

# Practice and Insights of Marvel's Promotion and Marketing Strategies from the Perspective of IP Life Cycle

Zihang Yang

Xinqi Middle School, Zhengzhou, China

yzhkkku18@outlook.com

**Abstract.** With the industrialization of the cultural industry, IP has transcended the form of single works such as novels and comics, and developed into a content ecosystem covering multiple media including comics, films and TV series, as well as multiple scenarios like cinemas, home TVs and theme parks. The IP Life Cycle Theory, derived from Vernon's Product Life Cycle Theory and later extended to the IP field, divides IP development into four stages: Incubation, Growth, Maturity and Continuation. Due to significant variations in IP characteristics, market demands and audience needs across different stages, targeted promotion and marketing strategies are required to maximize IP value. This paper takes Marvel, a global benchmark in IP operation, as a case study to analyze its marketing practices in each stage. It finds that Marvel's success lies in the precise alignment between its strategies and the IP life cycle stages, which also confirms that the IP life cycle can be artificially extended through dynamic marketing. The study further provides insights for other IP operations, including the adoption of stage specific strategies, adherence to content led marketing and active embrace of innovation.

**Keywords:** IP Life Cycle; Marvel; Promotion and Marketing Strategies; Content Ecosystem; Cross-Media Communication.

## 1. Introduction

The cultural industry is advancing toward industrialization, and IP has transcended single works (e.g., novels, comics) to become a "content ecosystem" covering multiple media (comics, films, TV series) and scenarios (cinemas, home TVs, theme parks). To operate IP effectively, the IP Life Cycle Theory is critical. It is originated from Vernon's [1] Product Life Cycle Theory (proposing four product stages: Introduction, Growth, Maturity, Decline) and later extended to IP by Liu [2] (redefining stages as Incubation, Growth, Maturity, Continuation), this theory highlights that IP characteristics, market demands, and audience needs vary significantly across stages—requiring tailored promotion and marketing strategies to maximize IP value.

The core of marketing is to help IP reach the right audience, convey the right message, and use the right channels. Marvel stands as a global benchmark in IP operation, whose development fully reflects all IP life cycle stages. This paper takes Marvel as a case to analyze how marketing strategies function in each IP life cycle stage, aiming to provide references for other IP operations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. IP Life Cycle Theory

The theoretical origin of IP Life Cycle Theory traces back to Vernon's [1] International Trade and International Investment in the Product Cycle, where he proposed that products experience four stages: Introduction, Growth, Maturity, and Decline. This theory was later extended to the IP field: Liu divided IP development into Incubation, Growth, Maturity, and Continuation stages, and emphasized that IP life cycle is not fixed but can be extended through effective operations—laying a key theoretical foundation for this study [2].

## 2.2. Marvel’s Marketing Strategy Research

Qiu sorted Marvel’s multi-channel promotion practices but failed to link these strategies to specific IP life cycle stages, missing the dynamic adaptation between strategies and stages [3].

Tian & Zhao focused on Marvel’s IP cross-media transformation (e.g., Iron Man driving Marvel from comics to films) but only concentrated on the Growth Stage, lacking systematic discussion of other stages [4].

Han analyzed Marvel's emotional marketing in the Maturity Stage (e.g., collective memory construction to enhance audience stickiness) but ignored Marvel's overall marketing layout across the entire life cycle [6].

## 2.3. Marvel-DC Comparative Research

Du focused on "hero divinity" and single-character comics in the early stage, forming a contrast with Marvel's "hero humanity" and "ensemble narration" in the Incubation Stage [5].

Tucker noted that in the Maturity Stage, DC’s overemphasis on “dark and serious” style in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* failed to arouse emotional resonance, while Marvel’s “humorous narration” better met audience needs—highlighting the uniqueness of Marvel’s strategies [7].

## 2.4. IP Cultural Influence Research

Wang emphasized that Marvel’s marketing not only achieved commercial success but also promoted the global spread of superhero culture, providing a broader perspective for evaluating Marvel's IP operation [8].

Existing studies have explored IP life cycle theory, Marvel’s single-stage marketing, and Marvel-DC comparisons, but lack systematic analysis of how Marvel’s marketing adapts to the characteristics of each IP life cycle stage. This paper fills this gap by systematically sorting Marvel’s marketing practices across all stages and discussing the logical relationship between strategies and stages.

## 3. Overview of Case

Founded in 1939, Marvel initially focused on comic creation, gradually building a superhero IP system (e.g., Iron Man, Thor). Since 2008, it has expanded to films, TV series, peripherals, and cross-field cooperation, becoming a global IP operation benchmark. Its IP development fully covers the four stages of the IP life cycle, providing a typical case for studying stage-based marketing.

The core of the IP life cycle is the dynamic coordination between content value and audience relationship, and marketing strategies are the key to achieving this coordination. Each stage has clear market goals, and marketing strategies must be adjusted accordingly shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Alignment of IP Life Cycle Stages, Core Market Goals and Key Marketing Directions

IP Life Cycle Stage	Core Market Goal	Key Marketing Direction
Incubation Stage	IP Awareness (letting core audiences know the IP)	Content exposure via niche channels (e.g., comic book stores, comic conventions)
Growth Stage	Audience Expansion (breaking out of niche circles to reach the public)	Cross-media communication (e.g., expanding from comics to films)
Maturity Stage	Brand Loyalty (maintaining long-term fan preference)	Emotional resonance (e.g., awakening fan memories of IP)
Continuation Stage	Value Extension (avoiding decline and exploring new value)	Innovative scenarios (e.g., streaming TV series) and new audience development

Many IPs decline due to strategy-stage mismatch (e.g., over-consuming popularity in the Growth Stage, lacking fresh content in the Maturity Stage). Marvel's advantage lies in its marketing strategies always being in sync with the IP life cycle—adjusting content, channels, and communication forms to maintain IP vitality.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1. Incubation Stage**

Marvel's incubation stage spanned from 1939 to 2007. During this period, as the main carrier, comics build IP worldview, shape core characters, and accumulate initial fans. There are two key strategies. Different from DC's "single-character comics", Marvel used "ensemble narration" (e.g., 1963 comic *The Avengers* integrating Iron Man, Thor, and Hulk) to attract cross-comic reading and form a "fan community" [5]. In addition, vertical channel cultivation was adopted, including cooperating with comic book stores for signing events and launching "limited-edition comics" to strengthen core fans' sense of belonging. As a result, the IP accumulated a solid core fan base, which later became opinion leaders for Marvel's film IP and laid the foundation for cross-media transformation [4].

### **4.2. Growth Stage**

In 2008, the release of *Iron Man* launched the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and pushed Marvel into the film field. *Iron Man* grossed \$585 million worldwide; Marvel successfully broke out of the comic circle and became a popular cultural symbol [4]. During this period, each solo film (e.g., *Iron Man*, *Thor*) served as a trailer for *The Avengers*, with post-credit "Easter Eggs" hinting at character connections to guide audience follow-up [3]. Combining social media (releasing behind-the-scenes clips), offline events (Comic-Con special events), and traditional media (interviews with lead actors like Robert Downey Jr.) to penetrate from core fans to the general public.

### **4.3. Maturity Stage**

In 2012, Marvel transitioned from Growth stage to Maturity stage. As a milestone, the release of *The Avengers* completed the IP worldview and reached peak market influence. During this period, Marvel has adopted emotional resonance marketing, such as character growth narration and collective memory construction (e.g., releasing a "ten-year character montage" before *Avengers: Endgame* to awaken fans' memories of "Marvel's ten years") [6]. Besides, a "film + peripherals + authorized cooperation" system was built, implanting props (e.g., *Iron Man*'s helmet) in films to drive peripheral sales, and cooperating with Disney parks (building *Avengers* theme parks) and game companies (launching *Marvel's Spider-Man*) [3, 8]. Finally, Marvel evolved from a cultural symbol to a business empire [6]. And *Avengers: Endgame* grossed \$2.797 billion globally.

### **4.4. Continuation Stage**

After Maturity stage (2019), Marvel's core characters have stepped down, facing issues such as declining popularity and an aging audience. During this period, there are three key strategies. Marvel try to launch TV series on Disney+ (e.g., *WandaVision*, *Loki*) to explore supporting roles' stories and maintain audience attention via weekly updates. For instance, *Loki* used "time travel" to attract non-traditional superhero fans [2]. To complete audience iteration, Marvel increases female superhero exposure (e.g., *Captain Marvel*, *She-Hulk*) to attract female audiences, and cooperates with Gen Z platforms (e.g., TikTok) to release "character dance challenges" [8]. Then, Marvel and SONY have collaborated on *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (using multiverse to link different *Spider-Man* versions) to activate old fans and attract new audiences (e.g., animation lovers) [7]. These strategies successfully maintain high market popularity in Continuation stage, and extended the IP life cycle.

## 5. Suggestions for IP Operation

IP operation should use stage-by-stage strategies and not apply the same method to all stages. In the Incubation Stage, focus on reaching core audiences through small, specific channels (instead of trying to get large-scale attention). In the Growth Stage, use different types of media together to break out of small, specific groups—for example, expanding from novels to films. In the Maturity Stage, use emotional connections to stop audiences from getting tired of the content and keep fans loyal. In the Continuation Stage, try new things actively instead of relying on past experiences, especially avoiding matching the wrong strategy to the stage (like using up too much of the IP's popularity in the Growth Stage).

At the same time, IP operation must use good content to guide marketing and strengthen emotional connections. Think of content as the core (the “1”) and marketing as extra support (the “0s”). First, make characters and stories better—such as Marvel’s “heroes being like real people” setup—to give content the ability to spread. Then, design marketing activities around the content (like Marvel's “telling stories of characters’ growth”) to get audiences to share actively and support the IP for a long time. Don’t depend too much on marketing excitement while ignoring how good the content is; this will finally make audiences stop trusting the IP. Besides, it’s important to accept new media changes and audience shifts to expand the IP’s range: change communication channels when streaming platforms (like Disney+) and short videos (like TikTok) become popular, adjust content and marketing ways for new audiences (such as Gen Z and female audiences), and work with other fields (like Marvel working with Disney parks and game companies) by connecting different IPs and using authorized partnerships. This helps the IP achieve “a second period of growth.”

## 6. Conclusion

Marvel’s IP succeeded mainly because its marketing strategies matched each stage of the IP Life Cycle exactly, forming a complete “stage-strategy-value” cycle. In the Incubation Stage, developing small, specific channels and connecting characters gathered core fans, laying the foundation for Marvel to become a fan symbol. In the Growth Stage, linking MCU works and using many channels together got Marvel out of small, specific groups, turning it into a national cultural sign. In the Maturity Stage, emotional connections and making money from the whole industry chain changed Marvel from a cultural sign to a business empire. In the Continuation Stage, new ideas for streaming content and updating the audience group solved the problem of core characters leaving and successfully made the IP Life Cycle longer. This process proves the core rule of IP operation: the IP Life Cycle is not a fixed natural process—people can make it longer through marketing. The key is for operators to correctly understand what the market needs and what audiences worry about at different stages. They should take good content as the core, proper channels as the tool, and audience needs as the focus to build a marketing system that changes when necessary. This is the key reason Marvel’s IP has developed for a long time, and it provides practical help for other IP operations.

## References

- [1] Vernon R. International trade and international investment in the product cycle. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 1966, 80 (2): 190-207.
- [2] Liu ZY. How Can IP Movies Achieve Longevity. *Economy*, 2016 (3): 3.
- [3] Qiu YF. A Brief Discussion on the Marketing Strategy of Marvel Studios. *Media Forum*, 2018, 1 (23): 176.
- [4] Tian LG, Zhao YM. Discussion on the Operation of Hollywood Superhero Movies—Taking Marvel Studios as an Example. *New West (Theoretical Edition)*, 2016 (1): 139-140, 122.
- [5] Du YF. Marketing of American Comics—From the Perspective of DC Comics Publishing. *Modern Business*, 2014 (20): 31-32.
- [6] Han JH. Research on the Communication Strategy of Marvel Series Movies—Taking the Avengers as an Example. *Economic and Technological Cooperation Information*, 2020 (27): 6.
- [7] Tucker R. Marvel vs. DC. *Motorcycle Information*, 2020, 435 (5): 66.

[8] Wang XY. The Influence of Marvel's Cultural Marketing. Corporate Culture, 2021.