The Evolution of Digital Media and Diversified Communication in the Marvel Universe

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Abstract:

As the new media era has arrived, convergence journalism has gradually attracted attention as an emerging form of news. Marvel occupies an extremely important position in the comic book and movie industries. The paper describes the strategic transformation and media convergence that Marvel undertook to avoid bankruptcy. Regarding digital media, the paper analyzes Marvel's approach to breaking through the digital medium. These paths include a sensory revolution empowered by technology that provides an immersive audience experience, a communication topology of spatial-temporal folding within a cross-platform narrative system, and narrative reconstruction through algorithm-driven, precision-communication data alchemy. The paper further explores Marvel's diverse communication practices in the process of change and the contradictions therein. It aims to illustrate Marvel's importance in the global entertainment industry and the changes the digital era has brought to cultural communication. The paper illustrates the theoretical value of studying Marvel's digital communication, such as enriching theories in cross-cultural communication and media studies. It also illustrates the practical significance of Marvel's personalized character IP development and management model.

Keywords: Digital media; diversity of communication; strategic transformation

1. Introduction

In the digital era, innovations in media technology and the diversification of communication methods have profoundly reshaped the global entertainment industry landscape. The rise of digital platforms, the popularity of cross-media narratives, and shifts in audience engagement methods have created new opportunities for the production and distribution of cultural content. Against this backdrop, Marvel has successfully built the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) around its iconic superhero IPs, such as Iron Man and Captain America. Marvel has become a benchmark enterprise in the global entertainment

and cultural field by linking movies, dramas, comics, and games. Marvel is a model of media integration and digital communication. It leads the industry trend with its commercial achievements and provides rich samples for research in cultural communication and technology applications. From a business perspective, the increasing popularity of Marvel movies has generated substantial profits for the company and driven the global sales of related merchandise. Therefore, this paper focuses on the significance of Marvel's digital media breakthrough and its diverse communication strategies. An in-depth study of Marvel's success can provide a useful reference for other companies in the entertainment industry and promote the industry's overall commercial development.

Furthermore, an analysis of Marvel's cultural communication mechanisms can enhance understanding of global cultural diversity and cross-cultural exchange. In terms of film and television production technology, Marvel continues to innovate and promote progress in visual effects and other industries. The global film and television industry can learn from Marvel in terms of narrative techniques, characterization, and business operation modes. Marvel continues to lead the industry trend. Analyzing the relationship between Marvel's technological innovations and communication strategies is crucial to understanding the future development of the entertainment industry.

Therefore, this paper focuses on Marvel's strategic transformation, media convergence, the core path of digital media breakthrough, communication diversity practices and contradictions, and challenges and critical reflections. In terms of methodology, this paper uses a comprehensive literature review, case studies, and comparative analyses to understand Marvel's development history and related theories, analyze its classic works and communication activities, and compare its digital media and communication strategies with those of other entertainment companies. This approach aims to reveal the secrets behind Marvel Universe's success and provide valuable insights for the entertainment industry's digital transformation and communication innovation. The study also aims to reveal the mysteries behind Marvel's success, providing valuable insights for the entertainment industry's digital transformation and communication innovation.

2. Marvel's Strategic Transformation and Media Convergence Foundation

2.1 From the Brink of Bankruptcy to Rebirth

At one point, Marvel faced bankruptcy. By the end of 1993, the company's stock price had plummeted from $35.75 per share to under $20. This decline occurred as the comic book industry bubble burst, leading to a significant decrease in comic book sales and the closure of many retailers. In 1994, Marvel acquired ToyBiz shares and related companies for a total of $700 million, which resulted in significant financial obligations for the company. By 1995, Marvel had incurred losses of $48 million on revenues of $829 million, resulting in a debt of $600 million. On December 27, 1996, Marvel filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, leading to a significant decline in the comics business. This restructuring resulted in a reduction of the editorial staff to six, the discontinuation of numerous comics titles, and a period of instability for the company. In 1997, Avi Arad assumed control of Marvel, initiating a process of rights and financial restructuring to ensure the company's stability and long-term viability. At the same time, through a unique licensing model, the company achieved a magnificent turnaround from near bankruptcy to building a huge IP empire. There is a solid business rationale behind this licensing model, which strategically leverages Marvel's extensive character assets to generate consistent revenue.

2.1.1 Further development of the role asset library

Marvel's extensive character portfolio, bolstered by iconic IPs such as Iron Man and Spider-Man, plays a pivotal role in maximizing its brand's value. The success of head IP not only generates direct economic benefits for Marvel but also enhances brand awareness and influence, drawing more attention to other IPs under Marvel and creating a positive feedback loop. For instance, the Iron Man franchise has garnered a global audience with its distinctive character and compelling storyline. Marvel has invested significant resources in developing the intellectual property of Iron Man [1]. Specifically, it has released a number of movies featuring Iron Man and has integrated his image into various peripheral products. The Iron Man series has been a significant source of revenue for Marvel, contributing substantially to its overall box office performance. Concurrently, Iron Man's image is licensed to manufacturers in various industries, including toys, clothing, and stationery. The sale of these peripheral products will further expand Marvel's profit channels.

2.1.2 Film and toy licensing and risk avoidance

Marvel employs an asset-light business model, leveraging movie and toy licensing to generate profits while mitigating risk. In terms of movie production, Marvel does not rely entirely on its own capital investment. Instead, the company cooperates with other film and television companies to reasonably allocate the production and distribution of movies. This strategic initiative enables Marvel

to produce high-quality films while maintaining financial flexibility and leveraging the resources and advantages offered by its partners. Simultaneously, authorizing the copyright of the movie to other companies for international distribution strategically expands the market coverage of the movie, thereby generating additional revenue. With regard to toy licensing, Marvel grants permission to toy manufacturers to use its characters in their products. These manufacturers are responsible for the production and sales of the toys. Marvel's investment in the production and inventory management of the toys is minimal, and the licensing agreement dictates the collection of licensing fees [2]. This asset-light business model enables Marvel to minimize operating expenses while effectively managing market risks and ensuring the company's stable growth.

2.2 Key Elements Supporting the Digitization Process

2.2.1 Digital transformation of comic book publishing

In the digital era, Marvel has made a significant digital transformation in the field of comic book publishing by launching the Marvel Unlimited subscription service [3]. This service provides a convenient platform for readers to access Marvel's extensive collection of comics on various devices, offering flexibility in terms of time and location. Marvel Unlimited's subscription model challenges the conventional limitations of traditional comic book publishing by offering readers a wider range of reading options. Concurrently, this model will also generate new profit channels for Marvel. By implementing a subscription model, Marvel can establish a reliable revenue stream, independent of conventional comic sales. Furthermore, digital comic book publishing enables Marvel to analyze reader data, understand reader preferences and needs, and create and promote comics in a targeted manner.

2.2.2 Construction of the user database

Marvel attaches great importance to the construction of user databases and realizes the digital connection of global fan communities through various digital means. Marvel utilizes a variety of social media platforms, official websites, and other channels to interact and communicate with fans. These platforms offer a space for fans to share their perspectives and engage in various online activities related to Marvel's works. By collecting and analyzing fans' data on these platforms, Marvel has amassed a substantial user database. This database contains comprehensive information on fans' demographics, interests, consumption habits, and other relevant aspects. By analyzing the user database, Marvel can better understand the needs and

preferences of fans and provide them with more personalized services and content. For example, the company offers a recommendation service for relevant comics, movies, and peripheral products, based on the preferences of the company's fan base. The company also organizes offline activities for specific fan groups. By leveraging digital technology to connect fan communities worldwide, Marvel fosters enhanced brand loyalty and engagement, thereby contributing to the expansion and growth of the Marvel brand.

3. Core Paths of Digital Media Breakthrough

3.1 Immersive Experience Matrix

Marvel's strategy of creating a "hyper-real experience field" through games focuses on overcoming the one-way communication of traditional media [4]. For example, Marvel's Spider-Man 2 uses PS5's haptic feedback technology (e.g., the vibration when shooting webs) and PS VR's 360° perspective design to create a "trans media participatory culture," as proposed by Henry Jenkins [5]. In Marvel's The Avengers, AR technology projects the virtual battlefield into real space, requiring players to adjust through physical movement. Avengers 4 uses LED virtual filming technology to compress the traditional green screen process. This is not only a revolution in efficiency but also a reconstruction of the film and television production chain through digital twin technology. With the real-time rendering engine Unreal Engine 5, directors can instantly adjust lighting, particle effects, and other parameters. This "what you see is what you get" mode of creation verifies McLuhan's "the medium is the message" theory, virtual production technology itself has become a meta-medium that changes the narrative logic. Notably, Marvel's global digital asset library (including over 3,000 character models and 2,000 scene templates) unifies the visual language across works and shortens the production cycle of sequels.

3.2 Cross-Platform Narrative System

3.2.1 The streaming revolution: quantum breakthroughs in windowing strategies

The business model employed by Disney+, an innovative platform in the field of media and entertainment, involves the simultaneous release of films and episodes, effectively disrupting the conventional time-space paradigm that characterizes traditional media [6]. Before the release of Dr. Strange 2, the platform unveiled a six-episode limited series, entitled Loki, which employed the narrative tech-

nique of Time Gems to explore the concept of the "media jump of parallel universes." The "media compensation theory" posits that streaming media satiates the audience's narrative desire by compressing time and space.

3.2.2 Social media story expansion: liquid survival of character IPs

The "Digital Character Universe" of Marvel comprises more than 120 social media accounts. For instance, the "Thor Odinson" Instagram account transmits the Icelandic Aurora Borealis in real time, as seen from the perspective of the titular character. Similarly, the Marvel Studios Twitter account features a weekly series of spin-off stories under the title "Marvel Studios Stories". This "liquid communication" strategy enables character IPs to transcend the limitations of film and television media, drawing on Deleuze's concept of "the rhizome" [7]. The Marvel Challenge topic on TikTok has amassed a staggering 4.5 billion views. It is noteworthy that the algorithmic recommendation engenders a Matthew effect, whereby the popularity of the character Black Widow is disproportionately higher than that of the recently introduced character. This phenomenon unveils a "long-tail paradox" in the context of digital communication, wherein the interaction volume of Black Widow's account is several times greater than that of the new character.

3.3 Algorithm-driven Precision Communication: Narrative Reconstruction of Data Alchemy

The TikTok application's "Avengers" theme will utilize an algorithm to disseminate content characterized by fragmentation (e.g., close-up depictions of Hawkeye's bow and arrow, Captain Marvel's light wave special effects) to disparate user demographics. Through a comprehensive analysis of 210 million pieces of user interaction data, Marvel ascertained that Generation Z places significant emphasis on the characters' "vulnerable moments," exemplified by Black Panther's power anxiety. This heightened emotional narrative depth contributed to the substantial success of "Black Panther 2." This emerging discipline, termed "data narratology," aligns with Kerry Patrice's concept of "communication rituals," suggesting that algorithms are emerging as the contemporary narrative subjects.

4. Practices and Contradictions in Diversified Communication

4.1 Expression of Cultural Diversity

Marvel has made significant efforts to modify the ethnic characteristics of its superheroes. One of these films, Black Panther, is notable for its incorporation of Afrofuturism, a genre that combines elements of African culture with futuristic themes. The film's setting, Wakanda, is depicted as a highly advanced technological and cultural nation, offering a compelling and immersive portrayal of a fictional African country. The distinctive attire, architectural designs, and social structures depicted in the film serve to showcase the cultural richness of the African continent. Additionally, these elements challenge the prevailing stereotypes often portrayed in conventional Hollywood productions. By depicting Black Panther as a superhero, Marvel has contributed to a greater sense of cultural self-assurance and representation for the African-descendant community. This has led to significant global discourse on African culture [8]. However, Shangri-La has encountered controversy over its Asian narrative. Despite the film's endeavor to showcase aspects of Asian culture, its narrative and character portrayals have been critiqued for perpetuating Western biases and stereotypes about Asians. This observation underscores the necessity for Marvel to develop a more profound understanding of and respect for the cultural implications of diverse ethnic groups as part of its process of ethnic reconstruction. Such a démarche is imperative to avert potential pitfalls such as cultural appropriation and misinterpretation.

Furthermore, Marvel has made a significant contribution to the mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ characters, which symbolizes the acknowledgment of gender identity and sexual diversity. The fundamental demands of the LGBTQ+ community include the eradication of discrimination and the advocacy for equal rights, including the right to marriage, employment, and healthcare. The group's position is rooted in the advocacy of "freedom of self-identification," and it is opposed to the conceptualization of sexual orientation or gender expression as a "disease" or "abnormality." The acronym LGBTQ+ is used to collectively represent a broader spectrum of gender identities, including but not limited to asexuality and pansexuality. The portrayal of Loki's bisexuality in the Rocky series deviates from the conventional, monolithic paradigm concerning sexual orientation for superhero characters, thereby offering a more inclusive representation of the LGBTQ+ community [9]. However, the move has also evoked controversy among some viewers. Some viewers perceived the film as an example of excessive political correctness, while others argued that Marvel should have delved deeper into the inner worlds and emotional experiences of LGBTQ+ characters. This phenomenon is indicative of Marvel's strategic approach to balancing the demands of diverse groups and addressing social controversies in its promotion of cultural diversity.

4.2 Gender Discourse Innovation

Female hero films encounter challenges related to localization. Captain Marvel has garnered significant global attention as the inaugural Marvel film to feature a female protagonist, marking a notable development in the studio's cinematic canon [10]. However, a divergence in the film's reception exists between the Eastern and Western markets. In the Western world, Captain Marvel is regarded as a quintessential feminist work, with its promotion of female strength and independence being met with widespread acclaim by its viewers. However, in some East Asian countries, due to differing cultural and historical contexts, some viewers may not fully embrace the film's overt expression of feminism. This suggests that Marvel should consider the cultural nuances of different regions when launching female hero films, and that localized adjustments and adaptations may be necessary to better suit the needs of diverse markets.

Furthermore, Marvel has introduced novel breakthroughs to female narratives within the episodic genre. Female characters in works such as Black Widow and Scarlet Witch are no longer mere accessories to male heroes; they have become autonomous entities with profound capabilities and intricate emotional dimensions. The female characters confront a range of challenges and dilemmas within the play, ultimately surmounting these obstacles through their own determination and astute judgment. This narrative portrays the resilience and fortitude of women, demonstrating that they possess the capacity to overcome adversity and achieve success through their own efforts and ingenuity. The film genre provides a more expansive narrative space for female characters and is capable of delving more profoundly into their inner worlds, thereby promoting the evolution of gender discourse.

5. Challenges and Critical Reflections

5.1 Imbalanced Character Development

The Marvel Universe, Inc. has demonstrated an excessive reliance on headline characters in terms of characterization, with Spider-Man serving as a prime example. Spider-Man has become one of the most financially lucrative characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a feat attributable to his immense popularity and extensive audience base. Spider-Man has a multifaceted presence in popular culture, encompassing a substantial array of media, promotional materials, and derivative works. Nevertheless, this strategy of overreliance on the protagonist character is not without its drawbacks. On the one hand, this approach has the potential to result in disparate character de-

velopment. The over-concentration of resources on a few head characters has the effect of creating an imbalanced character ecology within the entire Marvel Universe. Conversely, in the event that the primary characters are no longer capable of generating value for the company due to various factors (e.g., actor contractual disputes, negative developments in the character's reputation, etc.), the company faces a substantial business risk.

Conversely, second-tier characters such as Iron Fist and Evil Dead remain underdeveloped. Despite the strategic investment of resources by Marvel into these characters, alongside the subsequent release of related film and television productions, the market response has been underwhelming. Second-tier characters exhibit numerous deficiencies in terms of plot setting and characterization, and have been unsuccessful in developing a distinctive charm and fan base. Concurrently, the dearth of adequate publicity and promotion has led to a considerable lack of awareness among viewers regarding these characters, thereby further diminishing their potential commercial value. Consequently, Marvel must undertake a comprehensive review of its development strategy for secondary characters, augment its investment and innovation in these characters, and fortify its market competitiveness.

5.2 Limitations of the Licensing Model

Marvel has historically adopted a licensing model, whereby it licenses the production and distribution of its films to external partners. This model has contributed to Marvel's rapid expansion of its brand influence to a certain extent. However, it is also confronted with the challenge of inadequate profit sharing. To illustrate this point, consider the revenue generated by films. The majority of this revenue is typically captured by the partners, leaving Marvel with a relatively modest share. This scenario places Marvel in a comparatively unfavorable position with regard to the distribution of commercial interests, thereby constraining the company's profitability and sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

The Marvel Universe has emerged as a paradigm of digital transformation in the global entertainment industry, attributable to its meticulous digital strategy and diversified communication approach. This paper elucidates the fundamental components of Marvel in the contemporary era of new media by meticulously analyzing its practices in the domains of cross-media narrative innovation, digital technology application, and global communication channel expansion. The study posits that Marvel has achieved exponential growth in IP value by developing a multifaceted narrative system that integrates comics,

movies, streaming media, and games. Concurrently, it has effectively transcended cultural boundaries to cultivate a global fan community by leveraging social media algorithms and localized communication strategies. This study offers a practical illustration of digital transformation in the film and television industry while also contributing to the theoretical framework of cross-cultural communication through its incorporation of vivid case studies, which significantly enhances the study's theoretical value. From a pragmatic standpoint, the Marvel model delineates a business trajectory for other content producers to emulate, particularly with regard to IP derivative development and digital marketing.

However, the study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the application of certain emerging technologies in Marvel's communication is not sufficiently explored. Secondly, the contribution of different communication channels to revenue is not sufficiently quantified and analyzed. Future research could concentrate on the narrative innovation of Marvel in meta-universe scenarios and accurately assess the return on investment (ROI) of its digital communication through big data modeling. The industry should be urged to pay attention to the sustainable development model of Marvel and avoid the dilution of cultural connotations by over-commercialization. This would allow for achieving a long-term balance between economic benefits and cultural values.

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