

Integrating Social Cognitive Theory and Brand Equity Models: A Framework for Analyzing Audience Engagement Behavior in IP Animated Films

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Abstract

The IP animation industry in China is currently experiencing rapid growth, yet systematic theoretical research on audience engagement behavior remains scarce, especially regarding an integrated framework that combines personal factors and environmental factors. Therefore, this paper proposes a novel theoretical framework combining Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Aaker's Brand Equity Model (BEM) to analyze audience engagement behaviors in IP animated films. By synthesizing personal factors (IP awareness, IP loyalty, IP associations, perceived quality) and environmental factors (film production, film promotion, film distribution), this study provides a holistic perspective to understand how cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors jointly shape audience engagement behavior. The framework is contextualized within China's booming IP animation sector, with implications for global media industries seeking to leverage cultural IPs. The paper highlights the mediating role of audience attitudes and provides actionable insights for filmmakers and policymakers to enhance engagement strategies.

Keywords: Social Cognitive Theory, Brand Equity Model, Audience engagement, IP animated films, Cultural adaptation

Introduction

In recent years, Intellectual property (IP) animated films have become a core force in China's cultural industry. IP animated films typically refer to animated works created based on existing intellectual properties, such as mythological tales, online novels, games, or classic literature (Peng, 2023). IP animated film series are developed based on a specific intellectual property and produced as a series of related films (Ji et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2023). These IPs, through adaptation, generate a brand aggregation effect, not only attracting high initial

attention but also evoking emotional resonance among audiences, thereby promoting sustained viewing behaviors and brand-related consumption.

The Ne Zha IP animated film series refers to animated films adapted from the Ne Zha story in the traditional Chinese literary classic *The Investiture of the Gods*. These films form a series based on the Ne Zha IP, and in this study, specifically refer to the *Ne Zha 1* and *Ne Zha 2* animated films produced by China's ENLIGHT MEDIA COLORROOM. *Ne Zha 1* was released in mainland China in July 2019 and achieved a box office revenue of 5.035 billion RMB. *Ne Zha 2*, the sequel to *Ne Zha 1*, was released in mainland China in January 2025. As of April 2025, *Ne Zha 2* had earned 15.5 billion RMB at the box office, topping the global animated film box office rankings and ranking fifth in global box office history.

The *Ne Zha* animated film series has not only achieved remarkable commercial success but also triggered extensive audience engagement across multiple platforms and levels, including repeat viewings, social media sharing, word-of-mouth recommendations, purchasing of derivative products, and participation in fan communities. These highly interactive behavioral patterns reveal the potential of IP animated films in fostering emotional connection and brand identification, while also highlighting the practical necessity of constructing a robust theoretical model to systematically analyze the underlying drivers of audience behavior.

However, most current studies focus on adaptation strategies of IP animated films (Chen & Cho, 2024; Feng, 2022; Lau, 2024; Luo, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2020) and development strategies (Ju-Ae, 2024; Pan et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2021), while systematic exploration of the psychological mechanisms and brand perception logic underlying audience engagement behavior remains limited. In particular, at the theoretical level, the construction of models related to audience engagement behavior is still underdeveloped.

To fill this gap, this study integrates Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environment, with the Brand Equity Model (BEM), which focuses on brand-centered metrics, to construct an analytical framework for explaining audience engagement behavior in IP animated films. Using the Ne Zha IP animated film series as a case study, the research proposes a comprehensive path model that includes personal factors, environmental factors, audience attitudes, and audience engagement behavior, aiming to provide both theoretical support and practical insights for future IP film marketing and brand building.

Theoretical Framework

Current Status and Challenges in IP Animated Film Research

Researchers used the PRISMA method to conduct a content search with the keyword "IP animated film" across three databases: Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Scopus, retrieving a total of 638 articles. During the screening process, the following criteria were applied: first, the publication date had to be between 2019 and 2024; second, the document type was limited to research articles, excluding book chapters, newspapers, conference papers, and others; third, the language of the articles had to be Chinese, English, or Korean; fourth, the articles needed to be openly accessible; and fifth, the research field had to belong to social sciences or arts and humanities. Through this process, 300 relevant articles were obtained. Then, based on the research questions and objectives, manual screening and

selection were conducted, resulting in 38 articles. Finally, a quality assessment was performed on these 38 articles, and 12 articles were retained for this study.

Based on the review of 12 articles, the study found that current academic research on IP animated films still has the following limitations:

First, the research topics are primarily focused on IP adaptation strategies and IP development strategies, with a lack of systematic analysis of “audience engagement behaviors” themselves. This review identified seven major themes related to Chinese IP animated films. Among them, five articles focused on adaptation strategies of IP animated films (Chen & Cho, 2024; Feng, 2022; Lau, 2024; Luo, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2020), and three articles focused on development strategies and key developmental factors of IP animated films (Ju-Ae, 2024; Pan et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2021). In addition, each of the following themes was explored in one study: narrative studies of IP animated films (Xuan & Hoon, 2020), IP character development (Jiang & Chung, 2022), traditional cultural elements in IP animated films (Peng, 2023), and aesthetics of IP animated films (Kim, 2019). Thus, it is evident that most existing research concentrates on the adaptation and development strategies of IP animated films, while audience-related studies remain insufficient. The lack of research on audience behavior toward Ne Zha IP animated films has led to stagnation in the development of this genre and a gradual disconnection from audiences. If this trend continues, IP animated films may fall into a vicious cycle of decline (Monaco, 2023). Therefore, understanding the influencing factors of audience engagement behavior is particularly important and critical.

Second, the existing theoretical and empirical research remains limited. The researchers systematically reviewed the 12 articles mentioned above and found that 10 of these articles did not employ any theoretical frameworks or models (Feng, 2022; Jiang & Chung, 2022; Ju-Ae, 2024; Lau, 2024; Luo, 2020; Pan et al., 2019; Peng, 2023; Xuan & Hoon, 2020; Yan et al., 2021; Zhang & Li, 2020). Only two studies involved theoretical frameworks: Space aesthetics theory (Kim, 2019) and Defamiliarization theory (Chen & Cho, 2024), however, there is a lack of empirical research.

Third, the selection of behavioral variables is disconnected from the characteristics of IP, resulting in research findings that are difficult to generalize. Jia-yi et al. (2022), using Chinese animated brand equity as an example, developed an animation brand equity model based on the brand resonance model. The study proposed five brand equity dimensions: Brand Awareness, Perceived Content Quality, Perceived Culture, Perceived Innovation, and Creative Team Association. However, the theoretical variables in the above empirical study are weakly related to the specific characteristics of IP, so the findings are not entirely applicable to the Ne Zha IP animated film series.

The limitations present in the above related studies reveal an urgent need to develop a measurable and verifiable theoretical framework of audience engagement behavior specifically tailored for IP animated films, in order to address the increasingly complex reality of audience interaction.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was introduced and developed by Bandura and Walters in 1963. In SCT, personal factors refer to an individual’s internal psychological and cognitive

characteristics, which primarily include: cognitive abilities (such as observation, memory, reasoning); beliefs and attitudes (views on oneself, others, or behaviors); self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to accomplish specific tasks); emotions and motivation (goals, needs, emotional states). These factors directly influence how individuals interpret environmental information, choose their behaviors, and shape the learning and development process through the dynamic interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment (known as triadic reciprocal determinism) (Bandura, 2013). As shown in Figure 1.

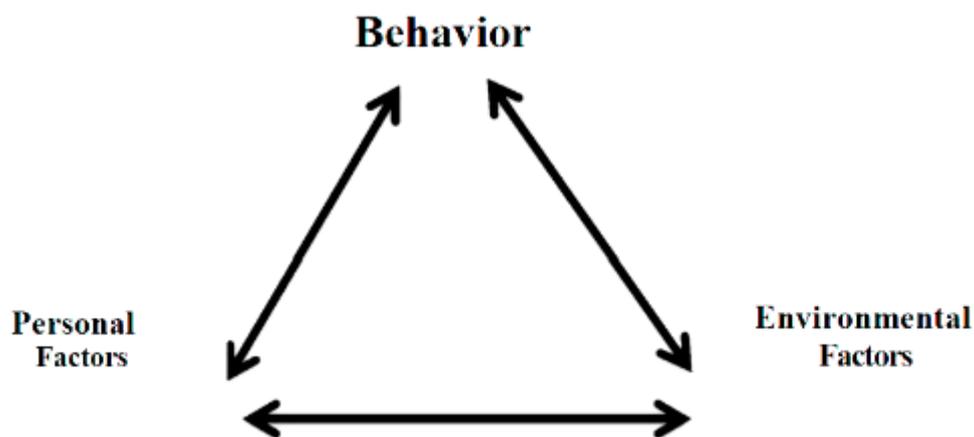


Figure 1: Social Cognitive Theory Model

Source : (Bandura, 1986)

In SCT, the environment refers to factors that influence an individual's behavior. The environment can be divided into physical and social environments. The environment provides a framework for understanding behavior (Parraga, 1990), and these three factors—environment, personal factors, and behavior—constantly interact and influence each other (Bandura, 2013).

Previous studies have primarily applied Social Cognitive Theory to explore educational behaviors (Hosen et al., 2021; Rubenstein et al., 2018), entrepreneurial behaviors (Madawala et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2019; Zaman et al., 2024), health behaviors (Kim & Han, 2021; Rolling & Hong, 2016; Xu et al., 2017), water conservation behaviors (Shahangian et al., 2021), green consumption behaviors (Lin & Hsu, 2015), and adolescent gaming behaviors (Chen et al., 2024). These studies demonstrate that Social Cognitive Theory has strong applicability in explaining individual behavior across various fields. However, there remains a gap in research applying Social Cognitive Theory to understand movie audience engagement behaviors. To fill this gap, this study attempts to use Social Cognitive Theory to explore the relationship between personal factors, environmental factors, and audience engagement behaviors in IP animated films.

Brand Equity Model

Aaker (1991) describes brand equity as the tangible and intangible assets a brand possesses that are relevant to consumers, encompassing all resources and capabilities that can influence consumer choice behavior and brand loyalty. Aaker (1991) proposed five components of brand equity: brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, and

other proprietary brand assets (such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships), as shown in Figure 2.

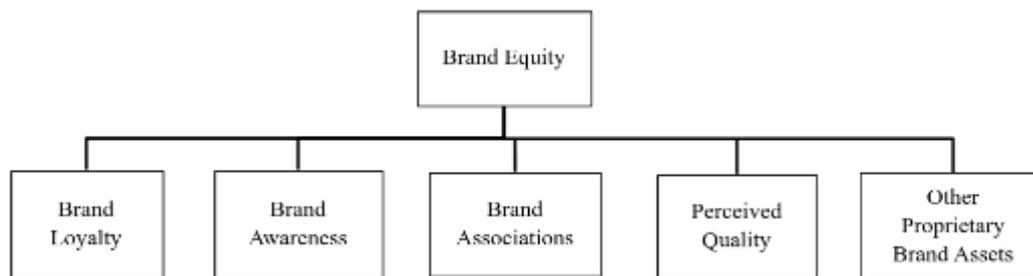


Figure 2 : Brand Equity Model

Source : Aaker (1991)

Over the past three decades, brand equity has attracted significant interest from both academia and practice (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), and substantial research has been conducted in traditional industries such as luxury goods, automobiles, apparel, and agricultural products, garnering widespread attention (Husain et al., 2022; Siddiqui, 2022). An outstanding animation brand can bring higher customer loyalty, higher profit margins, and more efficient marketing strategies to film production companies (Siu et al., 2016). It helps reduce perceived monetary risks for customers before making an actual purchase (Zhen & Mansor, 2022). For animation brands, building strong brand equity has always been considered a key factor in establishing a successful animation brand (Sharma, 2016). Given that brand equity has a significant impact on consumer attitudes and behavior (Lu et al., 2015; Ren et al., 2023; Siddiqui, 2022), both scholars and managers should gain a deeper understanding of brand equity and its influence on business outcomes (Siu et al., 2016). However, the current understanding of how brand equity in IP animated films influences audience engagement remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap.

Integrated Conceptual Framework

Personal Factors: Integration of Core Dimensions from the Brand Equity Model

The core dimensions of brand equity—brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations—exhibit significant consumer cognitive characteristics, which closely align with the “personal factors” in Social Cognitive Theory. Therefore, incorporating the four dimensions of brand equity into the “personal factors” category of Social Cognitive Theory is theoretically feasible. First, the elements of the Brand Equity Model are adapted to fit the context of IP animated films. Specifically, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations, and perceived quality are redefined as IP awareness, IP loyalty, IP associations, and perceived quality, as shown in Figure 3. These adapted elements are then integrated into the personal factors dimension within the Social Cognitive Theory framework, as shown in Figure 4, thereby enhancing the theoretical connection between brand equity and IP animated films. This adjustment aims to highlight how IP brand cognition drives audience engagement.

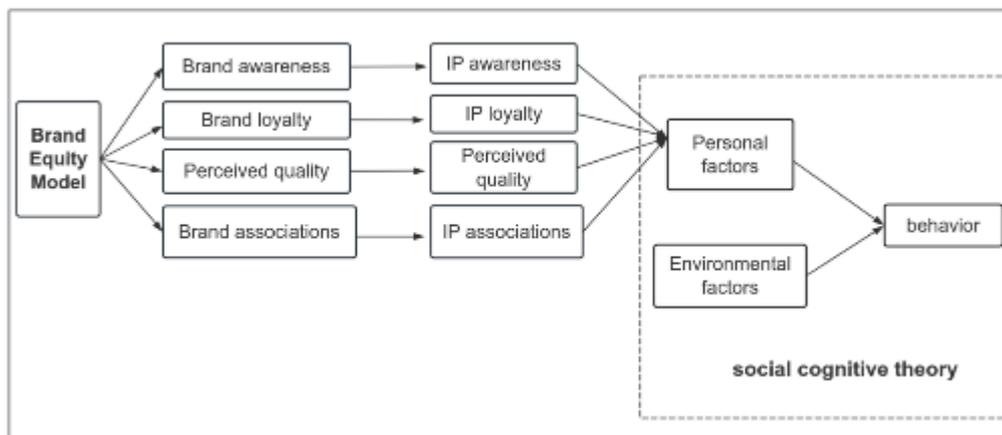


Figure 3 : Integration of Social Cognitive Theory and Brand Equity Model

Source : Authors' own work

Environmental Factors

Social cognitive theory also emphasizes the impact of environmental factors on behavior (Bandura, 1986). External environmental factors refer to the conditions that influence a film after its production is completed, including distribution strategies, media and critic reviews, advertising and promotion, word-of-mouth communication, as well as the broader social atmosphere at the time of release (Hwang et al., 2017). The black box model categorizes environmental influences into two main types: marketing stimuli and environmental stimuli. Marketing stimuli refer to factors that marketers can manipulate, such as product, pricing, distribution, and promotional activities. On the other hand, environmental stimuli consist of external elements like economic conditions, technological advancements, political landscapes, and cultural influences, which are generally outside the marketers' influence (Haw et al., 2013). At present, most scholars tend to analyze environmental factors influencing audience movie-watching behavior from the perspective of marketing stimuli. Many scholars in the past have argued that in the film industry, advertising, promotional campaigns, and distribution channels are environmental factors influencing audience behavior (Hassija et al., 2024; Kim & 조성근, 2015; Wu & Niyomsilp, 2022; Yoga & Hendrawan, 2019). Researchers have identified the common characteristics of these factors as three themes: film production, film promotion, and film distribution, which are then integrated into the environmental factors dimension of Social Cognitive Theory. This study aims to reveal the impact mechanism of environmental factors on audience engagement behavior and provide a new theoretical perspective for the study of IP film audience behavior.

Mediating Variable: Audience Attitude

External factors can influence behavior by affecting consumer attitudes, a phenomenon that has been widely studied across various fields (Muchran & Ahmar, 2019; Rastini & Respati, 2021). Çabuk et al. (2014) focused on the mediating role of attitude between food safety concerns and purchase intention, while Domínguez-Valerio et al. (2019) found a significant mediating effect of student attitudes between sustainability awareness and behavior. Verma and Sinha (2017) found that perceived ease of use is influenced by attitude, while other predictive factors directly impact behavioral intentions, this suggests that addressing attitude issues is essential for making agricultural extension services appear easy to use.

Therefore, this study posits that audience attitudes toward the Ne Zha IP animated film series have a significant mediating effect on the relationship between personal factors (IP awareness, IP loyalty, IP associations, and perceived quality) and audience engagement behaviors.

Audience Engagement Behavior

In the field of cinema, scholars have provided more specific definitions of audience engagement behaviors. Rubin et al. (2022) summarize these behaviors as immersive viewing experiences, repeat viewing behaviors, positive word-of-mouth, movie-themed tourism, interaction with derivative content (such as playing movie-adapted games, reading related books, visiting movie websites), fan creation and consumption of fan works, purchasing merchandise, and incorporating movie elements into popular culture (such as quoting lines or role-playing). Kohli et al. (2021) emphasize behaviors such as purchasing derivative products, recommending films, cross-platform content extension (such as movie-adapted TV series or games), and community participation. Engagement not only enhances audience satisfaction, but it has been found to be even more explanatory than satisfaction in predicting consumer behavior (Calder et al., 2016). Related studies have also discovered that engagement behaviors significantly influence key marketing metrics such as trust-building, brand loyalty, word-of-mouth communication, purchase intention, and repeat consumption (Brodie et al., 2013; Calder et al., 2016; Kumar, 2013).

Based on the aforementioned research, this study operationalizes the audience engagement behaviors for the Ne Zha IP animated film series as follows: repeat viewing, positive word-of-mouth communication, interaction with movie-related content, and purchase intention for movie merchandise.

Conceptual Framework

The integrated model framework is shown in Figure 4.

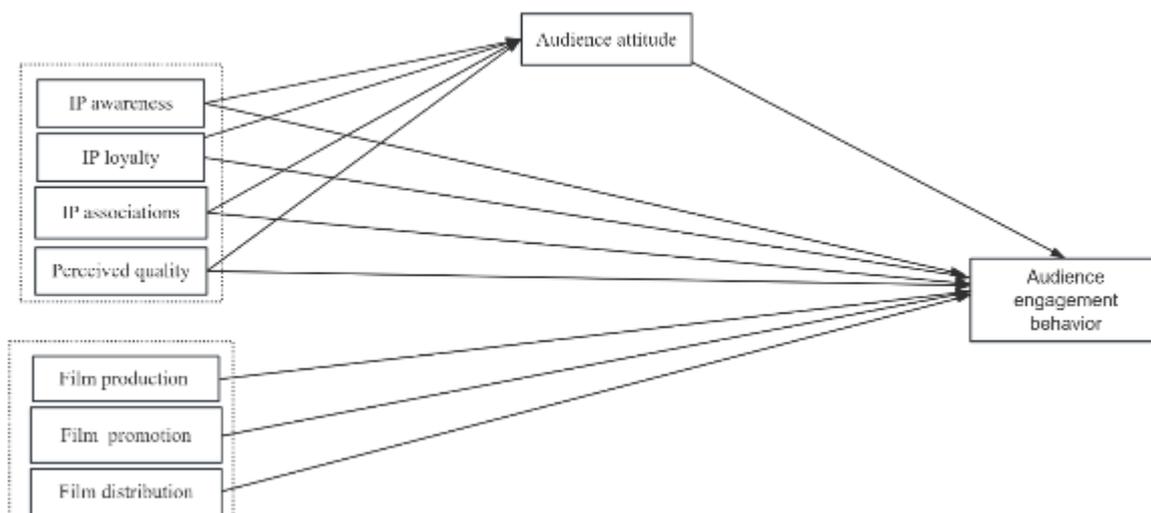


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

Source : Authors' own work

Case Application: Nezha Ip Series

This framework will then be applied to a case analysis of the “Ne Zha” IP animated film series to demonstrate its applicability and explanatory power in a real-world context.

Personal Factors

IP Awareness. Aaker (1991) asserts that brand awareness is the perception that potential customers recognize or recall a brand as part of a specific product category. According to Keller (2013), brand awareness involves consumer responses triggered by brand-related situations or contexts. This study defines IP awareness as the degree to which the audience recognizes and recalls the Ne Zha IP animated film series. It includes both IP recognition (the ability of consumers to identify the Ne Zha IP animated film series) and brand recall (the ability of consumers to remember the Ne Zha IP animated film series in a specific context). Previous studies have shown that brand awareness can enhance the advantages of a brand being chosen (Keller, 2013), influence market share (Srinivasan et al., 2005), and positively impact consumers' evaluations of the brand (Hsu & Chen, 2018; Miniard et al., 2018). It is generally believed that brand awareness has a positive effect on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Dick & Basu, 1994; Han, 2015). Therefore, this study argues that IP awareness has a positive impact on audience attitudes and audience engagement behavior in the Ne Zha IP animated film series.

IP Loyalty. Customer loyalty is critical for a brand's long-term competitive advantage over its rivals (Almeida & Coelho, 2019; Sharma & Jain, 2019). This study focuses on attitude loyalty, which emphasizes consumers' preference for and commitment to a brand (Bennett et al., 2005; Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2021; Jones & Taylor, 2007; Pike & Bianchi, 2016). Extending this concept to the IP movie domain, IP loyalty refers to the emotional attachment and psychological commitment to the *Ne Zha IP animated film series*. Brand loyalty indicates that consumers hold a positive attitude toward a specific brand and tend to purchase that brand regularly (Yang, 2009). Brand loyalty is crucial for long-term profitability (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Cossío-Silva et al., 2016) and leads to stronger brand evaluations by consumers (Belaid & Temessek Behi, 2011; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hollebeek, 2011; Lou & Xie, 2021; Park et al., 2010; Shimul et al., 2019). Based on this, the study hypothesizes that if the audience exhibits attitude loyalty toward the *Ne Zha IP animated film series*, they will maintain a consistently positive attitude and continue to support the series with sustained behavior.

IP Associations. Brand associations are any elements related to a brand in the customer's memory (Keller, 1993), and brand associations are considered to encompass "the meaning of the brand to consumers" (Keller, 1993). Brand personality and organizational associations have been used as measures for brand associations (Pappu et al., 2006), where organizational associations refer to consumers' overall impression of a company (Aaker, 1996). Based on the characteristics of animated films, this study focuses on the aspect of organizational associations. Therefore, in this study, IP associations refer to the audience's overall impression of the company behind the creation of the *Ne Zha IP animated film series*, ENLIGHT MEDIA COLOROOM, in China. Excellent organizational associations are, in themselves, a part of brand equity, representing a key element of an organization's image and one of the associations consumers hold about it. In the animated film industry, the creative production team behind the scenes is particularly important. For instance, the *Ne Zha IP animated film*

series—NEZHA1 and NEZHA2—were produced by the Chinese company ENLIGHT MEDIA COLORROOM, both of which achieved high box-office earnings. This indicates that animation brands with strong organizational associations positively influence audience attitudes and behavior.

Perceive Quality. Aaker (1992) argues that perceived quality is the primary reason consumers choose to purchase products from a specific brand. As a key element of brand equity, perceived quality is closely tied to the brand and its main function is to showcase or create a competitive advantage for the target audience (Wang et al., 2020). In this study, perceived quality refers to the audience's subjective overall evaluation of the *Ne Zha IP animated film series*. Perceived content quality is an important factor influencing decisions to consume, engage with, and share content, and many studies have explained or evaluated the impact of quality on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Fei et al., 2017; Filieri et al., 2023; Hassan Fathelrahman Mansour & Mohammed Elzubier Diab, 2016; Hemsworth et al., 2005; Mohd Suki, 2014; Owusu Kwateng et al., 2021; Rai et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 1996; Saeed & G. Grunert, 2014; Zhou et al., 2023). Therefore, in the current study, the audience's perceived quality of the *Ne Zha IP animated film series* may be a significant factor influencing their attitudes and engagement behaviors.

Environmental Factors

Film Production. The key creative team members during the film production phase are the director, actors, and producers, among others. The reputation of the director and the quality of their previous works directly influence the audience's expectations for a new film. For example, works by renowned directors typically attract a large fan base, increasing the film's visibility and box office performance (Wei & Yang, 2022). Movie stars and directors can be regarded as human brands (Yeol et al., 2012). The quality of the actors and director is considered a key factor in determining the quality of the film (Niraj & Singh, 2015). Therefore, this study posits that there is a positive relationship between film production and the audience engagement behavior of the *Ne Zha IP animated film series*.

Film Promotion. Film promotion refers to the promotional activities conducted after a film's completion to attract viewers (Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). Previous research has identified various Film Promotion factors that influence audience decisions to watch a film. For example, Afifah et al. (2022) proposed that Film Promotion elements include others' opinions and reviews, as well as media publicity, and focused on examining how these elements influence the audience's behavior in watching Chinese animated films. Similarly, Suvattanadilok (2021) argued that promotional programs, social media platform activities, and trailer assessments affect the audience's decision-making in cinema. Lee et al. (2021) also noted that consumer ticket purchases are influenced by external factors like advertisements and media reports. Wu and Niyomsilp (2020) further discovered that three types of viewing behaviors in university students (paid viewing, preferred viewing, and recommending films to others) are influenced by social environments, such as viewing behaviors or support from friends and family. Therefore, this study posits that there is a positive relationship between film promotion and the audience engagement behavior of the *Ne Zha IP animated film series*.

Film Distribution. Film distribution refers to the sales and rental activities of a film, which are the core business of film distribution companies. The primary distribution channels for films

are through cinemas, which include factors such as release timing, ticket prices, ticket sales events, cinema lottery promotions, and cinema posters (Rubin et al., 2022). In this study, Film Distribution refers to factors related to the Ne Zha IP animated film series, such as the release schedule, cinema availability, screening times, and other related factors. Holidays are often crucial periods for the movie market, as the demand for travel and entertainment increases. Cinemas typically release key films during these times to attract more viewers (Hu et al., 2018). Moreover, the scheduling of screening times is equally critical, as it directly influences the audience's viewing choices and convenience. Feng (2017) found that more screening sessions provide viewers with more flexible viewing times, increasing ticket purchase opportunities and ultimately boosting the film's overall box office performance. Therefore, this study posits that there is a positive relationship between Film Distribution and the audience engagement behavior of the Ne Zha IP animated film series.

Conclusion

Implication of the Study

This study takes the Ne Zha IP animated film series as an example and integrates Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) with the Brand Equity Model to construct a theoretical framework for analyzing audience engagement behavior in IP animated films. This paper expands the application scope of Social Cognitive Theory by extending SCT from its traditional research fields such as education, health, and entrepreneurship to the study of audience engagement behavior in IP animated films, thereby enriching the theory's applicability and explanatory power. The structural dimensions of the brand equity model in the context of cultural products have been redefined by incorporating IP animated brand equity into the "personal factors" dimension of Social Cognitive Theory, thereby enhancing the theoretical compatibility between the model and the Ne Zha IP animated films. This integrative approach helps provide a more comprehensive understanding of how audience perceptions of the Ne Zha IP series influence their engagement behaviors.

This study offers the following insights into the brand building and content dissemination practices of IP animated films: Film producers and marketers should focus on enhancing the cultural recognizability of the IP, refining the core character design, and developing a coherent symbolic system. These efforts help strengthen audience recognition and emotional association with the IP, thereby fostering IP loyalty. At the same time, attention should be paid to the overall synergistic effect of environmental factors. The precision of film production, the timing of promotional activities, and the distribution strategy must work together cohesively. In particular, the breadth of distribution channels and the compatibility with various platforms should be emphasized to maximize audience reach and stimulate engagement behaviors.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study constructs an analytical framework for explaining audience engagement behavior in IP animated films by innovatively integrating Social Cognitive Theory and the Brand Equity Model, thus making a theoretical contribution. But there are several limitations that warrant further exploration in future research. First, the lack of large-sample empirical validation: this study has not yet conducted a complete questionnaire survey and statistical analysis; future research can quantitatively validate the model paths using methods such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Second, sample type and geographic limitations: this study focuses

on the Nezha IP animated film series, primarily targeting the IP animation market in mainland China. Future studies could expand to IP products in different cultural contexts, such as Japanese anime or Western superhero franchises, to enhance the model's generalizability. Third, the variable dimensions need to be further enriched: future research could introduce additional psychological dimensions, such as "cultural identity" and "viewing motivation," to improve the model's explanatory power regarding audience behavior.

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