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How film stars faded - and pop stars took over

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Steven McIntosh, Entertainment reporter



Taylor Swift's own life is reflected in the lyrics of her songs

Taylor Swift heads to the UK in a fortnight, with cities braced for a jamboree of sparkly outfits, mass singalongs and boyfriends proposing during the final chorus of Love Story.

Fans are likely to spend hundreds of pounds on tickets, travel, accommodation and merchandise as they attend her record-breaking Eras tour.

But while the public can't seem to get enough of seeing their favourite pop stars on stadium tours, their favourite actors aren't drawing them to cinemas in the same way.

While casting a big star used to guarantee some level of success at the box office, the adulation which was once reserved for movie stars now seems to be directed at pop stars.

There are all kinds of factors at play - including the move towards streaming, the impact of the pandemic, and the film industry's over-reliance on franchises, sequels and superheroes.

But the trend is also arguably a reflection of how audience habits are evolving. Today's fans crave authenticity - something you get with pop stars who write their own music, but not so much with actors who are by definition always portraying somebody else.

"I think our expectations of celebrities are changing in general," The Hollywood Reporter's Lily Ford tells BBC News.

"Music is extremely personal, the world's most famous and glamorous people are pouring their heart out, and, for the length of the song, we feel as close to an artist as we would our best friend."



Harry Styles, formerly of One Direction, completed a 169-date stadium tour last year

Artists writing from personal experience is nothing new, but "Taylor Swift has taken that to another level," Ford says, "singing about vulnerable moments and relationships."

"It creates this illusion of accessibility to her private life, and that lends itself to abnormal levels of popularity, because it feels like you know this pop star on a personal level."

"And that's just not quite the case with movie stars. We can't feel like we know a film star when they're never playing themselves the way pop stars appear to do, or at least a pseudo-version of themselves."

None of this is to say there aren't successful movies anymore. There are. But what links them is generally not the bankable box office star, but the intellectual property (IP) attached to the film.

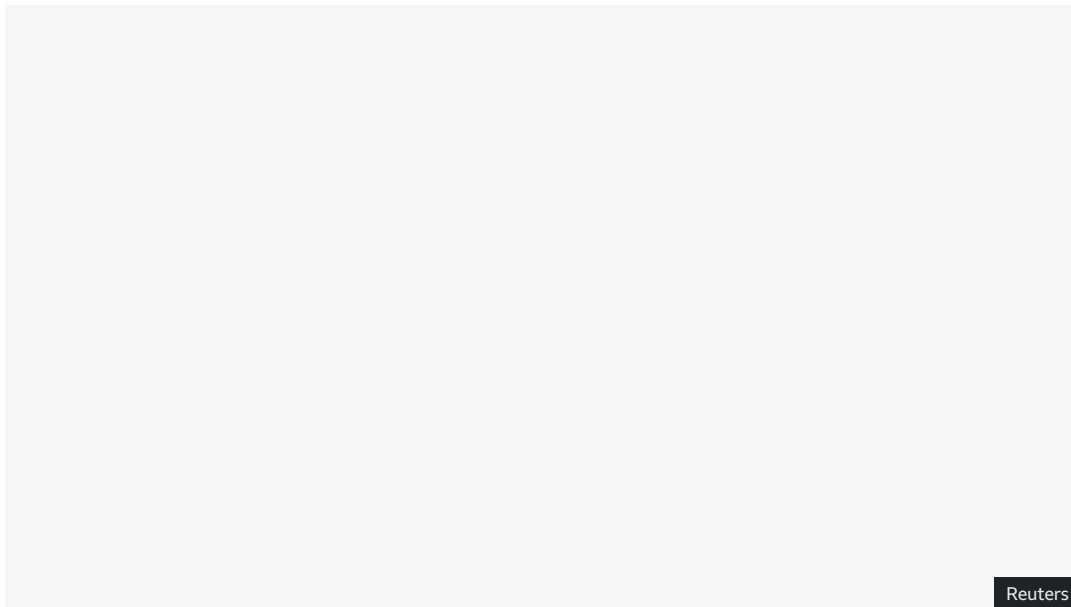
Timothée Chalamet, for example, is hugely popular - but his most recent hits have been *Dune* and *Wonka*, which had their own existing fanbases and mythologies. For Tom Holland, there's *Spider-Man*. For Margot Robbie, *Barbie*.

Many of today's movie stars also appear in original, creative projects, but these often flop. Six months before *Barbie* became a phenomenon, Robbie starred opposite Brad Pitt in *Babylon*, which bombed at the box office.

The *Fall Guy*, starring Ryan Gosling and Emily Blunt and adapted from the 1980s TV series, **was widely considered a surprise flop** when it was released earlier this month.

The film was well reviewed, and Gosling and Blunt has great chemistry both in the film and on the promotional trail. But two hugely popular leads weren't enough to make it a hit. **It also had a tiny theatrical window** before being released digitally, giving fans even less of an incentive to venture out.

Other recent star vehicles such as *Challengers* (starring Zendaya) have enjoyed some limited success, but today's biggest hits are almost all character and franchise driven.



Reuters

Timothée Chalamet famously said Leonardo DiCaprio told him: "No hard drugs, no superhero movies"

The highest-grossing films of 2023 included Super Mario and The Little Mermaid, alongside the latest instalments of Fast & Furious, Guardians of the Galaxy, Ant-Man, Aquaman, Mission: Impossible and John Wick.

Obviously, if these films had cast actors people hated, they wouldn't have been successful. But as long as the actor is agreeable enough, it's the stories and characters the public show up for.

Film critic Tessa Smith, founder of website Mama's Geeky, argues the films being made are ultimately driven by ticket buyers.

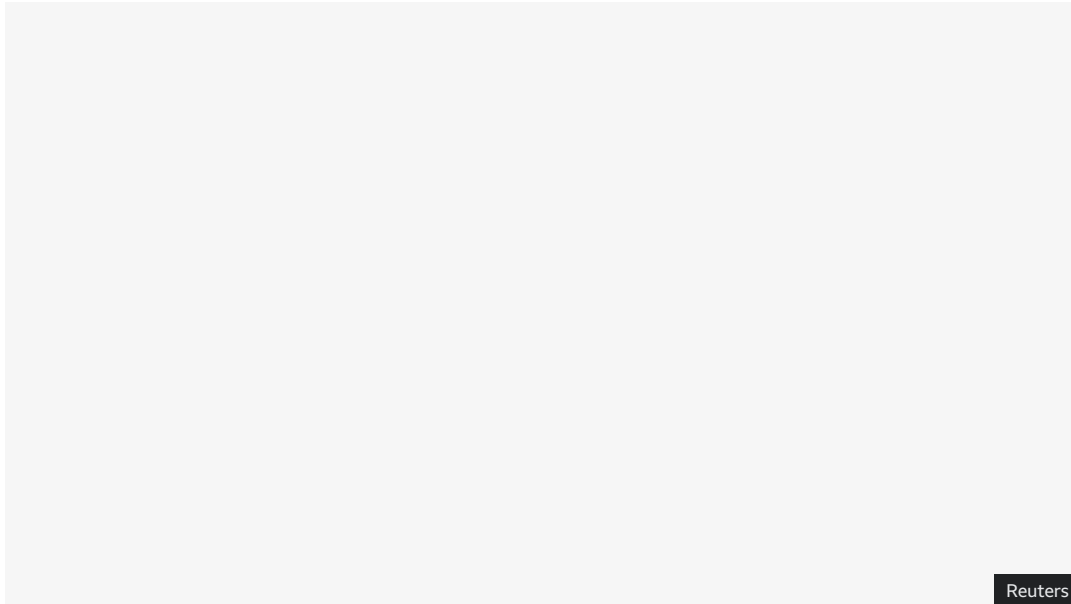
"While I certainly think the film industry is too reliant on IP, and I wish more original films would succeed, I think they are being forced to rely on IP by consumers," she says.

"It is unfortunate, and I wish it was not the case, but here we are. People do not want to pay the amount of money they have to for a movie, and not be positive they are going to enjoy it. They are not willing to take the risk."

The closest exception to the IP rule in the last year is perhaps Oppenheimer - its success owed less to the popularity of theoretical physicists and more to the viral Barbenheimer trend. Director Christopher Nolan was also part of the appeal.

Some movie stars appear to have already accepted the demise of the matinée idol and jumped to streaming services.

Adam Sandler's multi-film deal with Netflix **made him the highest-earning actor of last year**, while a growing number of actors who used to appear exclusively in movies have been **signing up to TV projects**.



Reuters

The deal Adam Sandler (pictured with Carey Mulligan) signed with Netflix could be a sign of things to come

Other movie stars have remained successful by leaning on superhero franchises. Doing so nets them a big salary, but often at the expense of doing something more original.

"Robert Downey Jr is a leading man, but his Iron Man could be played by almost anyone with wit," reflected Jonathan Dean in the Sunday Times. "The character is more important to audiences than the actor."

Some actors have actively avoided the kinds of popcorn-selling films which have been most associated with box office success in recent years.

Chalamet once famously revealed the advice that Leonardo DiCaprio, one of the few movie stars left, gave him early in his career: "No hard drugs and no superhero movies."

'A sense of community'

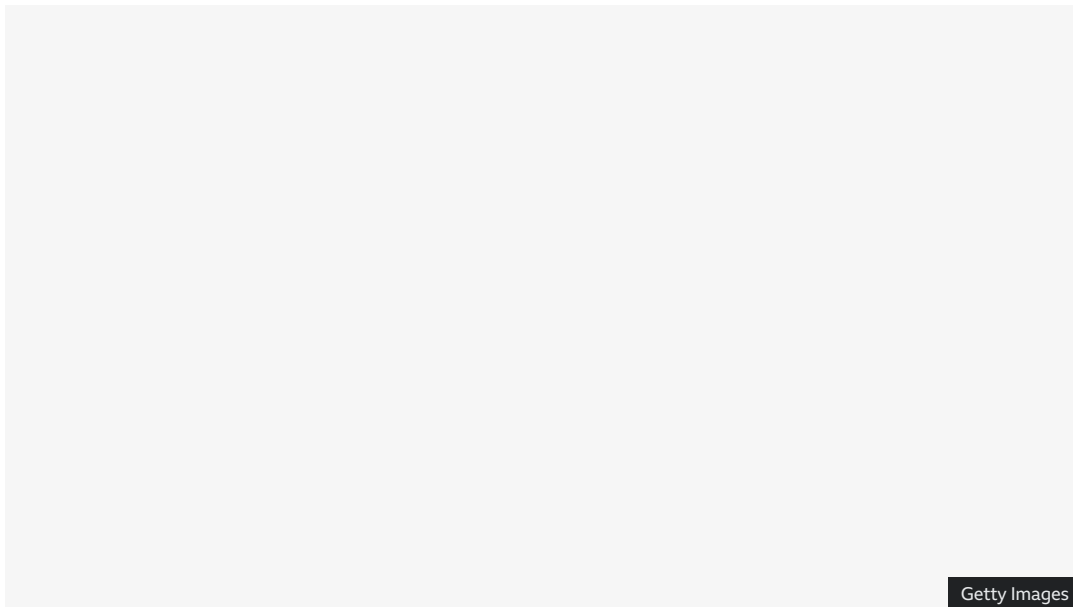
While many actors rely on IP, music stars such as Swift, Adele, Harry Styles, Beyoncé, Ed Sheeran and Ariana Grande are their own brand.

The Telegraph's Poppie Platt says the success of bands such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in decades gone by suggests musicians have always prompted this level of adoration.

"But I think it's shifted now to individual pop stars who give more back," she continues, "and you feel as if your money is going towards an investment which is benefitting you.

"There's a sense of community. I've been going to Taylor Swift's gigs since I was 11 or 12 years old. And you gain friends at those shows, there's usually a very supportive environment.

"You're at a show and you know everybody in the room loves the person as much as you do. It takes away any fear of crowds or big spaces because you know everybody is there for the same reason. You can build friendships from there. There's nothing like music that does that."



Getty Images

Tickets to *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Tom Holland, sold out in two hours

That experience is less common in cinemas, she notes, meaning you don't necessarily feel a connection with fellow moviegoers.

Smith goes a step further, suggesting one reason "the theatre experience is dying" is poor audience behaviour.

"I am lucky enough to attend press screenings, where viewers are respectful and mindful of others," she notes. "However, whenever I attend a public screening there are always people on their phone doom scrolling, recording the screen, or even talking. It ruins the movie for others."

In contrast, she continues, "Seeing Taylor Swift in person, perform a show live for nearly four hours, when all of her shows are different - and a cathartic experience if you ask me - is much different to going to see a movie in a theatre."

One major sign that pop stars now sit atop the celebrity tree is the biggest ones rarely do interviews.

Swift, at most, will give two big interviews a year. Styles, similarly, can afford to be extremely choosy with who he speaks to. Beyoncé broadly stopped doing press around 2013. They mostly let their music do the talking instead.

Movie stars, however, are still forced to run the promotional gauntlet, taking part in the endless junket interviews and red carpet appearances written into their contracts.