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Research on Content Oversaturation and Franchise Fatigue in the Post-Endgame Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract. The Marvel Cinematic Universe was initially at the heart of franchise filmmaking around the world. Following Avengers: Endgame (2019), Marvel entered a more competitive phase, characterized by accelerated release schedules. Disney+ made the franchise move past the movie theater stage, while streaming series became related to the plot of the universe. In parallel, the recent productions of the Marvel Universe were marked by less stable audience interest, resulting in the films receiving lower ratings and bigger differences in box office revenues between movies. This paper attempts to determine whether content overload is one of the reasons behind franchise fatigue following Avengers: Endgame and how such fatigue impacts audience engagement and box office success. It will conduct its analysis using a qualitative case study methodology along with comparative research, box office numbers, IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes ratings of the movies and relevant secondary sources. Results indicate that rapid expansion made the uniqueness of each new product harder to maintain. Additionally, the film-series format added to the viewing pressure, particularly for casual viewers who do not watch every Disney+ series. Nevertheless, fans' connection to old characters preserves their loyalty partially.

Keywords: Marvel Cinematic Universe, Franchise Fatigue, Content Oversaturation, Audience Engagement, Entertainment Marketing

1. Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is considered among the most famous film entertainment franchises in the film industry around the world. It was from 2008 to 2019 when Marvel Studios built an immensely interconnected film universe that had been developed over many years of storytelling and characterization. But after *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), Marvel Studios started entering into another stage of growth and development. Now, with the launch of Disney+ coming into play, Marvel began using films and TV shows' streaming service to make the MCU a cross-platform entertainment franchise.

The components of this transformation have already been investigated by various scholars. For example, there are studies dealing with issues of streaming platforms and their business models. Thus, according to Tang and Wei, streaming platforms should rely on exclusive content and an audience-based strategy for ensuring that users stay within the platform [1]. Kapliar's research demonstrates that the competition among streaming platforms has affected the production process of

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entertainment companies [2]. The above-mentioned articles could be used to justify the significance of Disney+ to Marvel after 2019. There are also studies related to the topic of audience fatigue. First, Cook investigates fan burnout in the context of the Multiverse Saga, which implies greater involvement in the series of interrelated episodes [3]. Moreover, Quiroga's research regarding the quantity-quality paradox is worth consideration because it raises questions about the effectiveness of increased content creation [4].

These works shed light on several parts of the problem, yet they do not fully answer the research question of this paper. Much of the existing literature discusses streaming platforms, fan culture, or content production as separate issues. Less attention has been paid to the post-Endgame MCU as a case where these issues appear together in practice. After 2019, Marvel's expansion was not only a matter of producing more stories. It also created a problem of content oversaturation, because audiences had to follow more films, more Disney+ series, and more connected plotlines than before. This change affected how audiences relate to the MCU, how new films perform in the market, and how the brand works as an entertainment business.

Based on this gap, this paper looks at the link between content oversaturation and franchise fatigue in the post-Endgame MCU. It asks how Marvel's output changed after *Endgame*, how audiences reacted through ratings and box office results, and what business problems appeared later. To answer these questions, the paper uses the MCU as a case study. It compares content output before and after *Endgame*, and also uses secondary data from IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, Box Office Mojo, and academic sources. These materials help connect audience response with Marvel's wider franchise strategy. The study seeks to explain why entertainment franchises that grow too quickly might become less engaging and what this implies for the management of franchises during the streaming era.

2. The expansion strategy of the post-Endgame MCU

Avengers: Endgame (2019) brought the Infinity Saga of the MCU to an end, and it also made Marvel face a new stage of development. Around the same period, Disney+ was launched, pushing Disney further into the streaming platform market. For Disney, streaming was not only another way to distribute content. It also needed a constant supply of exclusive works to keep subscribers interested. As stated by Tang and Wei, streaming platforms rely heavily on exclusive content and audience-oriented strategies to keep users on the platform [1]. Kapliar also points out that streaming services have changed how entertainment companies create and release their content [2]. Given this background, Marvel gradually moved away from a purely film-centered strategy. Disney+ was not only used for side stories. Some of its series also helped Marvel continue the MCU storyline when there was no new film in theaters.

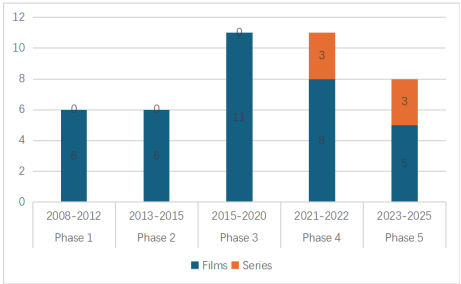

Figure 1. MCU content production by phase

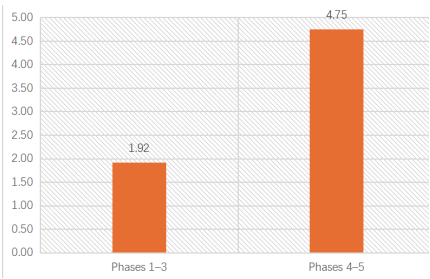

Figure 2. Average annual MCU content output

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The number of MCU films and the Disney+ series produced in different phases is presented in Figure 1, whereas Figure 2 provides a comparison between the average annual production before and after *Endgame*. The production data gives a clearer picture of this change. In the first three phases, Marvel released 23 mainline films, which means about 1.92 projects per year. The pace became much faster in Phases Four and Five. Across these two phases, there were 19 mainline projects in total, made up of 13 films and 6 Disney+ series. Since these projects came out in a much shorter period, the average annual output rose to about 4.75 projects. The total number of projects may not look much larger at first, but the production speed has changed a lot. This is the most important point in the data. Quiroga argues that a continuous increase in content quantity does not always bring higher audience satisfaction. Too much expansion may also make entertainment franchises harder to manage [4]. In this sense, the post-Endgame expansion of the MCU was not only about producing more titles. It also showed a change in how the franchise operated after Disney+ became part of its strategy.

Marvel also changed the way it released mainline MCU stories. In the first three phases, audiences could usually follow the central plot by watching the films in order. After Disney+ became part of the plan, this path was no longer so simple. Some important story information began to appear in streaming series, so the films were not the only place where the MCU storyline continued. Studies on streaming platforms show that media companies now use more than one channel to release and connect content [1, 2]. For the MCU, this meant that Disney+ series became part of the main viewing route. Audiences who wanted to understand the whole storyline had to watch not only cinema releases but also some of Marvel's streaming series.

This new release pattern also changed how MCU stories were connected. *WandaVision* is a clear example, because its story helps explain Wanda's role in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* also gives background for *Captain America: Brave New World and Thunderbolts**. These examples show that some Disney+ series were not separated from the film storyline. They became part of the information audiences needed if they wanted to follow the later films more fully. Cook makes a similar point when discussing the growing size of the MCU narrative. As more projects became connected with each other, audiences had to spend more time following different storylines, which raised both viewing costs and understanding costs [3]. In this sense, the MCU in Phases Four and Five no longer followed the older film-to-film route only. It started to work more like a film-series-film-series viewing pattern.

Disney+ therefore became an important part of Marvel's post-Endgame expansion. The MCU had more projects, faster releases, and closer links between films and streaming series. This helped Marvel keep the franchise active after the end of the Infinity Saga. At the same time, it also made the viewing process heavier for audiences. No longer was watching the MCU merely dependent on the next movie. The wait for the next MCU movie was not all there was anymore; one had to take into account what was going on with their favorite characters from one format to another. All of this makes up the backdrop against which the next chapter can be discussed.

3. Franchise fatigue and audience engagement decline

As was stated in the previous section, the expansion also affected the way people followed the MCU story. Before *Avengers: Endgame*, fans could follow the plot by simply watching the movies in order. After Disney+ became part of the main release plan, this became harder. New films were often connected with earlier films, series, characters, and plot details. For casual viewers, this created a feeling that they had to "catch up" before watching a new MCU release. Catch-up viewing became part of the post-Endgame MCU experience. Cook also links this problem to fan burnout. As the

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MCU became larger and more connected, audiences had to spend more time following different storylines, which increased both viewing pressure and participation costs [3].

The Multiverse Saga makes this catch-up problem easier to notice. Marvel can still use the multiverse in an attractive way. Old characters can return, and some viewers may feel a strong sense of nostalgia. The difficulty comes when a film expects the audience to already know too much. At that point, some casual viewers may feel that the story has already started before they enter the cinema. *Deadpool & Wolverine* is a useful example here. The film uses many references to the Fox-era X-Men films, earlier Deadpool movies, and the MCU multiverse setting. Viewers who have followed these films for years may read these references as rewards. For people with less background, the same details may feel more like missing information. Some jokes and emotional scenes therefore become harder to follow. For this reason, audience fatigue should not be treated as a simple rejection of superhero films. It is more related to the amount of past knowledge that viewers need before they can fully join the story [3].

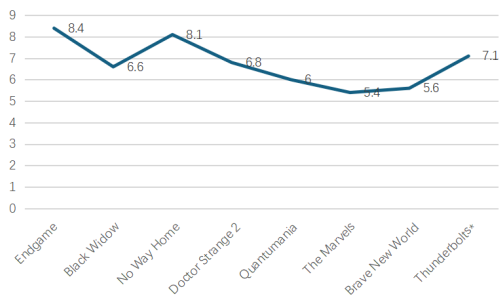

Figure 3. IMDb rating trend ofselected MCU films

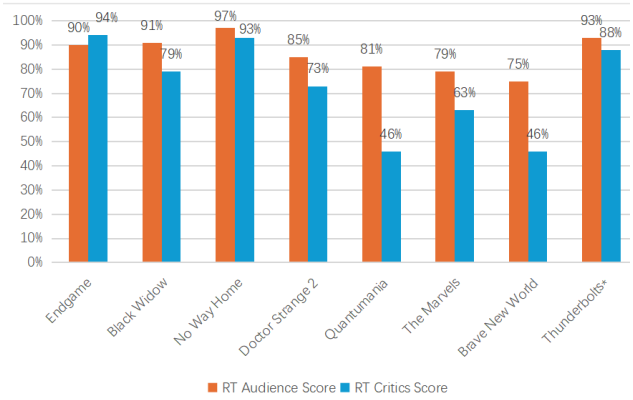

Figure 4. Rotten tomatoesaudience and critics scores

The rating data shows a more uneven audience response after *Endgame*. In Figure 3, *Avengers: Endgame* remains the strongest case, while *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania, The Marvels, and Captain America: Brave New World* received lower IMDb scores. The Rotten Tomatoes scores in Figure 4 show a similar pattern. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and *Thunderbolts** still received positive audience responses, so the post-Endgame MCU cannot be described as a complete decline. The problem is more about instability. Some releases still worked well, but others received much weaker responses. Quiroga's idea of the quantity-quality paradox helps explain this situation. More content does not always lead to higher audience satisfaction, especially when the release speed becomes hard for audiences to follow [4]. In this case, the rating data reflects not only the quality of individual films, but also a wider change in audience engagement with the MCU.

Box office data tells a similar story, but from the market side. Figure 5 shows that post-Endgame MCU films did not perform in a steady way. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* became a major commercial success, which means audiences were still willing to support superhero films when the project felt like a real event. *The Marvels*, however, became a clear low point for the franchise. *Ant-Man* and *The Wasp: Quantumania and Captain America: Brave New World* also lacked strong audience support compared to what Marvel may have anticipated. Later, *Thunderbolts** indicated some improvement in terms of market reception. This is relevant to note since there were no longer the same guarantees of market performance for every release made in the MCU franchise.

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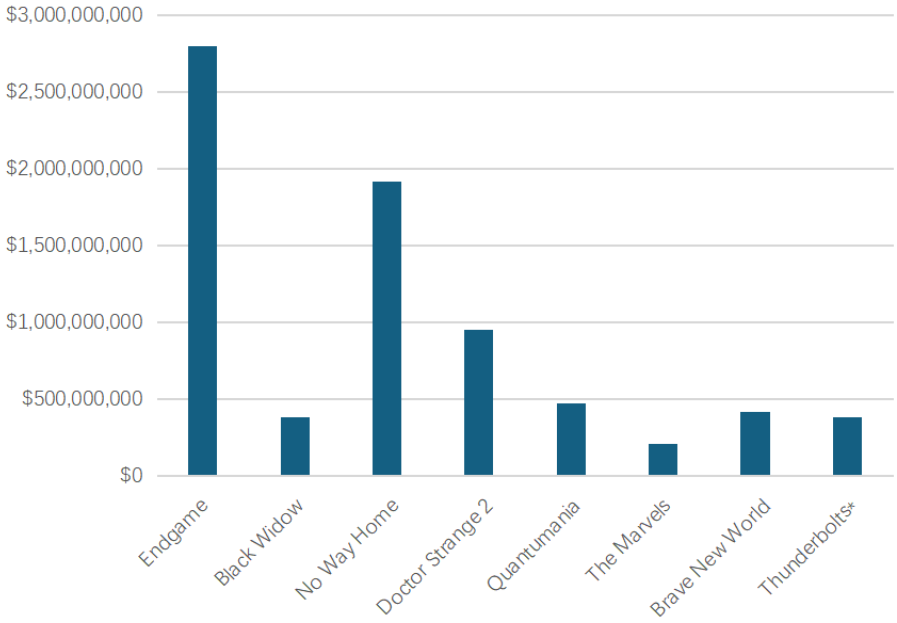

Figure 5. Worldwide box office performance of selected MCU films

By this point, the problem is not only that Marvel released more works after *Endgame*. The harder part is that viewers had to spend more effort keeping up with them. Films, Disney+ series, character changes, and older plotlines all became part of the same viewing process. This is why catch-up viewing matters in the discussion of franchise fatigue. The rating and box office results also do not point to one simple answer. Some MCU projects still brought strong audience interest, while others performed much worse. So the issue is not that superhero films suddenly lost their audience. A better explanation is that content oversaturation made the MCU less easy to follow. When a franchise asks too much time and background knowledge from its viewers, fatigue becomes more likely to appear.

4. Marketing and financial challenges

It can be seen from the above discussion that the post-Endgame Marvel Cinematic Universe increased its content production through Disney+ and narrative integration across different formats. At the same time, audience fatigue, rating uncertainty, and box office fluctuations also appeared in this period. In this regard, this chapter analyzes how content expansion and franchise fatigue influenced the brand management and entertainment marketing of the MCU. The discussion mainly focuses on brand dilution, lower marketing efficiency, and divided audience loyalty.

One problem that could occur is brand dilution due to over-expansion. MCU movies, being one part of the Infinity Saga, gave them some intrinsic scarcity and eventfulness. There was an awareness among audiences about their importance within the bigger story, leading to reasonable expectations. On the other hand, Phase Four and Phase Five brought about the emergence of a greater number of films and series on Disney+. Despite being beneficial for the ecosystem of the brand, the growing range of stories and characters diminished their uniqueness. According to Yousaf, Disney should deal with several strategy issues, such as brand image, profit generation, and the competitive streaming market [5]. Should Disney fail to ensure constant quality and audience engagement, the value of its brand may suffer in the long run. As far as the MCU is concerned, audiences are faced with the need to choose whether an upcoming movie deserves watching,

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whether it can be understood without previous content, and whether it relates to already-known characters.

Expanding content might also make marketing activities less efficient. During the early stages of the MCU franchise, marketing campaigns were easier to conduct. Important characters or crossover events like Avengers movies could grab everyone's attention and create excitement on a global scale. Now, due to the MCU's presence on Disney+, new MCU releases have become more numerous and closer to each other. Viewers also have more entertainment options in movies, streaming services, games, and social media content. As noted by Kapliar, the streaming era is marked by changes in content production, distribution, and consumption that are accompanied by increased market fragmentation and platform rivalry [2]. In this context, while marketing activities will likely continue to take place, it becomes less probable that each project attracts as much attention from fans as previous projects did.

The loyalty of the audience was also increasingly divided during this era. The Marvel Cinematic Universe kept its audiences loyal in its Infinity Saga by using familiar characters and large team-ups. Post-Endgame, the introduction of Disney+ shows and new characters made the ways for the audience to consume Marvel products even more varied. Some audiences might choose to stick only with theatrical movies, while others may opt to pursue the series, particular characters, or sub-franchises. According to the study by EL Goss on the churn among Disney+ subscribers, such platforms experience subscriber fatigue, content saturation, and challenges with retaining users. People might unsubscribe from the platform once they get what they want from the subscription service [6]. These findings help to explain the shift in MCU audience loyalty. Audiences are not loyal anymore to the whole brand, but rather to what is interesting for them.

On the whole, the expansion of the post-Endgame MCU's content has added additional burdens to its branding and marketing. The brand dilution effect reduces the uniqueness and special status of its new products. Marketing efficiency has also been negatively affected, making it increasingly difficult for the MCU to attract audiences consistently through frequent product releases. Fragmented fan loyalty adds another burden to the MCU because it becomes increasingly challenging for the franchise to keep its global audience stable and loyal. This means that the MCU cannot only depend on releasing more works. It also has to keep the brand valuable and make audiences willing to stay with it for a longer time.

5. Conclusion

This paper looked at how content oversaturation and franchise fatigue are connected in the post-Endgame MCU. It used Marvel's content expansion, audience ratings, and box office results as the main evidence. The problem does not seem to come from superhero films alone. It is more closely linked to Marvel's faster release speed after *Avengers: Endgame*, the more complicated story structure, and the higher entry barrier for viewers.

Disney+ changed the MCU from a film-centered model to one shared by films and streaming series. This made catch-up viewing more important, because audiences needed more background before watching some new releases. At the same time, frequent releases weakened the scarcity and event-like appeal of MCU projects. Audience expectation became less stable, which can also be seen in the ratings and box office data.

Marvel also has to deal with the business side of this expansion. More titles gave the MCU a larger product line, but they also made the brand harder to control. Some viewers no longer treat every new release as something they must watch. Even so, the franchise still has useful audience assets. Characters with a long history, such as Bucky Barnes, can still bring back part of the

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audience. The next problem for Marvel is not only making more MCU content but also making the new content feel clear and worth following.

There are, however, limitations associated with the current piece of writing. The majority of the used data sources come from public statistics and public reviews, rather than from the audience directly. The study cannot be called comprehensive, as there are no personal interviews conducted with fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Moreover, the analysis only covers Phases Four and Five after the release of *Avengers: Endgame*, meaning that the timeframe is rather small. The topic can be checked again after major Phase Six MCU projects are released, because audience reactions may still change.

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