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Marketing the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract

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This Bachelor's Thesis studies Marvel Studios' interconnected story world, otherwise known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, from a marketing point of view. Through analyzing various marketing related aspects applied in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and applying theory to the Marvel Cinematic Universe's content, we will have a better understanding of the elements leading to the success of the infamous story universe. Furthermore, through the examination of effective marketing strategies used in the entertainment industry, especially in movies and series, the difference is noticeable compared to marketing strategies for physical products. Moreover, in the process it is fascinating to discover the different aspects behind the success. Some of the elements examined in this paper are the four Ps, entertainment marketing theory, marketing campaigns used to market the content, and Marvel's brand. For Marvel as well as its competitors, storytelling is not just an important marketing tool, but an integral part of the actual product. Due to this storytelling is an essential feature and has been taken into account in the examination of Marvel Cinematic Universe and its competitors.

Contents

1 Introduction

Story universes have existed for several decades. Depending on the definition, they can be tracked all the way back to the 1940s. The definition of "story universe" varies, depending on the person and therefore, people can have different opinions on the matter. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is one of these story universes, where various narratives are created and shared within a story world. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish connections between the stories in order to create a story universe and to strengthen the connection between the stories with various cameos. To understand effective marketing in the entertainment industry and especially marketing a story universe like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, an appropriate research question would be: "How has marketing Marvel movies as a connected cinematic universe made these successful?".

Marvel Entertainment (Marvel) is a character-based entertainment company that is a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company. Marvel Entertainment consists of movies, TV shows, comic books, games, and merchandise. According to Marvel's own website Marvel utilizes its character franchises in publishing, licensing, and entertainment. Moreover, Marvel Studios is a film and television production company that is part of Marvel and responsible for Marvel Cinematic Universe.

1.1 Research Methods

The research and data collection methods used to collect the information for this thesis have relied on secondary resources. The resources are, for example, books and book chapters, journal articles, different discussion platforms, Marvel's own website as well as Marvel's verified social media platforms, statistics, *Disney plus* streaming service, case studies, and other possibly relevant online sources. Moreover, while conducting research I have used my own prior knowledge specifically about story universes as well as Marvel

Cinematic Universe more specifically. Furthermore, the analytical approach used in this thesis is literature-based. This is due to usage of secondary resources rather than primary, which would have been unlikely to yield any findings of additional value.

1.2 Limiting Factors

Marvel has developed several TV series, some of which take place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Some of the characters in these series also make appearances throughout the interconnected universe and are an integral part of it. Marvel has, as an example, developed three TV series for *ABC Network*. These series are *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, which ran from 2013 to 2020 and consists of seven seasons; *Agent Carter*, which ran for two seasons from 2015 to 2016; and *Inhumans*, which ran for one season in 2017 (Marvel 2022). Especially in the case of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, the significance to the universe is noticeable and narrative element of linked repercussions is very much existing. However, it does not mean there are not substantial differences.

Marvel also has developed six TV shows for streaming service *Netflix*. The TV shows ran from 2015 to 2019, which is when some of the series ended and some of them were cancelled. Four of the first live-action series were *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *The Punisher* and *Luke Cage*. These were individual shows, which led to the crossover TV series *The Defenders*. The sixth live-action show developed for Netflix was *Iron Fist*. Some of the shows make subtle hints to the MCU and are also located in the same universe (Marvel 2022).

Marvel also has included "one-shots" in the interconnected universe, which provides the audience more detailed backstory for the characters as well as for the events introduced in the movies. The one-shots are shorter than twenty minutes long which is why they are not considered to be movies. Moreover, with only one episode each, they are not considered TV shows either.

Furthermore, Marvel has productions originating before the making of Marvel Cinematic Universe. Marvel has also developed other shows for streaming services such as *Hulu*, animated movies, as well as TV series, and other productions. Not all of these will be included in the analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and its marketing aspect. The analysis below will include 27 movies as well as four TV shows, which have been considered to form the Marvel Cinematic Universe. More information can be found in the *Appendices* on page 41.

2 Background

Marvel's *MARVEL COMIC #1* was one of the most important comics in history. It came out in 1939 and was the one that started it all. The comic introduced its audience to the android *Human Torch* and the *Sub-Mariner*, and its title later on became the new name for the company (Dietsch 2019). This was the beginning of Marvel's journey all the way to the present-day Marvel Cinematic Universe, and due to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the comic book film adaptations reached their commercial peak (Burke 2016: 106).

In early 2000 the trend of adapting comic books into films began. It has also been described to be "the golden age of comic book filmmaking" due to the sheer number of comic book film adaptations. However, Marvel's superheroes did not make a leap from comic books to movies and TV shows in a single bound. This happened through a series of incremental steps and way before the Marvel Cinematic Universe was created. Marvel's very first animation was *The Marvel Super Heroes*, which was first aired daily in six-minute installments in 1966. Each day was dedicated to a different hero like Captain America, Hulk, and Iron Man. A year later Marvel's *Fantastic Four* -show aired on ABC, as well as animated series *Spider-Man*. *Spider-Man* -show was a step-up from the first animated series, although still having simple character designs and predictable plots, but still were able to raise the profile of the Marvel characters (Burke 2016: 106 -107).

In a pattern that repeats years later, the success of these early comics has led Marvel to pay attention to live-action. However, *The Incredible Hulk* -series from 1978 to 1982, was the only Marvel character that succeeded in television. Most of the shows made in the 1970s only lasted for 13 episodes and were disappointing for audiences. Marvel also made live action movies in the 1970s, like *Doctor Strange* (1978) and *Captain America* (1979), but these were never developed into shows (Burke 2016: 107).

Marvel owners Candace industries bought DePatie-Freleng Enterprises in 1981 and not long after formed the basis of the Marvel Productions animation studio by dissolving it. In the same year Marvel Productions launched the new studio by making two *Spider-Man* series. The first one to air was a series initially called *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends*, which ran from 1981 to 1983. The series also featured other Marvel characters, such as Captain America*,* Hulk*,* and Iron Man*.* The strategy of having characters interact with one another in a shared Marvel Universe was central to Marvel's success decades later. The second series ran from 1981 to 1982 and was called *Spider-Man* and it was considered to be closer to the comics (Burke 2016: 108).

Moreover, Marvel Productions CEO fought to get networks to pick up comic book adaptations, but little interest was shown. However, in 1992 the *X-Men* series aired on *Fox Kids*, and it gathered surprisingly great reviews, and in 1994 *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* aired on *Fox Kids.* These two shows were the longest running series in the 1990s, with *X-Men* ending in 1997 and *Spider-Man* in 1998. In the 1990s Marvel also had other productions like *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Marvel Action Hour*, which both ran only for two seasons. Nevertheless, not all Marvel characters were successful, but they still raised awareness of Marvel's characters (Burke 2016: 110 -111).

Furthermore, numerous series were produced in the 2000s before the beginning of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These series include *X-Men Evolution, Spider-Man The new Animated* series, and *The Spectacular Spider-*

Man. However, none of these series were able to match the success of the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* series. These series accomplished what no other animated series based on Marvel characters has accomplished before or since. They were able to provide a template for big screen adaptations and they were appealing to fans as well as non -fans. Most importantly, they transformed the continuity of comic books into some of the most complex and fascinating stories ever developed in adaptation until the launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Burke 2016: 115 -116).

3 Marketing Marvel Cinematic Universe

Marvel's superheroes began living in a shared universe in the comic books in the early and mid 1960s, Marvel Universe. The events of Marvel Universe made up one narrative and everything that would occur in one of the titles could ultimately affect all the others. The element of the shared universe is an essential differentiator in both Marvel's comic universe and the subsequent Marvel Studios' production philosophy. This is also why Marvel brings out their "competitive advantage" and enables the prosperity of the MCU (Flanagan et al. 2016: 3-4). Furthermore, the marketing of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has changed considerably throughout the years. When the MCU began in 2008 with the first movie *Iron Man*, Marvel did not possess the same resources as they do today. This chapter also features an analysis of Marvel's evolving marketing strategy with respect to the MCU.

3.1 The Four P's

The framework of the four Ps requires markets to determine the product as well as characteristics that go into it. Along with the product, marketers need to determine the ways the product will be distributed, decide the ways it will be promoted and set the prices. Moreover, the question is not whether there are four, six, or ten Ps, but the framework that is most useful in designing marketing strategies (Kotler 1999: 6 -7).

> "Just as economists use two principal concepts for their framework of analysis, namely demand and supply, the marketer sees the four Ps as a filing cabinet of tools that could guide the marketing planning." (Kotler 1999: 7)

The four P's, also known as the marketing mix, consists of four aspects, which are product, placement, promotion, and price, which is the order in which these will be examined. Since Disney established their own streaming service the access of the content as well as the promotion, placement and price has significantly changed.

3.1.1 Product

Marvel Cinematic Universe is a fictional universe created by Marvel Studios, which encompasses multiple superhero movies and shows and is a home for multiple superheroes. Currently in early 2022 Marvel Cinematic Universe consists of 27 movies and 4 TV shows, where the comic book -based characters are set. Every movie and show in the MCU are said to be standalones and tell a story on their own. However, in most cases audience make the most out of it with additional context and background information. This is due to everything being connected in the MCU and intertwined with one another, which happens through several cameos in the movies and shows, through the central characters' own story arcs as well as the baseline story arc. In other words, there is a clear red thread throughout Marvel Cinematic Universe movies. Moreover, the so-called main characters of MCU are not the only ones making cameos in other movies and shows. As an example of this, Wong, known from *Dr. Strange*, did a cameo in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings*, which ties everything together perfectly.

MCU has a chronological timeline, which is the preferred order to watch everything included in the MCU to make the most out of the experience. In some cases, the events of two different productions are happening at the same

time, just in different places. For example, *Captain America: Civil War* takes place in Germany while *Thor: Ragnarök* takes place in an alien planet Sakaar and later on Asgard. These events take place at the same time, which is why neither Thor nor Hulk appear in the *Captain America* movie. Without watching *Thor: Ragnarök* the audience would not know the reason for the absence of the characters. However, this does not mean the movies would not be entertaining to audiences not aware of the previous events.

Marvel Cinematic Universe also has timeline in which the movies and shows are released. This currently consists of four different phases, starting with the movie *Iron Man.* All of the current phases and their differences are briefly explained in the *Table 1* below in order to get better understanding of them. Moreover, all of the phases have ended in a larger crossover film, like *Avengers, Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Avengers: Endgame*. However, in the case of phase two and three, one more movie has been released after the "big ending".

Since MCU movies and shows are considered to be standalones, not everything has to be watched to enjoy a particular production. However, as mentioned earlier, it does come in handy to know the backstory of the events. This ultimately hooks the audience to watch more for the reason that everything ties together seamlessly. For example, the *WandaVision* show takes place right after the *Avengers: Endgame* where the character Vision dies. This is the reason for the events in *WandaVision*, where Wanda creates her own world to be able to live with her loved one, Vision.

Table 1. Main events of the MCU's four phases briefly explained

The Four Phases	
Phase One	• All about origin stories of the original Avengers

The Four Phases	
	• First two Infinity Stones are introduced • Audience gets a first glimpse of *Thanos*, the main villain of the first three phases
Phase Two	• Introduces new Avengers • Two more Infinity Stones are introduced • Introduces new concepts, like existence of multiple timelines, which is vital for the storytelling later on
Phase Three	• New heroes are introduced • Introduces the last two Infinity Stones • Ends in the biggest battle so far • The end of some of the Avengers, as well as the main villain, *Thanos*
Phase Four	• The beginning of the new era • Introduces new heroes and characters • Marvel brought heroes and villains from other productions outside of the MCU for the first time • Still ongoing

In the past Marvel has only included in the movies those characters who have already been a part of the universe. However, during phase four of MCU's timeline this has changed. As briefly explained in the *Introduction*, Marvel heroes have been seen, for example, in *ABC Network* and *Netflix*. These shows were considered to be individual at the time and were not largely connected to the MCU, therefore, they are outside of the MCU. Moreover, previous *Spider-Man* movie rights as well as *Venom* movie rights were owned by Sony, thus also not part of the universe. However, recently Marvel has brought these

heroes and villains to the universe and therefore, the more the audience knows about the history of the characters in the MCU as well outside of it from other productions, the more impact the movies have. This includes history of the characters that have not been considered to be a part of the same universe, like the first and second Spider-Man. In the movie *Spider-Man No Way Home* the audience received a massive surprise when the original Spider-Man and the Spider-Man from *The Amazing Spider-Man* appeared on the screen. In other words, the movie consisted of all three Spider-Mans. Moreover, Marvel has started to bring other characters to MCU like Daredevil and the villain from the *Daredevil* series, Kingpin. Kingpin has already made an appearance in the TV show *Hawkeye* and Daredevil in the movie *Spider-Man No Way Home*. It is also expected that more of Marvel's characters will be incorporated in the MCU sometime in the future; for example, Venom.

Marvel has also teased the audience with future projects. Marvel is known for planning ahead and therefore, getting the audiences hyped up even before the project is in the works. Marvel is coming up with more TV series included in the Marvel Cinematic Universe on *Disney plus*, including *She Hulk*, *Secret Invasion*, *Moon Knight,* and *Armor Wars* (Marvel 2022).

3.1.2 Placement

Most of the content in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are movies and therefore aimed primarily at movie theatres. MCU movies are also available on different renting services as well as for purchasing digitally and physically. Nevertheless, MCU movies have been shown in cinemas all over the world since the beginning of the movie franchise. The movies are still going strong in the theatres; however, Covid -19 has significantly changed the placement of the content.

Due to the pandemic movie theatres have been closed ever so often and the amount of people allowed in cinemas has been limited, so it is only logical that the movies will be released for the audience in a different way. Therefore,

almost all of the MCU movies are available on *Disney plus* streaming service, including the ones that have been released most recently. Even some movies have not been available in the movie theatres in some countries, like *Black Widow*, but only on *Disney plus.* This, however, required customers to have premium access to the movie right after its release. *The Incredible Hulk* from phase one, is the only movie in the MCU that is not currently available on the same platform. Furthermore, MCU has added several shows in their universe, which are only available for the audience on *Disney plus.*

Since nearly every movie and TV show are available on the same streaming service, it provides easy access for the audience. This enables the audiences to view most of the relevant content in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in order to understand the events. Furthermore, all of the moves and TV series are presented in the order they are advised to be watched, which makes it effortless for the viewers. Due to this reason if audiences wish to gain the best experience, it is easily accessible.

3.1.3 Promotion

Marvel Cinematic Universe's promotion happens through various channels, such as through different social media platforms. Not only does Marvel have a verified account with millions of followers on all of the biggest platforms, but Marvel also has several fan accounts. These fan accounts are maintained by the fans themselves and some of them have over half a million followers. Fan accounts vary depending on the platform and who maintains it, but mostly they consist of memes, discussions and shared videos and pictures. All of this means free and effortless promotion for the MCU and Marvel.

Marvel has several verified accounts on different platforms since it is the most efficient way to reach different audiences. Marvel and Marvel Entertainment represents all of the content created by Marvel whereas Marvel Studios specifically focuses on Marvel Cinematic Universe. Furthermore, according to statistics, all of these platforms were in the top 15 most popular social media

networks worldwide, ranked by the number of active users. Facebook and YouTube were first and second, Instagram was fourth, and Twitter 15th (Statista 2022).

Table 2. Followers on Marvel's verified social media platforms on the 17th of February 2022

Followers on different social media platforms	
Instagram	
Marvel	61,7 M
Marvel Studios	35,6 M
YouTube	
Marvel Entertainment	18,2 M
Facebook	
Marvel	33 M
Marvel Studios	6,8 M
Twitter	
Marvel Entertainment	13,7 M
Marvel Studios	8,6 M

Furthermore, Marvel promotes the MCU with trailers on YouTube, television commercials and billboards. Marvel has also utilized sides of buildings for large billboard advertisements, which is what happened with the advertising of

WandaVision. Moreover, there have been MCU posters on busses as well as bus stops for different occasions, like *WandaVision*, *Thor*, *Avengers*, *Ant-Man* and *Spider-Man*. Marvel has also held several press conferences and panels regarding Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Furthermore, *Disney plus* advertises Marvel Cinematic Universe heavily. As mentioned in the earlier section, the placement of the movies is not only on *Disney plus* but also in other online services and in cinemas. Therefore, for *Disney plus* they are not necessarily the key advantages to advertise the streaming service and Marvel. However, due to the fact that TV series have been added in the interconnected universe and are an integral part of it, it is the best key advantage. The TV series are *Disney plus*'s original series and therefore, only available on their service. *Disney plus* taking advantage of this is a great promotional technique and at the same time advertises the streaming service as well as Marvel Cinematic Universe.

3.1.4 Price

Pricing regarding the entertainment content is difficult to display. This is due to multiple factors; for example, pricing of the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies in theatres varies depending on the country as well as the movie theatre. As mentioned previously, Marvel Cinematic Universe movies are also available on several renting services and some of the movies are also available for purchasing. The pricing for these also varies depending on the store and the website. However, almost everything included in the MCU is available on *Disney plus*, which is marketed as the most convenient option for customers. This is due to the pricing range, which on *Disney plus* is approximately nine euros per month and the consumer has the opportunity to view all of the content in the MCU and more. Renting or purchasing an individual movie outside of *Disney plus* can be more expensive and the consumer does not receive as much value.

3.2 Entertainment Marketing Theory

Movies are and have been a huge part of entertainment marketing. Movies are a marketing dream with all of their possibilities including merchandising, licensing, sponsorships, and retail, generating revenues in millions across all platforms. Moreover, with advantageous developments in consumer technology movies are with us most of the time, existing outside of cinemas via television, tablets, smartphones, and computers. People want entertainment in their lives and with all of the technology it is everywhere (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 2). Marvel has utilized all of the available platforms with licensing product deals, selling merchandise for example on *Disney shop*, and most importantly making all of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's content available on *Disney plus* streaming service. Due to this, the audience is able to view the movies and shows everywhere and they are available all of the time.

> "Today, technology plays a huge role in the development and distribution of entertainment content. Marketing professionals must not only understand how to manipulate the available platforms; they must also be keenly aware of what technology might come next" (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 6)

The constant growing social networking and social media platforms are intelligent ways to utilize word-of-mouth. Constant usage of different social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, has made it possible for audiences all over the world to connect and share their thoughts effortlessly. This is also why it is important to use this as an advantage for promotion. As mentioned previously, Marvel has used this opportunity to be constantly promoting their upcoming and their current projects. Moreover, since Instagram has grown as a platform and Marvel has a big following, it is a resourceful tactic to consistently update the platform. Marvel Studios' account has been updated at least once a day, which is excellent for the consistency of content.

Moreover, entertainment marketing sets itself apart due to its content being based on creativity; for example, a story, an action, or fleeting moment that stirs the consumer. For Marvel Cinematic Universe this is strong storytelling, unexpected scenes and cameos, as well as cliff-hangers at the end of the movies. Furthermore, entertainment is not something, like a financial institution or a home, that can build a relationship with customers over a longer period of time. Entertainment has to grab the consumer's attention immediately before the consumer loses interest and attention is lost. Moreover, entertainment marketing focuses on selling an experience and convincing customers to purchase into the event. According to Lieberman and Esgate, this particularly requires creating a "Wannasee" reaction in consumers who are overwhelmed with options (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 5).

Entertainment is also not a necessity but a luxury. People do not need entertainment in order to survive and for most it's not a way to make a living. People will consume entertainment when they have the time and the funds for it. Moreover, people need to have desire for it and therefore, it is necessary that the entertainment is available when the consumer wants it. If sometimes it is not available for easy consumption, the consumer's attention will turn to other options. This is why moving MCU content to a streaming service was an intelligent decision and due to it the content is easily available and accessible to the consumers.

However, there are issues concerning entertainment content. According to Plunkett Research, a firm that specializes in entertainment industry, there exists three main issues relating to the control of entertainment content. As seen in the figure below, the issues are pricing of the content, portability, and delayed viewing. The figure presents the main problems that lie with each main issue.

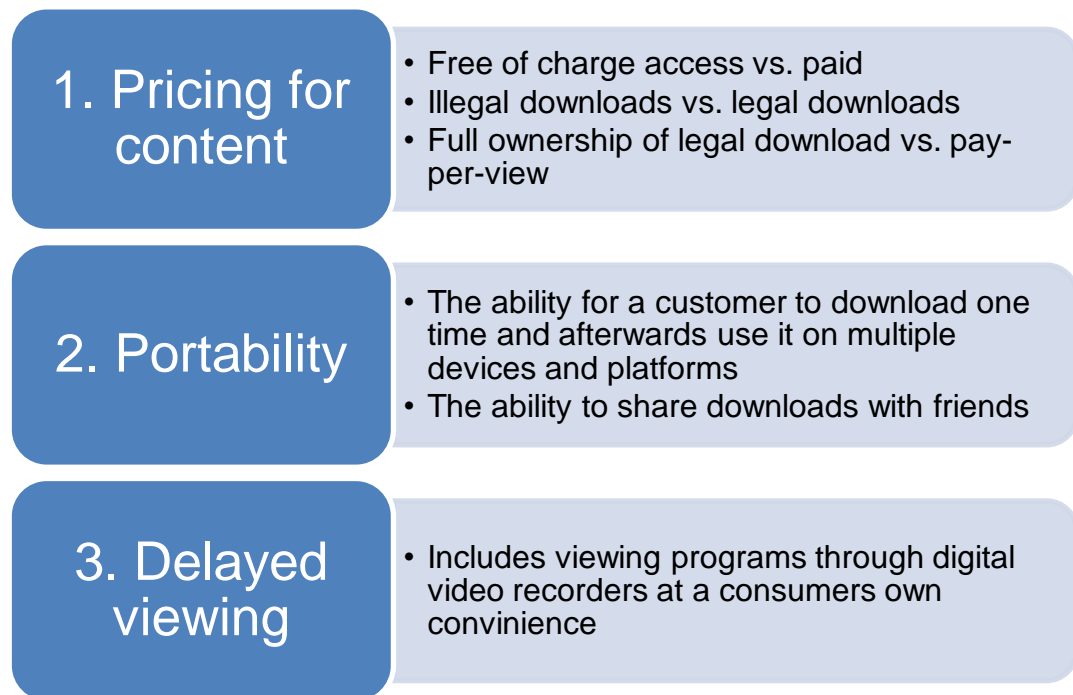|	
1. Pricing for content	• Free of charge access vs. paid • Illegal downloads vs. legal downloads • Full ownership of legal download vs. pay-per-view
2. Portability	• The ability for a customer to download one time and afterwards use it on multiple devices and platforms • The ability to share downloads with friends
3. Delayed viewing	• Includes viewing programs through digital video recorders at a consumers own convinience

Figure 1. Plunkett Research's three main issues related to the control of entertainment content (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 12)

As previously mentioned, creating a "wannasee" reaction is one of the important elements, but it is also one of the entertainment marketing challenges. The reaction needs to be enough to drive the consumers into the movie theater and turn want into need. The opportunity to achieve this is fairly short, given the amount of competition. The competition is not just other movie releases but other forms of entertainment the consumer could choose instead. Identifying the correct target audience and creating trailers that are compelling are vital. Furthermore, the audience needs to be able to feel the right emotions at the right time, like laugh when it is intended (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 60).

Furthermore, entertainment marketing possesses various ways of marketing methods and ways to create buzz around the new releases. *Sneak previews* and *movie trailers* are some of the ways to achieve this. *Sneak previews* are mostly used if the studio is certain that the audience will appreciate it and word-of-mouth is favorable. *Movie trailers* on the other hand are a must and a crucial

element of the marketing campaign. If the trailers are done by experts, they can be a huge hit with the target audience. Other ways of marketing are for example, *newspaper advertising* and *movie tie-ins*. Newspapers usually have either nationally syndicated reviews or they have their own reviews. *Movie tie-ins* create symbiosis from a marketing perspective and provide extra exposure for the film (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 61-64).

Marvel has created trailers for every single movie and TV show they have produced for the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Even for the very first movie *Iron Man*, Marvel created two trailers for it and added movie tie-ins along with other marketing methods, like posters and products. The marketing methods were done right, which is confirmed by the fact that the movie was a blockbuster. Furthermore, it was not only aimed to build excitement but also to maintain it.

For films, the Academy Awards or *Oscars* can also be used as a marketing tool. The nomination can provide great visibility for the movie, as the awards ceremony is broadcasted around the world. It is also viewed by millions of people annually (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 65). Marvel Cinematic Universe movies have been nominated for numerous awards, like best achievement in visual effects and sound effects. The movie *Black Panther* (2018) has also won three awards for best achievement in costume design, best achievement in production design and for best achievement in music written for motion pictures.

3.3 Marvel as a Brand

A brand represents everything that a product or a service means to a consumer. Building a brand is not about making quick and momentary profits; rather, it is about a strategy. Moreover, it is a long-term and continuous process, which aims to develop the brand image to meet the desired goals in order to serve the company's strategy as well as possible. Building a brand consists of five steps, which consists of brand-related analysis, creating awareness, incorporating the

desired features into the product image, making purchases occur and achieving brand loyalty (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 21).

Brand is also about brand awareness, brand associations and brand loyalty. Brand awareness can be a sign of commitment and success as well as affect consumers likings, behaviors and perceptions. Ultimately if a brand is easily recognizable, there has to be a reason for it. Brand awareness can also affect whether a specific brand is recalled while making purchases and therefore, among the brands the consumer is considering. Furthermore, design, quality, brand personality, symbols and user imagery is all included in brand associations. Essentially it is anything that connects the consumer to the brand and it can be the basis of brand loyalty, consumer relationships, and decision of purchase. While developing a brand, it is important to determine the association that the brand wishes to develop and enhance those associations. Brand loyalty is the heart of the value of the brand. Once it is obtained it is persistent, and it is difficult to break by the brand's competitors. One of the goals of brand building is to enhance the volume and intensity of each loyalty segment by making the relationship with the consumer consistent (Aaker 2014: 10 -11).

There aren't many who have not heard of Marvel or the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Marvel is a memorable and recognizable brand and Marvel has been one of the most consistent brands for several years. The consistency includes for example, trailers, designs, characters, and promotions. Furthermore, since most have access to the internet it is important to pay attention to details and what the brand does and what it stands for. Marvel has made its brand to be relatable, innovative, and inspiring (Chowdhury 2021). Moreover, branding is all about feelings, emotions, and building emotional connections. Marvel Cinematic Universe builds emotional connections through its incredible storytelling and unpredictable twists and turns.

Furthermore, one of the most important elements of branding is the brand's name itself. Its use in language provides universal reference point. Other important elements of branding are for example, letters, numbers, a symbol, a

colour, a signature, a tune, and a slogan. Moreover, great brands have superior brand positioning that is consistently executed for their target audience. A powerful positioning articulates why a consumer should choose a specific brand over others, like Marvel over DC, Marvel's chief competitor (Clifton and Ahmad 2009: 9 -74).

> "A brand name is meant to embody information about something, information that represents an added value, differentiating it in a marked way from alternatives. A brand name is meant to trigger in memory positive associations with that brand." (Hansen and Christensen 2003: 12-14)

Marvel by definition means to be filled with wonder or astonishment, or a wonderful and astonishing thing or a person. This describes Marvel and Marvel Cinematic Universe perfectly because it is not just a franchise or a brand, it is an experience. Marvel's big, bold, capital, white letters are the signature element that Marvel and the MCU productions possesses along with the red squared background, which makes the Marvel- letters enlightened. Moreover, at the beginning of each show or a movie Marvel has a signature clip that shows numerous MCU characters and most of the productions have a signature tune while the clip is playing.

Marvel Entertainment is a character-based entertainment company and therefore, it is apparent that at the heart of Marvel brand is all of the beloved Marvel characters. All of the characters are different and have diverse special abilities, where some are stronger than others. However, all of them add something to the universe and all of them have their struggles. Some of these characters are known for MCU movies and shows, through which the actors have brought the characters to life, added depth to the characters as well as given the audience a whole new perspective. However, Marvel Cinematic Universe's characters have been around long before the interconnected universe, therefore, it is more effortless to build a brand with already existing

material. Marvel also had already existing fans and fanbase from their iconic comic books thus MCU has only grown the fanbase.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe not only talks about established superhero figures already known to enthusiastic comic book readers, but also its innumerable, more or less diagonal, references to the folklore of existing comic books (Brinker 2017: 208). Moreover, the MCU fan base is not just comic book enthusiasts, but also superhero fanatics, fans of the specific genre the movie represents, adventure film fans, and action movie fans. MCU fans consists of hardcore superfans as well as so-called casual audience. The super fanatics only constitute a small portion of the viewers, which some might recent the casual audiences due to the lack of deeper involvement towards the franchise (Beaty 2016).

Nevertheless, most of MCU's fan base consist of teenagers, young adults, and middle-aged viewers, both male and female. According to Lieberman and Esgate teenagers and young adults are the key segment that is also considered to be "a heavy movie going group" (Lieberman and Esgate 2014: 58). *Figure 2* below demonstrates the percentage of viewers from different age groups in the United States from 2018 onwards. On average, over 43,7% of 18- to 34-year-olds have seen the movies in question, over 41,7% of 35- to 54-year-olds, and 23,8% of 55-year-olds or over (Navarro 2021).
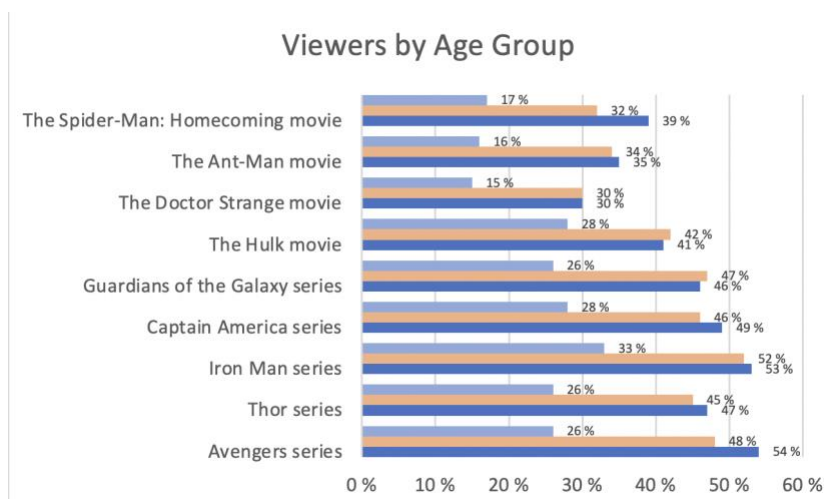
Figure 2. Percentage of viewers of MCU movies by age groups, where the top bar represents 55+ year-olds, middle bar 34–54-year-olds, and bottom bar 18–33-year-olds (Navarro 2021)

Marvel Cinematic Universe is simultaneously open to diverse media audiences, yet able to integrate diverse viewers with an ever -growing base of loyal fans and followers. Moreover, the interconnected universe's characters hold a ubiquitous presence on the screens of the media environment. At the industry practice level, the franchise's individual instalments contribute to Marvel's cultural vision of a "mega brand" and work to produce synergistic effects for all types of products featuring company characters and logos. The merchandise includes everything from clothing items, home décor, action figures, toys, eating receptacles, sheets, and towels (Brinker 2017: 208 -211).

3.4 Marketing Campaigns

Marvel has conducted marketing campaigning for its new releases since the first Marvel Cinematic Universe movie *Iron Man*. It is evident that the popularity of MCU has significantly grown throughout the years and therefore, the marketing has become more extensive. In order to get an idea of how the marketing for MCU productions, whether for a movie or a TV show, has changed, observing and analysing campaigns from the early releases to recent releases is appropriate.

3.4.1 Iron Man

The Marvel Cinematic Universe began with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008. However, few suspected that the movie in question would become the first instalment of one of the most successful media franchises of our time (Brinker 2017: 207). The first teaser poster of the upcoming movie was released two years prior, in 2006, to the audience at San Diego Comic-Con. This poster gave the fans an idea of what the Iron Man armor will look like. Moreover, fans of the comic books as well as the character were excited to see a comic book film

adaptation and therefore, the poster was a success. This was just the beginning of the marketing campaign and later on more posters were released (Thilk 2008).

A teaser trailer of the movie was released a year later after the first poster came out. The teaser showed the audience that the movie would contain much more than just action, but also humor, and the re-worked origin of the character and the connection between the movie and the comic books was still present. This not only appealed to the devoted fans but also the mainstream audience. A second trailer was released a year later, the same year as the movie came out, and it was similar to the first one, but it had more content. Furthermore, short movie clips were released only a couple of months prior to the release of the movie, which built up the hype (Thilk 2008).

Iron Man also got a special Slurpee ice drink product promotion with four different cup options featuring Iron Man in 7-eleven convenience stores in the USA. Additionally, three different straws were sold for these with action figures attached to them. Iron Man -toys was also featured in Burger King's kids' meals and Audi cross-promoted *Iron Man's* first film, which also was their first serious entry into the movie tie-in. Moreover, a huge movie ad for the film was placed in New York and Marvel's own website was actively informing the fans about the film and its production. Furthermore, marketing *Iron Man* also had straight advertising with TV spots, which were similar to the trailers (Thilk 2008).

3.4.2 WandaVision

The TV show *WandaVision* began streaming on *Disney plus* streaming service in 2021 where the events of the show take place after the movie *Avengers: Endgame.* Moreover, since the MCU has been ongoing for 14 years now, it is assumed that upcoming Marvel Studios' movies and series will be a part of the same universe, therefore, it does not need to be advertised as much as earlier.

WandaVision was also the very first series from Marvel Studios and would be the first of many (Hipes 2020). The campaign for *WandaVision* began around 1,5 years prior to the series release. The series was announced by the leading actors, Elizabeth Olsen, Paul Bettany and Teyonah Parris, at San Diego Comic-Con in 2019. However, the first trailer for the show was shown during the Emmys in 2020 and the trailer drop for the series gathered around 53 million views during 24 hours, which was the record for a streaming-series trailer. Furthermore, *WandaVision's* clear social media driver for awareness and engagement marketing has been played over 119 million times across YouTube and the campaign consisted of over twenty -four spots, including content on Marvel YouTube -channel, Disney + YouTube -channel, and Disney YouTube -channel (D'Alessandro 2021).

During November of 2020 *Entertainment Weekly* -cover and first -look images of the TV show debuted online and the date for *Wandavision's* drop was announced on social media along with a custom motion poster. Also, *Empire* magazine deputed the cover online with an alternative cover. In addition, during December six decade posters, from the 1950s to 2000s, were published daily online from 4.12 to 9.12 and they were a subliminal tease for the second trailer drop. The second trailer was unveiled on *Disney Investor Day* on 10.12 (D'Alessandro 2021).

Disney did not spare any amount of exposure promoting *WandaVision* throughout its sister companies. The airing date of the series was 15th of January and during the same date 15 -second trailers aired on several channels every hour along with animated billboards. The marketing campaign also consisted of a set takeover on ESPN SportsCenter to showcase the transformation of the logo throughout the decades. Along with other marketing tactics and advertisements, the series was also advertised on broadcast hits, it had custom emojis, which were being updated as the show evolved, black and white posters were being released digitally from 10.1 to 14.1, and a day before the series started airing a talent panel Q&A session was held with the cast.

Furthermore, posters for *WandaVision* were seen on the Sunset Strip, Hollywood towers, and Times Square as an example (D'Alessandro 2021).

Furthermore, the similarity with the marketing of *Iron Man* and *WandaVision* is certainly present; nevertheless, there is a gap of thirteen years between the productions. Both of their marketing campaigns began over a year before the actual release, and both were first announced in the same location. It is evident that the usage of posters, trailers, and straight advertising were used in the advertisement and marketing of both. However, it is also clear that the marketing for *WandaVision* was ambitious, and as stated previously, Disney did not spare any amount of exposure throughout the sister companies. Therefore, it is assumed that the budget for marketing *WandaVision* was also larger, and it shows. Nevertheless, *Iron Man* was the very first movie that started it all and the marketing budget was assumed to be from 50 million to 75 million dollars (Thilk 2008).

3.5 Marvel Cinematic Universe during Covid-19

During the Covid-19 pandemic numerous shows and movies have been constantly delayed, for example, due to difficulty in filming or waiting for better time to release. However, this creates challenges since people are encouraged to stay at home and avoid crowded areas and therefore, people need to find a way to spend time at home. Moreover, some of the significant forms of entertainment are shows, movies and games. In addition, when people have something to look forward to it helps them through the tough times we are currently facing.

During the pandemic Marvel has delayed some of the releases as well. However, Marvel has also released numerous shows and movies during this period of time. All of the show releases took place on *Disney plus*, which is to be expected since Marvel is a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company. The first show was *WandaVision* which started on January 2021 and became hit not long after. Nevertheless, streaming services do not release viewer data, however,

measuring how big an impact the show has had on the audience using Google Trends gives some information. Marvel has also described on their verified Facebook page the TV show to be its "most original storytelling". *WandaVision's* release was followed by the show *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* in March 2021, *Loki* in June 2021, and *Hawkeye* in November 2021. The series *Loki* was the most popular of all of these.
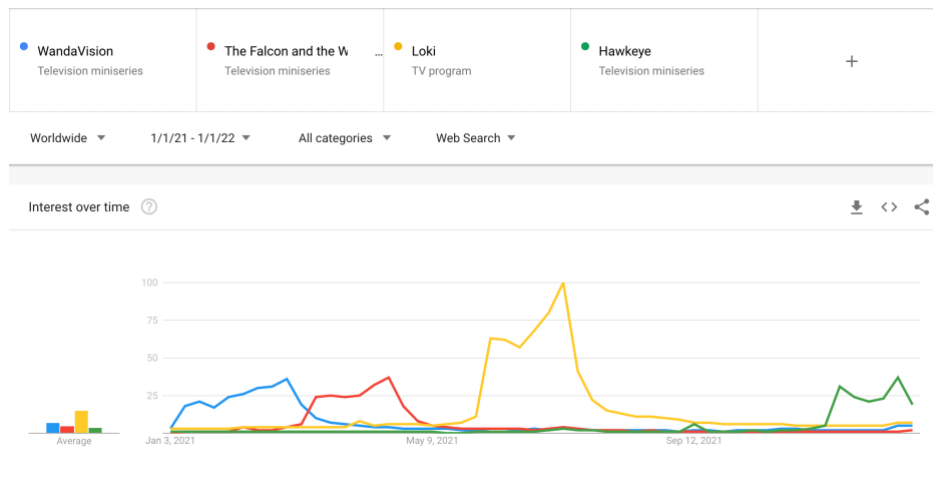

Figure 3. Worldwide Google Trend comparison between *WandaVision*, *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, *Loki*, and *Hawkeye* series during 01/01/2021 – 01/01/2022

Marvel has not only released shows, but also several movies. The first movie release was *Black Widow* in July 2021. In some of the countries the movie did not make an appearance in the theatres due to the pandemic, showing only in the streaming service. The movie was followed by *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* in September 2021, *Eternals* in November 2021, and *Spider-man No Way Home* in December 2021.

4 Storytelling

Storytelling has been and still is, one of the most powerful communication tools. It has been used throughout human history and can be described as a powerful form of persuasion. Storytelling is also one of the only ways people understand and interpret the world that is around them (Menard 2015: 8).

The basic aspect of storytelling consists of four features: the message, the conflict, the characters, and the plot. For some of the companies' storytelling is used in a way to communicate a clear, defined message to the audience, which positively reflects on the company's brand. The messages can for example be moral messages or metaphors, for instance in the tale or tortoise and hare. The story is about a slow and steady tortoise that ends up winning a race against fast but careless hare. The moral of this story is that arrogance backfires (Fog et al. 2003: 32). Neither Marvel nor one of Marvel's biggest competitors, DC, have a specific moral message or metaphor in their storytelling. For *Star Wars* on the other hand, it could be that there is hero and a villain in each one of us. However, Marvel's message could be interpreted as *you are special*. Marvel Cinematic Universe consists of different type of heroes who are willing to risk their lives for the sake of saving others. They go against overwhelming forces of evil by using their unique talents. Some of the characters have special abilities, which are evidently more powerful than others, yet every single one of them have an important role to play. Furthermore, they all give their everything for their cause and make a difference in the world by not giving up.

Conflicts in storytelling are most often between a hero and a villain with opposing agendas. However, conflicts can also form from different point of views, ideas, and experiences. Most importantly conflicts are the driving force of a compelling story, and without conflicts, stories would be dull and boring (Fog et al. 2003: 32 -33). As mentioned, the most common conflict is heroes against villains, which is the case with most Marvel and DC content. Either one hero goes against all odds to defeat the villain, like in Marvel's *Iron Man* and DC's

Wonder Woman, or the heroes team up for instance, in MCU movie *Avengers* and DC movie *Justice League.* However, in some of the cases the conflict lies elsewhere. In *WandaVision*, Wanda is considered the villain by trapping innocent people in a make-believe world. This drives from the loss of a loved one and wanting to bring them back. Nevertheless, the conflict needs to be presented and explained. Not all villains in stories act with malicious intent and explaining the intentions behind their actions elevates the storytelling.

Characters in storytelling need to be compelling and interacting. Each character has to add something to the story and have a specific role to play. Moreover, it is important that each character complements each other, and that the audience is able to identify the hero of the story as well as the problem or the villain (Fog et al. 2003: 36 -38). In Marvel Cinematic Universe there exists a hero everyone can identify with, and just like the heroes in the movies and shows, everyone can make a difference, and everyone is special in their own way. Every character is complex with unique talents and abilities. Spider-Man is a poor student, living a double life trying to balance "normal" life and superhero life; Captain America is honest, loyal, and dependable, and tries his best to follow the rules having lost the love of his life; Iron Man is quoting his own words "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist", who married the love of his life; and Black Widow is fearless, cunning intelligent, unpredictable, who is in love with her co-worker.

The plot most often consists of the beginning, the middle, and the end. It is the flow of the story and the story's events are crucial parts of the experience. The scene is set at the beginning, then a sequence of changes creates a conflict and sets the parameters for the rest of the story. The conflict escalates but eventually it gets resolved ending the story (Fog et al. 2003: 41 -42). This is the flow to most of the Marvel, DC, and *Star Wars* movies. However, there are exceptions like *Avengers: Infinity War*, where the ending of the movie left audience with more questions than answers. This was due to the movie being in two parts, the second part being *Avengers: Endgame*. However, this also creased a "Wannasee" effect for the people who seen the movie in question,

Avengers: Infinity War. Furthermore, without the second part of the movie, it would have been too long for audience to sit through, or important scenes would have been needed to cut.

Moreover, storytelling is not just about the basic aspects of a narrative but much more than that. In order to create a compelling story, it needs to thread topics and themes, plan the beats and the moods of the scenes, advance the story while presenting the dynamic arc of the characters to the audience, and the characters' need to have an authentic feeling dialog and relationships between each other. The dialogs should also be able to make the audience feel something whether it is sadness, happiness, excitement, or something else (Pussinen 2020). For Marvel storytelling is an integral part of its product, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and not just a marketing tool. Each movie and TV show advances the greater narrative forward and throughout the stories, from beginning to where it is now, there's a clear red thread throughout the entire MCU.

> "Interestingly, and contrary to what one might assume, neither the MCU's complex overall narrative structure nor its open appeal to specialized fan-knowledge has so far detracted from its mainstream success - in fact, these aspects seem to represent one of the MCU's primary advantages over competing film and television series, a circumstance that prompts us to reflect on the narrative logics of the franchise and the media preconditions for its emergence" (Brinker 2017: 208)

The Marvel Cinematic Universe constitutes an unprecedented attempt to convey the logic of sequential storytelling in this case created in the medium of superhero comics, to movies and further. Marvel Studio releases also have achieved commercial success, which sets it apart from other cinematic takes on different comic book superheroes. According to Brinker, the scope of the MCU's complex and expanding narrative universe has already surpassed those of other shared universes, like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek.* Furthermore, this has resulted from numerous separate subseries whose narratives exist within a

shared diegesis. Within this interconnected universe events taking place in movies and series are continuous with the others and therefore, they create lasting impacts for following installments, and objects as well as characters move effortlessly within the universe (Brinker 2017: 208).

4.1 Strategic choices

The way Marvel has approached its storytelling in Marvel Cinematic Universe has expanded its fanbase and audience from comic book fanatics to also non-comic readers. This has occurred through MCU's addictive product hook. Marvel already has a fanbase who are hungry for the next story in the MCU, nevertheless MCU movies and series are considered to be about superheroes, but it also incorporates other elements from specific genres. These elements make the movies more accessible for other groups of people. As an example, *Ant-Man* is also a heist movie, *Captain-America: Civil War* is a spy thriller, *Guardians of the Galaxy* -movies are sci-fi, and the first Marvel Studios series *WandaVision* has incorporated nostalgia through old TV sitcoms, which also brought something completely new to the universe. All of these factors not only appealed to the fanbase, but a larger audience and they brought a different kind of feel to each one of their productions (Phillips 2019).

Marvel also has an advantage when it comes to storytelling. This arises from thousands of already existing characters and various stories at their disposal from the comic books. Marvel also has a defined schedule, a baseline story arc, and clear idea of future projects spanning different media for Marvel Cinematic Universe. Marvel has carefully constructed the development of the MCU's content and how the characters and stories intertwine with one another and with the larger narrative (Kupselaitis 2021). Characters do not just make cameos in other movies and series, but they are an integral part of the storyline; for example, in *Spider-Man No Way Home*, without Dr. Strange the whole movie would not have happened. The characters making appearances in other productions does not only increase the sense of the shared story world, but they also reinforce the desire to see other productions of Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Furthermore, devoted fans tend to draw attention to possible future crossovers, which is one of the effects of making cameos (Beaty 2016).

As mentioned, Marvel has managed to connect everything together, even with the brand's red thread, and along with having intriguing hooks is what makes the storytelling successful. However, Marvel also plans everything much ahead of time, which gives it an advantage in marketing upcoming projects, like marketing *WandaVision*. This is also the reason storytelling in MCU is so clear, as everything has been planned years ahead of time, like infinity stones being found throughout the first, second, and third phase of its development (see *Table 1* above). Furthermore, for example, characters Vision and Wanda receive their powers from the *Mind Stone* and Captain Marvel receives her powers from the *Tesseract.* Marvel has also taken great advantage of the past events to create new ones, like the *Loki* series (2021) started when he steals the *Tesseract* in the movie *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The size of screenplay team varies typically between a couple of writers to even six writers or more.

Past events are not the only way Marvel utilizes storytelling on a large scale. It is a known fact, especially for MCU fans, that there will be post credits after the movie has ended and the credits start rolling. The after credits show a sneak peek of upcoming events for the future productions and have been forward looking. This makes the audience excited about what is going to happen next and even guess the next events. Post credits scenes in Marvel Cinematic Universe have also been one way to promote future releases (Beaty 2016). For example, in the after credits of the movie *Black Widow* shows a scene where Yelena, Black Widow's sister, is on the Black Widow's grave and is told that the character Hawkeye supposedly killed Back Widow. This raises the question if Yelena was going to be in the *Hawkeye* series. Furthermore, in the after credits of *Spider-Man No Way Home* two clips were shown, which is the first time it has ever happened. In the first clip is shown Venom, a Marvel character who has not been a part of the MCU, and the second clip was the trailer for the new movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe also contains so-called *easter eggs*. These *easter eggs* heighten the divide of the MCU's audience even more between the casual audience and the superfans. Their purpose is to trigger the imagination of the superfans and award their story knowledge as well as their brand loyalty. *Easter eggs* began with the very first movie *Iron Man* and has continued ever since (Beaty 2016).

> " --for the casual fan of these interlinked Hollywood blockbusters the pleasure of the superhero film resides in its qualities as a film exclusively; for the hardcore fan, however, it stems not only from that pleasure, but from the promise of additional pleasure in the future, and from the elevated status that comes from the way that filmmakers seek to flatter fans who are "in the know"." (Beaty 2016)

The interlinked universe also has linked repercussions and modular story development. The linked repercussions are similar to the ones in the comic books. This means that events that occur in one production will have an impact on the characters in other ones. The modular story development allows MCU to take on more risky projects, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*. It was a big budget movie and the riskiest project since the first film of the franchise. This was due to characters not being familiar with casual audiences nor being extremely popular in the comic books. Furthermore, due to the modular nature of series development, studios can avoid failures and produce unexpected success (Beaty 2016).

Marvel not only builds up the hype for upcoming productions through marketing early on but also in several other ways. Before the first *Avengers* movie came out, Marvel began building up its audience by making individual movies for the characters, known as phase one, before the big finale. Moreover, Marvel does not just aim to make big profits out of its productions but to make unforgettable moments for its audience and hook them to their storytelling (Phillips 2019). Marvel does the unthinkable and makes the MCU fans gasp when unforgettable

moments unfold. This happened with the *Spider-Man No Way Home* movie, when the audience witnessed all the Spider-Mans come together.

Nevertheless, Marvel does not specifically advertise and market the future productions to be part of the MCU. However, it becomes evidently clear in the trailers. These only minute-long clips tie the production into the universe, like in the *Eternals* trailer the audience heard the line "We are living in a world where people can just disappear". This quote was a reference to the movie *Avengers: Infinity War*, where half of the people vanished. Also, in the same trailer the characters were discussing who is going to lead the *Avengers* now that Captain America and Iron Man are gone, which is also a direct reference to MCU.

Some people might think of the Marvel Cinematic Universe to be a frustrating concept. Nevertheless, while every movie and series are a standalone, it might be difficult to grasp the story without any background information and therefore, not understand the full story. As an example, in the series *Hawkeye* the last couple of episodes would not make as much sense to someone who has not seen the *Avengers: Infinity War*. For some people this might also be a driving force to see several other MCU productions to gain better understanding. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, part of Marvel's strategy is to take advantage of the after credits and in a way MCU fans are trained to look for hints for upcoming projects, but it also enables the audience to engage in speculation. The speculations happen verbally as well as on the internet, which means everyone can take part in these conversations. This might backfire if the speculations build up expectations for the production and it cannot match or exceed these expectations. Furthermore, since storytelling is an integral part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, each movie and TV show has to offer something to the larger narrative and move the story forward. However, if this does not happen, the audience might be disappointed, and the story might fall short of expectations (DiLillo 2018).

4.2 Transmedia storytelling

Transmedia storytelling can be described as a story, which takes place across several different platforms and each one contributes to the larger narrative, yet every individual narrative has the ability to stand alone. According to the case study conducted by Drew Menard, transmedia storytelling holds the power to revolutionize the way we interact with stories. Furthermore, it is evident that media has evolved throughout the years, however, the nature of the content still continues to hold the ability to persuade, to inspire, and to develop among everything else (Menard 2015: 10).

> "Some of the most innovative storytellers have taken their narratives beyond the binding of books or the confines of a screen and opened universes for audiences to explore, from one media format to the next, with each format opening a new door within the greater realm." (Menard 2015: 9)

Most companies want to be a part of transmedia storytelling and it can be greatly beneficial for the company in long-term. Since transmedia storytelling enables stories to exist as various forms of entertainment, therefore, there exist strong possibilities to acquire larger audiences. The world of a particular story drives a consumer to actively consume all forms of entertainment. Transmedia storytelling is also a way to provide long-term and viable solution for firms to benefit from the fans' interests with barely any risks. Companies that manage to create intriguing universe are able to explore and expand across devices in several different forms, which is desired place to be in for companies and brands (Carredu 2018).

Marvel Entertainment, which has been owned by Walt Disney ever since 2009, has during recent years become "a box-office champion" with Marvel Cinematic Universe. A documentary was made about the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2014, called *Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe*. This aired on ABC, where

Marvel producers, directors and executives clarified that the Marvel Cinematic Universe was designed to span across into other media formats. Moreover, Walt Disney also has a department devoted to further Disney's transmedia vision through innovation, which also tells just how valuable it can be (Menard 2015: 11 -12).

Transmedia storytelling might be the future of storytelling and Marvel has already declared to its audience all over the world that it will be on top of transmedia implementation. Marvel has also been a champion when it comes to transmedia experimentation. It has spawned several movies, one-shots, comic books, television shows, and games, which most are a part of Marvel Cinematic Universe. Movies are one of the most visually alluring experiences, comic books are perfect way to provide a backstory and to build the universe, television shows are a mostly character driven and a way for audiences to get to know the characters more personally, and games allow its users to become immersed in the story world in a whole new way. In other words, every single aspect contributes to the whole (Menard 2015: 12 -13).

Marvel had the resources as well as the knowledge to create a universe that keeps its audiences coming back for more. Through personal appearance and reference, Marvel Cinematic Universe's characters are used in a cohesive way tying everything together. MCU has also been able to maintain a strong continuity across numerous cossmedia installments through the usage of the characters, events, technology, locations and natural laws. Furthermore, it is clear that additional understanding was used to strengthen the bonds throughout the transmedia story, based on the numerous connections woven into the entire MCU storyline across the media platform. Moreover, Marvel Cinematic Universe is a forerunner for the future of storytelling through its transmedia storytelling efforts. MCU has also reached a high level of prominence and staying true to the basic principles of transmedia (Menard 2015: 45 -105).

5 Analysis

It is evident that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is not the only story universe that exists and definitely not the only famous one. Marvel has been and still is compared with DC and not without a reason. Both of them are focused on superhero themes and have developed similar productions in the past such as single movies, trilogies, and now, a story universe. Moreover, both have begun with comic books and along with films are also developing series. Numerous games have been made from Marvel and DC characters and both have a significant amount of merchandise available. As already mentioned, Marvel's story universe is Marvel Cinematic Universe, which began in 2008, and DC has *DC Extended Universe*, which started in 2013. DC is considered to be Marvel's biggest rival and the two are compared to each other on several discussion forums, and for example, MCU is known for its post credit scenes and now *DCEU* has also tapped into the same concept.

Comparison between these two universes occurs for example, through the characters. Nevertheless, both universes' concepts are superheroes, they still hold considerable amounts of differences, and the characters are quite the opposite. DC's characters seem to be larger than life and some of them possess mythological qualities to them whereas Marvel's characters are more approachable and someone we can identify with. Furthermore, Marvel's characters have similar obstacles such as balancing life or feeling misunderstood. They are also more human-like than the characters of DC. Nevertheless, Marvel and DC have characters without hidden identities as well as with two identities, a superhero, and a regular person. For example, Marvel's Iron Man and DC's Wonder Woman have only one identity whereas Marvel's Spider-Man and DC's Superman have two identities. However, the line between Spider-Ma*n* and *Peter Parker* is thin and both are considered to be nerdy goofballs but, the line between Superman and *Clark Kent* is great since Superman is a superhero with only one weakness and *Clark Kent* is a nerdy reporter.

Another story universe that can be compared to the MCU is *Star Wars*. Nevertheless, the concepts of the universes are different, *Star Wars* franchise also includes several movies, series, and comics. The franchise also offers games and merchandise just as MCU, not to mention both have some of the highest grossing movies ever made and are some of the most successful movie franchises. However, the *Star Wars* franchise began in 1977, which is considerably earlier than the MCU or *DCEU* (Navarro 2022).

Marvel Cinematic Universe was as of August 2021 the highest grossing movie franchise worldwide with box office revenue being 22,93 billion dollars. Marvel's *Avengers: Endgame* was the franchise's highest grossing film with global revenue of 2,8 billion dollars*. DC Extended Universe* had box office revenue of 5,78 billion dollars worldwide, which statistically is significantly lower than that of the MCU. However, the *Star Wars* franchise had 10,32-billion-dollar box office revenue and *The Rise of Skywalker* film generated box office revenue of over one billion dollars globally during the pandemic, and the film has been ranked third on how much it has generated in the *Star Wars* franchise (Navarro 2021a).

With everything that has been stated so far, Marvel Cinematic Universe has been in the making for over a decade now and new productions are constantly being released, whether it being a movie or a series. Marvel also has already mapped out the next upcoming years for the story universe, which is vital for the story universe to stay cohesive. However, the question is just how much the story universe can keep expanding and is there a limit to it.

It is clear that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is going to keep growing the next few years with new character additions to the universe. Marvel has thousands of characters at its disposal from the comic books, which are easy to move onto the wide screen. Marvel has also already brought characters from production outside of MCU to the interconnected universe. As previously mentioned, these characters are for example, Daredevil, Kingpin, and two of the previous Spider-

Mans. Furthermore, in one of the after-credit scenes the audience witnessed another Marvel character, Venom, being the star of it. This raises the question whether Marvel has planned to bring this character in the MCU as well.

Marvel Cinematic Universe also has a large, loyal fan base eager to see where the story universe will take them next. Nevertheless, the universe has been expanding for years, it is still able to create unexpected scenarios and events that surprises the audience. Due to this the story world remains intriguing and alluring and most importantly, it does not become repetitive. Marvel has also managed to add something new to the universe even with its recent productions, like *WandaVision*.

MCU also has big characters that can be described as "main characters". These characters are, for example, Captain America, Iron Man, Vision, and Black Widow. Captain America and Iron Man are also described to be the leaders of the *Avengers* making them extremely important. What Marvel has done with this is killing off these four characters to make room for new ones and to enable growth for already existing ones. New characters might have been left on the sidelines with these fan-favorites and it keeps the story interesting and fresh. Furthermore, without these characters, a new era has begun in the MCU starting with the series *WandaVision*.

Marvel Cinematic Universe has great potential to grow and expand with the usage of already existing characters with addition of new ones. *Phase four* has also brought some completely new aspects to the story world and with the main villain, Thanos, of the first three phases gone, it opens whole new possibilities. Keeping the story world interesting while maintaining an easy-to-follow aspect are the keys to keeping the success.

6 Conclusion

Marvel's journey from comic books to movies has been through incremental steps, from animations to live action. Turning their attention to live action was an important step and with Marvel Studios' infamous Marvel Cinematic Universe existing for the past fourteen years, adding series alongside movies has been a resourceful decision. Furthermore, with most of the content, movies as well as series, being available on a streaming service, they are accessible for everyone all the time. As a result, consumers with limitless options of entertainment will most likely choose an option with effortless access and therefore, turn their attention possibly to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Nevertheless, Marvel's start to developing films took time until they hit a homerun; it is now one of the most, if not the most successful, franchises.

Marvel is a remarkably known brand with numerous characters at the heart of it, which is also why they are a huge part of merchandising. Marvel has done licensing deals, games, and merchandise, which all includes the infamous characters. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has brought depth to the characters and given the audience a new outlook of the characters. The characters are relatable with their diverse struggles in life and the qualities in them that the audience can relate to. Marvel Cinematic Universe's audience has a wide range of age and gender with a mix of hardcore superfans and casual audience. The movies and series are not just for comic book fanatics but also superhero fans, action movie fans and fans of the genres the specific production represents. Moreover, the name Marvel itself represents the brand and is the universal reference point, and suitably it means a wonderful or an astonishing thing.

Marvel Studios borrows the storytelling strategy developed by Marvel Comics in the 1960s as a modular way to increase the audience of its movie franchise. Superhero comic books have become more profitable media-format sources, from television and film to video games and licensed properties such as toys and T-shirts. Superhero movies from 2000 and onwards have, to a greater

extent, adopted the same strategy for storytelling as a way of cross-marketing movies, like the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Furthermore, this storytelling strategy has been described to be as the most innovative development in the Hollywood movie making industry of the past quarter century. Marvel utilizes each and every production in a way that it is not just an event itself but it also a promotional tool for upcoming productions, which is a way to increase anticipation. Elements that serve this promotional function differently engage superfans and casual audiences in various ways, creating a hierarchy of knowledge, communication, and intimacy within the consumer base to effect the transformation of casual viewers into solid, deeply committed groups (Beaty 2016).

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been statistically the most successful franchise. However, it has had some tough competition from *Star Wars* and the *DC Extended Universe*, both of which are also known story universes and extremely popular ones. The *DC Extended Universe* has more similarities with the MCU, which is why the two have been compared to each other on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, even with the competition Marvel Cinematic Universe has managed to stay on top and continues expanding. Series and movies continue to be developed for the story world and nonetheless, they are not specifically marketed to be part of the universe, it is to be expected. The relation to the universe can be spotted in the trailers as well as in the beginning of the production since all of Marvel Studios' productions hold similar intro to one another. The universe will continue to expand for the next few years and maybe even decades. Because Marvel plans its future projects years ahead of time, it makes the productions more cohesive and grants the opportunity to keep broadening the horizons.

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Appendices

Contents of Marvel Cinematic Universe

Table 3. List of all of the movies and TV shows currently included in the Marvel Cinematic Universe on first of February 2022

Productions in the Marvel Cinematic Universe	
Phase one	
Iron Man	2008
The Incredible Hulk	2008
Iron Man 2	2010
Thor	2011
Captain America: The First Avenger	2011
The Avengers	2012
Phase two	
Iron Man 3	2013
Thor: The Dark World	2013
Captain America: The Winter Soldier	2014
Guardians of the Galaxy	2014
Avengers: Age of Ultron	2015

Productions in the Marvel Cinematic Universe	
Ant-Man	2015
Phase three	
Captain America: Civil War	2016
Doctor Strange	2016
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2	2017
Spider-Man: Homecoming	2017
Thor: Ragnarök	2017
Black Panther	2018
Avengers: Infinity War	2018
Ant-Man and the Wasp	2018
Captain Marvel	2019
Avengers: Endgame	2019
Spider-Man: Far from Home	2019
Phase four	
WandaVision	2021
The Falcon and the Winter Soldier	2021
Loki	2021
Black Widow	2021

Productions in the Marvel Cinematic Universe	
Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings	2021
Hawkeye	2021
Eternals	2021
Spider-Man: No Way Home	2021