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REVIEW ARTICLE

Short-Video Topic Works Seen from the Perspective of the Culture Industry

Wenjing Huang[1], Dandan Liang[1,*]

[1] *School of Communication, East China University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai 201620, China*

Corresponding author: Dandan Liang, E-mail: dandan.liang@ecupl.edu.cn

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Abstract

Objective: Starting from Adorno's concept of the culture industry and related theory, this paper takes the topic works of the short-video platform Douyin as its object in order to analyse the underlying logic of their production and dissemination and the way the culture industry operates within them. **Methods:** A conceptual and case-based analysis of platform practice. **Results:** Three findings follow. First, platform positioning determines the content ecology: in the internet environment technology and capital convert their interests into a user craving for short video by raising user participation, and under commercial capital the topic work becomes a commodity through which the platform acquires traffic. Douyin follows a hit-making logic, using topic works to regulate user behaviour and to lay down platform rules and content strategy. Second, standardised production forms a cultural suppression: resources are deployed in every direction to stimulate the audiovisual senses, so that users fall into entertainment pleasure and lose the capacity to resist a repressive cultural production. Third, the welfare of traffic monetisation conceals capital hegemony: topic works offer users fast and varied channels of monetisation and a community interaction that satisfies social needs, so that the platform's commercial interest is blurred into a user welfare, users' habits are cultivated, and they are moved to serve capital. **Conclusions:** The topic work is a commodified cultural form whose inner mechanism is uniform and patterned beneath a surface of endless variation. Its production is a process of batch copying and imitation carried out under rules the platform has set for users; imitation becomes an absolute imitation that strips away style, and individual style, filtered through the sign system of the culture industry, is standardised into a homogeneous product short on substance. Short video thus passes from an atonal artistic utopia into a commodified cultural form and a tool by which capital extracts commercial profit.

Keywords: culture industry, topic works, Douyin short video, traffic

1 Introduction

A topic work is a form of play within the Douyin community. Having created and uploaded a work, the original user leaves behind something closely resembling a commodity that can be copied: an interested user may take that sound directly and lay it over a video of their own, imitating the gestures of the source video. From the #Wish Post-it Hand Dance# of 2017 to the #Lightsaber Outfit Change Challenge# of 2021, Douyin topic works have become widely popular, capable of drawing users into discussion more quickly and of raising a platform community's participation and heat. In terms of the form of creation, a topic work takes ready-made material and reworks or continues it at speed, that is, the platform sets up a set of rules for the creative process for users to choose from. The problem of excessive repetition therefore arises often: works under a single topic tend to converge closely in gesture, facial expression and vocal dubbing.

Douyin uses algorithmic technology to dig out, within the community, popular videos of high copyability, and to promote them into the directive form of a 'hot topic'. The more often a given topic template is reused, the stronger the 'pass-the-parcel' dissemination effect of the topic works becomes, to the point where it may form a traffic high ground on external platforms as well. Through the form of the topic work, the Douyin platform guides and controls the participatory production of its users. From the user's point of view, taking part in a topic-work activity is motivated first by the psychological need for individual self-display, and second by the wish to acquire more attention and traffic. From the platform's point of view, the form of the topic work — standardised production and batch copying carried out by way of classification and labelling — is a culture-industry phenomenon in the internet environment, that is, the manufacture of products by industrial means; its substance is the product made standard under a standardised system. How, then, does the culture industry operate where topic works are concerned? What is the underlying logic of their design, production and dissemination? And what role do ordinary users play under a mode of shooting that is all of a piece? This paper takes up these questions by analysing Douyin short-video topic works from the perspective of the culture industry.

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2 Topic Works: A Commodified Cultural Form

Adorno's critique of culture centred on the age of mechanical reproduction represented by the printing press. The press brought industrial standardised mass production, and these industrial products of sameness made art lose its autonomous standing: the aura of the artwork was excluded from consideration by commercial operation. The commodified society of the mechanical-reproduction era took no account of artistic style; 'art' reduced to exchange value alone was turned by the culture industry into a commodity in circulation. The culture industry describes a general hegemony of capital, stressing the hegemonic and repressive side of capitalist cultural production, holding that the receiver of cultural products is powerless to resist being brainwashed by repressive cultural works. This follows from the situation of the Frankfurt School while Horkheimer was director of the Institute for Social Research, when it faced the threat and persecution of German fascism. In a life of exile from place to place, its members deepened their understanding of fascist totalitarian rule and of monopoly-capitalist society, and on that basis built a body of social-critical theory for exposing and criticising fascism and totalitarianism. In the 1930s and 1940s, therefore, the theory could make the public aware that in capitalist society the ruling class used culture-industry products to control the minds of the masses.

In the internet environment the traditional receiver of culture becomes a user, at once cultural consumer and producer. This change in the audience's position has also driven an upgrade in the form of the culture industry. Take the topic work #Poor Fork Dance Contest#. Over the same sound effect there is an identical set of dance moves and performing positions; the result may make users laugh with pleasure, but a dance of a few dozen seconds supplies almost no meaning beyond gratification. Through the form of the topic work, Douyin solidifies this way of shooting into a single pattern, and users carry out secondary creation inside the content frame the platform has filtered for them [2] — that is, they follow an organised, planned mode of production that relies on technology, gathering heat for the topic and creating traffic value. What the user does is low in creativity. These sensory consumer goods, copied in bulk, keep the public too busy to take stock; the pleasure produced when short video stimulates the brain to secrete dopamine sends the brain the signal that 'scrolling short video will make you happy', and capital thereby succeeds in using digital technology to convert its own interest into a user craving for short video, and so conceals the traces of the culture industry. Topic works differ in subject and vary in form, but behind their bizarre and motley surface lies an identical, patterned inner mechanism: a commodified cultural form whose highest goal is commercial profit.

The culture industry in the internet environment is driven by technology and capital and offers users higher participation, but in substance technical rationality has replaced value rationality; in form the culture industry has become more covert, developing from the traditional culture industry into an internet culture industry marked by virtuality and hyperreality [3]. The maximisation of commercial profit is the platform's overriding purpose, and traffic is its yardstick: Douyin uses the scoring mechanism of the algorithm to filter the most-played video content on the platform, tags it as a topic work, and so quickly forms a traffic pool. It then establishes production standards and patterns for the particular topic work and supplies users with every kind of shooting material and template. In its essence this means that capital blurs its own traffic demand into the user's personal demand: within the given production frame, individual style has already been filtered and standardised by the sign system of the culture industry. The topic work becomes a culture-industry product of cultural homogeneity and predictability; under repeated batch production, the plot of the work, the performer's expression and movement and the dubbing are all foreseeable.

3 The Production and Dissemination of Topic Works: An Analysis of the Underlying Logic

3.1 Platform Positioning Determines the Content Ecology

From its emergence to its popularity, the topic work is not only a process of users participating in production and dissemination; behind it lies, more than anything, the operation of the video platform — it is the product of Douyin's standardised management of video content according to its own platform positioning [4]. Topic works have the advantage of being manageable in a concentrated way and producible in bulk, and have become an important means of perfecting Douyin's content ecology. In the making, distributing and reviewing of topic works, Douyin's platform rules and content strategy take shape.

A topic work comes about in one of two ways. The platform may create a topic in timely response to a current event and push it to the front of the hot-search area, drawing users to join the topic and produce and disseminate content by raising the topic's exposure; or it may dig out an original video by a user and promote it into a hot topic work. Whichever the route, the subject of the topic work accords with the platform's positioning. Douyin follows a hit-making logic, takes the creation of hits as its platform strategy, and takes commercial return as its overriding goal. Its topic works are mostly content that is easy to imitate and carries a dissemination gimmick — hand dances, outfit-change challenges, technical-showcase pieces. Douyin carries this logic through the entire making of a topic work; to make centralised management easier, it divides

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content into vertical categories, each with its own standards of review and quality inspection, and by this rule produces content with 'Douyin characteristics'. Correspondingly, the topic works users publish are given different content labels.

Having passed the double review of machine and human editor, a topic work enters a distribution stage that combines algorithmic push with manual traffic support. The platform algorithm first matches content labels to user labels and distributes a certain base traffic according to the weight of the creator's account; at this stage the video goes mainly to followers and to nearby users. On the feedback and data-tracking of that initial traffic — the work's plays (completion rate, next-week retention) and its interactions (likes, comments, shares) — the platform judges whether the content is welcome, and then further supports the dissemination of the topic work through stacked recommendation. If two rounds of stacked recommendation give good feedback, the platform gives the topic manual support, raising the video's exposure through traffic packages and resource placements. In this process, where Douyin wishes to support content that suits its platform characteristics but has not won deep popular affection, it likewise adopts the strong-operation method of traffic packages and resource placements to change users' existing preferences, cultivate new habits, and bring cultural suppression to bear through brainwashing-style dissemination. In this process the qualitative difference of users and artistic innovation are not what the platform attends to [5]; the topic work the user has produced has become a commodified cultural form, and whether traffic can be obtained is the highest standard of algorithmic distribution.

Douyin conducts a periodic review of hot topics according to how long they have been live: the high-quality creators that emerge within a topic are approached and put in contact, given video-creation guidance point to point or through community education, so that their content better conforms to platform standards and characteristics, and a further round of hot-topic operation follows, achieving batch production. The topic work thereby becomes a commodity in circulation, a product of the culture industry — homogeneous, copyable — created by the video platform. Users, facing sensory consumer goods filtered and copied in bulk by a standardised system, are too busy to take stock, and their genuine needs are lost in this repetition of the same tune.

3.2 Standardised Production Forms a Cultural Suppression

On a base of several hundred million daily active users, Douyin creates viral dissemination through resource placements for hot content that leave no opening unused. The gratification and entertainment of hot topics in endless supply draw users again and again into the production and dissemination of topic works, until they become an audience powerless to resist repressive batch production. The moment a user opens the Douyin app they are already caught in a pool of content the platform has prepared in advance.

By means of splash-screen pop-ups, traffic-package placement, banner carousel and hot-search recommendation, Douyin has built a content-recommendation mechanism covering the whole platform, and supports hot topic works through it. Specifically: on opening the Douyin app, the splash-screen pop-up displays content or advertisements the platform is chiefly supporting, and the user has by then entered the rules the culture-industry product Douyin has set for its users. Once inside, the intelligent algorithm distributes on the recommendation page, according to the user profile, the content the platform judges, after filtering, that the user may be interested in. The platform further displays topics that have passed the filter and show hit potential in such functions of the search page as 'you may want to search' and the 'Douyin hot list', and supplies material for users to take up, while the user's interpretation of the meaning of the content is dissolved by the standardised rules and drowned in the endless repetition and imitation of the same jokes.

On the one hand Douyin divides topic content into a number of vertical categories, controlling and standardising users' needs and their mode of cultural production through topic activities; on the other it keeps refining user profiles to ensure that traffic is allocated precisely. As to the first: Douyin uses topic classification to limit the content and form of works and video templates to standardise the manner of creation. This appears to offer users a channel of free choice but is in fact a compulsory cultural consumption — quietly constraining users' entertainment needs by the platform's standard rules until they become habit, dominating mass culture with a joy that lacks meaning. As to the second: the platform's intelligent algorithm builds consumer profiles from natural attributes such as age and sex together with such indicators as likes, comments and shares within a vertical category, pulls audience packages for the precise distribution of topic works, and refines user profiles through data review. Topic works accelerate the formation of user communities. On the basis of users' demands to 'expand the friend list' and to 'cpdd', Douyin connects through community this group of users with a strong social need, forming high-verticality communities around gaming, beauty, drawing and the like, and grants a degree of user empowerment to raise user stickiness; the community in turn drives highly active users to join topic activities, forming a virtuous circle. The gathering of users effectively improves the result of drawing traffic, and the platform can harvest the welfare of traffic more efficiently.

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3.3 The Welfare of Traffic Monetisation Conceals Capital Hegemony

Topic activities bring Douyin a large and stable body of creators and consumers; at the same time, to raise the retention of high-quality users, Douyin keeps extending the commercial functions of topic works so as to satisfy users' need to monetise. Providing users with varied channels of monetisation in fact blurs the interest of the platform's capital into a user's welfare of monetisation — that is, it conceals the traces of the culture industry and makes the user a digital labourer who ceaselessly creates value for the platform.

Since its appearance in 2016, Douyin has kept opening new lines of business to seize traffic increment in the market, and now has a dozen or more commercial models including e-commerce, advertising, training courses and MCN incubation. As to the monetisation of topic video, the main routes are advertising, e-commerce and community. Douyin sets different tiers for creators, with creator privileges advancing tier by tier, and this rule determines the difference in creators' channels and degree of monetisation, moving creators to strive ceaselessly to meet the platform's requirements and to produce content according to the rules Douyin lays down, in pursuit of a higher tier of welfare.

Eighty per cent of Douyin creators' income comes from advertising and e-commerce. Creators who meet Douyin's grading standard hold the privilege of hanging advertisements and product jump links on the video page, and a click on the link leads directly to the advertisement download page or the product purchase page. Douyin provides creators and advertisers with an intermediary service and charges advertising fees through its advertising system by click, by impression or by period. Beyond the commission it takes as intermediary, the community jump link on the video page connects users gathered under the topic page on the basis of shared interest, so that topic activities supply communities with highly vertical active users and provide them with a distinctive channel of monetisation — for instance, the functions of playing on another's behalf and selling equipment in gaming communities, which realise users' direct monetisation. Fast monetisation and the satisfaction of social needs effectively raise users' loyalty and stickiness toward the platform and raise their switching cost, and their subordinate position as the dominated and enslaved is strengthened with it.

4 Conclusion

In its early days short video was atonal, that is, it followed no rule and opposed the logic of the culture industry on every side. But driven by commercial capital and internet technology, once it entered the sphere of circulation technical rationality seeped into the production, creation and dissemination of short video. The topic works Douyin manufactures are produced and managed on the industrial model, with finished material supplied for users to take up. The production of a topic work is a process of batch copying and imitation built on the rules the platform has set for users; imitation becomes an absolute imitation that strips away style, and individual style, filtered through the sign system of the culture industry, is standardised into a product that is homogeneous and short on substance. Short video is thus turned from an atonal artistic utopia into a commodified cultural form, a tool by which capital extracts commercial profit, following the logic of the commodity economy.

An analysis of the underlying logic of Douyin topic works shows that Douyin takes the hit-making logic as its platform strategy and, through intelligent algorithms and big data, cultivates users' browsing habits and brings cultural suppression to bear on them. Compared with the individual differences among users, the platform attends more to the commercial return that users' gathered traffic brings it. Douyin's all-round resource placement for a mass of hot topics traps users in entertainment pleasure, until they become an audience powerless to resist repressive batch production. In addition, the shifting reward mechanisms in the industrial production of topic works move users to serve capital ceaselessly and cultivate in them the habit of actively taking part in running and maintaining the platform's rules.

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