

A Study on the Polarized Reputation Phenomenon of IP Dramas from the Perspective of Communication Studies: Taking Seasons one and two of Lost You Forever as Examples

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Abstract: *In recent years, IP adaptations have risen to prominence as one of the predominant mainstream genres in the market, successively achieving record-breaking viewership ratings. However, due to the growing prevalence of the seasonal release model for IP adaptations, these works have faced significant challenges in both reputation and viewership ratings. This paper, by examining the IP adaptation Lost You Forever as a case study, investigates the underlying causes of the polarized assessments of seasonally released IP adaptations through the lenses of communication theories and communication elements. The objective is to offer references for the production and dissemination of IP adaptations in seasonal formats, with the aim of enhancing their communication effects and sustainable development capabilities.*

Keywords: *audience expectations; IP adaptations; media dissemination; polarized evaluations; seasonal dissemination*

I. Introduction

Adapted from Tong Hua's novel of the same name, the TV series Lost You Forever is a costume mythological series. During its broadcast, it exhibited typical characteristics of polarized reviews. Thanks to its captivating storyline, meticulous production, and outstanding performances of the actors, the first season achieved a remarkable rating of 7.8 on Douban and an astonishing 3 billion views. Undoubtedly, it has become a well-deserved blockbuster series in the summer of 2023. However, the situation took a sharp downturn in the second season. Despite it had a good popularity on the Tencent platform on its first day of broadcast, it did not go viral and become a hit. With regard to critical reception, the second season of Lost You Forever obtained a rating of only 6.6 on Douban, which is notably lower than the 7.8 of the first. After the finale, the overall viewership of the drama surpassed one billion. Although the data still maintains commendable contrast with other TV series

broadcast during the same period, there is still a considerable gap compared with the 3 billion views of the first season.

From the perspective of communication studies, the process of IP adaptation dissemination encompasses multiple links and factors, including content production, dissemination channels, and audience acceptance. These elements may exhibit variations across seasons in the context of multi-season broadcasts, which could subsequently affect dissemination effectiveness and audience evaluations. From the perspective of communication studies, this study will thoroughly investigate the underlying reasons for the polarized reviews of the two seasons of *Lost You Forever*, with the aim of offering valuable references for the seasonal production and dissemination strategies for IP adaptations.

II. The Concept of IP Adaptations

IP is short for Intellectual Property, with its core lying in intellectual property rights. IP is the concept or story that can be adapted as a movie, television series, computer games, and all kinds of commercial derivative products and applications. Currently, it is online literary works that are adapted and are the main ones. In terms of adaptation, such dramas generally maintain the original story, characters and worldview, but will also make appropriate innovations and adaptations according to the requirements of visual expression.

The origin of IP adaptations can be traced to the early days of the film and television industry. As a defined concept, IP adaptations gradually emerged in the early 21st century, alongside the widespread popularity of the Internet and the rapid development of digital media. In 2000, the online novel *The First Intimate Contact* was adapted into a television drama, pioneering the adaptation of Chinese online novels into such productions in China^[1]. By 2014, the adaptation rights for 114 online novels were purchased, marking the initial emergence of the IP adaptation market. In 2015, the "One TV, Two Stars" policy boosted the development of the IP adaptations market^[2]. Almost all the popular dramas that year were IP adaptations, with four of the top five in terms of viewership ratings throughout the year falling into this category. As a result, 2015 was dubbed the Year of IP Series.

With the continuous development of IP adaptations, the seasonal broadcast model has gradually gained popularity. This model aims to maintain audience attention and heat of topic through sustained content output, providing a broader space for the realization of the commercial value of the serials. But due to the rising trend of IP adaptations being broadcast in different seasons, the phenomenon of polarized public reviews has become more prominent. Not only does it affect the communication effect and economic value, but it has also drawn widespread attention from both the industry and academia.

III. The Communication Theory Framework for the Polarized Phenomenon of IP-adapted Dramas

3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasizes the initiative of audiences, positing that they engage with media based on specific needs and motivations, thereby experiencing gratification^[3]. Different audiences can rely on the same media message to fulfill their distinct needs and accomplish various goals. From this perspective, it is clear

that the reason why IP adaptations can secure a place in today's large domestic TV market, with many hit series even reaching billions of views, lies in the active choices of the audience. When viewers watched the first season of *Lost You Forever*, their main demands focused on seeking novelty. The series constructed a unique ancient mythological world with a fantastical setting, which greatly arouses the curiosity of audiences. The legendary backgrounds and experiences of the protagonists also immerse the audience, providing a fresh audiovisual experience and emotional satisfaction.

With the popularity of the first season, audience expectations for the second season have risen significantly, and their needs have undergone profound changes, shifting from merely seeking novelty to anticipating a deeper exploration of values. Audiences are eager to witness the remarkable growth in terms of personalities and abilities, and hope that the narrative framework of the plot can be further expanded to present a more grandiose worldview and deeper conflicts and contradictions. However, the second season of *Lost You Forever* failed to satisfy their deeper audience expectations. The female main character's development is stuck. When facing numerous troubles, Xiaoyao's personality and behavioral habits were almost the same as in the first season. This greatly disappointed viewers who were anticipating the growth of a strong female lead. This disconnect between the content and audience expectations led to a sharp decline in viewers' evaluations of the series, triggering a wave of negative feedback.

3.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

Mass media possess the function of agenda-setting. In their 1972 article *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, American communication scholars Maxwell Mccombs & Donald L. Shaw stated, "The mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about and what issues are important^[4]." In short, mass media can effectively influence the order in which people focus on certain facts and topics by providing information and arranging relevant issues.

Regarding the dissemination process for the second season of *Lost You Forever*, the production team meticulously constructed a high-expectation agenda, framing it as a blockbuster sequel through a series of marketing strategies. By emphasizing the return of the original cast and releasing highlight previews, they successfully captured the audience's attention, making the second season a highly anticipated series even before its premiere. However, when people finally watched the second season, they discovered a significant gap between the actual content and the upgrade expectations built up by the production team. The sluggishness of the emotional storyline was also heavily criticized. And the noticeable decline in the quality of special effects was also hard for audiences to accept. Compared to the first season, elements such as the tap-like bloodletting and the childish political intrigues in the second season failed to meet audience expectations.

This huge gap led to cognitive dissonance among the audience, resulting in their trust in the series dropping significantly^[5]. They believed that the production team had excessively exaggerated the merits of the series to such an extent that the content itself did not live up to these claims, giving them a sense of being deceived.

This loss of trust not only affected the audience's judgment of the second season of *Lost You Forever* but also damaged the brand image of the entire IP adaptation.

3.3 Media Richness Theory

Media richness theory claims that different communication media possess different capacities for information carrying and dissemination effects. Katerina Marazi, in *Brand Identity, Adaptation, and Media Franchise Culture*, suggests that the cross-media operation of IP is an important way of brand identity, a choice adapted to the current context, and an essential part of the cultural industry, related to questions about brand loyalty and value^[6]. Cross-media is just a fancy way of saying tell one story across multiple media channels. Each narrative is separate but contained within the larger narrative. In the process of IP adaptations dissemination, social media communication has become the norm. By integrating internal and external resources, various platforms are interconnected. As a new type of online media, social media has changed the relationship between transmission and reception compared with traditional media, transforming from "you send and I receive" to "I send and I receive", with extremely strong interactivity^[7]. Social media covers Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, online video platforms like Tencent Video and Mango TV. Short video platforms, as an indispensable part of social media, played a significant role in spreading the first season of *Lost You Forever*. They carried out extensive secondary dissemination of the season's highlight clips. For example, the Yao-Liu Iconic Scene has been viewed over 2 billion times. These moving clips, through the dissemination on short-video platforms, have magnified the emotional resonance points and attracted a large amount of attention. Additionally, secondary creations of the work encouraged more users to actively participate. This not only enhanced user loyalty but also further promoted the television drama.

During the promotion of the second season, there was also an unequal distribution of information on all the different social pages. On long-video platforms, the narrative was tedious and slow, failing to effectively attract the audience's attention, and people will easily be annoyed and tired. Meanwhile, marketing on short-form video platforms excessively exploited character personas, constantly pushing similar content that led to aesthetic fatigue among the audience. The information received by audiences across different platforms lacked coherence and depth, resulting in fragmented attention. Unable to comprehensively and deeply understand the plot and characters from fractured messages, their overall perception of the series was negatively impacted. This fragmented mode of dissemination made it difficult for audiences to form a complete perception of the series, diminishing their interest and engagement, ultimately significantly undermining the series' dissemination effectiveness.

IV. Analysis of Specific Communication Factors Behind the Polarized Reception of *Lost You Forever*

4.1 Audience Fragmentation

Remaining faithful to the original work not only demonstrates respect for the original material and its author but also swiftly gains recognition from the original fans, thereby yielding favorable word-of-mouth effects. High-quality content is the key to attracting fans, and the faithful adaptation of an IP, to a certain extent, aligns with the audience's pre-established aesthetic expectations^[8]. Data indicates that prior to its adaptation into a television

series, the original novel *Lost You Forever* had amassed 506,000 reads on a single platform alone. Original fans exhibit an exceptionally high level of attention and sensitivity to the details of *Lost You Forever*. They know all the plot and characters in the original story very well, possessing their own unique interpretations and expectations. The adaptation of the key plot in the second season was unacceptable to original fans. In the short reviews on Douban, the proportion of comments that "deviate from the spirit of the original work" reached 32%, which reflects the dissatisfaction and disappointment of original fans with the adaptation. They felt that the series version did not respect the original work, arbitrarily altered the plot, and undermined the integrity and coherence of the work. They have a great love for the original work and are very optimistic about it. Hoping that it can restore the essence of the original work as much as possible instead of making major adaptations.

According to the exposition by Denis McQuail, an American communication scholar, audiences are characterized by features such as large in number, widespread distribution, non-interactivity and anonymity, heterogeneity, lack of organization or self-initiated action, and being targets of management or control^[9]. Although internally heterogeneous, from the perspective of those intending to manipulate them, audiences appear homogeneous in certain specific preference choices. The first season provided audiences with immediate emotional value through plot such as identity reversals and intense, tragic romance. In contrast, the second season suffered from a dragging pace, with the density of effective information per episode decreasing by 40%. The plot development was slow, with many lengthy and tedious scenes lacking substantial progression. The formulaic narrative of melodrama for melodrama's sake also bored the audience. This uninspired plot construction could no longer deliver freshness and excitement, unable to meet the fast-consumption viewing demands of non-fan audiences. In today's fast-paced lifestyle, audiences tend to prefer audiovisual content that can quickly provide pleasure and satisfaction. The second season of *Lost You Forever* lacked this sense of instant gratification for the general audience, leading to its lower evaluation.

4.2 Communication Strategy

Chinese scholar Ma Xiaojuan once pointed out in her research that in propaganda models, media function similarly to banks in capitalist countries^[10]. However, since audience attention is a zero-sum game, no single medium can retain audience attention for an extended period within such models. The one-year gap between the two seasons of *Lost You Forever* led to the gradual fading of the emotional resonance accumulated in the first season. When the second season premiered, the producers attempted to evoke audiences' memories and emotions through nostalgia marketing, but the results were less than satisfactory. The memory decline caused by the fragmented schedule may have made the audience have a hard time diving back into the storyline as deeply as they could with the emotion and plot of the first season. In the first week of the second season's premiere, the Baidu Index saw a 55% drop. This data directly shows the negative impact of a fragmented schedule on the series's communication effectiveness. The decay in audience memory greatly reduced their attention and expectation for the second season, placing it under pressure from the moment it was first broadcast.

Furthermore, the production company's decision to break up the single series into two seasons is viewed as commercial padding. Audiences perceive this move as a deliberate strategy to make more profits by dividing a

complete story in half, thereby increasing viewership numbers. This kind of excessive exploitation has caused audiences to feel deceived.

V. Optimization Path for Seasonal Transmission of IP Dramas

So, what can we do to help IP adaptations break free of the dilemma of polarized public reputation? Optimizing the dissemination of IP by season can be approached from three aspects: content, dissemination, and industry.

At the content layer, it is crucial to construct a progressive narrative value system and to make the character grow visually and emotionally within oneself. Take *Lost You Forever* as an example, Xiaoyao's transition from a relationship manager into an active participant in the power structure, avoiding the stereotypical emotional cycle. Meanwhile, the IP's key selling points can remain while the genre has an innovation. Nowadays, in the domestic TV market, female protagonists are especially favored by female audiences. IP adaptations with a one-woman and multiple men dynamic can have social issues, such as a metaphor for women in the workplace and identity recognition issues that can make the plot more intriguing and also reach more audiences.

At the dissemination level, it is necessary to properly manage audience expectations and emotional engagement through differentiation of marketing positioning. By focusing on emotional resonance in the first season and growth narratives in the second, the expectation gap can be narrowed. Also, cross-media interactive technologies like interactive videos and AI characters' dialogues, like Tencent Video's Dahuang Xiangsi Ranking interactive function in *Lost You Forever*, can boost the immersive experience and emotional connection with the audience.

At the industry level, it should be kept in line with commercial as well as with the substance of the content itself. For instance, the original *Lost You Forever* is a standalone novel. Splitting it up into two parts means we're gonna have more broken-up storylines and a worse show for people to watch. We divide a serial into seasons by the narrative integrity, not for commercial reasons. Additionally, creating a closed loop from content to audience, then to feedback, is necessary. Through the post-broadcast big data analysis of how viewers drop off or what words people are complaining about, the producer can understand the audience's preference and change their sequel strategies. Rather than simply crude reproduction, producers should improve the plot and character building and production to meet the audience's requirements and maintain the appeal of IP adaptations and their long-term sustainability.

Only when we combine these three aspects organically can we boost the dissemination effect and sustainable development ability of seasonally released IP adaptations.

VI. Conclusion

Seasonal dissemination model of IP adaptations is both an inevitable choice under the market-oriented development of the film and television industry, and an important way to deepen the value of IP. However, it can also be seen that there are underlying contradictions between the essence of the content and commercial benefits, as well as the contradiction between audience expectations and dissemination effect in the development of the industry, through this phenomenon of polarized public reputation. According to an analysis of *Lost You Forever*

from the perspective of communication theories, the issue is a core problem with seasonal dissemination, which shows narrative disconnects, audience expectation missteps, and uneven information dissemination. To solve this problem, producers need logic upgrades of narratives at the content level, precise synergy at the dissemination level, and balanced operations at the industrial level.

Looking ahead, as the film and television industry evolves, the seasonal dissemination of IP adaptations will present both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, technology improvements like AI and VR would give more opportunities for creating and spreading IP adaptations, maybe elevating their audiovisual part and interaction better. On the other hand, the growing audiences' aesthetic standards and fierce market competition will demand higher requirements for the quality and innovation of IP adaptations. The healthy dissemination of the seasons must ultimately conform to the core principle, which is that content is king. Only through the synergistic empowerment of the content creation, dissemination strategies, and industrial operation can the seasonal model be a vehicle for IP value accumulation. So as to realize a win-win situation with respect to both fame and sales for the film and television industry in this area of IP conversions, and to give the audience more moving and deep-seated audiovisual enjoyment. This method can help seasonal dissemination of IP adaptations avoid polarization and embark on a path of sustainable, high-quality development.

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