

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of OTT platforms on the cinema industry and audience preferences in China : A case study of tencent video

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how Chinese audience preferences and the film business are impacted by OTT platforms, specifically Tencent Video. To look into content creation, audience behaviour, and changing film distribution models, a total of six expert interviews and six generational focus groups with Gen Z, Gen Y, and Gen X participants were held. While generational comparison offered insights into changing media consumption patterns, the research used a case study technique to discover content strategies and platform governance mechanisms through thematic analysis. Tencent Video was found to be an example of platform imperialism due to its vertical integration of production and distribution, integration of algorithmic recommendation systems, and emphasis on monetisation through VIP models and exclusive access. Diverse generations' responses to these frameworks revealed diverse adaptations: Gen Z showed algorithmic engagement and multi-device adaptability, Gen Y represented hybrid consuming patterns, while Gen X showed pragmatic or hostile attitudes towards platformization. Growing conflicts between platform control and user autonomy were brought to light by discontent with monetisation logics across all cohorts. This paper develops an interpretive framework to describe the socio-technical reorganisation of China's film industry by fusing Platform Imperialism with Media Ecology Theory. In addition to influencing what is created and consumed, Tencent Video, as an infrastructure and content curator, also changes audience expectations, the value of films, and their theatrical importance. The results add to more general conversations about generational media transitions, digital governance, and cultural sovereignty in the Chinese context.

Keywords: OTT Platforms; tencent video; platform imperialism; Chinese cinema industry; audience preferences; algorithmic recommendation; media ecology; content production strategies; film distribution models

1. Introduction

The emergence of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has drastically changed China's media and entertainment scene, upending the movie theatre industry's long-standing hegemony and altering how viewers watch. Platforms like Tencent Video, iQIYI, and Youku have established a new paradigm of personalised, on-demand digital content consumption as mobile technologies and high-speed internet become more commonplace (Simlote & Singh, 2024; Yaqoub et al., 2022)^[1,2]. With more over 125 million paying customers as of 2021, Tencent Video in particular has surpassed other domestic rivals by combining

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social networking, algorithmic curation, and premium content techniques (Shi & Zhou, 2021)^[3]. While national box office revenues fell from 64.3 billion RMB in 2019 to just 47 billion RMB in 2021, recent market studies indicate that China's OTT industry grew fast during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Tencent Video memberships rising by 20% between 2020 and 2022 (China.org.cn, 2024)^[4]. This stark contrast emphasises how important it is to comprehend how streaming services are changing how people consume culture and undermining the importance of traditional movie theatres.

While existing scholarship has broadly addressed the global implications of OTT expansion—encompassing themes such as platform capitalism and media convergence (Obia, 2023; Pembayun & Yuwono, 2023)^[4,6]—there remains a critical gap in targeted research on how non-Western platforms like Tencent Video impact local cultural consumption and national film industries. To address this lacuna, this paper examines Tencent Video's influence on China's film industry, audience preferences, and content production strategies. It does so by deploying contemporary theoretical frameworks, including media ecology and platform imperialism, to interrogate how digital platforms mediate cultural and economic power in the Chinese context (Postman, 2000; Wu et al., 2024)^[7,8].

A key innovation of this study lies in its emphasis on generational variations in media consumption. Although there have been a large number of studies on digital viewing behavior, few studies have explored the differential reactions of Chinese generation X, generation Y and generation Z viewers to OTT content. This intergenerational perspective not only helps to understand how platformization affects individual viewing content, but also reveals how it shapes people's cognition of film value, uniqueness and collective film viewing experience. To further enrich this generational analysis, this study integrates Social Identity Theory, a foundational framework in social psychology that elucidates how individuals construct and negotiate group-based identities through social categorization, identification, and comparison. Specifically, this theoretical lens enables an exploration of how Gen Z, as a cohort of "digital natives" immersed in algorithmically mediated environments from early life, actively constructs and reinforces its generational identity through engagement with algorithmic recommendation systems on platforms like Tencent Video. Algorithmic curation—by prioritizing certain content genres, cultural markers, and interactive formats—serves not merely as a tool for content discovery but as a mechanism through which Gen Z articulates its distinct media preferences, solidifies in-group affiliations, and differentiates itself from older generations. This process of identity formation, mediated by algorithmic logics, offers critical insights into the socio-psychological dimensions of platformization, transcending conventional analyses of consumption behavior to uncover how digital media shape generational subjectivities.

The study also draws attention to the dilution of original creative content, which is a major worry in China's OTT scene. As platforms prioritize monetization and rapid content production, there has been a proliferation of low-quality imitations and derivative works, often mimicking popular films for financial gain (Wu et al., 2024; Bentaleb et al., 2025)^[8,9]. This phenomenon raises ethical questions regarding intellectual property and cultural sustainability, particularly when high-investment, decade-long projects such as *Feng Shen* are overshadowed by hastily produced online reproductions (Hodroj, 2023)^[10].

From 1.73 billion admissions in 2019 to 1.167 billion in 2021, empirical evidence shows a sharp drop in Chinese moviegoer attendance, which further decreased amid prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns. Subscription-based platforms accounted for more than 60% of China's digital entertainment market share by 2022, as OTT revenues increased concurrently (China.org.cn, 2024)^[4]. Tencent Video's approach demonstrates how platforms are actively influencing their markets in addition to responding to them, as evidenced by innovations like X Theatre for short-form drama (Wu et al., 2024)^[8]. Despite growing research

on OTT platforms and digital disruption, most scholarship remains Western-centric, focusing on global giants like Netflix or Disney+. The impact of Chinese platforms such as Tencent Video on domestic media institutions and audience behaviors remains underexamined empirically. Furthermore, few studies systematically integrate generational audience analysis with media ecology and platform imperialism theories in the Chinese context.

By examining cultural trade-offs in a rapidly digitalizing entertainment ecosystem, investigating generational disparities in OTT usage, and proposing a localized model of platform imperialism, this study contributes to existing literature. It concludes by advocating for a more balanced approach to media innovation that fosters technological advancement without compromising creative diversity or cultural authenticity. To address these gaps, this study poses the following research questions to provide a targeted analysis of Tencent Video's rise and its implications for China's film industry.

RQ1: To what extent does Tencent Video exemplify platform imperialism by shaping local content production and cultural consumption through algorithm-driven recommendations and standardized viewing experiences?

RQ2: How do OTT platforms, particularly Tencent Video, influence audience preferences and viewing behaviors across different generational groups (e.g., Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z) in China?

RQ3: What is the impact of Tencent Video on the Chinese cinema industry in terms of audience attendance patterns, content production strategies, and evolving distribution models?

2. Literature review

Significant changes in the global media ecosystem have been brought about by the rise of OTT platforms, especially in nations like China that have robust internet and mobile infrastructure. Because they provide convenient, customised, and on-demand viewing experiences, these digital platforms have posed a growing threat to traditional cinema (Simlote & Singh, 2024)^[1]. China's film business has seen fundamental changes in distribution, content creation, and income structures as audience tastes move towards streaming and mobile-based consumption. The nation's top OTT platform, Tencent Video, offers an engaging case study for comprehending how platform-driven media changes how people watch films and create culture in the digital age.

2.1. OTT Platforms and the Chinese film industry

Fast digitalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic, which drove customers to online platforms, have sped up the growth of OTT services in China. Over 927 million people in China watched videos online by 2021, with Tencent Video and iQiyi dominating the market (Thomala, 2021)^[11]. According to Ryška (2022)^[12], Tencent Video alone had 454 million monthly active users in 2022. Vertical integration, tailored recommendation algorithms, and smart content investments have all contributed to the company's success (Tang & Wei, 2023)^[13]. Zhao (2018) emphasise how industry rules and state policies influence platform strategies, such as intellectual property protection, censorship compliance, and content investment^[14].

China's cinema box office receipts fell by more than half to \$4.1 billion in 2022 from a peak of \$8.8 billion in 2019 (Xuefei & Chengzhong, 2023)^[15]. OTT platforms have replaced traditional revenue streams, particularly with regard to digital advertising and subscription models. Variety shows, live sports, and short-form web series are just a few of Tencent's creative content offerings that have broadened the entertainment market and helped to split apart conventional audience bases (Wu et al., 2024)^[8].

2.2. Media ecology and platform imperialism

The study uses Media Ecology Theory, which views media as settings that influence social behaviours and cultural structures, to put this transition in context (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 2000)^[16,7]. As new media platforms, OTT platforms not only distribute content but also change how viewers interact with it. For example, they have changed the cinematic experience from a linear, communal one to one that is personalised, interactive, and portable (Young, 2019)^[17]. The incorporation of media consumption into daily digital life, where Tencent Video users binge-watch across numerous platforms without temporal or spatial limits, reflects McLuhan's concept of the "global village" (Simlote & Singh, 2024)^[1].

Platform Imperialism Theory, which challenges the unequal power arrangements present in digital platforms, is a useful addition to this (Kwet, 2019)^[18]. Tencent Video functions in China using a hybrid governance model, which is both governed by political legislation and empowered by market incentives (Zhang & Chen, 2022)^[19]. Growth is aided by policies like "development-first, regulate-later," which also enforce censorship and influence algorithmic design, content curation, and soft power goals. Unlike Western OTT platforms, this results in a unique kind of localised platform imperialism (Zhang & Chen, 2022)^[19].

Tencent's combination of user data, production capital, and algorithmic management is a prime example of how domestic platforms can also have imperialistic influence both domestically and internationally by influencing cultural narratives and watching habits. Tencent's platform logic is further differentiated from its Western rivals by state-aligned tactics such as the Belt and Road cultural diplomacy and the "Internet Plus" project.

Tencent's ascent illustrates a localised sort of platform imperialism, whereas the conventional interpretation concentrates on Western dominance. A standardised media experience is produced even across national borders thanks to the platform's control over content recommendation, production finance, and distribution logistics, which allows it to promote some cultural values while marginalising others (Xu et al., 2021)^[20]. Furthermore, by fusing market expansion with the projection of soft power, state-aligned aims enable platforms such as Tencent Video to support China's larger cultural diplomacy objectives.

2.3. Integrating social psychology theories and audience analysis

This study uses Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004)^[21] to further analyse audience engagement by looking at how Gen Z users create a "digital native" identity through platform-based communities and algorithmic personalisation. In addition to suggesting content, Tencent Video's curation methods help younger users define their generational identities and foster a sense of community by reinforcing common cultural markers.

The behavioural intentions underlying audiences' transition from cinema to over-the-top (OTT) streaming are examined using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)^[22]. The reasons why streaming has become a popular choice across cohorts can be explained by attitudes towards convenience, subjective norms influenced by peers, and perceived behavioural control, such as ease of access across devices.

The paradoxical trends seen among Gen X audiences—who frequently express opposition to OTT platforms but nonetheless utilise them for pragmatic reasons like accessibility, pricing, or exclusive content—are further clarified by Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957)^[23]. This conflict is a continuous balancing act between long-standing movie-going customs and the practical advantages of digital access.

2.4. Audience behavior and cultural shifts

According to recent research, audience preferences and media habits are also changing, especially among younger viewers (Gen Z and Millennials), who are showing a greater preference for flexibility, short-form content, and customised experiences (Gaonkar et al., 2022)^[24]. In response to these inclinations, OTT platforms provide interactive formats, algorithm-driven curation, and binge-worthy series (Shin et al., 2024)^[25]. Due to the fact that many films are now distributed straight on streaming services, eschewing theatrical distribution entirely, this change has resulted in a drop in traditional moviegoer attendance (John, 2023)^[26].

But this change has also sparked worries about OTT productions' growing copying and dwindling originality of content (Sarkar, 2024)^[27]. The conflict between the preservation of cultural and artistic quality in national cinema and the mass production of material for platform monetisation is highlighted by certain situations (Shri et al., 2023)^[28].

Tencent Video is positioned inside China's distinct legislative and cultural framework and Western bias in the literature is generally lessened by incorporating Chinese-language research, government policy, and industry analysis. In the Chinese context, this offers a strong basis for investigating the impact of platforms on production, distribution, and audience behaviour.

2.5. Theoretical framework

Tencent Video's impact on movie development, distribution, and viewer behaviour is investigated in this study by combining platform studies with generational analysis. While Generational Analysis contextualises cohort-specific engagement, technological fluency, and cultural expectations (Tapscott, 2009; Seemiller & Grace, 2016)^[29,30], Platform Studies offer instruments to analyse structural and algorithmic power in content curation and monetisation (van Dijck, 2013; Gillespie, 2018)^[31,32]. Because Tencent operates in a hybrid regulatory environment where state policies limit algorithmic recommendations and production choices, China's political economy has a unique influence on platform governance. This supports localised forms of platform imperialism and promotes domestic cultural goals (Zhang & Chen, 2022)^[19].

Platform-led industrial restructuring (impact on professional practices and hierarchies), algorithmic recommendation (automated curation shaping viewing behaviour), generational preference divergence (cohort-specific media consumption patterns), audience transformation (shifts in identity, habits, and engagement under OTT influence), and platformization of content production (structuring creation and distribution pipelines) are the five dimensions across which the framework conceptualises interactions between platform power, regulatory context, and generational behaviour. This paradigm highlights the unique dynamics of local OTT platforms by integrating Platform Studies and Generational Analysis into China's industrial and regulatory environment. This allows for the interpretation of both audience-side and production-side effects.

Table 1. Theoretical framework: Platform and generational analysis dimensions

Dimension	Definition	Analytical Focus	China-Specific Implication
Platformization of content production	Structuring creation and distribution pipelines	Production logic, content flow, and release strategies	Regulatory constraints and state-aligned objectives shape production choices
Platform-led industrial restructuring	Impact on professional practices and hierarchies	Industry adaptation, roles of producers and creators	Localized platform imperialism influences employment and professional autonomy
Algorithmic recommendation	Automated curation shaping viewing behaviour	User engagement, content discovery, and consumption patterns	State oversight affects algorithmic design and content exposure

Dimension	Definition	Analytical Focus	China-Specific Implication
Generational preference divergence	Cohort-specific media consumption patterns	Differences in viewing habits, device use, and platform adoption	Digital fluency and platform reliance vary by generation (Gen X, Y, Z)
Audience transformation	Shifts in identity, habits, and engagement under OTT influence	Behavioral, social, and cultural adaptation to digital platforms	Platforms mediate cultural consumption and community formation

3. Materials and methods

In order to investigate how Tencent Video has affected China's traditional film business and audience viewing preferences, this study uses a qualitative research methodology. Media Ecology Theory, Platform Imperialism Theory, and the idea of changing audience preferences serve as the foundation for the study.

The two primary qualitative techniques that were employed were focus groups and in-depth interviews. Fifteen participants—including media experts, Tencent employees, and professionals in the film industry—were interviewed in-depth. Tencent's content creation, distribution tactics, and platform impact on audience behaviour were all examined in these semi-structured interviews. Five domains—platform strategy, content creation, audience transformation, algorithmic recommendation, and industrial restructuring—were covered by the open-ended questions in an interview guide. Participants were urged to go into further detail about their own experiences, business procedures, and professional insights, even though a uniform approach guaranteed comparability across interviews. Every interview was audio recorded with consent and lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. This approach made it possible to gain a thorough understanding of the inner workings of OTT platforms and how they are changing how people consume media.

Six groups of five participants each from various generational cohorts (Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z) participated in focus group talks. Groups representing both regular moviegoers and OTT users were chosen based on their media habits. These conversations looked at shifting watching habits, platform influence, and audience impressions of cultural material. In order to guarantee variety among each generational cohort, recruitment procedures were meticulously crafted, attempting to balance gender, occupation, and educational attainment. A variety of methods were used to recruit participants, including university mailing lists, online ads (WeChat, Weibo), and recommendations from the local community in large Chinese cities. To verify the age cohort (Gen X, Y, Z) and viewing preference (cinema-goer vs. OTT user), screening questions were used during the hiring process. The researcher moderated the focus groups, which lasted roughly 90 minutes each and followed a semi-structured guide that included questions about cultural expectations, viewing habits, and algorithm perceptions.

Purposive and stratified sampling guaranteed relevance and diversity. Purposive selection focused on those who had firsthand experience with media consumption or industry knowledge, whereas stratification captured generational differences. This two-pronged approach allowed for comparisons across generational cohorts and guaranteed the inclusion of both industry viewpoints and common audience experiences. However, the sample exhibits an urban bias because the majority of the recruiting was conducted in large Chinese cities. This could reduce the findings' representativeness for persons living in rural or semi-urban areas, where there are notable differences in viewing infrastructures, movie theatre accessibility, and OTT platform dependence. Both offline referrals and internet platforms were used for recruitment in major Chinese cities.

With the aid of Atlas.ti software, qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. The process of thematic analysis was methodical and open. Initially, a preliminary codebook was created using the

analytical dimensions of the investigation (V01–V05). Second, focus group transcripts were subjected to open coding in order to record audience viewpoints that were not foreseen in the codebook. Third, overlapping categories were combined and ambiguous codes were explained as part of an iterative code refinement process. Cross-cutting themes across generational cohorts were then identified by connecting focus group findings with interview data using axial coding. Two coders separately examined focus group transcripts and held peer debriefing sessions to resolve disagreements in order to increase credibility. Coding decisions were documented using memoranda in Atlas.ti, which improved reliability and ensured an audit trail.

A thematic framework covering five analytical dimensions—platformization of content production (V01), platform-led industrial restructuring (V02), algorithmic recommendation (V03), generational preference divergence (V04), and audience transformation (V05)—was used to code the data in Atlas.ti. Anonymised codes are used to reference quotes for traceability and clarity. Informed consent was given by each participant, and ethical standards were closely adhered to. Confidentiality and safe data handling were guaranteed by the study.

The study's urban sample presents inherent constraints, even though these measures improve methodological quality. To improve the generalisability of results, future studies could use mixed-method techniques that combine quantitative surveys with ethnographic case studies, or they could expand recruitment to include rural and semi-urban people.

4. Results

The study provides supplementary insights into how Tencent Video, China's top OTT platform, transforms content creation, audience behaviour, and cultural dynamics through its institutional and algorithmic operations by critically analysing qualitative data collected through six expert interviews and six focus groups divided by generation.

Cinema managers, producers, screenwriters, and directors participated in the expert interviews, which show how OTT platforms affect professional responsibilities, creative decision-making, and industry procedures. In the meantime, the focus groups, which were separated by viewing habits (OTT users vs. moviegoers) and generation (Gen X, Y, Z), provided insight into changing media engagement patterns, user expectations, and generational differences (Table 2).

Platform-related variables (V01–V05) exhibit varying manifestations across professional jobs and generational groups, as illustrated Figure 1. Younger users who rely more on algorithms and producers who follow curatorial logic exhibit deeper gaps in computer literacy, access, and user agency, suggesting that algorithmic dependence may limit the distribution of independent films and decrease exposure to diverse content. Deeper gaps in computer literacy, access, and user agency arise when younger users depend more on algorithms and producers adhere to curatorial logic. These trends show that Tencent Video is an infrastructure force that uses proprietary systems to redefine media value, stratify consumers, and influence cultural engagement in addition to being a content supplier. The analysis illustrates how platform design not only changes consumption patterns but also influences wider cultural outcomes by connecting generational adoption trends to possible content homogenisation and a reduction in creative diversity. By demonstrating platform imperialism, revealing generational adaption disparities, and demonstrating how platform design challenges conventional filmmaking and distribution, this synthesis bolsters RQs 1 and 3. In the end, the results are consistent with media ecology theory, showing how digital environments that are governed by algorithmic control and monetisation reorganise social life and cultural behaviour.

Table 2. Distribution of platform-related variables across participants

Participant Role	V01	V02	V03	V04	V05
Gen Z OTT	1	0	1	1	1
Gen Z Cinema	0	0	0	1	1
Gen Y OTT	1	0	1	1	1
Gen Y Cinema	0	0	0	1	1
Gen X OTT	0	0	0	1	1
Gen X Cinema	0	0	0	1	1
E01 Producer 1	1	0	0	0	0
E02 Producer 2	1	1	0	0	0
E03 Young Director	0	0	1	0	1
E04 Art Designer	0	0	0	0	0
E05 Scriptwriter	1	0	0	1	0
E06 Cinema Manager	0	1	0	1	1

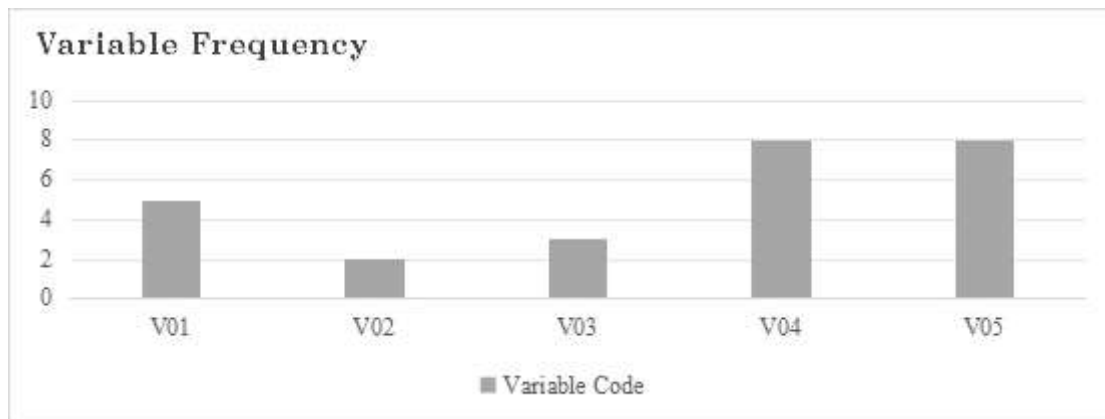


Figure 1. Frequency of variables across focus groups and experts

4.1. Shaping mechanism

We learnt a few things from interviewees on the first study topic, which is about how Tencent Video's algorithm-driven recommendations and standardised watching experiences represent platform imperialism to local content creation and cultural consumption.

Platform imperialism is exemplified by Tencent Video's tightly knit model of algorithmic control, industrial consolidation, and monetised user experience, which centralises production and distribution in ways that prioritise high-engagement, monetizable content over independent or niche storytelling and may lessen narrative diversity. The platform's vertically integrated structure puts it as a prominent producer and curator of Chinese media, in addition to being a distributor, as demonstrated by audience figures and expert interviews. Tencent Video gains control over what content is produced, how it is organised, and when and how it is published by funding its own dramas and movies, doing away with traditional middlemen. Screenwriters and filmmakers modify plot arcs and pace to suit engagement metrics and monetisation techniques, including cliffhanger episodes linked to paid early access, as computational logic increasingly shapes creative processes. Independent filmmakers are affected by this shift from auteur-led production to data-driven, audience-modeled content output since they encounter more obstacles to visibility, which concentrates cultural production in formats determined by platforms.

Algorithmic recommendation systems serve as a type of soft governance on the consumption side, gently focussing viewer attention and reducing exposure to specialised or non-mainstream content. Tencent's internal ranking systems, homepage placement algorithms, and exclusivity-based distribution logic eventually frame users' involvement, even though users—especially younger ones—seem to interact flexibly with these recommendations. This reinforces the possibility of content homogenisation at scale by influencing which cultural narratives are emphasised and which are ignored.

Furthermore, platform governance encompasses how viewers perceive and understand the value of content. The focus on early viewing privileges, VIP-tiered access, and exclusive catalogues promotes regular platform use while diminishing the significance of other exhibition venues, such as movie theatres. Users' choices of content are shaped by Tencent's curated offerings and monetisation cycles, and they start to associate cultural involvement with platform subscription. With consequences for cultural variety and independent film availability, this dynamic demonstrates how algorithmic control not only regulates consumption but also subtly influences the kinds of content created and disseminated.

Together, the results show that Tencent Video's practices, which standardise watching patterns, restrict creative plurality, and reorganise the power dynamics of cultural creation, are examples of platform imperialism. In addition to regulating media access, the platform has developed into an infrastructure system that shapes which stories are seen, supporting prevailing content patterns and possibly preventing the rise of alternative or culturally diverse narratives.

4.2. The impact on shaping audience preferences and viewing behaviors

Tencent Video's algorithm-driven infrastructure and content monetisation strategies have restructured viewing behaviours across generational cohorts in China, resulting in distinct generational patterns of media engagement shaped by platform design, lifestyle rhythms, and technological fluency. This leads to the second research question, which focusses on the impact on shaping audience preferences and viewing behaviours. Platformization of Content Production (V01), Algorithmic Recommendation (V03), Generational Preference Divergence (V04), and Audience Transformation (V05) are the four intersecting variables that mediate Tencent Video's influence.

Tencent Video's platform-centric governance, especially its algorithmic recommendation systems and monetised access mechanisms, has a considerable impact on audience tastes and viewing behaviours throughout China's age groups. While handy, Gen Z viewers' heavy dependence on algorithmic recommendations might reinforce popular preferences and limit exposure to independent or niche productions. Gen Z viewers consume media on smartphones, computers, and smart TVs. Although many take into account other factors like Douban ratings or personal preferences, their involvement is not totally passive. However, the prevalence of algorithmically promoted content implies that some cultural narratives are emphasised at the expense of others, which contributes to the homogenisation of content.

Gen Y users have a transitional media habitus, combining frequent OTT usage with infrequent movie outings. Although their judicious use of algorithms suggests that convenience and discernment are balanced, algorithmic curation that favours popular formats limits even this group's exposure to experimental or varied content. Mainstream content consumption is reinforced by economic factors and platform loyalty, which further influence watching habits.

Gen X customers exhibit a practical mindset, frequently using OTT platforms more out of need than choice. Even while suggestions have less of an impact on them, the general algorithmic structure of material nevertheless restricts their access to alternative films, which obliquely contributes to a reduction in the range of cultural options.

Tencent Video's recommendation algorithms and vertical integration work together to standardise behaviour across all cohorts, giving preference to highly engaging material while limiting the appearance of independent or regionally diverse films. Although users retain a certain amount of autonomy, platform-imposed logics are progressively mediating their decisions, underscoring the platform's influence on both preferences and the larger cultural ecosystem.

4.3. The influence on Chinese cinema industry

The results for Research Question 3—"What is the impact of Tencent Video on the Chinese cinema industry in terms of audience attendance patterns, content production strategies, and evolving distribution models?"—are based on the rich qualitative data gathered from expert interviews and focus group discussions. demonstrate the profound, structural change in the Chinese film industry brought on by Tencent Video's OTT platformization. Three main aspects of this change can be summarised: distribution models, content creation techniques, and audience attendance trends.

4.3.1. Decline of theatrical urgency and shifts in audience attendance patterns

The popularity of Tencent Video has significantly reduced the value of going to the movies, especially for younger viewers. Decreased exposure of theatrical releases and fewer options for independent or niche films to reach audiences have resulted from participants across demographic categories reporting an increasing preference for on-demand, home-based consumption.

While Gen Y selectively attends movies based on prestige, Gen Z mostly consumes content on mobile devices and only goes to the movies for big social gatherings or blockbuster releases. Due to scheduling and material restrictions, Gen X mostly stays away from theatres. This structural shift towards platform-first watching demonstrates how OTT infrastructure can change cultural routines and marginalise less commercially viable content, affecting the distribution and appreciation of a variety of cinematic works.

4.3.2. Content production strategies driven by platform logic

Tencent Video has a significant impact on who produces what, how it is arranged, and what content is created. Its gatekeeping function in China's cultural landscape is strengthened by its closed-loop, vertically integrated approach.

Platform-led production is increasingly using data-driven templates, with engagement analytics and monetisation measures guiding the structuring of episodes, casting, and scripts. This limits the exposure and feasibility of independent productions by fostering a preference for formulaic, mainstream fare. Funding and homepage visibility are determined by internal rankings, and the placement of cliffhangers promotes microtransactions, strengthening algorithmically preferred, high-engagement tales. As a result, there are less opportunities for experimental or culturally unique storytelling, creative homogenisation, and a reduction in narrative diversity.

4.3.3. Restructured distribution models and platform-first logic

Platform-first or simultaneous releases are given precedence over conventional theatre windows by Tencent Video. This change limits the distribution choices for independent films that depend on movie theatre exposure for visibility and lowers the perceived value of theatrical screening. One-time ticket sales are replaced by a tiered, subscription-based structure created by monetisation strategies including VIP memberships, early access fees, and exclusive content libraries, which also change audience expectations.

All things considered, Tencent Video is a prime example of platform-led industrial revolution. It changes the cultural value from theatrical exclusivity to algorithmically tailored convenience, standardises

production around data-centric monetisation, and reorients audience behaviours towards platform dependence. By limiting space for independent or diverse cinematic voices and focussing cultural output and audience attention within Tencent-controlled infrastructures, these changes serve to further platform imperialism..

5. Discussions

This study investigates how Tencent Video, the top OTT platform in China, uses its algorithmic and monetised infrastructure to transform the film business, viewer behaviour, and cultural output. It suggests a conceptual framework that shows the complex interrelationships among audience segmentation, algorithm-driven content delivery, OTT platform strategies, and the structural change of China's film business (Figure 2).

5.1. OTT Platform strategies framework

The foundation of this approach is platformization, which uses algorithmic recommendation algorithms to select and tailor content for different audience segments. These algorithmic algorithms shape different media consumption habits among Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z audiences by reflecting and reinforcing generational preferences. As a result, traditional cinematic experiences are undermined by the audience's shift towards personalised, on-demand content consumption, which also leads to a reduction in moviegoing and a change in the methods used for content creation and dissemination. China's political-economic environment further shapes this cyclical relationship between platform logic, audience behaviour, and industry transformation, illuminating a hybrid kind of platform imperialism that combines corporate influence with state authority. This paradigm offers a basis for future theoretical research on digital media regulation and cultural consumption in China, as well as aids in conceptually organising the empirical findings.

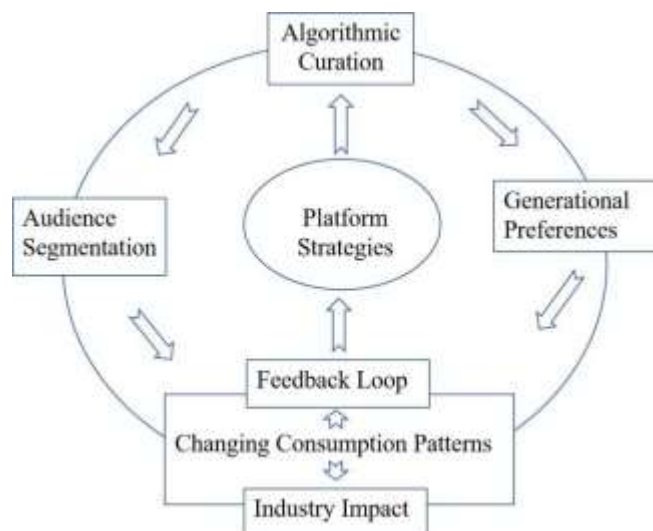


Figure 2. OTT platform strategies framework

OTT Platform Strategies: User interface optimisation, algorithm design, and content acquisition. Algorithmic Curation tactics are implemented using algorithmic processes that control user exposure, such as engagement-based filtering, homepage content ranking, and personalised recommendations. Algorithms allow for accurate user segmentation based on watching habits, content choices, and generation (Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z). Additionally, different generations display diverse media behaviours: Gen Z uses mobile devices a lot and has a tendency to binge-watch; Gen Y strikes a balance between nostalgia and fresh

information; and Gen X continues to watch selectively using traditional formats. These tastes cause a move away from traditional moviegoing and towards over-the-top (OTT) streaming, which leads to a decline in box office attendance and a fragmentation of media rituals. Film production and distribution patterns change in response, giving rise to platform-native aesthetics, shorter release cycles, and new financing arrangements. Demand that is predicted by algorithms is increasingly reflected in content creation. Lastly, audience data gathered during this process is sent back into the platform's algorithms, strengthening its influence and improving recommendations in the future.

The entire architecture operates as a recursive cycle, demonstrating how user behaviour and industry adaption both simultaneously form and are shaped by digital infrastructures such as Tencent Video. This model illustrates the dynamic co-production of technology systems, cultural preferences, and economic restructuring by combining viewpoints from media ecology and platform imperialism.

5.2. Implications

Theoretically, this framework provides a basis for comprehending how cultural consumption and technology systems co-evolve under hybrid state-capitalist control. Implications for policy include the need for infrastructure-level regulation to avoid content homogenisation, safeguards for cultural diversity, and increased algorithmic transparency. To strike a balance between platform-driven domination and more general cultural objectives, support for independent filmmakers and film studios is still crucial. Tencent Video's business model exemplifies both local distinctiveness and worldwide convergence. Similar to Netflix, it uses data-driven personalisation, but it functions in China's unique political economy by fusing business principles with policies that support the government. Tencent has a greater ecosystem integration than iQIYI, but its market dominance and opacity pose questions regarding fair access to and exposure of content.

5.2.1. Theoretical perspective

The conceptual framework created for this study combines information from generational focus groups and expert interviews to show how Tencent Video, a prominent OTT platform, is changing the media landscape in China. Its foundation is Tencent's platformization approach, in which algorithmic infrastructure uses engagement data and predictive analytics to standardise production while simultaneously personalising content.

By dividing audiences into different generations, these systems promote particular viewing behaviours including binge-watching, mobile-first access, and loyalty based on IP or celebrities. The emergence of short-form streaming, dwindling moviegoing attendance, and changing production and distribution structures suited for digital platforms are all consequences of these formed preferences.

Importantly, this cycle is strengthened by a feedback loop, which aligns platform strategies with audience behaviour by continuously improving algorithmic recommendations based on user data. This is an example of a hybrid kind of platform imperialism, in which governmental and commercial logics combine to organise cultural value, visibility, and content access.

From the standpoint of media ecology, the framework demonstrates how platforms reshape viewing habits and sensory cycles, altering the function of cinema in a disjointed, data-driven world. In the end, this model emphasises OTT platforms as algorithmic institutions that co-produce culture, industry standards, and audience subjectivities in modern China, in addition to their role as content distributors.

5.2.2. Policy Implications

The approach emphasises Tencent Video's pivotal role in influencing audience preferences and content structures through proprietary recommendation algorithms in relation to platform governance and cultural sovereignty. Platform imperialism, in which digital infrastructures concentrate cultural power in ways that put monetizable material ahead of public value, is exacerbated by this. Such processes necessitate the following policy initiatives in China: Require openness in algorithmic design to avoid echo chambers and cultural homogenisation. Encourage the creation and promotion of genres with educational, minority, or regionally diverse content to preserve cultural variety. Establish moral guidelines for data governance and monitoring, particularly in light of the feedback loop in which user data is continuously collected to improve recommendation systems. Recognise the cultural contributions of independent filmmakers and conventional film studios in a platform-dominated industry by providing them with public funding and policy protection.

In order to ensure that platform operations are in line with cultural development objectives rather than just commercial criteria, the framework recommends that Chinese regulatory agencies move beyond content restriction and engage in infrastructure-level governance.

5.2.3. Industry implications

The comparative value of the research is quite important. Tencent Video's strategy model exhibits both common logics and unique national traits when compared to both domestic and international peers. Tencent Video uses data-driven personalisation and content commissioning, just like Netflix, but it works in a state-capitalist media landscape where platform strategy is influenced by political sensitivities. Tencent strikes a compromise between national cultural demands and business algorithms, whereas Netflix prioritises worldwide scalability. Tencent Video seems to be more vertically linked with Tencent's larger ecosystem (such as WeChat and QQ Music) than iQIYI, which bills itself as a "AI-powered entertainment platform." This allows for more thorough cross-platform data circulation and audience targeting. While Tencent has tended towards high-engagement IPs and family-friendly programming, iQIYI places more emphasis on genre experiments.

In contrast to both platforms, Tencent's algorithmic opacity and its hegemony in China's digital ecosystem make it harder to find content and increase the stakes for consumers and artists who rely on the platform for access and visibility.

Platformization is influenced by various institutional settings, technical affordances, and governance frameworks, as demonstrated by the comparative lens. International discussions about platform accountability and cultural regulation can benefit from such comparisons.

5.3. Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature and has a number of limitations pertaining to representativeness, methodology, and scope. First, the study uses qualitative techniques, which emphasise depth over breadth, particularly focus groups and in-depth interviews. Although these techniques provide deep, contextual understanding of Tencent Video's platform tactics and viewer reactions, the results cannot be statistically extrapolated to all Chinese media consumers.

Second, the sample's size and variety are constrained. The sample tended towards urban, digitally literate people, despite efforts to recruit participation from Gen X, Y, and Z as well as professionals in the media and film industries. This concentration of demographics might not accurately reflect audiences that live in rural areas or are less tech-savvy, which could limit the range of interpretation.

Third, there is no direct comparison to other significant OTT platforms like iQIYI, Youku, Bilibili, or global companies like Netflix; the report only looks at Tencent Video. Although this case study method improves depth and focus, it restricts the findings' applicability to larger platform ecologies or international media landscapes.

Fourth, it became challenging to distinguish cause-and-effect links due to theme overlaps that surfaced inside the analytical framework, particularly between algorithmic suggestions and platform-driven content generation. Furthermore, the study ignores outside factors that can also affect viewing habits, like piracy, government regulation, and competition for short-form videos.

Lastly, because the study was qualitative and interpretive, its goal was to identify trends and conflicts in the platform-audience dynamics rather than to develop a general theory. Instead of making generalisations about all OTT consumption in China, the results should be interpreted as well-founded observations within a particular cultural and industrial environment.

5.4. Future research directions

Numerous avenues for further research both inside and outside of the Chinese context are made possible by the framework and conclusions produced in this study. Like Andersen et al.'s (2021) and Coyne et al.'s (2020) investigations, longitudinal studies could monitor how generational media preferences change over time, especially as Gen Z ages and younger cohorts like Gen Alpha start using OTT platforms^[33,34]. This would enhance our comprehension of how algorithmic systems influence long-term changes in media engagement as well as current behaviors.

Future studies could use mixed-methods approaches that integrate statistical breadth and contextual depth by combining qualitative interviews with large-scale surveys to improve representativeness. The current prejudice against urban and digitally literate people might also be lessened by complementary strategies including cross-class comparisons, audience ethnography in rural areas, and digital trace analysis. Examining how content producers, directors, and authors deal with the potential and limitations of algorithmically governed environments is another way to look at the platform ecology's production side. Such studies could provide insight into concerns of economic precarity, innovation, and creative autonomy under platform-led cultural regimes (e.g., Nichol & LeBlanc, 2021; Duffy & Meisner, 2023)^[35,36].

A deeper global understanding of platformization could be made possible by comparative research across various national media systems, particularly in emerging economies, which could further shed light on how economic structures, cultural norms, and regulatory frameworks mitigate the effects of OTT platforms. A more balanced view of audience diversity and platform adoption in China would come from comparative research conducted in both urban and rural areas. An excellent illustration of this is provided by Barkemeyer et al. (2024)^[37].

Methodologically, experimental or computational techniques may be able to distinguish the causal impacts of algorithmic recommendation systems, while longitudinal audience tracking may be able to record changing media consumption patterns over generations. A more technical line of research could examine the design reasoning behind recommendation systems, evaluating how engineering decisions affect audience targeting, narrative pace, and aesthetic standards. We might get a lot of ideas from these two surveys of the literature on algorithm research (Garcia-Penalvo et al., 2023; Bodduluri et al., 2024)^[38,39].

Lastly, audience agency—such as resistance, disengagement, or alternative digital practices that challenge prevailing platform logics—should receive serious attention, as demonstrated by Bonini & Treré's research (2024)^[40]. Emerging kinds of media citizenship and cultural autonomy in the digital age may be

revealed by researching how people and communities choose to participate in algorithmic culture in different ways, such as opting out, subverting, or reconfiguring their engagement.

6. Conclusions

Using Tencent Video as a primary instance, this paper examines how OTT platforms affect viewer choices and the Chinese film business. Based on six expert interviews and six focus groups with different generations, the study shows how platform tactics change the ways that films are made, how people watch them, and how they are distributed. Five key variables were examined across three study issues using theme analysis and media ecology theory, which demonstrated a significant shift in China's media ecosystem.

Tencent Video's concentration of content control through vertical integration, algorithmic gatekeeping, and monetisation frameworks is an example of platform imperialism, according to key findings. These systems standardise cultural consumption in addition to centralising governance. grasp audience segmentation requires a grasp of generational differences: Gen Z and Gen Y show a significant dependence on algorithms and multi-device engagement, but Gen X is still selectively involved and less engaged with digital-first viewing. As a result, customised, on-demand multimedia experiences supplant traditional movie routines. Shorter release periods, tiered subscriptions, and exclusive online premieres all help to redefine film as a platform-curated medium as opposed to a cinema-based one.

A recursive model is used in the conceptual framework created in this study to visualise these changes. Tencent's platformization approach combines user interface optimisation, content acquisition, and algorithm design to customise suggestions and influence media consumption. A circular system that reconfigures audience agency, production norms, and cultural access is created when these choices are fed back into platform algorithms. The model, which is framed by platform imperialism and media ecology, shows how Tencent Video functions in China not just as a distributor but also as an infrastructure system that co-produces user subjectivities, industrial logic, and media practices.

Overall, by showing how algorithmic infrastructures change the function of cinema in China, this work adds to current discussions in platform studies and media governance. The study provides useful suggestions in addition to its conceptual contribution. To guarantee algorithmic accountability and transparency, politicians could first enact regulatory frameworks. These frameworks could include requirements for recommendation criteria disclosure, prohibitions against monopolistic self-promotion, and protections for diversity in film visibility. Second, in order to help independent and minority filmmakers compete in an environment that is algorithmically biased, specific regulations could be created to support them through funding programs and content quotas on large OTT platforms. Third, according to the report, movie theatres and over-the-top (OTT) platforms don't have to compete with one another; hybrid partnership models like joint subscription packages, cross-platform marketing campaigns, or staggered release windows could benefit both industries. These collaborations would help OTT platforms increase their legitimacy and audience trust while preserving the cultural and social significance of films. In an increasingly platform-dominated media landscape, it emphasises the necessity of multifaceted regulatory, theoretical, and industrial methods to guarantee cultural variety and democratic access.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, Zhongyu Zhao and Hasrul Hashim; methodology, Zhongyu Zhao; software, Zhongyu Zhao; validation, Zhongyu Zhao, Hasrul Hashim and Ammar Redza Ahmad Rizal; formal analysis, Zhongyu Zhao; investigation, Zhongyu Zhao; resources, Zhongyu Zhao; data curation, Zhongyu Zhao;

writing—original draft preparation, Zhongyu Zhao; writing—review and editing, Hasrul Hashim and Ammar Redza Ahmad Rizal; visualization, Zhongyu Zhao; supervision, Hasrul Hashim and Ammar Redza Ahmad Rizal; project administration, Hasrul Hashim. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Approval Ref: JEP-2025-289).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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