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Preliminary Study on the Gratification and Continuance Intention of Chinese Audiences in Relation to Online Film Festivals

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Abstract:

The emergence of online film festivals has opened up new possibilities for the festival landscape, making the study of their positioning and future development a focal point in the film industry. However, most studies have focused on the significance of online film festivals in terms of curation, economics, or cultural tourism, while overlooking the importance of the audience. The objective of this preliminary study is to ascertain the relevance of investigating gratification among Chinese audiences of online film festivals and their intentions to continue participating in future online film festivals. This study fills this gap by examining the gratification levels and continuance intentions of Chinese audiences at the Pingyao International Film Festival (N = 54) through a detailed online survey comprising 37 questions. The results indicate that audiences with higher overall gratification are more likely to continue to participate in online film festivals in the future. Specifically, audiences prioritize process and technology gratification provided by online film festivals, while content and social gratification do not significantly influence their willingness to continue participating in the future. This study is based on a small sample size and covers only a portion of the audience demographic. Future research could increase the sample size to obtain more persuasive results. Additionally, this study focuses solely on audience gratification and does not explore other aspects, such as motivation. Future research could explore these areas to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Keywords: gratification, continuance intention, online film festival, audience.

中国观众对线上电影节满意度及持续观影意愿初步研究

摘要:

线上电影节的出现为电影节格局开辟了新的可能性，其定位和未来发展的研究也成为电影行业的焦点。然而，大多数研究都集中在线上电影节在策展、经济或文化旅游方面的意义，而忽视了观众的重要性。这项初步研究的目的是确定调查线上电影节中国观众的满足感以及他们继续参加未来线上电影节的意愿的相关

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性。本研究通过一项包含37个问题的详细在线调查，考察了平遥国际电影节(否=54)中国观众的满足感水平和继续参加意愿，从而填补了这一空白。结果表明，总体满足感较高的观众更有可能在未来继续参加线上电影节。具体而言，观众优先考虑线上电影节提供的过程和技术满足感，而内容和社会满足感对他们未来继续参与的意愿没有显著影响。本研究基于小样本，仅涵盖了部分受众群体。未来的研究可以增加样本量以获得更具说服力的结果。此外，本研究仅关注受众满足感，并未探讨动机等其他方面。未来的研究可以探索这些领域以提供更全面的理解。

关键词： 满足感、持续意向、线上电影节、观众。

1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the 20th century, film festivals have been widespread, annually impacting international distribution, recognition, and release of films, thereby significantly shaping the global cinematic landscape. These festivals are integral components of a global system that manages film production, distribution, and consumption, playing crucial roles in film distribution, brand image building, and providing high-quality content to cinemas. Beyond their economic and curatorial functions, film festivals also serve the interests of various stakeholders, from the tourism industry and regional development to political objectives and soft power initiatives (De Valck, 2008). However, in 2020, a sudden public health crisis led to the suspension of many crowd-oriented film festival activities, forcing organizers to confront the threat of such unexpected events. If film festivals cannot be held smoothly, the related film industry ecosystem may face serious problems (Liu, 2021). To mitigate losses, online film festivals emerged and developed under these circumstances.

De Valck (2008), the editor of the NECSUS Film Festival Review, pointed out that this crisis represents a moment of opportunity for the film festival industry. Online or hybrid forms allow festival organizers to consider new representation, impact, and community engagement (Armstrong, 2021). Bakker (2015) suggested that online film festivals are essentially alternative exhibition platforms for mature practices. The map of online film festivals is not much different from that of physical film festivals; it consists of activities that have sought funding and conquered ordinary audiences over the years (Taillibert, 2018). The development of online film festivals in China is still in its early stages, constrained by policies, industry factors, technology, and user perceptions (Sha, 2021). Currently, online film festivals in China appear more in the form of “audience festivals” rather than “industry festivals” (Peranson, 2009), focusing on screening and communication rather than the commercial sector. In this context, studying the audiences of online film festivals is crucial for the future development of such festivals. Understanding the target audience of film festivals is advantageous for nurturing audiences in their early stages, balancing competition and exhibition, and meeting relevant film enterprises’ public relations needs. Although there is limited research on online film festivals, most studies have focused on curation aspects

(Sha, 2021; Liu, 2021; Li, 2022) and the film industry (Yin & Li, 2021). Few studies have specifically examined the audiences of film festivals, especially online ones. As physical film festivals return to normal, research on online film festivals has decreased.

This study elucidates the gratification of Chinese online film festival audiences with their experiences and their willingness to continue participating in future online film festivals. The goal is to provide insights into balancing audience demand orientation and the precise positioning of film festival content, serving as a reference for the future planning of major film festival exhibitions.

2. Literature Review

The initial foray into online film festivals can be traced to the Fluxus Festival founded by Zeta Filmes in 2000 in Brazil. The Fluxus Festival regarded online film festivals as space for online novelists, independent creators, and innovative audio-visual content (Bakker, 2015). Online film festivals are not only a result of technological advancements but also depend on the interplay between technology and social, cultural, and historical contexts (Bakker, 2015). Film festivals have long possessed the technical capacity to move their content online (Richards & Pacella, 2022). While transferring content online is relatively straightforward, recreating the festival experience is a formidable challenge, as “creative attempts to simulate the festival experience online become more complex” (De Valck, 2008).

Brunow (2020) suggested that film festivals are not just about watching films; they also embody a sense of community, connection, and care. Coming together to watch films is crucial for this communal awareness, but individual participation faces obstacles such as social, economic, travel constraints, and health issues. Online viewing provides audiences with a free collective viewing experience and an avenue for discussion. Online film festivals establish a new sense of cinematic ritual, breaking away from traditional rituals (environment, form, content). This is manifested in the synchronous resonance of emotional energy and the convergence of collective solidarity. Audiences participating in online film festivals exhibit a state of “presence in spirit, absence in body,” generating shared emotions and exchanging emotional energy during their involvement (Tian & Li, 2023). Additionally, the online logic provides opportunities for on-demand movie

watching, granting audiences greater authority and flexibility in terms of the time, place, and content of their film viewing experience (Abbatecianni, 2023).

The theoretical framework for this study is the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, which views mass media audiences as active, rational individuals seeking gratification (Katz et al., 1974). Originally developed in radio communication research, this theory has been widely applied in mass communication (Gan & Li, 2018). With the development of the internet and social networks, the U&G theory has found extensive use in exploring the purposes of various media. It assumes that individuals utilize media technologies to enhance their gratification and elucidates the underlying motivations and mechanisms through which they engage with innovative technologies to fulfill their specific needs and desires (Camilleri & Falzon, 2021). In recent years, an increasing number of studies have employed this theory to explain user engagement on online platforms (McLean et al., 2022). Mouakket (2018) suggested that gratification is the strongest predictor of continuance intention (CI), as individuals tend to repeatedly purchase and use a service or product, spread positive word-of-mouth, develop loyalty, and exhibit continuance intent when they are satisfied with it (Sharabati et al., 2022).

Many information systems (IS) studies have also utilized this theory to examine user behavior in the context of streaming media (Bakar et al., 2014; Menon, 2022), providing evidence that user gratification positively influences continuous intention (Bakar & Bolong, 2017). User gratification with media is defined as an overall sense of gratification derived from media consumption (Bae, 2018). Previous research has classified the gratification obtained when using different media into categories. Stafford et al. (2004) described three key dimensions associated with consumer internet use: process gratification, content gratification, and a novel social gratification unique to internet use. Bakar et al. (2014) extended these concepts to film and streaming media, suggesting that gratification from prior experience on platforms like YouTube positively influences individuals' willingness to continue using YouTube for movie viewing, categorizing gratification into content, process, social, and technology gratification.

Content gratification, particularly when information is the anticipated outcome of consuming internet content (Stafford et al., 2004), is a fundamental necessity for all media users, regardless of whether they are traditional media consumers or online service users. For online film festivals, content gratification refers to the films screened during the festival and the events held, such as seminars and masterclasses. Wang (2022) suggested that the screening section of film festivals is the most engaging and anticipated part of the festival. Process gratification refers to the gratification individuals derive primarily or solely from participating in interactive behaviors rather than from the content of the messages (Cutler & Danowski, 1980). Yang and Xu

(2020) argue that as cultural rituals, film festivals realize dissemination activities through specific ritual fields, which include the "physical field" constituted by objective reality, the "interactive field" where experiences perceive reality, and the "psychological field" where ideas and meanings form. Among these, the interactive field of film festivals is manifested in the physical field created by the public's direct participation in the festival, including film viewing, participation in various activities, active interaction with festival-related rituals, and continuous attention to festival coverage. In this process, audiences can obtain process gratification from participating in the festival through interaction. Additionally, some audiences attend online film festivals out of interpersonal motives, viewing them as gathering platforms for film industry colleagues and offering numerous possibilities and opportunities. Audiences have the opportunity to interact with directors and actors, conduct live interviews with celebrities (Yolal et al., 2019), and discover people who share similar tastes and preferences. Regarding technology, today's widely accepted forms of online live viewing and post-screening discussions represent the final manifestation of technology's gradual intervention in online film festivals (Duan & Wo, 2020). Building on previous research, some scholars have emphasized technology gratification (Liu et al., 2016; Bakar et al., 2014; Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017) because they recognize online platforms as technological tools, with ease of use being one of the most critical factors. Media attractiveness and social presence can also be enhanced through technology gratification.

Therefore, based on the results of previous research, this study, grounded in the U&G theory, categorizes Chinese audiences' gratification with online film festivals into content gratification (CG), process gratification (PG), social gratification (SG), and technology gratification (TG), investigating their continued intention. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Gratification is positively associated with continual audience intention of attending Chinese online film festivals.

H1.1: Content gratification is positively associated with continual audience intention of attending Chinese online film festivals.

H1.2: Social gratification is positively associated with audience continuance intention of attending Chinese online film festivals.

H1.3: Process gratification is positively associated with continual audience intention of attending Chinese online film festivals.

H1.4: Technology gratification is positively associated with audience continuance intention of attending Chinese online film festivals.

3. Methods

The study employed the online survey platform Wenjuanxing to administer a survey comprising 37

questions to 54 film festival attendees. Purposive sampling was employed, and attendees of the Pingyao International Film Festival, from October 11 to 18, 2023, were sampled. According to Tian and Li (2023), the main target audience of online film festivals is composed of dedicated festival enthusiasts, which presents certain entry barriers for other viewers. Due to a lack of distinct external characteristics among this audience, the researchers chose to collect data from a physical film festival that has a strong attendance: the Pingyao International Film Festival. The Pingyao International Film Festival was selected for its renowned showcase of both local and international films, which attracts diverse and highly engaged audiences, thus providing a representative sample for studying online film festival experiences. This study does not impose any restrictions on participants' age, region, or profession, with the only requirement being their participation in both online and physical film festivals. Data collection used self-administered questionnaires, with 26 incomplete responses excluded from further analysis among the 54 questionnaires, resulting in the retention of 32 usable responses.

The research instruments encompassed two parts: gratification and continuance intention (CI). The gratification variable comprised 23 items, while the continuance intention variable comprised 14 items. All of the scales used in this study were measured using Likert five-point scales adapted from previous research and tailored to the context of online film festivals.

Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis in SPSS. To standardize the wording of the survey questions, cross-validation was conducted with subject matter experts and industry professionals to ensure the tool's validity. Additionally, this study conducted reliability testing of the questionnaire using SPSS. Cronbach's alpha is a commonly used statistical measure to demonstrate that the tests and scales adopted or developed for a research project meet the purposes (Taber, 2018). According to Shi et al. (2012), Cronbach's alpha values above 0.6 are considered acceptable. The reliability tests conducted on the sample yielded Cronbach's alpha values of 0.934 (gratification) and 0.900 (continuance intention).

4. Results

The study comprised a sample size of 37 participants, of which 81.2% were female and 18.8% were male. The respondents were aged between 15 and 31 years, of which 56.3% were young people aged 18 to 25 years. Regarding affiliations, a majority (43.8%) were students pursuing degrees in film-related disciplines. In terms of educational attainment, most respondents held a degree (59.4%), while 34.4% reported having education beyond a degree. Additionally, a significant proportion of those participating in online film festivals hailed from cities where offline film festivals were not locally held (66%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (The authors)

Variable	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	6	18.8
Female	26	81.2
Age		
Below 18	1	3.1
Between 18 and 25 years	18	56.3
Between 26 and 35	13	40.6
Education		
High school or below	1	3.1
Diploma	1	3.1
Degree	19	59.4
Master/PhD	11	34.4
Identity		
Work in the film industry	7	21.9
Film studies	14	43.8
Cinephile	8	25.0
Others	3	9.3
City		
City with physical film festivals	11	34
City without physical film festivals	21	66

As shown in Table 2, respondents were satisfied with the content ($M = 10.84$, $SD = 2.00$), process ($M = 21.50$, $SD = 4.20$), and technology ($M = 28.00$, $SD = 5.42$) of online film festivals. However, respondents stated that the social experience of attending online film festivals had not worked out as well as they thought it would ($M = 9.31$, $SD = 3.29$). Nevertheless, respondents were generally satisfied with attending online film festivals ($M = 84.38$, $SD = 14.19$), and they were willing to continue participating in them ($M = 13.94$, $SD = 1.95$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (The authors)

Variable	Mean	SD
Gratification	84.38	14.19
CG	10.84	2.00
SG	9.31	3.29
PG	21.50	4.20
TG	28.00	5.42
CI	13.94	1.95

This study also assumes that there is a relationship between audience gratification and their continuance intention for participating in online film festivals. According to Table 3, the results indicate that audience intention to continue is significantly influenced by the gratification they obtain from participating in online film festivals ($\beta = 0.542$, $p < 0.05$), thus supporting H1. This suggests that audiences who experience greater

gratification during their participation in online film festivals are more inclined to continue participating in the future. In addition, content gratification ($\beta=-0.363$, $P>0.05$) and social gratification ($\beta=-0.024$, $p>0.05$) do not significantly influence intention to continue; therefore, H1.1 and H1.2 are rejected. Conversely, process gratification ($\beta=0.432$, $p<0.05$) and technology gratification ($\beta=0.63$, $p<0.05$) impact continuance intention; thus, H1.3 and H1.4 are accepted. This indicates that in the decision to continue participating in online film festivals in the future, audiences place greater importance on the enjoyment of the process and technology convenience provided rather than the content and social functions of the film festival.

Table 3. Coefficients (The authors)

Variable	Standardized Coefficient Beta	Sig.
Gratification	.542	.001
CG	-.363	.131
SG	-.024	.890
PG	.432	.040
TG	.630	.002

5. Discussion

Film festivals are “social constructions,” thus requiring social subjects (people/audiences) to function (Dickson, 2014). Barker’s (2006) concept of advanced encounters suggests that audiences have already gathered knowledge and established expectations before cultural encounters. In the context of film festivals, audiences can decide when, where, and whether to attend screenings and activities. For festival organizers, retaining previous participants is just as crucial as attracting, motivating, and satisfying new ones (Lee et al., 2016). Therefore, for newly developed online film festivals, understanding audience gratification is essential. This study focuses on Chinese online film festival audiences, aiming to explore their gratification and continuance intention of participating in future online film festivals and the relationship between them.

The research findings align with those of previous studies (Báez & Devesa, 2014), showing that audiences with higher overall gratification are more inclined to continue participating in the future. This study extends the relationship between gratification and continued participation to the context of online film festivals, dividing gratification into four parts: content, social, process, and technology. Specifically, respondents were not entirely satisfied with participating in online film festivals. The study results indicate that audiences are relatively satisfied with content selection, process experience, and technical support provided by online film festivals, but they are dissatisfied with the social experience, which is consistent with the findings by Sha (2021) and Liu (2021). Sha (2021) suggested that investments and collaborations by streaming platforms and film copyright professional agents in high-quality

program procurement have contributed to the continuous accumulation of paying users in China. Due to the closure of cinemas, some projects that were originally scheduled for physical screenings have had to be shifted to an online format. In terms of technology, China’s streaming media and live broadcast models are maturing and popular, significantly improving viewing quality and fluency. Liu (2021) argued that the importance of actual locations for film festivals can be reflected in three aspects: 1. festival atmosphere; 2. rituals and celebrations; 3. face-to-face communication. Although online film festivals attempt to replicate the experience of attending a physical festival, they lack the opportunity for audience members to engage in real-world social interactions. Additionally, it can be difficult to distinguish between watching films at an online festival and watching other films available on streaming platforms. Thus, this may lead to lower gratification among audiences regarding the social functions of online film festivals.

Regarding the relationship between these four types of gratification and continuance intention, the main factors influencing whether audiences will continue to participate in online film festivals in the future are process and technology gratification, while content and social functions do not have a significant impact. Process gratification refers to the gratification gained by audiences through the process of participation rather than the informational content (Bakar et al., 2014). For online film festivals, the intervention of media technology brings about a sense of ritual different from cinema viewing. Audiences enter the online viewing space anonymously and usually join relevant virtual communities before viewing the content. They engage in bullet screen or chat interactions during the viewing process. In the post-viewing interactive session, each audience member has the opportunity to participate. In this process, audiences seek the authentic ritual effects of physical scenarios (Tian & Li, 2023). When this need for ritual gratification is met, they are more willing to continue participating in online film festivals in the future. Regarding technology gratification, previous studies have demonstrated the impact of technology gratification on continuance intention in the context of social media (Gan & Li, 2018), which also applies to online film festival contexts. The convenience of technology, media attractiveness, and social presence (Liu et al., 2016) give audiences of online film festivals a “sense of ritual” experience different from cinema viewing. They also break through various temporal and spatial limitations, allowing audiences from different places to participate in this public space provided by online film festivals. Audiences who cannot attend physical film festivals due to economic difficulties, transportation inconveniences, or time constraints may choose to continue participating in online film festivals due to the convenience they enjoy.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to examine the

influence of gratification among Chinese audiences of online film festivals based on their past experiences of attending such festivals on their intention to continue attending in the future. The results indicate that audiences generally express gratification with participating in online film festivals and are willing to continue doing so. Furthermore, among the content, social, process, and technology gratifications explored in this study, the audience prioritizes their experience and enjoyment of the process provided by online film festivals and the technological convenience they receive. The content and social gratification from the festival did not significantly impact their willingness to continue attending in the future.

This study contributes to the academic discourse by examining the relationship between gratification and continuance intention among Chinese online film festival audiences. It offers an innovative perspective by categorizing gratification into content, process, social, and technology dimensions and identifying the aspects that significantly influence continued participation. This research extends the uses and gratifications theory to the context of online film festivals, emphasizing the importance of process and technology gratification over content and social experiences.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that festival organizers should prioritize enhancing the interactive and technological aspects of online festivals to increase audience retention. Future research should consider a larger sample size and explore other factors, such as audience motivation and gratification-seeking behaviors, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of online film festival audiences.

Authors' Contributions

Yang Yening contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, writing of the original draft, and project administration.

Akmar Hayati Ahmad Ghazali supervised the project and contributed to conceptualization, validation, formal analysis, and writing-review and editing.

Sharil Nizam bin Sha'ri supervised the project and contributed to the methodology, investigation, and writing-review and editing.

Sun Jingle contributed to data collection and analysis.

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