

A comparative study of the BFL Player and Amazon Prime Video: The new streaming distribution platforms for low-budget films

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Abstract. The global film market has long focused on more commercially viable films, which has kept many unknown or low-budget films out of the schedule. Films are shown in a variety of channels, including DVD, Pay-TV and online video as well as cinemas. With the development of Internet and streaming services, there are many famous commercial Internet publishing platforms, BFI Player and Amazon Prime Video are two examples, and they are now developing online platforms for low budget films, which gives some excellent low budget films a chance to be released. This essay makes a comparative study of the BFL player and Amazon Video, analyzes how these two new streaming media distribution platforms of low-budget films help them become better from the aspects of resources, timeliness, price and user experience.

Keywords: BFL Player, Amazon Prime Video, film market, low-budget films.

1. Introduction

The global film market has been impacted by Hollywood blockbusters for a long time. Due to the traditional cinema distributors need to release the films with the most commercial value, a great number of unknown or low-budget films cannot rank on the schedules. Film exhibition has multiple channels, except cinema, including DVDs, pay TV and online video. Alongside, the development the Internet and streaming media services, there are great amount of famous commercial Internet publishing platforms, such as MUBI, Netflix and Blinkbox [1]. In order to solve the plight of the development of British domestic films, the British Film Institute (BFI) has introduced a public benefits online video on demand platform: the BFI Player, in 2013. The service aims to promote the development of British films [2]. Amazon Prime Video is a new developing commercial online video platform on demand service that is developed, owned and operated by Amazon. It offers television shows and films for rental or purchase [3]. Both platforms are now developing online platforms for low-budget films, who gives some excellent low-budget films an opportunity to be released.

In this essay, these two online platforms are chosen to conduct a comparative study about the online distribution of low-budget films. Firstly, the predicaments of low-budget films will be analyzed. Meanwhile, how these two platforms help such films to exhibit themselves will be discussed through the analysis of resources, timeliness, price and user experience.

2. The Predicaments of Low-Budget Films

Traditional cinema has a natural advantage for the audience and for the producers. The visual impact, realistic sound, and other viewing effects that theatre brings to audiences surpass other viewing methods. There are fixed film audiences for cinemas, which may guarantee the stability of the box office [2]. Additionally, the follow-up consumer motivation of films is sufficient. Thus, high-cost entertainment products should be placed in media with stronger transmissibility and higher consumption. This also makes that the high-budget film could recover costs in this short time [4].

However, the high distribution and exhibition costs in cinemas mean that cinemas have to ensure the maximum benefit by releasing the most commercial films and adjusting the schedule of the films. Film scheduling is an important factor that affects box offices; therefore, many low-budget films are difficult to release in theatres due to lack of publicity and influence.

According to a research study from the BFI, from 2003 to 2011, The output of British films was 1546, but only 388 films were released in the cinema, with only 25% of the release rate [5]. British domestic films have low box office, which figures result in the film companies being reluctant to give support to these risky investments. As a result, the overall output of British domestic films has declined, and the low or medium-budget films dominate [6]. Although a few years ago, some high level low-budget films obtained high box office figures, this mode of producing low-budget films is no longer successful now. Compared to 2014, the box office figures of low-budget films had dropped by 19% in 2015 [7].

In order to help the low-budget films to succeed in a highly competitive market, some producers have tried to shorten the window period of the theatre model for its own films [8]. The aim is to speed up the exhibition of films from the theatre to the online video platform; it has reduced the theatres' earnings. Most of the mainstream cinemas have rejected this plan and have not released these films; it cuts off the cinemas' revenue potential for these two films [7].

3. Analysis Of New Streaming Distibution For Low-Budget Films

3.1. Introduction of BFL Player and Amazon Prime Video

Streaming media is multimedia that is constantly received by, and presented to, an end-user whilst being delivered by a provider. A client end-user can use their media player to begin to play the data file (such as a digital file of a film) before the entire file has been transmitted [9]. With the popularization and development of the internet and streaming media, many young audiences would enjoy to watch films on their smart phones or iPods, in addition to some blockbusters. Development of streaming media services promotes technological development of online videos and relative players [10]. As two cases analyzed in this essay, the BFI player is a British public benefits online video platform and Amazon Prime Video is a North American commercial online video platform.

3.2. Comparative study of the BFL Player and Amazon Prime Video

In this section, how the mentioned two platforms help low-budget films to exhibit themselves will be discussed and analyzed through the resources, timeliness, price and user experience.

3.2.1 Diversity of resources

For an online video platform, the diversity of resources is an important factor in attracting viewers. The main function of the BFI is to help to promote the development of British films. At present, the resources of the BFI player are mainly based on British domestic films. Different from other commercial online platforms that mainly provide commercial films that come from Hollywood, the resources of the BFI player are quite niche. The player has a certain number of exclusive rights for some films. Currently, the BFI player has more than 1800 film resources, most of these are British domestic films and some classical films and independent films. The films in the BFI player are mostly from the BFI's national archive, since some of these films are difficult to find in other commercial online platforms, this is a strong competitive advantage.

As for Amazon Prime Video, they have enough funding for its unique resources; it could attract huge audiences. Since 2015, Amazon has started buying independent films and producing films by itself. Amazon establish Amazon Studios for original film projects and it plans to produce 12 unique original films each year [11]. Due to its financially sound nature, the anti-risk capability of Amazon gives it an advantage over several traditional film companies. On the other hand, it does not have the ability to develop larger projects, including the construction of the whole project and how to use professional directors and producers. Therefore, Amazon has tilted more resources towards independent, niche, and overseas films in its early stages.

3.2.2 Timeliness of the release

The timeliness of the film's release on the Internet video platform is also important [12]. The film exhibition of online platforms is usually after the cinematic release whilst some of the films on the BFI player are synchronized with the cinematic release. Amazon uses another method for their film exhibitions [7], which is "cinema first, after online". Amazon will provide online versions after films have been released in cinemas for four to eight weeks and its members can use Prime Video to watch the new films. This greatly reduced the period that traditional films have to wait, nearly 90 days, before being released online. Additionally, this method was not resisted by traditional cinema. Both the BFI player and Amazon Prime Video have their own successful release methods; this could create more audience interest in viewing films online.

3.2.3 Huge price advantage

Lower subscription price will also lead to competitive advantage. The main business model of the BFI player is Digital Transaction and supplemented by Subscription Model. Audiences must watch domestic films on Digital Transaction; the lease price is from 0.99 to 3.99 British Pounds and the buying expense is from 4.99 to 15.99 British Pounds. In the Subscription Model, the monthly price only costs 4.99 British Pounds, but it only has 100 films available for audiences in addition to several free films to attract audiences. Amazon Prime Video mainly uses the Subscription Model and supplemented by Digital Transaction. By becoming an Amazon Prime member for \$79 per year, a customer can enjoy free shipping services. Most importantly, its members can enjoy unlimited streaming video rights through Prime Video. The cost of the monthly Prime member subscription, at \$10.99 a month. For those members who do not need the free delivery and free Prime music services, it only costs users \$8.99 dollars a month. The price of the BFI player is reasonable and relatively high, with the aim of ensuring the recycling of British domestic films [13]. Amazon's price has a huge advantage in its competition with other online platforms.

3.2.4 High-quality viewing experience

Most audiences require a high-quality viewing experience when choosing their online video platform. According to a survey, more than 80% people think that the fluency and clarity of a film's screenplay is one of the important factors when choosing an Internet video platform [14]. In order to ensure the fluency of playback, the BFI player continues to innovate its Internet transmission to avoid low speeds. In the perspective of personalised service, although there is a daily-recommended film on the homepage of the BFI player, this does not meet the needs of all audiences [15]. The BFI player, in its primary development with its main source of funds coming from the government, is not in a practical position to purchase a very expensive data analysis and collection system. The personalised recommendation engines of Amazon Prime Video did very well in this aspect for their smart video recommendations, which are designed to give customers the best viewing experiences [16]. Amazon provides a personalised programme Video Finder and users can easily find what they enjoy. In addition, Amazon also provides viewing recommendations based on users' viewing histories to determine the types of programmes that users might prefer. Thus, Amazon Prime has a smoother user experience. According to market research, Amazon has become the third largest video service platform in North America, with 31% of the market share [7].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as the new developing online platforms, BFI player and Amazon Prime Video give an opportunity for low-budget film exhibition. With low social visibility and low financial support, the BFI player cannot help British films to gain a wide audience. Audiences are still attracted to commercial online video platforms, which provide commercial films. Therefore, these channels cannot effectively solve the dilemma of British domestic film. However, it is a great attempt for low-budget films, forcing them to promote their marketing to attract more users. Amazon Company operates Amazon Prime Video; it has large funds to invest and exploit new film projects. Some of its

successful films can be seen, but its successes mainly rely on its mass capital investment. Both platforms need to promote and complete themselves in an intensely competitive market.

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