

A Tale of Two Decades: International Movie Co-Productions in the U.S. Market

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Abstract

Due to globalization and industry dynamics, transnational cinema became more pronounced after the 1980s. International co-productions are common, as films are complex products requiring financial resources, advanced technology, and talent. This study examines international co-productions that secured U.S. theatrical release between 2000 and 2019, identifying common patterns and trends. The results indicate that adding more partners does not guarantee higher financial resources. Co-productions that achieve U.S. distribution frequently involve country pairs such as U.S.–UK, U.S.–France, and France–Belgium. Genre analysis shows that drama, comedy, action, romance, and crime are the most frequent categories among these films. At the continental level, North America dominates action, adventure, and sci-fi; Europe leads in documentary, war, and history, while Asia is active in animation and sci-fi in international co-productions.

Introduction

Movies as cultural products are an important part of global trade and play a significant role in cultural exchange. As they are complex products, they draw on multiple art forms and require advanced technologies, knowledge, and financial resources. Therefore, movies require a high level of collaboration. International collaboration in the movie industry is not a new phenomenon. For example, Western spaghetti films in the 1960s were mainly Italian–Spanish co-productions. Similarly, iconic movies such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *La Dolce Vita*, and *Doctor Zhivago* were also international co-productions. Due to advances in technology, producers can now access skills, technology, and financial resources from international markets more easily.

Movies have symbolic and cultural value. Although they may not always be transformative, movies carry and reflect cultural values and philosophies.¹

With their global reach and narrative power, movies not only convey cultural values but also influence public opinion. Therefore, they are an integral part of cultural policies and many countries provide incentives and establish regulations to support their national cinema such as quotas, subsidies, and tax benefits to mitigate the homogenizing impact of globalization.²

One of the challenges regarding movies is identifying or classifying their country of origin. Although national cinema was a dominant concept before the 1980s, the term *transnational* has risen due to globalization and evolving industry dynamics.³ As globalization increased, international collaborations and co-productions blurred the boundaries of national cinema.⁴ Moreover, the incentives of economic and trade blocs, along with the financial needs of producers from developing nations, have fostered international collaborations in the global movie industry.⁴ In a similar vein, it has become difficult to determine the nationality of a film, as its financiers, shooting locations, subject matter, language, and the director's nationality may all differ.⁴ This issue has become increasingly significant in the contemporary globalized film industry, where transnational collaborations are more common than in the past.

The Dynamics of International Co-Productions

Producers can gain several benefits from international collaborations. Movie production is a risky business that requires significant investment. As movies are experiential products, it is difficult to predict their success before release. Therefore, having partners from other international markets helps mitigate the financial risks associated with production. In addition, producers can access greater financial resources through these partnerships. Producers from developing countries in particular benefit from the financial incentives available in their co-producers' host countries. For example, the European Union supports external co-producers from African countries due to the lack of public funding in those nations.⁵

Access to larger budgets enables filmmakers to improve production quality and secure well-known directors and cast members, thereby raising a film's profile. Beyond financing, technology also plays a central role in the movie production process, from pre-production to post-production. Collaborating with producers from established film industries allows those from developing countries to access advanced technological tools required to create high-quality films.

Beyond production benefits, international collaborations also facilitate access to global markets. Since many governments impose quotas on foreign films, working with international partners helps reduce entry barriers. The theatrical release of a foreign film is often subject to such quotas, but bilateral

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agreements between countries can eliminate these restrictions on release and screen time. For example, France has 65 bilateral co-production agreements.⁶ Thus, co-productions help producers overcome institutional barriers to international market entry in the film industry.⁷ Similarly, firms can benefit from the distribution networks of their co-producers and access larger audiences via international co-production.

Movies naturally carry cultural elements, and their narratives are subject to cultural discounting. Collaborating with international markets enables producers to create films that better align with the tastes and understanding of audiences across different regions. Shared cultural input helps make movies more relatable to viewers from various international markets. Furthermore, blending storytelling styles from different international co-producers can reduce the sense of foreignness for audiences in the host markets.

On the other hand, collaborating with co-producers from international markets carries certain risks. Due to institutional differences, international co-productions must navigate diverse laws and regulations, labor standards, intellectual property rights, and complex jurisdictional issues. Moreover, coordinating the production process can be costly and time-consuming. Similarly, cultural and linguistic differences may lead to conflicts among co-producers, potentially reducing the efficiency of the process. Although such differences can pose challenges, empirical findings indicate that the benefits of working with culturally distant partners outweigh communication and cultural difficulties, ultimately increasing global box office revenue.⁸ Beyond legal hurdles, costs, and cultural conflicts, international co-productions face creative compromises, unequal power relations, disputes over profits, bureaucratic barriers to meeting treaty requirements, and the risk of producing films that lack cultural resonance.

The movie industry is rich in project-based partnerships.⁹ A high level of creativity and innovation is necessary in the product development process of movies.^{8,10,11} Although international collaboration is common in the movie industry, research devoted to this topic remains limited. Few studies examine the trends and factors that lead to successful collaborations. In their study on international collaborations, Yan and Yu found that partnering with producers from other countries contributes positively to performance due to institutional advantages such as increased screen time.⁷ Moreover, the authors found that the positive effect of co-production is more pronounced in culturally sensitive genres such as comedy. Similarly, it has been shown that collaborating with producers from culturally distant markets increases global box office performance.⁸ Furthermore, they showed that the positive impact of collaborating with culturally distant partners is contingent on the

cultural diversity of co-producers' home countries. Overall, studies on co-production and cultural trade are still limited.⁷ Therefore, this study seeks to fill a significant gap in the literature by examining collaboration trends and dynamics in the movie industry.

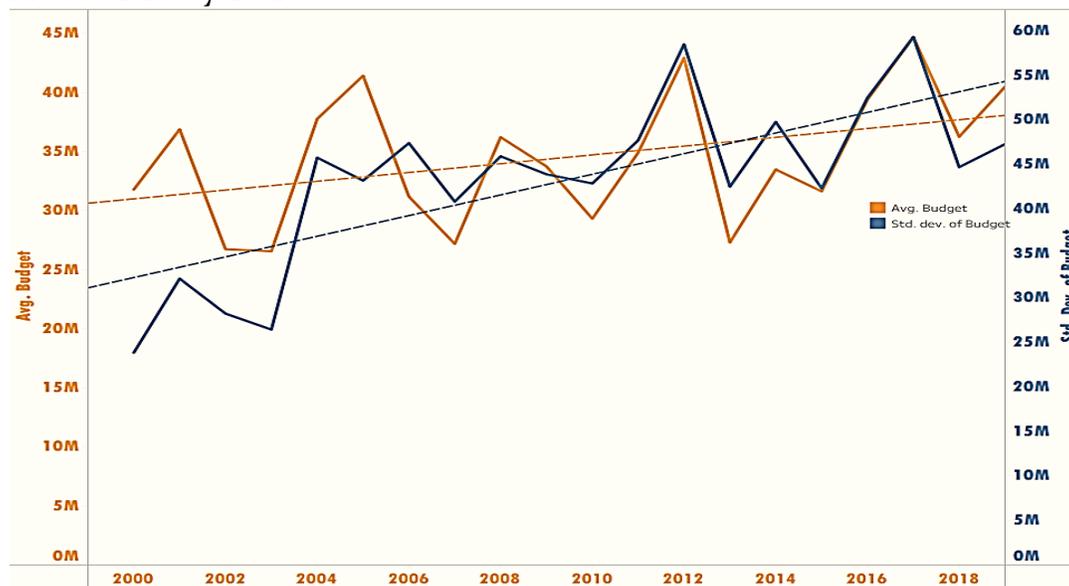
Dataset

Trends in international co-productions in the U.S. over two decades were analyzed using movies distributed in U.S. theaters between 2000 and 2019. The top 30 countries were identified based on their global box office revenues. To avoid home-country bias, the U.S. was excluded from the list. The top 20 producers from each country were selected according to their CompanyMeter scores in the IMDbPro database. From the productions of these producers, movies that did not secure theatrical distribution in the U.S. and those produced by partners from the same country were excluded. The final dataset contains 1,844 movies.

Adding Partners Doesn't Secure More Financial Resources

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in the average budgets of international co-productions, along with their standard deviations.

Figure 1. Average Budget and Standard Deviation in International Co-Productions by Year

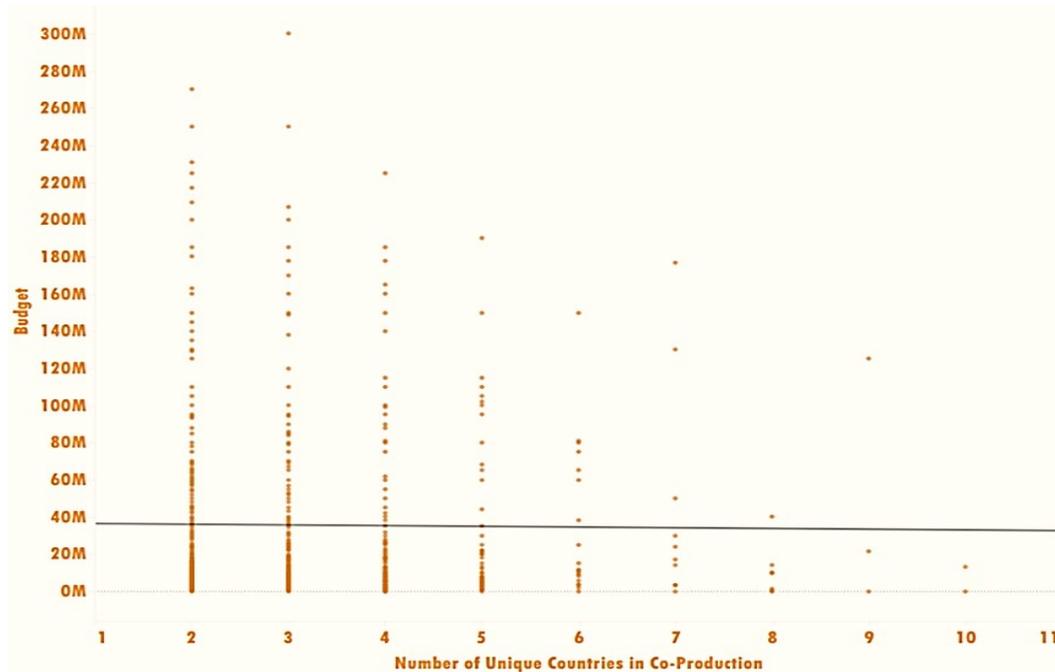


One of the main motivations for international cooperation is access to financial resources to improve the quality of movies. Between 2000 and 2019, the budgets of international co-productions showed an upward trend.

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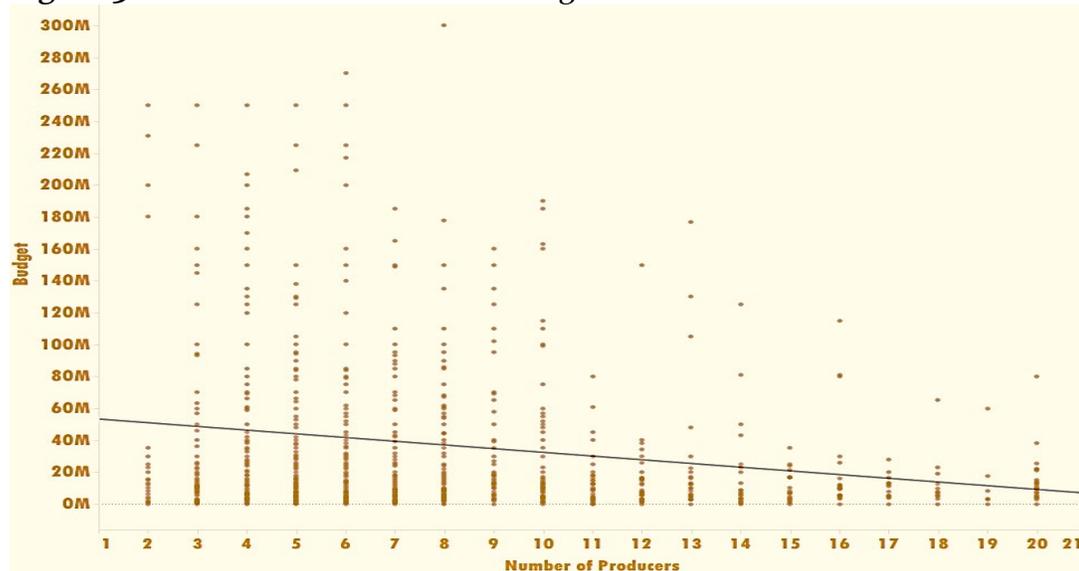
However, the analysis of the number of unique countries represented in these partnerships (counting each country only once, regardless of how many producers come from it) indicates no positive association with the budgets of international co-productions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of Unique Partner Countries and Budgets of International Co-Productions



Likewise, when considering the total number of producers involved, the results suggest that adding more partners does not necessarily increase average budgets. In fact, average budgets tend to decline in co-productions that involve an excessively large number of producers (see Figure 3). Accordingly, adding more partners from diverse countries or increasing the number of partners might not guarantee higher levels of financial resources. Moreover, increasing the total number of producers beyond a certain point may dilute the financial resources due to opportunistic behavior from the partners. Similarly, partners might have other motives such as distribution advantages or access to more markets.

Figure 3. Number of Producers and Budgets of International Co-Productions

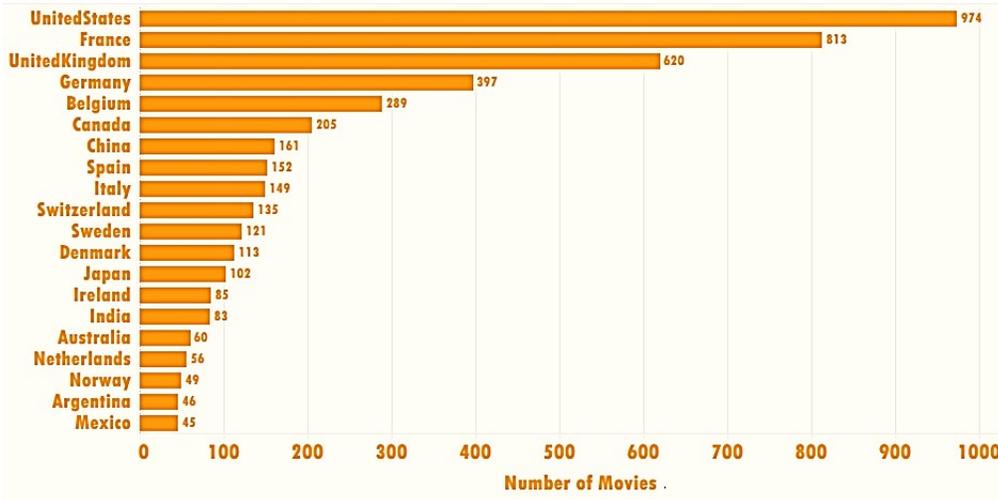


Who Gets into the U.S. Market?

In co-productions launched in the U.S., French producers account for the largest number of international co-productions between 2000 and 2019. The U.S. has the highest overall representation, appearing in 974 co-productions, followed by France with 813. The next most represented countries are the U.K. (620 co-productions), Germany (397 co-productions), and Belgium (289 co-productions). Figure 4 presents the top 20 countries by their participation in international co-productions launched in the U.S., and Figure 5 shows the top 10 country pairs and the most common partners of U.S., U.K., and French producers in their international co-productions. Although co-production among neighboring countries is common, Canada and Mexico are not among the top five in terms of American producers' partners. Canada appears in 137 such co-productions, while Mexico appears in 26. When considering neighboring partnerships, 65% of Canada's international co-productions include at least one U.S. partner, while 54% of Mexico's international collaborations include partners from the U.S.

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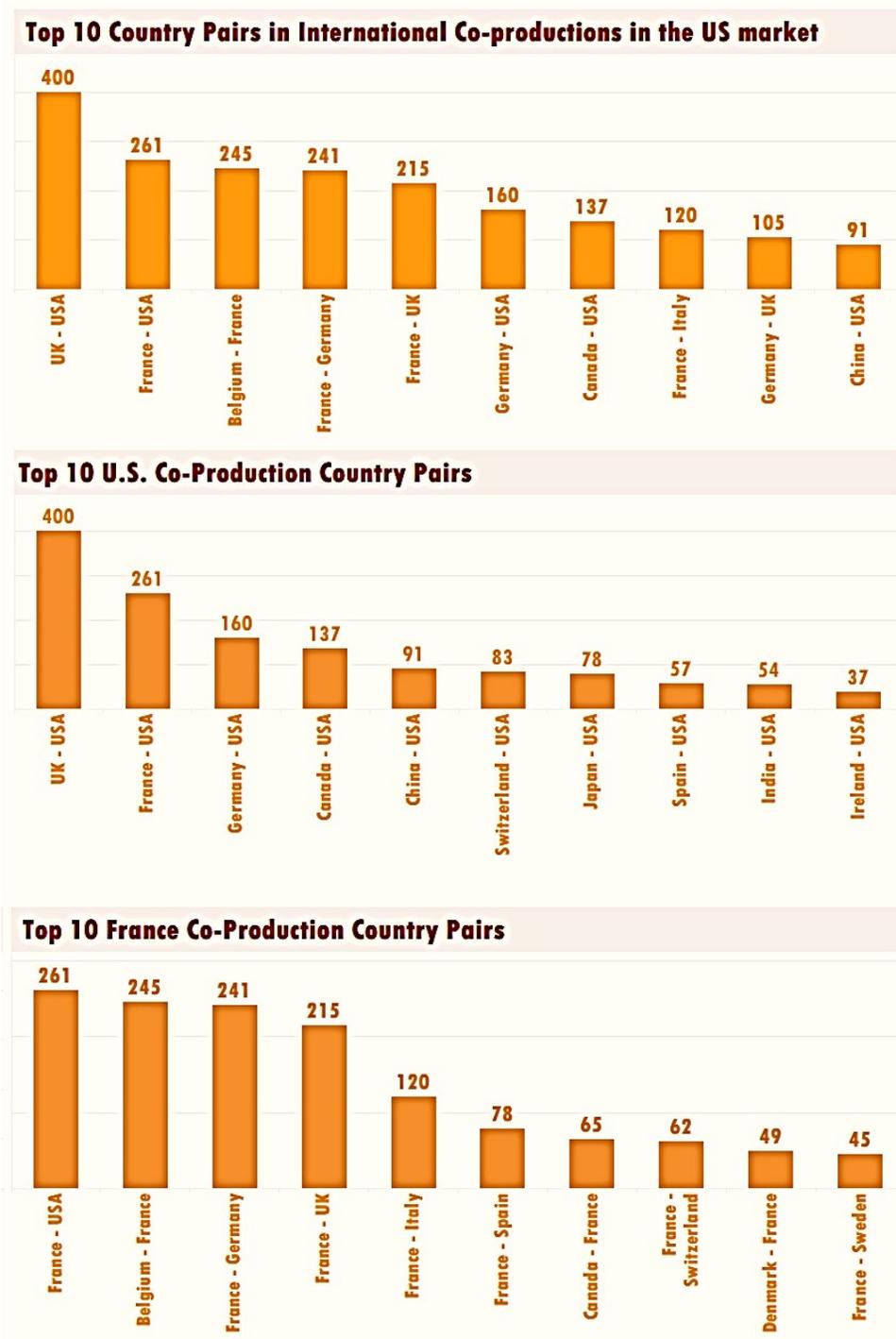
Figure 4. Top 20 Countries by Participation in International Co-Productions Distributed in the U.S.



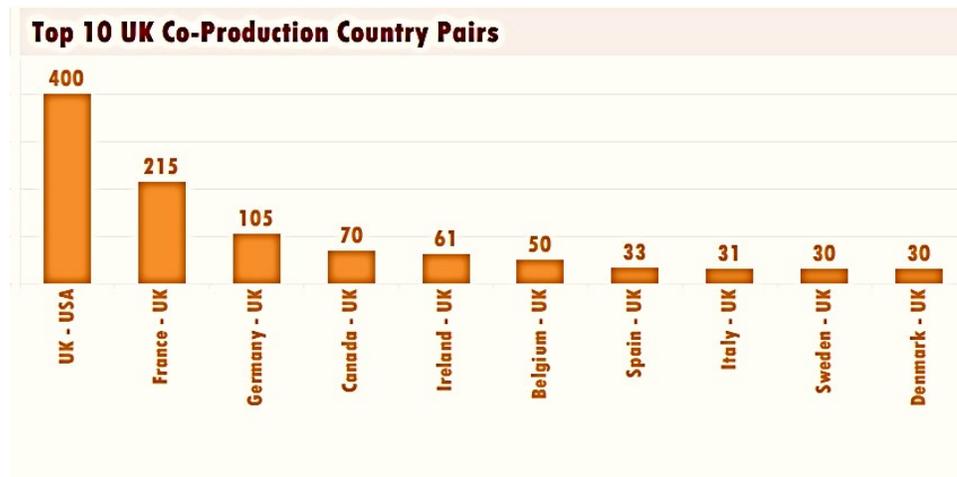
The analyses also indicate a strong pattern of recurring country pairs. The most frequent collaboration is between the U.S. and the U. K. (400 co-productions), and U.S.–France pairings are likewise common (261). Collaboration between Belgium and France is also notable when focusing on international productions launched in the U.S.. They appear together in 245 co-productions over the two decades, followed by Germany–U.S. (160 co-productions).

Considering trends in international collaboration, there is a substantial increase in Belgium–France co-productions among titles launched in the U.S.. While these countries were represented in 54 co-productions in the first decade (2000–2009), they produced 191 movies together in the second decade (2010–2019). France’s Tax Rebate for International Production (TRIP), introduced in 2009, made France a cost-effective destination for co-productions and gave French co-producers a clear financing advantage. Similarly, geographical and cultural proximity and well-established post-production services in Belgium may also have contributed to this rise.

Figure 5. Top 10 Country Pairs

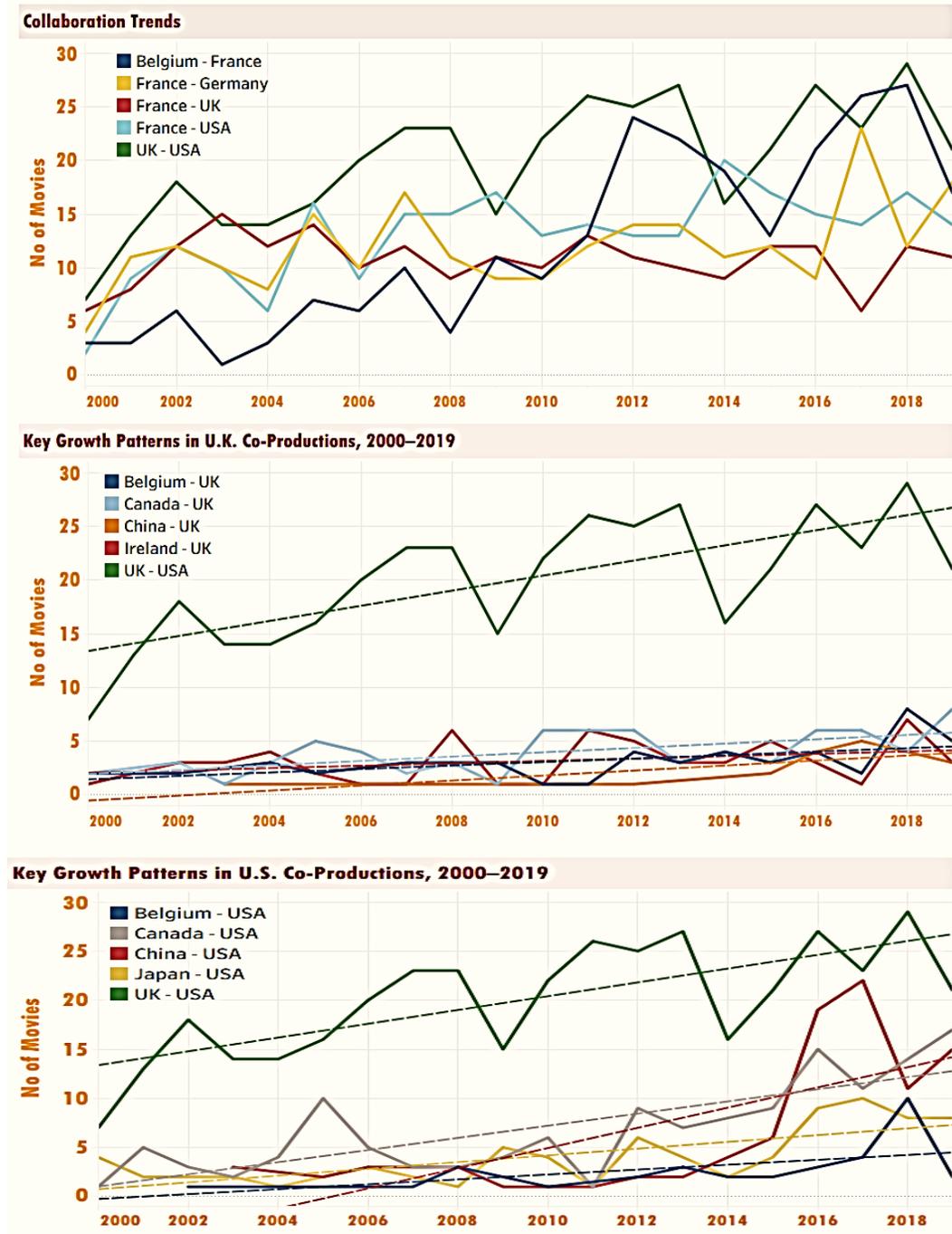


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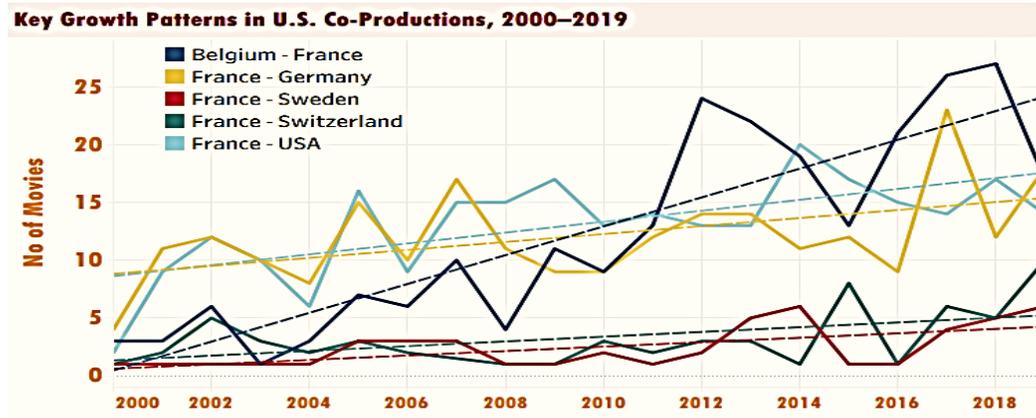


Comparing the two decades, U.S. collaborations increased markedly with China (+558.33%), India (+400.00%), Japan (+154.55%), and Spain (+207.14%). Likewise, U.S.-U.K co-productions grew from 163 in the first decade to 237 in the second (+45.40%). Over the 20-year period from 2000 to 2019, Belgium, Canada, China, Japan, and the U.K. show the steepest positive trends in American co-productions. For the U. K.-Canada partnership, co-productions rose from 24 to 46 (+91.67%). By contrast, the U.K.'s collaborations with major European industries did not follow the same upward trend. U.K.-France, U.K.-Germany, and U.K.-Italy shifted from 109, 62, and 23 respectively in the first decade to 106 (-2.75%), 43 (-30.65%), and 8 (-65.22%) in the second. Overall, the U.K.'s EU co-production volume held steady (301 in the first decade; 331 in the second, +9.97%). Non-EU co-productions, however, surged from 257 to 423 (+64.59%). Between 2000 and 2019, Belgium, Canada, China, Ireland, and the U.S. recorded the sharpest upward trends in British co-productions, following a pattern similar to the U.S. in terms of partner selection. Figure 6 shows the changes in the number of co-productions over the years for the top three country pairs.

Figure 6. Collaboration Trends



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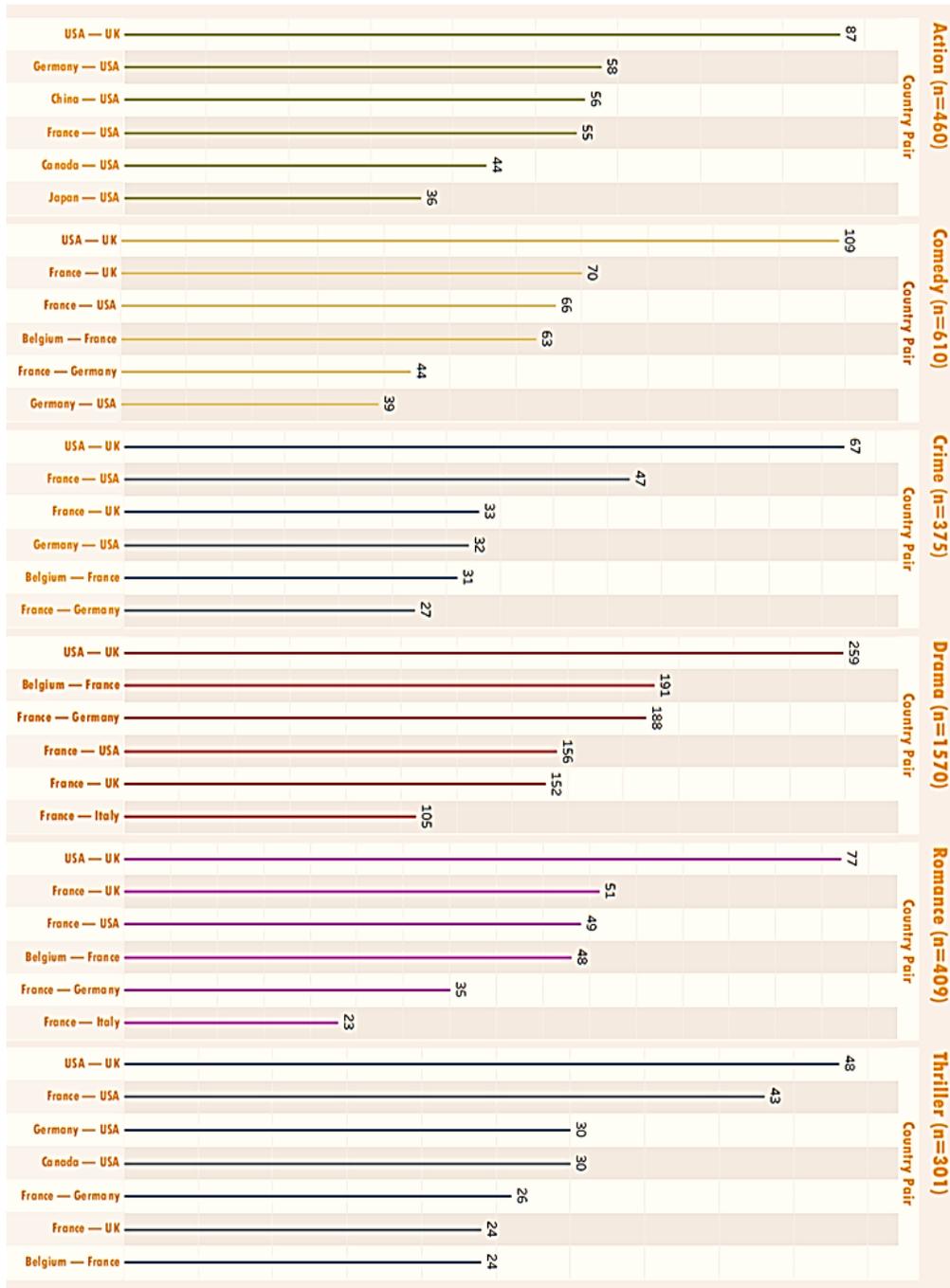
Genre Patterns

Movie genre is an important factor that determines the partner composition of international collaborations. Movies often carry the traits of more than one genre, making classification difficult. Among international co-productions, drama appears most frequently, accounting for 67.35% of films, followed by comedy (25.11%), action (19.03%), romance (17.35%), and crime (15.62%). Although comedy is considered a genre subject to a high level of cultural discounting, it is a common genre that attracts international collaborations. The analysis indicates that when comedy is a principal genre, international co-producers typically pair it with more universal genres, most often drama (51.84%), romance (22.89%), and adventure (14.9%). In addition, 11.88% of comedy movies also include action among their genres.

Figure 7 presents the most common country pairs in the most popular genres. The country pairs for comedy are heavily European in the international co-productions launched in the American market. Similarly, genres such as documentary, war, romance, history, music, drama, and sport show strong European participation. By contrast, resource-heavy combinations such as action/adventure and action/sci-fi are dominated by international co-productions that include American partners. Continentally, North American producers are highly active in sci-fi, action, and adventure, while they have less participation in musical, romance, and drama. European participation is relatively lower in animation, action, sci-fi, and adventure. Although their participation is lower than that of European producers across all genres, Asian producers are active in animation, action, sci-fi, and adventure. While South American producers are active in musicals, their participation in other genres is lower than that of North American, European, and Asian producers. Similarly, Africa's participation in international production is minimal compared with North America, Europe, and Asia.

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Figure 7. Leading Country Pairs in the Most Popular Genres



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Lastly, international co-productions that include producers from Oceania are more common in adventure and animation than in other genres. Figure 8 presents, by genre, the share of movies with at least one partner from each continent.

Figure 8. Continental Representation in International Co-Productions

	Africa	Asia	Europe	North America	Oceania	South America
Action	3.99%	44.44%	64.67%	80.91%	5.98%	1.42%
Adventure	4.17%	35.23%	70.45%	80.30%	9.09%	3.03%
Animation	0.00%	48.48%	62.12%	71.21%	9.09%	0.00%
Biography	2.83%	22.17%	85.38%	61.79%	6.60%	4.25%
Crime	2.78%	17.71%	82.99%	63.19%	2.43%	6.25%
Documentary	0.78%	12.50%	96.88%	60.16%	6.25%	3.91%
Drama	3.54%	20.29%	86.31%	50.00%	3.62%	5.80%
Family	1.33%	34.67%	73.33%	74.67%	5.33%	0.00%
Fantasy	0.78%	32.81%	71.88%	75.78%	7.03%	3.12%
History	4.10%	24.59%	86.89%	55.74%	5.74%	3.28%
Horror	4.69%	14.06%	75.78%	73.44%	5.47%	1.56%
Musical	5.88%	23.53%	82.35%	47.06%	0.00%	11.76%
Mystery	3.45%	12.41%	84.14%	68.28%	2.07%	4.83%
Romance	2.50%	18.75%	89.06%	49.38%	3.75%	4.69%
Sci-Fi	3.90%	36.36%	68.83%	81.82%	5.19%	3.90%
Sport	2.86%	28.57%	85.71%	65.71%	5.71%	0.00%
Thriller	3.90%	25.97%	79.22%	69.26%	3.03%	4.33%
War	10.34%	25.86%	89.66%	39.66%	3.45%	0.00%

Note: Percentages indicate the proportion of co-productions that include at least one partner from a given continent. Since individual films often involve partners from more than one continent, the summed total across continents exceeds 100%.

Managerial Takeaways

Distributing a movie in the U.S. is a challenging process for international co-productions. Securing U.S. distribution can be considered a success. U.S. distribution provides a pathway to entry into additional international markets and raises both visibility and prestige. Therefore, there are several takeaways from these findings for producers targeting the U.S. market.

One of the main motivations for international co-productions is access to financial resources. However, the results indicate that simply increasing the number of partners in a collaboration does not guarantee additional financial resources, even though international co-productions generally have higher budgets than domestic ones. Producers might look beyond budget gains and focus on added benefits such as technological expertise, market access, and creative collaboration. Considering the coordination costs of working with diverse partners, adding more partners may be less efficient when the motivation is limited to financial resources alone.

The results also indicate a noticeable country pattern in international co-productions distributed in the U.S.. Co-productions involving country pairs such as U.S.–U.K., France–U.S., Belgium–France, France–Germany, and France–U.K. are more common. Joining international co-productions that involve these country pairs may therefore be more advantageous for securing distribution in the U.S. market. Moreover, the results suggest that being in a co-production with a partner from the host country is particularly beneficial: international co-productions that include U.S. producers are prevalent among movies distributed in the U.S., indicating a clear market-access advantage.

When trends in international collaborations are considered, projects that involve partners from the U.S. and the U.K. appear especially promising, given the positive increase in the number of movies produced through this partnership. Similarly, co-productions that involve France and Belgium may also be advantageous for securing distribution in the U.S. market.

The results further indicate that movies involving drama as one of the themes in an international co-production are more likely to secure a place in the U.S. market. Although not as dominant as drama, co-productions in comedy, action, romance, and crime also appear among films that access the U.S. market. Previous studies suggest that comedy is subject to a high level of cultural discounting when released in foreign markets. The results indicate that when the main genre of a project is comedy, producers should prioritize international partnerships that integrate traits of drama, romance, or adventure, as this combination is more commonly observed among comedy films that reach the U.S. market.

The findings also indicate that co-productions involving North American or European countries are more common in the U.S. market. Accordingly, collaborating with partners from these continents may be more advantageous. At the same time, the results highlight the lack of representation of co-producers from Africa, South America, and Oceania, except in certain genres such as musical and war. Since movie audiences often seek novelty and exoticism in their decision-making process, the inclusion of partners from these continents may present an untapped opportunity for producers.

Author

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