

University of Muenster

Bachelor Thesis

## **The Blockbuster strategy of Entertainment**

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## **Executive Summary**

The restrictions placed on society due to the COVID-19 pandemic have propelled internet services enabling entertainment media consumption disproportionately. Agents of digitalization must be taken even more seriously than previously assumed and the time corporations have to adapt is shorter than anticipated. This means that it is important to properly understand and learn how to exploit these factors.

The aim of this paper is to showcase in what way the blockbuster strategy, which is of high renown in the distribution and marketing of entertainment media, interacts with agents of digitalization. As such the research question of this paper is *how have digitalization tools changed the entertainment media industry regarding the blockbuster strategy?*

A literature review was undertaken. Said review focused on the blockbuster strategy by itself, as it was conceived in the 1970s. It contrasts said strategy with that of the niche product, focusing on Anderson's long tail distribution, which he claimed would occur as digital stores would be able to store more products. Further network effects, social media and recommender systems are put into focus, to shine light on the underlying mechanisms and impulses these systems give and how they may affect the average customer. Lastly, the synergetic nature of these is analysed.

The thesis concludes that for producers, the blockbuster strategy and digitalization work well together. The interplay of networks and especially the star power of the blockbuster strategy create a ripple effect of anticipation, which is largest on social media. Based on the power distribution and fast paced nature of social media, the buzz marketing of the blockbuster acts in favour of big stars, whose social media success in turn aids the media piece. Recommender systems highlight those media pieces that have a large amount of highly positive reviews, which further highlights the blockbuster with its easy to grasp concept aimed at the largest possible audience. All of this leads to the blockbuster still being the preferred strategy for producers. Platforms gain from having a “full shelf”, meaning a purely blockbuster strategy is not beneficial for them.

Further research is advised in regard to “franchise fatigue” and the rising amount of criticism towards the blockbuster by both the general public and creatives working in the field.

## Table of Content

Table of Content .....	I
List of Abbreviations .....	II
List of Figures .....	III
1. Introduction .....	1
2. Search & Experience Goods .....	2
3. Blockbuster .....	3
3.1. High Concept .....	4
3.2. Quality .....	4
3.3. Broad Release .....	5
3.4. Star Power .....	6
3.5. Intellectual Property .....	7
3.6. Buzz .....	9
4. Niche .....	11
4.1. Anderson .....	11
5. Networks .....	13
5.1. Integrated .....	13
5.2. Complementary .....	14
5.3. Commentary .....	15
6. Social Media .....	15
7. Recommender Systems .....	17
7.1. A program based view .....	17
7.2. A need based view .....	19
8. Conclusion .....	20
8.1. Further Research .....	21
9. References .....	23

### **List of Abbreviations**

IP	Intellectual Property
KBS	Knowledge based systems
RS	Recommender System
SMM	Social Media Marketing
WOM	Word of Mouth

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Biggest opening weekends at the box offices in the United States and Canada as of October 2021, by revenue.....	2
Figure 2: The role of quality as a moderating variable: an illustration.....	5

## **1. Introduction**

Since the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak and subsequent lockdown, the environment in which we indulge in media entertainment has had to change. While the switch from public to a more private and especially streaming driven consumption has been a steady incline, the sudden need to abstain from large-scale venues has turned this into a sprint.

The increase in people watching shows online, playing video games on their consoles, and streaming music has had considerable effects, with news articles covering the sudden change in bandwidth and energy consumption ratings (Wroan n.d.). The fact that all this happened within the confines of our homes goes to show that the post digitalisation age enables us to engage with media to a before unprecedented level (Forrester 2021).

However, this time was difficult for this sector. As an industry characterised by high uncertainty as it is, the change in both production and distribution was tremulous (N.N. 2020). While the shift to a more online approach has been on the entertainment's peripheral for longer, the quarantine has shown that it is indispensable.

This change proved an issue, as traditional revenue streams were no longer accessible. Movie theatres had to close, freezing what was previously both a source of income and information used for forecasting (Khlystova, Kalyuzhnova, and Belitski 2022). As such, streaming services, especially big players, gained customers faster than expected, while many smaller distributors, platforms and offline services made disproportionate losses (Ryu and Cho 2022).

As the world is slowly moving out of the lockdown, managers, as well as academics, question whether it is possible to go back to the old distribution and marketing schemes in the post-pandemic world (Mason, Narcum, and Mason 2021).

Digitisation and online media have brought with them a change in how media ought to be produced, distributed and marketed (Cham et al. 2022).

While existing literature manages to explain the underlying factors and mechanisms of how digitalization changed media marketing in detail, these seldom show the

larger picture. As such, this paper aims to answer the question of *how digitalization tools have changed the entertainment media industry regarding the blockbuster strategy*.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, different papers and theories regarding the established blockbuster strategy and the contrasting niche distribution, including Anderson's prediction of the long tail of the streaming era, are examined. To fully capture the underlying factors and new rules of this form of distribution and its shift in our culture, the factors of networking, social media and the recommender system are put into focus; as networks are seen as the most important internet marketing tool to bind customers (Arnott and Bridgewater 2002), social media have reformed the how this interaction takes place (Constantinides 2009) and recommender systems are the knowledge-based systems (KBS) making sure this time is spent on the right customers

## **2. Search & Experience Goods**

To fully understand the underlying issues and approaches of the entertainment sector, first the term “experience good” needs to be discussed, as different marketing strategies are required.

While a more traditional- or “search”- good has certain objective standards that are met or not- e.g., a computer that either has or lacks a certain amount of memory- the experience good cannot be objectively assessed (Nelson 1970; Stigler 1961). As such, (Singhal, Jena, and Tripathy 2019) every person and their subjective judgement are on their own. These idiosyncrasies, as the book “Entertainment Science” (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019) calls them, make it hard for the customer to gauge whether they would be interested in a good.

An enjoyer of period dramas and a horror aficionado may, despite their seemingly polarizing opinions, find common ground in historical horror films, or both might be alienated by the “changes” made to their preferred type of media. Or they may find it enjoyable enough, but not too noteworthy. The only way for these two to know for certain which of these scenarios will come true is to watch the movie (N.N. 2007).

Those so-called “opportunity costs” the often non-monetary cost of choosing a product over another, such as time or having to disregard a better piece of media,

are always quite high (Leininger 1977). The substantial number of possible pieces of entertainment media that are competing, especially with the rather large backlog of no longer up-to-date products streaming platform showcase (Anderson 2004; Ordanini and Nunes 2016), further increase these costs, since the competition counts thousands of products instead of five. Hence, choice uncertainty is one of the biggest barriers entertainment media must combat.

### **3. Blockbuster**

The blockbuster strategy needs to be examined by itself, as it is the preferred marketing strategy of the pre-digitalisation era. Thus, it is a widely used managerial and analytical tool. Nevertheless, clearly defining the blockbuster is difficult. It is used often incorrectly or without internal consistency. As such, the definition of the term blockbuster strategy needs to first be defined.

Firstly adopted by Hollywood to refer to cinematographic films of a large size (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019; Lambert 2014), this older use of the term is restrictive, in that it only relates to long-form moving picture storytelling. However, due to the increasing amount of ways entertainment media can be created, and the increased relevance of the different industries, any definition that refuses to acknowledge series, books, music and video games ignores parts of the bigger picture.

Thus, the blockbuster strategy cannot be defined by the type of media alone.

Overall, it can be said that the definition of the blockbuster strategy is this: a piece of media, created using a massive budget, to appeal to a massive audience and gain a large revenue for the producers (Lambert 2014).

Therefore, *bestsellers*, *AAA-games* or *hits*, and *albums* fit and can be considered “blockbusters”. Certain elements can be found in a majority of blockbusters, aiming to attract as many people as possible. Not all blockbusters have all of these, but large overlap can be found (Cox 2014; Walls 2014). These are a high concept, high quality, a broad release, star power, intellectual property and buzz (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019; Walls and DeVany 2014)



### **3.1. High Concept**

The first element is the “High Concept”, meaning the setting and themes of the story told are rather easy to understand (Wyatt 1994). This, according to Wyatt, has multiple uses. For one, the easier the concept is to explain to other people, the easier the communication. This means that within the production, as well as outside of it, decision making is made easier.

While Wyatt immediately links this to other factors of the blockbuster strategy, Hennig-Thurau and Houston further develop how this might be used. The now-iconic image of the Jurassic Park Poster is a good example of this. The high concept “What if people made dinosaurs again and wanted to use them for economic profit?” is clear to the viewer once they see the movie poster (Crichton, Koepp, and Spielberg 1993).

Further, the authors agree advertisements can be hinged upon this concept with the viewer gauging their level of interest easily.

This idea that one should be able to comfortably capture the essence of blockbusters further helps with the marketing of the movie, in that, a movie can be promoted truthfully, reliably and within a short period -say a 30-second television advertisement-, thus limiting the aforementioned uncertainty (Nelson 1970).

### **3.2. Quality**

While quality is often and primarily used as a distinguishing feature of the blockbuster in a lot of the existing literature as a selling factor, rarely share two papers the same definition of the term.

Even when considering the published works of one author (Elberse 2008, 2013; Elberse and Anand 2007) there seem to be differences in what exactly is being focused on when describing quality. However, generally, two distinct factions can be found.

Visual quality being the first of the two, the reason for this is quite simple. Props, costumes and make-up all cost large amounts of time and money. As most blockbusters fall under the action/ adventure (Elberse and Anand 2007; De Vany and Walls 1999) category, set design for stunts, as well as stunt doubles have to be

properly incorporated. Props have to be carefully made, prepared and checked, otherwise, hazards may occur (Breznican 2022). Physical locations mean that the cast and crew need to be transported, blue- and green screens, as well as computer-generated imagery, cost a lot as well. Motion Capture, a tool used to record smooth movement, requires costly software, hardware and a lot of space.

That being said, visual quality is a selling factor across media (Eliashberg et al. 2016; Koçaş and Akkan 2016; Lambert 2014) and gives insight into both the concept of the movie (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019) as well as being a first indicator of the story quality (Steininger and Gatzemeier 2019).

Secondly, in terms of script quality, a higher budget means a better writer's room, a more well-known and acclaimed producer or director. Especially the latter two are helpful for a blockbuster. A unique style, alongside a high concept, allows for expectation management. Names like Kevin Feige, Hidetaka Miyazaki or Guillermo del Toro come with certain narrative or stylistic expectations. This means a higher recognition value and confirmation that in the past, these notions worked. Bogaert et al. , Silverthorne, De Vany and Walls all agree on predictability being a tool to guide the customer. Further, as this form of quality can most easily be referred to as “critical review” quality, a script that is known to engage with certain critics is preferable to one more daring (Elberse and Anand 2007; Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019; De Vany and Walls 1999), as reviews from critics often align with the release of the product and thusly create buzz.

### **3.3. Broad Release**

More substantial to the blockbuster strategy is a broad release. Since blockbusters are known for creating buzz before release, to draw as many people in as possible, the broad release is the only way to ensure that these people can engage (Lambert 2014).

Before the digitalization and consequent streaming age, this meant a large opening weekend (De Vany and Walls 1999). In terms of music, books and games, many stores should have the new media in stock (Webb 2008). In terms of movies, this meant as many cinemas as possible. The number of cinemas especially increased heavily over the last 20 years (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019). However, with

the rise of COVID, a lot of movie theatres had to close and, as such, many services had to adapt.

This, as some argue, will cause that streaming, and the consequent oligopoly will take on further hold. Disney, once it joined the “streaming wars” (N.N. 2019) as one of the main producers of today’s media, changed its revenue model. Instead of a long cinema only release, there is a shortened “windowing period” and an early streaming release (Elberse 2010; Farooqi 2020). Having said that, due to the relative recency of this phenomenon, there are few publications properly discussing the implications thereof.

As such, a look into the video game sector would be highly educating.

In terms of games, digital downloads have been common for years (Cox 2014; Steiner et al. 2016) with a heavy oligopoly in favour of large company-owned networks and platforms that belong to developers, such as steam, which is part of the VALVE organization (Caoili 2012). Music too had slowly been taken over, first by digital downloads, then by streams with the emergence of Spotify in the western markets (Elberse 2008; Feng and Hu 2022; Ordanini and Nunes 2016).

It is likely that movies and shows will follow that example with data (Bogaert et al. 2021; Elberse 2008; Elberse and Anand 2007) pointing in this direction as well.

### **3.4. Star Power**

Another factor one cannot underestimate is that of star power.

Every author agrees that star power is a massive tool of the blockbuster strategy.

As Elberse & Walls make clear, stars are already accredited (Elberse 2013; Lambert 2014; Silverthorne 2013; Walls and DeVany 2014). Both in their acting prowess and in how much the public liked them (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019). This is important if the piece of media aims to become a hit with as many people as possible. The risks of losing money are immense. Secondly, most actors spent years creating a public persona. As such, the so-called “typecasting” tends to happen, based on looks, attractiveness, way of holding oneself and accent, to name a few attributes (Mathys, Burmester, and Clement 2016; Yoon, Deng, and Joo 2022). A

good casting director is aware of this and uses this to the advantage of the piece of media and the star.

Yoon, Deng and Joo Have concluded, against the first impression, that quality, success and “fit” or a piece of media do not have to align to what was assumed of the celebrity. They state that a complete opposite to their usual fit might create a controversy, which would entice curious audience members and interest before a show. Zendaya, when she first accepted the Part of Rue Bennet for the controversial show “euphoria”, after being formerly known only as a Disney child star, would be such an example. However, they concur that this increase only occurs, as long as there is a “shock value” to be found in the change.

Lastly, stars have fans. While most people will be swayed towards an opinion regarding a movie by star power, fans are often unwavering. Studies have shown that fans heavily increase google searches (Yoon, Deng, and Joo 2022), raise network importance and are one of the main drivers in social media marketing (SMM) (Elberse and Anand 2007; Houston et al. 2018). In short, they create that pre-release excitement blockbusters need. Furthermore, fans are often willing to engage with media that otherwise would not have suited them, for the sake of their star of choice. As such, celebrities and blockbusters live in a heavily symbiotic relationship together. As Elberse stated, this creates a certain “war for talents”, which in turn drives budgets for blockbusters even higher. However, as the data shows, this seems to be worth it (Elberse 2013; Ordanini and Nunes 2016; Silverthorne 2013).

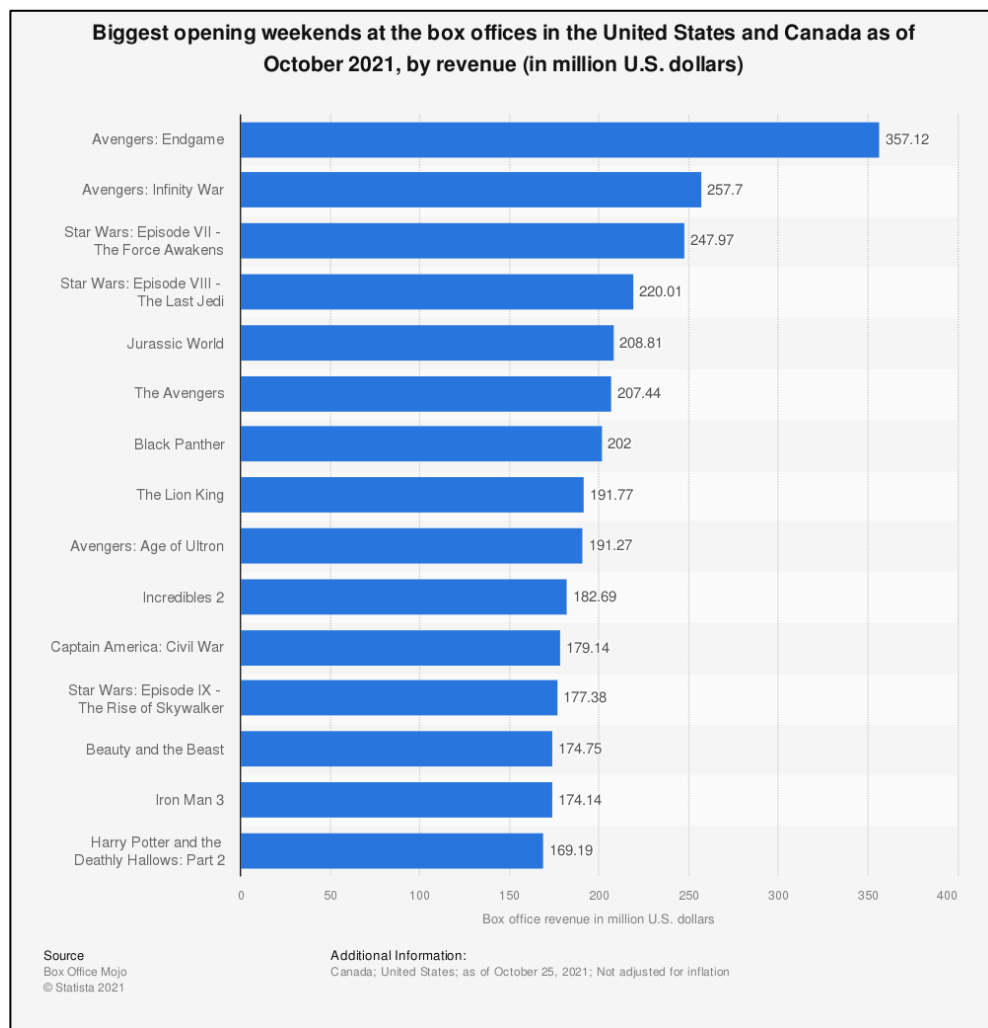
(Elberse 2013; Ordanini and Nunes 2016; Silverthorne 2013).

### **3.5. Intellectual Property**

As many people, ranging from twitter comment to highly accredited newspapers have noted (Leung 2022), few movies get made that do not already have an intellectual property attached to them (see fig.1).

**Figure 1: Biggest opening weekends at the box offices in the United States and Canada**

as of October 2021, by revenue



Source: Box Office Mojo. (2021)

Since the rise of the superhero genre in 2004, comics have dominated Hollywood. But even before that, since the 1970s, the rise of the IP has steadily increased. Starting with books, the early blockbuster movies already used a stencil. “Jurassic Park” and “Jaws” both are based on their eponymous books (Elberse 2013; Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019).

Some of this has to be attributed to the fact that story conventions are often overlapping (Eliot, Campbell, and Eliade 1990). Still, the adaptation has similar reasons and benefits to star power. Here too, fans most likely already exist, push the property and create a stir- partially uncoupled from perceived quality of the adaptation. This fanbase likely to engage with that media is immensely important,

due to the aforementioned cost structure of entertainment goods (Silverthorne 2013; De Vany and Walls 1999).

That being said adaptations alone are no longer the most applicable term, instead, the term “franchise” is more often used. Blockbusters are often set in franchises.

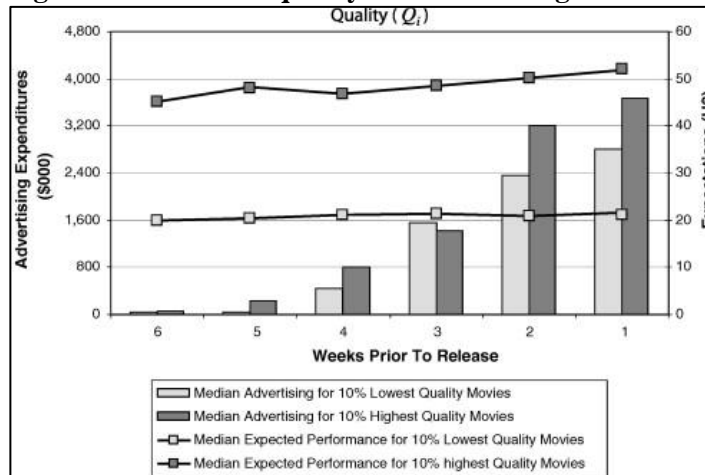
While it is commonly known that prequels and sequels often are less desired (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019) franchises are generally more accepted by the public. Set in a shared universe, although that definition may have to be expanded, once Disney’s “multiverse” phase becomes mainstream, these have a shared set of ground rules, but otherwise allow the writers, directors and viewers relative freedom (Trabucchi and Magistretti 2020).

Studies indicate that the most lucrative form of a franchise is that of a large network with notes that overlap individual characters’ stories (Beaty 2016; Trabucchi and Magistretti 2020). This has the benefit of individual stories, often directed and written by different people and thusly vastly different in tone and themes, making it harder for the public to become satiated. Further, cameos and links urge the average person to learn more about other characters and thusly, engage with another instalment of the series, as well as rewarding the person’s dedication to said franchise, as both papers point out.

### **3.6. Buzz**

All the aforementioned factors are important to the blockbuster, not just because quality makes for better revenue, but also because of the way blockbusters are advertised for (see figure 2).

**Figure 2: The role of quality as a moderating variable: an illustration**



Source: Elberse and Anand (2007)

The pre-release practice, also known as “buzz”, is seldom clearly defined. As Houston et al. pointed out in their paper, the majority of blockbuster literature uses varying definitions, with some of them even resulting in what is essentially another definition for Word of Mouth (WOM). This, understandably, makes research into buzz murky.

While older research intensely studied the usage of television advertising spots, with Elberse and Anand noting a bad cost/benefit ratio, SMM has gained massive popularity.

Blockbusters use a multitude of ways to promote their content. Critical reviews are released pre-emptively, with their conclusion leaving the general public to anticipate the piece of media, social media posts are created and shared- creating a visible and dynamic wave of content (Anastasiei, Dospinescu, and Dospinescu 2021).

With a majority of the population being internet-literate, speculations online are a potent way to promote (Khlystova, Kalyuzhnova, and Belitski 2022). Since nobody can report on their personal experience yet, buzz has to be seen from an aggregate level; the individual cannot confirm or deny anything other than interest. As such, sneak peeks, and stars further come into play (Houston et al. 2018; Mathys, Burmester, and Clement 2016; De Vany and Walls 1999)

These characteristics, a pre-release dynamic, forward-thinking, visible, positive way to advertise on an aggregate level, are, according to Houston et al. what makes a buzz. That being said, some publications note that too much of a positive buzz

can indeed prevent people from being interested, or- after the first week, create a dissonance, thus ruining the blockbuster in the second week (Elberse and Anand 2007; Houston et al. 2018; De Vany and Walls 1999)

#### **4. Niche**

Opposing the blockbuster strategy lies the *niche*. Herein, the focus must lie on the substance of the media, according to Hennig-Thurau and Houston . The lack of a large budget means star power or a generalized marketing approach is impossible. As such, the niche needs to find its customer base. (De Vany and Walls 1999)

As previously stated, most scholars agree that the hallmark of the blockbuster is the “pre-release buzz” (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019; Lambert 2014; De Vany and Walls 1999). However, with the absence of the investments required for this form of marketing, the niche has to work differently.

Since it is impossible to make a financially competitive piece of media made specifically for one person alone (Leahy 2005; Nelson 1970), these bases tend to be aimed at a subsection of the larger public, with relative homogenous taste within it. Because of this, genre is often a giveaway for a movie that is a niche product (Bawarshi 2000).

Generally, so Ordanini and Nunes, niche products, have to scale up, with a large release following only after a local success. The most useful tool for this scaling is WOM. Critics, small audiences and engagement not pre- but post-release, with a focus on the actual experience, not the anticipation beforehand. They tend to “crawl” to the top, unlike blockbusters, which start high and then tend to fall, as De Vany and Walls show.

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##### **4.1. Anderson**

In 2004 Chris Anderson proclaimed in his WIRED article “The long tail”, that in the digitalized age, the blockbuster would be overtaken by what he calls the long tail. Numerous niche products would skew the revenue curve away from the “megahit” and towards the longer end with the smaller budgets.

This, he, Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Smith stated, was because the costs of storing these niche titles were too large in the past. Storage, shipping and opportunity costs, they claimed, were simply too much for the vast majority of brick and mortar stores to



bear. The advent of the digital age and with it the ability to store large quantities of data with little cost would change this.

While many agreed with the notion that lowered storage costs would mean a longer long-tail, a majority of experts, such as Anita Elberse questioned this, stating that still, most sales would reflect a blockbuster or “superstar” heavy revenue curve (Elberse 2008).

Data gathered in the following years from various platforms, such as amazon for books and Spotify and rhythm for music (Elberse 2010; Koçaş and Akkan 2016) shows indeed, that while the tail got longer, it did not thicken. Instead, academics with Elberse at their forefront found out, that what previously was “caught in the middle”, now tends to either be swallowed up by big production or become one of many niche products, further proving that the market for mid-budget media is limited.

While these two strategies have existed for quite some time, Anderson was right in his proclamation that the digitalization age would mean that both of them would need to adapt (Anderson 2004).

One such adaptation was the rate at which quality improved.

Findings from Elberse further incentivised Ordanini and Nunes to research the actual “Top Hits” from each of these media types. Their findings agree partially with both Anderson and Elberse, in that they proclaim that across platforms- though they were unable to sample from the media leader in more cases than one (Ordanini and Nunes 2016) the number of producers rose highly, but the number of producers on the “leader board” was reduced rather drastically.

Niche products grew in size and, fairly quickly, in quality. With many forums, databanks and software providing people with anything needed to create such media and free tutorials on platforms such as YouTube, it is entirely possible to create something that would have been considered high quality a few years ago completely for free.

However, as Potts has argued, the same speed of innovation applies to higher quality production. While focusing on visual media, he proclaims that the power imbalance is still prevalent. Notably absent from the study are video games, despite arguable benefitting most from the shift to a digital world.

In terms of quality, it must be mentioned that the 2020 pandemic forced the world into quarantine and often restricted access to offices. While a few independent articles mentioned a “noticeable drop in quality” (Shaw 2021), this change is not yet academically fully researched. That being said, with the incentive to work from home still being active and the acceptance of remote work rising, this form of content may well grow in size.

## **5. Networks**

Breaking from the underlying strategies, drivers of internet-era marketing need to be discussed. The first agent of digitalization is the ability to connect with people. Studied since it became clear that Twitter was a success, “network effects” dictate our lives.

Arguably, networks affect entertainment media in 3 distinct ways. Integrated into the product, complementary with the product, or as a vessel for conversations about the product.

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### **5.1. Integrated**

As most types of entertainment media cannot have e.g., a built-in chat, most of the research is limited on video games.

Console games reside in a singular case, regarding networks, being one of the most directly influenced by networks, both in and around themselves (Steiner et al. 2016).

And while the importance of networks for specific genres, like Massive Multiplayer Online games, cannot be understated, games as a whole benefit from networks (Bonny and Castaneda 2022; Rietveld and Ploog 2021).

Steiner et al. claim that networks are important for any kind of game, most specifically focusing on the fact that, similar to revenue, this effect follows a U-shaped curve in terms of effectiveness. They argue network effects help those with either a wide, more casual base or a small, but heavily dedicated one.

In their Paper, Rietveld and Ploog however, state that introducing a social feature into a game that did not previously have one, only increases engagement, if either

a social feature was heavily requested, or if it had a large installed base, to begin with. Additionally, it seems that quality is still the more important variable for game adoption. These studies cannot agree on one type of game to study, nor manage to study all types of games. However, the large percentage of games that either have a multiplayer function built into them or are themselves based on the idea of collaboration clearly indicates that there is a market that values networks. And, as Cox states, the more people connected, the more attractive this network and thusly that game looks.

This being said, in their Paper Bonny and Castaneda claim that, amongst all players, not all fall into the described type “social gamer”, who explicitly cares about networks and connecting with their friends through games. However, since the subject of their study was not related to the blockbuster strategy, the applicability of this effect is yet to be seen.

## **5.2. Complementary**

Complementary networks are those that have a networking feature built-in but are not integral to the enjoyment of said media. In this regard, platforms become far more important than previously.

In the last few years, increasingly major platforms have integrated a social aspect into their repertoire. Spotify’s “green room” and Disney+’s “GroupWatch” are examples of this. Here, the piece of media can be enjoyed without the feature, but it is a variable to consider when choosing to engage with a platform or not.

Given that these features often are restricted to platform intern connections, the blockbuster would here too, have a huge advantage. Additionally, to the already larger percentage that a group of people willing to watch a movie together remotely will agree on a blockbuster, due to their generalized approach, the same can be said in terms of platform.

A group deciding to remotely watch a movie are thus far more likely to watch “Marvel the Avengers” on Disney+ than “Le Bonheur” on a smaller platform, such as MUBI (Prey 2020; Su, Sharma, and Goel 2016). This, so Prey is the biggest source of power for platforms, as they get to *curate* and display- something that frequently overrepresents products of their own making.

### **5.3. Commentary**

Both the most impactful and most commonly experienced way one encounters networks these days is through the last function. Entirely separate from the original content and largely impactful in terms of their marketing strategy is social media. As little more than a vessel for thoughts and comments about the product, this form of network is the main form in which WOM and buzz, are delivered from person to person.

Schroeder et al. argued in their paper that networks in the German Twitter-sphere are large, relatively easily influenced and in typical power-law shape. While the focus on the German Twitter-sphere is somewhat questionable, given the noted unease of the German culture surrounding online communication (Steininger and Gatzemeier 2019), as well as the focus on professional usage, the data given seems sound. Additionally to this, Das, Gollapudi, and Munagala have found that, depending on what filtering system a platform like Twitter employs, the opinion of the masses can be influenced.

As previously established, people want to engage and be engaged. As such, the blockbuster strategy has another advantage over the niche. To generate enough WOM for media to be important enough, one either needs to be able to find a particular niche in a larger network concerning itself with said niche media, but also has to be active enough for it to matter and for communication to happen. (Yoon, Deng, and Joo 2022). If one, however, has an opinion on a larger scale object, this means that the chance of something blowing up is larger. As such, spillover and bubble effects are severely more likely when discussing blockbusters.

## **6. Social Media**

As the second driver behind digitalization, it is no secret that SMM is important for entertainment media. However, a few changes in the past have changed the field. Firstly, the initial costs of targeted posts and search engine keyword acquisition were relatively cheap. Over time, however, this form of marketing, intrinsically linked to buzz, is becoming increasingly expensive (Wright et al. 2010).

Still, the blockbuster has other tools to ensure that the public is informed. Yoon, Deng, and Joo have found that a large amount of buzz about a new movie comes specifically from the fandom space. This is something that could easily be used, due to the perceived closeness to celebrities enabled by the informal social media, (Lueck 2012), stars can not only promote themselves but also their media. And by promoting their media, they promote themselves.

Further, fans are less likely to need confirmation that something is going to live up to their expectations. They are often willing to engage with something in the hopes of it being qualitatively well done, based on said star alone or, as has been noted by Mathys, Burmester, and Clement , in order to aid said star.

This form of marketing, linked to the “para-social relationship”, while being criticized for leveraging a perceived relationship to further one’s monetary gains, is highly effective. As Lueck found, and Mathys, Burmester, and Clement further established in their papers, there is only little chance for a celebrity to “overexpose” themselves. In that regard, more is more. As such, while the ramifications of the need to commodify one’s life for content are questionable topics on their own, concerning marketing, this approach works.

For producers too, social media is a useful tool. Here, as with the individual people, it is harder for the niche production to garner interest since the budget for the blockbuster is set out to aid with buzz. Further, while the internet “never forgets”, it is quick to cast aside. (Wright et al. 2010). Because of this, the relatively short lifespan of the buzz is again, boosted by the way larger scale networks, such as Instagram or Twitter work. Since most of these productions have done their own massive marketing campaigns, the first few reviews by major media outlets will go live at the same time, or slightly before the actual release date (Houston et al. 2018). As established before, the cycle of buzz marketing starts a considerable amount of time before release and ends shortly after. For this, these early reviews are a good thing.

On the other end, there is niche marketing. Focusing on WOM, these early reviews, if the team can invest in them, are the beginning of the marketing cycle. And while the WOM of an unbiased e.g., unpaid, person is considerably more worthy in an

online space (Perano et al. 2021) often it takes time until considerable WOM can happen. The time it takes for WOM to establish itself, especially outside the “echo chamber”, might be too long for this piece of media to still be relevant.

This, of course, further leads to a mass accumulation of a longer, but thinner tail as well (Potts 2014b).

## **7. Recommender Systems**

As the last agent of digitalization in the paper, recommender systems complete the framework. Given the massive amount of data uploaded every day, a curated interface has become a necessity, not a privilege. With over 82 Million tracks on Spotify alone (N.N. n.d.), the need for a so-called recommender system (RS) is large. RS are a class of information filtering software, in place specifically to give a rating, recommendation or curate one’s interface.

### **7.1. A program based view**

O’Dair and Fry have pointed out in their paper in 2020 that the conversation around recommender systems is neither easy nor complete. There may be two RS alike, but given each site’s specification, this is unlikely. Any recommender can be based on either content or collaborative filtering or both, additionally to more traditional KBS.

Collaborative filtering compares one’s tastes with that of other users to gauge interest in any title (O’Dair and Fry 2020). As such, Adomavicius et al. proved that past behaviour of ourselves, coupled with past behaviour of others, is indeed the best predictor of future behaviour. Content-based systems require the content to be *tagged* by pre-chosen characteristics. These are then compared to the user’s history and respective tags.

While both forms require a certain amount of user feedback, the former tends to be easily swayed by popularity, while the latter deems a customer’s taste more important (Adomavicius et al. 2018; Yi, Kim, and Ju 2022). As such, different RS create different user experiences based on what overall system employed, their mix of these systems and the individual data and knowledge artificial intelligence

strategies implored. In the modern age of digitalization and streaming wars, the RS is an agent every entertainment product must consider when deciding which strategy to follow since the customer has to rely on these curators given the high number of options and consequent opportunity costs for them (Lee and Hosanagar 2017).

Since different types of entertainment products are to be handled differently, there are various ways in which these are affected by these systems.

Yi, Kim, and Ju note the usage of a collaborative-filtering algorithm first with a search good and then a pure experience-based good that different rules apply for each good. While this study suffered from the common problem of a fairly homogeneous study group (paid, internet native students), they prove that the results of recommender usage differ.

Firstly, increase in search scope, while simultaneously noting a decrease in search diversity, is found. Overall, this proved, at least for search goods, the prevalence of the superstar product.

Similar can be said about entertainment goods. Here too, the *Matthew effect*, in which those at an advantage get disproportionately more, takes place, here this is attention and thusly, a higher revenue (Webb 2008).

Still, Adomavicius et al.; Rietveld and Ploog; as well as Yi, Kim, and Ju have in their previously mentioned studies found out that, with experience goods, the focus of the customer is less coupled with what others preferred. This weight on one's preferences was also found in a study regarding news consumption, with female customers being more open to other people's recommendations (Sonoda et al. 2018). The introduction of a recommender again meant a higher scope, but a lower diversity.

Given a search good must function according to objective guidelines, whereas an experience good can only be subjectively judged, these findings are to be believed. Still, it is worth mentioning that the study focuses on students, which is not representative of the public. The underrepresentation of people above the age of twenty-five is problematic. As O'Dair and Fry note, the *personal data* of a customer does heavily affect the level of acceptance of an RS. This, so it seems, is parallel to the level of internet nativity and customer confidence, as reported by (Nelson 1970).

Still, most people do accept recommendations from the system, which operate on a basis of variables and tags unique to each platform. This, additionally to the black-box nature of every algorithm, prove as an asset to the blockbuster and a negative influence on the niche object over a longer period (Das, Gollapudi, and Munagala 2014; Elberse 2010; O'Dair and Fry 2020).

## **7.2. A need based view**

Firstly, one major change is the previously mentioned change in production costs. As Weeds mentioned, the entry barrier to content production is lower than previously, e.g. every minute, 500 hours of content are uploaded onto YouTube (YouTube 2020). This creates the need for a customized feed. While this was discussed from the creator's perspective previously, the recommender shines light on the customer experience.

Even if most of the content uploaded is not qualitatively competitive, statistically this still means that there is far more content being distributed than consumable. As such, the RS must address the consumer and their shortcomings.

While addressing the curation process of the RS, gender, age and other personal data (Beel et al. 2013) were the most influential in determining how likely a customer is to accept a recommendation. As such, the level of comfort one feels while independently deciding what media to consume can be used as a variable of how likely a customer is willing to be influenced by a recommender system.

While the consumption of music or short-form video content can be done while completing other tasks, the consumption of long-form media, like movies, or more immersive media, e.g., video games, requires a level of attention that comes with the unbundling of these. As such, the consumption of especially movies takes place after the average workday. Since Mullette-Gillman, Leong, and Kurnianingsih have proven that a higher level of fatigue correlates with a desire for reduced decision making, it is safe to say that this benefits the blockbuster, which is generally the benefactor of the recommender system.

Lastly, the one type of person the RS may not help, the customer with extremely niche taste, does not mind the rather high opportunity costs.



The types of customers that do not rely on the RS show “too much” initiative. Hennig-Thurau and Houston state that the higher the probability that a person will engage in a longer search for a piece of media, the higher both, the expectations they have- which must be met by the media, lest it risks negative WOM - as well, as the chance that, if these expectations are not met, the search continues. Since these kinds of customers possess the knowledge of themselves, the tools used to distinguish between what they like and not as well as the willingness to spend a significant amount of time looking for something.

As such, the only type of person willing to disregard both the blockbuster as well as the recommender system is not as beneficial to the niche product as one might first suspect (Elberse 2008). These fickle customers, thusly, while uninterested in the blockbuster, do not aid the long tail as much as one might believe. The blockbuster strategy has the upper hand here as well

## **8. Conclusion**

Having looked at the three agents of digitalization, and the two contrasting distribution and marketing strategies, the interconnectivity of all aspects stands out. Literature suggests that digitalization and its tools on how to make customers engage with the right number of media are deeply in favour of a blockbuster strategy, culminating in the already known heavily skewed revenue curve with a long but thin tail. While a lot of these trends are fairly new and proper research is still being conducted, the overall trend towards streaming media means that in the future, producers will have to work with these tools and not against them.

Producers seem to be better equipped with the blockbuster production and marketing strategy. The combined efforts of producer and star power paired with the engine of SMM give both parties both a larger customer base to interact with, and a higher profile over time. Recommender systems, which increase search scope but decrease diversity, further recommend the blockbuster over the niche product. Additionally, the networking system and oligopolistic distribution enable those with an already large base to grow exponentially larger.

This creates a wave, in which the blockbuster is bound to create those funds that enable long term sustainability.

For platforms, nice products are more important. Firstly, because customers value a “full shelf”. As such, high diversity should exist for customer satisfaction (Elberse 2010). Since producers of blockbusters know their media’s worth, padding the shelf will be more fruitful if platforms find a balance between high demand and niche products that cost less. Further, those niche products draw in those that at least identify as niche enjoyers. Many of these end up engaging with blockbuster media as well.

For managers, this means further expansion between media outlets. Increased amounts of reviews, both professional and by influencers, will further overwhelm the market. For this the number of paid-for services should be limited.

Further, talents should be scouted, honed and supported from a young age, with a focus on multi-talented people. This should include training in how to promote online without engaging in harmful para-social relationships and coping strategies for the newfound amount of monitoring of stars

### **8.1. Further Research**

Given the drastic change in behaviour over the last two years in terms of entertainment consumption, future research will prove itself indispensable. Through the newfound availability of knowledge and information, people are more media literate than ever before. The ease that comes with the usage of social media makes it possible to discuss storytelling across the globe. This, coupled with a rising percentage of people criticising blockbuster hallmarks, as Johnson and Brew label it, should be an interesting new angle when it comes to the full picture of blockbuster content production.

Additionally, the perceived political divide on topics such as diversity or political correctness make it harder to create a unified audience, with either stance resulting in backlash from the other party. Whether this will hinder or help blockbusters is yet to be seen.

A rising number of well-performing media are distributed, without large marketing campaigns beforehand. Most of these have enough of a high concept and star power approach to question how important such an advertising campaign is to create buzz as well as the role of WOM for blockbusters.

Further, first signs that the streaming market is saturated can be found in, e.g. the

decline of new Netflix subscribers. If the business model of streaming platforms is able to thrive in this environment is yet unsure.

These recent trends are still in their initial stages, but information about them will enable academics as well as practising marketers to gain a fuller picture and make better decisions in the future.

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### **The Blockbuster strategy of Entertainment**

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Titel der Arbeit: The Blockbuster strategy of Entertainment

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