



The Global Fan Community Construction Strategy of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract. With the development of the Internet and the popularization of participatory culture, the fan community has become a crucial support for brand operations. Some researchers assert that the success of Marvel Studios cannot be achieved without the support of the fan community. However, the formation mechanism behind the success still lacks a unified explanation. Therefore, this paper utilizes qualitative research methods to systematically examine the construction strategy of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)'s global fan community. It analyzes theories such as fan culture, participatory culture, and cultural reproduction to deeply understand the logical basis of the construction of the fan community. This paper suggests that creating an interconnected narrative universe, promoting digital publicity, and shaping diversified roles are important strategies for the construction of the MCU's global fan community. Based on this, this paper recommends that the cultural industry should attach importance to the significant commercial potential and cultural influence of the fan community, regarding it as a long-term cultural resource, rather than a short-term consumption tool.

Keywords: Global Fan Community Construction, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Fan Culture

1 Introduction

In recent years, fan culture has become a phenomenon that shall be difficult to ignore in the entertainment and cultural industry. With the popularization of social media and the rise of digital technology, the individual's spatiotemporal limits have vanished. This enabled fans worldwide to conduct real-time discussions and participate in fan creation in an online community via the Internet. Against this background, Marvel Studios has forged its own vast global fan community with a shared cinematic universe and extended roles system, which has been one of the world's strongest brands.

The concept of the fan community itself is not necessarily an aggregate of fans who love a certain role. The encoding and decoding theory explains that the media products with their own codes and symbols, the code symbols will be released into different cultural contexts. The fans will decrypt the media product codes and

symbols, ultimately translating to produce their own meaningful content for themselves [1]. This decoding diversity is an important basis for the fans to get a connection with the world. Secondly, the participatory culture theory points out that fans have a positive understanding and transformation of the media's meanings. Fans, through multi-platform discussion, fan creation, and spreading, build a participatory fan community with a shared experience [2]. The global fan community of the MCU is not just a one-directional audience but also a participant in influencing the social and cultural ideology. Moreover, the fan world theory explains that modern fan culture is an inclusive fan activity. It is an open world of fluid borders, diverse pathways, and highly mobile identity [3]. The fan community of the MCU can accept both fans of the traditional community and the platform participants who avoid being fans.

In the past few years, research on the MCU has concentrated on the business model, the celebrity effect, and the construction of the cinematic universe. The less mentioned is that the construction of the MCU global fan community also has a deep impact on the development of Marvel Studios. In an era when the tendency to globalize is faster and cross-cultural communication is more profound, studying the construction of the MCU global fan community is one way to expand the horizon of fan research. It also provides a reference for other brands in culture-shaping, cross-cultural communication, and global media publicity.

The article explores the MCU's approach to constructing an international fan world in the information age. It seeks to examine how Marvel Studios unites fans through movie stories, publicity of the digitalized entertainment platform, and cross-cultural communication. This study draws on qualitative research methods. The research focuses on participatory culture, the theory of encoding and decoding, and the theory of the fan world. Additionally, it explains the peculiarity of Marvel Studios in its interconnections within the cinematic world, its dissemination on the Internet, and its character constitution, based on the case study within the theoretical framework.

2 Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Basis

2.1 Fans, Fan Culture, and Fan Community

Fans mainly refer to anyone who has a strong emotional connection with a certain work, whether they share this emotion with others or not. Simply stated, fan identity can be premised solely on liking the post of a work on X. When the unique meaning of the individual generated by this emotion is shared with a larger community, the construction of meaning can be formed as a model with cultural attributes.

The fan community emphasizes the value of culture and practice. Art does not arise in isolation but collides with sparks of inspiration in collective sharing [4]. Members of these fan communities do not always reach a consensus. The community encourages unique and innovative insights. However, when those insights reach the level of being recognized by the majority of members, the effects of the operation and dissemination of the community can be fully maximized.

Cross-media interaction has gradually become one of the most popular ways for the public to use digital media. The fan community is no longer simply understood as a stable community, but a highly personalized, fragmented, and liquid fan world [3]. For example, the types of the MCU fans are highly differentiated. Some of them participate in cultural creation (MCU movie mashup videos, character-centric fan fiction, and comics). Partly participate in physical activities (purchase and collect merchandise of superheroes). Some of them only browse the content they are interested in on the platform and do not take any concrete actions. These fan behaviors can remain simultaneously active, or they may switch to each other without clear boundaries. This makes the MCU's fan world become a more open cultural aggregate.

2.2 Participatory Culture and Fan Practice

Participatory culture is a dynamic operating model between fan culture and media [2]. Compared with the audience who passively receives content. The engaged fans are more active in participating in community activities and producing relevant content. The popularization of digital platforms has greatly lowered the threshold for fans to engage in participatory interaction. Strange users can also interact through common interests. The results of creation can be widely disseminated through the Internet. The fan online community provides a more convenient channel for socialization. As a result, newcomers can rapidly integrate with the community and participate continuously. Non-fans can also access the media products of the fan community under the influence of algorithmic recommendations and big data dissemination, making participatory culture with a stronger sense of public meaning.

In addition, the emotional support and interaction of members in the community also enhance the enthusiasm of fans to participate in activities. Because the fan community provides a channel to convey the emotions of fans' favorite media products, it has gradually become a space for fans to make cultural and political appeals to media content. From fan fiction to recut, from meme culture to offline fan movie groups, from physical collection to rewatching movies, these fans can choose different practical activities according to their interests. With the continuous expansion of the MCU's worldview, the cultural background of fans is becoming increasingly diverse. In the global media ecology, the fans are connected by shared narrative experiences and emotional values, forming a huge global fan community that transcends geographical and cultural restrictions.

2.3 The Global Fans' Cultural Reproduction of the MCU

Cultural reproduction refers to the continuous, repeated transmission or re-entitlement of a certain cultural value, ideology, and system of thought through media and other channels. The encoding and decoding model emphasizes that the production of cultural significance constitutes a dynamic and two-way process. It is divided into four stages: production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction. Production (encoding) refers to the transcoding of information into meaningful symbols by media producers (TV stations, film companies, and advertisers, etc.) under a specific ideological and knowledge structure. Circulation means that after coding, media products are circulated through various media channels. Consumption (decoding)

refers to the audience's reception and use of different meanings of the same information based on their own cultural literacy, social background, and value orientation. Reproduction means that the reinterpretation of these meanings is discussed and disseminated, thus affecting social ideology [1].

Take Marvel Studios as an example. As a coder, it has introduced dominant American values into the MCU, such as individual heroism and liberalism. Audiences in different regions of the world have different decoding processes of American culture. For instance, audiences in Europe and the UK tend to accept this value (dominant position). However, audiences in East Asia are more inclined to collectivist ideas, which may have a certain degree of resistance to this cultural dissemination (oppositional position), or accept part of the content while retaining their personal position (negotiated position). These reproduction discussions are further disseminated on the digital platform to form a certain consensus, resulting in the development of a large-scale fan community.

3 Analysis of the Construction Strategy

3.1 The Interconnectivity of the Narrative Universe

Through cross-media interconnected narrative and highly unified worldview construction, the MCU has created a communication space for fans to share knowledge and collective emotions. The television and films of the MCU share the same worldview. For instance, the characters and narrative logic can be expanded to various types of TVs and films, so that the audience can easily follow why the relationship between two texts is a possibility. This is one of the useful methods for narrative expansion across media [5]. Intertextuality and interconnected narrative help the audience realize the relationship between different texts.

As the first TV series produced by Marvel Studios, WandaVision is shared with the MCU so that people within the audience can not be bewildered about the content in the media. Aside from the MCU, it integrates the expression of American sitcoms. A large number of easter eggs and concealed clues about the TV series provide a meaningful space where the fans must reconstruct it in groups and have conversations with one another. In addition, the continuation of narrative branch line supplementation and main line development of the movie series is echoed in the TV series. The weekly release model of the TV series extends the interpretation and discussion cycle of the movies. The fans are always required to continuously share information and opinions in real-time, which will give strength to the interaction mechanism of the fan community. The movies deliver the realization of the main line plot. The accumulated feelings of the fans in the initial TV series are collectively emitted in the film. The joint movie-watching and viewing experience will gradually transform into a shared memory of the community over time, thus strengthening the sense of belonging of the fan community.

Furthermore, the MCU continuity allows the fans to verify the storyline and fill in the blanks for the hints they already got from the previous clues. Fans all around the world who share the same worldview and are interconnected through the cross-media

can share equal plot systems, without any kind of distancing. The collaborative participatory culture is fundamentally mobilizing the enthusiasm of the fans instead of passive acceptance. The intimacy of the narrative universe has provided the basis for the construction of the MCU fan community. However, to achieve effective fan participation, effective dissemination channels and interaction mechanisms are necessary.

3.2 Digital Communication and Interaction Mechanism

The global fan community of the MCU is inevitably linked to the development of the Digital era. Large-scale communication media have been the cornerstone of Marvel Studios' promotion. The differentiation of the propagation mechanisms of different digital media for customized media products is promoted by Marvel Studios.

The trailers of Avengers: Endgame have reached more than 300 million views on YouTube. Instagram or TikTok are appropriate for short-form videos and photos. Marvel Studios can release posters of the characters, clips of the films, and behind-the-scenes videos. X is also suitable for the union of pictures and brief-form texts. Marvel Studios can hashtag a range of keywords related to the movie for the fans and audiences to discuss and interact. Each of these promotional media can greatly mobilize the enthusiasm of the fans to engage. As is expected, a large number of fan accounts spontaneously generate the meme photographs and short humorous pieces to disperse in the fan circles, which will evoke the resonance of the fans. More popular posts can even disseminate beyond fan groups to a broad online audience, thereby strengthening the power of the fan community. This fan-dominated model transforms the MCU's marketing from one-way communication to a dissemination structure of content reproduction.

In the digital age, the relationship between brands and audiences ranges from emotional drive to deep participation to the final formation of a community of significant scale [6]. The decoding theory emphasizes that the audience would take different interpretation positions on media texts. The emotions in the process of interaction include not only expectation and excitement but also disappointment and anger. Boredom is not the loss of enthusiasm for the MCU to withdraw from participation, but a kind of participation mentality with a critical attitude [7].

Fans left comments in the comment section, such as "The MCU has declined" and "I won't watch it anymore". These comments will be widely discussed and reposted, driving a new wave of popularity. Before the release of Black Panther, a large number of audiences maintained a skeptical stance toward black superheroes, and the internet was in a complaining mood. Throughout the film's release window, the high-quality content won widespread acclaim. However, it was also fiercely debated by fans from different cultural backgrounds. After the release of the film, the audience's emotions gradually returned to a state of calm. They could approach the film from an objective standpoint. These positions reveal the multi-level, meaningful negotiation process within the fan community.

In general, the dissemination mechanism of the digital platform and the high degree of activity of fan interaction enable the MCU's global fans to update their new insights in real-time and produce a considerable scale of communication, providing a

solid sharing space for the construction of the community. However, when the participatory culture expands the scale of the MCU fan community, the cultural background and values of the fans have also become increasingly complex.

3.3 Multicultural Role Construction and Market Localization

The success of the MCU can be attributed to creating superhero characters with different cultural backgrounds and distinct personalities, allowing global fans to discover content that matches their cultural values and resonates. With the rapid expansion of the Asian market, Marvel Studios has forecasted the development potential of the film market in this region. In recent years, the MCU has created several Asian superheroes, such as the Chinese male superhero Shang-Chi and the Pakistani female superhero Ms. Marvel. Although these characters have sparked controversy from domestic audiences, the MCU's efforts and progress in character diversity and localization are of considerable significance.

As one of the world's largest film markets, China's enthusiasm for superheroes has somewhat declined in recent years. However, its core audience remains significant. According to relevant research, compared with the male-dominated fan structure in the United States, female fans of the MCU dominate in China (more than 45% of movie audience, 60% of the MCU-related consumers, and more than 90% of Weibo fans) [8]. Unlike American male fans, who pay more attention to the display of superpowers, Chinese female fans are used to projecting their emotions onto the characters themselves and pay more attention to the charm of the characters. In addition, the fan creation of female fans is influenced by Japanese ACG culture. They are more inclined to transform American bromance into BL culture. For example, creating couples such as Iron Man and Captain America, Thor and Loki, etc. This makes the MCU's media products realize the local re-creation of cultural significance in China, thereby gathering a large number of Chinese fan communities.

Moreover, the rights and interests of the LGBTQ+ group are constantly attracting worldwide attention. Marvel Studios is inevitably going to align itself with this trend. However, Marvel conducts queerbaiting in this aspect: hinting but not clearly showing [9]. For example, Loki identifies as a genderfluid person in comics, but in the TV series *Loki*, his gender identity is only mentioned in a scene that vaguely shows his identity in the paper information, and finally chooses to have a relationship with a female character. Female characters such as Valkyrie and Okoye had the scenes depicting their queer identities deleted. This kind of queerbaiting is essentially to cater to the conservative market (such as the conservative regions of the United States, China, and Russia). For example, China utilized AI face-swapping to transform the queer couple roles in the film together into opposite-sex versions. In order to ensure the box office profits, Marvel has to avoid the obvious queer plot. This initiative reflects the conflict between market demand and cultural diversity. As the range of the MCU characters becomes increasingly diverse and the localization production process strengthens, the global diversification of the MCU's fans has also gradually deepened. However, it should be noted that commercial compromises made in response to the market may undermine social inclusiveness, causing the queer community to once again retreat to the periphery of society.

4 Discussion

Although the MCU has achieved great success in the world, its box office decline and weakened influence in recent years have been very prominent. Firstly, the high interconnectedness of the MCU has raised the viewing threshold. 37 films and 18 TV series compose a complex narrative structure, necessitated by a high level of background knowledge that new audiences must possess for clear perception. Therefore, comprehending the characters and background of the story becomes challenging for new audiences. This causes fan communities to transform high openness to exclusiveness, while the non-core fans have no opportunities to join. Thus, when executing long-term IP, the entertainment industries should provide simplified and easy-to-understand movie and TV works for new audiences, empowering audiences to be immersed in the discussion of fan communities without comprehending the storyline's background information.

Moreover, the three-act narratives of the MCU films are repetitive and lack innovation, leading to aesthetic fatigue and a diminishing interest in the audience. Simultaneously, the broken connectivity between old and new characters has generated a decline in fans' passion for the MCU. New characters, for instance, Ms. Marvel, lack comprehensive character descriptions, rendering it unattainable for the audience to empathize with them. The old characters' final move was too precipitous, creating emotional harm for fans. Such direct influences impact the fundamental foundation of the fan community, weakening the emotional attachment of fans to these characters [10]. Thus, the film and television sectors cannot restrict themselves to the same narrative model during the production of IP series. They should explore diversified narratives and production styles that enable innovation. In addition, new characters must provide a complete character growth plot, unlike a replacement for the old characters.

Furthermore, the MCU failed to create a new role leader after the core characters were created. New superheroes lack a complete storyline subplot, and the design of the characters is weak and cannot carry the key role. Consequently, the ubiquitous emotional reliance of the fan society is lost, and its involvement level drops. Therefore, in IP-based film and television dramas, it is critical for the construction of the core representative character. Its development should be designed in advance and cannot simply depend on the old characters' departure to look for a replacement character.

5 Conclusion

Based on research results, this paper concludes that the global fan community of the MCU is constructed through a multiple-layered, incremental strategy. Unlike other film production companies, Marvel Studios achieved a huge, unified worldview through its specially constructed interconnected universe plot, so that fans can immerse themselves in it. At the same time, it boosts fans' desire to participate and extends the fan community's scale by using the Internet's disseminating and

interacting mechanisms. Due to global fans' active participation in fan activities, Marvel Studios pays attention to diversified characterizations. Similarly, fans from various cultural backgrounds collaborate on fan communities, resulting in an enriched influence of the MCU.

Nowadays, fan communities emerge as an important consumption group of the cultural industry. Therefore, the cultural industry needs to switch from unidirectional content production to participatory and collaborative production, which can help realize the fan community's long-term commercial benefit and cultural effect. Different from the previous research that treats fandom as a subculture, this research puts special emphasis on the fan community's crucial function in the cultural industry's developing structure. Other IP series or related industries could be compared and analyzed in the future to provide further in-depth study of this subject.

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