

Analysis of Success Factors of Popular TV Series from the Perspective of Psychology

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Abstract: With the development and the prosperity of the entertainment and film industries, blockbuster TV series have become a global cultural phenomenon. These TV series not only attract audiences with their unique themes but also achieve emotional resonance with the audience by accurately grasping the psychological needs of the audience. Through case analysis, as well as psychological analysis and business analysis, this paper explores the key factors for the success of popular TV series, and puts forward suggestions on avoiding routines, strengthening logic, and using psychological investment. The results not only reveal the multifaceted role of psychology in the success of TV series but also provide a psychological perspective reference for film production, marketing and investment, which has important theoretical and practical significance.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the vigorous development of the entertainment and film and television industries, the popularity of series has become a global cultural phenomenon. From the nostalgia-filled horror movie *Stranger Things* to the social-reality debunking *Squid Game*, these popular TV shows have captured the attention of audiences around the world and caused a lot of discussion. However, the success of these shows does not depend solely on unique shooting methods and novel subject matter. The deep inner resonance and satisfaction of psychological needs they provide to the audience give the works more far-reaching artistic value. This phenomenon also shows the importance of psychology in film and television production and marketing.

Previous studies have shown that psychological elements can affect the audience's emotional response, mental state, identity psychology, and even affect the audience's willingness to share. For example, previous literature has explored the effects of mystery on the psychology of the audience, and how suspense and the unknown can engage the audience and elicit emotional resonance. Therefore, it is particularly important to explore how to make good use of audience psychology in film production and media marketing (Ikemi, 2005). Hence, this article will explore how popular TV series use psychological

principles to attract and retain viewers. Through case studies of two popular TV series, *Stranger Things* and *Squid Game*, we will delve into the psychological mechanisms of marketing these shows, from narrative style to emotional resonance and then to cultural promotion. This article will provide a psychological perspective and useful information and assistance for series production, marketing and investment. The research significance of this paper is to reveal the multifaceted role of psychology in the success of TV series, and provide useful advice for the film and television industry. For example, producers can create more popular content that resonates with audiences based on these psychological principles, or investors can make smarter decisions based on psychological analysis. This article will review previous research on the topic, exploring psychological and emotional responses and marketing mechanisms, including case studies, psychological and business insights, potential risks and conclusions.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This article will clarify the relationship between psychology and the success of movies and TV series and explore how popular TV series attract audiences through psychological means to achieve emotional

resonance. In this section, we will discuss the application of psychology to TV series, the success factors of hit TV series, and the key findings of previous studies. Research on film and television works and psychology can be traced back to the 20th century. Some scholars believe that film is essentially a reflection of mind. In this book, film is a psychological game in which the creation and viewing process are closely related to human cognition and emotion (Münsterberg, 1916). Research in the 21st century has shown that viewers' preferences for movie genres are closely linked to the brain's response to emotions. Film and television works can meet the psychological needs of different audiences through different narrative and emotional strategies (Zwicky et al., 2024). With the development of psychological theory, more and more studies have emerged on the psychological elements in film and television works on their impact to the audience's emotional response. Although a large number of studies have explored the application of psychology to film and television dramas, most research samples mainly focus on Western films and television dramas, with relatively few studies on Asian dramas. By analyzing *Stranger Things* and *Squid Games*, this paper will further explore the role of cultural context and social communication in the success of the series, filling in the gaps of existing research.

3 CASE ANALYSIS

3.1 Squid Game

Squid Game is a South Korean television series produced by Netflix and released in 2021. The series tells the story of hundreds of helpless people who are invited by a mysterious organization to participate in a survival game to verify human nature in order to seek a chance to live and finally get the prize money. The theme of the game is a traditional Korean children's game, including "Red Light, Green Light" and "dalgona candy challenged". The series reflects many real social issues, such as the gap between the rich and the poor, social inequality, and the problem between humanity and survival. The game in the series is to live or to die. It evoked the fear of survival from the audience and generated their emotional resonance greatly. The series grasped wide attention on social media platforms. Besides, the traditional Korean cultural elements in the series helped their promotion extensively. Within its first month of release, the series achieved an impressive 111 million

views. It became one of the most popular shows in Netflix history.

3.2 Stranger Things

Stranger Things is an American science fiction thriller television series produced by NETFLIX that aired in the United States in 2016. Set in an American small town in the '80s, the series followed a group of children who discovered secret government experiments and paranormal phenomena while searching for their missing friends. The series quickly became a global hit after its broadcast, attracting a large audience. By 2021, *Stranger Things* has been watched by more than 196 million viewers on Netflix. The story is combined with science fiction elements, and through the psychological experience of nostalgia and suspense and fear, the discussion of friendship, courage and growth has aroused the emotional resonance of the audience. A case study of *Stranger Things* shows that psychological elements play a key role in the show's success. In addition, the lines and portrayal of the characters sparked a huge discussion on social media. It brought huge traffic and popularity to the show. By 2024, the hashtag #strangerthings on TikTok had been viewed 135.3 billion times.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 Survival Fear and Psychological Resonance

For film and TV programs, raising the audience's emotional resonance is the key to their success. Murray Smith once pointed out that the appeal of character is multifaceted, extending beyond mere appearance or behavior. It also relates to the character's ability to evoke emotional resonance with the audience through both narrative and visual storytelling techniques. Furthermore, Resonance is not only an emotional response but also involves the audience's identification with the characters and stories. It will bring the audience into the programs imagining themselves to be or to be with the characters. Positive emotional resonance will better the experience of watching, thus it will enhance the film's recognition. However, how does it achieve social resonance? The answer is obvious - clever plot design. The plot of film and television work is not only the framework of the story, but also the bridge to establish emotional communication with the audience (Smith, 2022). In "*Squid Game*", the creator carefully designed the plot, an in-depth discussion of

the social reality of the common social problem - survival fear, to arouse the audience's resonance. In The book *The Horror Film: An Introduction*, it is proposed that when the audience watches horror works, fear, anxiety and other emotions will be aroused, so that the audience will associate the fear emotions in the film with their own experiences (Worland, 2024). For example, in the "dalgona candy challenged", some people get a simple and easy round sugar cake, while some people get an umbrella pattern that will be broken if they are not careful, which implies the unequal distribution of resources in today's society. The main character enters the game in order to win money to pay his mother's medical bills. However, in the course of the game, the protagonist gradually realizes that the class solidification of society and the gap between the rich and the poor cannot be easily changed through individual power. Although the main character eventually wins the game, the main character's mother dies during the game, which exposes the main character to social injustice. In addition, another character in the drama is a graduate of an elite university who takes part in the game because he has incurred huge debts due to embezzlement of public funds. Ultimately, his story reflects that ordinary people, even if they have a high degree, cannot change their origins and escape the difficulties brought by social class. The contestants in the drama gamble their lives for the huge prize money, which deeply reflects the cruel competition and inability and struggle of the people at the bottom in the face of the miserable life. The stories of these characters reflect the common problems in today's society, allowing the audience to see their own shadows in them, thus triggering strong emotional resonance and deep thinking. This kind of social resonance not only enhances the influence of work but also promotes people's attention and reflection on real social problems.

4.2 Narrative Style and Cultural Background of Nostalgia

Deep exploration of Nostalgia and cultural background is the key to the popularity of *Stranger Things*. The classic pop culture elements of the 1980s gave the retro visual style which evoked the memory of childhood. The scream was full of Nostalgia. In terms of props, the show makes extensive use of retro costumes, props and set designs, such as tape players, retro video game consoles and other iconic items of the 1980s. In addition, some of the plot settings of the show pay homage to classics such as *E.T.*, *Stand By*

Me, and the *Goonies*, which are culturally resonant with the audience. Previous research has shown that nostalgia as a highly social emotion enhances an individual's sense of social connection with others. For example, by recalling past experiences, nostalgia can make people feel the continuity and meaning of life and inspire individual optimism and positive actions towards the future (Juhl & Biskas, 2023). This emotional resonance not only helps the audience to establish a sense of belonging to youth, family, or a particular era, but also to understand and strengthen themselves through the experiences of the characters.

Second, it is about the unique plot setting of the drama -- an upside-down world which is a parallel universe full of unknown and uncertainty. Butler uses this setting as a metaphor referring to the people's fear during contemporary life in the face of rapid changes of technology, environment and society. He especially focused on the time when the story is set in the 1980s, when the United States was in the midst of the Cold War and the whole society is full of anxiety and fear. *Stranger Things* involved the audience in nostalgia for the 1980s first. The worry and fear of that time were correspondingly portrayed (Butler, 2017). In addition, although the core of the series is a sci-fi horror story, each character is given distinct personality characteristics and storylines. Multiple storylines, such as friendship, youth, growth, and family relationships, give depth to the entire series.

4.3 Audience Immersive Experience

Experiential marketing is a marketing strategy that creates positive emotions, deep feelings and memories for consumers by creating interactive experiences with brand products in the real world. This experience can include product trials, interactive activities, and environmental creation (Gunawan, 2022). Netflix successfully promoted *Stranger Things* through IP derivative and scene marketing through experiential marketing. For example, Netflix designed a creative billboard for the Hawkins Power element of the show. Audiences can directly call and chat with the characters in the show. In addition, the publicity team has also carried out some themed exhibitions around the world. They've got all these classic props and iconic scenes from the show on display, and there are interactive areas where you can really dive into the world of *Stranger Things*. As nostalgia culture becomes more popular, it has developed into a cultural industry. Hassler Forest pointed out that the success of this nostalgia strategy lies in its ability to combine the emotional needs of users with commercial interests. By taking advantage

of the audience's nostalgia, it attracts a wider audience and stimulates their consumption behavior (Hassler-Forest, 2020). *Stranger Things* has also spawned a lot of co-branding. *Stranger Things* in recent years with a number of brands and areas of co-branding derived of a lot of peripheral products, such as the joint launch of retro sneakers with Nike, and cooperation with LEGO brand reversible design Lego sets.

4.4 Business Operation and Communication

The reason why *Squid Game* quickly became a global hot topic after its launch is inseparable from the key role played by its viral communication mechanism in the publicity of the play, especially the discussion and sharing on social media, which promoted the global influence of the play (Ahmed et al., 2022). Through the "echo chamber effect", the discussion and sharing of influential figures on social media attracted the attention of a large number of users with the same views, further expanding the influence of the series (Cinelli et al., 2021). According to TikTok data, challenges and imitation videos related to "*Squid Game*" are popular, such as "dalgona candy challenged" and related topics have been played more than 2.47 billion times. MrBeast, an American YouTuber, has launched a live-action version of the *Squid Game* of the same name, which recreates the scenes and rules of the show, and attracts participants from around the world with a huge bonus. The video has been viewed 760 million times and has become a global social media hotspot. What is more, the reason for its popularity is also attributable to Netflix's business strategy of releasing all the episodes at once, encouraging users to continue to watch the series. This behavior not only increases the viewing time of users but also enables them to get feedback and opinions quickly from the audience, and thus better promote the work.

4.5 Psychological Investment Mechanism

In recent years, with the popularity of drama series, its unique production mode and market performance attracted a large amount of capital influx. The time for production of these shows is considerably short. For example, the first season of *Squid Game* took only five months to produce. Some other short series can be completed within 1-2 weeks. On the one hand, it can be brought to the market quickly and meet the immediate needs of the audience. On the other hand, the cost of production is much lower than other films

or TV shows. For instance, the total production cost of the first season of the *Squid Game* was \$21.4 million and the cost of a single episode was \$2.4 million. The high return on investment in short series attracts a lot of capital and talents. The short series market gradually forms the Matthew effect which promotes the output of high-quality series and stabilizes the market position of series.

5 SUGGESTIONS

5.1 Routinization

Over-reliance on violent or thriller elements risks audience psychological fatigue and desensitization. Creators should counter homogenization through innovative approaches: introducing novel themes, adopting experimental narratives (e.g., interactive storytelling), and addressing pressing social issues. Pre-release evaluations must combine psychological surveys with audience feedback mechanisms to measure engagement thresholds and ensure content balances creativity with mental health considerations.

5.2 Logic Vulnerability and Audience Trust

The creator should review the logic of the script during the writing stage to ensure that the plot is reasonable and new. In some subjects, such as medical astronomy, etc., professional teams can be hired to review. In addition, opinions can be collected by questionnaires and interviews among some audience members. Avoid logical loopholes which can reduce the trust of the audience. By integrating interdisciplinary expertise and empirical data, scriptwriters can enhance narrative credibility and emotional resonance, fostering deeper audience immersion.

5.3 Technical Means and Marketing Methods

Leveraging advanced visual effects and immersive soundscapes, creators can design interactive experiences like real-time polls or branching narratives, fostering deeper audience engagement. Social media platforms amplify organic reach through viral challenges, fan art campaigns, and UGC initiatives, while data analytics track hashtag trends to optimize promotional strategies. Cross-media extensions—such as companion podcasts or AR

filters-extend narrative worlds, encouraging sustained fan interaction and community-driven growth.

5.4 Investment in the Direction in Psychology

Audience psychological analysis—using personality typologies and emotion recognition algorithms—uncovers latent preferences through neuroimaging and psychometric modeling. By quantifying engagement via GSR and eye-tracking, creators map cognitive responses to narrative elements. Investors leverage these insights through predictive analytics integrating psychological principles and market trends, using ML models to forecast ROI based on audience risk tolerance. This interdisciplinary approach aligns creative vision with audience needs, minimizing financial uncertainty through data-driven decisions.

6 CONCLUSION

This article explores the key role of psychology in the success of TV series by analyzing hit shows such as *Stranger Things* and *Squid Games*. The study found that these episodes successfully attracted the audience and achieved widespread dissemination through the path of suspense setting, emotional resonance and social communication. For example, *Squid Game* reflects the social reality through the survival game setting, arousing the audience's resonance to social issues; *Stranger Things*, on the other hand, use nostalgia and cultural fear to evoke emotional identification. In addition, experiential marketing and the spread of social media further expanded the impact of the series.

Looking forward to the future, with the continuous changes in the psychological needs of the audience, such as the emergence of internal anxiety, social pressure and other problems, creators of series need to pay more attention to these psychological changes, explore new themes, and maintain the innovation and attractiveness of the series. At the same time, it is suggested the producers of series should pay more attention to the application of psychological factors and enhance the artistic value and market competitiveness of the works by enhancing the emotional resonance of the audience. Investors should also pay attention to psychological analysis and use it to predict the market performance of the drama to make more informed investment decisions. The research results of this paper not only

reveal the multifaceted role of psychology in the success of TV series but also provide a psychological perspective reference for film production, marketing and investment, which has important theoretical and practical significance.

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