Transcultural Commercialization Pathways of Narrative-Embedded Intellectual Property: A Sino-US Comparative Case Study Based on the 4P Marketing Mix

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Abstract. Against the background of digital globalization and cultural consumption upgrading, the cross-cultural commercial monetization of intellectual property rights has become the core stage of global cultural industry competition. Existing research mainly focuses on the cultural discount phenomenon or isolated IP marketing strategies, and lacks a systematic analysis of the profit path and marketing strategy of narrative-driven IP. This study examines two narrative-driven Intellectual Properties (IPs) that have demonstrated significant cross-cultural commercial viability: China's Douluo Continent and the United States' Marvel Cinematic Universe, establishing a comparative framework between Eastern and Western models. The research results reveal the obvious differences in the 4P marketing theory in various dimensions. First of all, Douluo Continent has adopted the model of "ecological evolution and flexible outreache". Its products mainly rely on the multimedia dissemination of online novel content and its derivative products. Pricing is based on the content experience on different platforms. The sales channel adopts the cooperation model of "borrowing a boat to go to sea", and the promotion strategy emphasizes the participation of fans. On the contrary, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a model of "industrial production and saturation marketing" model.

Keywords: Narrative-Embedded Intellectual Property, 4P Marketing Mix, Cultural Discount

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

Driven by the upgrading of digital globalization and cultural consumption, the intellectual property economy rooted in the narrative worlds has become the main battlefield of the global cultural industry. Hollywood's Marvel Cinematic Universe and the Japanese animation industry have not only established a profound cultural influence, but have also built a highly industrialized and globally integrated commercialization system [1]. Against this background, China is also actively promoting its cultural internationalization strategy. Narrative-driven works such as

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Douluo Mainland and Three Bodies are turning from domestic popularity to overseas sensation, gradually occupying a place in the global cultural consumption market.

However, the cross-border dissemination of cultural products always faces the fundamental challenge of “cultural discount” - it means that cultural products rooted in one culture “will be less attractive in other places because it is difficult for the audience to identify with the style, values, beliefs, systems and behavior patterns of relevant materials” [2]. The dilemma of cultural discounts determines that China's IP cannot simply copy the Western success model when expanding overseas. This reveals an amazing dichotomy: superhero IP franchises such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe use cultural influence and monetary profits globally through highly industrialized mass production and comprehensive global saturation. The domestic emerging narrative-driven IP represented by Douluo Continent mainly relies on the domestic platformized digital ecosystem to achieve continuous expansion through content circulation and user accumulation. Adopting a flexible and gradual intellectual property internationalization licensing strategy, that is, borrow ships to sail overseas to avoid the high cost of building your own infrastructure. The two methods show systematic differences in their commercialization pathways, coverage and penetration levels.

On this basis, this article tries to clarify a fundamental problem from the micro-strategic perspective of marketing management: what are the systematic differences between the 4P strategies of Chinese and Western top narrative-driven IP in the process of cross-cultural commercialization? What different industrial mechanisms, resource conditions and strategic intentions do these differences reflect?

1.2 Research Significance

This article examines and expands the classic 4P marketing theory under the complex background of cross-cultural intellectual property management, This study moves beyond the traditional 4P marketing framework and its application in physical product marketing. More importantly, this article does not use the 4P framework in isolation. On the contrary, it systematically examines the differences between the four strategic dimensions (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion), as well as the potential industrial economic structure and cultural adaptation principles revealed in the cross-cultural commercialization process of China's “Douluo Continent” and the United States' “Marvel Cinematic Universe”. This analysis is carried out within a broader theoretical framework, including related theories such as the “cross-media storytelling” theory [3] ,cultural discount theory and global value chain theory.

This comprehensive analysis framework aims to prove that the choice of micro-level marketing strategies is essentially a reflection of industrial structure, cultural strength and organizational ability. Therefore, it provides a new analytical framework to explain the global flow of cultural products at the intersection of marketing, communication research and international business. At the same time, using the 4P framework to make a side-by-side comparison and theoretical interpretation of the “ecological diffusion” model of Douluo Continent and the “industrial production” model of “Marvel Cinematic Universe” will further facilitate the in-depth analysis of the development trajectory of these two representative cases. In addition, at the operational level, this article aims to determine the status, core advantages and capability gaps of China's narrative-driven intellectual property rights in the global industrial chain. It aims to provide a reference path for Chinese intellectual property operators, investors and policy-making institutions to monetize narrative-driven intellectual property rights. Based on comparative analysis, this study provides forward-looking and actionable management insights to promote the globalization of narrative-driven IP.

1.3 Research Methods and Technical Approaches

This study adopts the qualitative comparative case study method. The theme is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in the United States and the Douluo Continent in China. Both represent successful narrative-driven intellectual property rights in their respective cultural backgrounds, with similar goals (building a broad narrative universe and creating global business value). However, they adopt different models in terms of origin, realization path and development mechanism, which makes them ideal objects for theoretical model sampling and provides important comparative value.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

In the era of deep integration of consumer globalization and the digital media, how to realize the cross-cultural commercialization of narrative-driven intellectual property rights has become the focus of attention of academia and industry. The research on such problems mostly focuses on the definition of IP concepts, cultural conflicts and discounts, IP marketing practices, etc., forming a theoretical basis. Among them, regarding the definition of the IP concept, Jenkins put forward “Transmedia Storytelling”, pointing out that narrative-driven IP is a unified story world told across media platforms such as movies, games and literature [3]. Each medium contributes distinct narrative components to form the integrated experience. In addition, he also believes that the core of a successful narrative-driven IP (such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe) is to create an expandable “story world” across various communication platforms. Its value and emotional resonance with consumers come from complex storylines and character arcs - fundamentally different from appearance - and symbol-driven “image-driven IP” like Labubu and other collectable toys.

Secondly, in solving cross-cultural barriers, Hoskins & Mirus' “cultural discount” explains the decline in attractiveness of IP when entering other cultural markets [2]. The “cultural similarity strategy” and the recent “reverse globalization” trend have become the main ways of cultural adaptation. “reverse globalization” means that content with local characteristics achieves global resonance through global distribution and promotion, and through universal emotional appeals.

Finally, starting from IP marketing practices, the classic 4P marketing theory is used to analyze the commercialization path of cultural products. Under this framework, scholars have elaborated on product derivatives, pricing strategies, distribution channels and integrated promotions. However, reviewing the above research, it is found that most of the studies are based on the inductive analysis of a single successful IP, or only based on the marketing theory from a single perspective. There is still a lack of comprehensive comparative research on the combination of core narrative-driven IP operation mechanisms, cross-cultural adaptation logic and specific marketing combination strategies. In view of this, this article adopts the 4P marketing combination as its explicit analytical framework, and takes the cross-media storytelling, the cultural discount and the global value chain as the implicit analysis dimensions. It deconstructs how the two representative cases of Douluo Continent and the Marvel Cinematic Universe strategically position themselves and achieve their own results, thus solving the existing research gaps from a comprehensive and comparative perspective.

3 Research Design

3.1 Methodological Choice: Comparative Case Study Approach

This study aims to find out the reasons behind the different monetization paths of narrative-driven intellectual property (IP) in China and the West. Such research questions aim to reveal the potential mechanisms and evolutionary processes of complex social phenomena, which constitute typical "how" and "why" surveys. Therefore, comparative case studies are the core research methods. In this study, the author carefully selected China's "Douluo Continent" IP and the United States' "Marvel Cinematic Universe" IP as comparative cases, aiming to analyze the different strategies and practices adopted by the two under similar global profit goals, so as to reveal how cultural background, industrial environment and development stage shape or restrain the globalization trajectory of narrative-driven IP. Compared with a single case, comparative research will form a greater theoretical tension.

3.2 Case Selection

Case 1 (Oriental): Douluo Continent. This IP is a successful model of China's original "narrative-driven IP". Its development trajectory perfectly embodies the model of "expansion driven by the new ecosystem". It originated from the fantasy online novel series "Soul Realm", which was first serialized by writer Tang Jiasan in 2008, creating a unique cultivation world with the core concepts of "soul master" and "soul ring" . In the system operation of Yuewen Group, the company has established a diversified ecosystem, starting with novels and extending to comics, animation series, mobile games, reality dramas, movies and derivative products. The evolution of IP shows a model of "expanding from a single origin to a wider ecosystem and growing in a cycle through its own content". Different media products use Tencent's digital content ecosystem to cross-promote and guide traffic, work together, expand the influence of IP, and jointly build a huge and constantly updated knowledge base.

The process of commercial monetization and overseas expansion is clear and logical. Therefore, choosing Douluo Continent as a case study can comprehensively examine how IP uses the Internet to build its own narrative world from scratch [4], while exploring cross-media derivatives and gradually penetrating the world through the platform ecosystem. This reflects the universal model, core advantages and common risk challenges of China's IP going out.

Case 2 (Western): Marvel Cinematic Universe. This intellectual property is recognized as the most mature and successful narrative-driven intellectual property in the world, representing the pinnacle of the “mature industrial manufacturing” model in the industry. Marvel began with comics, and the character narratives accumulated for decades have undergone strict selection, reorganization and industrialization. Through Hollywood's highly mature and precisely designed film production and distribution process, the series has established its film series as the core strategic engine. At the same time, this ignited the global market and built an unprecedented unified and interrelated “story universe” [5]. Disney's acquisition of Marvel in 2009 provided indispensable financial support and global distribution channels. This integration enables the Marvel Cinematic Universe to use Disney's distribution network, licensing rights and theme park operations to create a complete industrial ecosystem covering content creation, global distribution and offline experience, setting standards for the global cultural industry. By choosing this IP, this paper can analyze how a top narrative-driven IP can strategically plan content production, manage risks, and release value throughout the value chain driven by strong capital, cutting-edge technology, comprehensive ecosystem and global distribution network.

The Basis for Comparison and its Analytical Tension. Although their origins and development paths are different, they are all narrative-driven IPs and have obtained considerable commercial returns by building a vast “story world”. Their goals are very similar. However, there are fundamental differences between the intrinsic value core of the two (online novels vs movies), the driving mechanism (ecological expansion vs industrial planning), the industrial support system (online platform vs Hollywood), and the overseas promotion steps (gradual penetration vs global synchronization). This “convergence of results and process differentiation” has produced a strong theoretical contrast and analytical tension, so that the analysis can go beyond the superficial strategic description and go deep into the deeper structural reasons behind the differences.

4 Comparative Analysis of Case Studies Based on the 4P Marketing Mix Dimensions

4.1 Product Strategy Comparison: Divergence in Narrative Engines

The content structure of Douluo Continent belongs to the category of “ecological derivation and diffusion narrative”. Its core product is an ultra-long serial novel, which provides a highly scalable narrative resource base. Animation and comics act as the main content amplifiers, reproducing and extending the main storyline. Mobile games are mainly presented as “parallel universe” or “single story”, adding interactivity and immersive experience while integrating into the core settings. This model provides maximum flexibility and can develop multiple narrative clues on different media at the same time. However, it also poses the biggest challenge in terms of consistency and quality control, for developing a comprehensive branch extension model. In contrast, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a textbook example of “industrial planning and collective narrative”. Its core and most expensive product is still a theatrical film, which is designed as a “major event” that drives the whole universe forward. TV series and comics, as “derivatives”, are classified as supporting roles - filling in the gaps in the plot and enriching the peripheral characters - while strictly adhering to the timeline and theme tone established by the film. All products eventually converge into phased “assembly” blockbusters (such as the Avengers series), forming a narrative promotion mechanism that sweeps the world.

This difference stems from the different logic of “cross-media narrative” and the different strategies to solve the “cultural discount”. Marvel is a highly vertically integrated film studio system. As the most widely recognized medium with the smallest “cultural discount”, movies have strong cross-cultural understandability in audio-visual language and narrative structure, and it is easier to establish a globally unified IP identity [6]. From Marvel’ s success, operators can see that it needs to change from a passive "content developer" to a strategic "strategic narrative architect" [7]. The Douluo Continent series, which comes from online literature, mainly relies on the strong loyalty of its domestic fan base. Its subsequent expansion strategy is to adopt a low-risk and flexible cultural penetration strategy in markets with similar cultures (such as Southeast Asia) and take advantage of the solid foundation of its core audience.

4.2 Price Strategy Comparison: the Chasm in Value Perception

The pricing structure of Douluo Continent adopts the “multi-platform, multi-service” model. In terms of content, readers pay for novel derivative products, while viewers buy memberships for video applications. In the game field, players will make in-game purchases. Its pricing mechanism includes “paying for specific content experiences or virtual assets”. For goods such as collectible characters, the pricing is determined by the production cost of the product plus the premium that reflects the emotions of fans.

Under a unified brand, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has built a high-quality ecosystem across the whole industry chain. By maintaining a consistent brand image, it achieves overall premium pricing across different content formats. For example, a movie ticket not only buys entertainment, but also buys “the opportunity to enter global cultural activities”. The pricing of its products - from high-end collectibles to cooperative T-shirts - is basically based on the global cultural identity and emotional values embodied by the “Marvel” brand. The Marvel Theme Park in Disneyland further transforms the IP experience into a high-profit tourist attraction.

This reflects the structural gap between the two in terms of brand asset accumulation. Marvel has established itself as a global cultural symbol through dozens of films released around the world at the same time, and its pricing ability comes from its symbolic value. By combining the value system of IP with the theme of universal resonance, its emotional resonance and acceptance in different cultural markets can be significantly improved [8]. In contrast, the IP assets of Douluo Continent are still closely related to the specific narrative content. Its value recognition is largely at the level of "storytelling" and has not fully evolved into an independent brand asset that is detached from the narrative content. Therefore, its ability to control premiums and establish consistent pricing standards is still comparatively limited.

4.3 Place Strategy Comparison: the Contest for Position in the Value Chain

The overseas expansion of Douluo Continent mainly adopts the model of "borrowing vessels to sail the seas". Online novels use proprietary translation platforms such as Qidian International for global distribution, while animations and games for a wider audience rely heavily on overseas publishing partners. For example, animation copyright is authorized to global platforms such as YouTube, while mobile games are operated by local publishers. Although this method can achieve rapid market entry, it partially relinquishes distribution channels, a significant share of revenue, and critical decision-making power to partners. In the short term, they can indeed deepen cooperation agreements with international platforms to ensure favorable revenue sharing arrangements and user data sharing rights [9] .

In contrast, the Marvel Cinematic Universe embodies the "aircraft carrier navigation" model. With the support of the Disney Group, it maintains all-round control over the entire value chain - from production (Marvel Pictures) and global distribution (Walt Disney Pictures), directly to key consumer touchpoints (Disney theme parks, Disney+ streaming and Disney stores). While maximizing profits, this vertical integration model also ensures the consistency of brand experience and risk management.

From the perspective of the global value chain, the differences in their respective positions reflect the differences in their fundamental status in the world's cultural industry value chain. Marvel (Disney) is the "leader" of the global value chain. It sets the rules of the game and obtains the maximum value in the chain. Douluo Continent is currently the "content provider" in the global value chain. Although it has a certain core competitive advantage, it is still limited in the field of global distribution. This is the most fundamental challenge that China's intellectual property rights must overcome from "product globalization" to "brand globalization" to "industrial globalization".

4.4 Promotion Strategy Comparison: Philosophies of Fan Engagement

The promotion and marketing of Douluo Continent focus on segmented goals. Marketing activities mainly revolve around the fan base of novels, domestic animation enthusiasts and mobile game players. By launching "Character Birthday", encouraging the submission of fan fiction and actively managing the fan community, the brand has maintained an emotional connection with the existing fan base. This method emphasizes the sense of participation and belonging, creating a penetration mechanism from the inside out and driven by word of mouth.

The marketing of Marvel Cinematic Universe is a model of global event-driven marketing. The release of each new film constitutes a global marketing campaign: from star advertising and global premieres to cross-brand cooperation with consumer products, its purpose is to create an blockbuster large-scale popular cultural event. It utilizes a wide range of mainstream media channels for saturation promotion, aiming to attract the widest possible range of entertainment consumers. Large-scale offline activities or fan meetings are held in cultural centers around the world (such as New York, London and Tokyo) to trigger heated social discussion [10].

This also represents two completely different "fan participation philosophies", which are formed by different resources and goals. The strategy of Douluo Continent fully embodies the concept of "participatory culture", and achieves the maximum participation and output of core fans with relatively limited resources. In contrast, Marvel has achieved the ultimate "integrated marketing communication", using a large amount of budget to spread unified messages at multiple contact points around the world, aiming to cultivate mass consumption habits. The former emphasizes the construction of identity and belonging, while the latter emphasizes the efficiency of market arrival.

4.5 Comprehensive Discussion

Through the systematic comparison of 4P dimensions, Douluo Continent and Marvel Cinematic Universe show a completely different business operation logic: Douluo Continent represents the growth paradigm of "ecological evolution and flexible expansion" in the East, while the Marvel Cinematic Universe embodies the dominant paradigm of "industrial production and saturation marketing" in the West.

This comparison is by no means a coincidence; it is an objective result of different stages of industrial development, resource differences and strategic positioning. China has the world's most advanced digital reading and mobile entertainment ecosystem, but it lacks mature global physical distribution channels and a cumulative legacy of a century-old media brand. The Douluo Continent model is based on the existing advantages (online novels and mobile games), and at the same time adopts a pragmatic strategy to tailor, phased penetration and give priority to partnerships in the process of globalization. With Hollywood's mature industrial system and Disney's global distribution advantages, Marvel can undertake this highly concentrated and high-risk global business expansion.

Both models have their rationality at this stage. However, for Chinese IP, which aspires to become a global cultural symbol, Marvel's approach provides a crucial insight: the core competitiveness of IP ultimately depends on its mastery of "core narrative products", its strategic layout on the "global value chain" (channel), and its upgrading of IP to a "global cultural brand" capability. This marks the strategic shift from "flow operation" to "asset construction" and from "content output" to "operation mode output".

5 Conclusions

5.1 The Global Monetization and Upgrading Path for China's Narrative-Driven IPs

This article compares the Douluo Continent with the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and emphasizes their different models in cross-cultural commercialization: "ecological evolution and flexible extension" and "industrial production and saturation marketing". The purpose of this comparison is to identify potential mechanisms, while providing a promising development path for future practitioners. For narrative-oriented IPs like Douluo Continent, Marvel's success offers strategic upgrading directions.

5.2 From “Story Database” to “Story Architect” and From “Cultural Product” to “Cultural Symbol”

The advantage of China’s narrative-driven IP is its huge "story database", while its weakness is the lack of long-term and unified planning for cross-media narrative. From Marvel’s success, operators need to change to a strategic "narrative architect". A multi-year story blueprint across key media formats must be established, clarifying which elements are achieved through top products and which through other forms, integrating how different products cross-promote to strengthen IP cohesion. Meanwhile, monetization still relies heavily on users paying for content updates. Marvel shows that high-level IP management includes cultivating it into a cultural symbol to promote emotional resonance. This includes exporting cultural values by combining IP’s value system with universally resonant themes. Eventually, the IP becomes a marker of cultural identity, transforming derivatives into "collectibles" and experiences into "cultural participation". This gives brands premium pricing power.

5.3 From “Borrowing Vessels to Sail Overseas” to “Building and Navigating One’s Own” and From “Niche Hit” to “Crossover Event”

The model of "borrowing vessels to go to sea" may yield short-term benefits but leads to channel dependence and a passive position. Marvel used Disney’s integrated platform to show the advantage of controlling core channels. China’s IP operators should adopt a long-term strategy of combining hierarchical channel cooperation and independent development. In the short term, they can cooperate with international platforms, but for long-term development, they must establish core global communication channels under independent control. This involves progressing from "content provider" to "channel co-manager" and ultimately "value chain leader". At the same time, to achieve global breakthrough, it is necessary to improve the ability to create "global cultural events". Allocate a global integrated marketing budget, adopt methods like worldwide premieres, establish joint branding with high-end consumer brands, and hold large-scale offline activities in global cultural centers. This raises IP influence from niche circles to mainstream communication.

5.4 Summary: Defining the Future in Inheritance and Transcendence

China's narrative-driven IP should learn from Western IP but avoid uncritical replication. They should draw inspiration from the systematic industrial approach that focuses on user emotions and enables control over the industrial chain. The Internet ecosystem behind Douluo Continent, its cultural heritage and fan co-creation ability constitute its advantages. One feasible path is to integrate the core competencies of the "Marvel Model": top-level design, brand promotion, channel control and entering the mainstream. This will create a globalization model of IP with unique Chinese characteristics. This path also offers a comparable and empirically testable analytical framework for the internationalization of China' s narrative-driven IP.

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