Analysis of the Influence of Star Effect on Movies-Taking Marvel Series as an Example

Tianliang Qi

Institute of Business, Ningbo University, Ningbo, China
qtlgaganb@outlook.com

Abstract: The film industry has always relied on star power to attract audiences and boost profits, but its effectiveness is changing as viewers become more focused on story quality and digital platforms grow. This study uses the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to explore how star power helps and limits success in modern movies. While big-name stars can increase a film's early popularity, ticket sales, and fan loyalty-especially when actors closely connect with their roles (like Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man)-their impact varies based on movie type, cultural trends, and timing. Data shows that relying too much on stars becomes less effective over time. Marvel's strategy of signing actors on long-term contracts helps tie stars to iconic roles, reducing risks when replacing them. However, newer films like Shang-Chi and Eternals show challenges in shifting to younger stars, such as higher costs and weaker creativity. The study suggests that star power alone cannot guarantee success. Instead, studios should balance star appeal with strong scripts, fresh ideas, and smart marketing. To stay competitive, the industry should focus on finding the right actors for each story and training new talent, especially as streaming services change how people watch movies. This research provides practical tips for filmmakers to mix star power with quality content in a fast-changing industry.

Keywords: star power, marvel movies, box office success, character identity, new talent training

1. Introduction

With the development of economy and technology, people's material life has been greatly satisfied. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. High-level pursuits such as cultural life are increasingly becoming the most important part of People's Daily life. The proportion of cultural industry in the total economy has also become higher. As a comprehensive art form and carrier of mass culture, film occupies an important position in people's cultural life. At the same time, film is also a commercial product and a powerful media of communication, which has a profound impact on social development.

According to the statistics of the British data observation company Gower Street (figure 1), from 2017 to 2023, the global box office revenue showed a trend of first rising, then falling, and then rising. In 2019, global box office receipts reached $42.3 billion. In 2020-2022, global box office revenue fell below $26 billion due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the global film market improved, with box office revenue reaching $33.9 billion, recovering to 80% of the total box office in 2019.The total global film box office in 2024 is $27.85 billion, down 5.3% from $29.42 billion in 2023.Affected by the Hollywood writers' strike and the lack of film supply, as well as the sluggish performance of the Chinese mainland film market, the box office recovery was not ideal. But analysts expect a rebound in 2025, when the global box office is expected to reach $33 billion.

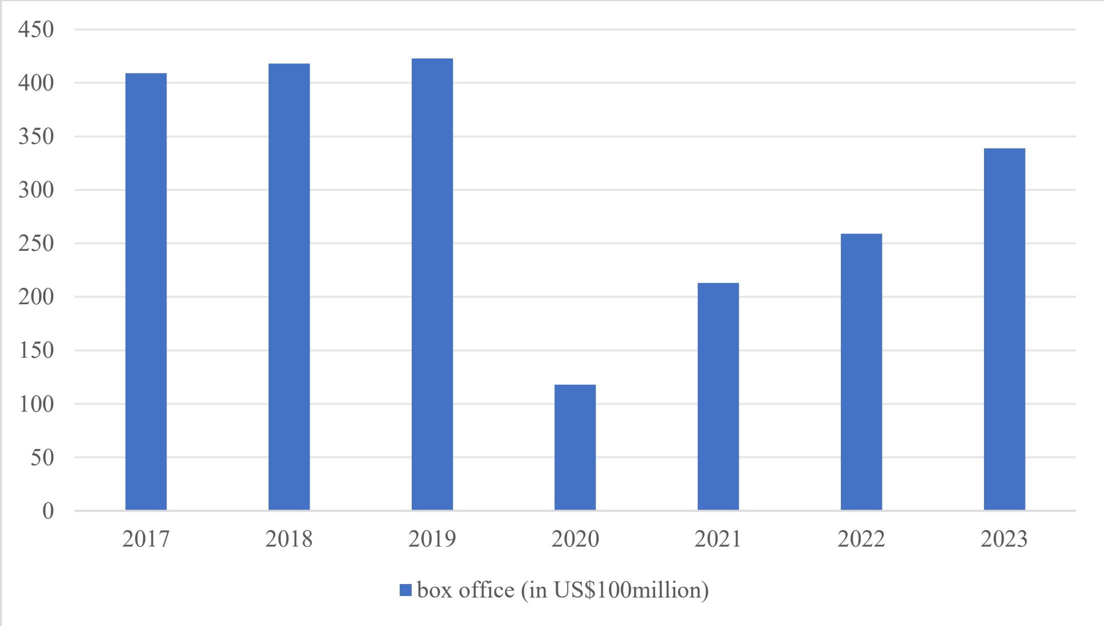

Figure 1: Global box office revenue, 2017-2023
data source: Motion Picture Association of America (MPA), Gower Street Analytics.

Marvel has kicked off the new year with the highly anticipated sequel Captain America: New World Order, marking the fourth installment in the Captain America series. The audience officially bids farewell to Chris Evans, as Anthony Mackie takes up the mantle amidst controversy. Character change in Captain America 4 is not only an important turning point in the Marvel Universe, but also a profound reflection of star power and character relationship. The closeness of the relationship between the star power and the role directly affects the audience's acceptance of the new role. Chris Evans became a worldwide superstar by playing Captain America, Steve Rogers, even though he wasn't very famous before that. His personal charm and the character's integrity and bravery are highly matched, making the audience almost equate him with Captain America. This symbiotic relationship deeply binds Evans' star power to the character. The future of the Captain America franchise's popularity without Chris Evans remains uncertain, and whether Sam Wilson, as the new Captain America, can fully replace Steve Rogers in audience perception is yet to be determined. If McKay can successfully portray Sam Wilson as Captain America, the star power will increase significantly. This shift has not only tested the acting skills of the actors and the acceptance of the audience but also reflected Marvel's strategy in character development and star power utilization.

It is evident that the relationship between a movie's box office performance and its stars is exceedingly complex. The influence of stars on a movie's box office success is not absolute, and other factors of the film may be more significant. If the star effect has a significant impact, it should be applied reasonably by balancing star power with other factors. If the impact of stars on the overall box office revenue is limited, it is a question that what other factors could profoundly influence the final box office earnings. With this starting point in mind, the following research was conducted in this paper.

The influence of star effect on the film is complex and multi-dimensional, including the suitability of the actor and the role, the reputation of the star itself, the certain fan economy that the star may drive, the quality and acting ability of the star itself as an actor, and so on. Especially now is the era of short video streaming media, the current situation is already different from the past, and the star effect will show what kind of trend under the blessing of the Internet and short video, which needs to be studied.

With fierce competition in the film industry, how to create a successful film has become a common problem for all filmmakers. Due to the complex production process, environmental polytroph and the diversity of audience needs, the film is a commercial product with high investment and high risk. The factors that affect the box office are complicated, Plot, characters, visual effects, sound and soundtrack, emotional resonance, acting skills, cultural and historical background, and word-of-mouth all affect the box office revenue of a film. Therefore, it is of great significance to formulate the correct production marketing strategy to reduce the risk and the operation of the film industry.

2. The multi-dimensional influence of star effect on film

2.1. Box office performance

The box office is the most intuitive indication of a movie's success. It reflects the audience's acceptance of the film, directly demonstrating the movie's market appeal. It is also the most critical metric for producers, distributors, investors, and other stakeholders, as it directly determines whether a film can recoup its costs and achieve profitability. According to the research by Peng et al., in China, the direct impact of the star effect on movie box office is negative, but the overall effect on movie box office revenue is positive [1]. A similar situation is occurring in Kazakhstan. According to the research by Asylee Amagansett, in the Kazakhstani market, the star effect acts as a double-edged sword—while a star-studded cast in a film can boost its opening week box office, the star power of competing films (especially those featuring well-known actors) can significantly divert a56+udience attention. At the same time, the strength of the star effect is moderated by factors such as film genre, nationality, and release cycle. This conclusion provides empirical evidence for film scheduling, actor casting, and market strategies [2]. Tristan Drost also points out in his research that while there is evidence suggesting stars may boost movie box office, their impact is constrained by multiple factors (such as budget, project quality, and the personal traits of the stars) and is not a decisive factor [3]. This contradiction is related to the complexity of the film industry and differences in research methodologies.

2.2. Marketing promotion

Market promotion is crucial to the success of a film, and its expenses account for a significant portion of the total costs. Effective market promotion can boost box office revenues, elevate the recognition of actors and directors, and attract investors, among other benefits. However, market promotion cannot play a decisive role in the success of a film; otherwise, those blockbusters with substantial marketing budgets would not have flopped. From the perspective of market promotion, it is certain that it is the star power, particularly that of social media influencers and popular celebrities, which takes center stage. Kay H. Hofmann points out that whether it is traditional advertising, public events, or transmedia storytelling, the involvement of celebrities significantly enhances the commercial visibility and audience appeal of a film [4]. Some scholars have demonstrated through Bollywood and Hollywood case studies, respectively, that the star effect serves as both a commercial catalyst and a cultural symbol in film market promotion [5,6]. Especially in this digital age, many celebrities inadvertently become 'opinion leaders' for their fans online, easily creating cognitive biases [7]. Even if the quality of a film may not be exceptionally high, its reputation and box office performance can soar, precisely because of the endorsement of these stars.

2.3. Film quality

The quality of a film is undoubtedly of paramount importance; it is the foundation upon which a movie stands. Superb content, stellar performances, masterful cinematography, impressive visual effects, and captivating soundtracks can all become talking points that people relish, serving as the cornerstone for a film's favorable reputation. Actors, being the central focus of the frame and bearing the brunt of the screen time, are precisely where stars can truly shine and make their mark. However, numerous studies have shown that the impact of stars on directly enhancing the quality of a film is limited. The improvement of film quality must return to the core elements such as the screenplay, directorial prowess, and technological innovation. Stars enhance the audience experience through emotional connections (such as appearance and fan interactions), but this pertains to subjective perception and may not necessarily correlate with objective quality [8]. Certainly, this phenomenon is also region-specific. For instance, Chinese audiences tend to focus more on stars, sequels, and major distribution companies. In contrast, within the Indian film market, the direct influence of stars on film quality and audience appeal is limited, with their role as a quality signal being supplanted by budget scale and online reviews [9].

3. Case analysis: the star strategy of marvel movies

3.1. Case background

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a fictional shared universe constructed by Marvel Studios, based on characters and stories from Marvel Comics. This universe has been expanded through a series of movies and television shows, with interconnected settings and characters. Each work serves as an independent story while also being part of a larger narrative arc, forming a cohesive storytelling system. Similar to the Marvel Comics Universe, the MCU connects various works through shared elements, settings, and character interactions, forming an officially recognized multiverse system alongside other Marvel comics, films, and animated series. Moreover, leveraging Disney's resource integration capabilities, Marvel has developed a business model that spans the entire industry chain, including movies, merchandise, theme parks, and more, thereby maximizing the value of its IP.

3.2. The specific manifestations of the star effect

3.2.1. The binding of actors to roles and the branding of characters

Marvel secures core actors through long-term contracts (such as Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man and Chris Hemsworth as Thor), creating a deep association between the actors and their characters. This strategy not only strengthens the audience's emotional connection to the characters but also creates a "star as character" branding effect. Research indicates that the continuous involvement of stars can significantly boost the box office expectations of a film series, especially when the actors have a track record of box office success or artistic acclaim [10]. For instance, Robert Downey Jr. has successfully intertwined his identity with that of Iron Man through his portrayal of the character. Robert Downey Jr.'s personal experiences resonate with the character, and his acting seamlessly merges with the role. He not only brought the character to life but also convinced the audience that "Iron Man is Downey himself," to the extent that some fans declared they would no longer watch Iron Man movies if Downey did not play the role. When Marvel was on the verge of bankruptcy, it bet on Downey, and he repaid that trust with the "Iron Man" series, which grossed over $5.8 billion worldwide. Downey’s salary skyrocketed from $500,000 for the first film to $100 million for "Avengers: Infinity War," making him one of Forbes' highest-paid male actors globally.

3.2.2. Interactive marketing between stars and young audiences

Marvel leverages stars' interactions with audiences on social media to generate buzz for their films. For example, during the promotion of "Avengers: Endgame," the lead actors actively engaged with fans on platforms like Twitter, driving hashtags such as “Whatever It Takes" to trend, successfully building momentum for the film. Following the buzz generated by Tom Holland's live-streaming mishap, Marvel cleverly transformed it into an official interactive event, further solidifying the fan community. Marvel also encourages actors to share behind-the-scenes interactions, such as unreleased scenes on DVDs, enhancing fan engagement. Marvel has not only successfully utilized the social media influence of stars to generate anticipation for their films but has also built a fan-centric interactive ecosystem, closely connecting stars, characters, and audiences, continuously driving brand heat and loyalty [11]. The star effect can influence audiences through dual pathways of rational cognition (knowledge) and emotional drive (attitude, emotion). The weight of these influences varies depending on the audience's level of interest; highly engaged audiences are more likely to be driven by star-related knowledge (such as character background) and emotions (such as affection for the actor), thereby generating related consumption [12].

3.2.3. The synergistic effect of star combinations

Marvel excels at enhancing the appeal of its films through an “all-star” cast. Marvel has built a network of hero alliances centered around the Avengers, the Guardians of the Galaxy, and others, creating a tightly woven narrative through frequent interactions between characters (such as the cooperation and conflict between Captain America and Iron Man). This "intertextuality" ensures that the actions of individual characters impact on the entire universe, with storylines frequently intersecting across different characters. By assembling multiple protagonists from standalone films, it achieves a "1+1>2" effect. Eberses’ empirical research shows that the synergistic effect of stars indeed exists in the film industry, particularly when there is already a strong cast. Adding new stars (such as Doctor Strange joining "Avengers: Infinity War") significantly boosts box office performance [13].

4. Discussion

4.1. The risks of over-reliance on celebrities

The star effect can significantly boost box office revenues in the short term, but excessive reliance on it may lead to content homogenization, cost overruns, and legal risks. Moreover, the utility of this effect is subject to the law of diminishing marginal returns. Particularly for large-scale productions, an over-reliance on star power may paradoxically result in diminished box office returns [14]. Moreover, while high-profile celebrities can exert a more pronounced impact on box office earnings, they may not constitute the optimal choice when compared to the meticulous crafting of screenplays and the judicious selection of fitting actors, especially considering the exorbitant remuneration commanded by star-studded casts. Marvel once faced risks due to its over-reliance on a single star. For instance, the character of Iron Man became inextricably linked with Robert Downey Jr., and following his departure, while "Avengers: Endgame" soared to unprecedented box office heights, subsequent standalone films such as "Shang-Chi" necessitated a renewed effort to cultivate audience acceptance for new characters. Furthermore, the "Black Widow" lawsuit has shed light on the potential legal and public relations crises that may arise from an excessive reliance on the commercial value of individual stars. If a movie lacks quality, the star power may serve as a "fig leaf"[15]. Research has found that negative reviews have a more significant impact on high-budget or star-studded films. For example, "Eternals" experienced a lack of sustained box office performance due to controversy over its reception [16].

4.2. Establishing a cultivation mechanism for the new generation of stars

The essence of the film industry's reliance on stars lies in its dependence on a single production factor. To mitigate the risks associated with this dependency, it is crucial to establish a cultivation mechanism for the new generation. This initiative is not merely about risk hedging; it is also an essential measure to drive content innovation, cultural export, and industrial upgrading through talent iteration. This mechanism must integrate various facets such as the agent system, media exposure, and award recognition (akin to the Hollywood model), while also exploring differentiated pathways within the local context to achieve sustainable development. For instance, Marvel has effectively mitigated the risks associated with generational shifts among stars through its on-screen character succession mechanism: The mentorship role of Iron Man in Spider-Man's growth not only strengthens the narrative continuity but also provides an emotional bond for character transition, reducing audience resistance to actor changes. This mechanism ensures the longevity of the IP by pre-establishing new characters and creating intrinsic connections with classic roles (such as mentors, allies, or successors), while also opening the door for emerging actors to be introduced to the audience [17].

5. Conclusion

This study employs literature review and case analysis to examine the impact of star power on films, specifically in terms of box office performance, marketing, and film quality. Star power can significantly boost a movie's opening-week box office (particularly in attracting initial audiences), but its long-term effect on sustained revenue is limited. Overreliance on stars may even reduce profitability due to increased costs. As "opinion leaders," stars can generate buzz on social media, driving engagement and visibility. The deep association between actors and their roles fosters emotional resonance, serving as a core marketing appeal. Meanwhile, multi-star collaborations create a synergistic "1+1>2" effect, amplifying market appeal. While stars enhance subjective audience experiences through emotional connections (e.g., charisma, fan interactions), their direct impact on core quality elements-such as script and directorial craftsmanship-remains limited. Moreover, star power may mask content flaws, leading to a "fig leaf effect."

These findings offer valuable insights into the film industry: Star power plays a significant but not absolute role. A balanced approach-integrating stars appeals with other factors like script quality, genre innovation, and distribution strategies-is crucial. For blockbusters, reducing reliance on individual stars in favor of a "content + suitable casting" model is advisable. As audiences grow more discerning and the industry shifts toward content-driven quality, prioritizing substance over star-studded spectacles should become the market's competitive edge. Moving forward, the film industry should leverage star power judiciously while focusing on content innovation and nurturing emerging talent to ensure sustainable growth. Additionally, with the rise of streaming platforms and short-video apps (e.g., TikTok), the manifestation and influence of star power may evolve, warranting further exploration in future research.

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