

***Transmedia Adaptation: A Content Analysis of Audience's Perception
of Chinese Intellectual Property TV Series
—“The Bad Kids” on the Douban.com***

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the audience's perception of the "transmedia adaptation" of the Chinese intellectual property (IP) TV series "*The Bad Kids*" on the popular Chinese social media platform, Douban.com. The study utilizes a quantitative content analysis approach to examine audience comments and sentiments regarding the adaptation. The research question focuses on how audiences perceive the "transmedia adaptation" and is supported by three hypotheses. The study begins by selecting a sample from the top 2000 comments on Douban.com, based on the number of likes received. The comments are analyzed in three stages: the first two weeks of the TV series' broadcast, the last two weeks of the broadcast, and the two weeks after the broadcast. Additionally, sentiment words in the comments are coded and categorized as positive, neutral, or negative. The findings reveal that audiences perceive the transmedia adaptation of "*The Bad Kids*" as more interesting to watch compared to the original novel. The suspenseful storytelling of the TV series is also found to be satisfying to the audience. Moreover, the audience shows a significant interest in the "kids' crimes" storyline in the TV series. This research provides valuable insights into audience perceptions of "transmedia adaptation" and highlights the importance of narrative structure and engaging storytelling in successful adaptations. The study contributes to the understanding of the Chinese audience's preferences and interests in transmedia storytelling.

Keywords: Transmedia Storytelling, Transmedia Adaptation, Chinese Intellectual Property (IP) TV Series, Audience's Perception, Kids' Crimes

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Introduction

In June 2020, a TV series based on the novel "*The Bad Kids*" aired on Chinese IQiYi platform and promptly received an 8.8 rating on the Douban, with over 1 million people rating it to date. Douban (www.douban.com) is a well-known Chinese social networking site. Similar to most Web 2.0 platforms, it allows users to collect, rate, and review films, TV shows, books, and music. Anyone can rate on Douban, which could potentially lead to instances of deliberate manipulation of ratings for personal gain. However, unlike professional critic scores on Rotten Tomatoes, Douban has its own platform barriers and mechanisms to prevent malicious reviews and ensure the fairness of ratings (Sina, 2015).

The practice of adapting textual narratives into visual forms has a longstanding history, dating back to Western culture in the 1980s. During this period, a notable focus was on adapting and reinterpreting globally renowned literary works, with frequent film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and Jane Austen's classics serving as prime examples (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2013). In contrast, early Chinese novel adaptations primarily focused on Chinese literary classics such as "*Journey to the West*" and "*Dream of the Red Chamber*". The adaptation of online novels began in 2004, and since 2010, there has been a significant surge in the adaptation of these works into films and television shows. Simultaneously, the development of video games under the same intellectual property (IP) titles has emerged, fostering the evolution of an increasingly complex industry ecosystem (Peng, 2014). Therefore, understanding how audiences perceive these adaptations within the industry is a worthwhile area of study.

One unique aspect of "*The Bad Kids*" is that it exemplifies intellectual property (IP) consistent with Henry Jenkins' theory of "transmedia storytelling". This TV series is just one part of a larger story told across multiple media. For instance, the original novel offers deeper character development and background information not available in the TV series. The comic book provides a visual representation of the story, allowing readers to see the characters from different perspectives. The game lets players interact with the story and characters, even allowing them to make choices that affect the story's outcome.

It is argued that Jenkins' theory served as a conduit for integrating contemporary aesthetic trends from the cultural realm into the domain of the film and television industry, offering a novel framework for Intellectual Property (IP) development (Ryan, 2006). Jenkins defines "transmedia storytelling" as a process where essential elements of a narrative are distributed systematically across various medium, with each medium contributing unique and valuable content to the overall storyline, thereby creating "a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins, 2006, n.p.). Schiller (2018) further expounds that storytelling need not be confined to a singular medium but can undergo a process of "transmedia adaptation" to leverage the unique strengths of each medium, thereby facilitating broader audience engagement (p. 100).

In recently years, many TV series have adopted the technique of "transmedia storytelling" to attract audiences and promote their intellectual properties. However, Peng (2014) argues that "transmedia adaptation" has not really matured in China, and stories based on novels are only "products for entertainment" in view of businessmen (p. 61). This paper believe that the ideal "transmedia storytelling" maximizes the functionality of each medium—starting as a novel, it can expand into television, comics, game, and so on. Each medium's narrative is complete in itself, allowing audiences to enjoy the game without needing to watch the film, and vice

versa. The IP "*The Bad Kids*" has been adapted from a novel into a television series by both Chinese and Japanese creators, and has also appeared on the Steam as a game. Therefore, "*The Bad Kids*" serves as a suitable case for studying Chinese audiences' perceptions of "transmedia storytelling".

Research Question

The research question of this study is *how audiences of "The Bad Kids" perceive the "transmedia adaptation" on the Douban*. Therefore, the author formulated three hypotheses to examine the question:

- H1.** Audiences believe that the transmedia adaptation of the TV series "*The Bad Kids*" is more interesting to watch compared to the novel.
- H2.** Audiences are satisfied with the suspenseful storytelling of "*The Bad Kids*".
- H3.** Audiences are more interested in the "kids' crimes" storyline in the TV series.

First, this paper provides a brief overview of the study's methodology. Second, it examines the three hypotheses by categorizing audiences into three distinct groups based on their responses within the sample and by quantifying and analyzing the sentiment words in the comments. Additionally, this paper integrates the findings from the content analysis with perspectives from other scholars to conduct an in-depth discussion on the characteristics and perceptions of Chinese audiences regarding "transmedia adaptation." Finally, the paper addresses the limitations of the study.

Methodology

This is a study based on a quantitative content analysis method to examine audience comments on the Douban for the Chinese IP series "*The Bad Kids*". As an observational scientific research method, content analysis is a technique for identifying specific patterns or characteristics of information through an objective and systematic approach that enables inferences to be drawn (Wimmer & Dominick, 2005, p. 151). According to Yu and Dong (2014), when content analysis is applied to study audience reviews on films, it allows researchers to gain insight into audience feedback and identify audience needs and trends (p. 22). Therefore, for this study, quantitative content analysis can be applied to understand how audiences perceive the "transmedia adaptation" of the Chinese IP series "*The Bad Kids*" through their comments on the Douban.

1. Sample Selection

This study centers its attention on an exhaustive collection of audience comments. However, owing to the substantial volume of comments pertaining to the TV series, characterized by recurrent content and format, further refinement is deemed necessary. On the Douban platform, comments are subject to two sorting mechanisms: "popular comments" and "latest comments". For the purpose of this paper, "popular comments" have been selected as the criterion for inclusion. This choice is motivated by the inherent attributes of "popular comments", which encompass a higher number of likes, enhanced relevance to the TV series, heightened interactivity, and a more concentrated focus on the evaluations and sentiments expressed by the Chinese audience regarding the adaptation of "*The Bad Kids*". Consequently, the selection of "popular comments" is anticipated to yield a more representative dataset.

The population under examination in this study comprises the top 2000 comments, determined by their highest number of likes, within the discourse surrounding "*The Bad Kids*". From this population, a random sample of 200 comments has been drawn for further analysis and investigation.

2. Coding

Determining units of analysis and establishing coding are the core of the content analysis. The units of analysis are what actually need to be coded and counted in this study. Based on the determination of the research sample, the units of analysis in this paper are the number of comments at different stages, the sentiment words in the comment text, and the categories of audience responses.

The number of comments at different stages of the series' run will give an indication of whether the transmedia adaptation is trending upwards in terms of audience interest and related topics. "*The Bad Kids*" first aired on online platforms on June 16, 2020, and aired its finale on July 14 of that year for a four-week run. This study examines the number of comments in the following three phases:

- i. The number of comments in the first two weeks of the TV series' broadcast.
- ii. The number of comments in the last two weeks of the TV series' broadcast.
- iii. The number of comments in the two weeks after the broadcast of the TV series.

The sentiment words in the comments will also be coded, and these sentiment words will be categorized as positive and negative in this study. According to the second hypothesis of this study, keywords related to "kids Crime" will also be counted when coding these sentiment words. The association of "kids' crime" with these sentiment words may reflect the attitudes and interests of the audiences in the transmedia adaptation of "*The Bad Kids*" regarding the plot of kids' crime in the TV series.

For the purpose of this study, the response categories of the audience on Douban will also be coded. Therefore, in order to study the audience's attitude and interest in the "transmedia adaptation" of the Douban, the audiences of this series are divided into the following three categories:

- i. Those who read the original novel before watching the adaptation (fans of the original novel).
- ii. Those who have not read the original novel but have played the "*The Bad Kids*" mobile game.
- iii. Those who did not know the IP and watched the adaptation directly.

By analyzing and examining these three audience categories, it is possible to understand the attitudes of audiences who had been introduced to "*The Bad Kids*" through other media (books and games) before watching the TV series, towards the transmedia adaptation of the TV series. It is also possible to examine the willingness of audiences who have only watched the TV series to engage with the story of "*The Bad Kids*" in a different medium.

Hypothesis and Analysis

The number of comments at different stages of the series' run gives an indication of whether the transmedia adaptation is trending upwards in terms of audience interest and related topics. "*The Bad Kids*" first aired on the online platform on June 16, 2020, and ran for four weeks.

This study examined the number of comments in the following three stages, and the results are shown in Figure 1.

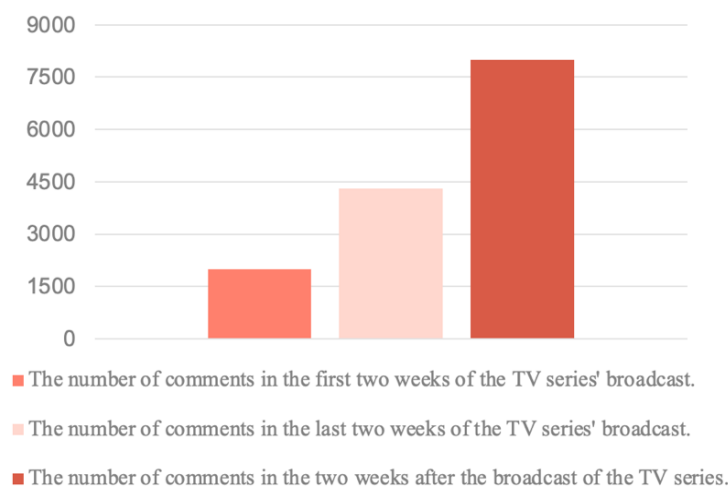


Figure 1. The number of comments

Based on the data presented in Figure 1, there is a positive correlation between the number of comments and the airing time of the series. Within the first two weeks of the series' broadcast on the Douban platform, there were 2,000 comments. The number of comments increased exponentially over the subsequent two weeks and continued to rise gradually even after the broadcast ended. This trend indicates that audience attention to "The Bad Kids" is steadily increasing on the Douban platform.

According to Cheng (2022), excluding certain external factors, higher levels of audience interaction (likes and comments) and popularity correlate with the higher completion rate of a film or TV series. This completion rate reflects how well the work aligns with public aesthetics and can be considered a measure of its success (p. 26). Therefore, it can be inferred that the transmedia adaptation of "The Bad Kids" exhibits a high degree of completion and has effectively realized the themes of the original novel.

This paper aims to test the following three hypotheses:

H1. Audiences believe that the transmedia adaptation of the TV series "The Bad Kids" is more interesting to watch compared to the novel.

In order to study the audience's attitude and levels of interest in "transmedia adaptation" on Douban.com, this study systematically categorized 200 randomly selected comments into three distinct response categories. The ensuing findings are meticulously outlined in the subsequent table.

| Audience response categories | Number of audiences |
|---|----------------------------|
| Those who read the original novel before watching the adaptation (fans of the original novel). | 56 |
| Those who have not read the original novel but have played the " <i>The Bad Kids</i> " mobile game. | 28 |
| Those who did not know the IP and watched the adaptation directly. | 116 |

Table 1. **Audience Category Statistics**

As delineated in Table 1, it becomes apparent that within the sampled cohort, 84 individuals had prior exposure to the intellectual property (IP) of "*The Bad Kids*" through alternative media channels, such as books and games, before engaging with the television adaptation. Conversely, the remaining 116 participants constituted those who consumed the TV adaptation directly, devoid of prior knowledge concerning the IP. Consequently, to initiate the investigation into hypothesis 1, this study's initial focus is directed towards an analysis of comments originating from the 84 audiences situated within the first two categories of audience response.

| Rating | Content of comments |
|--------------------|---|
| Recommended (8-10) | Although I had already read the original, the TV series was a great adaptation and I was fascinated. |
| Recommended (8-10) | This TV adaptation has quite a few changes compared to the original, but that appeals to me even more. The director has introduced a lot of suspenseful elements and details. |
| Recommended (8-10) | The TV series brings the storyline of " <i>The Bad Kids</i> " to life better than the novel, and each episode makes me eager to find out what happens next. |
| Recommended (8-10) | The TV adaptation is more interesting than " <i>The Bad Kids</i> " mobile game, especially for the subject of kids' crimes, it is more fascinating. |
| Average (6-7) | Compared to the novel, all the characters in the TV adaptation are softer and not as radical as in the novel. |

Table 2. **The comment data of Douban.com (partial)**

By analyzing the content of these 84 audiences' comments, 61 of them used positive review words and gave high scores (8-10) on the Douban. And Table 2 shows partial comments from 84 audiences. From the specific comments in this category, it can be seen that the "transmedia adaptation" of "*The Bad Kids*" has gained the approval and favor of most Douban users, and has achieved positive communication effects in general.

The highest percentage of content in the sample was positive, such as "fascinating", "better than the novel", "more details", etc. This content mainly focused on the appreciation of "*The Bad Kids*" and the differences between the storyline of the TV series and the original novel. When a novel is "interpreted" as a film or television, there are inevitably two opposing camps

of TV series fans and the original fans, especially when the original novel and the adaptation are widely different (Baines, 1996). In *"The Bad Kids"*, in contrast to the original in which everyone is a villain, the director of the adaptation changed the series' biggest bad guy, Zhu Chaoyang, into a good one who does not seem to be evil in the play. But there is always some unexplained storyline, if you take Zhu Chaoyang as the role of the villain, it all immediately explains. This is a choice question left by the director for the audience, the original fans not only did not feel dissatisfied, but also aroused interest.

This indicates that users of the Douban platform who watched the TV adaptation were positive about the characterization and the more detailed and suspenseful elements of the adaptation. *"The Bad Kids"* has been successfully tried and tested in transmedia adaptations. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is established.

H2. Audiences are satisfied with the suspenseful storytelling of *"The Bad Kids"*.



Figure 2: Word cloud chart

In this paper, the 2,000 Chinese comments of *"The Bad Kids"* were saved in text format, translated into English by the author, and the word cloud chart were generated using "WordCloud" application for analysis. The keywords in the word cloud chart can reflect the main focus of audience attention (Yang, 2019). As seen in Figure 2, the most dominant words in the comments about the perception of TV series are "Fascinated", "Intense storyline", "Full of surprises", and "Good series". These positive words indicate that *"The Bad Kids"* is a popular "transmedia adaptation" in terms of perception.

According to Figure 2, the frequency of comments mentioning "Suspenseful elements" is the same as the frequency of mentioning the positive word "Unique", which can be inferred that the audience is satisfied with the use of suspenseful elements in the series. Some audiences believe that although *"The Bad Kids"* has weakened the original novel's deductive elements, it still retains its tense storytelling appeal through the use of suspenseful elements and some details. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is established.

Based on the audience's perception, it is quite clear that the success of the adaptation is inseparable from the use of narrative structure. As Geraghty (2018) argues, a "transmedia storytelling" work requires that the audience be intrigued and want to know what happens next. In this case, the audience is immersed in the story, because whether they want to be or not, their interest is compelled to move forward (p. 125).

H3. Audiences are more interested in the "kids' crimes" storyline in the TV series.

According to the word cloud chart in Figure 2, the frequency of mentioning the keyword "kids' crimes" in the sample is relatively high.

Based on the observation, 88 comments out of the sample of 200 comments discussed the topic of kids' crime in this TV series. Accordingly, in this study, the sentiment words in 88 comments were coded into three categories: -1 for negative, 0 for neutral, and 1 for positive. The comments of the TV series were counted by positive and negative sentiment values, and the sentiment tendency of each text related to "kids' crimes" was analyzed. Table 3 shows some of the representative data.

| Audience comments (partial) | Scores |
|---|--------|
| The TV series is fine, but how can kids, who are supposed to be innocent, be involved in crime? It makes me uncomfortable. | -1 |
| Set against the backdrop of kids' crime, " <i>The Bad Kids</i> " bravely explores a disturbing and thought-provoking topic. This is a precedent in China. | 0 |
| The actors in the TV series are excellent and their performances make the theme of kids' crime more real and touching. | 1 |

Table 3. Sentiment scores and comments (partial)

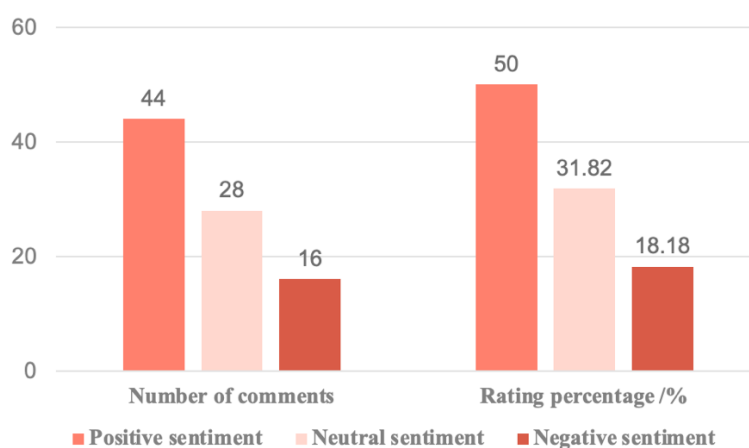


Figure 3: Results of the sentiment analysis of the "kids' crime" storyline

According to Wang and Bi (2022), "*The Bad Kids*" differs from traditional crime novels by going beyond the world of adult crime and focusing on the world of kids' crimes. Prior to this, there were no novels about kids committing crimes in China, and kids mostly showed innocence and kindness. This can be attributed to the influence of thousands of years of traditional Confucian culture in China, where everyone believes that "the nature of man is inherently good", thus a story that is not in line with the mainstream Chinese values immediately attracts attention and causes discussion (p. 103).

The analysis results, as shown in Figure 3, indicate that comments related to "kids' crimes" are predominantly positive, with 50% of the comments being positive and 18.18% negative. These findings suggest that: (1) audiences have a high level of interest in "kids' crimes"

storylines, indicating its successful departure from traditional Chinese crime narratives; and (2) the portrayal of kids' crimes in "*The Bad Kids*" opens new avenues for the increasingly homogenized Chinese film and TV adaptation industry. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is supported.

Discussion and Limitations

The above hypotheses and analysis indicate that most audiences on the Douban platform are satisfied with the transmedia adaptation of "*The Bad Kids*". Compared to the original novel, "*The Bad Kids*" employs its own adaptation strategies, with the most significant change being the softening of the novel's "dark" tone and the addition of a "warm" tone (Hu, 2020, p. 71). The study finds that this adaptation strategy not only did not disappoint fans of the original novel but also increased their interest in watching the adapted work. This is notable, as most film adaptations tend to receive more criticism.

This observation appears to support the ideal "transmedia storytelling" theory, where each medium can contribute its unique value and attract a broader audience. Based on several studies, this paper posits that the perception of "transmedia adaptation" among Chinese IP series audiences and the "transmedia works" themselves primarily face three challenges: (1) a tendency toward homogenization; (2) a disregard for the artistic quality of the works; and (3) the difficulty of pleasing all audiences with a single adaptation.

First, since its inception, the Chinese internet has been a relatively free media platform. Due to China's unique national conditions, the internet has developed differently from that in Western countries. It has become a hotbed for foreign cultures, including Western, Japanese, and Korean influences, which have introduced popular and subcultural elements (Yin & Liang, 2016). Between 2010 and 2020, Marvel Studios in the United States successfully utilized "transmedia storytelling" to adapt comic book stories such as Iron Man and Captain America into films and games, and subsequently into theme parks. This success has led to an exponential increase in the adaptation of novels and comics into films and games in China. Marvel Studios' success illustrates the potential of "transmedia storytelling" to create a unified and engaging entertainment experience across different media platforms.

However, replicating this model in China presents challenges. Many adaptation films attempt to capitalize on the popularity of Marvel movies, but they often lack creativity and are poorly executed. This leads to a loss of interest among discerning audiences and contributes to aesthetic fatigue. This trend highlights the increasing homogenization of transmedia adaptations.

Second, according to Ryan (2015), "transmedia storytelling" offers a new narrative experience, but such adaptations must not lose the artistic value of the original work (p. 12). The commercialization of adapted works often aligns with Adorno and Horkheimer's Culture Industry Theory (1973), where art in the age of mechanical reproduction employs "pseudo-difference" and "pseudo-individualization" to satisfy the public's "vanity," leading to a diminished appreciation for true artistic aesthetics (p. 154). This suggests that while transmedia adaptations can be commercially successful, they risk compromising the artistic integrity that should be preserved in such works.

Third, a classic intellectual property (IP) often has a substantial fan base before it is adapted, which is a key reason for its adaptation. However, during the adaptation process, directors inevitably make cuts or changes to the original work, potentially creating discrepancies

between the film or TV series and the source material. This divergence can be challenging, as fans familiar with the original novel naturally expect the adaptation to preserve its spirit.

Directors must navigate the delicate balance between fidelity to the original work and the creative adjustments needed for adaptation. For instance, in adapting a novel like "Harry Potter" into a film, the narrative must be fragmented and condensed to fit the cinematic format, ensuring it remains engaging and accessible to viewers (Peng, 2014). This involves retaining key plot points and character arcs while making changes that enhance visual storytelling and pacing. Such adaptations require careful consideration of what elements are essential to the story's core and how to translate them effectively into a different medium without losing the essence that captivated the original audience.

There are some limitations of this study. First of all, there may be some selection bias among audiences who watch "transmedia adaptations" on Douban.com, as these comments come from specific user groups that may be more likely to be film lovers or people of a certain age group. Second is the subjective nature of sentiment, and this paper needs to identify the sentiment polarity (positive, neutral, and negative) in the comments of audiences in the analysis. However, sentiment vocabulary may be subjective in different cultures and contexts, and the same sentence may produce different sentiment tendencies when interpreted by different people, thus the results of the analysis may be influenced by subjective factors.

Conclusion

The audience perceives "transmedia adaptation" mainly through three aspects on the Douban.com. The first is characterization. An analysis of sample comments showed that audiences used a lot of positive words to evaluate the characterization, with those who read the original novel before watching the adaptation saying that the "transmedia adaptation" of "*The Bad Kids*" made the characterization more interesting. The second is the storyline. This paper found that audience perceptions of the "transmedia adaptation" also focused on the setting of the storyline, and they were satisfied with the suspenseful elements used in "*The Bad Kids*". The third is the values that are reflected through the storyline. The storyline of "kids' crimes", which is not compatible with the Chinese Confucian culture, is very appealing to the audience, and there is not much criticism from the audience.

Despite some limitations, through content analysis, this study constructs a more nuanced understanding of audiences' perceptions of "transmedia adaptation" of this intellectual property. With the trend of media convergence, "*The Bad Kids*" can be considered as a qualified "transmedia storytelling" work in China.

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Appendix

Coding Sheet

A. Stage with the Highest Number of Comments on "The Bad Kids"

1. Number of comments during the first two weeks of the TV series' broadcast.
2. Number of comments during the last two weeks of the TV series' broadcast.
3. Number of comments during the two weeks following the broadcast of the TV series.

B. Audience Category Most Attracted to the Transmedia Adaptation

1. Individuals who read the original novel before watching the adaptation (fans of the original novel).
2. Individuals who have not read the original novel but have played the "The Bad Kids" mobile game.
3. Individuals who were unaware of the IP and watched the adaptation directly.

C. Sentiment Category with the Highest Percentage of Comments Referring to the Keyword "Kids' Crimes"

(Scoring Criteria: -1 for negative, 0 for neutral, 1 for positive)

1. Positive comments
2. Neutral comments
3. Negative comments

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