

The Success Factors and Development Mechanisms of Global High-Grossing Films

Zheyang Dai

Hangzhou No.14 High School,
Hangzhou, China
dzy118035@outlook.com

Abstract:

The sustainable development of high-grossing films has drawn extensive attention from both the industry and academia. However, existing research mostly focuses on single-factor analysis and lacks a comprehensive exploration of the most fundamental operating mechanisms and potential contradictions of films. This article aims to systematically analyze the underlying success logic of global high-box office films. It also seeks to construct a sustainable development mechanism from multiple perspectives. Analysis reveals that the success of high-grossing films relies on the precise matching of release dates and audiences, extensive marketing on social media, emotional resonance triggered by the film's theme, the construction of a high-quality IP universe, and the coordinated transmission of star signals, among other strategies. However, the exhaustion of creativity caused by excessive reliance on IP and the erosion of content quality by the "marketing first" approach have become the core contradictions restricting the healthy development of the industry. Based on this, this essay proposes that a data-driven intelligent distribution and precise marketing mechanism should be established to promote the in-depth development and innovative iteration of the IP value chain, and to build a word-of-mouth management and long-term brand maintenance system centered on content quality, to promote the long-term prosperity of the film industry.

Keywords: High box office; marketing mechanism; IP linkage; release period; star

1. Introduction

As one of the most influential forms of mass art and entertainment since the 20th century, the commercial value of films is most directly reflected in box office revenue. High office receipts can bring additional

funds and investment confidence to new projects, which is particularly crucial for independent films and new directors seeking to establish a foothold in the industry [1]. At the same time, box office receipts can also be regarded as a form of market feedback, which is crucial for the progress of filmmakers [2].

People often regard box offices as a reliable indicator to measure whether a film has an unshakable position. The box office miracles created by films such as “Avatar”, “The Avengers”, and the “Fast and Furious” series have not only constantly refreshed market perceptions but also sparked intense discussions in both academia and industry: What comprehensive factors enable a film to transcend cultural boundaries, attract hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide, and achieve huge commercial success? Is this entirely proportional to the amount of investment made by the producers, or is it purely determined by luck?

Since 2020, the domestic film industry has begun to raise alarms, showing a worrying development trend: the total box office in 2023 (54.915 billion yuan) still has a gap of over 9 billion yuan compared to the historical peak in 2019 (64.149 billion yuan), with a recovery rate of approximately 85.6% [3]. In order to study the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the movie box office, based on the data of 187 movies released from January 2020 to November 2021, and combined with several data features introduced earlier. By checking the importance of model features, it is found that the situation of the COVID-19 epidemic at the time of movie release had a certain related impact on the movie box office [4]. This indicates that, in terms of the absolute value of box office scale, the industry has not yet returned to the pre-pandemic level and is generally in a period of recovery and consolidation after a decline. From a theoretical perspective, systematically analyzing the causes of high-grossing films can help deepen the understanding of the consumption patterns of cultural products and global marketing strategies. From a practical perspective, for film producers, distributors, and marketers, clarifying these success factors can curb the probability of the emergence of bad and failed films, reduce the investment risks of producers, and enhance the reputation and success rate of films in the market. Especially in the current situation, with the high cost of film production and the increasing diversion by streaming platforms, it has become particularly urgent to grasp the rules of box office success. This article aims to integrate the perspectives of marketing, communication psychology, and film studies to systematically analyze the underlying success logic of global high-grossing films and reveal the universal laws and operational mechanisms behind them. Then, analyze the main problems existing in the current theory in practice and finally construct a set of possible and sustainable development mechanisms to provide valuable ideas for Chinese-language films to impact the global market and even for the healthy development of the world film industry.

2. The Underlying Logic of High-Grossing Films

The high box office performance of the film industry is mainly influenced by target marketing strategies (IP continuity, social background combination), release schedule arrangement, media publicity intensity and star effect, which can roughly be divided into the combined effect of artistic, commodity and social attributes.

2.1 Selection of Schedule and Target Audience Targeting

The precise selection of a film’s release date and the in-depth targeting of the target audience are the fundamental strategies for maximizing box office potential. Targeted marketing strategies can accurately meet the needs of the audience, thereby evoke a high degree of resonance and strengthening their perception of the theme of the film. Audience preferences are easily influenced by specific holidays such as the Spring Festival and Valentine’s Day. Film producers must be familiar with film genres and then determine the best release time. For instance, comedy films are deeply loved by all kinds of audiences because of their strong entertainment value and relatively easy-to-understand content and are suitable for family reunions during the Spring Festival. The top four domestic box office films in 2024, “You Only Live Once”, “Pegasus 2”, “Successor”, and “Article 20”, are all mainly comedy films, with box office receipts exceeding 2.4 billion yuan each [5]. Besides specific holidays, the release time slots on regular days are also crucial. According to Ding Jinyu’s view, weekends (especially Saturdays) and holidays (such as the Spring Festival and National Day) are peak periods for movie-watching, and daily box office receipts often break records. This might also be the reason why cinemas tend to schedule the premieres of key films on Fridays or holidays to maximize revenue, while low-budget films choose to avoid competition during peak hours. For films aimed at the global market, marketing strategies need to consider both global uniformity and regional particularity. In different countries and regions, using stars familiar to local audiences for promotion and customizing posters and trailers in combination with local cultural elements can effectively break down cultural barriers and enhance acceptance [6]. For instance, in the 2025 release of Zootopia 2, the production team adopted a personalized customization strategy for the role of the “host” in the film based on the representative animal features of different countries: the Chinese exclusive version of Zootopia chose the image of a panda, while the Australian exclusive version chose a koala. Depending on the production cost and the

positioning of the film, films with distinct type and locating target can find ways to achieve high box office goals.

2.2 Social Media Marketing, Preview and Word-of-Mouth Building

Before a movie's release in theaters, trailer advertising provides valuable information that can help viewers and investors form expectations about the movie's future success [7]. Social media marketing can quickly build audience anticipation through large-scale promotion in forms such as trailers and topic creation. Meanwhile, the deep emotional resonance between the film and social issues is the core driving force for audiences to purchase tickets. For global box office top-grossing films like "Avatar", "The Avengers" and "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows", they have all invested huge sums of money in the promotion and distribution of their films. The increasingly fierce competition in the film market means that the number of viewers willing to spend their spare time watching a complete film is decreasing. In this case, a 90-second short video that condenses the film's tone, stunning shots, and style can help the movie stand out and capture the audience's attention. To assess the influence of trailers, the trailer for "Avengers: Endgame" set a record with over 289 million views in a single day. Long before the movie was released, fans had been continuously discussing and creating meme images, putting forward ideas, and engaging in discussions based on the analysis of each frame [8]. Metrics such as sharing, commenting, and liking are crucial for building expectations. When the trailer went viral on the Internet, it seemed as if the audience was forced to experience this thrill by watching the exciting trailer.

In addition, word-of-mouth marketing (also known as the halo effect in psychology) is an advertising method that attracts social attention and creates wide popularity for a film by generating captivating topics or events [9]. Make social media platforms the main battlefield for film promotion and distribution. By creating topics, launching challenges, and releasing behind-the-scenes footage, the film was able to go viral among the audience. It can quickly create public opinion momentum in the early stage of the film's release and influence the ticket purchasing decisions of onlookers.

2.3 Emotional Resonance

Evoking emotional resonance is also one of the indispensable factors. The success of some high-grossing films lies in their hitting the social issues or collective sentiments that were widely concerned at that time and place. For instance, "Dying to Survive" touches upon the issue of medical care and people's livelihood, while "Oppenheimer"

prompts reflection on the ethics of science and technology and historical responsibility. In news videos, text has a substantial impact on emotions, while in movie trailers, colors play a more influential role in eliciting emotional responses. These insights benefit content creators and marketers by aligning content features with the desired emotional impact, enhancing audience engagement and connection [10]. This profound emotional and ideological resonance can drive the audience to go beyond the simple purpose of entertainment and enter the cinema to truly feel the spiritual guiding role played by this film and think in parallel with today's social issues.

2.4 Continuation of IP

Mature IPs provide films with a reduced risk of trial and error and a guaranteed basic box office by building a grand universe and generating stable fan economic income. IP (Intellectual Property) has become the cornerstone of the contemporary film industry, especially for high-grossing film series. The birth of a mature IP cannot be achieved without effort in multiple aspects and the accumulation of time. It needs to have a story framework that has been verified by the market, deeply rooted character images, and a stable fan base with purchasing power. For the audience, in a market with information asymmetry, choosing familiar IPs (such as Marvel and the Harry Potter series) is an absolutely low-risk and quality-assured consumption decision. At the same time, a successful IP film is never content with the narrative of a single work but is committed to building a grand "universe view" through a series of films, because usually a two-hour narrative is not enough to cover all the content. This model weaves multiple films into a large web through character interaction and plot interweaving, firmly "locking" the audience, making them continuously consume to understand the complete story. Thus, such an approach ensures the stability of the series' box office.

2.5 Star Effect and Quality Signal Transmission

Inviting celebrities to participate in performances can serve as a "guide" to attract initial attention and stand out in short-term competition. Despite the growing call for "content is king", celebrities still play an irreplaceable role in attracting initial attention and enhancing the commercial appeal of films. One of the main reasons why producers choose stars is to boost the box office. Top male and female actors have an inherent fan base, and these fans are likely to watch their movies, thereby driving box office sales. The connection between a well-known name and a film can generate excitement and anticipation, leading to a higher opening at the weekend box office. In fact, it is the

star's popular appeal reflected in appearances before the promotional push that significantly affects box-office success [11]. Moreover, fans are not only consumers of the film, but also disseminators of its culture and purchasers of its derivatives. They will continuously discuss, create fan works, and purchase peripheral products on social media, forming a powerful "fan economy", which greatly amplifies the commercial value of the IP. Each new installment of the series of films is a "withdrawal" of the emotional accumulation of fans and can continuously attract new fans to join. More essentially, stars are superior to ordinary actors not only because their acting skills can make the audience feel more involved, but also because they can better interpret the characters depicted in the movie script. Stars can be regarded as a certain guarantee of a good film because they demonstrate the economic strength of the producers. However, in a market full of uncertainties, the best role of a star is to act as a "guide", drawing in the audience. The audience makes a movie a hit, and no amount of "star power" or marketing can alter that. The real star is the movie [12]. Ultimately, what truly retains the audience and builds word-of-mouth is a solid script and excellent production. Stars are catalysts for success, not the foundation. Its greatest function lies in making potential audiences feel at ease, thereby enhancing commercial appeal.

3. Problems Existing in the Modern Film Model

3.1 IP Dependence and Creative Exhaustion

Excessive reliance on IP sequels and traditional adaptations will lead to a decline in originality, audience aesthetic fatigue, and ultimately suppress the innovative vitality and ecological health of the entire film market. At present, the film industry's reliance on mature IPs has almost become a kind of "superstition". Producers are keen on reproducing literary works, classic films, and even popular games that already have a large fan base in a "production line" style, such as sequels, prequels, and spin-offs. From a business logic perspective, this is understandable: creating within the comfort zone can significantly reduce market uncertainty and ensure a basic box office base. For instance, the decade-long glory of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the ultimate embodiment of this strategy. However, when the entire industry indulged in this "safe" model, its side effects became increasingly prominent. First, it directly leads to conservatism and inertia at the creative end. Capital and resources naturally tilt towards "safe" IP projects, making it extremely difficult for those

original scripts that lack a fan base but are full of ingenuity to seek investment. Rather than daring to break through the unknown risks of traditional frameworks, many directors prefer to depict their films within the established and conventional framework. If movie creating at "safe" zone goes on for a long time, the creativity of the screenwriter will gradually wear down within the framework of "adaptation" and "continuation". This inevitably gave rise to aesthetic fatigue and loss of trust among the audience. When the audience steps into the cinema and finds that the screen is filled with familiar hero journeys, formulaic plot twists, and unchanging character arcs, the initial surprise will turn into boredom. Ultimately, the prevalence of this kind of "conservatism" will dampen the innovative vitality and healthy ecosystem of the entire market. A vibrant film market should be a place of great diversity, featuring both commercial blockbusters to support the market volume and original works of various styles to bring surprises. If original experiments with low and medium costs, high risks, and high returns lose their survival space, the exploration boundaries of film as an art form will continue to shrink, and the entire industry will fall into a meaningless repetition and formula application, seemingly lively but stagnant.

3.2 Overemphasizing Marketing and Shifting the Focus

The strategy of "marketing first" while neglecting content quality may create short-term box office bubbles, but it will damage the film's reputation and the credibility of the industry. In the long run, it is not sustainable. Extensive marketing before the film's release helps to quickly open the film market, make it widely known, and guide positive public opinion. However, there is a dangerous tendency that needs to be guarded against: some producers seem to regard marketing as a "panacea", falling into the myth of "marketing first". They devoted most of their budget and energy to the early stage of topic hype, viral spread, and fan mobilization of popular stars, but they did not invest enough in the core "product" of the film - that is, the artistic quality and narrative integrity of the story itself - and dealt with it perfunctorily. The trailer, which focuses on creating high-quality shots and dialogue, leaves an extremely excellent first impression on the audience. However, when watching the full film, it is found that the entire story's logic is chaotic and the narrative is unclear, like an old blanket inlaid with jewels and jewels, all show and no substance. It is undeniable that such an approach can increase the initial box office revenue, but it does not guarantee the essence of the film. In the short term, it might be possible to "trick" a brilliant first-week box

office with a powerful promotional campaign, creating the illusion of a prosperous market. However, as a word-of-mouth-driven commodity, the vitality of a film lies in the spontaneous dissemination and recommendation by the audience after they leave the cinema. In the long term, when a flood of negative reviews floods platforms such as Douban, Weibo, and Moments, the box office of the film will experience a sharp decline, forming a typical curve of “high start and low finish”. This fully demonstrates that in today’s increasingly transparent information environment, any marketing bubble that deviates from the quality of the film, with its glamorous appearance, will eventually be punctured by the public’s gaze. Ultimately, the credibility of the entire film industry in the eyes of the audience will decline. Viewers will remain skeptical of trailers and then seek more cost-effective entertainment activities outside of films, ultimately leading to the deterioration of the film market environment.

4. Construction of a Sustainable Development Mechanism for High-Grossing Films

To solve the problems mentioned above and ensure that the film industry not only makes money but also develops healthily and sustainably, it needs to establish a smarter and more systematic operation method.

4.1 Audience-Oriented Precise Marketing Mechanism

Building a precise marketing mechanism based on big data analysis is a key transformation from casting a wide net to a deep emotional connection. The era of reaching the general public through quantitative advertising has passed. Nowadays, platforms need more precise operations, such as using big data to “profile” the audience. By analyzing the audience’s gender, living area, what types of movies they like to watch, and what they usually follow on social media, personalized push of promotional content and precise channel reach can be achieved [10]. View marketing as a process of in-depth dialogue and emotional connection with the target audience group, rather than a one-way information infusion.

4.2 Intelligent Issuance Mechanism Based on Data Analysis

The determination of a film’s release date and the planning of a cinema’s screening schedule should not rely solely on subjective experience but should be based on systematic data analysis. By applying artificial intelligence technology to deeply explore multi-dimensional data such

as historical box office performance, regional audience preferences, and the competitive landscape of the market during the same period, a scientific basis can be provided for distribution decisions. For instance, art films can focus on precise distribution in cinemas around universities and cultural institutions. Blockbusters with market potential can avoid fierce competition during popular periods such as the Spring Festival and National Day, and choose to be released during times with a solid audience base and relatively mild competition, implementing a strategy of differentiated competition. Its core objective lies in leveraging data insights to identify market opportunities and fully unleash the potential commercial value of each film. This data-based intelligent distribution model is precisely the key path for the film industry to transform from extensive operation to refined and scientific operation.

4.3 In-depth Development and Innovation Mechanism of the IP Value Chain

Build a larger ecosystem around the IP, such as developing it into games, animations, novels simultaneously, or even building theme parks and selling derivatives. In this way, the value of a story can be magnified many times over.

At the same time, the story of an IP itself cannot remain unchanged all the time. Beyond the main storyline, one can attempt to produce some spin-off series or films with unique styles, telling stories from new perspectives and with new characters to keep the IP fresh all the time, rather than making the audience feel that it is following the beaten track and repeating the same mistakes.

4.4 Word-of-mouth Management and Long-term Brand Maintenance Mechanism

After a film is released, a system must be established to monitor the audience’s evaluations and feedback in real time, just like having a “public opinion radar”. For negative comments, it is necessary to analyze the reasons promptly and make appropriate responses. More importantly, to put the principle of “content is king” into practice, production companies should devote more resources and energy to the script development and production process to ensure the high quality of the film itself. If a company can establish a reputation that “all products are of high quality”, it will win the long-term trust of the audience, which is the most stable wealth.

5. Conclusion

Overall, a film that achieve high box office requires precise marketing, smart scheduling, in-depth exploration

of IP, and effective use of resources such as celebrities. It must be clear that the foundation of all these means is always the film itself - a good story and solid technical production. Nowadays, the film industry is generally confronted with problems such as excessive reliance on IP, lack of creativity, and content homogeneity. In the future, if people want to produce high-grossing, high-quality works that will be passed down from generation to generation, they must strike a balance between artistic pursuit and commercial returns and be able to provide audiences with an irreplaceable, comprehensive value that watching videos at home cannot offer. On the one hand, it is necessary to make good use of technological means such as big data and artificial intelligence to optimize the marketing and distribution process and enhance operational efficiency. On the other hand, it is even more important to adhere to the original intention of content creation, encourage originality, cultivate screenwriting talents, and take touching stories as the core competitiveness. In an era of the rise of streaming media and the changing habits of movie-watching, the “immersive” collective movie-watching experience provided by cinemas is an irreplaceable advantage. The future of high-grossing films belongs to those works that can not only offer audio-visual wonders but also evoke emotional resonance and ideological enlightenment, ultimately creating irreplaceable comprehensive value for the audience.

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