

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต

JOURNAL OF DHAMMA FOR LIFE

ISSN: 2822-048X

<https://soo8.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/dhammalife/index>

Original Research Article

Marketing Communication for Developing Traditional Chinese Elements of Animation Movies in Digital Age

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ARTICLE INFO

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Keywords:

Marketing, Communication,
Traditional, Chinese,
Elements of Animation Movies,
Digital Age

Article history:

Received: 04/06/2024

Revised: 10/04/2025

Accepted: 20/06/2026

Available online: 29/06/2026

How to Cite:

Wencong, J. & Nualnetr, P. (2026).
Marketing Communication for
Developing Traditional Chinese Elements
of Animation Movies in Digital Age.
Journal Dhamma for Life, 32(4), 58-69.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to: (1) explore marketing communication strategies that enhance the effectiveness of promoting Chinese traditional element animated films; (2) examine the role of these films in supporting the sustainable development of China's animation industry; and (3) develop a marketing communication framework for Chinese traditional element animated films in the digital age. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative phase consisted of a comprehensive literature review, five representative case studies, and in-depth interviews with eight experts, including animation directors, producers, screenwriters, university scholars, and marketing specialists. The quantitative phase involved a questionnaire survey of 400 valid respondents, selected through random sampling from audiences attending major cinemas in Beijing. The research instrument was developed based on established questionnaire design principles and validated through expert review, pilot testing, and post-test reliability assessment. Qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive content analysis, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS.

The findings indicate that digital communication platforms, including social media, online streaming services, and interactive digital marketing, significantly enhance audience engagement, cultural dissemination, and brand recognition of Chinese traditional element animated films. Furthermore, integrating traditional Chinese cultural elements with innovative digital marketing strategies improves audience acceptance, expands international market reach, and supports the sustainable development of China's animation industry. Based on these findings, the study proposes an integrated marketing communication framework that offers practical guidance for filmmakers, marketers, and policymakers to strengthen cultural communication, enhance industry competitiveness, and promote the long-term sustainability of Chinese traditional animation in the digital era.



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Introduction

In the digital era, animated films have become an influential cultural medium that integrates artistic expression, entertainment, and the development of creative industries. The advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed animation production by improving visual realism, artistic creativity, and production efficiency. At the same time, digital distribution platforms and social media have expanded audience engagement and strengthened the marketing and dissemination of animated content, enabling animation studios to reach global audiences more effectively (He, 2008; Ling, 2013). Against this backdrop, Chinese animated films incorporating traditional cultural elements have attracted increasing attention in both domestic and international markets. By integrating traditional Chinese philosophy, folklore, festivals, mythology, and artistic aesthetics with modern animation techniques, these films create distinctive visual narratives that preserve cultural heritage while appealing to contemporary audiences. Such productions not only promote Chinese cultural identity but also contribute to international cultural exchange by presenting Chinese stories from a modern perspective (Bao, 2020; Li & Du, 2021). The growing success of Chinese animated films reflects broader efforts to revitalize traditional culture through creative innovation. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of visual aesthetics, cultural symbolism, and traditional festival elements in enhancing the artistic quality and cultural value of animation (Bao, 2020; Chen, 2020). Furthermore, research has highlighted the critical role of branding, marketing communication, and digital media in expanding the commercial competitiveness and international influence of Chinese animation (He, 2008; Ling, 2013). Despite these developments, several challenges remain. The global animation market has become increasingly competitive, while audience preferences continue to evolve rapidly in response to digital media consumption and international cultural influences. Although existing studies have examined visual aesthetics (Bao, 2020), traditional cultural elements (Chen, 2020), national cultural representation (Li & Du, 2021), and animation marketing strategies (He, 2008; Ling, 2013), relatively few studies have comprehensively investigated how traditional Chinese cultural elements, digital animation technology, and marketing communication collectively influence the cultural competitiveness and international dissemination of Chinese animated films. This gap limits a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to the sustainable development and global success of Chinese traditional animated films.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by examining the integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements, digital animation production, and marketing communication strategies in contemporary Chinese animated films. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical understanding of cultural communication and animation studies while providing practical insights for animation producers, cultural policymakers, and creative industry practitioners seeking to enhance the international competitiveness and cultural influence of Chinese animated films.



Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Marketing Communication

Marketing communication refers to the strategic process through which organizations inform, persuade, and remind consumers about products, services, or brands using integrated communication channels. It plays a critical role in building brand awareness, shaping consumer perceptions, and influencing purchase decisions. Integrated marketing communication (IMC) emphasizes consistency across multiple communication platforms to enhance customer engagement and brand equity (Kotler & Keller, 2022).

4I Marketing Communication Theory

The 4I Marketing Communication Theory, proposed by Liu Dongming, consists of four core dimensions: Interesting Content, Interests, Interaction, and Individuality. The theory emphasizes creating engaging and personalized content that encourages consumer participation and long-term relationships in digital environments. In social media and e-commerce contexts, the 4I framework enhances customer engagement by increasing interactivity and personalized communication, making it highly applicable to digital marketing strategies. This study adopts the 4I theory as the primary framework for evaluating marketing communication strategies in Chinese animated films.

1. Supporting Theories Agenda-Setting Theory Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that media influence public attention by determining which issues receive greater visibility rather than directly shaping opinions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In film marketing, strategic communication based on the 4I principles can increase audience awareness and influence perceptions of animated films through repeated and engaging media exposure.

2. Uses and Gratifications Theory Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that audiences actively select media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1974). Applying this perspective, effective digital marketing should provide entertaining, informative, and interactive content that satisfies audience expectations and encourages behaviors such as viewing, sharing, and purchasing.

3. Consumer Behavior Consumer behavior examines how individuals select, purchase, use, and evaluate products or services to satisfy their needs (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Purchasing decisions are influenced by cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural factors. Effective marketing communication can shape consumer attitudes, strengthen brand awareness, and increase purchase intention through persuasive content and positive brand experiences.

5. Chinese Animated Films and Traditional Cultural Elements Chinese animated films integrate storytelling with traditional cultural values, myths, symbols, and aesthetics to create culturally distinctive content. Traditional Chinese cultural elements—including Confucianism, Taoism, festivals, traditional arts, architecture, and folklore—enhance cultural identity while increasing the international competitiveness of Chinese animation. Successful animation balances cultural authenticity with contemporary audience preferences and global market demands.

6. Development of China's Animation Film Industry China's animation industry has experienced significant growth due to government support, technological advancement,



digital distribution, and increasing domestic demand. Industrial development is supported by four major perspectives: cultural innovation, market orientation, technological innovation, and industrial chain integration. These factors improve production quality, expand international competitiveness, and strengthen the sustainable development of China's animation industry.

7. Theoretical Framework This study integrates the 4I Marketing Communication Theory with Agenda-Setting Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Consumer Behavior Theory to explain how digital marketing communication influences audience perceptions and behavioral intentions toward Chinese animated films. The framework proposes that engaging, beneficial, interactive, and personalized marketing communication enhances audience awareness, satisfaction, engagement, and ultimately consumer behavior, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of China's animation industry.

Conceptual Framework

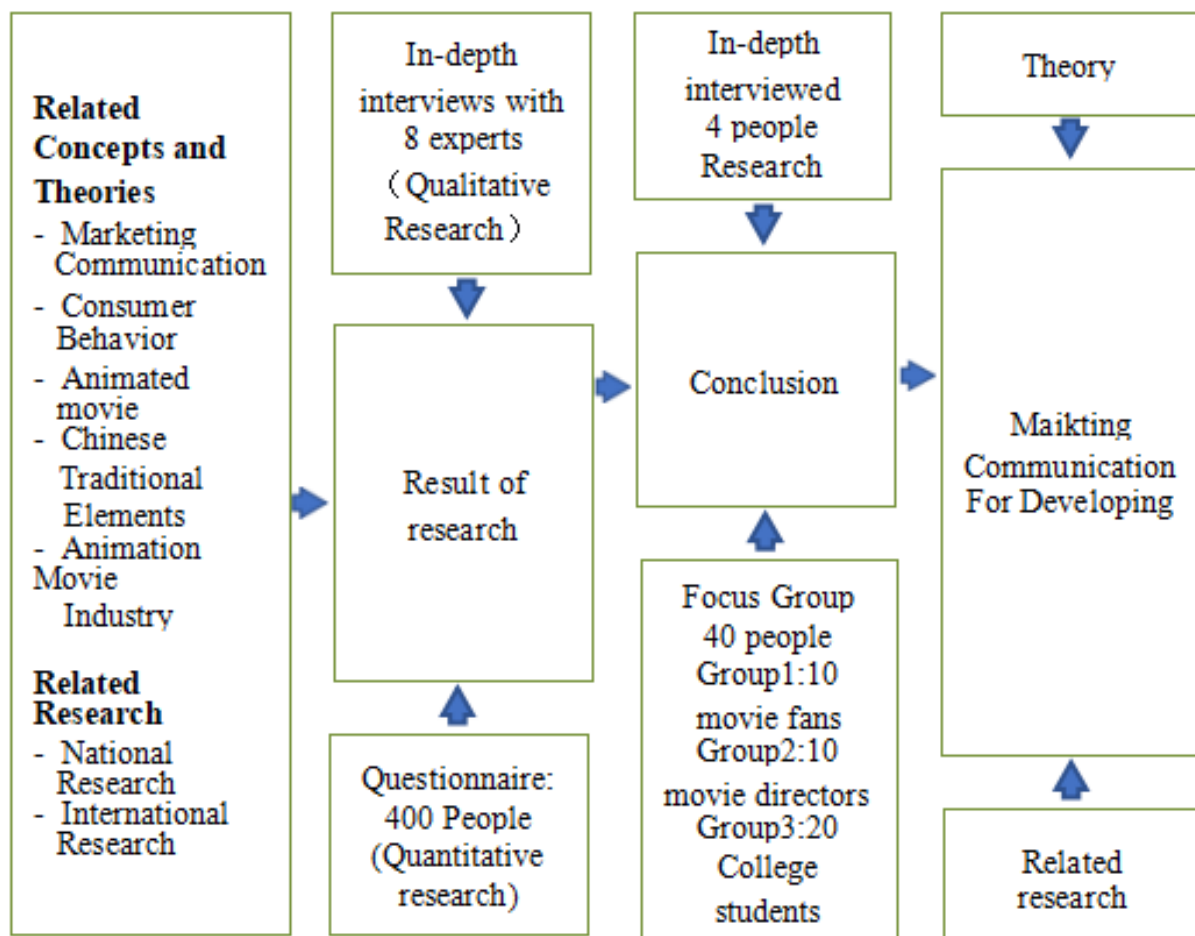


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Objectives

1. To explore the marketing communication of Chinese traditional element animated movies in the digital era for improve the efficiency and effect of marketing communication.
2. To study Chinese traditional animated movies, promote the sustainable development of the movie industry.
3. To purpose marketing communication developing traditional chinese elements of animation movies in digital age.

Methodology

Research Desig

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the marketing communication of Chinese traditional element animated films in the digital era. The study aimed to: Examine marketing communication strategies of Chinese traditional element animated films in the digital era. Investigate how these films contribute to the sustainable development of China's animation industry. Develop an effective marketing communication model for Chinese traditional element animated films.

The qualitative phase involved a comprehensive literature review and expert interviews to explore the evolution, cultural symbolism, and communication characteristics of Chinese traditional elements in animated films. The quantitative phase used a questionnaire survey to evaluate audience perceptions, communication effectiveness, and marketing performance. Findings from both phases were integrated to develop recommendations for improving marketing communication strategies.

Study Population and Sample

The study included two target populations: Experts (Qualitative): Eight purposively selected experts, including animation directors, producers, screenwriters, university scholars specializing in animation, and marketing professionals. Audience (Quantitative): Chinese audiences with prior experience watching Chinese animated films.

For the quantitative study, 400 valid questionnaires were collected using simple random sampling based on sample size determination. Data were collected from audiences at major cinemas in Beijing. Invalid responses were excluded until the required sample size was achieved.

Research Instruments

Two research instruments were employed:

1) Semi-structured interview Conducted with eight experts. Questions focused on marketing communication, cultural representation, audience engagement, and industry development.

2) Structured questionnaire Developed from literature review and qualitative findings. Designed according to principles of relevance, clarity, logical sequencing, representativeness,



respondent acceptability, and statistical suitability. Most items used a five-point Likert scale to facilitate quantitative analysis.

The questionnaire was reviewed by experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) to establish content validity and was revised before data collection.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted in the following stages: Literature review on Chinese animated films and marketing communication. Selection of five representative Chinese traditional element animated films for case analysis. Development of interview protocols and questionnaire. Expert validation (IOC) and ethical approval (IRB). Semi-structured interviews with eight experts. Thematic analysis of qualitative data. Verification of qualitative findings by four experts. Questionnaire survey with 400 respondents. Post-test validation using 40 participants. And Statistical analysis using SPSS.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with eight experts in Beijing. Quantitative data were obtained through questionnaire surveys administered to audiences of Chinese animated films. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing and revision to improve reliability and validity.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive thematic analysis to identify key themes related to marketing communication, cultural identity, and industry development.

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, employing: Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) Reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha) Inferential statistical analysis, where appropriate, to examine relationships among study variables. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings enhanced the validity and comprehensiveness of the proposed marketing communication framework.

Results

To explore the marketing communication of Chinese traditional element animated movies in the digital era to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing communication

The findings indicate that Chinese traditional elements in animated films are primarily expressed through instrumental music, color schemes, visual design and shapes, linguistic styles, martial arts choreography, and folklore narratives. The results demonstrate that audiences exhibit a high level of acceptance and positive cognitive response toward the integration of traditional cultural elements in animation. This suggests that incorporating culturally rooted elements enhances both audience engagement and communicative effectiveness. Therefore, animation production teams are encouraged to systematically explore and integrate traditional cultural elements in film creation. Such integration

strengthens cultural connotation, improves narrative depth, and enhances the overall marketing communication impact of animated works in the digital era.

To examine how Chinese traditional animated movies contribute to the sustainable development of the film industry

The research findings reveal that audiences demonstrate strong identification with traditional Chinese cultural content in animated films. This cultural resonance provides valuable insights into the selection and optimization of marketing communication channels and dissemination strategies for animation products. The results further suggest that embedding traditional cultural values into animated films not only strengthens audience loyalty but also supports the long-term sustainability of the film industry by enhancing cultural relevance, market acceptance, and product differentiation in a competitive digital environment.

To explore marketing communication strategies for developing traditional Chinese elements in animated films in the digital age

Based on expert interviews, the study collected professional opinions regarding the enhancement of marketing communication effectiveness for animated films incorporating traditional Chinese elements. The expert group expressed positive evaluations of integrating traditional cultural components such as instrumental music, color symbolism, linguistic expression, martial arts movements, and folklore content into animation. Experts further emphasized that the expression of traditional cultural elements should be refined, specialized, and contextually detailed in order to strengthen narrative authenticity and audience emotional resonance. Such refinement enhances viewers' cultural identification and emotional engagement, thereby improving the overall reputation and market performance of animated films. The findings suggest that audience cultural recognition serves as a critical driver of effective marketing communication. Strengthening the integration and professional presentation of traditional cultural elements is therefore essential for achieving sustainable communication impact and improving film reception in the digital era.

Discussion

The first objective explored the marketing communication of Chinese traditional element animated movies in the digital era, focusing on how these elements enhance communication efficiency and effectiveness. The findings indicate that the integration of traditional Chinese visual and cultural components—such as color symbolism, character design, dialect usage, idiomatic expressions, martial arts choreography, and folk festival narratives—plays a significant role in strengthening audience engagement and cultural recognition. Specifically, the use of culturally rooted color schemes and symbolic design enhances visual identity and differentiates Chinese animation in the global market. Similarly, incorporating linguistic elements such as dialects and idioms increases narrative authenticity and educational value, thereby improving audience immersion. Moreover, martial arts representation contributes to dynamic storytelling and strengthens cultural appeal by showcasing the essence of Chinese heritage. Folk traditions and festival-based narratives further enrich content depth and

improve emotional engagement. These findings are consistent with Wang Yueming (2022), who emphasized that integrating traditional cultural elements into marketing communication strategies significantly enhances the visibility and influence of Chinese animation in both domestic and international markets. Therefore, the results confirm that culturally embedded marketing communication is an effective strategy for improving audience perception and communication efficiency in the digital era.

The second objective examined how Chinese traditional animated movies contribute to the sustainable development of the film industry through cultural promotion and audience identity formation. The results demonstrate that audience cultural identity plays a central mediating role in the sustainability of traditional animation. When audiences perceive cultural authenticity and emotional resonance in animated works, their attachment to both the content and cultural heritage increases, which supports long-term industry growth. This study finds that cultural identity can be strengthened through three key mechanisms: (1) deep cultural representation during production, ensuring accurate and meaningful portrayal of Chinese traditions; (2) integration of educational content such as philosophy, history, and arts within storytelling frameworks; and (3) emotional narrative structures that promote audience empathy and resonance. These findings align with Li Mei (2021), who identified cultural identity as a key mediating factor in audience response to traditional animation. Furthermore, Zhang Haisong (2022) supports the view that emotional storytelling and cultural integration enhance audience identification with traditional values. Additionally, the results support broader cultural communication theories suggesting that animated films function as cross-cultural bridges, allowing Chinese cultural narratives to reach global audiences while maintaining local identity. Therefore, strengthening cultural identity through animation contributes not only to audience engagement but also to the sustainable development of the animation industry by ensuring long-term cultural relevance and market continuity.

The third objective proposed marketing communication strategies for Chinese traditional element animation films in the digital age, based on empirical findings and the 4I marketing communication theory (Individualize, Interesting, Interaction, and Impulse). The results suggest that effective marketing communication should begin with specialization and cultural precision, ensuring that each traditional element—such as music, costumes, colors, and martial arts—is accurately and professionally represented. This strengthens cultural credibility and brand differentiation. Secondly, story-driven cultural resonance is essential. Narrative structures should embed traditional values such as harmony, loyalty, and moral development, enabling emotional engagement and cultural transmission. Thirdly, cross-media digital marketing strategies are crucial in the digital era. Platforms such as social media, video-sharing networks, and online communities should be used to distribute trailers, behind-the-scenes content, and character storytelling, thereby increasing audience interaction and visibility. Fourthly, interactive cultural education strategies enhance audience participation. Offline exhibitions, workshops, and online engagement activities allow audiences to experience traditional culture directly, strengthening learning and emotional connection. Fifthly, word-of-mouth communication and community building play a significant role in sustaining audience interest. Online fan communities and interactive platforms encourage content sharing and long-term engagement. Finally, cross-sector collaboration and cross-cultural integration between animation producers, cultural institutions, museums, and performing arts organizations expand communication channels and enrich cultural expression. These findings are supported by the 4I marketing communication theory framework proposed by Wu Sheng



and Su Xia (2017), which emphasizes Individualization and Interaction as key drivers of effective modern communication strategies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that a multi-dimensional marketing communication strategy combining cultural authenticity, digital innovation, and audience interaction significantly enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of Chinese traditional animation in the digital era.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the communication effects of traditional Chinese cultural elements in animated films and to develop evidence-based management guidelines for enhancing their marketing communication in the digital era. The research adopted a multi-method and multi-phase design integrating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches to ensure methodological rigor and comprehensive insight. The findings demonstrate that traditional animation elements significantly influence audience perception and communication effectiveness, with traditional cultural identity playing a mediating role in strengthening audience recognition and emotional engagement. The quantitative analysis, based on a representative sample of approximately 400 respondents determined using Krejcie and Morgan's sampling framework, confirmed the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments through expert validation, IOC analysis, and Cronbach's Alpha (≥ 0.80). Exploratory Factor Analysis further refined the construct structure and ensured the robustness of the measured variables. In addition, qualitative insights obtained through focus group discussions and expert interviews enriched the interpretation of quantitative results and supported the development of practical management guidelines. These guidelines emphasize four key strategic dimensions: (1) market research, focusing on audience needs analysis and industry trend evaluation; (2) targeting, highlighting audience segmentation, positioning, and differentiated branding strategies; (3) content innovation, emphasizing the integration of traditional cultural values with modern aesthetics, narrative structures, and audiovisual design; and (4) channel development, focusing on digital platform utilization, cross-channel promotion, and strategic partnerships.

Overall, the study confirms that the effective integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements into animated films not only enhances communication impact but also strengthens cultural identity and audience engagement. The proposed framework provides both theoretical contribution and practical guidance for animation producers and marketers, offering a systematic approach to improving the global competitiveness and cultural dissemination of traditional Chinese animation content.

Recommendations

Recommendation for Policies Formulation

1. Policy making recommendations: Formulate management regulations: Relevant departments should formulate a set of detailed management regulations to regulate the use of traditional Chinese elements in animated movies and ensure that the cultural connotation and historical authenticity of the works are maintained when spreading traditional Chinese culture.



2. Strict review mechanism: Establish a strict censorship mechanism to censor traditional Chinese elements in animated movies. The review team should be composed of cultural scholars, historians, animation experts, etc., to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of traditional elements in the animation.

3. Cultural Education and Communication: To encourage and support the educational function of animated movies in disseminating traditional Chinese culture. Through the dissemination of animated movies, the Chinese history, philosophy, art and other cultural knowledge are popularized, and the public's understanding and respect for traditional Chinese culture are enhanced.

4. Copyright protection and incentive mechanism: Strengthen the copyright protection of traditional Chinese elements in animated movies, crack down on infringements, and protect the legitimate rights and interests of creators. At the same time, an incentive mechanism should be established to encourage animation creators to innovate on the basis of respecting and inheriting traditional culture.

5. International Cooperation and Exchange: Support the international cooperation and exchange programs of animated movies, promote the international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture and enhance the international influence of traditional Chinese culture through cooperation and exchange.

Recommendation for Practical Application

1. Market Research and Analysis: Conduct regular market research to collect audience feedback on animated movies, including acceptance of traditional Chinese elements, cultural identity and viewing experience. Through data analysis, we can understand the preferences and needs of different audience groups and provide basis for adjusting marketing strategies.

2. Social media interaction: Use social media platforms such as Weibo, wechat and Jitterbug to interact with the audience and collect opinions and suggestions. Through topic discussion, questionnaire survey, online voting and other ways to enhance the audience's sense of participation, while collecting valuable market information.

3. Cross-platform marketing: Marketing communication on different digital platforms, such as video sites, live streaming platforms, game platforms, etc., to expand the audience. Develop differentiated marketing strategies according to the characteristics of different platforms and user behaviors.

4. Content Marketing: Create high-quality trailers, behind-the-scenes production footage, character introductions, etc., to capture the audience's attention. By telling the cultural story behind the animated movie and the creative process, it promotes the audience's cultural identity.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Leveraging virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies: VR and AR technologies provide immersive viewing experiences that enable viewers to experience scenes from animated movies or interact with characters, thereby enhancing the appeal of animated works.



2. International marketing strategy: Adopt localized marketing strategies for the international market, including translation, dubbing, cultural adaptation, etc., to meet the needs of audiences in different countries and regions.

3. Collaborate with Key Opinion Leaders (Kols): Collaborate with industry opinion leaders, well-known bloggers, animation critics, etc., to influence viewers'

viewing decisions through their recommendations and reviews. Choose Kols that match the theme and style of animated movies to cooperate with to improve the precision of marketing communication.

4. Combine online and offline activities: Organize online and offline marketing activities, such as theme exhibitions, interactive experiences, fan meetings, etc., to enhance the audience's sense of immersion and participation. By participating in the activities, the audience can deepen their understanding and identification of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, big data and artificial intelligence technology are used to monitor and analyze marketing effects in realtime, and timely adjust marketing strategies and optimize advertising, content release and other links according to data feedback to improve marketing efficiency and effectiveness.

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