

Using Content Analysis to Analyze Issues in the Development of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Their Impacts

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Abstract. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has become one of the most successful and popular franchises worldwide due to its continuous development. Therefore, this essay employs content analysis to investigate the worldbuilding and character develop issues in the Marvel Cinematic Universe productions. The findings reveal that the dense interconnections within the productions of the franchise makes it challenging for new audiences to enter. The repetition and declined quality of the plot of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's productions after *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) has also made old fans begin to lose interest. The imbalance between old and new characters leads the franchise to an awkward situation. To address these problems, Marvel can slow down the pace of new releases, so that the new audiences will be given more time to know the fictional world by catching up previous productions. Besides, Marvel Studios can have more time to improve the quality of their works to maintain the attraction to old audiences. Furthermore, they should focus on balancing the development of both old and new characters to better serve different audiences.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has become one of the global film market's focuses, attracting a large number of audiences. The Marvel Cinematic Universe refers to a narrative universe that shares the same worldview across films, TV series, and other media. As a franchise, Marvel Studios has created a vast fictional universe by integrating different media products, leading the trend of global superhero films. Since the release of the first *Iron Man* (2008) film, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has launched 31 movies and 11 TV shows, many of which have been widely discussed worldwide. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) even temporarily became the highest-grossing film in global box office history, cementing the Marvel Cinematic Universe's place in film history [1]. Burke analyzed the Marvel Cinematic Universe using the concept of transmedia storytelling proposed by Jenkins, revealing the reasons for its popularity from attributions such as continuity, multiplicity, and seriality [2]. Brinker explained how the Marvel Cinematic Universe spread across various media platforms and achieved such enormous success from the perspective of media convergence [3]. However, there has been little in-depth research and analysis of the problems existing in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Although the Marvel Cinematic Universe has a broad influence among audiences, its popularity is gradually decreasing, and some films have received negative reviews, indicating specific issues. For example, the vast narrative universe makes it difficult for new audiences to enter the franchise. Some film plots are too monotonous to attract audiences' attention [4]. There is also some confusion in worldbuilding and character-building. The portrayal of new

characters lacks depth and complexity, making it difficult for audiences to truly feel a vivid figure. The old characters have reached their peak of arc, facing a bottleneck. These issues limit audience participation and the sustainability of the films, potentially causing significant negative effects on the Marvel Cinematic Universe productions' box office and market performance. Therefore, this paper will use the content analysis method to systematically analyze and explore the problems existing in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The content analysis method employed in this article integrates both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitative analysis involves the extraction of data from literature, such as movie box office and the number of movie releases, aggregating them for analysis in order to draw objective conclusions. Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, involves delving into media texts themselves, such as movies and TV series, exploring the underlying backgrounds, motivations, and purposes to investigate potential meanings and impacts. By combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the content analysis method utilized in this article can generate a precise, objective, and profound conclusion. The paper will also analyze the impact of the problems, providing references and suggestions for film creators, thus contributing to the development of the Marvel franchise.

2 Background of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

The Marvel Cinematic Universe refers to a series of cross-media products, including movies, TV series, and other media products that belong to the same narrative universe,

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which are all based on Marvel Comics characters and storylines. By interweaving different characters and storylines, Marvel Studios has created a vast superhero world. The first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe was Iron Man (2008), which received widespread acclaim after its release, thanks to Robert Downey Jr.'s outstanding performance, the film's special effects, and the storyline. Iron Man (2008) was the eighth highest-grossing film of the year worldwide and was also selected by the American Film Institute as one of the year's top ten films. Since then, Marvel Studios has released several films over the next three years, each featuring a single superhero as the main character, including The Incredible Hulk (2008), Iron Man 2 (2010), Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), and Thor (2011), all of which received positive reviews and box office success. In 2012, The Avengers was released, which brought together the previously introduced superheroes into one film, creating a new way of storytelling in superhero movies and causing a stir [5]. The Avengers (2012) became the highest-grossing film worldwide in the year and still holds the tenth place in box office history. Since The Avengers (2012), Marvel Studios has continued to expand its narrative universe by adding new characters and creating sequels for existing ones. Avengers: Endgame (2019) assembled almost all the heroes from the 22 previous Marvel Studios films and once became the highest-grossing film in global box office history, becoming widely known [1]. To date, the Marvel Cinematic Universe includes 31 films and 11 TV shows, most of which have received widespread critical acclaim, as well as good box office. The films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe have grossed over \$28.7 billion in total, making it the highest-grossing film series in history [6]. However, while Marvel still maintains a large following, the productions in phase 4 of Marvel Cinematic Universe, which are after Avengers: Endgame (2019) and Spider-Man: Far From Home (2019), have started to receive negative reviews and lower box office. For example, Eternals (2021) received many negative reviews, with New York Post calling it 'the worst Marvel movie ever made' and the Rotten Tomatoes freshness reaching only 47%, creating a new low in the series' reputation [7]. The recent Ant-Man and The Wasp: Quantumania (2023) also received criticism from reviewers, who believed the plot was clichéd and lacked originality. It also created the record for the largest second-week drop in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In addition, the two TV series in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in the past year, Ms. Marvel (2022) and She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022), received mostly negative reviews on rating websites. Although Ms. Marvel (2022) is rated PG-13, many reviews suggest that the plot is boring and childish, seeming to be entirely aimed at children. Media reviews suggest that although She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022) claims to be a lawyer comedy but has no decent legal scenes or funny jokes. It seems that the Marvel Cinematic Universe has encountered some problems, and its future development prospects are not so promising. Therefore, next, this paper will analyze the issues that arise.

3 Issues of the content in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

3.1 The vast and interwoven story exerts negative influence on viewers' experience

Overall, the issue with the Marvel Cinematic Universe lies not in the promotion and distribution of its works, but primarily in the content of its productions. Marvel Studios has released 31 films and 11 TV shows, creating a vast and intertwined superhero narrative universe. It has made the relationships between each superhero complex, with different movies and TV shows featuring interactions of different characters. For example, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) had an easter egg of Wong and Abomination fighting each other. Wong is from Doctor Strange (2016), and Abomination is from The Incredible Hulk (2008). Then, they appeared as supporting roles in She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022). Gilardi and Reid refer to it as an attribution of transmedia storytelling: entirety, in which the stories or characters from different works in the same transmedia narrative universe correspond or relate to each other, forming a dynamic whole [8]. It is a pleasant experience for fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as they may watch all works of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and have a good understanding of the relationships between characters, enjoy seeing the interactions between characters, and appreciate the plot connections. However, it becomes a problem for ordinary viewers unfamiliar with the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Viewers who have not watched Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) may be confused about why Wong and Abomination appeared in She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022) and may not have enough background information about them. As major supporting characters in She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022), Wong and Abomination's story plays an essential role in the plot development, which can lead to an unsatisfactory viewing experience for ordinary viewers who may be missing some critical information before watching the series. Moreover, the vast narrative increases the difficulty of entering the Marvel Cinematic Universe. For example, to fully understand the film Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022), audiences are required to start watching films from Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015) and then watch all the movies and TV series that feature Doctor Strange and Wanda. Furthermore, the many supporting characters in Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022) are related to many other movies and TV shows in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, such as Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) and Captain Marvel (2019) and even some productions which currently are not part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, including the movie X-Men (2000) and the TV series Inhumans (2017). Additionally, to understand why the multiverse exists, viewers also need to watch the TV series Loki (2021) and the movie Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021). With so many films and TV shows to watch, it undoubtedly requires a significant investment of time and energy. Ordinary audiences in today's fragmented era may choose to give

up watching Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022) and instead watch other movies or engage in other entertainment, such as watching TikTok short videos or playing League of Legends. Therefore, it can be seen that raising the threshold of watching the Marvel Cinematic Universe production may reduce the interest of casual viewers.

3.2 Repetition in Marvel's productions reduces audiences' interest

Secondly, Marvel's works have been criticized by audiences for their 'assembly line' production, meaning that each work gives people a feeling of sameness, with similar narrative patterns, such as the traditional Hollywood three-act structure [9]. The Marvel Cinematic Universe film Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022) is very much in line with this pattern. In the first act, the villain Namor appears and massacres unnamed characters, giving the impression of great power. Afterward, Namor meets the protagonist Shuri, and the two clash due to ideological differences, gradually creating conflict. In the second act, the country where the protagonist is from, Wakanda, is invaded by Namor's country, Talokan, resulting in heavy casualties. The protagonist's situation took a turn for the worse. In the third act, the climax and resolution, the protagonist makes a firm decision, rises to resist, and ultimately defeats Namor through strategy, achieving peace between the two nations. It is a very formulaic film that lacks originality, reducing the story's watchability and harming the characters' emotional expression. When audiences watch such works, they may be able to predict what will happen next from the beginning of the film and therefore unable to experience the unexpected and thrilling feelings that come with superhero sci-fi action films. This formulaic filming is all too common in The Phase Four of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with the plot patterns of the movie being quite similar, lacking in change and surprises. Long-time Marvel Cinematic Universe viewers may experience aesthetic fatigue from Marvel films, gradually losing interest.

3.3 Unconnected and chaotic storytelling in the Marvel Cinematic Universe Phase Four

Furthermore, after Avengers: Endgame (2019), the main storyline of Marvel Cinematic Universe became even more fragmented, disjointed, and chaotic. There is a sense of disconnection between the films in Phase Four of the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Black Widow (2021) is a look back at the past, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) tells the present story, and Eternals (2021) spans thousands of years. These films do not give the impression of a central storyline progressing in chronological order compared to the movie in Phases 1-3 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which were all linked by the appearance of the infinity stones as a clue. Many of the films in Phase 4, such as Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021), Eternals (2021), and Thor: Love and Thunder (2022), have no direct connection to the

main storyline of the 'Multiverse Saga'. Moreover, the main storyline is chaotic. Although the TV series WandaVision(2021) and Loki (2021), as well as the film Spider-Man: No Way Home(2021), are all related to the opening of the multiverse, none of them clearly explains how the multiverse is opened, whether it is due to the magic of Wanda and Doctor Strange or the Time Variance Authority in Loki (2021). In Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021) had the multiverse opened by Doctor Strange, but it is not mentioned once in the later film Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022). This phenomenon undermines the foundation of Marvel Cinematic Universe's past success: works are not unclear or contradictory in their worldview and are created under a rigorous and comprehensive plan.

3.4 Imbalance between old and new characters lead Marvel to an awkward situation

In addition to the issues with plot development in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films and TV shows, there have also been problems with character development. Marvel Studios' handling of new characters has begun to deviate from the successful approach of classic heroes like Iron Man and Spider-Man, whose memorable origin stories left a lasting impression on viewers. In the recent TV series Ms. Marvel (2022), the main character gains her powers simply by donning a family heirloom bracelet, and she undergoes little internal growth despite being pursued by villains. Throughout the series, Ms. Marvel remains a one-dimensional, cute little girl, failing to elicit an emotional connection from the audience. A similar issue can be seen within Ant-Man and The Wasp: Quantumania (2023). The emotional bond between the father Ant-Man and daughter established in the previous films is underdeveloped in this sequel, and suddenly the daughter shifts from a clever and charming neighbor girl to a scientific genius, making her seem like a character that can be changed at will in the story. In Phase 4, Marvel also tends to rely on old characters to introduce new ones, as seen in the movie Black Widow (2021), where Natasha brings along Yelena, and in the TV series Hawkeye (2021), where Clint mentors the second Hawkeye, Kate. While Black Widow (2021) was supposed to be a fitting farewell to Natasha, fans did not get a thorough exploration of the character's backstory, and the often-mentioned "Budapest incident" was replaced with clichéd plot points. Black Widow (2021) seems to have conformed to a programmed design like a younger Natasha herself. Natasha in Black Widow (2021) becomes a mere tool for introducing new characters, with little exploration of her complex personality. The TV series Hawkeye (2021) is no different, with the show seemingly focused more on Kate than on Clint, who is given little opportunity to shine. It leaves some fans disappointed as the old and new characters are not quite balanced, resulting in an awkward situation where old characters do not get satisfying endings and new characters fail to be likable.

3.5 Previous core superheroes are gone while new ones have not been established

For audiences, the reason for loving the Marvel Cinematic Universe is not simply because a few movies are exciting, but because audiences have developed an emotional connection with the characters on screen. It presents the biggest challenge for the fourth phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. With the departure of Iron Man and Captain America, some new characters that lack a strong identity cannot fill in the blank left by the main characters. Older characters must step up. Spider-Man, Doctor Strange, and Wanda, who already have some popularity, should gradually replace Iron Man and Captain America as the key characters that connect different works and become the new emotional carriers for the audience. However, Spider-Man's movies either dig up the remaining value of Iron Man or are overshadowed by the previous two versions of Spider-Man. Doctor Strange has been serving the plot as a tool in different films, which has reduced his sense of importance as a main character in the audience's mind. Wanda, who seemed to have already completed her self-redemption in the finale of *WandaVision* (2021), suddenly became the antagonist 'Scarlet Witch' in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), killing without mercy [10]. Her behavior appears inconsistent, and her character-building has been somewhat ruined. It seems that the core single superhero characters are not established, therefore it might be at a low possibility to replicate the success of the previous 4 Avengers films with *Avengers 5*, which links all characters together. Without a solid foundation, the scattered layout will fail to bring the emotional accumulation process accompanying each work, damaging the brand image that Marvel Studios has built over the past decade.

4 Suggestions for creators of Marvel Studios

4.1 Marvel should slow down its pace

Next, this paper will provide some targeted suggestions for Marvel Studios based on the abovementioned issues. Firstly, Marvel Studios released 7 movies and 10 TV series in 2021-2022. This rapid output is driving the development of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Still, it has also caused some difficulties for ordinary viewers who need to spend a significant amount of time catching up with each new movie or TV series. Although the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a capital-intensive franchise, Marvel Studios should slow down the production of films and TV series, prioritizing quality over quantity. Slowing down the release of new works will first give viewers more time to catch up with the pace of new releases, which means they can have time to watch previous works, better understand the relationships and related stories between existing characters, and grasp the overall situation of the current stage of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It will enable them to better understand the information conveyed in the new works,

and ultimately obtain the best viewing experiences when they are released. Secondly, slowing the release of new work will increase the production time between each work. It will provide movie makers with more time to carefully plan the story arc of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as well as think about how to write more creative stories or use unique narrative perspectives to avoid repetition and similarity in the plot of new works. Polishing works and improving their quality can break the cycle of negative reviews from audiences. Furthermore, less frequent releases can relieve audience fatigue and maintain their anticipation of new works.

4.2 Marvel should re-establish the emotion bond between characters and audiences

One of the reasons why the Marvel Cinematic Universe has been well-received by audiences is that the characters have been portrayed realistically, creating an emotional connection with viewers. However, in the latest Phase 4, the departure of old characters and the creation of new characters with flat and unlikable personalities seems to gradually break the emotional bond between the audience and the characters [11]. Therefore, Marvel Studios should focus more on character development. For the old characters, while maintaining their well-developed three-dimensional image, sequels or cameo appearances should be arranged to continue their character arcs rather than just being used as tools to introduce new characters. Although characters like Iron Man and Captain America have already made their exit, the concept of the multiverse allows Marvel to potentially bring back these characters, either in live-action form or in animated form like *What If...?* (2021). It can maintain the appeal of old characters to the core audience and slow down the loss of old fans. As for creating new characters, Marvel Studios should not hastily produce new characters solely to iterate old ones and therefore living in their shadows. Instead, Marvel Studios should develop independent works featuring new characters with three-dimensional figures, such as the TV series *Moon Knight* (2021). Despite having no connection to other Marvel heroes, the TV series has received universal acclaim from both old and new audiences due to its unique setting and well-developed characters. Such independent works featuring new characters also allow new viewers to directly enter the franchise without having to worry about not understanding or having to catch up on previous Marvel Cinematic Universe works.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper conducted a content analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's films and TV shows from a critical perspective. It identified issues with the plot and character development, addressing a research gap in understanding the shortcomings of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Regarding the plot, the paper found that the intricate and interwoven narrative makes it challenging for new viewers to enter the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Moreover, the repetitive plot structure leads to audience fatigue, and the inconsistent

world-building and fragmented stories confuse the audience. In terms of character development, the essay noted that the core characters are gradually leaving the stage, while the new characters are poorly developed and unlikeable. Additionally, the imbalance in screen time between new and old characters is an important issue for the audience. To address these problems, the paper provided recommendations for the producers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, such as slowing down the development of new works and maintaining the appeal of old characters while also creating more complex and compelling new characters. This approach could benefit the Marvel Cinematic Universe 's continued growth, maintain high box office or viewership, and provide audiences with more captivating and entertaining content. However, the essay has some limitations, as it did not explore the impact of actor replacement and their acting skills on character development and audience perception. Future research could investigate these perspectives to understand better the importance of actors in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's storytelling.

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