

## ***Unpredictable Box Office Performance of Franchise Blockbusters: The Fading "Magical" Appeal of the "Fantastic Beasts" Series in Mainland China***

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### **Abstract**

To achieve success in the box office, many filmmakers attempt to regroup the factors from the previous successful films into subsequent productions. The *Fantastic Beasts* series exemplifies a combination of multiple factors seen in the past successful formula, such as well-known intellectual property, famous stars, appealing spectacles, and less culturally specific genres. However, the box office of three *Fantastic Beasts* films has been declining, suggesting that it is nearly impossible to replicate the success of earlier films by integrating these factors. This research aims to investigate the factors that influenced the box office of the *Fantastic Beasts* series in mainland China and analyse the reasons for its decreasing performance. The Chinese box office performances of this series were examined using secondary data analysis. Also, content analysis was conducted to explore the Chinese audience reviews of the three films on Maoyan and Taopiaopiao (two major ticketing platforms in China) from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The findings indicate that the previous succeeded factors were only effective during the early stages of these films' exhibition in China. Additionally, an increasing number of Chinese audience reviews expressed dissatisfaction with these films' illogical narratives. I argue that the previous succeeded factors should be regarded as marketing assets and not as crucial components that have a positive long-term impact on the film's box office. Meanwhile, the strategy of emphasising spectacle over narrative seems ineffective in sustaining the success of franchise blockbusters in China because poor storytelling would alienate new customers and disappoint the existing fan base.

Keywords: Box Office Performance, International Film Flow, The *Fantastic Beasts* Series

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## Introduction

According to Zuckerman and Kim (2003), it is fundamental to acknowledge the profound uncertainty that is inherent in a film project in order to comprehend the film industry. Hence, improving understanding of the factors that influence a film's box office success and their interrelations becomes essential (Hennig-Thurau, et al, 2007). The film industry is interested in combining the factors that have contributed to previous successes to reduce uncertainty in future productions (Wasser, 1995). However, this paper provides further evidence to suggest that simply regrouping the factors that previously contributed to box office success is not sufficient for a film to replicate that success.

In order to establish a prediction model that is based on a substantial sample size, prior research has aimed to identify the factors that influence box office performance, primarily through the use of quantitative methodology. The most pioneering articles are those of Litman, which attempt to predict film success by evaluating relevant factors through regression analysis. Litman and his colleagues identify several factors that may impact the domestic box office of American films, including budget, genres, MPAA ratings, the presence of stars, the use of pre-sold intellectual property (IP), the type of distributor, the release timing, the pattern of release, any awards or nominations, and critics' reviews (Litman, 1983; Litman & Kohl, 1989; Litman & Ahn, 1998). The relationships between box office and these factors are further investigated in several studies, such as those conducted by Prag and Casavant (1994), Chang and Ki (2005), and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2007). In recent box office research, such as those by Craig et al. (2005), Fu (2012), and Lee (2006, 2008), there has been a growing interest in the performance of films in overseas markets, with culture and language emerging as significant factors. Culturally specific films would encounter obstacles in their ability to transcend cultural barriers, as foreign audiences necessitate a higher level of cultural literacy to comprehend and appreciate the content (Fu, 2012). Hoskins and Mirus (1988, p.500) coined the term "cultural discount" to describe the phenomenon in which the value of a media product, which is rooted in a particular cultural context, "will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioural patterns of the material in question." In order to improve the probability of success in the global market, films often universalise their themes and content to make them less culturally specific and more accessible to diverse audiences (Lee, 2006).

A notable example of how films mitigate uncertainty in the international market is the production of franchise blockbusters, which not only regroups those positively correlated factors but also diminishes their cultural specificity. For example, the substantial budget allows for extensive marketing campaigns, use of advanced special effects, and recruitment of a stronger cast (Litman, 1983; Litman & Kohl, 1989). Additionally, their genres tend to be less culturally specific, such as action, adventure, and fantasy, which feature less dialogue and emphasise special effects to enhance their accessibility in a wide range of cultural contexts (Barthel-Bouchier, 2012). Furthermore, it is also common for franchise blockbusters to use pre-sold IP, which allows them to take advantage on the established fan base (Basuroy & Chatterjee, 2008; Cucco, 2009; Gunter, 2018). Therefore, franchise blockbusters are expected to encounter diminished cultural discount and draw more moviegoers in the worldwide market. However, they do not always succeed. I argue in this paper that the previous quantitative research did not take into account for one of the most critical influencing factors of box office performance: the storytelling abilities of individual films.

In 2016, J.K. Rowling, working as the screenwriter, initiated a new film series named the *Fantastic Beasts* series, which is also rooted in the Wizarding World established in the *Harry Potter* franchise. This series now consists of three films: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2016), *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (2018), and *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022). This paper will refer to the three films as *Fantastic Beasts 1, 2, and 3*. This film series exemplifies a typical franchise blockbuster that incorporates numerous successful factors from the past, such as pre-sold IP, famous stars, large budget, and less culturally specific genres. Nevertheless, the box office of these three films continues to decrease. The aim of this research is to investigate the factors contributing to the declining performance of the three films in the *Fantastic Beasts* series, with a particular focus on the mainland Chinese market, a significant global film market with a substantial fanbase for the *Harry Potter* franchise. I examined film reviews written by empirical Chinese consumers to evaluate the factors that affected the box office performance of each case study film. The research findings suggest that the strategy of prioritising spectacle over narrative appears to be ineffective in maintaining the popularity of these franchise blockbusters in China, as their unsatisfactory storytelling not only alienated new customers but also disappointed the existing fan base. The results of this study will aid in comprehending the significance of storytelling ability in influencing the box office performance of franchise blockbusters, a factor that has been frequently disregarded in previous research.

## Methodology

The mixed-methods case study design was employed in my research to address the gap in qualitative and case study research methods, as the previous study on box office performance primarily concentrates on quantitative methodologies that are based on a large number of samples, which fail to adequately capture the complexity of an individual film.

Quantitative content analysis was implemented to investigate the film reviews posted by Chinese viewers on Maoyan and Taopiaopiao during the theatrical run of these films in order to investigate the perceptions of Chinese customers regarding these films. These are two major ticketing applications that collectively control nearly 80% of the Chinese film ticket market (Frater, 2018). I gathered a total of 150 reviews by collecting 50 reviews for each film, with 25 reviews obtained from each platform. The first 25 reviews shown to users on platforms (with the filter set to default mode) were sampled. As there is no comparable existing research, I conducted the subset of coding categories based on the factors identified in the previous research, including “Genre”, “Stars”, “Cultural Specificity”, “Language”, “Pre-sold IP”, “Audio-visual effects”, “Marketing”, and “Awards”. Considering the absence of a professional film critic platform and a film classification system in China, I excluded these two factors that cited in prior research from my study. The factor of distributor was also excluded, as the state-owned China Film Group Corporation and Huaxia Film Distribution are the only organisations authorised to distribute foreign films in mainland China (Cheung, 2016; Yeh & Davis, 2008; Su, 2016). Additionally, in light of Bordwell (2017)’s claim that the main objective of viewing activities is to construct a meaningful narrative from the plot, the coding categories were further broadened to include the factors of the visual narrative that Goodnow (2020) suggested, including “Plots”, “Characters in story”, and “Places in story”. To acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of these factors on the box office of these films, I analysed the frequency and manner of references to these factors in the comments of Chinese consumers. Meanwhile, to assess the attitudes of Chinese viewers about these factors, the coding procedure also included an evaluation of the general sentiments of the comments, which were classified as “Positive”, “Negative”, or “Neutral” in

accordance with these categories. Subsequently, I implemented qualitative textual analysis from the viewpoint of Chinese viewers to ascertain their perceptions of these factors and films, as the beliefs, values, and conventions of the audience may influence film interpretation. Textual analysis could offer an in-depth understanding of the way in which the mentioned factors influence the box office performance of the films by relying on the results of the content analysis. In addition, I used secondary data analysis to evaluate the factors mentioned by Chinese consumers in each film on the films' performance in China. This was achieved by utilising data from IMDb, Box Office Mojo, Maoyan Pro (the data analysis application of Maoyan), and Dengta Pro (the data analysis application of Taopiaopiao).

## Findings & Discussions

As Table 1 indicates, the three *Fantastic Beasts* films in China have experienced an ongoing decline in both box office revenue and cinema admissions (Box Office Mojo, 2016, 2018, 2022; Maoyan Pro, 2016, 2018, 2022; Dengta Pro, 2016, 2018, 2022). Their ratings on Maoyan and Taopiaopiao have consistently dropped as well (Maoyan, 2016, 2018, 2022; Taopiaopiao, 2016, 2018, 2022). It is important to note that *Fantastic Beasts 3* was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which the Chinese film market was adversely affected by the implementation of the “dynamic zero COVID” policy (Brzeski, 2022). The attendance and opening rates of cinemas were significantly impacted (Liu & Lu, 2023). The impact of this policy on the decrease in attendance and income for *Fantastic Beasts 3* needs to be acknowledged. Yet, it is undeniable that these three films have encountered progressively deteriorating reception and performance in China.

Table 1: Performance of Three *Fantastic Beasts* Films in China

Title	Cinema admissions (approximate)	Box office revenue (approximate)	Rating on Maoyan	Rating on Taopiaopiao
<i>Fantastic Beasts 1</i>	17 million	\$86 million	8.9 / 10	8.8 / 10
<i>Fantastic Beasts 2</i>	10 million	\$57 million	7.9 / 10	8.1 / 10
<i>Fantastic Beasts 3</i>	5 million	\$29 million	7.9 / 10	7.7 / 10

Source: Box Office Mojo, Maoyan Pro, Dengta Pro, Maoyan, and Taopiaopiao

The subsequent sections will present an in-depth analysis of each of these three films to clarify the factors contributing to the fading appeal of the Wizarding World in China. Owing to the space constraints, this study primarily focuses on factors extensively discussed by Chinese users, omitting those less frequently stated.

### *Fantastic Beasts 1*

Out of the 50 Chinese audience reviews for *Fantastic Beasts 1*, 45 users gave it a positive rating (7 to 10 out of 10), 4 users gave it a neutral rating (4 to 6 out of 10), and only 1 user gave it a negative rating (0 to 3 out of 10). The factors they mentioned were summarised in Table 2, which suggests that the film was generally well-received by most Chinese consumers.

Table 2: Most Frequently Mentioned Factors in Chinese Audience Reviews of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2016)

Mentioned Factors and Their Frequency				
Category	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
<b>Pre-sold IP</b>	27	3	1	31
<b>Characters in story</b>	20	5	0	25
<b>Plot</b>	13	8	1	22
<b>Audio-visual effects</b>	17	3	0	20
<b>Stars</b>	20	0	0	20
<b>Cultural specificity</b>	8	4	1	13
<b>Genre</b>	3	1	0	4
<b>Marketing</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Places in story</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Language</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Awards</b>	0	0	0	0

Sources: Maoyan and Taopiaopiao

The most frequently mentioned factor was the “Pre-sold IP”, as most users watched this film due to their devotion to the *Harry Potter* franchise. For example:

As a loyal *Harry Potter* fan, how can you miss “Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them” written by J.K. Rowling, the mother of magic world. (Maoyan user)

This really is a must-see film for die-hard *Harry Potter* fans. (Taopiaopiao user)

In the same vein, many users addressed J.K. Rowling under the “Stars” category:

If Stan Lee created the Marvel Universe, then Rowling constructed the entire magical world. (Maoyan user)

I really admire Rowling’s logic and ability to handle the plot. The various details in the film are really good news for *Harry Potter* fans. (Maoyan user)

Rowling’s storytelling ability and the Wizarding World she established in the *Harry Potter* series appeared to be appreciated by many Chinese viewers. It indicates that the popularity of *Harry Potter* and its original author could be viewed as advantageous promotional assets for *Fantastic Beasts 1*. This supports the arguments of Basuroy and Chatterjee (2008) and Gunter (2018), which propose that using a pre-sold IP can take advantage on the existing fan base and remaining value of the parent brand for financial benefits.

The “Characters in the story” were also frequently referenced by users, with many of them expressing their fondness for the magical creatures portrayed in the film, particularly Niffler, which they thought to be funny and adorable:

The animals are so cute! Every one of them is cute! (Taopiaopiao user)

I like Niffler very much, it made me laugh the whole time. (Taopiaopiao user)

Likewise, the film’s vivid depiction of the Wizarding World prompted viewers to frequently engage in discussions regarding the “Audio-visual effects”:

The 3D effect is unexpectedly good. It is the most enjoyable 3D film in recent years. From beginning to end, all kinds of magic effects and animals “jump out” of the screen. This is what a true 3D film is! (Maoyan user)

The IMAX effect is great. The appearance of the magical animals and several fighting scenes feel like they are coming towards you! (Taopiaopiao user)

It seems that the presence of magical creatures is not only the key themes that differentiate the *Fantastic Beasts* series from the *Harry Potter* series, but it could be regarded as a prominent attraction for many Chinese viewers. In addition, the integration of spectacular special effects, 3D, and IMAX allowed Chinese consumers to experience a more immersive portrayal of the Wizarding World, which could also be considered a significant selling point of this film. This supports the findings of Elliott et al. (2018), which reveal that box office revenues in mainland China are considerably and positively influenced by enhanced format films (i.e. 3D and IMAX films).

The “Plot” was also a frequently discussed factor; however, many Chinese viewers maintained a relatively conservative attitude towards it. Users who held positive attitudes toward the plot assessed the film as possessing a compelling narrative with a well-structured pace:

The pace is very good. It’s just over two hours long, but it feels like a long story, but it still leaves people wanting more. (Maoyan user)

Almost every scene has a clever and exquisite design. The supernatural carnival makes the 133-minute film a non-stop experience. (Taopiaopiao user)

Conversely, those who held a neutral stance on the plot noted that while the overarching narrative was captivating, comprehending it required some effort:

But this new story line is a bit tiring to watch, and some things are confusing at the beginning, such as Obscurus. (Taopiaopiao user)

I was a little confused at first, and even fell asleep at one point, but then I slowly understand the plot a little bit and find it very exciting! (Taopiaopiao user)

It suggests that the film contained some settings and details that might not sufficiently elucidated, which may impede comprehension for certain ordinary viewers. This can also be regarded as an aspect of “Cultural specificity”. Nevertheless, under this category, most users claimed that the film was accessible to non-fans and did not require extensive prior knowledge regarding the *Harry Potter* series for comprehension and appreciation:

Even if you are not a *Harry Potter* fan, the interesting creatures and wonderful magic in the film are still very attractive. (Maoyan user)

Except that Dumbledore is mentioned only once in the line, the whole story is very clear to a viewer who has not watched *Harry Potter*. It is a masterpiece that is very suitable for *Harry Potter* fans and other audiences who simply like magic-themed films. (Taopiaopiao user)

In addition, some viewers noted that, as devoted *Harry Potter* fans, they could find numerous familiar elements throughout this film, which further enriched their viewing experience. Hence, although the culturally specific content in this film presented some challenges in comprehending certain aspects of the setting for ordinary viewers, as observed under “Plot”, it seems that it did not hinder most viewers’ comprehension of the overall narrative.

Overall, the pre-sold IP (the *Harry Potter* franchise), the star power of Rowling, the adorable magical creatures depicted in the film, and the captivating audio-visual effects were received positively by Chinese viewers. These factors can be regarded as being effective in attracting Chinese consumers to *Fantastic Beasts 1*, which may have a positive impact on its box office performance in China. Although the film’s plot and cultural specificity were subject to some neutral evaluations, most Chinese fans and casual viewers found the overall quality of *Fantastic Beasts 1* to be satisfactory.

### ***Fantastic Beasts 2***

Out of the 50 reviews for *Fantastic Beasts 2*, 41 users gave it a positive rating, 2 users gave it a neutral rating, and 7 users gave it a negative rating. Although the positive ratings of this sequel did not decline significantly in comparison to the first film, they did experience an increase in the negative ratings. As illustrated in Table 3, Chinese users generally expressed more neutral attitudes towards the factors they mentioned.

Table 3: Most Frequently Mentioned Factors in Chinese Audience Reviews of *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (2018)

<b>Mentioned Factors and Their Frequency</b>				
<b>Category</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Plot</b>	2	22	8	32
<b>Pre-sold IP</b>	17	10	1	28
<b>Audio and visual effects</b>	23	0	0	23
<b>Characters in story</b>	11	8	1	20
<b>Cultural specificity</b>	2	8	7	17
<b>Stars</b>	10	2	0	12
<b>Genre</b>	2	0	0	2
<b>Language</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Places in story</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Marketing</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Awards</b>	0	0	0	0

Sources: Maoyan and Taopiaopiao

Although the “Plot” was the most frequently discussed factor, few people expressed positive opinions about it. Most users maintained a neutral stance and voiced dissatisfaction with the film’s excessive number of characters, which led to a lack of clarity in the main storyline:

First of all, the distribution of roles is uneven, and each character wants to stand out, but in the end none of them stand out. .... The plot is rather complicated, and it is obviously a foreshadowing for the next film, so it is not friendly to plot lovers. (Maoyan user)

To be fair, the story is very fragmented, there are many characters, and the focus is not prominent. (Taopiaopiao user)

Users with negative attitudes were enraged by the film's plot, asserting that the confusing narrative disappointed consumers:

Apart from the special effects, it's a really bad film. It's boring and long, with many and complicated characters, and the story is not clear! It's not commercial, and it's not artistic. The ending is also incomplete! Are you waiting for the next film to make more money? (Maoyan user)

I don't understand what you are talking about, it's boring. 99% of the people in the cinema hall were sleeping. Really, the film is just here to cheat people out of their money. (Maoyan user)

Dissatisfaction over the "Plot" may also be associated with the film's "Cultural specificity", which was likewise mainly mentioned with neutral and negative attitudes. Many users who maintained a neutral stance acknowledged that, despite their extensive knowledge of the narrative of the *Harry Potter* series, the film's abundance of characters and the lack of elaboration on certain background stories could render it less accessible to ordinary consumers. For example:

Rowling's grand magic world has expanded from the UK to the whole world, which is a good supplement and inheritance to the entire series. The disadvantage is that there are too many characters, and the plot is a bit trivial, so non-fans can easily get confused. (Taopiaopiao user)

Users with negative attitudes complained that this film was inappropriate for viewers who have not watched the *Harry Potter* series and *Fantastic Beasts 1*:

As a non-*Harry Potter* fan, what the hell is this film? I want to give it a score of 0. This is the first time in my life that I have no idea what a film is about after watching it. *Fantastic Beasts 2* is really a film that purely serves *Harry Potter* fans. It can be said that it is not friendly to other groups of people at all. ... So, if you are not a *Harry Potter* fan, I really don't recommend you waste tickets and waste two hours to watch this film. (Maoyan user)

It is evident that a specific level of familiarity with the Wizarding World was required to comprehend the numerous plots and details in *Fantastic Beasts 2*. Despite its roots in the renowned *Harry Potter* and its classification within the fantasy genre, the film exhibited high cultural specificity that may hinder comprehension for non-fans in China. This finding aligns with Schauer's (2007) argument that the narrative of a franchise blockbuster can be exciting and intricate for a fan deeply engaged with the associated supplementary material, yet it may lack narrative coherence for the general public.

Besides, the film's "Audio-visual effects" and Rowling's storytelling ability under the "Stars" category were still appreciated by some users, indicating that the construction of the magical world and its vivid depiction remained crucial in captivating Chinese viewers. Despite extensive discussion about the "Pre-sold IP" as a significant selling point for the film, the number of individuals adopting a neutral stance on this factor increased. For instance:

If you haven't watched the first film, you can't even be sure who the protagonist is. ... Rather than "Fantastic Beasts 2", it's more like "A Large Trailer for Fantastic Beasts 3." (Maoyan user)

Similarly, those who adopted a neutral stance towards the "Character in story" also increased, primarily articulating dissatisfaction with the diminished presence of magical creatures:

Compared to the first film, the magical creatures don't appear much, and I feel like the focus is no longer on the magical creatures. ... But I hope there will be more magical creatures, especially the Niffler! (Maoyan user)

It is evident that although many people expressed disappointment about the "Pre-sold IP" and "Character", the general sentiment remained tolerant. This may illustrate the effectiveness of these factors in China, as many users continued to exhibit interest for the forthcoming sequel, hoping that it would provide new insights into the story.

In general, although the pre-sold IP, Rowling, and audio-visual effects continued to be effectively attract Chinese consumers to *Fantastic Beasts 2*, there was a notable rise in complaints about the film's culturally specific narrative, which might negatively affect its box office performance. However, despite the rise in neutral comments regarding each factor of the film, the overall tolerant sentiment among Chinese consumers could potentially reflect the effectiveness of these factors as marketing assets in China.

### ***Fantastic Beasts 3***

Out of the 50 reviews for *Fantastic Beasts 3*, 32 users gave it a positive rating, 5 users gave it a neutral rating, and 13 users gave it a negative rating. It experienced a substantial drop in positive ratings compared to its two predecessors, with a higher number of users assigning a negative rating. In terms of the factors mentioned in their comments, as shown in Table 4, the "Plot" received an overwhelming number of negative comments, while the other factors received fewer positive comments in comparison to the previous two films.

The analysis of this film will concentrate on the negative reviews of Chinese viewers in order to investigate the reasons for its box office decline, as the factors that attracted Chinese consumers were basically the same in this series and have been previously addressed in the analysis of the previous two films.

Table 4: Most Frequently Mentioned Factors in Chinese Audience Reviews of *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022)

<b>Mentioned Factors and Their Frequency</b>				
<b>Category</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Plot</b>	7	2	20	29
<b>Characters in story</b>	15	4	5	24
<b>Pre-sold IP</b>	8	2	4	14
<b>Audio and visual effects</b>	8	2	2	12
<b>Stars</b>	8	1	1	10
<b>Cultural specificity</b>	1	1	0	2
<b>Genre</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Places in story</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Language</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Marketing</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Awards</b>	0	0	0	0

Sources: Maoyan and Taopiaopiao

The “Plot” was still the most discussed and dissatisfying factor, as most users perceived the narrative as lacking in logical coherence:

It’s completely a script problem. The screenwriter has no respect for the audience’s intelligence and feelings. The characters are broken. ... The timeline is confusing everywhere. The political struggle methods are childish. (Maoyan user)

It’s so tiring to watch. I really don’t know what these characters are busy with. Why are they fighting! It’s already the third film, and I still don’t know what the point of this series is. Who is the protagonist? (Maoyan user)

Additionally, while some users continued to express their fondness for the magical creatures, there were varying perspectives concerning “Characters in story”. Some users articulated discontent with the inconsistencies of character settings in the film compared to its two predecessors and the previous *Harry Potter* films. For example:

The character settings of Dumbledore and Grindelwald are completely broken. Where is Grindelwald’s prophetic ability reflected? (Maoyan user)

Meanwhile, some viewers expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited presence of magical creatures in the film:

The reason why *Fantastic Beasts* is called *Fantastic Beasts* is that the focus is on the creatures that attract fans, but there are not that many scenes with creatures in this film. (Maoyan user)

This may indicate that the film’s “Plot” and “Characters” can be difficult to engage with, disappointing many Chinese consumers. Unlike its two predecessors, Chinese consumers were not actively engaged in discussions about the film’s “Cultural specificity”, which indicates that the narrative’s incomprehensibility for viewers may not stem from the cultural specificity impacting non-fan consumers. The fans of *Harry Potter* also held an unfavourable assessment of the film’s narrative. As a prequel to the *Harry Potter* narrative, the primary reason why many Chinese viewers were interested by the *Fantastic Beasts* films could be

their desire to investigate additional stories and details within this magical world. However, this film apparently did not satisfy the expectations of most Chinese fans. These negative reviews of the film's plot and characters could potentially discourage potential Chinese consumers as well. Thus, the narrative's illogicality and ambiguity in *Fantastic Beasts 3* could be considered as a significant drawback that adversely affects its performance in China.

Moreover, although many users maintained their appreciation for the film's "Audio-visual effects" and Rowling's "Star" power, opinions diverged about the "Pre-sold IP", with some complaining that the film exploited the loyalty of *Harry Potter* fans:

I had high expectations and went to see it as soon as it came out. But after watching it, I am very disappointed. This is the worst of the eight *Harry Potter* films and the three *Fantastic Beasts* films. (Maoyan user)

It's really bad. ... Anyway, I won't support the *Fantastic Beasts* series in the future. What a waste of such good actors. (Maoyan user)

It appears that many Chinese consumers perceived the *Harry Potter* series' production quality as an important selling point for the *Fantastic Beasts* series, therefore resulting in higher expectations for the latter. However, their expectations were not met by the quality of this film. In the first two films, many viewers exhibited a level of tolerance and expected that the upcoming instalments in this series would fulfil their expected criteria. Yet, comments from Chinese viewers regarding *Fantastic Beasts 3* suggest a loss of patience and trust in the series.

Generally, the film's unsatisfactory plot and character construction were the primary issues that Chinese customers complained about. The deficiencies in production quality and storytelling ability in turn undermined the reputation of the pre-sold IP. Thus, the audio-visual effects, the devotion of the *Harry Potter* franchise, and the appeal of Rowling, which were previously effective marketing assets, appear to be insufficient to maintain the series' popularity and box office success in China, as both fans and ordinary viewers were disappointed with the story in *Fantastic Beasts 3*.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the findings of this research indicate that the primary attractions of this series for Chinese consumers could be attributed to the pre-sold IP (i.e. the *Harry Potter* series), the star power of J.K. Rowling, the fascinating audio-visual effects of the Wizarding World, and the presence of adorable magical creatures. Nevertheless, these factors could only be regarded as important marketing assets, as they are capable of attracting viewers but incapable of sustaining the long-term popularity of this franchise. The main aim of watching this series for many Chinese consumers appears to be not just to enjoy the special effects but also to explore more stories set in the Wizarding World before the events of the *Harry Potter* series. Yet, the culturally specific content, confusing narratives, and inconsistent character constructions in these *Fantastic Beasts* films not only alienated potential new customers but also disappointed the current fan base. Therefore, although these three films incorporated previously successful factors that enhanced global appeal and somewhat diminished cultural specificity, past successes cannot be replicated, primarily due to the compromised narrative logic and coherence of the films.

The particular significance of this study lies in the implementation of the mixed-methods case study design, which analyses both qualitative and quantitative evidence from the empirical Chinese audience, which addresses the gap in existing research on box office performance that primarily relies on quantitative methods. The findings of this research contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding the importance of storytelling abilities in influencing box office performance, a factor often overlooked in earlier research. However, due to the restricted personnel and financial resources of my research, I was the only coder, and the sample sizes were constrained. Future studies could improve reliability by utilising more coders and samples to develop a more in-depth comprehension of the factors influencing box office performance of films from a qualitative and case-study perspective.

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