

Role of New Media in Shaping Audience Engagement with Chinese Independent Documentaries

Yi Li ¹Somdech Rungsrisawat ^{2*}*Received: 22 October 2025 Revised: 15 November 2025 Accepted: 2 December 2025*

Abstract

This study examines how new media channels shape audience engagement with Chinese independent documentaries and explains why specific tactics succeed or fail. Integrating the SICAS (Sense, Interest & Interactive, Connect & Communicate, Action, Share) audience journey model with Uses and Gratifications (U&G) and Media System Dependency (MSD), we develop a stage-mechanism framework that links channel affordances to measurable outcomes. Using directed document analysis and multi-case synthesis of platform surfaces, creator communications, virtual events, and institutional reports, we map high-yield tactics to each SICAS stage and identify the gratifications they deliver (cognitive, affective/entertainment, social) under varying dependency conditions (individual, group, pseudo-environmental). Results show that sequenced, stage-aware orchestration—platform-native paratexts for discovery, structured real-time interaction, roleful community cadence, single-step conversion flows, and permissive remix with weekly curation—produces compounding gains in discovery, retention, conversion, and diffusion. Mechanism analysis clarifies boundary conditions specific to documentaries: over-novelty or gamification can erode narrative seriousness and suppress completion; automation is most effective when scoped to reply latency and load, but overuse flattens authorial voice. The proposed SICAS-U&G-MSD model offers a practical operations playbook for creators and curators and a theoretical account of when, how, and for whom tactics work in the new media ecology of Chinese independent documentaries.

Keywords: Chinese Independent Documentaries, New Media, Audience Engagement, SICAS Model

¹⁻² College of Communication Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Thailand.

* Email: somdech.ru@ssru.ac.th

Introduction

Chinese independent documentaries have evolved from small, underfunded circuits into prominent arenas of public discourse, chronicling social transformation through intensely personal, author-led perspectives. Long understood as a form of alternative media, they have brought forward marginalised voices and contentious themes often omitted from mainstream narratives, enlarging civic visibility and debate (Viviani, 2014). At the same time, the field faces a dual pressure: regulatory constraints continue to shape where and how sensitive works can circulate, while the intensely competitive, gamified logic of new media platforms tends to suppress slow, serious content in favour of easily consumable spectacle. Today this tradition unfolds within a radically altered media ecosystem. The expansion of comprehensive video portals, short-video applications, and social platforms has changed how viewers discover, judge, engage with, and recirculate documentary works, while storytelling tactics increasingly bend toward micro-formats, episodic release plans, and supporting paratexts that carry meaning beyond the principal film (Zhao, 2016).

Within such conditions, “engagement” should be viewed as a multi-stage pathway rather than a single outcome: initial recognition in crowded feeds; curiosity and interactive response during viewing; the formation of relationships through communities; conversion into concrete behaviours (for instance, subscribing, donating, or attending events); and subsequent sharing that extends advocacy. Platform affordances—algorithmic recommendation, danmaku overlays, comment streams, live Q&A, co-watch sessions, and creator updates—can be deliberately arranged to serve each step. Yet the very forces that broaden reach may also thin depth: fragmentation privileges clips over sustained comprehension; entertainment incentives elevate spectacle; uneven craft standards weaken credibility; and excessive gamification risks trivialising the narrative seriousness that underpins independent documentary practice.

Clarifying how new media shapes engagement is therefore essential. At the theoretical level, it reveals how platform features intersect with audience motivations and social dependencies to generate observable outcomes across a documentary’s life course. At the practical level, it offers creators, curators, and platforms a design map for moving people from passive exposure to active support—crafting salient first touchpoints, structuring real-time interaction, nurturing communal identity and trust, simplifying conversion routes, and preparing portable artefacts for cross-network travel. Treating engagement as a sequenced and optimisable process allows this study to reconcile creative intention with distribution realities—maintaining documentary depth while harnessing the connective capacity of contemporary platforms. To address the dual crisis of constrained circulation and shallow engagement, this article proposes a unified stage–mechanism framework that integrates three theoretical lenses: SICAS provides the sequential structure of the audience journey, Uses and Gratifications (U&G) explains why audiences act at each stage in terms of their dominant motivations, and Media System Dependency (MSD) specifies the platform and social contexts that condition the strength of these effects.

Research Objectives

1. To study how new media dissemination channels shape audience engagement with Chinese independent documentaries across the SICAS stages, identifying key affordances, practices, and bottlenecks.
2. To study the mediating role of audience need gratifications and the moderating role of media system dependency between channel characteristics and engagement outcomes, yielding measurable indicators and optimization strategies

Literature Review

1. Audience satisfaction and documentary consumption on digital platforms

Targeting university viewers in China, Li Mengyu et al. (2023) show that satisfaction with documentary offerings arises from the joint influence of content–audience fit, perceived trustworthiness, and production workmanship, together with platform contingencies such as interface fluency and opportunities to interact. Their survey evidence indicates that satisfaction is built from a triad of cognitive gain, affective resonance, and social value, each shaped by how platforms curate, sequence, and support the viewing experience. Importantly, satisfaction behaves less like a terminal judgment than like a propellant of subsequent participation—longer dwell, intention to return, and willingness to recommend—thus tying program attributes and platform design choices to downstream outcomes. For independent documentaries seeking traction in contemporary distribution ecologies, the implication is to pair depth and credibility with deliberate interaction design and navigability so that discovery, in-session experience, and post-viewing activity form a coherent, self-reinforcing path.

2. Interaction modalities and their behavioral effects in live environments

In an analysis of live-streaming practice, Wang Dedong (2025) distinguishes four primary interaction modes—text, voice, on-camera video, and game-like mechanics—and associates each with different participation signals: watch duration, frequency of interaction, sharing volume, and virtual-gift spending. Modality diversity, the study argues, is effective at capturing attention, while instant feedback heightens the feeling of being noticed, sustaining involvement over time. Beyond immediacy, Wang underlines relationship building through trust-oriented exchanges (e.g., call-ins) and shared experiences (e.g., collaborative mini-games), which deepen commitment and increase repeat attendance. Because the interaction architecture is also connected to monetization (leaderboards, gifting), engagement is framed as simultaneously experiential and economic. For documentary settings that adopt live Q&A, watch-party formats, or community fora, the lesson is that carefully staged, multimodal interaction can convert brief curiosity into durable connection and observable action.

3. AI-enabled affordances for amplifying participation and conversion

From a production-operations angle, Zhang Hao (2025) details how AI—spanning AIGC teasers, XR/AR scenes, virtual presenters driven by real-time motion capture, and NLP chat assistants—reshapes participation during live broadcasts. Reported benefits cluster around stronger first-touch salience, sustained mid-session interaction, and data-guided interventions. The study also covers community operations, including AI-assisted support and cross-platform synchronization, which extend engagement beyond the live window and stabilize audiences over time. Although the analysis centers on live streaming, the mechanisms translate cleanly to independent documentaries: virtual or hybrid premieres, bot-mediated creator AMAs, AR-enhanced behind-the-scenes vignettes, and personalized recommendation loops can jointly raise completion, subscription, and sharing propensity. In effect, AI functions as a suite of orchestration levers that connect discovery, interaction, conversion, and diffusion into an operationally coherent engagement strategy.

4. SICAS-based orchestration in live streaming and lessons for documentaries

Using women's apparel live commerce as an empirical setting, Li Bin et al. (2024) operationalize SICAS as a staged scenario-marketing schema and, via questionnaire data modeled in SPSS/AMOS, link specific tactics to purchase intention. They find that featured displays and service-quality cues strengthen Sense and early trust; interactive modules (Q&A, polls) boost Interest & Interactive; regular update cadence and community touchpoints

consolidate Connect & Communicate; and time-bounded discounts/coupons plus social proof lift Action, with Share amplified by curated recaps and cross-platform reposting. The central insight is orchestration: stage-appropriate stimuli compound across the journey more reliably than undirected “more interaction.” For independent documentaries, commercial triggers map to time-windowed access (festival windows, limited-time Q&A); service cues translate into paratextual credibility signals (source transparency, ethics notes, creator statements); and community cultivation becomes role-based forums with predictable cadence and curated audience contributions. Thus, Li Bin et al. provide empirical backing for stage-aware design and cumulative effects, reinforcing that aligning tactics with SICAS phases—not merely increasing volume—yields more durable engagement outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The study advances a unified conceptual framework—the SICAS–U&G–MSD model—that explains how new media channels shape audience engagement with Chinese independent documentaries as a sequenced journey and why tactics succeed under specific conditions. New-media affordances (discovery paratexts, multimodal interaction, community operations, streamlined conversion, and sharing scaffolds) are orchestrated across SICAS stages—Sense, Interest & Interactive, Connect & Communicate, Action, Share—so that each stage deliberately delivers a dominant gratification identified by Uses and Gratifications theory (cognitive clarity at discovery, affective/entertainment flow during viewing, and social belonging for community and advocacy). Media System Dependency specifies the context that governs effect size: individual dependency amplifies tactics that reduce cognitive friction, group dependency strengthens collective calls to action, and pseudo-environmental dependency rewards alignment with platform “vernaculars” of tags, cadence, and visual grammar. Outcomes are assessed through discovery and retention, interaction tempo, community growth, conversion, and diffusion; boundary conditions—depth–novelty trade-offs, the scope of automation, and platform fit—temper design choices. In short, engagement is achieved by coordinating channel affordances stage by stage, targeting the appropriate gratification at each step, and calibrating tactics to prevailing dependency structures to produce durable gains in discovery, retention, conversion, and sharing (Figure 1).

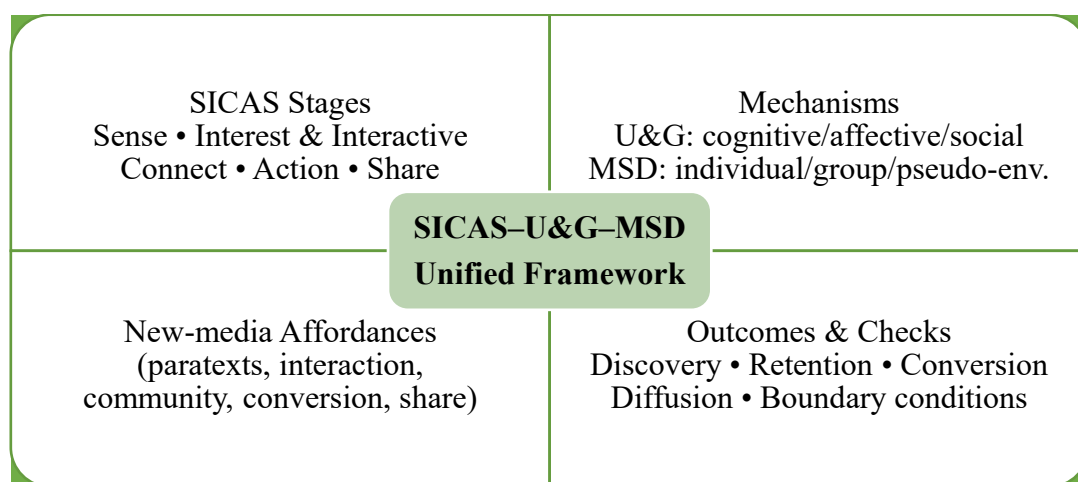


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven and explicitly non-empirical design that integrates the SICAS (Sense, Interest & Interactive, Connect & Communicate, Action, Share) audience journey with Uses and Gratifications (U&G) and Media System Dependency (MSD). The scope focuses on Chinese independent documentaries disseminated via new media platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, WeChat Video Channels and comprehensive video portals (e.g., iQIYI, Tencent Video) over approximately the past five years. We conduct document analysis and multi-case synthesis on publicly available artifacts: (1) platform pages (recommendation surfaces, hashtag hubs), including visible interface elements and public metrics such as view, like and comment counts; (2) creator communications (trailers, Q&A announcements, community posts), and other promotional paratexts; (3) event descriptions (virtual premieres, festivals, online Q&A or watch-parties); and (4) press or institutional reports and industry summaries related to documentary distribution and audience engagement. A purposive case sample covers major new media contexts for Chinese independent documentaries (comprehensive video sites, short-video apps, social media, specialist documentary platforms) and varied interaction architectures (danmaku/comments, live Q&A or watch-parties, community operations, subscription/crowdfunding flows), with cases selected for clear identification as independent works, high social relevance, diversity of engagement strategies, and a mix of relatively successful and less successful engagement outcomes, rather than through random sampling. Analogous cases from adjacent cultural communication (e.g., live streaming, museum audience programs) are included only as comparative evidence for engagement mechanisms.

Using directed content analysis, tactics are mapped to SICAS stages (Sense; Interest & Interactive; Connect & Communicate; Action; Share). U&G categories (cognitive, affective, entertainment, social) and MSD types (individual, group, pseudo-environment) are applied as mechanism labels, so that all data are coded directly against the three theoretical pillars of the integrated SICAS–U&G–MSD framework. Where sources report observable indicators, we extract descriptive measures—early retention/dwell time, interaction frequency and response latency, community activity, completion/revisit, subscription or crowdfunding counts, and sharing/referral volumes—organizing them as stage-specific “measurement slots” rather than a unified dataset. Cross-case comparison identifies recurrent bottlenecks and high-leverage remedies.

Reliability is supported by coder calibration and an audit trail of coding decisions; triangulation draws on multiple artifact types. Only public, aggregated information is used; no personal data are collected. The aim is formative: to clarify how channel features, gratifications, and dependency patterns can be orchestrated to move audiences from exposure to advocacy, rather than to produce statistically generalisable or causal estimates.

Results

1. How new media channels shape audience engagement across the SICAS stages

Audience activity around Chinese independent documentaries follows a repeatable sequence from first contact to advocacy. In the new media environment, each stage benefits from distinct channel affordances: discovery surfaces and paratexts improve Sense, interaction design sustains Interest, community operations deepen Connect, frictionless flows enable Action, and permissive reuse scaffolds Share. To make these relationships operational, we distil high-yield tactics and practical indicators for each stage, so creators and curators can audit current practice and prioritise improvements.

Table 1 SICAS stages, high-yield tactics and indicative measures

SICAS stage	High-yield tactics	Indicative measures
Sense	Featured placement; platform-vernacular titles and tags; serial short paratexts; mobile-first thumbnails and cutdowns	Impressions; click-through rate; early retention at 10s and 60s
Interest & Interactive	Comment backchannel with scheduled Q&A; creator prompts; polls and quizzes; quick replies; chatbot assistance	Comment velocity; response time; Q&A resolution rate; mid-session retention
Connect & Communicate	Regular updates; recurring spaces; roleful community; segmented guidance; curated reviews	Community activity; revisit rate; subscription growth; quality and volume of long reviews
Action	One-click paths; time-bounded benefits; social proof; timely operational prompts	Completion; conversion to subscribe, pledge or RSVP; repeat viewing
Share	UGC kits and explicit licences; hashtag challenges; weekly amplification; cross-platform threads	Share counts; external referral traffic; topic reads and comments

As Table 1 shows, engagement improves when channels are orchestrated across stages rather than applied piecemeal. In the Sense stage, discoverability rises with native thumbnails, concise teasers and serial paratexts that fit platform search and recommendation grammar; long trailers without short cutdowns underperform in crowded feeds. During Interest & Interactive, sustained attention depends on a balanced interaction design that combines a fast text backchannel, scheduled Q&A windows, creator prompts and light gamification, supported by quick, specific responses; automation smooths peaks without diluting voice. Connect & Communicate requires visible continuity beyond a single screening. Regular updates, recurring gathering spaces and roleful communities, together with segmented guidance for newcomers, experts and families, extend meaning-making and anchor trust. In Action, conversion increases when routes are short and benefits are clear and time-bounded, reinforced by social proof and timely operational prompts that counter mid-session fatigue. Finally, Share accelerates when reuse is permitted and easy through UGC kits, weekly curation and cross-platform syndication that acknowledge fragmented publics; ambiguity around rights or absent assets suppresses diffusion.

Sequenced, stage-aware operation outperforms isolated tactics. Rollouts that start with platform-native paratexts, host structured live interaction, maintain predictable community cadence, compress conversion paths and actively scaffold user sharing achieve higher completion, conversion and diffusion, with gains compounding over time.

2. Mechanisms: gratifications as mediator and dependency as moderator

The stage-level practices above rest on two mechanism layers. First, tactics work by satisfying specific audience gratifications at particular points in the journey. Second, the strength of those effects depends on audience and platform dependency structures. Before detailing implications, we present a compact map that links tactic focus to the primary gratification it delivers, the dependency condition that amplifies it and the indicative lift observed in practice.

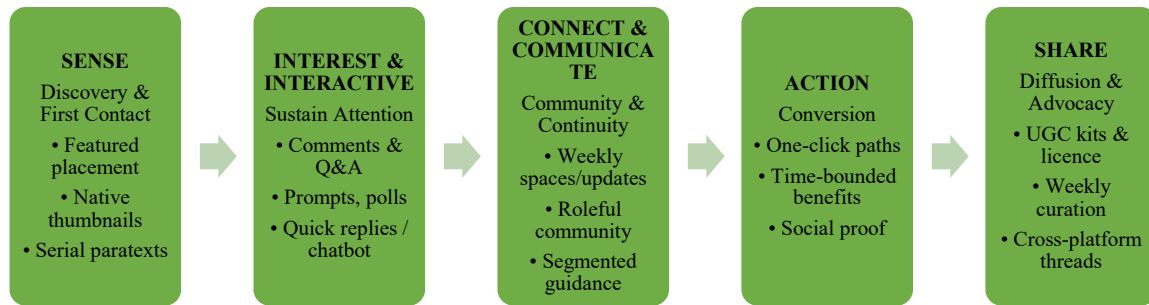


Figure 2 SICAS Journey Flow for Audience Engagement with Chinese Independent Documentaries

As Figure 2 shows, effects travel through gratifications and are strengthened or weakened by dependency conditions. At first contact, cognitive gratifications reduce uncertainty and shape expectations; during viewing, affective recognition and entertainment flow sustain attention; as communities form, social gratifications of belonging and dialogue become decisive; at the point of action, cognitive clarity, affective affinity and social signalling combine to lower hesitation; in diffusion, social and expressive gratifications motivate sharing. These pathways are amplified where individual dependency on media for orientation is high and cognitive friction is low; they are magnified by group dependency when calls are framed as collective goals within stable communities; and they are modulated by the platform's pseudo-environment, where alignment with visual grammar, tag culture and cadence accelerates recommendation and social uptake.

Outcomes are strongest when each stage targets a specific gratification and operations are aligned with prevailing dependency structures. Designers should treat gratifications as the intended effect of each tactic and dependency as the context that sets its strength: reduce cognitive friction for highly dependent individuals, mobilise collective goals within groups and write to the vernacular of each platform's symbolic environment.

The results show that channel orchestration across SICAS stages and mechanism alignment at the level of gratifications and dependency produce complementary gains. Stage-aware tactics raise attention, sustain participation, deepen relationships, simplify action and legitimise sharing; mechanism-aware design ensures those tactics resonate with how audiences use media and how platforms structure meaning. This dual focus offers a practical roadmap for creators, curators and platforms seeking durable engagement for Chinese independent documentaries in the new media era.

Discussion

1. Synthesis of findings

This study shows that audience engagement with Chinese independent documentaries is best understood as a staged journey in the new media environment. When creators align channel affordances to SICAS stages—optimising discovery paratexts (Sense), structuring live and asynchronous interaction (Interest & Interactive), sustaining community cadence (Connect & Communicate), compressing conversion flows (Action), and scaffolding permissive remix and cross-platform circulation (Share)—engagement metrics improve in tandem rather than spiking and collapsing. The mechanism analysis further clarifies why this orchestration works: stage-specific gratifications (cognitive, affective/entertainment, social) mediate tactic effects, and audience/platform dependency conditions (individual, group, pseudo-environmental)

moderate their strength. Together, these results argue for treating engagement as continuous experience design rather than a collection of isolated promotional activities.

2. Consistency with prior research

Our findings are broadly consistent with cross-domain evidence that interactive design elevates audience participation. In live video contexts, diversified interaction (text, voice, video, gameplay) and timely feedback increase attention, social connection and commercial outcomes; we observe the same pattern when documentaries deploy comment backchannels, scheduled Q&A and light gamification to pace sessions (Wang, 2025). Likewise, results echo work showing that AI augmentation—real-time analytics, chat assistants, and virtual hosts—stabilises interaction intensity and personalises experience; in our corpus, automation supported swift, specific replies during peak loads and helped maintain conversational tempo without eroding authorial voice (Zhang, 2025). Finally, the value of segmenting guidance and creating roleful communities parallels museum studies where interactive exhibitions and audience-centred programming deepen dwell time, learning and satisfaction (He, 2025). In our setting, beginner notes, expert roundtables and parent–child guides functioned as the online analogues of targeted interpretive layers that museums deploy on-site.

3. Points of divergence and boundary conditions

Despite these convergences, we also identify important differences that qualify cross-domain generalisations. First, the documentary context imposes a stronger tension between depth and novelty than typical entertainment streams. Tactics that inflate surface interaction without protecting narrative seriousness (e.g., over-gamifying sombre topics) can lift comment velocity yet depress completion and downstream support—an inconsistency relative to general live-stream findings that treat interaction volume as a universal positive (cf. Wang, 2025). Second, AI assistance is most effective when tightly scoped to operational bottlenecks; over-automation of creator voice risks flattening affective gratifications central to documentaries, a nuance less visible in cases where virtual hosts themselves are the attraction (Zhang, 2025). Third, the museum literature assumes co-present, spatially curated journeys; in fragmented online publics, the “wayfinding” work must be done by paratexts, vernacular tagging and serial releases. Thus, while the mechanism of layered interpretation aligns with He (2025), the unit of curation shifts from gallery rooms to feeds and cards, and failures of platform vernacular fit can nullify otherwise strong content.

4. Theoretical contributions

Conceptually, the results integrate Uses and Gratifications with Media System Dependency to explain not only whether tactics work but when and for whom. We specify a mapping from tactic classes to dominant gratifications at each stage, then show how dependency structures gate effect sizes: individual dependency amplifies tactics that reduce cognitive friction; group dependency boosts community-centred calls to action; pseudo-environmental dependency rewards alignment with platform grammar. This synthesis extends interaction-centric accounts by showing that the same surface behaviours can produce different outcomes depending on the gratification targeted and the dependency context. It also reframes AI’s role from a generic engagement booster to a precision tool for protecting tempo and specificity at known choke points.

5. Practical implications

For creators and curators of independent documentaries, the findings translate into a coherent set of operational directions: platform-native paratexts to clarify first contact, two-

speed interaction architectures, roleful communities, compressed action flows, and structured support for reuse and remix. Rather than isolated “tips,” these elements function as an integrated orchestration strategy across the SICAS journey. Detailed, stage-specific recommendations are therefore presented separately in the Recommendations section, where they are grouped into general operational advice and suggestions for platform and institutional partners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how new media channels shape audience engagement with Chinese independent documentaries and why certain tactics work. We reach four concise results.

Engagement works best as a sequenced journey. When creators align channel affordances with the SICAS stages—clear first contact, paced interaction, community continuity, simple conversion, and scaffolded sharing—attention, participation, and downstream actions rise together rather than peaking and fading.

Effects are explained by mechanisms. Tactics succeed when they deliver the right gratifications at the right moment: cognitive early, affective and entertainment during viewing, social for community and advocacy. Their strength depends on dependency structures: individual dependency rewards reduced cognitive friction; group dependency strengthens collective calls; platform pseudo-environments reward vernacular fit.

Boundary conditions matter. Over-novelty or gamification can weaken documentary seriousness and reduce completion and support, even if interaction volume increases. Automation is helpful when scoped to reply latency and load, but overuse can flatten the authorial voice that audiences value.

The framework translates into practice: produce platform-native paratexts in serial form; run two-speed interaction with staffed moderation and targeted automation; build roleful communities with predictable cadence and segmented guidance; compress action flows to a single step with concrete near-term benefits; publish reuse licences and curate community remixes across platforms.

Taken together, we obtained a stage-based model suited to the current media ecology, a mechanism account linking gratifications and dependency to observable lifts in discovery, retention, conversion, and diffusion, clear limits that protect narrative depth and voice, and an operations playbook that turns theory into process. Despite measurement heterogeneity and limited causal inference, the evidence offers a practical roadmap: design for the whole journey, specify each tactic’s intended gratification, and operate within the social and symbolic structures that give tactics force.

Recommendations

1. General recommendations

For creators and curators of Chinese independent documentaries, engagement should be planned as a continuous SICAS-based workflow rather than as one-off campaigns. At the Sense and Interest & Interactive stages, small teams can standardise a basic operations kit: platform-native paratext templates, simple reply protocols, and lightweight moderation so that first contact is clear and interaction is timely without overloading staff. At the Connect & Communicate and Action stages, effort should be concentrated on a few stable community spaces with one-step routes to concrete actions such as mailing lists, screenings, or crowdfunding pages. At the Share stage, explicit reuse policies and small UGC kits (pre-cleared stills and clips, caption prompts) can lower the barrier to diffusion while preserving narrative seriousness.

2. Recommendations for future research

Future studies can use the SICAS–U&G–MSD framework as a scaffold for more empirical designs. One direction is to run field experiments or A/B tests on paratext formats, reply latency, or conversion-flow length at specific stages and measure their effects on completion, subscription, and sharing. A second direction is qualitative work with viewers to examine how gratifications and dependency are experienced in practice, especially for serious topics. A third direction is comparative research that applies the same stage–mechanism lens to other serious media forms.

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