

# Marketing Strategy Study of Marvel Studios' Marvel Cinematic Universe

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the marketing strategies employed by Marvel Studios and propose actionable recommendations for enhancement. By conducting an in-depth examination of the key elements of Marvel's marketing approach, including teasers, social promotions, storytelling, and the launch of new episodic projects, this study identifies several strengths in the studio's marketing endeavors. While Marvel Studios has demonstrated prowess in various aspects of marketing, such as engaging teasers and effective social promotions, it has also faced significant challenges, particularly in its social media campaigns in China, the introduction of film and television productions into the Chinese market, and the maintenance of production quality. To address these challenges, this paper proposes a set of recommendations aimed at improving the efficacy of Marvel's social media operations in China, prioritizing the introduction of film and television works in the Chinese market and maintaining a strong focus on the quality of its productions. Implementing these recommendations is expected to enable Marvel Studios to expand its presence in the Chinese market further, enhance its brand value, and foster long-term development. This study holds considerable reference value not only for Marvel Studios but also for the broader film and television industry. By offering practical suggestions and guidance tailored to the Chinese market, this paper contributes to the advancement and growth of related companies operating in this dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape.

**Keywords:** Marvel Studios; Marvel Cinematic Universe MCU; Marketing Strategy.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) represents a significant and enduring achievement in the history of cinema. It has achieved both commercial success and cultural influence, reshaping the entertainment landscape in the process. Over the past decade, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has not only reinvented the definition of the superhero movie but has also become a phenomenal case in the film industry due to its innovative marketing strategies, consistent profitability, and valuable audience feedback. The origins of the MCU can be traced back to the 2008 release of Iron Man, featuring Robert Downey Jr., which marked the official beginning of the MCU story and laid the groundwork for a series of interconnected narratives that would become the foundation for the MCU. This work was more than just a movie and a bold marketing attempt. The first Avengers, released in 2012, was a huge success, receiving \$1.5 billion at the global box office, and it was the first Marvel movie to exceed a billion dollars [1]. Marvel Studios has concentrated on developing the story of the MCU through an innovative approach, and the first 22 films in the series have collectively earned more than \$17 billion at the global box office, making it the highest-grossing film series of all time. The MCU's success has not only been financial; Additionally, the MCU has garnered significant critical acclaim, with an average critical rating of 84% on Rotten Tomatoes, which is significantly higher than the average critical rating of 68% of the highest-grossing 15 series. Furthermore, the MCU has received an average of 64 nominations and awards per movie [2]. Over time, the MCU has gradually created a universe-spanning different stories and characters through coherent individual and group storytelling narratives. This strategy has not only strengthened the brand's coherence but also built up greater audience anticipation for the launch of new works. Additionally, MCU's films



have generated a significant amount of discussion on social media, with an impact that far exceeds traditional methods of movie promotion. These achievements not only demonstrate the commercial value of the MCU but also reflect its social and cultural importance.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

The development of the MCU has attracted considerable attention from both academic and industry sources. This paper selects literature that is closely related to the development of the MCU and summarizes the key findings of this literature, which provide valuable insights for this paper.

Harrison, Carlsen, and Škerlavaj suggested in their study that Marvel Studios redefined the concept of the movie series by finding a balance between innovative filmmaking and maintaining coherence. A total of 338 interviews with producers, directors, and screenwriters, as well as 140 reviews from leading critics, were analyzed in order to ascertain the key principles that have contributed to Marvel's success. The findings of this analysis indicate that the four principles that have been identified as being instrumental to Marvel's success are as follows: choosing experienced novices, utilizing a core of stability, continually challenging formulas, and fostering customer curiosity [2].

Davies analyzed the evolution of the Marvel brand in relation to the evolution of the MCU's production model in their paper. This paper examined the significant shifts in the Marvel brand over the past three decades. It traces the evolution of the brand from a popular comic book franchise to bankruptcy, to an independent movie studio, and ultimately to a major part of Disney. Davies attempts to integrate the cultural and economic elements of Marvel, exploring its past and present. Additionally, he notes that Marvel produces a series of movies in a special format, which allows characters from different series to cross over, creating a coherent storyline where the characters cross over into each other. This innovative model is crucial in changing consumer perceptions of the series [3].

Mahmutović examined the MCU's "idea of the world" in their study in the *Journal of World Literature* and argued that the synergy between Marvel and the film industry has redefined the universal narrative of modernity. The authors posit that Marvel has activated the "world concept" by presenting the MCU as infinitely scalable to the world. Marvel's culture not only reflects the current state of the World Concept but also influences its evolution and dissemination [4].

Dong Tianheng and Wu Jianxiao conducted a comprehensive analysis of Marvel's marketing strategy through SWOT analysis. They identified the flaws in the strategy and provided suggestions for optimization. These suggestions included accelerating the development of peripheral products, integrating multiple elements, and expanding the audience [5].

The findings of this literature provide valuable insights for this paper. Most of the articles examine the achievements and impact of Marvel's extensive character portfolio and innovative worldview during the initial and middle phases. Additionally, the development and dissemination of the company's brand culture are frequently discussed. However, there is a paucity of scholarship that analyzes the differences between Marvel's marketing strategies across different phases and their relative strengths and weaknesses.

## **1.3. Research Framework**

This paper will focus on the evolution of marketing strategies and audience feedback at various stages of Marvel Studios. Firstly, the paper will provide a general overview of the historical development of Marvel up to the present stage. Secondly, the strengths and weaknesses of Marvel's marketing strategies will be identified and analyzed. Thirdly, the paper will present relevant solutions and strategic suggestions for addressing the shortcomings identified.

## **2. Case Description**

It is commendable that Marvel Studios has taken the initiative to meticulously and judiciously map out its future plans before embarking on the production of its films. Furthermore, the studio has

demonstrated a commendable ability to refine and revise these plans as the process progresses. Its films are presented in phases, with the recently completed Infinity Saga comprising the first three phases, which collectively encompass 23 films and nine Marvel One-Shots. The fifth phase, which is currently underway under the Multiverse Saga, is planned to consist of phases four through six.

Since the release of Iron Man in 2008, Marvel has endeavored to enrich and refine each character's standalone narrative as well as each team's team narrative. In Phase 1 of the MCU, Marvel released a total of six film titles, which served as a preliminary phase for the studio. Its primary objective was to introduce each of the Primordial Avengers to a relevant audience on screen and connect them to form a unified worldview initially. In Phases 2 and 3, Marvel gradually introduced new threats with each character's arc and set up a Final Threat to serve as the conclusion of The Infinity Saga's conclusion. Phase 4 marked the beginning of The Multiverse Saga, during which Marvel introduced a significant number of new characters and new stories. This was primarily done to set the stage for Phase 5, but as a result, Phase 4 was less heated than previous phases. Currently, Marvel is in the middle of Phase 5 and has decided to conclude this part of the story in Phase 6 with The Avengers 5 and The Avengers 6.

Moreover, Marvel Studios' marketing initiatives extend beyond the realm of film. In 2013, Marvel Television expanded the MCU to American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) *Agents of SHIELD* television episodes. This was followed by similar collaborations with Netflix and Hulu's streaming television services, as well as Freeform's cable television network. In 2021, Marvel Studios is also engaged in the production of its own streaming television episodes on Disney+, with *WandaVision* serving as the initial offering in Phase Four. Additionally, Marvel has unveiled the Dark Werewolf project, known as Marvel Specials, which suggests the expansion of the MCU into Phase 4 television specials. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Marvel has a series of Marvel One-Shots short film projects. This article examines the strategy and performance of the movies and TV episodes.

### **3. Analysis on the Problem**

#### **3.1. Posters, Trailers and Easter Eggs**

Posters and trailers can create buzz around an upcoming movie release and are necessary and important elements of a marketing campaign. Marvel also produces posters and trailers for every movie and TV show production in the MCU.

In the case of the MCU's inaugural film, Iron Man, the initial poster was released two years prior to its theatrical release. This poster provided fans with an insight into the visual representation of the Iron Man armor in the film, which generated considerable excitement. The initial poster for the film adaptation of the comic was a resounding success, marking the beginning of a comprehensive marketing campaign. A year later, the trailer was released, further establishing the film's appeal to both fans and a broad mainstream audience. The trailer's rich content and its connection to the comic book series contributed to the film's eventual success.

Another example is the MCU's first TV show, *WandaVision*. Its initial trailer was released at the 2020 Emmys, and that trailer was viewed a staggering 53 million times in 24 hours, which represents the highest record for a streaming episode trailer. Additionally, this trailer exemplifies the efficacy of Marvel's marketing strategy.

The marketing of Marvel is not limited to the period preceding the release of a movie. For fans of the Marvel franchise, the conclusion of a film and the subsequent appearance of the cast list may be followed by what are known as "easter eggs" and end credits. These are all teasers for future production plans, thereby engaging and exciting the audience and encouraging speculation about the future. These are all for Marvel to promote future releases [6].

## **3.2. Social Media Promotion and Advertising**

### **3.2.1. Advantages.**

The MCU employs a promotional strategy that encompasses various social media platforms. Marvel has established a robust presence on the most prominent social media platforms, with verified accounts that have amassed hundreds of thousands of followers across all major platforms. Additionally, the MCU has several fan-generated accounts, with some gaining over 50,000 followers. These accounts serve as a valuable conduit for brand awareness.

Marvel has also established a network of certified accounts on various platforms, which enables them to reach diverse audiences effectively. This strategy allows them to leverage the unique characteristics of each platform to engage with their target audience in a more targeted and effective manner. Statistically, all these platforms are among the 15 most popular social media in the world. Marvel promotes the MCU by releasing trailers, TV commercials, and billboards on YouTube. Twitter also amassed a large number of Marvel fans, and Marvel interacts with fans for a long period of time and occasionally sends gifts to fans to create surprises. Instagram has also grown into a platform, so Marvel's strategy of updating once a day is excellent [6]. From the outset, Marvel has attached great importance to social media marketing and has been utilizing the advantages of these platforms to interact with fans as a means of enhancing user stickiness. This is evidenced by the company's utilization of actors, with Marvel allowing actors to take set photos and post them on social media for fans to imagine. Furthermore, through some actors interacting with each other, Marvel is able to attract fans, a strategy that will continue to ferment [7].

In addition to social media, Marvel has an extensive advertising campaign. This includes the placement of MCU posters on buses and bus stops, which advertise various films and TV series, including *WandaVision*, *Thor*, and *The Avengers*. Another aspect of Marvel's marketing strategy is the organization of press conferences and symposiums about the MCU. There are innumerable examples of Marvel collaborating with other brands to promote the release of its initial film, Iron Man. These include a partnership with seven-eleven convenience stores in the United States for a Slurpee promotion, which involved the sale of different cups and straws; Collaboration with Burger King to launch kids' meals containing Iron Man toys; and Audi's promotion of Iron Man, which marked the first instance of Audi's involvement in a film collaboration [6]. A multitude of other characters have also collaborated with a plethora of brands in a multitude of fields, including KFC, Adidas, Hyundai, Coca-Cola, and numerous others. This cross-border marketing strategy has proven to be mutually beneficial for all parties involved.

### **3.2.2. Shortages.**

Marvel's approach to social media promotion in China is relatively limited. A significant proportion of the trailers that people view on social media are shared by other users rather than being officially released by Marvel. Marvel has a YouTube account with 16 million subscribers, but there is not even an official Marvel account on Bilibili (China's largest non-short-form video platform). This represents a missed opportunity for Marvel to engage with a potential advertising platform with 200 million users. Moreover, although Marvel has an official account on TikTok in China, its update rate is relatively low compared to other U.S.-based platforms. Furthermore, it is only used for the uploading of movie trailers, with minimal interaction with fans [8].

## **3.3. Storytelling and Cross-Cultural Marketing**

### **3.3.1. Storytelling.**

In the present era, the practice of storytelling remains a potent means of conveying information. Marvel stories often originate from conflicts. For the most part, the conflict is situated between heroes and villains, who hold different standpoints. The presence of conflict serves to maintain the engagement, preventing it from becoming boring. However, in a small number of situations, the source of conflict may be for other reasons. One example is *WandaVision*, in which the protagonist

is depicted as the antagonist, as she traps innocent individuals in an alternate reality. The cause of this conflict is Wanda's grief over the loss of loved ones. Her actions are driven by a desire to bring them back. In order to maintain narrative coherence, it is necessary to present and explain the various conflicts that arise in the story, and not all villains in all stories have malicious intent [6].

The MCU also possesses a significant marketing advantage in storytelling. The MCU draws its stories from the extensive array of characters and stories that already exist in Marvel Comics, and it establishes clear timelines and storylines to organize the intertwining of the various characters and stories. A character cameo may be an integral part of some episodes. For instance, in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, the entire narrative would not have been possible without the appearance of Dr. Strange. Furthermore, the appearance of characters in other stories serves as a powerful marketing tool, enhancing the sense of a shared story world and heightening anticipation for the MCU [6].

Marvel also plans everything for the story ahead of time, which confers a distinct advantage when marketing future projects. This is evident in the MCU's storylines, which provide the audience with a clear understanding of what to expect, such as exploring the Infinity Stones in Phases I through III and the Multiverse in Phases IV through VI. In addition, Marvel employs past events as a foundation for new ones, such as in *Avengers 4*, where Loki's theft of the Tesseract kicked off Loki's episodic series [6].

The level of secrecy Marvel keeps about their stories is also unimaginable. Marvel's actors are required to sign non-disclosure agreements, which means that they have to answer no until a reporter asks them a question. At the same time, Marvel also employs this strategy for marketing purposes. They allow some fans or paparazzi to take some spoiler photos and spread them through social media in order to fuel the audience's anticipation [7].

### **3.3.2. Cross-cultural marketing.**

In the early days of the MCU, characters, including Captain America, were marketed with anti-war themes that established themselves in the minds of Americans at the time. Marvel's anti-fascist heroes also received considerable feedback from audiences around the world, reflecting the beginning of Marvel's cultural export. Marvel's cross-cultural communication strategy includes both diversification and integration.

For instance, when targeting the Chinese market, Marvel incorporates Chinese elements into its films to mitigate the challenges posed by cultural differences. Additionally, it engages in offline activities to enhance the audience's engagement.

The integration strategy is reflected in Marvel's focus on integrating different cultures. This is exemplified by the participation of global creative staff, which facilitates cross-cultural audiences' access to the film. Furthermore, Marvel expands the audience by using some flat-name characters, which addresses the challenge of cultural misunderstanding. In conclusion, Marvel's cross-cultural marketing strategy has not only achieved success in the Chinese market but also built up a wide fan base around the world [9].

## **3.4. Television Series Creation and Introduction of Characters**

### **3.4.1. Advantages.**

In the 14th year of the MCU, 2021, *WandaVision* aired on Disney+ streaming as the first TV episode production outside of a Marvel movie. Marvel's early announcement of the project got viewers excited. Marvel has also released other MCU TV episodes, including *She-Hulk*, *Secret Invasion*, *Moon Knight*, *WHAT IF*, and more. The marketing advantage of these TV shows is that they are part of the MCU. These TV shows can only be watched on Disney+, which can simultaneously promote its parent company, Disney's streaming service for its own MCU [6].

In the early days of the MCU, there were television episodes of Marvel heroes that aired on the ABC network and Netflix. However, at the time, it seemed that they were separate from the MCU. However,

since the beginning of Phase 4 of the MCU, things have changed, and Marvel is bringing these characters back into the MCU. For example, Daredevil and Inhumans have been incorporated into the MCU. Furthermore, with the acquisition of 20th Century Fox by Disney, the rights to the X-Men were returned to Marvel. Sony has also entered into a partnership with Marvel that allows them to share the rights to Spider-Man and even brought back two generations of Spider-Man in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* with both Tobey Maguire's version and Andrew Garfield's version. Consequently, Marvel is resurrecting some iconic characters that were previously excluded from the Marvel Universe, and this is generating considerable excitement among fans [6].

### **3.4.2. Shortages.**

Since the Disney+ service has not entered the Chinese market, along with the reluctance of Chinese broadcasters to approve the purchase of broadcasting rights for this streaming platform, all the Marvel TV productions that can be seen in China are illegal, as there is no Disney+ service in China. With the immense success of the MCU, the potential for the TV episodes to be a significant hit in China is considerable. However, at present, they are virtually unknown in the Chinese market. This represents a significant setback for Marvel in terms of its marketing strategy [8].

## **4. Suggestions**

### **4.1. Strengthening Social Media Operations in China**

Marvel Studios is underrepresented on Chinese social media and should increase its presence on Chinese social platforms. China's leading social media platforms include the short video platform TikTok, the non-short-form video platform Bilibili, and the self-media community-sharing platform Little Red Book. In China, Marvel Studios has an official account on TikTok, but it is only used to post a trailer. The suggestion is that the update rate should be increased, and the interaction between the relevant staff and the fan base should be strengthened to increase fans' understanding and attention to the brand. Marvel doesn't even have official accounts in Bilibili and Small Red Book, which is a big waste of the opportunity to promote its works. Marvel should set up accounts in different areas on different platforms, just like its local social media, to make full use of different markets and strengthen its interaction with Chinese fans, to increase the interest of Chinese fans and even non-fans, and at the same time understand the demands of fans and its own shortcomings.

### **4.2. Emphasize the Introduction of TV Episodic Works in China**

Marvel has been gradually developing its own MCU TV series since *WandaVision* in Phase 4, and some of the TV episodes have been well-received with positive reviews. But its parent company, Disney's own streaming platform Disney+, has not landed in China for a number of reasons, mainly because it has not obtained a license for mainland China, which undoubtedly gives up a huge marketing market and loses the expectations of a large number of fans. In China, any platform that provides video or audio content must be approved by the relevant government agencies in order to operate legally in the country. Marvel is allowed to cut or modify the content of its episodes to meet the requirements of the relevant authorities in mainland China and to broadcast its episodes online in the Chinese market.

### **4.3. Focus on Quality Rather Than Quantity**

Phase 4 of the MCU has come to an end, but it wasn't considered a success. Marvel Studios concluded Phase 3 with *The Avengers: Endgame*, which was well-received by fans, leading to high expectations for the future of the MCU. However, Marvel's ambitions in Phase 4 exceeded their capabilities, resulting in a greater quantity of output than quality. Excluding the new TV series set projects added to Phase 4, Marvel Studios has already increased the number of its movie projects from approximately 11 movies in a previous phase to a few per year. Such a large number can lead to a significant decline in the quality of its output. For the MCU, with several of its iconic characters retired at the end of

Phase 3, Marvel has to introduce new characters with connectivity. However, the audience's comparison of these new characters to the classic ones can lead to failure if they fail to live up to expectations [10]. Therefore, Marvel should fully adopt the audience's views on the many new characters currently available and suggest suitable modifications. Moreover, the MCU has been accompanied by a plethora of television projects, which has resulted in the timeline of Marvel's products becoming increasingly confusing, the VFX appearing rushed and unfinished, and the plots tending to be formulaic. However, Marvel appears to be aware of some of these problems and openly pokes fun at itself in *SHE-HULK* [11]. The success of Marvel's first three phases is not a coincidence; it is the result of a step-by-step accumulation of achievements. In order to maintain this success, Marvel must refocus on the quality of its work rather than the quantity. This refocus should prioritize the unique storylines of each character and their individual characteristics rather than focusing on the appearance of all characters in a final story. The new characters should be like the classic characters of Iron Man and Captain America in that they should be flesh-and-blood individuals with their own characteristics.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1. Key Findings**

The objective of this paper is to examine the marketing strategies employed by Marvel Studios and to propose recommendations for improvement. By analyzing the key elements of Marvel's marketing strategy, this paper concludes that there are numerous strengths to its marketing approach, including its teasers, social promotions, storytelling, and the launch of new episodic projects. Concurrently, it is evident that Marvel has encountered significant challenges in its social media campaigns in China, the introduction of film and television productions into the Chinese market, and the emphasis on quality in its productions. To address these concerns, this paper proposes recommendations to enhance the efficacy of social media operations in China, prioritize the introduction of film and television works in the Chinese market, and prioritize the quality of its productions. The implementation of these measures will enable Marvel Studios to further expand into the Chinese market, enhance its brand value, and promote the company's long-term development. This study is of significant reference value to Marvel Studios as well as the entire film and television industry and can provide substantial suggestions and guidance for the development of related companies in the Chinese market.

### **5.2. Research Significance**

This study is of significant reference value for Marvel Studios and the broader film and television industry. By analysing the successful marketing strategies employed by Marvel Studios and the promotion strategies and introduction of works in the Chinese market, it can provide substantial suggestions and guidance for the future development of Marvel Studios. Second, for the entire film and television industry, this study can provide reference and inspiration for the development of other film and television companies and promote the healthy competition and sustainable development of the industry. However, it should be noted that this study also has some limitations. First, due to data and resource limitations, this study may not be able to cover all relevant factors and details. Second, due to changes in the market environment and policies, the results of the study may be subject to changes due to external factors. Consequently, future research can be conducted to examine these issues in greater depth further, utilising additional future data and company strategies to validate the findings.

### **5.3. Limitations**

In conclusion, this study presents a series of substantial recommendations based on an analysis of the promotional strategies and work introduction issues of Marvel Studios in the Chinese market. This analysis is of significant importance to the development of Marvel Studios and the broader film and

television industry. However, it is important to note that the study is not without limitations, which future research can address to enhance the study's findings further.

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