy.

2.1 The Impact of Digitalization on the Film Industry

Digging into the shift in the traditional movie industry, especially in production and release. First and foremost, driven by the innovation of techniques (big data algorithms) and given the current economic climate and operational models, major streaming platforms have begun to modify their primary operating methods. Starting with the most basic short videos and mini-series, it's widely known that a major reason most people easily discover content and shows they enjoy is through big data algorithms. These include Collaborative Filtering, Content-based Filtering, Matrix Factorization combined with Deep Learning, Reinforcement, and analyzing big data to track what you like and dislike. These algorithms then match content based on video profiles, where each video is assigned multiple-dimensional tags by AI. Netflix‘s Head of Communications, Jonathan Friedland, noted as early as 2012: “We know what people watch on Netflix, and based on their viewing habits, we can confidently understand the potential audience size for any given show.” For instance, a major reason “Stranger Things” became a hit was that data indicated high viewer interest in sci-fi thrillers featuring strong casts and episodes under 45 minutes [3]. Similarly, Netflix‘s investment of over $100 million in “House of Cards” in 2011 was no coincidence. Big data provided crucial ideas for casting decisions, release timing, and episode count, and helped Netflix analyze its viewer habits. This data guaranteed their risk and gave them the confidence to succeed with the project.

A similar case in mainland China is the variety show “Strange Talk,” produced by the streaming platform iQIYI. It has also been a highly successful project. Audience preference prediction mechanisms and big data helped this streaming platform identify that the primary audience for its original content was young people born after 1990. Consequently, the show‘s content was mainly centred around the topics of interest to this age group, through multiple channels and platforms, to practice the topic selection. Surprisingly, the show didn‘t really take off until the third episode. This was precisely because data adjustments ensured sustained discussion around the program‘s topics [4-6]. The show‘s rising heat was inseparable from pre-launch buzz on short-video platforms and the production of “reaction-driven” content. Screenwriters and producers increasingly favored designing plots with “eye-catching opening seconds.”This includes leveraging trending search terms and memes across major social media platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo—marketing techniques that blend human creativity with big data algorithms. Similarly, these methods influence short-form drama production, contributing to their increasingly fractionalized and fast-acting format.

Undoubtedly, changes in the distribution of entertainment programs, TV shows, short dramas, and other audiovisual projects also impact the traditional film industry, as they all share the same consumer base. To preserve its existing market share and remain unaffected, the traditional film industry has begun transforming its distribution model. The foremost strategy is simultaneous release, or the day-and-date strategy—as the name suggests, a distribution approach where a film or TV series is released across multiple platforms simultaneously. Online records indicate this distribution model traces back to 2005, when UK distributor Dogwoof partnered with British ISP Tiscali to release EMR. The film was released in theaters, on DVD, and made available for digital purchase. Amid the overwhelming force of the pandemic, an increasing number of films began releasing online or premiering on their parent companies‘ streaming platforms. One of the best-known examples is Trolls World Tour, which reportedly earned nearly $100 million in streaming revenue—far exceeding its theatrical earnings [5]. This trend extended to contemporaneous releases like Emma and The Invisible Man. In the same year, 2020, this strategy was also seen as a lifeline for box office revenue. Warner Bros.‘ Wonder Woman 1984 announced simultaneous theatrical and HBO Max releases, despite targeting overlapping audiences.

Meanwhile, as this model gained traction, the gap between theatrical and online release constantly narrowed. Traditionally, audiences expected a lengthy “theatrical window”—in the United States, typically about 90 days—after which downstream availability was staged according to box-office performance and popularity. Only once that window closed would a film leave cinemas for major streaming platforms, protecting ticket revenue and enabling phased monetization to maximize overall returns. Today, however, many distributors have moved beyond the 90-day norm; titles like Free Guy now employ a 45-day window—a shift that, in the post-pandemic market, has unquestionably intensified pressure on theaters.

In the digital age, driven by the logic of the attention economy, film marketing has experienced a fundamental transformation. Bus stops, highways, and elevator advertisements are not the only way to promote movies. Technological advancements have enabled major film studios to adopt more diverse formats. One now-familiar approach involves using KOLs (essentially film reviewers) and influencers to boost word-of-mouth. Studios invite them to premiere and coordinate simultaneous content releases during the film‘s launch to maintain and increase buzz across platforms like Rotten Tomatoes, Douban, Reddit, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. In an era where Millennials and Gen Z heavily rely on social media, 23% of global internet users depend on word-of-mouth recommendations to choose movies [6]. This has led to recognized authoritative KOLs now having a significant influence on early film buzz. Poor initial reputation inevitably results in a significant drop-in box-office earnings or failure to meet expectations. At the same time, UGC, memes, spoof videos, and viral challenges not only extend a film‘s lifespan but also become a participatory marketing strategy, enhancing the sense of interaction between the movie and audience. Examples like the “find the Easter egg at the end” challenge, which arouses curiosity while ensuring viewers stay engaged longer; capturing emotionally charged acting moments for release on short-video

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platforms, triggering consumer-generated memes; The walking challenge sparked by the BGM of the Chinese film “Full River Red”; and various marketing tactics like audience reaction videos and roadshow variety shows are numerous. Under this attention- and interaction-driven ecosystem, these nearly free marketing methods requiring minimal budget can help achieve advertising and marketing benefits and influence maximization. Such strategies are gradually occupying/rebuilding traditional marketing approaches.

2.2 Consumer Behavior Features in the Digital Age

Linking the diversification of viewing habits to Maslow‘s Hierarchy of Needs theory, the growing preference for short dramas can be analyzed through each stage: At the most fundamental physiological level, short dramas contribute rest and relaxation. Compared to movies, they satisfy physiological needs more quickly and immediately, making them undeniably better suited to today‘s fast-paced lifestyles than traditional films. Big data plagiarism enables better matching of short dramas to consumer preferences. At the safety needs level, viewers gain basic economic security by consuming short videos—most short dramas offer the same pleasure at lower costs. Additionally, short dramas offer the choice to watch in secure environments like home. Regarding belongingness and love, short dramas provide real-time social interaction through bullet comments during viewing, enabling users to express their thoughts—an experience traditional films cannot replicate. This simultaneously fulfills esteem and self-actualization needs. When viewers instantly post comments and receive likes or agreement, they rapidly gain a sense of accomplishment. This represents a new way for young people to establish identity and express creativity. In contrast, traditional films lack this immediacy and rely more on cultural capital, identity, and status for fulfillment.

Followed by the evolution of marketing strategies and film distribution approaches, the box office‘s role as the only measurement of a film‘s quality and its reference value has significantly declined. As consumers increasingly rely on social media, their movie choices no longer depend solely on box office rankings; they are starting to shift to personalized options based on diverse pathways and platforms. Although short video marketing strategies and platforms do not cannibalize traditional box office revenue—they exist in a symbiotic relationship—the focus has likely already shifted toward the former. At least 80% of people conduct online information searches before making purchases or taking actions [7]. Increasingly, audiences watch movie reviews, plot summaries, TikTok hot searches, and authoritative KOL movie critiques before viewing films. They maximize information gains with minimal attention and time investment, exploring the film from multiple angles to ensure they select something they‘ll enjoy and avoid wasting money and time on a disappointing experience. Time and cost are precisely the most critical factors during economic recessions and recovery periods.

Currently, over 5.7 million people in the United States are unemployed. At a time of resource scarcity and global economic decline, consumers are especially sensitive to payment schemes and paid content. This has led to a surge in subscription services. According to the Forbes database, 99% of households subscribe to at least one streaming platform—be it Netflix, Disney+, Apple TV+, or HBO+. Netflix alone has over 301.6 million subscribers [8-10]. The reliance on streaming services is evident, especially as more film distributors have adopted simultaneous release strategies in recent years. In comparison, the $10-$30 cost of a single cinema visit is obviously less cost-effective than paying $10 monthly for unlimited access to countless newly released films. This flexibility in time management clearly makes streaming a rational alternative, naturally leading consumers to choose it. Moreover, consumers aren‘t limited to movies—they can also enjoy TV shows, documentaries, short dramas, and so on, which successfully maximize benefits at minimal cost and avoid risks. The shift toward short dramas represents another rational substitution: they deliver entertainment at lower costs, faster speeds, and more flexible viewing scenarios, maximizing utility. This is one of the reasons that short dramas have shot up in popularity in recent years.

Meanwhile, technological improvements and innovations have provided us with numerous ways to interact with content and fellow users during our consumption experiences. For instance, Danmu culture offers viewers the opportunities to share their thoughts while they are watching, fostering a sense of companionship on certain levels. This is also one reason why streaming platforms are gaining increasing popularity—they offer spaces where it‘s easier to meet like-minded friends, find a sense of belonging, and discover communities that best suit your interests. Regarding visualization, it enables consumers to achieve immersion not only in theaters, for example, the Teleparty (Netflix Party) offers anyone in a group chat to pause it at any time, ensuring that everyone watches simultaneously, it also provides a chat box and various emojis so people can express their moods and thoughts among friends during the screening. From motivation to decision-making, from pricing to experience, consumer behavior has become fully digitized. Short dramas and streaming platforms have emerged as viable alternatives.

3. Case study

Deepening the impact on the traditional film industry, major studios like Disney, HBO, Warner Bros., etc., have also begun reforming across all fronts in response to streaming media development and the attention economy era. Take Disney as an example, initially, like other traditional studios, Disney complied with the minimum 90-day theatrical window policy. However, due to unavoidable factors during the pandemic and consumers‘ gradually shifting viewing habits, Disney launched Disney+ in 2019. This enabled Disney Studios to gain over 50 million Disney+ subscribers within the first six months. An achievement Netflix took seven years to accomplish [9]. This remarkable success mainly came from their loyal consumers and fans‘ willingness to embrace new formats. Additionally, to process the backlog of films due to the pandemic and the rise of the attention economy, Disney was forced to adopt a simultaneous release strategy. The first major attempts were Black Widow, which launched at theaters and Disney+ (with Premier Access) at the same time. This strategy fulfilled audience expectations and needs during pandemic-imposed theater closures and restrictions. From another perspective, this flexible adjustment also increased consumer stickiness during that difficult period. Of course, this came at the cost of conflict with lead actress Scarlett Johansson and made a significant controversy, which demonstrated that traditional studios‘ or any distributor‘s adjustments to thrive amid streaming media‘s rise are no easy feat in balancing relationships with stars, stakeholders, and theaters. Post-pandemic, while returning to theater-first releases, Disney and Warner Bros.announced to shorten the theatrical window to 45 days. By 2025, this window will face stricter controls—for instance, The Lion King will not go to Disney+ until 96 days after its theatrical release. The evolution of the 90-day window to simultaneous releases, and subsequent shortening and readjustments, not only reveals both the repeated experimentation within this transformation process, but also the deep restructuring of traditional distribution models in the streaming era.

Unlike Disney‘s streaming strategy, the Chinese market relies more on short-form video promotions as a catalyst for box office growth. The most representative example in recent years is the film The Missing Her: First, Chinese director Chen Sicheng and an all-star cast, with their strong acting skills and popularity, enabled the film to be marketed from multiple angles. The movie conducted the most effective marketing strategy to maximize the attention economy–the spoiler-style content on major short-video platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou during the pre-release phase: behind-the-scenes footage, actor interviews, emotional clips, and plot twist teasers,etc , triggered a wave of post-viewing discussions. After that, they capitalized on trending topics like “Must-See for Couples” and “Say No to Love- Brain,” resonating with young female audiences. Additionally they used the “dramatic spoiler marketing” deliberate misdirection: during promotion, online narratives are intentionally directed toward ending A, in cooperation with related short-videos and trending topics—however the actual ending is B, which successfully create a powerful reversal effect, maintain post-viewing discussion and increase the desire to share and discuss with friends, furtherly creates UGC, social topics, and achieves viral community sharing. Within 31 days of release, the film‘s total income was 3.4 billion RMB, topping the 2023 summer box office. By successfully activating its topic-driven nature in life, the movie created secondary buzz and promotional fission, which stimulated the curiosity of consumers to go to the theatre to watch. Whether it‘s Disney balancing theatrical and streaming releases through windowing experimentation, or Chinese films by using short-video trends to drive box office, both cases reveal the extraordinary transformation traditional industries face in the era of the attention economy and digitalization: from production and distribution to promotion, every step is being redefined.

3.1 Issues and Challenges

Everything has two sides, and so does digitalization. It‘s worth considering that digitalization advances technological means, making film piracy more covert. For instance, as technology advances, so do methods of unauthorized recording. Many cameras can now record even when a phone screen is black, and cameras can be installed virtually anywhere on a device. This has significantly increased the probability of screen recording in theaters. According to People‘s Daily statistics, during China‘s Spring Festival film season alone, there were a staggering 2.2957 million copyright-violating links, which led to severe infringement occurring, with films facing massive piracy before they could recover their costs, and box office revenues suffered significantly due to consumers naturally gravitating toward lower prices to gain greater value.

The rapid expansion of streaming platforms has forced those studios to compress theatrical windows, breaking down the long-standing revenue equilibrium between distributors and exhibitors. The strategy of accelerated or simultaneous releases has caused many potential viewers to turn to channels outside of theaters. Compounded by the impact of the pandemic, almost 20% of adults report being unwilling to return to theaters [10,11], further intensifying pressures on the exhibition industry. According to AMC Theatres’ most recent quarterly report, global attendance totaled 42 million, which shows that it is down 10% from 46.6 million in the same period compared to last year. As the traditional advantages of theatrical release erode, value is being redistributed across the motion-picture supply chain.

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3.2 Responses and proposals

Facing the current unbalanced and unstable industry landscape, movie studios, as the core of the industry, need to enhance the differentiation of media products like short dramas and streaming content, while also increasing immersive viewing experiences. In script writing, with the help of existing big data and AI, they can get involved in script writing, movie genres, casting, and even distribution and promotion. This can help film companies avoid unnecessary costs while also maximizing profits. For theater companies, try collaborating with film producers to create more physical viewing effects and experiences. For instance, cinemas could offer 5D experiences combined with vivid effects (water sprays, shaking seats, air blasts, etc.) that link with the film‘s plot to offer a unique, theater-exclusive viewing experience. This approach increases attendance while enhancing the sense of immersion and delivering superior cinema experiences.

From the perspective of consumer behavior theory, for the sense of safety and rational decisions, more and more consumers tend to choose subscription and short dramas to obtain pleasures at lower costs. Enterprise and society should enhance the public's awareness of Copyright through education and advocacy, guiding healthy spending habits, echoing the safety needs in Maslow‘s Hierarchy of Needs, and plan consumption wisely [11-14].

Finally, the operation of an industry cannot function without the protection and support of the law. Government and regulatory authorities need to be stricter in the rules of digital copyrigh protection, improve enforcement mechanisms, and utilize modern technology to combat covert theft. Simultaneously, enact certain encouragement for cinema experiences, for instance, reducing the tax portion of movie ticket prices during the first three weeks of a film‘s release, to encourage people to watch movies in theaters. For small and medium-sized cinemas, provide subsidies for digitalization renovations, for example, the construction of IMAX theaters and Dolby giant screens, or the introduction of VR and AR equipment

4. Conclusion

Technological improvements have reshaped numerous industries, and the film industry—a capital-intensive enterprise—is especially vulnerable to consumer behavior and technological innovations, which can affect multiple dimensions. Understanding consumer habits allows theaters, distributors, and studios to make more cost-effective decisions, and simultaneously enhances the viewing experience for audiences. In recent years, the film industry has begun experiencing significant transformations in production, distribution, and marketing. Based on the analysis of Hollywood and Chinese case studies, which reveal adaptive strategies for digitalization, Hollywood mainly focuses on "window period experimentation," while China emphasizes "short-video viral growth." These reforms have exposed the industry‘s vulnerabilities that piracy methods have become more invisible, and simultaneous releases have broken the traditional profit balance between theaters and producers. During the period of economic downturn, consumers have become more rational, favoring subscription models and short-form dramas. Finally, the research found out to help the film industry sustain growth dynamics and restore its original equilibrium in the digital era, they should attempt to seek a balance between innovation and protection: utilizing big data and immersive experiences to attract consumers, guiding consumers toward rational and copyright-conscious consumption, while simultaneously improving regulatory movie facilities. These findings provide crucial guidance for the industry‘s future transformation and sustainability.

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