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Film Media Planning in the Attention Economy: A Case Study of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Xinyu Xiong

School of Broadcasting and Hosting Arts, Wuhan College of Communication, Wuhan, China
BearXrain@outlook.com

Abstract. In the era of mobile Internet, attention is scarce, and film promoters struggle to convert digital exposure into movie-going audiences. Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is used as the research object in this paper to study how media planning operates under attention economy and integrated marketing communication. The MCU has built a powerful attention-capture system to schedule the release of event nodes, synchronize multiple touchpoints, circulate memetic content, and is supported by a fan-community relay. The four problems of this system are pre-release decay, narrative dissolution, expectation misalignment, and psychological saturation. Together, the above frictions help to explain why there are differences in promotional coverage and box office results. These frictions originate from structural imbalances across four core media-planning dimensions—temporal scheduling, spatial coordination, content design, and audience engagement—which necessitate a systematic reconstruction. The four areas of the intelligent attention management system are optimized pulse launch planning, unified story maps, layered content tuning, and dynamic frequency capping. Its contribution is to treat exposure and conversion as separate problems and to connect attention economics with franchise film marketing.

Keywords: Attention Economy, Film Marketing, Media Planning, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Promotional Conversion

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The spread of mobile Internet has distributed the audience's attention among short-video platforms, social media feeds, and instant-messaging applications. As a result, there will be a gradual reduction in the dwell time of each message [1]. Feature films have a particular problem: they are long-form works that require continuous attention, and first, they need to be "watched" before they can be remembered. Due to a lack of attention, linear scheduling is no longer effective. At present, algorithms recommend, and the business logic of information feeds determines which times are worth recording [2]. Large volumes of information lead to cognitive overload, and high-investment content, such as feature films, has difficulty attracting people's attention. Now, media planners only need to decide on the time of broadcast. It is the time when people are not busy with other things.

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a typical case. It is the result of more than ten years of fan accumulation and an industrial promotional system, and it still has a strong following. The structure of the media plan fails to connect reach with conversion. Trailer views are high, but there has been little increase in first-weekend box office. Repeated ad displays occur after a drop in ticket-purchase conversion [3, 4]. Therefore, there are both academic and practical values in studying MCUs. It shows the logic of film promotion in an age of attention scarcity and offers a path for industry players from exposure to conversion.

1.2. Literature review

Existing studies provide some directions for attention economics and film media planning. Davenport and Beck are concerned about the scarcity of attention in the Information Age. Media planning has changed from increasing the reach of the audience to keeping people interested in them for longer [1]. Later, researchers referred to film promotion as a staged front-stage performance. Trailers, posters, and celebrity interviews inform the public, and schedules set the times and places for the showing of this work [4]. Scholars of integrated marketing communication (IMC) focus on multi-touchpoint coordination. Cinema exhibitions, TV commercials, social media trends, and outdoor large-screen displays need to have a united narrative and should not be run independently [5].

Research has shown that the characteristics of high-engagement content in short-video film marketing include emotional appeal, humor template, scene fragment, and audio-visual punchline. Short-form videos can attract the attention of young people more easily than long films [6]. Research on Uses and Gratifications theory has shown that people actively seek film information for roles, social status, or escape. Therefore, media planning should design touchpoints based on these motivational triggers [3]. Together, these studies cover attention economics, promiscuous viewing, integrated communication, short-video marketing, and audience psychology. They provide the foundation for the current study.

Although existing studies have explored the effects of single channels or the general impact of the attention economy on advertising, few have investigated the specific "black box" of film conversion [4]. Few studies have investigated the reasons for the drop in advertising reach and ticket sales after high-budget film promotions in an age of reduced attention. Existing research generally attributes the relatively low conversion rate to "film quality issues" and fails to consider structural problems in media planning; alternatively, it blames "audience reluctance to go to the cinema" without examining the rhythm of scheduling or failures in touchpoint design. No study has traced the whole chain of fracture points in the sequence of "attention capture - scheduling coverage - touchpoint coordination - conversion funnel". Equally undetected are four interrelated problems: front-loaded scheduling results in heat decay before release; fragmented touchpoints scatter the core narrative information; memetic material creates expectation misalignment; and excessive exposure induces audience psychological fatigue.

1.3. Research framework

According to the economic theory of attention and integrated marketing communications, the four planning dimensions are as follows. It shows the development history of the MCU's promotional activities. Then, it will examine the working mode and internal structural contradictions of event-driven scheduling, multi-touchpoint coordination, memetic content, and fan-community relay. Finally, targeted optimization strategies are developed.

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2. Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU): a paradigm case of media planning

2.1. Evolutionary trajectory of the MCU promotional ecosystem

In 2008, the MCU started to weave a connected story, and over the past 15 years, a media planning system has been developed. Several months before the film's release, a large-scale, multi-touchpoint promotional campaign will be organized. Television networks broadcast dramatic spots and actor interview programs. High-end outdoor display areas in central business districts and transport hubs serve commuters. Social Media Platforms Launch Character-Themed Hashtags and Challenge Activities. Short-video channels release transformation clips, villain reveals, and behind-the-scenes videos. These digital touchpoints are used in conjunction with fan screenings, premiere activities, and cross-brand collaborations in the automotive, quick-service restaurant, and beverage industries to create offline experience events.

The typical MCU promotion cycle is about four to six months long. Start with the date announcement and then spread the word after the film's release. First of all, there are trailer releases, new character posters, media press tours, and preview screenings.

2.2. Empirical observation: decoupling of attention and conversion

Table 1 shows the representative promotion indicators of the four recent MCU films and their structure under this industrialized campaign system.

Table 1. Promotion reach vs. conversion metrics for selected MCU films

Film Title	Release Year	Trailer Views (Official, 1st 24h)	Promotional Cycle (Months)	Opening Weekend Global Box Office (USD)
Avengers: Endgame	2019	289 million	5.5	1.2 billion
Spider-Man: No Way Home	2021	355 million	4.5	601 million
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3	2023	112 million	4	289 million
Deadpool & Wolverine	2024	365 million	4.5	388 million

Note: Trailer view counts refer to official YouTube platform views in the first 24 hours; the promotional cycle is measured from the first teaser release to the theatrical opening; box office figures are aggregated global opening-weekend grosses in nominal US dollars. Data collected from public studio reports and industry monitoring institutions.

As shown in Table 1, although the trailer view counts for the new movies are relatively high, the opening-weekend box office performance has not increased at the same rate. From the table, the proportion of the opening weekend.

3. Attention paradox: capture and erosion mechanisms

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) can be viewed as an attention device that mobilizes people's attention to create a sense of awareness and demand for the films. Yet, the same machinery that

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attracts attention is also what causes it to fade; when attention is scarce, each core mechanism of the system has a reason for failure, and thus, over-optimization has led to fatigue.

3.1. Architecture of capture: mechanisms of attention acquisition

3.1.1. Temporal architecture: event-nodal scheduling

Marvel organizes its advertising calendar in the form of several distinct event nodes, such as release-date announcements, trailer premieres, character-poster drops, and premiere ceremonies; all of them aim to generate a concentrated wave of attention. Given the large amount of information, event-based scheduling has created a time-limited window for attention; thus, the audience will actively seek related materials near each node and participate in active collection [1]. Since the nodes are arranged deliberately, heat forms waves rather than spreading linearly; therefore, with the addition of each new material, the discussion will be stimulated again before the previous wave dies out. Therefore, the calendar is no longer just an organization of time but has become a high-impact tool for capturing attention in the attention-scarce era for entertainment marketers [1-3].

3.1.2. Spatial architecture: multi-touchpoint synchronization

MCU campaigns run for several months. The first teaser will be released long before the ticket sale. Early preparation raises consciousness; however, it may also fade. Many other films, sports events, streaming releases, and social news have also attracted people's attention between the first trailer and the opening weekend. Some viewers watch the trailer, wish to purchase tickets, but then forget. The campaign is over prematurely. The event nodes have not failed; instead, the distance from them to the memory-validity period has been exceeded. When that happens, interest does not accumulate—it leaks [1].

3.1.3. Content architecture: memetic reuse

Marvel takes the visual highlights from its films, such as character transformations, iconic weapons, and famous lines, and turns them into dynamic stickers, reaction memes, and short-video clips for fans to use freely. Memetic Design transforms promotion from an invitation to watch into an invitation to play; audiences chat, create, and remix with brand materials in their daily lives, becoming unpaid promotional agents [4]. Low-barrier dissemination spreads Marvel symbols to non-fan groups at a near-zero marginal cost, and participatory reuse fosters audience identification.

Memetic content is one of the most cost-effective secondary-exposure tools in the attention economy [4].

3.1.4. Audience architecture: fan-community relay

Marvel has a worldwide fan community that proactively interprets new releases of the work, discusses changes in the story, and creates fan edits based on official announcements [5]. This community relay will keep people warm during the off-peak hours of the official advertisements and fill the quiet period between promotional waves. Fan-driven spreading is more trusted by the public, and they believe it is peer-to-peer sharing rather than advertising [6]. Thus, the fan community serves as a low-cost but very stable media planning and unpaid distribution platform for the audience of the MCU.

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3.2. Dialectic of erosion: structural tensions in conversion

3.2.1. Temporal erosion: pre-release decay

MCU campaigns run for several months. The first teaser may be released long before the ticket sale. An early start will raise people's spirits and also get them ahead of schedule. After the first trailer is released, other movies, sports events, streaming platforms, and social media will all be attracting people's attention. Some viewers see the trailer, wish to purchase a ticket, and then forget. The campaign is over prematurely. The event nodes do not fail; instead, the distance between them may exceed the memory-validity period. Interest is not accrued; rather, it is lost.

3.2.2. Spatial erosion: narrative dissolution

All the platforms are paid for by the movie. Short-video channels show actions; social media presents personality interactions; outdoor screens display large-scale scenes; television broadcasts dramatic clips. Division will expand the range of application, but it may also lose the original charm. Some parts of the movie have been released; the whole concept is not yet known. Coverage becomes confusion. Ubiquity of the campaign has diminished the original narrative it aimed to promote [2].

3.2.3. Content erosion—memetic excerpts and expectation misalignment

Memetic clips generally select the funniest, quickest, or most visually attractive parts. Then the audience will determine the genre of the work based on these clips. If the feature film starts slowly, has dark themes, and lacks emotion, it will not be well-received by the public. A well-known meme has generated a sense of novelty among the public as a result. It will eventually damage the franchise's reputation [4].

3.2.4. Content erosion: expectation mismatch

High Budgets support frequent publications. Repetition is not without fault. Meta-analytic evidence suggests an inverted-U relationship between exposure and favourability, and after repeated exposures, attitudes decline [7]. Under conditions of attention scarcity, the peak may occur earlier due to a lower tolerance for repetition among the audience. Promotion is now about disruption, not attraction. Audiences ignore the subject and stop watching the film. The System's Coverage is the source of the backlash.

The four above frictions are also not independent errors. They are side effects of mechanisms that function properly on their own. It is a system problem; over-optimization leads to burnout. Therefore, the analysis needs to cover all links in the attention-capture, schedule-coverage, touchpoint-coordination, and conversion process, and not only focus on faults in film quality or lack of audience interest.

4. Optimization strategies: an intelligent attention management framework

The above optimization strategies are structurally mapped onto the four core planning dimensions identified in Section 3—temporal scheduling, spatial coordination, content architecture, and audience engagement—each directly countering the corresponding erosion mechanism: pre-release decay, narrative dissolution, expectation misalignment, and psychological saturation. By realigning

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these dimensions, the intelligent attention management framework transforms excessive exposure into measurable conversion. The following subsections elaborate on each dimension in turn.

4.1. Temporal compression: a pulsed launch strategy

Instead of releasing the information evenly over several months, concentrate the strongest material in the final 2-3 weeks before release. In the beginning, only show basic curiosity through concept teasers. Final trailers, premiere events, and word-of-mouth catalysts should be saved for the window when tickets are actually for sale. Recency effect: The intent to purchase will be closer in time to the actual purchase. Schmidt and Eisend's meta-analysis have also found that attention retention is relatively low after the first exposure [7, 8].

4.2. Narrative unification: a story map mechanism

Before the platform publishes the content, the studio should prepare 3-4 main selling points. All platforms are built upon these foundations. Short-video channels focus on spectacle; social media is about character relationships; Out-of-home advertising enhances recognition. Interactive tools can help audiences connect the pieces. Although there are some differences in places, the story should remain the same in all adaptations. It is in line with integrated marketing communications [9, 10].

4.3. Layered content design: expectation calibration

Separate attention-grabbing content from expectation-setting content. Funny or exaggerated scenes will attract more people. Director's commentary, tone-focused short documentaries and additional contextual materials can introduce the life and emotions of the film. Organize the materials in order according to an algorithm: first the entertainment section, then the background information. Thus, there will be no disappointment in reach.

4.4. Intelligent frequency capping: dynamic exposure regulation

Media planners should know where each user is in the awareness-to-purchase funnel. If the user has already had enough brand exposure, hard advertising can be discontinued. Soft content can be used to show behind-the-scenes footage and franchise history, etc. Per-user daily exposure thresholds will change the mode of promotion from 'intrusion' to 'fan service'. This is in response to the inverted-U evidence for exposure and favourability under attention scarcity [11, 12].

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

The Case of the MCU is damaged. Event-driven scheduling, multi-touchpoint synchronization, memetic content, and fan-community relay are all methods of gaining attention. There is also an early-stage decay, loss of narrative, mismatch with expectations, and psychological saturation. Therefore, more digital coverage does not automatically lead to an increase in box office revenue. The new system will reduce the demand for attention by providing stories in various forms at different times.

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5.2. Research significance

Theoretically, this paper links attention economics and IMC to franchise film marketing. It is considered a media-planning problem of the visibility-conversion gap, rather than a content-quality issue. Studios can thus allocate promotional resources more effectively based on the timing and narrative consistency of expectations and exposure frequency. The logic can also be used for streaming shows and video games.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The study is based on the qualitative analysis of secondary-industry data. It does not test the causal effect of exposure frequency on purchase intention. Future experiments and surveys will be conducted to determine a resistance threshold, and big data will be utilized to study memetic diffusion and box office performance. Cross-cultural studies will determine the framework's universal applicability.

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