

Original Paper

Social Media Marketing Strategy in Chinese Musical Theatre

Industry

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Abstract

The usage of social media in the context of musical theatre marketing continues to grow. More and more musical theatre production companies in China are using social media tools such as Weibo to provide various services and interact with customers. In an effort to help understand how the current musical theatre industry conducts social media marketing and the future development direction, this paper describes a case study which applies content analysis to examined posts on Weibo sites of five top musical theatre production companies: Seven Ages, Shanghai Culture Square, Musicals, Focustage, and Amazing Musicals. The results provide insights into the characteristics of social media marketing strategies of musical theatre production companies and changes after covid-19 pandemic. The study results add to the rapidly evolving field of social media within the musical theatre industry marketing context. Moreover, it advocates for an active role for the musical companies to explore and actively participate in the customer and musical fan communities on social media.

Keywords

musical theatre, theatre experience, social media marketing, parasocial interaction

1. Introduction

The percentage of enterprises use social media for product marketing, customer relationship maintenance, consulting and after-sales service continues to increase. Originally, social media is only an optional online marketing channel, but now in the era of pandemic, industries are adapting to and exploring the new possibility of commercial marketing in the network space.

1.1 Social Media

The definition of social media has always been a challenge due to the variety of stand-alone and built-in social media services. Some early researchers referring to social media as social networks or

social networking services in the mid-2000s (Boyd, & Ellison, 2007). A more recent and detailed definition was proposed by Filo et al. (2015) who defined social media as “new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g., teams, government agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g., customers, athletes and journalists)”.

People worldwide establish extensive connections through the deep engagement of social media platforms. Increasingly, social media are largely considered by modern business as promising platforms to conduct the promotional activities as to effectively communicate with the targeted customers (Kohli et al., 2015).

1.2 Social media Marketing

According to Dwivedi et al. (2015), social media marketing could be defined as “a dialogue often triggered by consumers/audiences, or a business/product/services that circulate amongst the stated parties to set in motion a revealing communication on some promotional information so that it allows learning from one another’s use and experiences, eventually benefitting all of the involved parties”. Tuten and Solomon (2015, p. 21) stated that “the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software is to create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization’s stakeholders”.

1.2.1 Marketing in Musical Theatre Industry

According to Dwivedi et al. (2015), the vast majority of social media studies were observed to be within the marketing area. This study mainly focuses on social media marketing in the field of Musical theatre industry.

1.2.2 Broadway Marketing

At the old times, marketing Broadway shows must be as much about advertising the show itself as it is about offering opportunities to purchase tickets, and a premium ticket brokerage was the middleman, between the producers and the audience, the role musical theatre marketing still plays today. Since the first Broadway musical theatre tickets were sold online in 1996, musical theatre producers have gradually incorporated the Internet into their marketing campaigns (MacDonald, 2017).

Especially with the development of social media, the marketing strategy of the musical theatre industry has also been adjusted to have more interact with audience online. Vogel and Hodges. (2006) clarified that there are three areas of theater marketing: advertising, promotion (often called marketing), and publicity. He also discussed the importance of cast appearances on television shows and having star names attached to the cast. As stated, “We know we can’t give away a ticket to a bad show, yet if a production is hot, people will pay premium prices, especially for special limited shows or hot new shows in their first few months”. Also, “The online brand experience begins the storytelling that ticket buyers will experience at the theatre, and social media platforms allow musical fans and spectators to

participate in musical theatre marketing, promoting individual musicals through online activities and helping marketers to expand a community of ticket buyers” (MacDonald, 2017). Thus, Fan-generated contents on social media are ultimately providing free advertising for a commercial musical product.

Ackman, N. (2017) explored how *Hamilton*, a Broadway hit musical can be marketed using social networking, viral marketing and online advertising providing content for fans, creating a significant online presence, and keeping people engaged. He concluded that “*Hamilton*’s creative, marketing, social media, and advertising teams ensured that fans had access to original content, in the form of projects like the PBS documentary, book, and #Ham4Ham shows. Much of their marketing efforts promoted these products rather than tickets to the show itself; in fact, the advertising team had to do remarkably little because the show survived greatly on word of mouth. *Hamilton* fans continue to engage on social media with the official accounts, cast members, and other fans and have built a community, aided by Karns, *Hamilton*’s account runner. Thus, the *Hamilton* fans may be counted on to purchase Broadway, West End, and national tour tickets to see the show, despite the difficulty of obtaining tickets”.

Another Study has explored the continuing diversification of musical theatre fandom of a musical called *Dear Evan Hansen* via social media and the interactive ways in which productions harness fan engagement. The musical’s producers and marketing team frequently invite interaction around the musical’s core mantra, ‘You Will Be Found’. These interactions can benefit fans by potentially eliciting feelings of social inclusion that may be experienced as empowering (Rush, 2021).

1.3 Musical Marketing in China

In China, market-oriented musical theatre companies have gradually rose in the early 21st century, which is also the time of the rise of social media. With more and more people engaged in social media platforms, Musical theatre producers began to focus on the operation of social media accounts to promote their products. But unlike the United States, market-oriented musical theatre production started very late, only a very small number of people are familiar with this form of stage performance, so the marketing of musical products is very difficult both online and offline.

However, this situation was changed by a variety show called *Super Vocal*. This show presents many excellent musical actors who perform some of the songs from classical musicals which draw a lot of attention nationwide. This foreign performance art was introduced to more audiences in China and attracted many fans into the theater to watch the plays. The musical theatre market was more active than ever before. This is the time when Chinese musical theatre producers realized the business value of musical fandom, and they started to put effort to interact with online users (mostly young people) and try to turn these fans to theatergoer.

Since the spreading of covid-19 pandemic, theaters have been closed from time to time, resulting in a huge loss of profits for musical companies. Using social media for product marketing and managing

relationship with fans and audiences is an effective way to turn around the company. Because the live performance was stopped, the musical company was unable to provide actual products, so they need to create experiences to meet consumer expectations by providing content, creating a significant online presence, and keeping people engaged. Thus, understanding the ways in which musical companies can preserve the intimate relationship qualities offered by social media while still meeting consumer expectations amidst the escalating volume of interactions has become essential.

Labrecque, L. I. (2014) proposes that parasocial interaction (PSI) theory may be used as a theoretical lens for designing successful social media strategies. Labrecque's study provides evidence of PSI's role in the development of positive relationship outcomes. It reveals that this sense of feeling connected with the brand goes beyond the interaction itself and drives increased feelings of loyalty intentions and willingness to provide information to the brand.

Musical is a highly experiential product and people can only get a complete viewing experience when they enter the theater. Therefore, how to make the audiences get the best experiences and satisfaction through online social media is also a difficulty.

This study sought to examine the efforts of five musical theatre companies' social media marketing, compare the changes of their social media marketing strategies before and after the pandemic, and their main obstacles in interacting with fans and audiences. While scholars have discussed many Broadway shows and their digital marketing success, whether these can be applied to the marketing of Chinese musical market remains to be verified. Because the scale of China's musical market is far smaller than that of the United States, and there is a lack of popular original musical production like Hamilton. This study will explore the current situation and problems of social media marketing of Chinese musical theatre from the perspective of musical production companies and hope to offer marketers some guidance for fostering relationships in social media environments. To be specific, this paper explored the questions as follow:

- 1) What are the characteristics of social media marketing strategies of different types of musical companies?
- 2) What are the changes in the social media marketing of musical companies after the pandemic?
- 3) How do musical companies interact with the fans and audience on social media?

2. Method

2.1 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected via go through five top musical production companies' official social media accounts on Weibo (Note 1).

Content analysis will be used in this study. Based on the Chinese social media platform Weibo, this study chooses five musical theatre companies' official accounts to analyze their contents in a certain

period of times. These companies are Seven Ages, Shanghai Culture Square, Musicals, Focustage and Amazing Musicals. They were chosen based on their market shares according to a report on the top 30 Chinese musical theatres in 2019. Their social media influence and recent activity were also considered. Table 1 shows some basic information of the top five musical theatre production companies, and how many followers they had on their social media sites (Note 2).

Table 1. Basic Information of the Top Five Musical Theatre Production Companies

Company Name	Start Time	Business Scope	Production	Follower
Seven Ages	2012	Localized production of foreign musicals + Introduction of original foreign musical	<i>Man of La Mancha, Avenue Q, How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying, The Sound of Music, Les Choristes, Cinderella, Next to Normal, Matilda (original)</i>	122k
Shanghai Culture Square	2011	Localized production of foreign musicals + Production of original Chinese musicals	<i>Spring Awakening, Maybe Happy Ending, Fan letter, My Bucket List, Rachmaninoff, Romeo and Juliet, The Throne and The Poetry</i>	100k
Musicals	2015	Production of original Chinese musicals + Localized production of foreign musicals	<i>Teddy & Friends, The Moon and Sixpence, The Bad Kids, The Long Night, The Fiction, Flames, The letters, Mr Sunshine's Grocery, Tick Tick Boom, Vincent van Gogh, Rock of Ages</i>	76k
Focustage	2018	Localized production of foreign musicals	<i>Black Mary Poppins, Flowers for Algernon, Mia Famiglia, Santa Lucia</i>	50k
Amazing Musicals	2018	Production of original Chinese musicals	<i>Pink Ladies, What If, One Fine Day, Light Keepers</i>	38k

2.2 Procedures

To answer the research questions, this study conducted a social media content analysis for the Weibo sites of the Top Five Companies by following two phases.

First, this study collected quantitative data from their individual social media sites such as number of followers, number of postings, comments, reposts and likes in April, 2022. In this month, Shanghai was lockdown due to the spreading of Omicron, and theaters are largely shut off. Social media is the best channel for musical theatre company to rely on to promote their product. So a lot of online activities were hold during these times to manage the relationship with the fans, connect the producers, actors to the audiences.

Then, to compare the changes of social media marketing and user engagement before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, musical companies' posts during February 2019 is chosen to represent the times before pandemic. At that time, the variety show Super Vocal was popular and just finished broadcasting, which led to a lot of discussion on social media. People started to learn about this live performance art more than ever before. It's a huge success for that show to expand the market for musical theatre industry, and many of the show participants were later joined the musical theatre industry which brought a lot of fans to watch plays in the theater. Therefore, the musical producers were paying more attention to use social media to manage the fan relationship and enlarge the potential audience.

Secondly, this study applied text mining to analyze the text messages posted on their Weibo sites in order to discover new knowledge and patterns, and to acquire a deeper understanding of how the five musical production companies are using social media in practice. For the above reasons, this study used the posts collected between April 1, 2022 and April 30, 2022 as the sample for text mining. The posts were saved into Excel Spreadsheets for analysis.

The text mining process includes multiple steps. Firstly, raw data was transformed into a usable format, mainly by cleaning, segmenting words and counting out high-frequency words. Subsequently, text mining techniques were used to examine the data sets in order to gain insights about companies' social media activities. ROSTCM6 was used to explore and extract key concepts, generate categories, and help to quickly gain insights from the textual data. By pre-processing, applying text mining, and evaluating the mining results and recognize actionable information, to identify new knowledge including patterns, issues, and themes from the collected social media data.

3. Result

3.1 Phase 1

This study collected quantitative data from their individual social media sites such as number of followers, number of postings, comments and likes, frequency of posting, posting and response time.

Below is the trend of posts numbers in April, 2022 for the top five musical companies: namely Seven Ages Weibo site (<https://weibo.com/7ages>), Shanghai Culture Square Weibo site (<https://weibo.com/shculturesquare>), Musicals Weibo site (<https://weibo.com/u/5542720743>), Focustage Weibo site(<https://weibo.com/u/6582303814>), and Amazing Musicals Weibo site

(<https://weibo.com/u/6641891098>). 275 posts were collected from the five Weibo sites in total. Among them, Seven Ages' Weibo site had the largest number of posts; 130 messages were posted on their site. Focustage posted 45 messages, Shanghai Culture Square and Musicals both posted 40 messages, while Amazing Musicals posted 20 messages. Figure 1 shows the number of messages posted on the five Weibo sites in different days in April. As illustrated in the figure, the reason for the disparity is that the five musical companies had different events and special activities such as live stream, luck draw at different days.

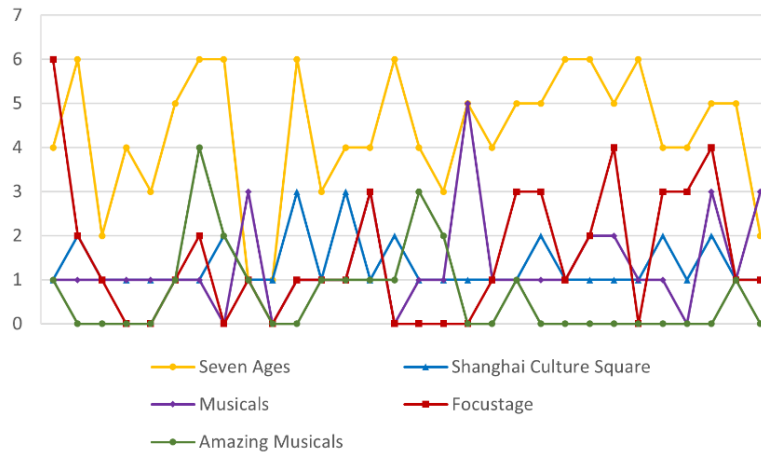


Figure 1. Trend of Posts Numbers in April for the Top Five Musical Production Companies

Figures 2-6 show the number of reposts, comments, and likes posted on the five companies' sites in different days in April. Typically, the user engagement reaches the peak when the companies announce a new production and casts, upload videos, or start a live stream involved popular musical actors. In total, Seven Ages received 739 reposts, 1189 comments and 2433 likes; Shanghai Culture Square received 206 reposts, 177 comments and 991 likes; Musicals received 3591 reposts, 901 comments and 7695 likes; Focustage received 2097 reposts, 5946 comments and 7222 likes; Amazing Musicals received 842 reposts, 392 comments and 1935 likes during the month of April in 2022. Overall, Focustage had a higher level of engagement than its four competitors in terms of comments. But Musicals received more reposts and likes than others did.

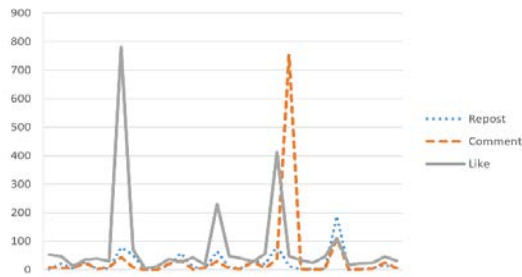


Figure 2. Seven Ages' User

Engagement Trend in April, 2022

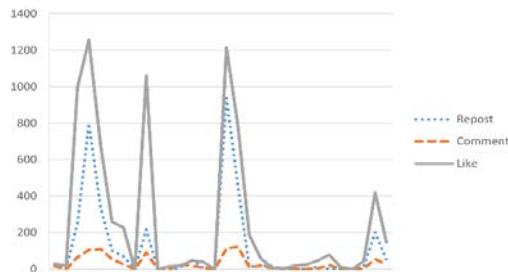


Figure 4. Musicals' User

Engagement Trend in April, 2022

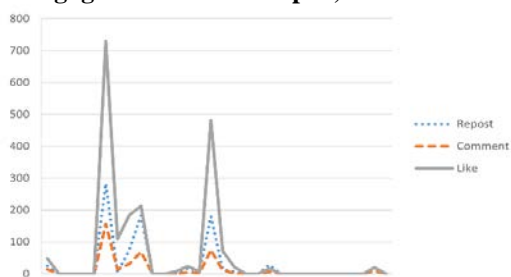


Figure 6. Amazing Musicals' User

Engagement Trend in April, 2022

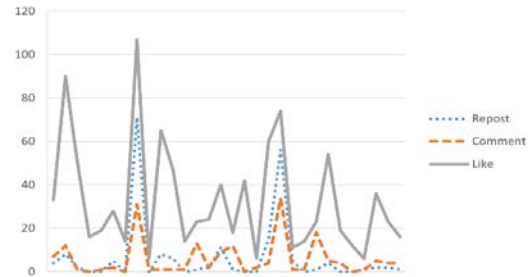


Figure 3. Shanghai Culture Square'

User Engagement Trend in April, 2022

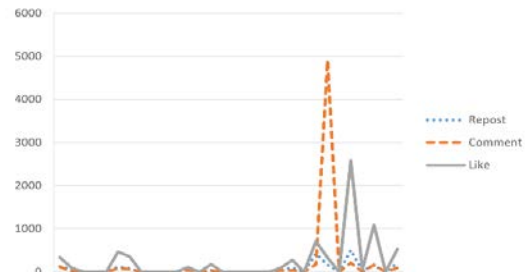


Figure 5. Focustage's User

Engagement Trend in April, 2022

This study compared the average posts and user interactions (reposts, comments, likes) of each company before and after the covid-19 occurred. The purpose is to find out whether there is any significant change in the use of social media by musical companies and their user engagement. In this study, t-test was used to analyze the significance of sample differences between February 2019 and April 2022. The study found that the pandemic has no significant impact on the number of posts ($t = -1.37, p = 0.208 > 0.05$) and user interactions ($t = 0.815, p = 0.439 > 0.05$) of musical companies.

In order to further test the change of user interaction volume of each company, this study collected the average reposts, comments, and likes of each company in February 2019 and April 2022, and made an independent sample t-test on these data (see Table 2).

Table 2. Independent Sample T-test Result

		Average repost	Average comment	Average like
Seven Ages	Before	131	67	233
	After	10	16	20
	T	2.344	1.816	3.537
	P	0.023*	0.074	0.001*
Shanghai Culture Square	Before	54	34	44
	After	8	6	25
	T	1.161	1.158	2.091
	P	0.258	0.26	0.045*
Musicals	Before	942	881	1111
	After	109	35	208
	T	1.983	3.678	3.592
	P	0.066	0.002*	0.002*
Focustage	Before	31	27	42
	After	70	198	172
	T	-1.243	-0.856	-1.816
	P	0.219	0.396	0.075
Amazing Musicals	Before	12	9	15
	After	56	26	97
	T	-1.933	-1.46	-1.962
	P	0.072	0.163	0.064

*Indicates significant at 95% confidence interval.

The study found that there were significant differences in the average number of likes of Seven Ages, Shanghai Culture Square and Musicals before and after the pandemic ($t_1 = 3.537$, $p_1 = 0.001 < 0.05$; $t_2 = 2.091$, $p_2 = 0.045 < 0.05$; $t_3 = 3.592$, $p_3 = 0.002 < 0.05$). Also, there were significant differences in the average repost of Seven Ages ($t_4 = 2.344$, $p_4 = 0.023 < 0.05$) and in the average comment of Musicals ($t_5 = 3.678$, $p = 0.002 < 0.05$). There was no significant difference in the rest. This shows that, in general, the covid-19 has no significant impact on the social media utilization and user participation of musical companies. At the same time, this study also found that the user engagement of the top 3 companies Seven Ages, Shanghai Culture Square and Musicals showed a downward trend, while the user engagement of Focustage and Amazing Musicals showed an upward trend.

3.2 Phase 2

This study applied text mining to the text collected in order to discover new knowledge and patterns. As there were no criteria available to compare the social media content of the musical companies, this study combines the textual data from the five companies to discover main shared themes first. After themes were established, then examine and compare the detailed efforts of the five companies. The summary of the five themes and results of the text mining are listed below.

(1) Musical related introduction

A major theme was found is musical related introduction and knowledges share (around 24%). The companies would share the scripts, songs, and characters of classic musical dramas, introduce theater customs, theater seat layout, share video clips of stage performance. For example, Seven Ages has a fixed topic column #musical treasure chest#, and Shanghai Culture Square has #little-known facts of drama# to share anything about musical theatre.



Figure 7. Photo of Seven Ages' Post with #Musical Treasure Chest# Introducing Important Awards in the Theater Industry



Figure 8. Photo of Shanghai Culture Square's Post with #Little-known Facts of Drama# Sharing Knowledge about Ghost Light on the Theater Stage since the 19 Century

Focustage also connect the theme of the musical drama with social topics. One of their shares is about a song "In the name of love" from the musical "Flowers for Algernon". They wrote, "#Flowers for Algernon## World Autism Awareness Day# 'Look at this colorful world with your heart, you will find

love everywhere’. We hope everyone can feel the power of love”.

(2) Casual socialization posts

This study noticed that the posts (around 17%) sometimes are holiday greetings, wishes for an early end to the epidemic, and casual chat, which creates a friendly socialization atmosphere. In other words, the musical companies were trying to make their online presence on Weibo more like an online community or a circle of friends.

Table 3. Examples Related to Casual Socialization Posts

Topics	Examples
Holiday greetings	<i>#All Souls’ Day# Cherish and remember forever. They live in you. On the first day of the holiday, wish you all keep the health code!</i>
Wishes for the end of the pandemic	<i>Please take care of yourself and look forward to our reunion in the theater as soon as possible. Although we can’t meet during these days, but the pandemic can’t stop the hearts of missing each other.</i>
Casual chat	<i>Good morning! Is the musical you recently saw a tragedy or a comedy? Follow me to bathe in the sunshine on this warm spring day.</i>

(3) Ticket purchase and refund information

Some messages were related to the musical theatre ticket purchase and refund such as recent performance arrangement, cast adjustment, ticket purchasing channel. Due to the spread of covid-19 in Shanghai in April, theater performances were suspended, so many performance delay announcements and explanation of ticket refund methods were included.

(4) Feedback on customers’ purchase

This study also found that a few messages were responses to customers’ reviews and experiences after watching a performance. For example, Seven Ages regularly selects some of those for display.

(5) Company and online activity

The musical companies also posted messages about company and online activity information such as open new official account, live stream, lucky draw, membership activities, actor recruitment information, which accounted for nearly 35% of the total initial messages they posted. There were many live stream activities in April including musical actor performance experience sharing, online Live Action Role Playing games, music radio, etc. Based on analysis and observation, these activities seemed effective strategies to engage the Weibo audiences.

Finally, this study examined the messages that were re-tweeted the most. They all were messages posted by Musicals. The post with the largest number of reposts is about a neighborhood concert

initiated by a musical drama actor cooperated with the company under the circumstance of community epidemic prevention and control.

4. Discussion

The results reveal that the five musical production companies are actively in social media and have committed substantial resources for their social media efforts. The examined data show that they were committed to providing delightful experience for their customers. For example, during the lockdown, many performances were canceled, and the customer service staff of Musicals responded to customers' demand for ticket refund and exchange quickly. All companies attach great importance to the introduction of company and online activities. Because the epidemic has made offline performances impossible, online activities have become the main way of interaction. Compared with other companies, Seven Ages and Shanghai Culture Square put more efforts in musical theatre introduction and causal social chat. The reasons behind this remains to be further studied in the future. Since Focustage has more performances per month, it also has the most posts related to performance cancellation and refund.

On the other hand, this study also found that only Focustage and Amazing Musicals continued to increase in the amount of user interaction after covid-19 compared with the other three companies. The user interaction volume of Focustage even exceeds that of its all competitors. Their social media efforts are more noticeable considering that their number of fans (7.60%) is smaller than Seven Ages, Shanghai Culture Square and Musicals. Based on data analysis and observation, the posts related to two popular musicals Mia famiglia (also known as The Bistro by fans) and Santa Lucia produced by Focustage have the highest number of likes. Mia famiglia has started an immersive performance in field mode in China. In a small space that conforms to the plot design, the audience can immersively participate in the drama and greatly enhance the interaction with the actors. This mode has changed the traditional layout of the actors on the stage and the audience off the stage and has won great popularity. Unlike other musicals, it is a long-term resident performance, with more and fixed performances per month, thus, the popularity lasts for a long time.

The study demonstrates that the five musical production companies have made significant social media efforts to increase interaction with customers and build brands in the online communities, in the form of actively paying attention to user demands, timely reply and informing the company's production arrangement. It is also worth noting that each company shapes its social media image into a friendly character. For example, Seven Ages call themselves little seven, Amazing Musicals call themselves little whale, and Musicals conducts personification interaction with other official accounts belong to the company in the role of big brother. This way will create a friendly and interactive atmosphere. This creates a friendly communication atmosphere. In general, social media is a convenience platform for

musical companies to develop online customer communities and fan group. However, this study only preliminarily explored the current situation of social media marketing in China's musical industry from the perspective of musical product providers, the changes after the pandemic, and the overall characteristics of social media marketing. It did not make an in-depth comparison of the marketing strategies and effects of different companies, and it needs to be further studied in the future.

5. Conclusion

Social media has become an important concern of many industries, so it is important to understand the marketing strategies applicable to social media. This case study analyzes the current situation and characteristics of social media marketing in China's musical industry through content analysis and text mining. The results show that musical companies have put a lot of efforts in social media marketing. They provide social media users with information in front of and behind the stage of the musical theatre through live stream and video clips and pay attention to customer needs and feedback. Not only to promote products, but also to maintain the relationship with customers and strengthen the stickiness of musical fans. All in all, social media plays a positive role in expanding the audience market in the musical industry in China. However, in this process, in addition to the role of musical companies, the contribution of the audience cannot be underestimated. Future research can pay more attention to the impact of this musical community formed on social media on the musical industry marketing.

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Notes

Note 1. Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website, similar to Twitter. It was created in 2009, and has since grown to become one of the most popular social media platforms in China. Weibo allows users to post short text, images, and videos, as well as interact with others through comments, likes, and reposts.

Note 2. The number of fans of each company's account continued to increase during this research, but the ranking remained unchanged.