

Advertising in an Assembled Franchise: Utilizing Product Placement as
Storytelling Instruments within the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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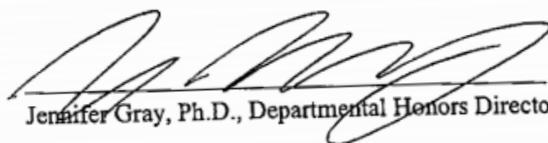
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Abstract

This paper serves as a conversation for how advertising is used within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). More specifically, how are brands presented to a large-scale consumer base within the narrative. In order to investigate this, the first twelve films within the first two phases of the MCU were investigated by means of a content analysis. It is determined that product placement is in the forefront of the narrative and influences the plot greatly.

Dedication

“Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe, you just don't know it yet.” This line (as spoken by S.H.I.E.L.D Director Nick Fury to Tony Stark/Iron Man during the post credit scene of *Iron Man*) has been the catalyst for sparking my imagination and ultimate love for the Marvel Cinematic Universe, since 2008. It has been such an extraordinary honor to have reached this point in my academic career. Many long nights, stressful thoughts, and bouts of doubt have walked alongside me on this path. Yet, this experience has also shown how much love and support I have in my life. So while I cannot get to every single person that I would like to thank at this time, I would like to personally say thank you to a few select individuals at this time.

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Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

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Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

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And to anyone who reads this: Thank you very much for taking the time to read this paper and I hope you enjoy the read whether you are a fan of superhero movies or not.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
Review of Literature.....	9
Methodology.....	14
Results.....	16
Discussion.....	18
Limitations and Future Research.....	22
Conclusion.....	23
References.....	24
Appendix.....	27

Introduction

As a media entity, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has been a mainstay in popular culture for nearly eleven years. The franchise has incorporated twenty films (as of this writing) into the zeitgeist of modern-day film discussion. It became interesting to notice multiple instances across multiple films wherein which characters or story moments in the films utilize or mention a particular product or brand.

The intended purpose of this manuscript is to examine how Marvel Studios features product placements, and how they may be able to influence the way in which the narrative progression of both episodic individual films, and the thematic MCU at large. Additionally, this paper is designed to investigate the ways in which commercial advertising and marketing practices that can be utilized in the development and execution of an ongoing multi-billion-dollar franchise, and how they influence the way in which consumers process films. Furthermore, this paper will cover topics including: the inception of the MCU, research into different discussions of narrative development in stories, and how product placements are used in cinematic film franchises. A content analysis of twelve MCU films was performed, in order to understand product placement within the narrative.

To understand the fundamental nature of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a conduit for brand synergy within the greater realm of consumer engagement, it is first important to chronicle the overall beginnings of the franchise, as a frame of reference for how brands learned to recognize the economic appeal towards product placement within superhero franchises.

The inception of this new age pop culture empire first began during the year 2005, when New York based entertainment company Marvel Entertainment was in the final stages of preparing a calculated financial move (Fritz & Harris, 2005). The company wanted to take on the responsibility of production for any upcoming films moving forward, with more artistic

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

ownership. This was in direct correlation to the company licensing films based off of some of their more familiar properties (such as *Spider-Man*, *Blade*, *The Incredible Hulk*, the *Fantastic Four* and the *X-Men* just to name a few) to other film studios (Waxman, 2007). The company found that their best option for success would involve partnering with a film distribution group that best represented their wishes to grow and flourish as their own independent studio (Leonard, 2014). On April 27, 2005, it was announced that Marvel had a conversation with (at the time) Chief Executive of American film Studio Paramount Pictures Brad Grey and was able to work out a distribution arrangement to secure a seven year ten film deal with Marvel for a collective value of \$525 Million (Fritz & Harris, 2005). In exchange for Paramount only being the primary distributor for the films and taking a portion made from overall promotion, Marvel would provide a credit line from Merrill Lynch Commercial Finance Corp to fund the ten films (Fritz & Harris, 2005).

Within the overall development of this narrative, it is important to highlight three key players that were vital in the overall this deal. First is Avi Arad. Arad was Marvel Entertainment's head for the film division, and it was ultimately his desire that the company to creating the independent Marvel Studios team (previously known as Marvel at its inception in 1993 and of which he served as founder and CEO up until 2006), (Leonard, 2014). The second individual of notoriety was Chairman of Marvel Studios David Maisel, who was the individual within Marvel team that negotiated the \$525 million credit deal with Grey and Paramount Pictures (Masters, 2016). Finally, is Kevin Feige. Having worked his way up to a producer under the direct instruction of Arad, Feige was the pioneering force who envisioned an expansive crossover franchise universe utilizing the remaining characters that were still under ownership of Marvel Studios, leading to the Earth 1-99999 universe franchise, better known as The Marvel Cinematic Universe (Shaw-Williams, 2013). Since the 2008 release of *Iron Man* (Marvel's first

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

film within their connected universe franchise), Marvel Studios was purchased by Walt Disney Co. for \$4 billion (Goldman, 2009), has produced sixteen additional films, and amassed a collective \$17,548,901,330 Billion in worldwide total earnings (Goldberg, 2018). To help with maintaining a semblance of narrative progression, the films within the MCU are sectioned off into phases. These phases effectively help to develop narratives that occur between each film, over a specific period of time, and connect to the overall narrative of the entire universe at large.

Review of Literature

Modular story development is utilizing a narrative in the form of providing an audience member with a series of individualized sections of a story (Beaty, 2016). While this franchise is designed to lead characters to eventually cross paths, every film is written and produced in such a way to where it is also able to tell individual stories that can be isolated when pulled out of the franchise lineup. The advantage of this philosophy, is that it allows for experimentation and opportunities to provide filmgoers with unique experiences film to film (Beaty, 2016). In Beaty's (2016) article, he notes the release of the studio's tenth film in the cinematic universe *Guardians of The Galaxy* being the company's riskiest venture, based solely that it was such an isolated tale so far removed from every other character introduced up till that point, with a whole suite of characters that were not fully known or understood to casual consumers. However, the overall positive reception (as Feige explained in an interview with Cinemablend) gave Marvel the overall confidence to start telling as many unique and fun stories that they wanted (Holmes, 2016). Furthermore, *The Guardians of The Galaxy* gained a follow up film and a major narrative involvement in 2018's *Avengers: Infinity War*, from having done so well at the box office (Beaty, 2016). Being that this franchise places an immense emphasis of a series of individual films carrying an ongoing narrative (and an entire universe for that matter), it is important that

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

there be an evaluation of the techniques that Marvel Studios utilizes to effectively tell a continuous story from film to film.

Crafting A Narrative- Customs and development of Media Storytelling

At the foreground of most discussions surrounding film analysis, is the term film theory. Film theory refers to a scholarly critique of concepts that appear within a film, and how they can connect back to society and other forms of expression. Like any art form, film appreciation can vary from each and every audience member based on factors such as moral viewpoints, environment developments to expressive art forms, and overall level of engagement to the material at hand.

Coleman et al. (2013) detailed their findings when trying to understand the way in which audience members react to narrative developments within film and television. Three key research points are focused on during the course of this article. First, narrative schema (Coleman et al, 2013, 95); which is the component of film theory that helps viewers have a grasp on how they mentally process a story. This allows viewers to learn how to better predict the outcome and trajectory of plot and character developments that take place within a narrative (Coleman et. al, 2013, 95). Second, is narrative expectations, which exist when audiences experience an aspect of a story that reaches a point that effectively challenges their comfort abilities (specifically referred to as boundaries in the writing) that run parallel to the narrative schema based by an audience segmented behavior (Coleman et al. 2013, 95). The third is called scriptwriting theory, which points towards to how filmmakers and screenwriters utilize manuals and guides of writing a script, to dictate the actions of a film's story. However, it does not take into account how the filmgoer will interpret clearer concepts that can be explored through segmentation behavioral analysis.

Through the research and methodology of Coleman et al. (2013), they were ultimately able to reach that not every form of narrative media follows along the same track of thought in order to tell an effective story. Rather, they suggest that a distinctive style of analyzing and seeing the way in which stories play out is the best course moving forward. As a corporate film studio with licensing to hundreds of different characters, world and storylines, Marvel Studios must curate a phase of films that can appease filmgoers and be accessible for brands to be interested in featuring products or services within the films. This crossroad between the overall storyline, and the featured product or brand, means that a degree of communication must take place regarding how, and to what extent the placement in question will be utilized within the narrative. Whether that is intentionally placed in the foreground and be used actively by characters, or just be featured in the background as something to be seen in passing, product placement within a narrative allows for a degree of recall to exist within a consumer (See Appendix A). Successful product placement within a narrative can allow for influences on purchasing decisions to be made.

Product Placement Within Cinematic Franchises

As the main focal point of this research is the topic of advertisers implementing product placement within commercially successful film franchises. To clarify, the term product placement refers to “a form of advertising in which branded goods and services are featured in a video production that targets a large audience. Also known as "embedded marketing" or "embedded advertising," product placements are typically found in movies, television shows, personal videos, radio, and — less commonly — live performances. In exchange for product placement rights companies may pay a production company or studio in cash, goods or services.” (Kenton, 2018). One component of this conversation is: how long of a lifespan do these product placement in the grand scheme of reality? Karniouchina, Uslay, and Erenburg

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

(2011) describe concepts such as efficacy, and the conceptual framework that is associated with having ads within movies.

The first topic is on efficacy. This is when an item is attempting to acquire a predetermined action or outcome (Karniouchina, Uslay, and Erenburg, 2011). In the case of this research, they point towards the notion that product placements have a transferable quality to them, when compared to other forms of advertising and marketing techniques. Three points of research are mentioned during their discussion of efficacy. The first mentions that from other researchers shows that product placement can covertly gather different emotional responses that were already sanctioned towards the film (as cited within their text from Russell, 1998) (Karniouchina, Uslay, and Erenburg, 2011).

The second is Excitation Transfer Theory (Zillmann, 1996), which states that the excitement that audiences can generate towards a film can bleed over into other parts of the film, which could also include the product placement within the film in question. As a result of this theory, product placements have a more intrinsic place in a film that cannot be avoided or passed on in cases such as commercials- better known within the paper as “The Anti TiVo” (Schonfeld & Borzo, 2006). The last piece of research drawn on by Kretchmer (2004), is what is known as “advertainment” or that product placements can exist in between the realities of traditional realms of advertisement and entertainment content (Karniouchina, Uslay, and Erenburg, 2011).

Another component that can impact the overall quality and delivery of product placement is how the product or brand in question affects consumers, when having to be in contact with them. One of the more looked at approaches to this mentality is the research study that involves materialism. This term describes a philosophical belief that acquired material possessions hold a much more impactful portion of our lives. Seeing as how the fundamental goal of advertising is to encourage consumers to purchase or believe in products, materialism can be in line with how

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

product placement is implemented within films. Manyiwa and Brennan's (2016) research discuss attributes within product placement, such as concerns of ethical standards, as well as the perception of both product placement and materialism itself. Within that research, the paper presents a few points that further elaborate and give insight on these aspects of product placement.

The first discussed attribute of Manyiwa & Brennan's (2016) research is on subliminal perception within product placements. This is when a consumer comes into contact with a commercial message that the individual subconscious keeps without fully realizing that they have done so on a conscious level (Moore, 1982). Combined with how product placements are covert in terms of how they are placed deep within the content of a media product, consumers find it difficult to fully recognize when these promotions are occurring. As a result, audiences have started to acknowledge the subliminal messaging that has been occurring in recent decades. Yet, Manyiwa & Brennan's (2016) article suggests that when the messaging is used in proper conditions, the subliminal communication can be much more effective as a psychological priming method of goal relevant issues (Verwijmeren, Karremans, Stroebe, & Wigboldus, 2011).

Part of product placement effects on advertising are the different factors that ultimately affect how they are impactful to consumers. One of these are known as execution factors; which place a heavier focus on the mode, its incorporation within the film, and how much it is featured overall. It should be noted, however, that advertisements and product placements are not particularly viewed as the same entity. Consumer awareness has increased to the point where they are understanding when the attempt to sell is approaching through advertising. In turn, the more covert and constraint approach has led to research suggesting that: A.) The more aware consumers are of communication practices that strongly implement persuasion tactics leads to consumers understanding and appreciating it differently compared to when they are not aware of its effects (Friestad & Wright, 1994, via Nabi & Oliver, 2009, 301), and B.) that consumers that

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

become aware of the placement may decide to completely shut down components of association towards the product placement and enjoy the program it is from less. (McCarty, 2004, via Nabi & Oliver, 2009, 301)

Taking the literature review into account, it is important that to present a point of focus towards this research. With that being said, the question presented in this essay is: are advertisers directly influencing the overall narrative trajectory of the MCU?

RQ1: How does Marvel use product placement in their films?

RQ2: How does Marvel utilize products in the narrative?

RQ3: How does product placement influence the narrative in the MCU?

Methodology

For developing a methodology for finding results towards the proposed research question, a content analysis would be the most beneficial to the overall landscape of the research within the framework of the first two MCU phases. The result of this desire to achieve developmental data, lead to the creation of seventy-one pages of research notes and coding sheet. Of the two that were just mentioned, the first crafted object that was made were the research notes within a Google Docs page. Every film associated with the first and second phases of the MCU. Prior to beginning the film, the film title was recorded, alongside the official date of release within the United States, and average runtime of the film. From here, all films within the parameter of the research sample (within phases one and two). Once an instance of either product placement, easter egg/pop culture reference, and or a moment of licensed music occurred, specific use and instance of any of the items listed above, and the time stamp that was connected to the moment that they were featured were recorded. While watching the films, articles or press releases associated with any recorded history or mentioning of brand partnerships sponsorships in the overall endorsement of the film were cross referenced in conjunction with the discovered artifact.

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Upon the completion of a film, an estimated time frame of the total hours it involved to effusively research, watch and document all of the material found within the film was calculated and recorded.

From here, the coding sheet was the next item of focus. The first stage was to figure out how to describe coder identification. The decision was made to section off all twelve films based on their phase number. For context, a phase refers to the complete set of films that Marvel Studios deemed to be the most connected based on major plot developments/events (Jaworski, 2018). (Phase one started on May 2, 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*, and concluded on May 4, 2012 with the release of *The Avengers*. Phase two started on May 3, 2013 with the release of *Iron Man 3*, and concluded on July 17, 2015 with the release of *Ant-Man*). Therefore: *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *The Avengers* were coded with a one, for phase one; while *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Ant-Man* were coded with a two, for phase two. Next was post identification. Here, a sequential number sequence for each film starting at one at continuing until the conclusion of the individual film was utilized. Following this was product identification, which was essentially numbering each film as the installment within its respected phase (i.e the brand identification) starting from one and going up all the way to twelve. Post date was the next item of code, in which the official US release date for each film was used. Following this came the process of coding for brand placement. The items in this section placed a focus on the artifact's visual placement within the shot of the film. If the artifact was present in either the foreground or background, it was coded. For this aspect, it was a matter of looking to see if the artifact was necessary to the overall progression of the film's narrative. Next was coding for brand announcement which was looking for how the brand artifact was impacted in terms of how producers and marketers may have had

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

on the overall ecosystem within the MCU. Any instance of an artifact that was shot or utilized in such a way that placed a heavier emphasis on a brand whether it was visually shown or mentioned as a line was noted. If the artifact had no explicit announcement or anticipation, it was recorded as well. A brand artifact that was not easily identifiable during the viewing of the film that a casual consumer could not recognize was labeled. As for any instances of artifacts that were considered to be within another category were also given a label.

Results

To help answer the question of how Marvel uses product placement in their films, an R x K Chi Square test were conducted to differentiate the variables of interactive usage and brand placement for the phases of the MCU. Within the phases and how much interactivity it was used by characters in the story, the results were statistically significant: $\chi^2(1, N = 437) = 9.60, p = .002, V^* = .148$. A Bonferroni post hoc reported for phase one, section one (characters being interactive with brand/product) reached statistical significance at -3.1 adjusted residual. Section two (characters not being interactive with brand/product) also achieved statistical significance at 3.1 adjusted residual. For phase two, section one reached statistical significance at 3.1 adjusted residual. Section two also achieved statistical significance at -3.1 adjusted residual. As for brand placement, the results for both phases and their respective sections also showed statistical significance: $\chi^2(1, N = 437) = 19.61, p < .000, V^* = .212$. A Bonferroni Post Hoc Test also reported that phase one, section one (having the placement be visible in the foreground of the film) reached statistical significance at -4.4 adjusted residual. Section two (having the placement be visible in the background of the film) also achieved statistical significance at 4.4 adjusted residual. For phase two, section one reached statistical significance at 4.4 adjusted residual. Section two also achieved statistical significance at -4.4 adjusted residual.

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

To help answer the question of how does Marvel use product placement in their films, R x K Chi Square tests were conducted to differentiate the variables of interactive usage and brand placement for the individual films within the MCU. Within the individual film and character interactivity, the results were statistically significant: $\chi^2(11, N = 617) = 40.66, p < .000, V^* = .26$. Thor and Guardians of the Galaxy both achieved significance at 3.4 adjusted residual. As for brand placement, the results were also statistically significant: $\chi^2(11, N = 617) = 49.28, p < .000, V^* = .28$. A Bonferroni post hoc found The Avengers achieved significance at 3.1 adjusted residual. Also, Guardians of the Galaxy achieved significance at 3.6 adjusted residual. To answer the question of how does Marvel utilize products in the narrative, an R x K Chi Square tests were conducted to differentiate the variables of Brand ID and Brand Announcement for the phases within the MCU. Within the phases and brand announcement, the results were statistically significant: $\chi^2(4, N = 437) = 23.79, p < .000, V^* = .23$. In both cases of phases one and two, significance occurred during instances when brand announcements were either announced solely by the product (section two) or when the product or brand were not announced with any form of anticipation of announcement (section three). For phase one, section two significance occurred at -3.3 adjusted residual. In section three, significance occurred at 3.4 adjusted residual. For phase two, section two significance occurred at 3.3 adjusted residual. In section three, significance occurred at -3.4 adjusted residual.

To answer the question of how Marvel utilizes products within the narrative, R x K Chi Square tests were conducted to differentiate the variables of Product ID and Brand Announcement for the individual films within the MCU. Within the individual films and brand announcement, the results were statistically significant $\chi^2(44, N = 617) = 184.78, p < .000, V^* = .27$. Four films were ultimately able to achieve significance here. The first Film was Iron Man, which achieved significance in section three at 5.7 adjusted residual, and section five at -3.4

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

adjusted residual. The second was Captain America: The Winter Soldier which achieved significance in section two at 3.8 adjusted residual. The third film was Guardians Of The Galaxy, which achieved significance in section five at 6.8 adjusted residual. Finally, Avengers: Age Of Ultron achieved significance in section two at 4.2 adjusted residual.

To answer the question of how product placement influences the narrative in the MCU, R x K Chi Square tests were conducted to differentiate the variables of Brand ID and narrative relevance for the phases within the MCU. Within the phases and the amount of narrative relevancy, the results were statistically significant: $\chi^2(1, N = 437) = 19.61, p < .000$. A Bonferroni Post Hoc Test was conducted to determine significance within the variables. For phase one, statistical significance occurred at -3.1 adjusted residual.

To answer the question of how product placement influences the narrative in the MCU, R x K Chi Square tests were conducted to differentiate the variables of product ID and narrative relevance for the individual films within the MCU. Within the individual film and character interactivity, the results were not statistically significant: $\chi^2(11, N = 617) = 21.18, p = .032$.

Discussion

The intended purpose of this study was twofold. The first was to effectively analyze the complexity of the MCU's (current) eleven year storyline, and how it has evolved and expanded since its 2008 start. The second, was to see if advertisers are able to effectively shape and influence character motivations and narrative progression, through instances of product placement and brand equity. In order to accomplish these goals, it was essential that any instances of brand placement be tracked based on how, and when, they were utilized within both phases and the individual films of the MCU.

From the perspective of the phases, gathered research data ultimately led to the discovery that more instances of product placement existing in both the foreground and background was

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

higher overall in phase one as oppose to phase two. As suggested by Nabi & Oliver (2009), product placements are better served within either the foreground, or used within the narrative, as opposed to being placed in the background. An example of this within the MCU can be seen during the final scene of *The Avengers*. As our main characters part their separate ways, we are shown them driving off as the camera pans to capture explicit shots of the different vehicles they are in: Tony Stark/Iron Man driving with Dr. Bruce Banner/The Incredible Hulk in a concept model 2012 Acura NSX Roadster, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow and Clint Barton/Hawkeye can be seen driving a 2010 Acura TL, and Captain Steve Rogers/ Captain America is shown leaving in a Harley Davidson Softail slim motorcycle.

Both interactivity of product placement items or references, as well as their significance to the plot were also reported as being substantially higher overall within the phase one portion of the MCU. Specifically, the notion of the films having characters incorporate products, brands, and or services, serves as a framing construct that allows the MCU to be a counterpoint of our actual world; that this world is one that feels all so similar to our own, albeit with superheroes. Furthermore, the decline of overall interactive usage may come down to the overall narrative placing more of a concentrative focus of connecting the multiple storylines together as the MCU progressed. As such, the films were able to stand on their own two feet as a competent narrative entity, rather than having to rely on branding and promotional deals to attract filmgoers.

Within the advertising and marketing perspective of product placement, it is also key to discuss the importance of brand recall. According to Aaker (1996: 10), as cited by Van Der Waldt et al (2008), brand recall is the way in which a consumer remembers (recalls) the name of a brand or product based on having seen it within a film. The more that a consumer is visibly exposed to the brand on screen, the greater the likelihood becomes of a consumer being able to effectively recall it (Van Der Waldt et al, 2008, 21). For the consumer, this recall is typically

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

collected through memory and signaled cues. Aaker's research also points to three key advantages that are associated with how consumers become aware of a product. 1.) "it provides the product with a sense of familiarity; 2.) the salience of a product will determine if it is recalled at a key time in the purchasing process and 3.) product awareness is an asset that can be remarkably durable and thus sustainable" (Van Der Walddt et al, 2008, 21).

Transitioning over to evaluating the MCU from an individual film perspective, the most collected instances of interactivity, brand placement, and narrative development occurred most prominently in film franchises with multiple instalments. These films being: *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, *Iron Man 3*, *Thor*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *The Avengers*, and *Avengers: Age Of Ultron*. Taking this into consideration leads to two schools of thought. First, is that films that have been garnered a sequel have a historic tendency to outperform their original counterparts (Sola, 2016). This may stem from consumers' need to avoid risky purchases of tickets to unfamiliar works, in favor of familiar and comfortable works. In turn, this allows the sequel to gain more profit from a loyal fan base who wish to continue the story and character developments from previous installments (Sola, 2016). Second, is that Marvel Studios placed a higher value on characters that they felt would be able to carry the MCU over a series of multiple years and film franchises. It should be noted that these thoughts are based more on the idea of a series continuing with sequels as oppose to a film appearing standoffish to consumers based on the number and type of brand placements that are contained within. This philosophy can also be visible in what is known as the big three. To clarify, the big three is a term used to describe the three most lucrative and commercially successful properties within the Marvel catalog. While the lineup of the big three has shifted from the comics in recent years, Marvel Studios' decision to frame the characters of Tony Stark/Iron Man, Captain Steve Rogers/Captain America, and Thor Odinson as the MCU's

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

big three plays a major component in following their developments and how their actions fundamentally shift certain world events of the MCU.

One philosophy that came off of the idea of the big three of the MCU, was the idea of character identity through the use of products. Essentially, certain characters within this cinematic universe are synonymous with branded products, or have a memorable moment through these products. For instance, pertaining to the question of how Marvel uses product placement in their films, one example of this is of the character of Tony Stark/Iron Man. Throughout multiple occasions of the character appearing in the MCU, Stark is more often than not driving an Audi car product to travel from location to location whenever he is not in his Iron Man suit. Therefore, the company of Audi has the potential to be synonymous with the lifestyle and imagery of Tony Stark to casual consumers. Looking at the question of how Marvel utilizes products in the narrative, an example is showcased in the to-do list of Captain Steve Rogers/Captain America in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Here, Captain Rogers is shown jotting down (among a series of other iconic pop culture items from the last seventy years) a recommendation of the 1972 album *Troubleman* by Marvin Gaye. By the end of the film, in which Captain Rogers is recovering from sustained injuries during the final battle of the film, he awakens to the sound of the *Troubleman* album in his hospital bedroom- serving as a narrative bookend to the story of the film. Lastly, when looking at the question of how product placement influences the narrative in the MCU, the best example of this occurs with the character of Peter Quill/Star-Lord from the film *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and his Sony Walkman, which not only is used as a plot device towards the development of his character, but also serves as the diegetic device used for the overall soundtrack of the film.

Limitations and Future Research

Regarding the limitations of this research, the most impactful aspect ultimately came down to this being an incomplete understanding of the current narrative of the MCU thus far. As of this writing there is the existence of a third phase of MCU films, which comprises of the following films: *Captain America: Civil War*, *Doctor Strange*, *Guardians Of The Galaxy: Vol. 2*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, *Captain Marvel*, *Avengers: Endgame*, and *Spider-Man: Far From Home*. Being that this writing commenced prior to the release of *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, placing evaluative into two completed narrative phases and one incomplete one felt illogical. With more time for allowing the conclusion of phase three, an evaluation would have occurred. Another limitation is that this study is only an evaluation of the feature film releases. While an examination of the different media forms associated with the MCU (television, short films, comic books, and digital series) would have been interesting, it was ultimately decided that covering solely the films would better hone in the focus of the research. Finally, this research is covering product placement and brand deal developments between the years of 2008 and 2015. As such, this study does not account for any changes in branding and or licensing deals that may have occurred from 2016 to present.

In terms of future research, this paper is meant to serve as a platform from which other researchers can carry off of. By establishing this research concept, the next step would be to have opened the conversation for how advertising can be synthesized within the ongoing narrative of the MCU. While three has (at the time of this writing) yet to conclude with the release of *Spider-Man: Far From Home* on July 2, 2019, one approach could be an evaluative report at the conclusion of every phase. Not only would this help to serve as a reflective examination as to how the MCU is doing from a narrative and financial point of view, but it would also allow for

Running head: ADVERTISING WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

tracking the trends of brands and how much interest they have to the MCU at large and how these brands market themselves in this franchise; be that having an affinity towards a specific character(s), or wanting to have a place within the entire universe.

Conclusion

In closing, the current study suggests that the way in which consumers can appreciate and enjoy certain components of narratives within entertainment may be partially influenced by product placements and advertising techniques. While the MCU is accessible to a diverse array of audiences due to drawing heavy inspiration from established comic book storylines/characters as well as crafting multiple action adventure filmgoing experiences dabbling into different genre tropes within film; Marvel Studios implementation of product placement allows for a parallel between the real world, and the world of superheroes. Furthermore, the inclusion of these product placements not only help with establishing/maintaining business relationships amongst other brands, but can also be incorporated as devices to help build narrative threads or connective tissue within a cinematic universe.

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Appendix

MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE CODING SHEET

CODER ID- sole coder, utilized coder reliability (an agreement between two or more coders that agree on an operational quantifiable definition of a coding category; a definition used to answer a research question) is most likely the way to go.

BRAND ID- Representation of the phases of the MCU. Phase One films indicated by a 1, Phase Two films are indicated by writing a 2.

POST ID- Indicates the individual instances of a product or placement that occurs in a film. Coded In sequential ascending order from 1 to 6.

PRODUCT ID: Based on the individual films order released based within the frame of the phase number associated with them.

POST DATE: Refers to the official U.S premiere date of each MCU film.

BRAND PLACEMENT: How the featured brand and or product is framed within the world of the MCU film it is present in.

- 1.) Foreground: Easily identifiable or recognizable in close proximity to characters, actions, or events.

- 2.) Background: Placed further away from characters, actions, or events.

INTERACTIVE USE:

- 1.) A brand and or product is used directly by a character at any point in the film
- 2.) A brand and or product is not directly used by a character in the film.

NARRATIVE USE: How a brand and or product is influencing the story of the film.

- 1.) The brand or product serves or directly impacts the narrative developments of the film.
- 2.) The brand or product does not serve or directly impact the narrative developments of the film.

BRAND ANNOUNCEMENT: The way in which a brand or product is introduced into the film.

- 1.) Brand is explicitly announced or mentioned- both product and brand are explicitly announced before being shown.
- 2.) Product is explicitly announced or mentioned- only product is explicitly announced.
- 3.) Brand and product are not explicitly announced before being shown- no anticipation.
- 4.) Brand and product are not easily identifiable.
- 5.) Other- I.e.: Historical or Public figures, pop culture references.