

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BALANCE  
BETWEEN ART AND COMMERCE?  
THE CASE OF BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a relatively novel kind of marketing communications, namely branded entertainment, and its growing importance for global branding strategies. Specifically, this work uses a socio-cultural approach to analyse industry practitioners' perspectives on how product placement has evolved into branded entertainment, the new forms of collaboration required to develop branded entertainment projects, how branded entertainment projects are governed by industry stakeholders, and where responsibility might lie for the ethical issues that emerge as consumers engage with diverse branded entertainment formats. Using a mediated discourse analysis methodology including interviews with global industry leaders, practitioner event observations and multimodal analyses of a selected branded entertainment films and series, this research explores the interrelationships among practitioners' actions within discourses and text. Findings reveal three core discursive themes on the complex tapestries of branded entertainment: the complexities that practitioners face in conceptualising, creating, producing, and distributing this communication format; the new ways of working that emerge, including new collaboration approaches, novel intellectual property management and ownership issues, and the power issues that emerge as practitioners navigate the world of entertainment for the purposes of communicating about brands; and, finally, the ethical and responsibilisation issues that manifest with new branded entertainment formats, given the level of brand integration in these entertainment formats and the portrayal of such projects as entertainment films or television shows. This work's theoretical contributions are threefold. First, this research establishes clearer boundaries for the conceptualisation of branded entertainment, capturing its inherent complexities, and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its underlying dynamics and the roles, responsibilities and expectations involved in this mode of branded communication. Second, this research highlights the continual

importance of storytelling and emotions for building strong iconic brands, where the storytelling message becomes the medium for communicating about brands, thus, inverting McLuhan's classic proposition that the medium is the message. Finally, this research contributes to the development of the film marketing brandscape by illuminating how the various components of branded entertainment can collectively constitute a brandscape where brands can strive for meaning. It does so by focusing on how collaborations and control over creative outputs are impacted by the development of branded entertainment projects and the ethical and responsibility issues that emerge through such projects. Implications for practice, policy and consumers are also addresses in this work.

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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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Including material from both publications in literature review in Chapter 2.

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## LIST OF FILMS

- 21 Jump Street (2014)
- 5B (2018)
- Air (2023)
- Alien: Covenant (2017)
- American Gangster (2007)
- Avengers (2012, 2015, 2018, 2019)
- Barbie (2023)
- Black Panther (2018)
- Blade Runner (1982)
- Blade Runner 2049 (2017)
- Cars (2006, 2011, 2017)
- Elf (2003)
- Forever (2008)
- Guardian of the Galaxy (2014)
- Hair Power: Me and My Afro (2020)
- Harry Potter (various)
- House of Gucci (2021)
- Iron Man (2008)
- James Bond (various)
- Jurassic Park (various)
- Jurassic World (2015)
- Lo and Behold - Reveries of the Connected World (2016)
- Ocean's Eight (2018)
- Pirates of the Caribbean (various)
- Playmobil: The Movie (2019)
- Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018).
- The Girl in the Spider's Web (2018)
- The Hunger Games (2012)
- The Journey (2019)
- The Lego Batman Movie (2017)
- The Lego Movie (2014)
- The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part (2019)
- The Lego Ninjago Movie (2018)
- The Most Dangerous Town on the Internet (2016)
- The Super Mario Bros. Movie (2023)
- The Tail of Thomas Burberry (2016)
- Vale (2015)
- Zoolander (2001)

## **LIST OF TELEVISION SHOWS**

- 24 Hours in A&E (2020)
- All Star Driving School (2017 – present)
- Cook Clever, Waste Less (2021)
- Cooking with the Stars (2021 – present)
- LEGO Jurassic World (2018 – present)
- Lego Star Wars: The Yoda Chronicles (2013-2014)
- Nature Needs Heroes (2020)
- Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds (2017-18)
- Phil Spencer's Home Hacks (2015)
- RAD Lands (2017)
- The Goop Lab (2020 – present)
- The Great British Bake Off (2010 – present)
- Where to Britain? (2018)

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Dolling up the Cinematic Landscape: Barbie's Triumph through Branded Entertainment

Emerging from the challenges posed by the pandemic, the cinema industry has been struggling to entice audiences back to theatres (Ambrose, 2023). However, a notable exception in 2023 was the remarkable success of the movie *Barbie* (2023). Considerable attention has been given to two aspects concerning the film: its ability to lure audiences back to theatres and the feminist narrative, portrayed as the dynamic of gender conflicts by Gibson et al. (2023). The film was the highest-grossing release in 2023, generating \$1.44 billion (£1.2billion) globally (Mzimba, 2023). Drawing parallels with the success of other industry players, such as *Lego* with its *Lego* movies, this highlights the significant impact that cinema can have in engaging audiences through effectively tapping into storytelling opportunities embedded in popular culture to ensure the continued relevance of products and brands in the marketplace.

This cinematic success of *Barbie* emerged from a collaboration between Mattel, the renowned toy brand that owns the Barbie doll and holds the intellectual property (IP) rights to the Barbie brand, and Warner Brothers, a major player in film production and distribution. Moreover, this collaborative effort extended much beyond conventional filmmaking in which it is crucial to consider the extensive marketing efforts that contributed to the success of the film in various international markets (see Shafter et al., 2023). *Barbie* encompassed various product placement deals as well as more than 100 licensing deals cross-promotional activities (Addley, 2023). It appealed to fans across generations, although the film served predominantly as a vehicle for promoting the iconic Barbie brand itself.

The significance of Barbie extends beyond being a mere children's toy; it encompasses decades of evolution in terms of her role as a doll, her narrative, and her relevance to the changing roles of women in society and the workforce. As the steward of the Barbie brand, Mattel has continuously sought innovative ways to stay relevant to current and future generations of children.

However, producing and promoting films on such scale requires significant financial resources, which is further complicated by the fierce competition and standing out among other blockbuster films. To address these challenges, Mattel and Warner Brothers strategically collaborated with numerous brands, which included product placement deals within the film as well as extensive cross-promotional activities outside the film. Such collaboration not only benefitted the individual brands involved, but also contributed considerably to the overall excitement and anticipation surrounding the Barbie movie, thus further strengthening its impact within the broader cultural and commercial landscape.

The Barbie movie serves as a promotional platform for the Barbie brand through branded entertainment while incorporating traditional product placement and engaging in various cross-promotional activities. Notable instances of product placement within the film include the presence of renowned brands like German shoe manufacturer Birkenstock, who witnessed a remarkable 518% surge in UK Google searches for "women's Birkenstocks" since the start of the movie (Troy-Pryde, 2023). Furthermore, the film features Chanel's heart-shaped bag and at some point, Ken can be seen wearing three TAG Heuer watches simultaneously (Tait, 2023).

Moreover, the Barbie film has achieved new heights with a plethora of cross-promotional activities involving various and diverse brands. In addition to more obvious collaborations with fashion brands such as Primark, who launched the Barbie Capsule Collection, other collaborations were rather intriguing. For example, in Brazil, a partnership with Burger King led to the sale of a Barbie-themed bacon cheeseburger, which was accompanied by a matching pink sauce. Other cross-promotional activities included a Barbie Dreamhouse-themed collaboration with sustainable furniture brand Joybird, Tangle Teezer's Totally Pink Barbie brushes and Proper Snacks' brand Propercorn, who not only covered double-decker buses in London in vibrant Barbie pink but also introduced a Barbie-themed limited edition of sweet popcorn (Rambharose, 2023).

The exceptional success of the *Barbie* movie exemplifies a comprehensive approach that enhances contemporary societal discourses while also positioning itself as a dynamic catalyst for various brand collaborations. Such strategic collaborations demonstrate the extensive reach of the Barbie brand into various facets of popular culture through branded entertainment, increasingly blurring the boundaries between promotional activities for a brand and the creation of an entertainment product. As such, the Barbie movie represents a significant case, which reveals the intricate relationship between brands, advertising, entertainment as well as the evolving expectations of audiences in contemporary popular culture. In the light of this, the film can be regarded as one of the most noteworthy examples of branded entertainment at the time of completing my PhD thesis. This is a relatively new mode of marketing communication requiring scholarly attention. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is on the branded entertainment phenomenon, aiming to explore the evolution of branded entertainment over time and delving into the broader consequences it holds for the advertising and entertainment sectors.

## 1.2 My First Encounter with Branded Entertainment

From 2007 to 2010, I worked in the German film industry; more specifically, I worked at a talent agency. One of the main tasks when working in a talent agency, as you can imagine, revolves around representing, strategically promoting and pitching actors to casting directors based on casting calls. The aim is to position actors within film and television shows. Placing actors within film and television shows was our focus; however, occasionally we stroke deals for our actors to appear in conventional television commercials although we tended to avoid such deals. This was because television commercials were generally viewed unfavourably by both talent agents and actors, primarily because engaging in the commercial landscape was often associated with a potential negative impact on the actor's reputation and career trajectory. The stigma stemmed from the perception that appearing in commercials might diminish an actor's credibility, making them less likely to be considered for more serious and prestigious roles in film and television. So, from a talent agent's perspective, we were quite hesitant to engage with the commercial sector as we felt the need to protect our actors' standing within the film and television industries.

However, during my three years at the talent agency, I witnessed a noticeable shift in the broader film and television landscape, in which commercial deals with actors became more prevalent and increasingly accepted. A pivotal moment occurred when two of our actors were casted by German fashion brand *Blutgeschwister*, translating to blood siblings, to appear in *Forever* (2008), a commercial campaign that extended beyond the usual 30 or 60 second time constraints. I distinctly remember watching the resulting commercial with my colleague, and both of us repeatedly viewed the commercial as it beautifully portrayed the intricate

relationship between a brother and a sister. Watching it felt more like viewing a movie trailer than a typical ad, as it cleverly integrated cinematic elements in its execution, leaving a lasting impression and giving us goosebumps.

Interestingly, the brand was not explicitly showcased in the commercial; instead, a story was created around the brand's name - 'blood siblings'. The identification of the brand only surfaced in the end, where the *Blutgeschwister* logo briefly appeared. The commercial, directed by Hanna Maria Heidrich, achieved notable recognition at the time, winning the Gold Award at the International Festival of Advertising Films Spotlight in 2008 in Germany. Additionally, it received multiple nominations for other awards, such as the Young Directors Award in 2008 in Cannes, France. I believe that this personal encounter marked a notable departure from the industry norm, hinting at the evolving possibilities for actors in the commercial sphere. If this illustrative case has sparked your interest, dear reader, the commercial can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/56943859> (provided you have a Vimeo account).

Reflecting on it, this 'commercial' likely signifies my first encounter with early forms of branded entertainment, interestingly aligning with the publication of Hudson and Hudson's (2006) germinal article "Branded entertainment: a new advertising technique or product placement in disguise?" published in the Journal of Marketing Management.

Despite stepping away from actively working in the film industry, I remained observant of its developments. In 2010, I chose to pursue a degree in International Management for my undergraduate studies and later pursued a postgraduate degree in Consumer Behaviour. This academic path allowed me to stay connected to the film industry through research by exploring

various aspects of film consumption within a broader marketing perspective in coursework and dissertations. Furthermore, it has motivated me to embark on a journey to pursue a PhD in Marketing, driven by the realisation of the lack of theory to explain the evolution of the branded entertainment phenomenon and its implications for marketing communications, entertainment and popular culture.

Both the opening vignette and my first-hand experience working in the film industry illustrate the significance of branded entertainment in the entertainment landscape. It highlights the power of entertainment vehicles, such as films and television shows, to facilitate substantial promotional activities of brands in the contemporary marketplace. Branded entertainment exists across a range of media formats such as video games, novels, songs and plays (Russell and Belch 2005; Molesworth 2006; Lehu 2007; Grainge, 2012; Williams et al., 2011), as well as social media platforms (Zhang, Sung, and Lee, 2010) and live streaming platforms, such as Twitch. However, for the purpose of this thesis, my focus is on film and television (Hudson and Hudson, 2006), as they are two of the most prominent branded entertainment formats, due to my professional background and passion for film and given my understanding of how the branded entertainment phenomenon has continuously evolved and transformed communication modalities.

To understand the development of branded entertainment, this thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach by predominantly drawing on broader research from advertising and marketing, film, media and communications studies, cultural studies as well as ethics. By merging these different research streams, it allowed me to establish a strong foundation for a comprehensive theoretical exploration concerning the branded entertainment phenomenon. As this research is concerned with branding from a broader perspective, a central focus in

theorising this study was to review how the branding literature was conceptualising branded entertainment. To obtain a comprehensive understanding, I expanded the scope of the research beyond the branding literature and engaged with various advertising and communications literature. This exploration helped me to understand different forms of promotions, particularly how entertainment vehicles like film and television have been used historically to promote and position products and brands to consumers. Indeed, one of the central elements of this thesis was to clarify the distinction between product placement and branded entertainment, as well as other related forms, such as sponsorship and native advertising.

### **1.3 Theoretical Lens**

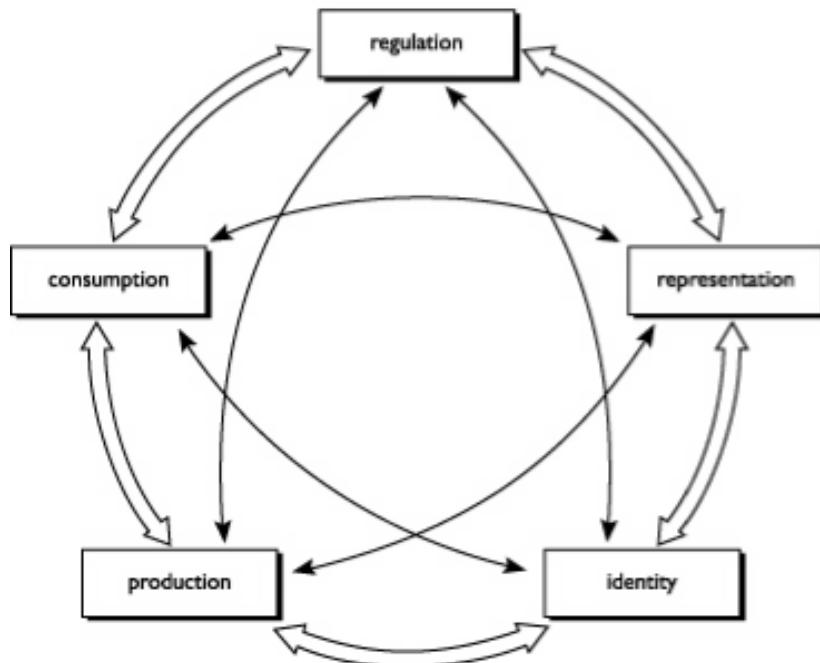
A key component in branded entertainment is the subtle intertwining of brand messages with entertainment content through creative storytelling techniques. However, stories transmitted through branded entertainment can stay with audiences beyond the mere consumption of branded entertainment content. As noted by Kerrigan and Yalkin (2009), film consumption is not restricted to watching a film from the beginning to the end; films and therefore branded entertainment content can have sociocultural impacts upon audiences. Films, television shows and brands share the same characteristics in that all are systems of signification, which “involve the historically situated production, consumption and regulation of meaning in a cultural context” (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013, p. 450). As such, films and television shows are significant cultural products that produce and transmit meaning to audiences (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013). More specifically, as branded entertainment is a form of marketing communications and is associated closely with advertising (Martí-Parreño, Ruiz-Mafé and Scribner, 2015), its meanings arise from the culturally constituted world, which are

conveyed to the endorsed brands in the course of time and finally transferred to the consumer's life through the purchase or consumption of that brand (McCracken, 1989).

As such, I use a sociocultural theoretical lens to frame my work on branded entertainment. Sociocultural discourses reflect the beliefs and principles of specific societies. When advertising professionals adopt and utilise these discourses, the meanings conveyed are integrated into the advertisements promoting goods and brands (Kelly, Lawlor and O'Donohoe, 2005). Keller (2003) argues that brands can provide meaning through the creation of mental structures to aid consumers with interpreting information and elucidating decision making as well as creating value for a company. Moreover, brand meaning is related to the various brand associations in the minds of consumers, which are based on how they interact with the brand and can include functional or symbolic meanings (Keller, 2003; Batra, 2019). Therefore, brands offer shortcuts through which consumers can understand the various products and services that are available for them to meet their needs, wants and desires.

To understand how meaning is created in the context of cultural artefacts and texts, and therefore in relation to branded entertainment, the 'circuit of culture' provides a useful lens. Grounded in the work of Du Gay et al. (1996) and Hall (1997), the circuit of culture describes how meaning is created through five interrelated processes: regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1: The Circuit of Culture



(du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus, 1997, p. 3)

The processes depicted in Figure 1 create “a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified and recreated” (Curtin and Gaither, 2007, p. 38) and acknowledge that culture, identity and power influence the dynamic nature of meaning construction (Tombleson and Wolf, 2017). Thus, the meanings conveyed in branded entertainment vehicles are described and established by practitioners but are also shaped by audiences and consumers, who in turn employ shared codes that permit them to construe and make sense of the brands’ meanings (Schroeder, 2009). In other words, aesthetic meanings in cultural practices are attributed to the various courses of action that consumers and companies navigate in the realms of commerce and consumer culture (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006).

This sociocultural approach to my research also enabled me to identify issues of ethics and responsibilisation in branded entertainment. Initially, this thesis focused on seeking to

understand how consumers perceive branded entertainment endeavours. Yet, as the consumer research progressed, it became clear that the consumers I approached struggled to differentiate between branded and non-branded content. Even media-literate consumers found it challenging to recognise the promotional nature of a substantial portion of the content they consumed. Further, as I progressed the industry interviews, it also became apparent that producers were not always transparent about the commercial elements within their productions. This prompted me to shift the focus of my work from consumer research to investigating how creative producers framed branded entertainment projects and their potential ethical issues.

In my industry practitioner research, data were showing that practitioners assume that consumers have the necessary literacy to understand the branded entertainment content they consume as branded entertainment. However, my attempts at interviewing consumers demonstrated that this assumption was flawed. Responsibility for understanding the persuasive nature of branded entertainment was seen as lying somewhere between the enlightened consumer and the savvy practitioner, but these boundaries shifted depending on different practitioners' perspectives. Therefore, this discrepancy between consumer understanding, practitioner perceptions, and the nature of branded entertainment led to an additional theoretical frame for the research focusing on issues of responsibilisation.

Scant literature examines film marketing through an ethics and responsibilisation lens. Thus, this work adds to relevant literature on film marketing by addressing such ethical issues through the lens of epistemic responsibility. Existing theory suggests that epistemic conditions can help determine whether an agent is morally responsible for a particular action (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998; Timpe, 2011; Levy, 2017). Epistemic conditions address the kinds of deliberative awareness needed (Sher, 2008), so that responsibility for a particular action can be

ascribed to an individual or collectively (Kidd, 2016; Fleisher and Šešelja, 2020). Therefore, identifying the epistemic conditions involved in practitioners' branded entertainment projects can help to illuminate how moral, immoral and non-moral boundaries are discursively negotiated, and inherently entwined with neoliberal ideologies.

#### **1.4 Research Aim and Questions**

The aim of this thesis is to understand how developments in branded entertainment have changed the marketing and entertainment landscape. This aim is pursued by exploring the interrelationships among practitioners' actions within discourses and text. The following research questions were employed in order to address the overarching aim of this research:

RQ1: How has the conceptualisation of product placement evolved into branded entertainment according to industry stakeholders?

RQ 2: What are practitioners' key considerations when creating branded entertainment?

RQ 3: How are branded entertainment projects governed by industry stakeholders?

RQ 4: Where does responsibility lie, according to industry practitioners, for how consumers engage with, and understand, branded entertainment?

Mediated discourse analysis (MDA) served as a robust methodological tool for navigating the complexities and rapid advancements within the branded entertainment landscape. One of its primary strengths lies in its ability to grapple with the inherent 'messiness' of contemporary branded entertainment as mediational means. By examining the discourse in action, MDA illuminates the dynamic and evolving nature of discourse in branded

entertainment. This involves actively observing and analysing how language and communication are manifested and used within specific contexts and situations. More precisely, it encompasses the ways in which discourse shapes and is shaped by social interactions, power dynamics, cultural norms, among other contextual factors, which all play a significant role in, for example, constructing meaning, negotiating identities, and influencing social reality through verbal and nonverbal communication.

To explore the concept of responsibilisation within the realm of branded entertainment, MDA enabled me to integrate a range of data sources into my research. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of discourse in branded entertainment, I conducted interviews with industry practitioners, many of whom are global leaders in the field. In addition, I conducted a comprehensive analysis of diverse audio-visual branded entertainment content in film and television shows using multimodal analysis as well as observing discussions at a practitioner event focused on the evolving strategies employed by brands and broadcasters through the reconsideration of traditional advertising approaches. By amalgamating these different data sources, I obtained a comprehensive understanding of the discursive landscape surrounding branded entertainment. Moreover, it allowed me to delve into the ways in which discourse within branded entertainment shapes and is shaped by notions of responsibilisation. In doing so, the examination of the discourses in action within branded entertainment uncovered the complex interplay between language, power dynamics and sociocultural norms that contribute to the process of responsibilisation. Moreover, it helps to illuminate inconsistencies and why they are where they coexist.

Consequently, this thesis reveals how practitioners navigate their roles and responsibilities within the realm of branded entertainment, ultimately shaping perceptions and

influencing socio-cultural dynamics. The thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the conceptual definitions and descriptions applied to branded entertainment, focusing particularly on film and television formats that employ advanced storytelling techniques. It also addresses branded entertainment governance, the tensions between arts and the market, as well as issues of responsibilisation and legitimisation in branded entertainment. Chapter 3 focuses on the mediated discourse approach used to analyse the practitioner data collected from global industry leaders through interviews, practitioner event observations and multimodal analyses of a selected branded entertainment films and series. Chapters four, five and six delve into the findings. Specifically, Chapter 4 focuses on the complexities that practitioners face in conceptualising, creating, producing, and distributing branded entertainment formats. Chapter 5 addresses the novel ways of working that have emerged through branded entertainment projects, including new modes of collaboration, novel intellectual property management and ownership models and issues, and the many power issues that manifest as industry practitioners navigate the world of brand-driven entertainment. Chapter 6 focuses on the ethical and responsibilisation issues that manifest through new branded entertainment formats. Findings show that such issues emerge due to the level of brand integration required by these entertainment formats, but also because branded entertainment content tends to be positioned en par with films or television shows. Finally, Chapter 7 then focuses on the discussion and conclusion sections of the thesis, developing the theoretical contributions, limitations, areas for future research and relevant implications emerging from this work.

This work's theoretical contributions are threefold. First, this research establishes clearer boundaries for the conceptualisation of branded entertainment, capturing its inherent complexities, and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its underlying dynamics and the roles, responsibilities and expectations involved in this mode of branded

communication. Second, this research highlights the continual importance of storytelling and emotions for building strong iconic brands, where the storytelling message becomes the medium for communicating about brands, thus, inverting McLuhan's classic proposition that the medium is the message. Finally, this research contributes to the development of the film marketing brandscape by illuminating how the various components of branded entertainment can collectively constitute a brandscape where brands can strive for meaning. It does so by focusing on how collaborations and control over creative outputs are impacted by the development of branded entertainment projects and the ethical and responsibility issues that emerge through such projects.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the conceptual definitions and descriptions applied to branded entertainment. The research field of branded entertainment is emerging and therefore it is vital to provide a conceptual analysis on the theoretical language employed, and to unpack and elucidate any examples of conceptual confusion (Tähtinen and Havila, 2019). This is complicated by the fact that different working definitions co-exists among practitioners and scholars of branded entertainment come from a range of complementary but distinct disciplines.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive overview of literature relevant to the development and articulating of branded entertainment as a theoretical construct. In doing so, I focus on film and television formats that employ advanced storytelling techniques. This is because these formats often make it difficult to distinguish between conventional film or television programme content, as content and promotion becomes increasingly blurred (Grainge and Johnson, 2015). Storytelling techniques also influence how content is consumed and how brands are integrated into different film and television formats.

The chapter provides tables of definitions and illustrative examples of the different but related concepts to illustrate the distinctions between them. The intention of this chapter is not to provide a definitive, single definition of branded entertainment, but rather to unfold the existing conceptual language that is associated with branded entertainment and related modalities, seeking to provide increased clarity between these marketing communication modalities. In doing so, this chapter discusses what related concepts such as product placement,

product/brand integration, branded content or advertainment disclose about branded entertainment as an intricate phenomenon.

## **2.2 Developments in Hybrid Marketing Communication Modalities**

Branded entertainment is a relatively novel form of hybrid marketing communication, which merges the commercial messages of a brand with non-commercial content (Balasubramanian, 1994; Lehu, 2007). It is positioned in a promotion environment and has evolved into a flexible term for various unconventional, digital and content marketing techniques (Grainge and Johnson, 2015). It is part of entertainment marketing, which refers to the experiential consumption arising from various and diverse product and brand placements (Lehu, 2007). Specifically, it relates to the ways in which a brand and/or product is presented to the audience by “weaving brands into the consumers’ experience of mediated entertainment” (Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2006, p. 64).

A major incentive to merge advertising and entertainment is that increasingly marketers are confronted with finding innovative ways to create integrated marketing communication programmes as brands, consumers and the media have been changing significantly in recent years (Keller, 2016). This is due to increasing levels of convergence (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008), which “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 34), which has emerged since the 1980s with the start of the media evolution (Stöber, 2004). This media evolution has driven various countries to deregulate their media industries, which has resulted in an increasing conglomeration of the media industry (Chan-Olmsted and Chang, 2003; Arsenault and Castells, 2008). This conglomeration is a consequence of global capitalism, administered by the notions of

neoliberalism (Herman and McChesney, 1997). Besides these economic and political motivations, this increasing deregulation has also been driven by technological advancements, particularly media technologies, to shape human association and action (McLuhan, 1964/2010).

Lash and Urry's (1987) notion of "the end of organised capitalism" is relevant here, as it highlights the transformation and complexity within contemporary economic and social systems. This transformation has impacted how advertising and media have evolved since the media evolution, leading to changes in strategies, power dynamics, consumer behaviour, and media content creation. Practitioners involved in branded entertainment must be able to adapt to these shifts and embrace the opportunities and challenges presented by the evolving landscape of networked, digital, and globalised economies. As a result, these developments, and particularly the future of advertising, have become a point of discussion among both practitioners and academics (Rust and Oliver, 1994; Laurie et al., 2019; Lewine, 2019).

Product placement and influencer marketing are well-established alternative ways to advertise products and brands to consumers, but branded entertainment "lies at the core of the new media economy" according to Baltruschat (2011, p. 45). Due to technological advancements, audiences can create their own schedule, binge-watch as well as produce and share content with each other (Mulhern, 2009; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008; Bright and Daugherty, 2012). Consumers are therefore able to govern their own media consumption, resulting in avoidance of advertising commercials (Wilbur, 2008; Bright and Daugherty, 2012; Teixeira et al., 2012; Ferreira et al., 2017). This is because consumers report negative attitudes (Speck and Elliott, 1997; Li et al., 2002) and growing cynicism (Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2006) towards traditional advertising, which are attributed partially to consumers' growing

sophistication (Williams et al., 2011). Consequently, these developments have significantly disrupted and transformed the media landscape, and the way content is presented to consumers.

Further, increased media fragmentation has generated growing channel capacities, enabling audiences to consume content on various platforms and on multiple devices (Napoli, 2011; Kant, 2014). This has also led to increased audience fragmentation (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012), in which consumers demonstrate migratory behaviour and are able to choose from a vast selection of television channels and multiple platforms, such as subscription video on-demand (SVOD) portals (Wayne, 2018; Schauerte, Feiereisen, and Malter, 2021), benefitting from enhanced viewing options such as rewinding, fast forwarding and pausing content (Woltman Elpers et al., 2003). Therefore, it is recognised that consumers are radically changing their media consumption patterns as they make use of various media channels and platforms to obtain the information they look for, affecting at what time, where and in what way they select brands (Batra and Keller, 2016). Hence, it is increasingly difficult for media owners (Chipp and Chakravorty, 2016) and brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011) to manage consumers, as they have yet to understand how to adjust to this continuously advancing landscape. As a result, advertising modalities are in a period of innovation and experimentation, which is particularly evident through the spawning of relatively novel and related terms of branded entertainment, such as ‘advertisainment’, which also represents a form of hybrid communication.

### **2.3 Conceptualising Branded Entertainment**

Branded entertainment has been discussed predominantly in relation to product placement, sponsorship, advertainment as well as product or brand integration (e.g., Hudson

and Hudson, 2006; Lehu, 2007; Russell, 2007; Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier, 2016; Kerrigan, 2017; Choi et al, 2018; Stolley, Kerrigan, and Yalkin, 2021). What these modalities have in common is that they signify content which is informational and/or entertaining that is funded by marketers (Hardy, 2022). However, the industry has recognised that the definition of branded entertainment is not thoroughly developed and needs further clarification (Arhio and Raunio, 2015; Asmussen et al., 2018; Dias and Harrach, 2018). In a similar vein, branded entertainment also remains ill-defined within scholarly research with only scarce attempts to advance its conceptualisation (Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier, 2016; van Loggerenberg, Enslin, and Terblanche-Smit, 2021). Yet Ho, Pang and Choy (2020, p. 133) claim that the lack of distinct definitions may be ascribed to leading practitioners aiming to pursue their own ‘organisational and methodological agendas’. Nevertheless, these structural barriers to developments in marketing communications hinder the advancement of theory and practice as extant language and theoretical frameworks are no longer sufficient to explain these processes.

Before providing the conceptual analysis of branded entertainment and its related concepts, it is vital to discuss the importance of conceptualisation in marketing, as the development and fragmentation of marketing theory has created an abundance of definitions, concepts, and theoretical paradigms in recent years (Patsiaouras, 2019). Significance as well as apprehensions over definitions within the field of marketing have been long established (e.g., Bartels, 1951; Kollat, Engel and Blackwell, 1970; Teas and Palan, 1997; Gummesson, 2005; MacInnis, 2011; Patsiaouras, 2019; Tähtinen and Havila, 2019) and concern issues around ill-defined or vague terms (MacKenzie, 2003), obscured and overlapping concepts as well as conceptual redundancy (Singh, 1991) that lead to inadequate or complicated theory development (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). As such, determining unified definitions may be considered an unachievable task with theorists developing their own understandings of branded

entertainment and its related concepts. However, Patsiaouras (2019) argues that the lack of universal definitions merely reflects a dynamic research area. Yet, given the significance of conceptual definitions (Bartels, 1951; MacKenzie, 2003; MacInnes, 2011), marketing scholars demand more conceptual work and marketing scholarship to generate new knowledge to interrogate the status quo (Yadav, 2010; MacInnis 2011, Tähtinen and Havila, 2019) with the aim of reducing ambiguity and minimising confusion over meanings (Sartori, 2009).

The absence of explicit conceptual language in terms of branded entertainment (Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Van Loggerenberg et al., 2021) and its related modalities, thus, faces the dilemma of conceptual confusion, which Tähtinen and Havila (2019, p. 534) describe as “studies focusing on the same phenomenon [that] use a variety of labels and terms to refer to the phenomenon or the experiences of it, without explicit definitions or descriptions”. In particular, definitions of hybrid communication modalities (see *Table 1* for examples) face the issue of synonymy, which refers to the adoption of several concepts that relate to the same phenomenon where the use of similar words generates ambiguity, as ‘a similar meaning is not the same meaning’ (Sartori, 2009, p. 112).

Table 1: Synonymy examples of branded entertainment and related terms

Term	Definition	Authors
Branded entertainment	“Branded entertainment is the way branded content adopts when its content is entertainment, whatever its form, and can be distributed across multiple channels and platforms”.	De Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González and Ramírez-Perdiguero (2015, p. 523)
Product placement	“Product placement, also known as brand placement is the process of integrating branded products or services into entertainment programs, apparently in a non-commercial manner to influence the target audience leading to commercial returns”.	Sharma and Bumb (2022, p. 104); based on definition of Balasubramanian (1994)
Branded content	“Branded content is described as a fusion of advertising and entertainment into one marketing communications product that is integrated into an organisation’s overall brand strategy intended to be distributed as entertainment content with a highly branded quality”.	Horrigan (2009, p. 51)
Native advertising	“Native advertising is a form of paid media where the advertisement is relevant to the consumer experience, integrated into the surrounding content and is not disruptive”.	Lovell (2017, p. 3)
Advertainment	“The term advertainment was coined to reflect the increasingly intertwined connections between advertising and entertainment. It refers to promotional practices that integrate brand communications within the content of entertainment products”.	Russell (2007, p. 3)
Sponsorship	“A cash or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property”.	Woisetschläger et al. (2017, p. 121)
Programming and content sponsorship	“Programming and content sponsorship involves the sponsor creating specific media or programming content, which can include online influencer activities”.	Lin and Bruning (2021, p. 221)

*Table 1* demonstrates what Sartori (2009, p. 111) labels ‘collective ambiguity’, which reflects the notion of synonymy as researchers apply very similar definitions but assign different labels to their definitions. However, theory development can only be facilitated when ambiguity, relating to both concept usage and definition, is avoided (Sartori, 2009). Nevertheless, Sartori (2009) also stresses that, in order to advance research, concepts need to be fluid, so their meaning is not subjected to a sole ‘strict definition’ (Kaplan, 1964, pp. 70–73). Hence, unpacking and thus clarifying conceptualisations permits the comprehension of novel

facets and world views and thus expands knowledge (MacInnis, 2011) in relation to branded entertainment.

The reflexive nature of concepts thus allows both scholars and practitioners to comprehend phenomena and guide their application of such concepts (Giddens, 1987). Based on Tähtinen and Suomi's (2022, p. 2) notion of 'multivocality', which advocates the formulation of various narratives or discourses of researchers, I recognise that my own ontological viewpoint influences and guides my analysis to provide conceptual boundaries and/or a description of branded entertainment. As a phenomenon can be conceptualised differently across research disciplines (Tähtinen and Suomi, 2022) as well as research subjects, it is important to understand how the concept of branded entertainment is applied within this thesis. Rather than advocating a definitive definition, Satori's (2009) notion of conceptual fluidity is considered to address the potential challenges involved in unpacking the concept of branded entertainment. Therefore, I move towards a working definition rather than a definitive definition by providing a conceptual overview to increasingly unfold the current conceptual language associated with branded entertainment. I do this in order to make appropriate decisions about how branded entertainment, as a complex phenomenon, can be further deconstructed to advance theoretical development. In doing so, I draw predominantly on academic journal articles and books. However, a few select practitioner definitions are included, as they denote specific characteristics about the evolution of branded entertainment. Nevertheless, practitioner literature is outside the scope of this conceptual overview.

Despite various discussions about branded entertainment in the academic literature, there are only a few articles that have attempted to conceptualise and/or define branded

entertainment. An extensive search of the literature has revealed that only three academic papers have explicitly aimed at conceptualising branded entertainment within the marketing literature. The most recent attempt is by van Loggerenberg et al. (2021), who conducted an exploratory study with global brand communication professionals to provide a definition of branded entertainment. The second article is by Kunz et al. (2016), who offer a conceptual model of branded entertainment within the context of sports marketing through analysing the Red Bull phenomenon. The earliest yet most advanced attempt to conceptualise branded entertainment is Hudson and Hudson's (2006) germinal paper in which the authors differentiated branded entertainment from product placement by developing a product placement – branded entertainment continuum. In line with this, other authors have also delivered more elaborate definitions of related hybrid communication modalities of sponsorship (Cornwell, 2008; Cornwell, 2014; Johnston and Spais, 2015; Lin and Bruning, 2021), product placement (Russell and Belch, 2005; La Ferle and Edwards, 2006; Williams et al., 2011; Eagle and Dahl, 2018; Guo et al., 2019; Russell, 2019; Sharma and Bumb, 2022), advertainment (e.g., Russell, 2007; Craig-Lees et al., 2008), and branded content (e.g., Asmussen et al., 2018, Hardy, 2018; Hardy, 2022). However, these attempted definitions remain vague and frequently overlap so that a clear distinction among concepts is obscure. Consequently, the conceptual boundaries around branded entertainment remain quite chaotic.

The intention of this thesis is to build on the academic journal articles of Hudson and Hudson (2006), Kunz et al. (2016) as well as van Loggerenberg et al. (2021) to draw on recent developments and unpack theorisation attempts to provide clearer conceptual boundaries. As a form of marketing communication, branded entertainment has the same characteristics as other marketing communication modalities; it is promotional, persuasive, targeted and creative

(Keller, 2016; West, Koslow and Kilgour, 2019; Childers, Lemon, and Hoy, 2019). Furthermore, branded entertainment and other hybrid communication forms frequently blur the lines between the consent and the form of promotion (Grainge and Johnson, 2015; Wojdynski, Evans and Hoy, 2018; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019; Russell, 2019). As a result, definitions are broadly ambiguous although there are some distinctions apparent which are highlighted in the discussion that follows. I focus on foregrounding branded entertainment by examining its connection and contrast to sponsorship and product placement, these are as long-standing hybrid communication modalities. I also focus on levels of brand integration and advertainment as rather novel hybrid communications forms.

## 2.4 Conceptualising Branded Entertainment through Sponsorship

As sponsorship is central to all hybrid messages, including branded entertainment, a valuable starting point is to re-engage with Balasubramanian's (1994, p. 30) notion of hybrid messages which

*“include all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character; under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages.”*

This definition helps to unpack the branded entertainment concept, as it entails some form of sponsorship and highlights the commercial intent of hybrid messages, which are paid for by a sponsor and in which content and format can openly or stealthily conceal their commercial underpinnings (Balasubramanian, 1994). Thus, the diverse meanings and multiple functions of sponsorship types could aid in identifying new contexts, processes and consequences (Lin and Bruning, 2021) in relation to branded entertainment.

The concept of sponsorship as a promotional tool has been long established (Cornwell, 1995) and the move of marketing funds to sponsorships is demonstrated in the waning effectiveness of traditional media (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2006). Sponsorship, like branded entertainment, aims for integrated communication in their marketing activities by becoming actively involved in television programming and by becoming an inherent part of everyday life (Cornwell, 2014). Consequently, integrated marketing strategies now place less prominence on persuasive mass communication advertising. Sponsorship is particularly prominent in the arts, sports, charity as well as entertainment and has developed into an important component of brand strategy (Cliffe and Motion, 2005; Kim et al., 2015; Kunz et al., 2016; Cornwell, 2019; Toscani and Prendergast, 2019; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020). Branded entertainment is also prominent within these sectors and hence demands that its relationship with sponsorship be clarified.

An early and germinal definition of sponsorship was provided by Meenaghan (1983, p. 9) who defines sponsorship as “the provision of assistance either financial or in-kind to an activity by a commercial organisation for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives”. Cornwell and Maignan (1998) view sponsorship as a communication instrument and promotional endeavour that comprises of two key pursuits: First, sponsorship entails an exchange between a sponsor and sponsee where the sponsee secures a fee and the sponsor gets the permission to relate itself with the sponsored undertaking, and second the marketing of the connection by the sponsor. Both pursuits are essential for the sponsorship fee to be a worthwhile investment. This relates to Nickell et al.’s (2011) work, who distinguish two characteristics among the various efforts to define the sponsorship phenomenon. One characteristic is related to the exchange between the sponsor and the sponsored in which both

parties receive some profit whereas the other one is concerned with the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored (Crompton, 2004; Cornwell et al., 2006).

A relatively fresh attempt to refine the definition of sponsorship has been provided by Lin and Bruning (2021, pp. 214-215), who define sponsorship as “a purposeful exchange relationship between a sponsoring entity and a separate sponsored entity in support of a tangible activity, event or dialogue engaged by the sponsored entity.” As this dissertation focuses on branded entertainment within film and television, it is worth looking at different types of sponsorships that are particularly associated with film and television, which are connected to commercial, programme, media and content sponsorship (see *Table 2*).

Table 2: Examples of different types of sponsorship definitions

Sponsorship	“Sponsorship can be regarded as the provision of assistance either financial or in-kind to an activity by a commercial organisation or in-kind to an activity by a commercial organisation for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives”	Meenaghan (1983, p. 9)
	Sponsorship is “the provision of resources (e.g., money, people, equipment) by an organisation directly to an event, cause or activity in exchange for a direct association (link) to the event, cause or activity. The providing organisation can then engage in sponsorship-linked marketing to achieve either their corporate, marketing or media objectives.”	Lee, Sandler, and Shani (1997, p. 162)
	“Sponsorship can be either aggressive, with the purpose of selling a product or company (commercial sponsorship), or subtle, with the purpose of projecting an image of good corporate citizenship (philanthropic sponsorship).”	Colbert, d'Astous, and Parmentier (2005, p. 48)
	“Sponsorship is a cash or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property.”	Woisetschläger et al. (2017, p. 121)
	“Sponsorship captures a purposeful exchange relationship between a sponsoring entity and a separate sponsored entity in support of a tangible activity, event or dialogue engaged by the sponsored entity.”	Lin and Bruning (2021, pp. 214-215)
Commercial Sponsorship	“Commercial sponsorship involves an investment in cash or kind in an activity, person or idea for the purpose of exploiting the potential associated with this activity.”	Meenaghan (1991, p. 36)
	Commercial sponsorship is “is a versatile method of communications that can be used to achieve a variety of objectives such as nurturing trade and business relationships and achieving awareness and image benefits on behalf of brands.”	Grimes and Meenaghan (1998, p. 51)
	“Commercial sponsorship stresses on the goal to support marketing objectives (e.g., increasing brand awareness or sales).”	Zu, Li, and Liao (2018, p. 734)
Programme, media content and sponsorship	“Defining characteristics of programme sponsorship are best uncovered when compared with conventional advertising. The main differences are that programme sponsorship is: - part of the programme; - seen to work in a different way; - to the benefit of everyone (in some markets).”	Bloxham (1998, p. 92)
	“Program sponsorship message refers to the inclusion of a short commercial message at the beginning of a program block, identifying the brand as a sponsor of the program.”	Dens, De Pelsmacker, and Verhellen, (2018, p. 152)
	“ <i>Media and programming content sponsorship</i> is a sponsorship exchange relationship between a sponsoring entity with an online or offline media entity that can provide programming or virtual communities.”	Lin and Bruning (2021, p. 221)

What is evident from *Table 2* is that there has long been a need within the cultural sector to seek commercial funding to produce high quality art and cultural content (O'Hagan and Harvey, 2000; Lewandowska, 2015; Ryan, 2018). Equally, the arts and cultural sectors have long been acknowledged as ideal locations for collaboration for commercial entities looking to benefit from the positive associations that this brings. The various challenges in relation to film finance and funding (Kerrigan, 2017; Hugenholtz and Poort, 2020) thus pose new sponsorship opportunities for branded entertainment projects.

As branded entertainment is co-created by sponsors (Kunz et al., 2016), the rise of sponsorships as a marketing communications strategy is ascribed to the general increase of indirect marketing approaches (Cornwell, 2008), with commercial sponsorships becoming increasingly prominent regarding its implementation in businesses. This is because marketers are aware of the significant benefits sponsorship-linked marketing can offer (Gupta et al., 2013). The growth in sponsorship pursuits is further indicated through the increased recognition that it can reinforce recall (Bennett, 1999; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012), attitudes and behaviour (Olson and Thjømøe, 2009), and credibility (Pham and Johar, 2001), which thus can further influence brand equity (Cornwell et al., 2001; Tsordia, Papadimitriou, and Parganas, 2018). Therefore, when a brand sponsors and provides entertainment value through branded entertainment, it can connect with consumers in a more meaningful way to enhance recall, preference and/or engagement through relevant and careful communications (Martí, Bigné, and Hyder, 2014; van Loggerenberg, Enslin, and Terblanche-Smit, 2021; Sharma, and Bumb, 2022).

Commercial sponsorship is commonly utilised within film and television and is defined “as a versatile method of communications that can be used to achieve a variety of objectives

such as nurturing trade and business relationships and achieving awareness and image benefits on behalf of brands" (Grimes and Meenaghan, 1998, p. 51). As such, commercial sponsorships are branding investments (Biscaia et al., 2014) and thus align well with branded entertainment endeavours. In the context of television, various researchers refer to programme sponsorship (e.g., Bloxham 1998; Olson and Thjømøe, 2012; Dens, De Pelsmacker and Verhellen, 2018), emphasising the importance of fit between the brand and a programme's emotional appeal as well as customer and audience profiles (Bloxham, 1998). Within television the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored is crucial for brand recall (Hudson and Hudson, 2006), so the sponsoring brand can benefit from the positive association with the sponsored programme among the programme's audience. Tiwsakul, Hackley and Szmigin (2005) state that the stronger the connection, the profounder the impact can be on the sponsor's representation as well as the attitudes regarding the sponsor itself. Therefore, as outlined previously, the alignment between the sponsor and sponsored is vital (D'Astous and Blitz, 1995).

Johnston (2009) notes that, in programme sponsorship, advertising messages are put directly before or after the content. *Figure 2* shows the Aldi Gingerbread Family as an illustrative television programme sponsorship example between Aldi and Channel 4's *The Great British Bake Off* franchise in the UK, which was produced by Love Productions, with McCann UK as the advertising agency. This sponsorship includes, for example, *The Great British Bake Off*, *Bake Off: An Extra Slice*; *Junior Bake Off*, *Bake Off: The Professional* (4Sales, 2023), which appears directly before the start of the programme with a sponsorship announcement (Olson and Thjømøe, 2012). The grocery brand Aldi sponsored the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> series of *The Great British Bake Off* franchise from 2020 to 2021 and allegedly paid a sponsorship fee to Channel 4 of approximately £4m to sponsor the television series, which was

twice the contracted amount compared to the previous year (Gonçalves, 2022). The ‘purposeful exchange relationship’, as noted by Lin and Bruning (2021, pp. 214-215), is reflected in the sponsorship fee, whereas Aldi was able showcase their products and reinforce its quality positioning with one of the most popular television shows in the UK. In doing so, the relationship between both benefitted from the mutual positive and uplifting tone (Vizard, 2020). With the sponsorship, Aldi aimed to continue the sales growth it had enjoyed during the Covid-19 lockdown, to expand its attraction and to engage a more diverse demographic audience, which makes *The Great British Bake Off* an appealing and profitable investment for Aldi (Stewart, 2020). From its initial sponsorship, Aldi noticed greater year-on-year penetration, increased recognition and exceptional sales results, which led to its consecutive sponsorship in 2021.

Figure 2: Great British Bake Off Programme Sponsorship Announcement Example



(Aldi Gingerbread Family (2021) *The Great British Bake Off*, Channel 4, Love Productions. McCann UK)

What can be seen from the Aldi sponsorship is the significance of the “fit between the sponsor message and the subject matter of the media” (Chan-Olmsted and Shay, 2015, p. 21), as both Aldi and *The Great British Bake Off* are food related. Also, Masterson (2005) highlights the importance of image fit in which crafty, entertaining, and creative approaches are favoured by audiences, which can lead to increased recall and approval of the programme sponsorship. The Aldi sponsorship example in *Figure 2* demonstrates this by employing an animated gingerbread family. Notions of pleasant and entertaining approaches also resonates with branded entertainment, as the emphasis is on the entertainment instead of the brand *per se* (Lee, Park and Jun, 2019). Branded entertainment has thus become increasingly prevalent because commercial messages are conveyed so that they do not disturb audiences (Jun, 2017).

As branded entertainment is apparent in both offline media (e.g., linear television programmes) and online media (e.g., online videos and social media platforms), it is valuable to further engage with media and programming content sponsorship, as it denotes the technological advancements in the field (Burton and Schlieman, 2021; Lin and Bruning, 2021). Dens, De Pelsmacker and Verhellen (2018) found that merging programme sponsorship messages with brand placements can increasingly aid brand recall in contrast to implementing solely either programme sponsorship messages or brand placements. As a result, contemporary sponsorship forms have evolved and span from simple announcements to marginal brand appearances or more intricate product or brand integrations (Russell and Belch, 2005).

## **2.5 Moving from Product Placement to Branded Entertainment: The Shift to Brand Integration**

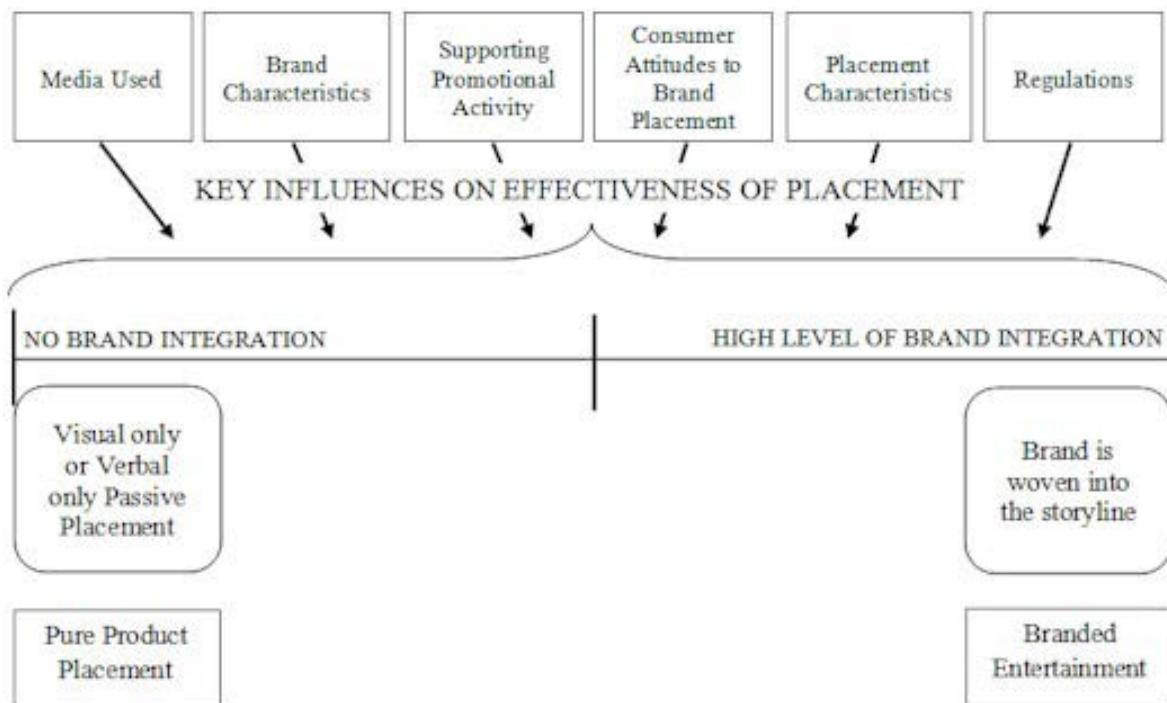
Product and brand integrations refer to the extent to which products and brands are incorporated into storylines or plots within films and other types of media (Hudson and

Hudson, 2006); they are commonly associated with product or brand placements and are widespread in today's media environment. However, before discussing the relevance of branded entertainment in terms of product and brand integration, it is helpful to review definitions of product and brand placement. This is because branded entertainment is frequently discussed in relation to both product and brand placement (e.g., Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Um and Kim, 2014; Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier, 2016, Kerrigan, 2017, van Loggerenberg et al., 2021; Stolley, Kerrigan, and Yalkin, 2021; Sharma and Bumb, 2022).

Product placement is concerned with messages that are intended to commercially advocate for products through a crafty integration of these in films or television programmes, aiming at influencing viewers' purchase decisions (Balasubramanian 1994). However, Karrh (1998, p. 33) elaborates on the definition of product placement by replacing 'product' with 'brand' and thus defines brand placement "as the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming". Karrh's (1998) definition emphasises the commercial objectives of placements in which particular brands, rather than specific product types, are inserted into films and television shows for commercial purposes. Both types of placements appear purposefully in non-commercial settings (Williams et al. 2011). However, although product and brand placements are often used interchangeably (Karrh, Frith, and Callison, 2001; Lehu and Bressoud, 2008; Davtyan and Cunningham, 2017), this thesis will adopt Russell and Belch's (2005, p. 74) definition of product placement, which is "the purposeful incorporation of a brand into an entertainment vehicle". This definition highlights that placements may not solely consist of products, but also of brands, services, organisations, places and so on (Kerrigan, 2017). In addition, it reflects different levels of brand integration (Russell, 2002).

Based on the level of brand integration, Hudson and Hudson (2006) conceptualise branded entertainment as a continuation of product placement by developing a product placement – branded entertainment continuum, which represents product placement on the one extreme and branded entertainment on the other (see *Figure 3*). Such integrations are influenced by different key factors that can impact the effectiveness of these hybrid messages (Hudson and Hudson, 2006).

Figure 3: The Product Placement – Branded Entertainment Continuum



(Hudson and Hudson, 2006, p. 495)

On the one end of the continuum, product placement has no brand integration. Initial applications of product placement served to add realism to entertainment products through commercially placed brands (DeLorme and Reid 1999; Gupta and Gould 1997; Hackley and Hackley 2012; Stolley, Kerrigan and Yalkin, 2021). Such conventional placements were fairly rudimentary (Karrh, 1998), in which objects were lent or donated to the production, or in which

required products were simply acquired from local retailers (DeLorme, Reid and Zimmer, 1994, cited in Karrh, 1998, p. 32).

Over the course of time, product placement applications have developed into more elaborate placements in which film studios and placement agencies operated as intermediaries to provide careful developments and purposeful implementation of product placements (Russell, 2019; Stolley, Kerrigan and Yalkin, 2021). In doing so, agencies assist with the partnering of advertising agencies and film/television producers, and placement deals are normally paid for by the advertiser or else would be subject to a barter system concerning products and services (Karrh, 1998). With more elaborate placements, Newell, Salmon and Chang (2006, p. 591) state that “in a single program one product’s on-screen appearance can be the result of cash payment, other products receive airtime in return for reciprocal advertising, whereas other products are included to save money on the purchase of props”. Chang, Newell and Salmon (2009) identify three particular business models for product placement including ‘serendipitous placements’, which consist of ephemeral unintentional placements; ‘opportunistic placements’ in which agencies notify various marketers about their storyline in order for them to integrate their product or service into the film; and planned placements, which consist of pre-negotiated deals between film makers and advertisers to insert products in different ways.

However, as contemporary developments of brand integration have become more intricate, increasingly they involve multiple stakeholders who are engaged in placement deals (Stolley, Kerrigan and Yalkin, 2021). Russell (2019) highlights that product placement thus endeavors to progress into wider entertainment marketing pursuits in which agencies need increased expertise not only in sponsorships and product placement, but also in productions

that have high levels of brand integration. High levels of brand integration are reflected on the other end of the continuum and thus reflect branded entertainment, which Hudson and Hudson (2006, p. 492) define as “the integration of advertising into entertainment content, whereby brands are embedded into storylines of a film, television program, or other entertainment medium. This involves co-creation and collaboration between entertainment, media and brands”. In this case, brands are inherent parts of storylines, which separates branded entertainment from product placement. In other words, product placement commonly integrates marketing communications within a film or television show in which placement agreements can take place at any production stage from pre-production to mid- and post-production, and in which products/brands can be adapted to different markets. Branded entertainment developments, however, entail a transformation whereby an ensuing final cultural artefact, such as a film, is a demonstration of integrated marketing communications (Stolley and Glynne, 2022). Hudson and Hudson (2006) further identify key influences that affect both, product placement and branded entertainment to varying degrees; these are: *media used, brand characteristics, supporting promotional activity, consumer attitudes to brand placement, regulations and placement characteristics*.

The first influence, *media used*, relates to the medium in which a brand is placed. Both product placement and branded entertainment are prominent within films and television programmes (Hudson and Hudson, 2006), but also occur within novels (Lehu 2007), plays (Alston, 2012) computer and video games (Nelson, Keum, and Yaros, 2004; Molesworth, 2006; Mackay et al., 2009, Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, and Aldás-Manzano, 2017), songs and music videos (Capelli, Fayolle, and Sabadie, 2016; Krishen and Sirgy, 2016; Matthes and Naderer, 2016), social media (Zhang, Sung, and Lee, 2010; Liu, Chou, and Liao, 2015; Touchette, Schanski, and Lee, 2015; Eagle and Dahl, 2018) and live streaming platforms (Park,

and Lin, 2020; Rees-Roberts, 2020). How the brand is placed is subject to the marketing objectives of the advertiser.

Furthermore, the second attribute, *brand characteristics*, should determine the meaningfulness of the brand integration (Hudson and Hudson, 2006). There are differences among brands in terms of their suitability for branded entertainment pursuits (Zhang, Sung and Lee, 2010; Kamleitner and Khair Jyote, 2013) with predominantly fast-moving consumer-good brands, such as Coca-Cola, Nike Inc. or Procter and Gamble actively aiming to target consumers through placements (Williams et al., 2011). Wiles and Danielova (2009) suggest that placing well-known brands might be processed more easily by consumers and thus have the potential to influence consumers more effectively. For example, popular and renowned brands, such as LEGO, Marriott, Johnson and Johnson as well as Tinder have embarked on branded entertainment projects. Moreover, brand placements can be more effective when a brand possesses a unique personality and has distinct attributes, which distinguishes them from competing brands (Um and Kim, 2014). However, consumers view brands that are connected with ethically charged products such as alcohol, cigarettes and guns as less appropriate than others when it comes to brand placements (Gupta and Gould, 1997).

Another influence is *supporting promotional activity*, which should be linked to brand integration in order to encourage a call to action. In both product placement and branded entertainment, extensive communication endeavours are complemented by messages in and around a particular cultural artefact, which are sponsored by the brand (Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Stolley and Glynne, 2022). An example of a fruitful placement accompanied by a promotional activity includes the launch of Fiat 500X in the *Zoolander 2* film. The promotional

advertising campaign launched the Fiat 500X crossover, with film character Derek Zoolander as the star of the campaign covering television, digital and social media platforms.

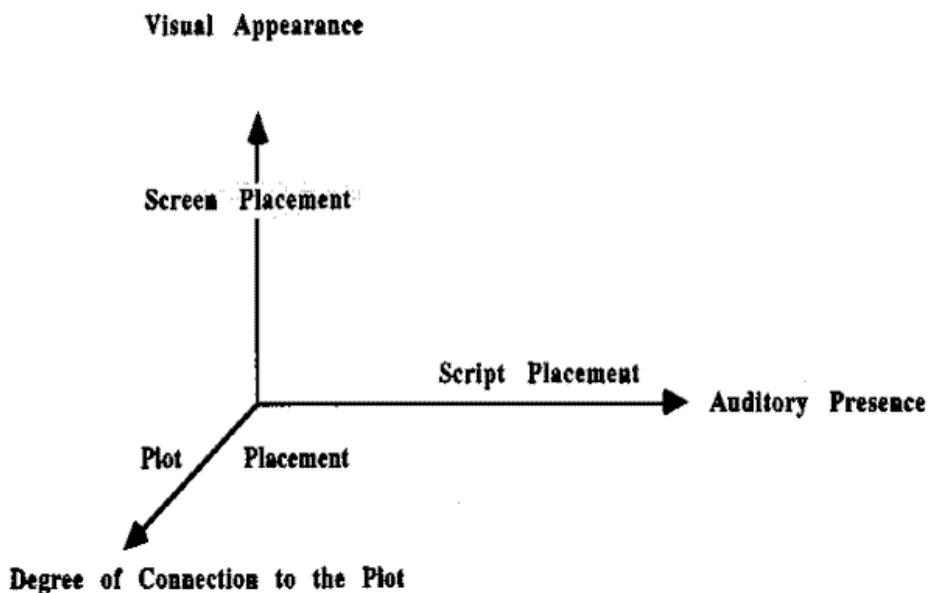
*Consumer attitudes towards brand placement* has been investigated in terms of brand prominence within entertainment content (Van Reijmersdal, 2009), in which high brand prominence results in negative brand attitudes for audiences who demonstrate awareness of purposeful brand placements and who have low involvement with the programme (Matthes, Schemer and Wirth, 2007; Cowley and Barron, 2008). Opposingly, prominence has a positive impact on audiences who demonstrate increased involvement with the content they consume yet have limited awareness of a purposeful brand placement. Similarly, if audiences are cynical and disapproving about content, they can feel increasingly annoyed, which may lead to less favourable brand attitudes (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2015). Within product placement vehicles, brand placements can have a greater influence on consumers in contrast to conventional advertising exposures (Karrh, McKee, and Pardun, 2003). However, Hudson and Tung (2016) state that there is limited research on consumer attitudes regarding branded entertainment. Nevertheless, a study conducted by Verhellen, Dens and De Pelsmacker (2019) examine how consumers' brand attitudes are affected by branded entertainment modes based on the interaction of three main factors relating to brand attitudes, which are programme liking, viewing frequency and programme connectedness. Findings reveal that if a programme is liked by consumers this also transfers to brand attitudes, which is correspondingly facilitated by connectedness with the programme yet not by the frequency of viewing. In addition, consumer attitudes towards brand placement may be further affected by demographic and cross-cultural differences (Hudson and Hudson, 2006). However, it is important to recognise that there are cross-cultural differences in consumer reactions towards brand placements (Gupta and

Grabner-Kräuter, 2000; Karrh, Frith and Callison, 2001; McKechnie and Zhou, 2003; Nelson and Devanathan, 2006; Lee, Sung, and De Gregorio, 2011; Chan, Petrovici, and Lowe, 2016).

*Regulations* in terms of brand integration vary internationally. While brand integration in some countries is very prevalent, other countries impose stricter regulations, making it less common (Siegel, 2004; Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Hackney, Tiwsakul and Preuss, 2008; Chan, 2012; Eagle and Dahl, 2018).

*Placement characteristics* are particularly important in examining the differences between product placement and branded entertainment, as they concern how and when brands are integrated into content. Russell (1998) developed a useful three-dimensional framework to study product placement based on three placement modes, namely screen placement, script placement and plot placement, which are classified in relation to modality and relevance (see *Figure 4*).

Figure 4: A Three-Dimensional Construct of Product Placement



(Russell, 1998)

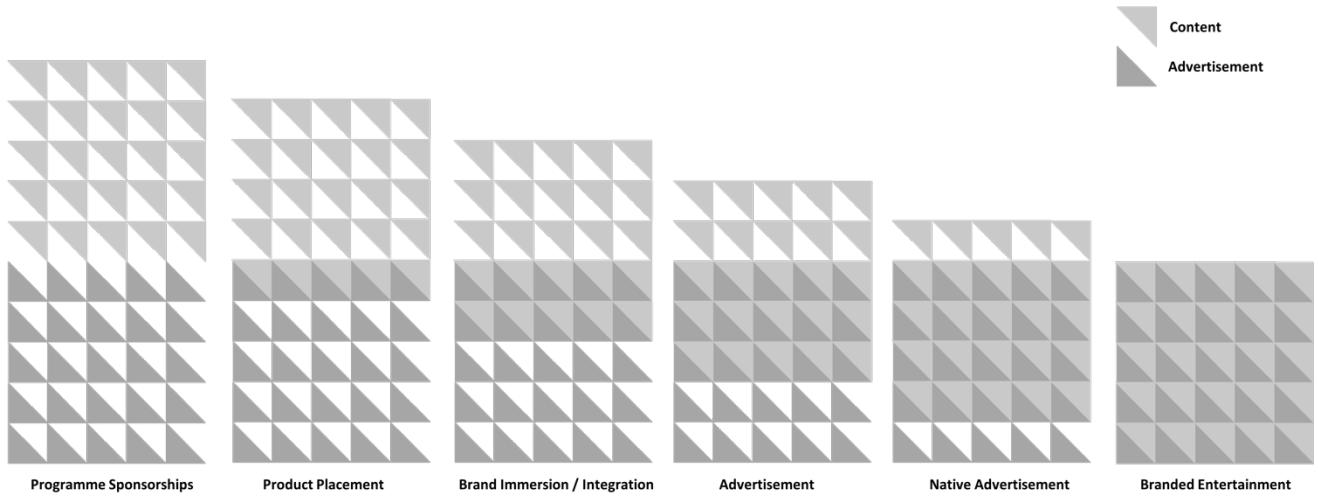
Placement characteristics for television programmes and films differ based on two key dimensions, visual appearance and auditory presence (Russell, 1998). Visual appearance is the first dimension and reflects an entirely visual placement type through either creative placement, which incorporates the brand into a movie (e.g., character holds a branded coffee cup) or through on-set placement, which places the product on the setting itself (e.g., grocery brands are positioned in kitchen settings). This is known as *screen placement*, and is influenced by, for example, camera shots, number of screen appearances, lighting and so on. According to Park and Berger (2010) it facilitates consumers' visual processing. Purely verbal/auditory types of product placement are labelled as *script placement* and make up the second dimension, in which brands can be referenced in a dialogue. Script placement is dependent on how and in which context the product is discussed as well as on the prominence put on the product name relating to, for example, position in the dialogue, tone of voice, frequency and the significance of character engaged in the dialogue. The third dimension is *plot placement* and relates to instances where the product is an integral component of the plot through either occupying a significant space in the storyline or constructing the identity of a film character. This dimension is particularly significant in relation to branded entertainment advances, as it merges visual and verbal components and can have varying degrees of association between the product and story.

Russell (1998) differentiates between low and high intensity plot placement. Low intensity plot placement has little significance to the story (Purnawirawan, Wouters and De Pelsmacker, 2010), in which, for example, a brand is simply mentioned and only appears momentarily on the screen. However, high intensity plot placement is concerned with a film character having a clear association with a particular brand or where the brand becomes a central part in the storyline, such as Wilson the Volleyball in the film Cast Away with Tom Hanks. However, Sharma and Bumb (2022) note that these different characteristics neglect some considerations in regard to execution which relate to, for example, timing of display and

reference, strength and emphasis of the display as well as the time span of the display. Moreover, placement characteristics need to consider culture, language, traditions and behaviour among other factors.

To acknowledge culture and the evolution from product placement to branded entertainment, Russell (2019, p. 38) reconceptualises “product placement as an intertext at the intersection of the entertainment content, the IMC context, and the sociocultural environment in which the product placement/entertainment/IMC are consumed”. In other words, product placement can be regarded as an intertext, which puts placement at the intersection of contexts, texts, as well as connections with other practices like the wider IMC surroundings by recognising that these interconnections are in flux. In addition to individual brand messages profiting or failing from being inserted in entertainment modalities, the encompassing context, such as the entertainment text, the IMC relationships and the sociocultural background can also profit or fail as a result of these connections (Russell, 2019). As entertainment plays a vital role within branded entertainment vehicles, increasingly brand messages must be integrated unobtrusively as consumers actively pursue and consume the content (Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier, 2016). In doing so, Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier (2016) have attempted to differentiate between different types of hybrid messages in terms of the intertwining of advertisement and content (see *Figure 5*).

Figure 5: Intertwining of Advertisement and Content in Hybrid Communication Forms



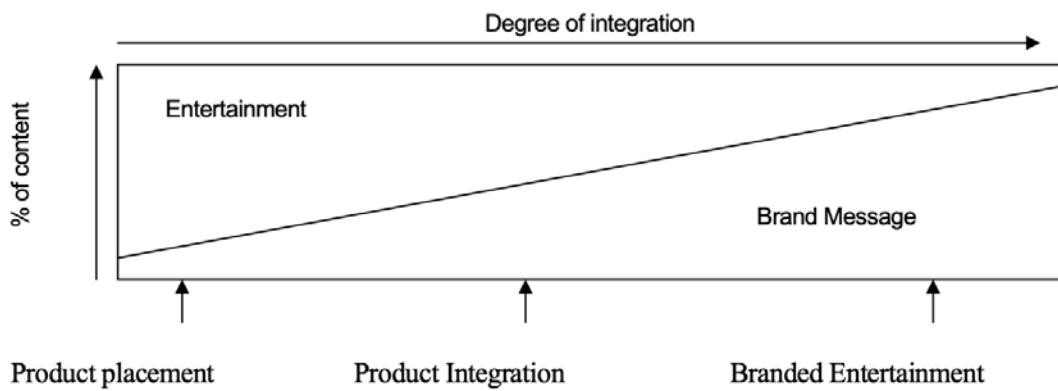
(Kunz et al., 2016, p. 525; adapted from Kunz and Elsässer, 2015, p. 56; based on Duttenhöfer, 2006;

Tsvetkova, 2007)

In line with previous discussions of programme sponsorship, Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier (2016) adopt Johnston's (2009) definition of sponsorship in which advertising messages are located directly before or after the content, which thus implicates that content and entertainment are completely separated. Although apart in *Figure 5*, product placement is perceived as closely related to branded entertainment. In contrast to Hudson and Hudson (2006), who see brand integration as the degree to which brands are incorporated into films and other types of media, Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier (2016) describe brand immersion or brand integration as another hybrid form that merges brands more organically into content. However, this thesis adopts Hudson and Hudson's (2006) viewpoint in that brand integration is the continuum along which product placement and branded entertainment are positioned. In terms of advertisement, it is not quite evident how it aligns with the intertwining of content and advertising. Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier (2016) refer to 'advertisainment' in this context by stating that this type centres predominantly on advertising messages rather than on the entertainment content. However, Deery (2004) and Russell (2007) simply view advertisainment

as the interweaving of advertising and entertainment as promotional activities in which the content of entertainment vehicles incorporates brand communications. Like Hudson and Hudson (2006), Russell (2007) situates advertainment through the level of brand integration within the entertainment content (see *Figure 6*).

Figure 6: Advertainment Typology



(Russell 2007, p. 5)

All these forms portray disguised forms of sponsorship; the messages are paid for by the marketer whilst co-creating content with entertainment producers to exhibit a particular product or brand (Russell, 2007). The most basic category in this figure relates to product placement which solely inserts brands into existent entertainment content in contrast to the most advanced type which is branded entertainment. Russell (2007) notes that with branded entertainment, the brand steers the production of entertainment content where the content is created around the brand with greater product involvement. While product integration relates to a substantial product placement in which a particular product is part of the story of an episode, with branded entertainment the product integration is even greater as the brand spans across a whole series. However, advertainment can reveal itself in two ways: either the entertainment is an advertising type or advertising is an entertainment type (Deery, 2004; Kretchmer, 2004). Kretchmer (2004, p. 51) highlights that all advertainment tactics create

“emotional, engaging connections with consumers, gaining “mindshare”, advertisements appearing in the guise of entertainment [and] concealing selling messages within storylines”.

Finally, branded entertainment can be regarded as the greatest interweaving of advertisement and editorial content that can be disseminated via various media platforms. Moreover, Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier (2016) argue that branded entertainment is not regarded as a replacement for advertisement and other types of hybrid messages that integrate content and advertisement; instead, they complement one another. Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier (2016) further discuss native advertising, which describes a hybrid message that is used in editorial print and online media and publishing (Carlson, 2015; Wojdynski and Evans, 2016; Wang and Li, 2017; Amazeen, 2020). However, as this dissertation focuses on branded entertainment within film and television, this is outside the scope of further discussion.

Therefore, according to Hudson and Hudson (2006), branded entertainment has the highest level of brand integration in which the brand is woven into the storyline. An obvious example is the *The LEGO Movie* (2014), which can be regarded as an advertisement that is approximately 90-minutes long and which aims at deepening consumer’s connection with the brand. While *The LEGO Movie* is an obvious example, other films, documentaries and television shows are more concealed, as the entertainment aspect is much more to the fore than the brand can ever be woven into the storyline. An example includes Johnson and Johnson’s documentary *5B* (2018), which tells the story of nurses in an AIDS ward in San Francisco General Hospital in the 1980s. It beautifully portrays the importance of caring and giving which are the values of Johnson and Johnson. However, the brand itself is only ostensibly visible in the credits of the film. Similarly, Norton, which provides antivirus and security software, spent most of their marketing budget in 2015 collaborating with an Oscar-winning director to

produce *The Most Dangerous Town on the Internet* (2016), a documentary about cybercrime in which their premise was getting viewers into buying antivirus software. Channel 4 commissioned the award-winning documentary miniseries *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds* (2017-18), partnered with the charity Age UK. In the series, young children and older people living in a retirement home shared the same classroom to work and play together. This intergenerational experiment drew attention to current issues in social care to evaluate the impact of social interaction with young people on the health and happiness of retired people. The show was a success and Age UK experienced significant changes in perceptions of their brand, with audiences now viewing Age UK as an “uplifting brand” that is “caring and compassionate” (Channel 4, 2020). What is evident from these examples is that films, documentaries and television series can utilise branded entertainment in a way that makes the story reflect a brand’s mission, vision or purpose.

By integrating the brand into the storyline, whether overtly or covertly, branded entertainment uses a convincing and authentic narrative with the aim of pursuing brand resonance (Van Loggerenberg, Enslin and Terblanche-Smit, 2021). Grounded in previous scholarship, Van Loggerenberg, Enslin and Terblanche-Smit (2021) suggest that an authentic narrative within branded entertainment requires a narrative that is brand-generated; that communicates the brand’s identity; that is an original piece; that carries emotional meaning; that is genuine and credible. Authentic narratives within branded entertainment vehicles are important as they facilitate deep emotional connections with audiences, which can thus result in brand resonance. The next section discusses current developments in brand storytelling, which allows me to link branded entertainment back to fundamental and underlying branding theory to further unpack the branded entertainment phenomenon.

## 2.6 Storytelling and Emotions

What is evident from the above discussion is that product placement, advertainment as well as branded entertainment make use of storytelling techniques to varying degrees, with branded entertainment employing the most advanced storytelling techniques. Storytelling has been long understood as a valuable marketing tool (McDougal et al., 2021). Storytelling is considered as a key component in persuasive marketing communications (Woodside, 2010) and in the management of cultural branding strategies (Ganassali and Matysiewicz, 2021). As such, storytelling is ubiquitous in life as much information is stored, recorded and retrieved from stories. Brands as well as products frequently contribute to these stories both on central and peripheral levels (Woodside, Sood and Miller, 2008). This is because storytelling inherently aligns with the human tendency to seek narratives and symbols that contribute to shaping one's identity, thus reflecting an essential aspect of branding (Hirschman, 2010). These stories are often transported through myths, which can entail brands but more often people (e.g., Marilyn Monroe). When a brand creates a myth, consumers identify that myth as a representation of the product (Holt, 2003). Hence, when consumers purchase the product, it can be regarded as a ritual endeavour helping to utilise the myth and build a relationship with the brand. Holt (2003) states that iconic brands in particular incorporate myths that aim to settle acute tensions that people experience between their personal lives and society's dominant ideology (Holt, 2003; Holt and Cameron, 2010). This links to Holt's (2004, p. 11) notion of 'cultural branding' which is 'the set of axioms and strategic principles that guide the building of brands into cultural icons', through the circulation of cogent myths. As such, storytelling has been a fundamental technique for disseminating traditions and myths while also educating and entertaining people (Carnevale, Yucel-Aybat and Kachersky, 2018). Therefore, branded

entertainment as a mundane consumption practice can encompass various meanings (Holt 2002). In doing so, it employs mythical narratives that “enable consumers to dramatically enact their ideological beliefs” (Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler, 2010, p. 1017)

Stories typically follow a chronological structure, encompassing a start middle and conclusion (Escalas, 2004). Identifiable components within such stories include, for example, characters, plot, conflict and resolution and in the context of brand storytelling, marketers can deliberately manipulate these components to attain specific brand objectives, such as influencing attitudes or beliefs (Houghton, 2021). Applying storytelling frameworks, such as the *Hero's Journey* or *StoryBrand* (Campbell, 1949/2004; Miller, 2017; McDougal, Syrdal and Kemphelp, 2021) help provide information, attract audiences to listen, view and engage in content (e.g., Escalas, 2004; Escalas, 2007; Van Laer, Feiereisen and Visconti, 2019). Academic marketing literature has discussed the benefits of storytelling to brands. For example, Lundqvist et al. (2013) demonstrate that storytelling facilitates positive and unique brand associations, which consecutively contribute to increased brand equity. Moreover, compelling stories are valuable in terms of building a strong brand identity (Simmons, 2006); as a brand is the essence of all corporate activities and communications, it shapes consumers' experiences with a product or business, which can be reflected in successful branding activities (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010; Spear and Roper, 2013). Stories can thus establish and/or foster emotional connections with brands (Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010; Dessart, 2018; Kang, Hong, and Hubbard, 2020). They create both, consumer-brand and consumer-consumer interactions, which facilitate the incorporation of individuals' experiences into the brand story (Escalas, 2004).

Due to storytelling's intricate and emotional abilities, businesses have thus been using it as a key component in branding and advertising (Simmons, 2006; Fog et al., 2010; Chronis, 2015; Kılıç and Yolbulan Okan, 2021; Kasilingam and Ajitha, 2022), to build and strengthen consumer resonance (Lundqvist et al., 2013). As a result, the importance of emotions in advertising has been long understood (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1984) in recognising dramatic advertising elements of narration, plot, story, characters, the message, and the recipient (Stern, 1991, 1994, 1996). Stern (1994) argues that advertisers, consumers and promotional texts are multifaceted contributors when it comes to building consumer-advertising text relationships. Consequently, stories can inhabit different forms and functions, and these have changed because of technological capacities, realising that "these communicative structures have implications for message production, including the types of narratives that are told and the voices represented within them" (Bell and Leonard, 2018, p. 2). Films thus represent a valuable storytelling device, as they are an integral component in everyday life with the ability to deploy "ideas, objects and places within these stories" (Stolley, Kerrigan and Yalkin, 2021, p. 372), as well as selling products and ideologies (Kerrigan, 2018). In this regard, brands and products (Gopaldas, 2016) can be deemed marketplace icons, but so can films (Kerrigan, 2018), and TV shows (Yalkin, 2021). This is because they "are associated with a complexity of cultural meanings, can attract polarising attention, are mentioned in diverse media, and are creatively adapted to multiple spheres of social life" (Cronin, Hadley, and Skandalis, 2022, p. 493).

Consequently, as a hybrid communications form branded entertainment has the ability to be a convincing piece of entertainment employing strong narratives that can remain for years on a global scale across cinematic, linear, and digital platforms (Stolley and Glynne, 2022). With the evolution of brand storytelling, branded entertainment formats, among other hybrid

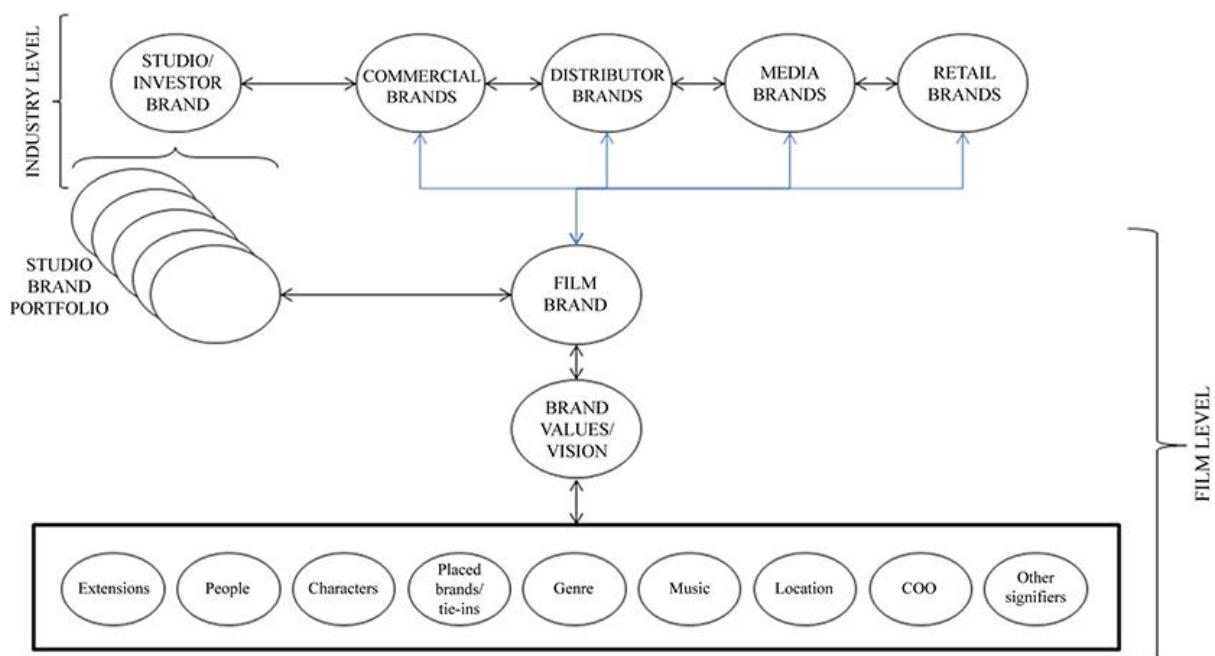
messages, aim to contribute to brand longevity, thus accomplishing social salience and continuous consumer engagement over a prolonged time period (Preece, Kerrigan and O'Reilly, 2019).

## **2.7 Understanding the Brandscape**

To further examine how meaning is created in the mind of the consumer and socio-culturally, it is important to acknowledge the co-dependency brands have upon each other. Brands are embedded within brandscapes, which are defined as “a culture or a market where brands and brand-related items such as signs and logos increasingly dominate everyday life” (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2010, p. 412). Mörling and Strannegård (2010, p. 413) see this as “a field of relationships where consumers’ experiences are ideologically infused”. It relates to the idea that brands are consumed in relation to other brands (e.g., Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002; Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), which is often the case when considering the work of the cultural industries and, in particular, that of cultural intermediaries (Kelly, Lawor and O'Donohoe, 2005). Brandscapes can provide consumers with familiarity and reassurance (Wood and Ball, 2013). Furthermore, brandscapes serve to highlight the ideological contexts within which brand meanings are established and disseminated (Sherry 1998; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2010). Consequently, branding procedures are not solely influenced by managers or consumers, but rather by multiple procedures such as ideological discourses, consumers’ contextual understandings, rhetorical procedures as well as cultural codes, all of which affect consumers’ connections with brands, advertising, and mass media (Schroeder, 2005). Cultural codes in particular can advance or restrain how brands operate to produce meaning.

In the context of film, O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2013) have developed the film brandscape (see *Figure 7*) in which brands can be investigated on their own, but also in conjunction with other brands located within films. Within both television and film contexts, brands mutually grapple for meaning and commercial brands can profit from connections with a film or television brand, adding realism through their occupancy in the brandscape. Brand meaning is thus not only ascribed to a specific brand but placing the brand at issue within a larger sphere facilitates that artistic, commercial, sociocultural as well as ideological ambitions collide.

Figure 7: The Film Brandscape



(O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013, p. 780)

O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2013) differentiate between artistic brands, such as director, actors, music and characters, and commercial brands, which can be, for example, prequels and sequels as well as tie-in cross-promotional campaigns. Commercial brands are usually integrated by virtue of funding arrangements between studios and commercial brands (Avery and Ferraro, 2000; Karrh, 1998; Hudson and Hudson, 2006; O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013;

Neale and Corkindale, 2022). From a consumer perspective, brand meaning is created through intricate processes which govern individual perception, selection and evaluation of a film (Hart, Kerrigan, and vom Lehn, 2016). This can further be attributed to the consumer's previous involvement with the numerous brand components that they have encountered (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013). However, brand meaning can also be assessed based on the overall brand experience with a particular film or television show among various stakeholders (e.g., consumers, producers, talent, creative agencies), and this can "be co-created before, during, or after the consumption of the brand" (Merz, Zarantonello, and Grappi, 2018, p. 80). A sociocultural approach to branding can, thus, explain why films and television shows offer ideal spaces for various brands to be presented in order to create or strengthen brand meaning. Therefore, brands can be conceptualised as "dynamic assemblages of sociocultural artefacts that occupy simultaneously discrete and interacting nests of association and meaning" (Preece, Kerrigan and O'Reilly, 2019, p. 331). Consequently, the film brandscape, and thus branded entertainment, are complex phenomena due to the various brands and brand modalities that coexist within the brandscape to fight for, strengthen, and ascertain brand meaning.

Overall, this section shows that brands are forced to find novel and innovative ways to reach consumers due to technological developments and changes in consumption behaviour. This section unpacks the branded entertainment concept in relation to other hybrid communication modalities, which are sponsorship, product placement and advertainment. In doing so, I have highlighted the conceptual confusion between these modalities, yet have drawn out differences and similarities to unravel the conceptual confusion between these terms. The discussion of the different sponsorship forms has demonstrated the necessity for the arts and cultural sectors to obtain commercial funding to make up for the deficits of film finance and funding, whereas brands can benefit from the positive associations when placed in cultural

artefacts. Sponsorships are generally announced in the opening or closing credits and there should be a perceived fit between the brand and the programme as well as the subject matter of the media. Product placement, on the other hand, inserts products and brands into an existing cultural artefact, such as a film, and this can be done visually, verbally or by using a combination of both. Products and brands can be placed at any production stage and can be amended depending on which products and brands are culturally relevant in a chosen market. Advertainment focuses particularly on advertising messages instead of the entertainment content. It aims to create emotional and appealing content to engage with consumers on multiple levels by integrating disguised selling messages within storylines, which is in line with branded entertainment. However, branded entertainment gives greater prominence to creative storytelling techniques by integrating brands in storylines; these integrations are increasingly intricate, as storylines focus on entertainment qualities by subtly reflecting on a brand's mission, vision or purpose to reflect the brand's authentic narratives.

## **2.8 Stakeholders and Brand Governance in Branded Entertainment**

As discussed in the previous section, due to technological advancements and changes in consumption behaviour, brands have moved away from transactional relationships when getting their products or brands integrated into films and television programmes. Instead, brands have started to embrace more collaborative approaches in order to find innovative ways to engage with consumers. As branded entertainment projects generally incorporate various stakeholders, it is apparent that brand ownership is increasingly distributed. Although there is a recognition that both consumers' and marketers' perspectives need to be understood in

advertising developments (Ang, Lee, and Leong, 2007), Um and Kim (2014) highlight the need to take wider stakeholder perspectives into account when examining branded entertainment.

A stakeholder is defined as “any individual or group who can affect or is affected by the actions, decisions, policies, practices, or goals of the organisation” (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). When it comes to branded entertainment, there are multiple stakeholders, each with their own drivers, deliverables and measurements for success. They all have different levels of commitment and expectations, which makes collaboration an uneven playing field, often with conflicting operations and definitions of success (Stolley and Glynne, 2022). As such, contributing stakeholders are generally autonomous performers who collaborate for the intentions of creative outputs (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013). In doing so, industry players are required to continuously innovate to satisfy consumers, which requires them to be agile with their business models to remain competitive and to succeed in these uncertain and dynamic environments (Lee, Olson and Trimi, 2012). Consequently, brands and collaborating entities such as producers, broadcasters and ad agencies are increasingly forced to engage in strategic collaborations to provide the experiences they promise to consumers (Helm and Jones, 2010) through branded entertainment. In addition, research recognises that consumers are active contributors in the creation of brand meaning (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This links to the notion of brand co-creation, which is a relatively novel branding paradigm (Gregory, 2007; Christodoulides, 2008; Hatch and Schultz, 2008), based on the recognition that today's consumers increasingly move away from being passive buyers of a brand (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019). As such, Pera, Occhiocupo and Clarke (2016) state that co-creation goes beyond consumer – company interactions thus proposing a multi-stakeholder ecosystem. Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016) suggest, based on their integrative framework of brand value co-creation, that consumers, employees, associates as well as other stakeholders

engage mutually in co-creation processes. Consequently, brand co-creation takes place in a “context of complex networks that are part of dynamic service ecosystems, comprising not only firms and customers but their contextual communities and other stakeholders” (Merz, He and Vargo, 2009, p. 329). In doing so, brand co-creation is specifically concerned with “a process of intentional interaction between or among two or more parties that influence a brand” (Sarasvuo, Rindell and Kovalchuk, 2022, p. 544).

In the context of the creative industries, Durgee (2004) states that marketers and consumers co-create meaning when creatives employ empathy in order to discern in what ways audiences deal with brand offerings. Empathy is defined as “the ability or capacity to experience emotions from the position of the other” (Adams, 2016, p. 31). This is particularly with branded entertainment endeavours as creative storytelling is applied to evoke emotions in audiences to create brand meanings and thus build consumer-brand relationships. In doing so, brand meanings are manifold due to a multiplicity of stakeholders who create and recreate a continuously changing and frequently obscure array of brand interpretations. As a result, co-created advertisement in the form of branded entertainment can offer marketing professionals significant benefits, from participating consumers through, for example, the production of authentic content or by generating deeper consumer insights (Thompson and Malaviya, 2013).

In addition, Ind and Bjerke (2007) perceive stakeholder participation concerning brand co-creation as a matter of brand governance, mainly because it indicates that control of brands is shared between a company and its stakeholders. Brand governance is regarded as a rather novel research area requiring thorough examination (Helm and Jones 2010), in order to unpack the opportunities and challenges that businesses are encountering (Ind and Bjerke 2007) in the context of branded entertainment. Overall, brand governance is concerned with

company/stakeholder involvement, which is executed through ‘co-creation’, indicating that brand governance can only be achieved through company-stakeholder engagement, which is reflected in a combination of access and dialogue among the relevant parties (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Consequently, it requires companies to surrender but also accept control of brand meanings which eventually contribute to the value(s) of relevant parties involved.

Brand governance is regarded not solely as the most advanced strategy within brand management, but also as a novel brand management philosophy in which ‘participation’ is a fundamental aspect in the development of successful brand building (Ind and Bjerke, 2007). This means that stakeholders involved in the production, consumption and dissemination of branded entertainment are involved in intricate relationships. However, building and engaging in these partnerships might pose significant risks to companies when managing their brands due to increased complexity and potential conflict of interest as well as diminished control (Helm and Jones 2010). Consequently, marketers may find it difficult to adjust to a brand governance philosophy, as it requires them to relinquish some degree of control to move the organisation through the dynamic outcomes of brand co-creation (Barwise and Meehan 2010; Hatch and Schultz 2010). Nevertheless, due to the continuous changing nature of technology and consumption, marketers are required to engage in strategic partnerships in order to take full advantage of new technologies and collaborative idea generation to reach consumers through authentic and compelling experiences.

For stakeholders involved in the production and dissemination of branded entertainment, branded entertainment facilitates innovative opportunities for brand alliances (Haberman, 2018; Bang et al., 2020), which are prevalent in contemporary brandscapes (Kupfer et al., 2018), and thus pose new modes of brand governance. Brand alliances between

two or more brands have quickly transcended mere product integration to content co-creation (Bernazzani, 2019), leading to the production of co-created brand value. This implies that companies form this alliance in order to profit from the competences of each other, which thus reinforces the notion of co-branding aiming at strengthening the customer-brand experience.

Therefore, branded entertainment practitioners engage in the formation of temporary organisations, which are growing in popularity, as campaign outcomes necessitate the collaboration of diverse experts (Grabher, 2002) and have therefore become increasingly predominant to fulfil marketing objectives (Grabher 2004; Hadida, Heide, and Bell, 2019). Baumgarth (2018) suggests that collaborations between brands and artists facilitate brand meaning development through the co-creation process of both brands and artists, and that research in the field should move beyond consumers' assessments. Instead, Baumgarth (2018) proposes that an examination of partnership processes requires a more comprehensive understanding of obstacles such as cultural dissimilarities, underlying motivations, and components (i.e., brand owners, intermediaries such as advertising agencies and talent). To further understand the collaborative processes within the creative industries, Ghaffari et al. (2019) investigate how creative ideas permeate through the power dynamics and persuasive strategies of agency teams and client-side teams in a major Iranian creative advertising agency. In doing so, a sequence of social processes in relation to advertising creativity are identified, which are control power, knowledge power and persuasive power. Thus, creativity can be regarded as a set of social practices, which are adopted in order to deal with potential conflicts regarding creative output with the aim to achieve both the creation of successful work and convincing the client to approve the creative strategy. In addition to creating strong connections with consumers through branded entertainment, marketers further obtain consumers' emotional labour through the enhancement of value of the brand's characteristics within day-to-day

communication (Gaigne, 2011). Brand messages are thus shifting from rather obtrusive advertisements and product integration towards audience engagement by offering or allowing participation within the entertainment experience.

Therefore, to increasingly understand the collective and collaborative nature of branded entertainment, a multi-stakeholder approach (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015) needs to be considered. Stolley and Glynne (2022) identify six key stakeholders which are exemplary in the context of branded entertainment endeavours in film and television. These are *the brand*, *the producer*, *the platform*, *the agency*, *the talent* and *the audience*, which are discussed subsequently in greater detail.

*The brand* is at the heart of the branded entertainment ecosystem. As outlined in the sociocultural approach to branding, the brand can sometimes be regarded as a patron of artists. Historically, for example, when the brand wanted to use its money, power, and reach to create an impressive and lasting cultural impact, it did so in order to (directly or indirectly) improve its reputation and equity (Yoon, and Choi, 2020). The brand, in these cases, has very little creative or logistic control over the final output, especially in comparison to a print ad, television commercial or even influencer content. The brand is risking its own investment on ventures that do not have guaranteed or even trackable results, unlike a digital banner campaign or television commercial, for example. According to Glynne (2023) a key challenge facing branded entertainment projects is that there are no robust return on investment tools around branded entertainment, and therefore value emerges through the value ecosystem, through the interactions of multiple stakeholders both through partnerships and competition (Preece, Kerrigan, and O'Reilly, 2016). In this sense, branded entertainment becomes the antithesis of a data-driven solution for marketing – it is art as marketing channelled via branded

entertainment. The brand commits to this form of arts marketing because brand owners want to connect with their customers in more engaging and interesting ways than they might via traditional marketing (Kunz, Elsässer, and Santomier, 2016). As discussed, brands see the value of creative storytelling in elevating the message to something that becomes culture itself and, in the process, attracting audiences in a scalable fashion through a strong entertainment format that can last for years and travel the world across cinematic, linear and digital platforms. Although brand performance indicators in this context are not as measurable as in other potential forms of brand communications, the less tangible uplift in brand values, the ability to portray a brand's purpose and the long-term public relations value can be significant. Therefore, branded entertainment can accomplish brand resonance through the creation of an authentic narrative, which should be rooted in its identity (Van Loggerenberg, Enslin, and Terblanche-Smit, 2019).

*The producer* is more interested in benefitting from the patron's marketing budget to fund content production (or their art) than in the marketing process itself. However, along with benefitting from new business opportunities via brand money, the producer also capitalises upon a brand's marketing power to drive audiences to the show or artform, to access the brand's associated talent and sponsored events and to harness the insight that the brand has about its consumers' needs. The key is to deliver the highest quality art through content that would attract viewers regardless of whether it has been funded by a brand. The television or film producer's ability lies in knowing how to create scalable intellectual property (IP) that can travel across seasons, platforms and territories, maximising the investment for all parties (Glynne, 2018). For the producers, however, a shift in perception is required in understanding their role as marketers; whereas when they are commissioned by a commercial broadcaster, they are one-step removed from the flow of money, branded entertainment puts them right next

to the financial source, with its incumbent stakeholders and patrons to manage. It is easy for them to fall into the position of feeling they are “selling out” to brands, where the alleged purity of their art is taken away, but this perception is gradually changing in the industry as branded entertainment becomes more normalised and, due to changing economics, necessary (Stolley and Glynne, 2022).

*The platforms* that carry branded entertainment have a stake in the game (Hudson and Tung, 2016); they are the distributors for the patron’s commissions who bring the art and its embedded messages to the public. For advertiser-supported broadcasters, a brand’s money helps to deficit-fund content (Kerrigan, 2017), bringing in advertising funding around the programme in the forms of sponsorship and television commercials. For SVOD services such as Netflix, the brand’s investment becomes a marketing tool in its own right. Netflix cannot have paid-for product placement as it contradicts their business terms as a subscription network. Hence paid-for brand partnerships are activated anywhere but on the screen and include co-marketing campaigns. In other words, brand money does not contribute to the production in terms of on-air product placement; instead, it is diverted off-air to co-promote the show, using branded entertainment to flow money from funding art to arts marketing.

*The agency* (whether media, creative, digital, public relations or a combination of all of these) represents the brand and looks after its best interests. They are responsible for ensuring the brand’s values and marketing messages are integrated into the content, and that the brand’s money is spent to achieve the most desirable, artistic content that reaches target audiences. Increasingly, agencies are threatened by audiences skipping television ads and as such are diversifying their business (Jensen and Sund, 2017; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019; Stuhlfaut and Windels, 2019) by creating their own branded entertainment offerings. The agency uses

branded entertainment as an arts marketing tool for their creative excellence and ability to think outside of the box. The value of winning at industry events, such as Cannes Lions or Sundance Film Festival, demonstrates the recognition by critics in that entertainment and advertising worlds can be elevated beyond a campaign to an artistic project.

*Talent* are also stakeholders in branded entertainment. This is because talent, such as celebrities, have the opportunity to obtain economic and social advantages as they are able to achieve their social influence amidst society as well as other players from which they can profit through the active co-creation with stakeholders (Centeno and Wang, 2017). Consequently, talent behind and in front of the camera use branded entertainment not only as a funding mechanism, but also as an opportunity to solidify a purpose or message they find meaningful. Talent can elevate an idea or artistic endeavour and bring it to a massive audience – and talent are aware of this power. An example is Gwyneth Paltrow producing *The Goop Lab* for Netflix.

*The audience* is responsible for consuming, sharing and creating a cultural impetus around content (Parreño, 2015). It is the audience's reception of branded entertainment that can transform it from the mundane or invisible to 'successful' or 'popular' artistic product. The audience ranges from professional critics and judges on festival juries to the passionate consumers who become default marketers through word-of-mouth and social posts. Holbrook and Addis (2008) refer to success-related factors as artistic excellence and commercial appeal. Artistic excellence is determined by industry acknowledgement through awards, whereas commercial appeal is gauged by market performance such as box office figures. Although in the context of music concerts it has been found that when branded entertainment is co-created with the audience, this collaborative effort has the ability to improve the brand image, as

branded entertainment can evoke more positive brand associations than other hybrid forms (Capelli, Fayolle and Sabadie, 2016).

To conclude, branded entertainment endeavours disrupt previous modes of brand governance and industry practitioners need to understand how to deal with these generally complex strategic partnerships. As such, brand co-creation strategies increasingly apply to branded entertainment projects in which multiple stakeholders deliberately interact to shape narratives and content around a particular brand. Identified stakeholders in branded entertainment are the brand, the producer, the platform, the agency, the talent and the audience. From a practitioner viewpoint, the creation of an advertising campaign and branded entertainment is a process shaped by society and technology (Stuhlfaut and Windels, 2019), which is influenced by the interactions of diverse groups, each driven by their unique beliefs and goals. As such, advertising presents an intriguing juncture where the creative and managerial ideologies of various practitioner groups within the advertising process converge (De Waal Malefyt and Morais, 2010; Keegan, Rowley and Tonge, 2017; Windels, and Stuhlfaut, 2018). Every stakeholder wins when branded entertainment has craft, creativity and distribution at its core, yet the creative kernel is responsible for developing branded entertainment that can elevate content above data-driven integration into something that has aesthetic and emotional resonance through creative storytelling. When successful, branded entertainment can be appealing to both film and television audiences as well as to artistic juries, it can bring awards, get people talking and ultimately build brands and sell products while also delivering on key performance metrics, as marketing artefacts demonstrate the potential for branded entertainment to fulfil both artistic and commercial demands.

However, the dichotomy between artistic and commercial demands can pose significant challenges, which is reflected in the tension between the arts and the market. This tension is rooted in the notion that films and television shows can be regarded as forms of art (Russell, 1998; Kerrigan, 2017; Nannicelli, 2017). As branded entertainment falls between art and entertainment, it is situated between cultural types aiming for creative integrity while simultaneously looking for commercial accomplishments through mainstream appeal (Holbrook, 2005). By acknowledging that commercial means are necessary in the arts market and that brands have an eminent place within audio-visual culture, art provides a useful lens through which to scrutinise and recognise cultural influences in branding (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1992; Stern and Schroeder 1994; Schroeder 2005), which is discussed in the next section.

## 2.9 The Tensions between Arts and the Market

As this thesis examines the intersection of marketing communications and branding by specifically looking at how advertising is impinging upon the cultural industries, it is important to discuss the tensions between arts and the market, which are inherent in the film and television industries. The interface of art and commerce continues to underpin many studies in arts marketing, and the developing field of branded entertainment is ideally placed for exploring this intersection. This intersection falls under the heteronomous sphere, in which arts intersect with different entities, such as commercial interests and the marketplace (Bourdieu, 1985; Rentschler, Fillis and Lee, 2022). Branded entertainment falls under the broad field of ‘arts marketing’ and can be considered an evolving marketing tool for attracting audiences and achieving market-based objectives (Bradshaw, 2010).

Loose (2015) highlights that different forms of art are well-established and employed by marketing and advertising to sell products and gain access to new markets, both within the cultural industries and more precisely within entertainment media. Brown and Patterson (2002, p. 17) offer a compressive discussion of the dichotomy between arts and marketing in different forms and periods of art production in relation to marketing by reviewing previous research that have embraced a market-for-the-arts or marketing-for-the-arts perspective, considering “it might be better to consider the arts for marketing”. O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2010, p. 1) propose that the relationship between arts and marketing may be analysed via ‘marketing through art’, which is a helpful lens to illuminate advertising, product placement as well as branded entertainment modalities. However, it is helpful to note the distinction between arts and entertainment, because some entertainment modalities are recognised art while others are not. Larsen and Kerrigan (2018) argue that the principal distinction between arts and entertainment is often volatile, unrecognized, and continuously changing.

Moreover, various issues of concern in relation to arts marketing are embedded in critiques of capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972) provide a critical discussion of popular culture and how it is produced within industrialised production methods in order to be sold to people, where the cultural industry is regarded as a means of diverting individuals to influence their consciousness. In doing so, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972) determine a shift from arts to entertainment in which entertainment is simply portrayed as a distraction with the aim of alleviating boredom, while the arts are perceived as elevated leisure activities. This is further underpinned by Bourdieu's (1979/1984) notions of social, cultural, and symbolic capital, which are strongly connected to possession of and the opportunity to approach economic capital, where cultural consumption is closely tied to social class and the possession of economic and social capital.

Traditionally, there are two opposing views which ascertain rather conventional camps in connection to arts and society. On the one hand, ‘high culture’ or ‘highbrow art’ is regarded to attract a cultural elite; one that is characterised by highly educated consumers that are interested in arts like theatre or museums. On the other hand, ‘low culture’ or ‘lowbrow art’ is the domain for the masses, with consumers being interested in popular art forms such as cinema, street art or popular music (Butler, 2000; Colbert, 2014). Nevertheless, it has been acknowledged that the arts are a much broader and intricate field, which transcend beyond the conventional disparities of high and low culture in order to embrace the various artistic and cultural contributions (Larsen and Kerrigan, 2018). Consequently, there has been a shift away from rather elementary and myopic definitions which merely include ‘arts’ into present marketing definitions, recognising that the arts represent practices relating to production, distribution and consumption of cultural meanings due to their offerings (O’Reilly et al., 2013).

Thus, branded entertainment can be regarded as both a cultural product and, more broadly, a form of art, which is created, transmuted, and disseminated within consumer culture (Lash and Urry, 1994). The cultural industries are predominantly responsible for producing cultural products. They consist of various sectors that produce cultural products through aesthetic and artistic applications where cultural production processes involves the interaction and collaboration of cultural actors who produce symbolic meaning (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). More precisely, aesthetic symbols and meanings are created within consumer culture through production and consumption procedures that circulate in and through the cultural industries (McCracken, 1988; Kozinets, 2001; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Colombo, 2018).

There are three cultural actors involved in cultural production that can help us understand underlying production and consumption dynamics in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2019) relating to branded entertainment. These are cultural producers (e.g., artists, designers, musicians), intermediaries (e.g., television, marketing, advertising) and consumers. Due to technological advances, intermediaries such as marketing and advertising practitioners are confronted with finding innovative ways to create integrated marketing communication programmes, given that brands, consumption and media landscapes have significantly changed in the past years (Keller, 2016). These advancements have not only considerably disrupted and transformed the cultural industries but also resulted in changes in terms of how cultural producers engage with each other.

The tension between arts and the market in the context of film and television is particularly visible in the interactions between cultural producers and intermediaries, resulting in clashes between the artistic efforts of, for example, filmmakers and the commercial requirements of the industry (Kerrigan, 2017). While conventional filmmaking can be regarded as a means for artistic and creative representations, storytelling or societal commentary (Brown, 2016, Kerrigan and Callaghan, 2018; Schwartz and MacDonald, 2020), marketing and advertising practitioners can take advantage of this by developing branded entertainment content based on these means, with the aim of appealing to audiences and maximising profit. Dolbec et al.'s (2022) concept of 'nested coupling' provides a useful framework for this, describing how organisations integrate market-oriented practices while preserving their core identities to balance demands for conformity and differentiation. In the context of branded

entertainment, nested coupling is crucial as it highlights the intertwining of artistic and commercial logics.

Therefore, branded entertainment can be regarded as commodification, which portrays practices in which cultural meanings and values are produced as a result of marketing pursuits (Scott, 1993; Peñaloza, 2000). As such, the commercialisation of films and television shows through branded entertainment demonstrates an increased market-driven approach to the arts and entertainment in which advertising can be regarded as a tool for artistic commoditisation and consumer socialisation (Nava and Nava, 1992). Moreover, commercialisation can pressure cultural producers to conform to market demands which can compromise artistic endeavours which may lead to the creation of formulaic and derivative content to accommodate popular trends. Therefore, filmmakers may be forced to engage in mainstream film and television show productions in order to secure resources such as financing, distribution, or exposure (Kerrigan, 2017). However, attempts to reconcile the tension between arts and the market in film and television involve establishing a balance between artistic integrity and commercial viability. In the case of branded entertainment this can be achieved through film funding (Kerrigan, 2017), or film and creative festivals (Stolley and Glynne, 2022). Stakeholders involved in the creation and production of branded entertainment therefore use branded entertainment as an arts marketing tool for their creative excellence and ability to think outside of the box. For many of them, winning prestigious awards at major creative and/or film festivals such as Cannes Lions, Emmy Awards or Sundance Film Festival is a major achievement in which advertising and artistic creativity is acknowledged (Stolley and Glynne, 2022).

In the case of branded entertainment, it means that marketing and advertising practitioners adopt the role of marketplace actors (Smith-Maguire and Matthews, 2012) to

understand how marketing and advertising permeate cultural products with additional symbolic meaning (McCracken, 1986; Elliott, 1999; Schroeder, 2002; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). Featherstone (1991: 35) states that

*“the new tastemakers, constantly on the lookout for new cultural goods and experiences, are also engaged in the production of popular pedagogies and guides to living and lifestyle. They encourage inflation in cultural goods, constantly draw upon artistic and intellectual trends for inspiration, and help to create new conditions of artistic and intellectual production by working alongside them. The new cultural intermediaries can be found in market-oriented consumer cultural occupations - the media, advertising, design, fashion etc.”*

These marketing intermediaries must therefore study aesthetic means to comprehend and convey the market (Brown and Patterson, 2000), to create relevant and appealing branded entertainment content. Here, it is helpful to remind ourselves of how arts and marketing overlap at the stage of cultural production (Brown and Patterson, 2000; Fillis, 2000; Bradshaw, 2010), by acknowledging that marketing practices are culturally embedded. Based on the discussions in the previous section, marketing practitioners should recognise the current ideological zeitgeist in which brands are perceived as cultural products that employ myths and cultural codes to reach consumers and circumvent the market’s internal and peripheral tactical conflicts (Holt and Cameron, 2010). Diamond et al. (2009) propose the notion of a ‘brand gestalt’, in which the brand is rooted in its story and the interaction of its surroundings are expressed through sensations, insights, and sociocultural semantics. Representations of a brand are understood individually but are constructed by various actors and codes (Centeno and Wang, 2017). These theorisations consider the constantly changing interference between brands and culture and how this interface is based on a specific history and affected by macro issues (Kelly, 2011).

Consequently, the branded world pervades culture with meaning so that brands significantly affect contemporary society (Schroeder, 2009). In this regard, cultural meanings are conveyed through marketing products and services as well as contexts that are embedded in cultural artefacts, such as branded entertainment. This demonstrates the intricate interconnections between the arts and the market, as meanings transfer between ideological, economic, socio-cultural and political realms (Rodner and Preece, 2016). This means that the cultural industries, and more precisely the entertainment industry, influence marketers in directing their own creative activities (Brown, 2005), and vice-versa. Therefore, creative and commercial interests should not be deemed to be two separate components, as the arts have significant potential to influence and augment individuals' tastes and consumption choices (Kerrigan, 2017).

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the tensions between arts and the market in film and television reflect the broader conflicts between creativity and capitalism. Fisher (2009, p. 9) reminds us of the function which commodification has played in culture production since the twentieth century; it is not about the integration of materials, which originally appeared to hold disruptive capacities, but rather their 'pre-corporation'. This means that individuals' desires and visions are fabricated and influenced through a continuous and ubiquitous bombardment of advertising campaigns where rebellion can be regarded as just another fad that is subsumed within the contemporary cultural industry.

### 2.9.1 Experiencing Art and the Market

Indeed, marketing through art, particularly through films and television, has faced broader criticism for the social and political influence that it can have. For example, Loose (2015) looks at the vital function of art in marketing and advertising and discusses how marketing and advertising use psychoanalysis and art in order to sell products and tap into new markets. He claims that art only helps to sell products when it is not employed in a discernible way, as people would only value 'art for art's sake' (Fillis, 2006). This means that as long as consumers can acknowledge art for what it actually represents, they will be receptive to purchasing the product that is connected with it. In terms of psychoanalysis, Loose (2015) builds on Freud's pleasure principle, which describes individuals' inherent search for pleasure and avoidance of pain, and the matter that people are longing for something that lies beyond the pleasure principle which relates to 'the promise of something more' (p. 37).

As brands are inserted or interwoven into audiences' experiences of mediated entertainment (Hackley and Tiwsakul 2006), it can lead to a transformation of experience, which conveys the power of placements based on the imaginative involvement audiences have with their favourite film or television show (Russell, 1998). Russell (1998) identifies four aspects of the transformational proposition in relation to product placement that need to be considered to understand its function; these are: personal relevance, informational, executional, and experiential/empathy aspects. However, it is argued that these four aspects are relevant to all hybrid modalities in varying degrees, including branded entertainment. *Personal relevance* reflects the degree to which a consumer associates themselves with a film or television show. The *informational aspect* relates to the aptitude of the hybrid modality to present audiences with information regarding brands, whereas the *executional aspect* is concerned with whether

and how the corresponding experience is liked and remembered. The *experiential/empathy experience aspect* is particularly relevant in relation to the pleasure principle and is identified as a consumer's underlying emotional relationship with a film or television show. Integrating products and brands into films or television shows can enhance authenticity and prominence and thus augment empathy (Russell, 1998) when brands resonate with consumers' everyday experiences (Hackley and Tiwsakul 2006). Within popular culture, films and television shows, can be regarded as a useful and projective component (Hirschman, 1988), as consumers immerse themselves into different worlds as a result of dramatic entertainment. Consequently, when brands are integrated into novel and stimulating worlds, individuals can merge into in that world, both during and after consuming the film or television show (Hackley and Tiwsakul 2006).

Experiential aspects of consumption, stemming from fantasies, feelings and fun (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), are vital in media consumption and therefore in branded entertainment. Hart, Kerrigan and vom Lehn (2016) propose that in the context of film, fantasies contribute to the pre-selection of film, where envisioning the viewing experience relates to fantasies that are brought to mind by advertising clues. Moreover, fantasy can be identified with feelings elicited by marketing materials of a film. Both, escape and fantasy can occur while viewing a film as different feelings, such as joy or disgust, can be incited. Fun originates from the film content as such, but also from the collective essence of film consumption.

In particular, experiential aspects consist of aesthetic, hedonic and symbolic characteristics, thus highlighting the significance of primary process thinking in line with the pleasure principle (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Pleasure can be felt in varying degrees during consumption experiences (Eccles, Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott, 2006) and depending on the degree to which it is experienced, it has the ability to influence consumers over a prolonged period of time. Consumption experiences are multisensorial (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) aiming to make room for emotions (Carù and Cova, 2003). By considering branded entertainment as an experiential consumption practice, we can position it as an ideal space for emotions due its creative storytelling capacities (Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010; Dessart, 2018; Kang, Hong, and Hubbard, 2020; Loggerenberg, Enslin and Terblanche-Smit, 2021).

To provide rewarding consumption experiences through branded entertainment, Kerrigan (2010) defines the notions of *marketability* and *playability* in the context of film. *Marketability* refers to how appealing a film is to the proposed target audience. It encompasses fundamental commercial and marketable components that need to be taken into account when releasing a film. These marketable features, such as actors, genre, or age group, communicate different facets of the film to consumers, which may or may not grab attention when disseminating films. *Playability*, on the other hand, concerns the film per se and relates to the performance of actors, the value of the production, script characteristics and so on. After viewing the film, consumers contemplate the film's playability by evaluating their initial expectations of the film in relation to the consumption experience itself. Hart, Kerrigan and vom Lehn (2016) relate the playability concept to Oliver's (1980/2010) seminal work on satisfaction, which can be defined as

*“the consumer's fulfilment response... a judgment that a product/service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under- or over fulfilment”* (Oliver, 2010, p. 8).

Consequently, a pleasurable experience can possibly enhance the consumption experience through, for example, spreading positive word-of-mouth in addition to shaping individuals' potential choices and opinions concerning films (Kerrigan and Yalkin, 2009). In a similar vein, but in the context of traditional advertisements, Das, Galekh and Vonkeman (2015) found that emotional appeals, such as sex, humour and control, are preeminent in elucidating advertisement persuasiveness. The pleasure principle is key to illuminating advertisement persuasiveness. Provided that the advert is pleasant, it can facilitate positive attitudes regarding the advertisement as well as the promoted brand. As a result, branded entertainment, as created by brands such as Red Bull, Unilever or LEGO, can be more aesthetic, engaging, intricate and culturally relevant than most conventional advertising, and the brand's journey from tactical advert to the specially created and crafted film or television series is part of the journey from functional product to art (Stolley and Gynne, 2022).

However, referring back to Loose's (2015) notion that people constantly long for something that lies beyond the pleasure principle, “the promise of something more” (p. 37)’ will in fact never arrive, but marketing and advertising continuously assure its arrival by making use of this tension to promise a solution. Nevertheless, the influence that marketing and advertising have in relation to art is different from the influence that psychoanalysis pursues in that in psychoanalysis the goal is to resolve the tension, although the aforesaid tension cannot be prevented and, as a result, one needs to develop ways to cope with it. As

such, both art and psychoanalysis are exploited by marketing and advertising to promote products and to tap into new markets.

Moreover, Stiegler (2014) argues that our contemporary era is portrayed by the capture of the symbolic through industrial technology in which audio-visual and digital technologies have increasingly evolved into systems of influencing individuals consciously as well as unconsciously, thus also shaping patterns of awareness and existence. In doing so, Siegler (2014) explores the connections between aesthetics and politics in the hyper industrial age. The hyper industrial age is related to hyper industrial capitalism, which controls the means of production and patterns of consumption. Stiegler (2014) claims that the current era is represented through capturing the symbolic through industrial technology; aesthetics has been transformed into both theatre and weapon as part of economic conflict. This has led to what Stiegler (2014) calls ‘symbolic misery’, which describes how social conditioning substitutes experience through social monitoring where ‘aesthetic weapons’ play a major role. Symbolic misery refers to the phenomenon where individuals experience a sense of deprivation or loss due to the replacement of genuine experiences with those mediated by social norms and marketing influences. Stiegler (2014) suggests that this occurs because people are consistently exposed to aesthetic conditioning through marketing efforts, which ultimately disconnects them from the ability to critically engage with aesthetics in their own experiences. Stigler (2014) thus urges the art industry to acquire political awareness of their position by examining the role of cinema, as it inhabits a distinctive place in the temporal war which is the source of symbolic misery. As cinema represents simultaneously industrial technology and art, it is the aesthetic experience which can confront this conditioning at their own game.

These advancements necessitate the consideration of how commerce intersects with art through branded entertainment, as the emphasis is not solely on delivering stories to satisfy audiences but also on how these stories can represent products and brands in different lights, with various stakeholders influencing these processes. These processes determine how content and narratives are presented in branded entertainment, and they can vary in terms of how obvious or obscure they are. Consequently, as products and brands can be intricately embedded into storylines, it can be difficult for audiences to separate branded entertainment from pure entertainment, raising ethical issues regarding branded entertainment practices.

As discussed, brands represent a significant, influential and discernible role in culture (Schroeder, 2009). They can be important and attractive cultural artefacts, yet they can also be dishonest carriers of meanings that hold wider cultural, societal and ideological codes (e.g., Arvidsson, 2006; Askegaard, 2006; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Beverland et al., 2020). As branded entertainment blurs the line between content and promotion (Kuhn, Hume, and Love, 2010; Morton, and Friedman, 2002; Wenner, 2004; Williams et al., 2011), applications of storytelling facilitate that information enter the consumer's mind in more subtle and subconscious manner. Particularly, when consumers engross themselves in entertainment, such as watching a film, "they do not expect to find a promotional motive within that experience" (Hackley and Tiwaskul, 2006, p. 66).

## **2.10 Designing Deception into Entertainment and the Lack of Consumer Literacy**

Bhargava and Valasquez (2021) outline how social media companies embed design features which lead to addiction, a practice that is not wholly evident to the users. Similarly, as outlined, branded entertainment does not make its persuasive nature readily visible to its audiences (Ikonen, Luoma-Aho and Bowen, 2017), engendering potential consumer

vulnerabilities to blended entertainment-marketing communication modalities that operate dynamically and under stealth. Branded entertainment surreptitiously penetrates social practices through popular culture artefacts, imbued with narratologically-embedded neoliberal ideologies that shape and educate consumer desire in ways that further the interests of market logics and existing power relations in the marketplace. For these reasons, branded entertainment raises ethical concerns (i.e., O'Donohoe, Kelly and Lawlor, 2005; Cain 2011; Nyilasy and Reid 2011; Um and Kim 2014; Choi et al. 2018), particularly in relation to how it devolves responsibility to the consumer for understanding and knowing how it functions and for unpacking market forces that are structured, taken-for-granted and made invisible to the consumer.

As a result, it is not always apparent to the consumer that content is branded and therefore they can be manipulated into engaging with promotional content without being fully aware of it. This implicates that branded entertainment can elude persuasion knowledge (Um and Kim, 2014). Persuasion knowledge comprises wide-ranging capabilities (Tutaj and van Reijmersdal, 2012). However, overall, it is concerned with whether and how consumers recognise and understand advertising generally and more precisely advertising's persuasive intents (Friestad and Wright, 1995).

A similar concept that is worth exploring in the context of persuasion knowledge is the notion of literacy. In the case of branded entertainment, two concepts apply which are media literacy and advertising literacy. Media literacy relates to people's competency to obtain, examine and create messages in various contexts (Christ and Potter, 1998), whereas Adams

and Hamm's (2001, p. 33) definition increasingly focuses on the underlying cultural codes inherent in the creation of meaning through different media forms:

*"Media literacy may be thought of as the ability to create personal meaning from the visual and verbal symbols we take in every day from television, advertising, film, and digital media. It is more than inviting students to simply decode information. They must be critical thinkers who can understand and produce in the media culture swirling around them."*

In addition, advertising literacy is a component of media literacy (Potter, 1998), and, according to Malmelin (2010), can be considered from three points of view which are media education and research, consumers and communicators. In terms of media education and research, advertising literacy represents an analytic construct that can be applied to examine various advertising types. From a consumer perspective, advertising literacy relates to a person's individual, realistic aptitude to recognise and analyse promotional messages and media phenomena, while for the communicator advertising literacy offers guidance in terms of advertising development. Consequently, advertising literacy permits a means of expecting responses of stakeholders and of examining the social effects of communications (Malmelin, 2010). Thus, advertising literacy, like branded entertainment, is socio-culturally embedded (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998), and reinforces the notion that branding is an inherent component within marketing communication practices. This is because brands function within socio-cultural, political and economic environments where brand messages are conveyed in various types of media (Krugman and Hayes, 2012). Thus, it is important to understand the different contexts and viewpoints of involved parties, which influence branded entertainment encounters.

Persuasion knowledge and media and advertising literacy are crucial in terms of understanding branded entertainment content due its potential deceptive and unjust influence it can have over audiences (Kerrigan, 2017), especially children (Nairn and Fine, 2008; Waiguny, Nelson, and Terlutter, 2014; Boerman et al., 2018), as they are unable to identify persuasive intents (Karrh, 1998; Um and Kim, 2014; Choi et al., 2018). Hence, consumers can be swayed by a brand when lacking awareness of persuasion attempts (Kuhn, Hume and Love, 2010). Therefore, branded entertainment can be seen as a morally problematic form of marketing communications, as persuasive intent without full consumer awareness is its main objective, which in turn signals unjust power relations through a lack of contextually convergent objectives among marketers, and consumers (Miller and Wertheimer, 2010; Moraes, Kerrigan, and McCann, 2019).

## **2.11 Regulation and Ethics**

As entertainment formats and particularly branded entertainment shape cultural life, both discernibly and impalpably, they raise questions about regulations. Based on the notion of ‘soft power’ (Nye, 1990), branded entertainment has, thus, the capacity to influence people to a greater extent than originally expected. This is also recognised by Schaefer and Kerrigan (2008) who investigated trade association engagements of UK water and the film industries. In contrast to the water industry, which is heavily regulated in order to provide access to clean water, the film industry lacks regulation as the main focus often rests on the entertainment value. Therefore, entertainment products are not generally deemed as a fundamental value where its social and environmental influences are less noticeable than those of the water industry. While Water UK represents a single trade association that regulates the overall water industry in the UK, the fragmented film industry consists of several trade associations that may

have corresponding, but not matching, membership and objectives (Schaefer and Kerrigan, 2008). This highlights a lack of recognition of the impact that the film industry – and, in broader terms, the cultural industry – can have and the issues of responsibility that emerge from such an impact. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the societal roles and responsibilities of the cultural industries and of marketing more broadly.

The advertising industry has faced various ethical contraventions in which many commentators emphasise the evident deficiency of societal responsibility (Treise et al., 1994). As highlighted in existing studies, issues of ethics and morality in the advertising industry persist (e.g., Drumwright and Murphy, 2004; Drumwright and Murphy, 2009; Snyder 2016; Van der Goot, Van Reijmersdal, and Zandbergen, 2021), despite ongoing business ethics education, which does not seem to embed. Advertising professionals continue to morally disengage (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura 1999; Alnuaimi, Robert and Maruping, 2010; Newman, North-Samardzic and Cohen, 2020; Chen et al. 2021), and do not take responsibility for their business actions, which can be ascribed to these historically entrenched socio-cultural patterns.

Product placement, in particular, has undergone ethical scrutiny over the years (i.e., Gupta and Gould, 1997; Wenner, 2004; Hackley, Tiwsakul and Preuss, 2008; Hudson, Hudson and Peloza, 2008; Eagle and Dahl, 2018), leading to the development and implementation of regulatory frameworks that seek to protect consumers (i.e., Petty and Andrews, 2008; Cain, 2011; Boerman, Van Reijmersdal and Neijens, 2014; Eagle and Dahl, 2018). However, branded entertainment is more nuanced and complex than product placement. Given its diverse formats

and the increasing number of digital channels where branded entertainment content circulates stealthily (Rodgers and Thorson, 2018), consumers struggle to distinguish between advertising, content and entertainment, and therefore have difficulties recognising sponsored content (Kees and Andrews, 2019). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has acknowledged this issue in the US, raising apprehension about consumers' competence to differentiate between content, and advertising (FTC, 2017). The European Commission (2018, p. 92) also has outlined similar concerns in the context of online social media, stating that existing legal frameworks do not always address unjust commercial practices due to changing, and fragmented "disclosure practices among devices, jurisdictions, and providers".

In response to potential unjust influences that hybrid messages can have over consumers, advertising regulators like the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the UK or the FTC in the US provide legal regulations and ethical guidelines on placements as well as the timings and media use of placements (ASA, no date; FTC, no date). Moreover, the European Commission sets out the *Misleading and Comparative Advertising Directive* for countries in the European Union (European Commission, no date), and there are two international networks, the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) and the International Council for Ad Self-Regulation (ICAS), which promote advertising self-regulation. All these regulatory bodies provide general rules and/or guidelines around advertising, including specific restrictions that seek to protect vulnerable consumers, such as children, and regulation related to specific product categories like cigarettes and alcoholic beverages (Gould et al., 2000; McKechnie and Zhou 2003; Eagle and Dahl, 2018; Lapierre et al., 2020).

## 2.12 Legitimising Branded Entertainment

The various regulatory specifications in numerous countries do not sufficiently account for the myriad of media types employed for placements (Eagle and Dahl, 2018). Eagle and Dahl (2018) state that placement pursuits produced with the European Union are dependent on the regulation of the European Union. For example, a product placement logo needs to appear before and after a sponsored programme if placements are longer than three seconds (O'Reilly, 2011), and this applies to the United Kingdom, Spain and Portugal (Tessitorem and Geuens, 2013). However, in Germany, Switzerland and Austria there is no appearance of a logo but rather a declaration that the programme includes product placements (Matthes and Naderer, 2016). In contrast, product placements in films or television shows from outside the European Union do not fall under this regulation. As a result, regulations around advertising diverge globally, which has led to contradictory regulations not only between, but also within countries, which subsequently has sparked demands for congruous policies and regulations (Avery and Ferraro, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2014).

This is further linked to the changing media landscape in which over-the-top (OTT) is a way of delivering film and television content via the internet, on demand, in order to correspond to the prerequisites of a particular consumer. OTT includes SVOD such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and Disney+ (Koul, Ambekar and Hudnurkar, 2021), as well as other video content platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. However, OTT, and thus SVOD, are sparsely regulated regarding public welfare responsibilities and antitrust behaviour (Sundaravel and Elangovan, 2020), as well as programming, rating systems or content limitations, which allows them to create and disseminate content with less restraint in comparison to programmes circulated via traditional television channels. Moreover, content distribution gives rise to

matters concerning policy including access, pricing, jurisdiction, merging of ownership and source diversity, which relate to media content being available from various content producers (Holt, 2014). Consequently, appropriate regulation in terms of brand integration within SVOD programmes is essential, as it is the main revenue stream for advertising-free services like Netflix and Amazon Prime (Redondo and Bernal, 2016; Corkindale, Neale and Bellman, 2023).

However, due to ongoing technological advancements, it may be challenging to design and administer regulatory policies in this continuously changing environment. Due to the rapid growth of online media formats and the effortless ways in which media types and modalities can advance, hybrid modalities such as branded entertainment pose potential issues of detection (Campbell and Grimm, 2019). This is because branded entertainment is present in various formats and can surface on broadcast, apps and online platforms including SVOD. In contrast to conventional advertising on broadcasting services, the online environment enables branded entertainment content to appear and spread rapidly across platforms and, due to the various targeted and personalised content that consumers are exposed to daily, persuasion attempts may go unnoticed (Van Noort et al., 2020). This raises issues of transparency, trustworthiness and commitment in relation to the promotional messages included in branded entertainment.

Existing business ethics research acknowledges the interdependencies between business and society (Murphy and Schlegelmilch, 2013), and, thus, between marketers and consumers. Relevant research suggests that businesses are responsible for both amplifying positive societal impacts and reducing intentional or unintentional harms (Carroll, 1979; Maignan, Ferrell and Ferrell, 2005; Strike, Gao and Bansal, 2006; Armstrong and Green, 2013; Murphy and

Schlegelmilch, 2013; Price and Sun, 2015; Mena et al., 2016; Lin-Hi and Blumberg, 2018). While consumers are not perceived as lacking in agency or as passive dupes (Hilton, 2003), this discussion highlights that consumers are being managed into consuming marketized cultural artefacts through the idea of consumer freedom to choose and, thus, of being accountable for choices, even in circumstances where they are kept uninformed about brands' persuasive goals. This discussion reiterates that the contemporary neoliberal marketplace is characterized by marketing activities that are integral to culture production (Eckhardt, Varman, and Dholakia, 2018), which are accompanied by a longstanding apprehension about the social implications of marketing practices for individuals and broader society (Wilkie and Moore, 2003).

Dean (2005, pp. 54–55) critiques what she terms communicative capitalism, which is conceptualised “as the commonplace idea that the market, today, is the site of democratic aspirations, indeed, the mechanism by which the will of the demos manifests itself”. Entertainment products are part of popular culture; consumers actively choose to consume them because “they seem to offer what they want” … “so they must be popular” (Dean, 2005, p. 55). This autonomy appears to rest on the neoliberal ideology that advocates the freedom of consumers to make their own decisions to consume entertainment products, regardless of whether they are aware of the potentially subliminal persuasion techniques within these entertainment vehicles. It supports the notion of consumer sovereignty, and consequently freedom to achieve autonomous consumer choices in neoliberal markets (Carrington, Zwick and Neville, 2016; Shaw, Chatzidakis and Carrington, 2016; Voola et al., 2018; Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019; Barnhart, Huff and Scott, 2023). Examples of such perspectives can be seen in research addressing how moral criteria are embedded into consumption choices, meanings,

experiences, and practices (Ulusoy, 2016; Batat et al., 2017; Zabkar et al., 2018; Addis and Holbrook, 2019; Pinto et al., 2020), with a view to understanding why or how people might be morally fallible or inconsistent as consumers to address attitude-behaviour (e.g., Chatzidakis and Mitussis, 2007; Hassan, Shiu and Shaw, 2016; Park and Lin, 2020), or value-action gaps (e.g., Williams and Hodges, 2022; Essiz et al., 2023).

This ideological legitimisation is significant because it stealthily promotes neoliberal aesthetic tastes, sensibilities, and ideologies, serving to perpetuate existing hegemonic market forces. It supports, and further reinforces, contemporary social processes of individualization (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2016), including mechanisms of individual responsibilisation for operating within complex and deregulated markets, and for the consequences of these operations (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). In part, these mechanisms emerge through market players' techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza 1957; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007), whereby rhetorical rationalisation strategies based on ideas of consumer freedom help to construct denial of responsibility, injury, and victim, and where loyalty to free markets is the highest priority. In this case, the individual consumer is condemned for not being market literate enough or as responsible as they should for their own choices. Indeed, neoliberalism functions to dwindle the division between markets and the state, where increasingly social issues that were previously the responsibility of governments are now addressed by 'responsible consumers', and other stakeholders in the marketplace (Shamir, 2008). Nevertheless, Caruana and Chatzidakis (2014) argue that consumer responsibilisation is shaped by numerous agents who intersect, for example, people, workplaces, governments, businesses as well as the media.

Therefore, in order to establish a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how subjectified consumers are made morally responsible for complex marketplace issues of systemic scale, industry stakeholders of branded entertainment should be taken into consideration. Applying Young's (2011) notion of "responsibility for justice" to media and advertising involves recognising and addressing the potential perpetuation of injustices in their content, representations, and practices. In terms of what creating branded entertainment content with responsibility for justice might entail, it could involve content and brand messages that adhere to ethical standards and truthfulness, for example, thus, avoiding deceptive or manipulative practices in order to maintain public trust and prevent the exploitation of vulnerable audiences.

Consequently, social responsibility concerns practitioners involved in the creation of advertising and branded entertainment, as promotional messages influence consumers' attitudes, cultural virtues and public discussion more than ever (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004; Maignan, Ferrell and Ferrell, 2005; Drumwright, 2012; Schauster, 2019). For example, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) examine how advertising practitioners perceive ethics in their profession by highlighting that due to the creative industry's rapidly evolving and competitive nature, there is limited time and support available to address profound and concerning matters that could influence individuals, businesses, or society. Based on the diverse attitudes of advertising practitioners towards ethics, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) identify three concepts related to the ethical perspectives and behaviours of individuals: moral muteness, moral myopia and moral imagination. Moral muteness refers to practitioners being reluctant to address ethical issues, whereas moral myopia addresses advertising practitioners' limited ability to recognise ethical issues as they emerge where they may neglect the broader ethical

consequences of marketing communication campaigns by focusing mainly on quick returns or organisational targets instead. Therefore, it is important to focus on the everyday responsibility understandings, and discourses of the marketing practitioners and creative professionals involved in branded entertainment, thus building on previous research concerning ethical practices in advertising (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004; Van Der Goot et al., 2021).

Moral responsibility theorisations subject individual or sets of agents to “moral criticism (praise or blame) and/or social sanctions (reward or punishment) on the basis of an assessment of the individual actions that are considered to have a significant connection with the state of affairs” (Braham and van Hees 2009, p. 2). Researchers tend to consider control and epistemic conditions to determine whether an agent is morally responsible for a particular action (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998; Timpe, 2011; Levy, 2017).

Epistemic condition is complex (Hetherington 2002); it addresses the kinds of deliberative awareness needed (Sher, 2008) to ascribe responsibility at individual and collective levels (Kidd, 2016; Fleisher and Šešelja, 2020). Epistemic condition focuses on three core questions related to the content, kind, and extent of awareness needed (Rudy-Hiller 2018), to determine responsibility boundaries. Of particular interest to assessing issues of responsibility in branded entertainment is the question that concerns the *content* of the awareness, and which asks, *of what things must a marketplace actor be aware in order to be responsible for a specific branded entertainment action, and for its resulting outcome?* Rudy-Hiller (2018) suggests four epistemic requirements for this question to be addressed in full, namely awareness of action, awareness of moral significance, awareness of consequences, and awareness of alternatives. Together, these requirements help to

determine how moral, immoral and non-moral boundaries can be discursively negotiated, and inherently entwined with neoliberal ideologies.

The first requirement, *awareness of action* (Mele, 2010; Sliwa, 2017), suggests that for an agent to be responsible for their action, they must be aware of what they are doing. Thus, for a film producer to be held responsible for their persuasive branded production, they must be aware of producing branded entertainment that has, at its core, persuasive marketing goals. However, for an agent to be directly blameworthy for an action, they must be aware that they are carrying out the focal action, and this awareness must be based on a suitable account (Anscombe, 1963, Levy, 2014).

*Awareness of moral significance*, the second requirement for the epistemic condition to be met, suggests that the agent must either have a belief about the wrongness of the action, or a belief about the existence of any features that make the action wrong (Rudy-Hiller, 2018). Therefore, for a brand director or producer to be culpable, for example, they must be aware of the moral significance or moral valence of the content of their branded entertainment. However, an agent can exhibit concern for morality in two different ways, and a significant distinction must be made here between *de dicto* and *de re* awareness of moral significance (Arpaly 2003; 2015). The former refers to whether a branded entertainment practitioner can exhibit concern for particular moral interests or values *so conceived* (Zimmerman, 2008; Rosen, 2004; Levy, 2011; Sliwa, 2017), whereas the latter questions whether a branded entertainment practitioner can exhibit concern for particular interests, and values that are *socio-culturally construed as* morally significant irrespective of whether the practitioner themselves conceives of them as morally significant (Talbert, 2013; Levy, 2014; Littlejohn, 2014). In other words, *de dicto* awareness suggests that moral knowledge and beliefs are essential for responsibility (Sliwa, 2017), while *de re* awareness does not require moral

knowledge (Harman, 2011; Talbert, 2013), but rather an appreciation for moral concerns that are socio-culturally significant. One does not preclude the other and may co-occur in practitioners' constructions of what is moral, immoral or amoral in the branded entertainment marketplace. Thus, this second requirement for epistemic condition would ask whether the film producer believes that producing branded entertainment is intrinsically wrong, whether they attribute wrongness to features within the film (i.e., plot, genre, props), and/or other possibilities altogether (e.g., the only wrong-doing is the lack of overt communication and labelling that their film is branded entertainment, like the 'P' we see when British entertainment content contains product placement features).

The third epistemic requirement for moral responsibility is about the *awareness of consequences* of an actor's actions (Rudy-Hiller, 2018). This kind of awareness, which is required for a branded entertainment practitioner to be blameworthy, resonates with Zimmerman's (1997, p. 420) notion of "cognitive connection" between the actor, and the outcome, in which the actor must have a belief about the outcome of their action. Philosophers such as Zimmerman (1997), and Vargas (2005) argue that this connection requires one to believe that an existing outcome that has occurred could have been caused by their action. Others (Ginet, 2000; Fischer and Tognazzini, 2009) would argue that awareness of consequences is not essential, and that an ability to reasonably foresee potential consequences suffices for this third requirement to be met. Therefore, even if an agent is not fully aware of the consequences of their actions, they may be responsible for them if they can foresee or imagine such potentially negative outcomes. Thus, for the branded entertainment practitioner to be responsible, they must believe that the films they have produced are, or have potential to be manipulative, deceiving, not particularly open about their marketing goals, and/or that they are contributing to furthering existing neoliberal ideologies through their encoding into, and through, sociocultural artefacts.

The fourth, and final, requirement for the epistemic condition to be met is *awareness of alternatives*. This requirement would suggest that a branded entertainment practitioner cannot be blameworthy for a wrong action unless they believe that there is an alternative, permissible course of action available to them (Rudy-Hiller, 2018). Levy (2011, p. 111) argues that “access to alternative possibilities” may be actual or *epistemic* in nature, and that agents “can only appropriately be blamed for performing an action if they believed that alternatives were available to them and understood the significance of these alternatives.”

Moreover, it has been recognised that the cultural industries have the ability to promote or challenge ideological positions. This ability is attributed to the realisation that the cultural industries are vital economic assets that need to be promoted resourcefully (Bazalgette, 2014; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Dinenage. 2021). It is also attributed to the shift in management approaches whereby creativity is seen as essential to success and the creative industries as the foundation of vision and inspiration (Dennis and Macaulay, 2010). O'Reilly, Rentschler and Kirchner (2014) highlight that the advancement of novel technologies disrupts distribution channels, transfers revenue streams and requires increasing customer attention. In order to sustain in the contemporary competitive market, businesses embrace effusive ideas and continuous evaluation regarding existing modes of practice (Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014). Fillis (2009, pp. 15-16) recognised the contemporary organisation as an art firm or avant-garde enterprise which “allows for the application of the methods used by artists to create value to be contrasted against more conventional notions of market making”. In this regard, Brown (2010a) advocates for increasingly artistic methods, highlighting the significance of experimental marketing to attract broader and more diverse audiences.

However, as outlined previously, when industry practitioners employ more artistic methods, consumers can be manipulated into watching branded entertainment content in film and television shows as well as in other (digital) media without necessarily being aware of it. Yet, consumers must be able to make autonomous decisions in order to render the legitimacy of branding as a social practice in capitalist economies. Legitimacy can be regarded as “the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, pp. 573–574). Previous studies have explored forms of legitimacy to better understand how brands (Kates, 2004; Giesler, 2012; Veresiu, 2023), markets (Humphreys, 2010; Huff, Humphreys and Wilner, 2021; Wiart, Özçağlar-Toulouse and Shaw, 2022), practices (Humphreys and Latour, 2013; Hakala, Niemi and Kohtamäki, 2017), cultural products (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2016) and consumers (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013; Lillqvist, Moisander and Firat, 2018) seek and attain legitimacy. In the context of the entertainment and media industries, Fournier and Alvarez (2019) argue that both significantly contribute to the creation and legitimisation of novel cultural models, which determine meanings for brands. As notions of legitimacy are grounded in institutional theory, they position companies as systems that are receptive to their sociocultural environments (Scott, 1992), including to their inherent norms, symbols and myths (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Therefore, companies manifest and integrate vital social viewpoints substantially because they intentionally accomplish particular tasks (Dart, 2004), as evident in branded entertainment.

In order to identify how branded entertainment obtains legitimacy and thus cultural meaning, it is worth drawing on cognitive, pragmatic and moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

Cognitive legitimacy involves the evaluation that business's activities are appealing, acceptable, and decorous because they align with pre-existing beliefs regarding organising work and creating social values (Pollack, Rutherford and Nagy, 2012). Thus, "from the cognitive perspective of legitimacy," branded entertainment formats can be seen as legitimate "when they are understandable (i.e., there is greater awareness and therefore less uncertainty" [...] "rather than considering when they are desirable" (Shepherd and Zacharakis, 2003, p. 151). Pragmatic legitimacy, on the other hand, relies on self-interested evaluations made by a company's closest audiences (Randrianasolo, 2021). It is a form of legitimacy that is tied to exchanges, where the company convinces major stakeholders of its value and of the value of its practices, such as practices related to branded entertainment. In doing so, stakeholder support for a company's practices arises from the discernment that the company is responsive and supportive of their interests, rather than solely concentrating on the company's main achievements in its interactions with the external environment (Díez-Martín, Prado-Roman and Blanco-González, 2013). Moral legitimacy pertains to constant, pro-social activities that allows consumers to evaluate whether institutional actions are in alignment with moral norms and values, so whether the company is "doing the right thing" (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). It pertains to how the ethical standards and expectations set by society or relevant norms influence the actions and endeavours of individuals or collectives (Dart, 2004). These norms exist outside the realm of assessors and individuals or of the groups being assessed; they collectively shape the environment that is encountered by all stakeholders. Moral legitimacy is thus assessed by considering the outcomes and results of a company's branded entertainment actions (consequential legitimacy), the methods and processes it employs (procedural legitimacy), its organisational structure and affiliations (structural legitimacy), or the qualities and credibility of its leaders and spokespersons (personal legitimacy) (Bunduchi, 2017).

Moral legitimacy as well as the requisite of institutional and stakeholder reciprocity (Elms and Phillips, 2009) have been expanded to legitimacy in the context of branding (e.g., Guo et al., 2017; Hakala, Niemi and Kohtamäki, 2017; Rentschler, Fillis and Lee, 2022). Brand legitimacy generally relates to company's endeavours to determine that brands correspond to a group's shared norms, and that the brand is desirable, proper or suitable within the systems of norms, values and beliefs shared by a social group (Suchman, 1995; Kates, 2004; Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn, 2017). In other words, brand legitimacy occurs when there is a perceived cultural fit between the consumer and the brand (Fritz et al., 2017). This is connected to the concept of moral reciprocity, which "indicates whether individuals' consumption behaviour is in line with the moral norms in force and if consumers of a certain product and service are perceived to represent morally sound or morally weak values" (Hankala, Niemi and Kohtamäki, 2017, p. 539). However, for Rentschler, Fillis and Lee (2022) reciprocity not only links to individuals' consumption behaviour but also to the prerequisite of mutual respect among stakeholders, as vital activities such as branding impact not only the organisation, but also other stakeholder groups. This implies that in order to ascertain and uphold moral legitimacy, involved parties have reciprocal duties for honesty in exchange.

Thus, to achieve moral legitimacy in the context of branded entertainment practices, industry stakeholders such as advertisers, brands and consumers need to uphold mutual ethical obligations and responsibilities in which norms, values and other ethical considerations need to be continuously communicated and exchanged. Brands that, for example, prioritize transparency, respect, social responsibility, and authenticity in their entertainment efforts can establish a sense of moral reciprocity, which can lead to stronger legitimacy and more meaningful relationships with their audience. As such, moral reciprocity is a key component

of self-regulation and the issue of managing mutual deeds for stakeholders (Bagozzi, 1995) when forming consumer-brand relationships through branded entertainment. Hence, moral reciprocity is determined and influenced through socialisation, rewards and sanctions on both individual and societal levels. However, as branded entertainment blurs content and promotion, these reciprocal duties can be compromised, which can have serious repercussions for brands and other relevant stakeholders and could lead to, for instance, loss of trust, negative brand perceptions, decreased audience engagement, potential boycotts, loss of legitimacy, as well as legal consequences.

## 2.13 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed how product and brand integrations have evolved from mundane sponsorships and product placements into sophisticated branded entertainment vehicles, transforming the landscape of both advertising and media. Initial forms of product and brand integrations aimed at gaining exposure through subtle appearances in content. However, due to media evolution, technological advancements and changes in consumption behaviour, brands are required to find more creative ways to connect with consumers. In doing so, the integration of brands into entertainment has become increasingly prevalent and sophisticated by producing content that integrates brands seamlessly into storylines through creative storytelling. This integration can take different forms: on the one hand, they can be more obvious where the brand is clearly seen and integrated into the storyline as in *The LEGO Movie*; on the other hand, integrations can be surreptitious where the brand is not seen, but the storylines reflect the brand's purpose and/or values. Further, this chapter has argued that the collaborative and collective nature of branded entertainment is reflected in the multiple key stakeholders which are the brand, the producer, the platforms, the agency, talent as well as the audience.

One of the critical challenges and points of discussion in branded entertainment is the balance between commercial interests and artistic integrity. Commercial interests are prioritised predominantly by brands with the aim of appealing to audiences, increasing profitability and generating market success. However, artistic pursuits are grounded in creative expressions, artistic value and authenticity, which may not always align with commercial interests, thus demonstrating the complexities and tensions of the creative industries. In

addition, these complexities and tensions can lead to issues of brand governance in the context of branded entertainment. The co-creation of branded entertainment requires stakeholders to promote open and transparent communication throughout the creative process in order to avoid potential power dynamics inconsistencies or misalignments between artistic and commercial pursuits.

Further, when merging commercial and artistic pursuits, consumers can be manipulated into watching content that is branded, as they are not always proficient in dealing with persuasion knowledge due to weak media or advertising literacy. If consumers lack persuasion knowledge or advertising literacy, they are not able to critically analyse, evaluate, and interpret promotional messages. In order to counteract these issues, many countries have implemented regulations and guidelines to ensure compliance with consumer protection laws. While sponsorships and product placements are somewhat regulated through advertising codes, disclosure requirements, time and frequency limits, branded entertainment regulations and guidelines remain scant. This is because branded entertainment can take many forms which evolve rapidly, and promotional messages can be craftily integrated. Regulations also vary depending on the country or region, as well as the specific medium or platform involved.

Therefore, practitioners must consider ethical issues in branded entertainment to avoid consumer exploitation or deception. As such, branded entertainment comes with moral responsibilities for brands, creators and marketers, who must ensure that it aligns with broader ethical standards and that it respects the autonomy of its audiences. Ethical responsibility can be facilitated through moral reciprocity, which emphasises the importance of value, authenticity, and transparency to their audience in exchange for the audience's attention and

engagement. It thus involves a mutual ethical relationship between the brand and the audience, where both parties uphold certain moral principles and expectations. Consequently, legitimacy plays a crucial role in the success and effectiveness of branded entertainment as the brand's actions must be accepted by its stakeholders, including consumers, collaborators or the wider public. Upholding moral responsibility and ethical practices enhances the legitimacy of branded entertainment practices, which can significantly impact a brand's reputation.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to understand how branded entertainment developments have changed the marketing and entertainment landscape by exploring the interrelationships of practitioners' actions within discourses and text. The following guiding research questions were employed to address the aim:

RQ1: How has the conceptualisation of product placement evolved into branded entertainment according to industry stakeholders?

RQ2: What are practitioners' key considerations when creating branded entertainment?

RQ3: How are branded entertainment projects governed by industry stakeholders?

RQ4: Where does responsibility lie, according to industry practitioners, in terms of how consumers engage with and understand branded entertainment?

These research questions were addressed through mediated discourse analysis (MDA), the methodological approach employed in this thesis, to explore branded entertainment developments and their consequences. Therefore, the next chapter delves into this methodological approach, emphasising the significance of adopting a critical realist perspective to examine the relationships among discourse and text. This is achieved by

integrating various data sources, including practitioner interviews, an event observation and multi-modal analysis of film and televisions shows.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the theoretical position that underpins the adopted methodological approach employed in this thesis. In doing so, it discusses the research philosophy and its analytical perspectives to justify the appropriacy of the adopted methodology. In particular, the chapter starts by outlining the approach of mediated discourse analysis (MDA) which is embraced in this thesis. The section that follows outlines the philosophical underpinning of critical realism, which supports MDA and my methodological choices. I also discuss additional methods including interviews and the observation at a practitioner event. The next section then explains how the data were analysed. The chapter also addresses research ethics considerations and I reflect critically on my positionality and on how the pandemic has impacted my research. Finally, the summary provides an overview of the main points addressed in this chapter.

### 3.1 Introducing Mediated Discourse Analysis

To accomplish the research aim and to answer the research questions, I embraced a mediated discourse analysis (MDA) approach to researching practice (Scollon, 2001a; Nicolini, 2012). MDA is a relatively novel approach developed by Ron Scollon, which centres around connections between discourse and action and how these transpire into intricate social situations (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012). Although MDA shares certain similarities with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Norris and Jones, 2005), such as intertextuality, the main objective of study in MDA is social action, in which discourse is produced through social interaction. This implicates that MDA steers away from CDA's 'discourse *as* action' to 'discourse *in* action'; instead of analytically focusing on the text itself, MDA emphasises the action that appropriates discourses or texts (Scollon, 2001a; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Norris and Jones, 2005; Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012; Wohlwend 2014). Jones (2010) adds that MDA employs an

action-oriented approach to discourse, which has its foundations in Goffman's (1974, p. 25) well-known question 'What's going on here?' to then investigate the part which discourse represents. As such, MDA embraces aspects in which "texts are not just linked to other texts, but also linked to past actions and material objects in the work as they cycle through different semiotic systems and their materialities" (Bhatia et al., 2008, p. 230). Moreover, Jones et al. (2017) highlight that MDA can help with clarifying how actions are taken in an organisational situation to influence change and development of practice, which is particularly useful in terms of how product placement evolves increasingly into branded entertainment practices.

It is important to clarify how 'discourse' is understood within MDA but also in terms of this thesis: discourse involves "all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural and historical patterns and developments of use" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 3). It thus acknowledges that discourse and semiotics are synonym, which emphasises extralinguistic production of discourse. Unlike other discourse research, the approach of MDA starts with the occurring *action* to understand a specific discourse, allowing for a broad semiotic scope of enquiry in which an action could be affected or directed by various components such as practices, gestures, objects, non-verbal sounds and the built environment (Scollon, 2001a; Norris and Jones, 2005; Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2011; Rodner and Kerrigan, 2017). Those identical practices, gestures, objects, non-verbal sounds, and the built environment then replicate written and spoken texts. In that way, MDA embraces intentional and *unintentional* forms of communications inherent in all behaviour to become a constituent of the analysis and takes into consideration the separation between interpretation and intention (Scollon, 2001a, pp. 109-110). This separation is important in the analysis because it enhances the understanding the investigator has of the research subject. Moreover, MDA problematises the connection between action and discourse, observing that it is not always feasible to 'read'

social actions from discourse or to anticipate particular types of discourse to naturally coincide with certain actions (Jones, 2001, cited in Norris and Jones, 2005). At times, the ideational content of the discourse is hardly connected to how it is being utilised to take social action. Consequently, the researcher must examine each component separately to consider the context concerning, and contribution to, the discourse being investigated. To aid this examination, Scollon (2001b) identified six key analytical units around which MDA is organised:

1. Mediated action
2. Site of engagement
3. Mediational means
4. Practice and mediational means
5. Nexus of practice
6. Community of practice

These units of analysis provide the researcher with clarity regarding the subject that the study focuses on (Patton, 1987). Therefore, it is crucial to clarify and identify each unit of analysis to provide clear guidance for data collection and the discussion of the research findings. The central unit of analysis within MDA is *mediated action*, which is the actual moment when social actors, mediational means and the sociocultural environment cross (Jones and Norris, 2005). The emphasis on the *mediated action* as the unit of analysis is ascribed to Wertsch (1991), who indicates that all actions are mediated via ‘cultural tools’ (Wertsch, 1998). Within MDA this is known as *mediational means* and these means can be identities, objects, practices, technologies, social institutions, communities and language as well as alternative semiotic systems. These tools have histories that have formed the types of things that can and/or cannot be done with them, which thus represent particular *affordances* and *constraints* that may facilitate a tension (Jones and Norris, 2005). This is because actors adapt them into their *habitus*

(Bourdieu, 1977), to deliberately use them in social actions. This means that certain mediational means facilitate specific actions better than others, and to be beneficial their utilisation must be adopted at some time in the life cycle of the social actor. Therefore, to regard an action as “mediated,” the individual must employ one or more material objects, texts or language that is appropriated for the purpose of the social action (Scollon, 2001b). If mediated actions are routine and become habitual, they are understood by different social actors in different conditions as ‘the same’ social action and this is what is called *practice* in MDA. Principally, practices are described as closely defined, specific and concrete. A group of social actors that is tied together based on a shared understanding of a particular set of practices is described as a *community of practice*. They are almost infinite in scope and might be shaped around wide-ranging understandings of a practice (e.g., script writing) as well as around specific practices (i.e., storytelling as a branded entertainment technique).

Mediated actions occur within *sites of engagement*, which are defined as being at “the intersection of social practices and mediational means” (Norris and Jones, 2005, p. 139) that facilitate a mediated action to take place. In other words, *sites of engagement* are points in time and space which consider all components of a particular moment. Each mediated action is unique, and it is impossible to replicate the exact same mediated action. Therefore, MDA takes into consideration the social actor’s conscious and unconscious use of space and time as fundamental to understanding the action. Furthermore, MDA may uncover the intersection of distinct practices across time and space through particular trajectories (de Saint-Georges, 2005). Consequently, it is crucial to establish which elements of the site of engagement are most significant to the comprehension of the mediated action being scrutinised.

The *community of practice* may be confused with the concept *nexus of practice*; however, both constitute different things (Scollon, 2001a). Within MDA, nexus of practice is identified as a ‘lower’ level of social organisation thus being more loosely structured, whereas community of practice is used for the analysis of comparatively limited and fixed social groups. Moreover, nexus of practice is described as the intersection of numerous practices of groups of mediated action (Scollon, 2001a), which is rooted in two compatible notions: the acknowledgement of *repeatable* linkages of actions by actors and the capability to accomplish those subsequent practices in a group. The nexus of practice unites the trajectories of *historical body*, *interaction order* and *discourses in place*; it is the object of critical consideration in which the analysis commences (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2011; Lane, 2014; Wohlwend, 2014). The *historical body* can be regarded as lifespan accumulations of experiences, memories, and actions in our body (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). This is closely related to Bourdieu’s (1977) habitus, yet the term ‘historical body’ focuses more on the individual histories and biographical trajectories of the actors involved in the action. Moreover, the term incorporates both the concept of time and embodiment (Blommaert, 2009): the objective of study, which is the social and action and practice, is located in real time yet it is shaped by historical procedures. *Interaction order* stems from sociologist Erving Goffman and describes the social organisation and history of interactions and is concerned about how people behave differently according to who they are (interacting) with (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). *Discourses in place* situate meaning in the complexity and abundance of the lived world instead of merely in the language itself (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2003; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). Scollon and Wong Scollon (2003, 2004) claim that people can understand the meaning of overt texts merely by solely taking into consideration the social and physical world in which these texts are situated. Overall, the main focus of MDA is to study and theoretically explain the frequently oblique and generally

intricate connections between action and discourse. Therefore, MDA points out that one cannot take, for example, a conversation transcript or an advertisement and deduce any explicit or direct ‘reading’ of the social actions which have resulted in its production. Also, neither can one draw any direct assumptions about how they will be ‘read’ by any following social action (Scollon, 2001b).

### **3.2 Philosophical Underpinnings**

The theoretical foundation of MDA permits rigour in the suitable alignment of research pursuits with ontological and epistemological perspectives (Jones et al., 2017). The underlying philosophical positions of ontology and epistemology must be made explicit as they guide researchers to choose suitable approaches, methods and procedures for their studies (Saunders et al., 2019). In other words, understanding philosophical stances helps researchers to shed light on their research design. In particular, researchers must deal with philosophical enquires related to those of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology (Saunders et al., 2019), as these beliefs define how research questions are understood, how methods are deployed and how findings are interpreted (Crotty, 1998).

Ontology is concerned with the study of the nature of reality, whereas epistemology deals with the study of knowledge. Further, axiology determines the researcher’s role in terms of values, while methodology involves the plan of action and procedures employed by the researcher to establish that reality (Saunders et al., 2019). Carson et al. (2001, p.1) highlight that research philosophy “helps to contribute a deeper and wider perspective of research so that our own specific research projects can have a clearer purpose within the wider context”. Given the importance of research philosophy, it becomes evident that ontological and epistemological

assumptions form the basis of all research (Grix, 2010), which further determine theoretical perspectives and research methods (Gray, 2004).

This study empirically engages with the interpretive procedures of understanding how practitioners develop and create branded entertainment content. It takes into consideration the importance of the intertextual, polyvocal and interdiscursive connection that branded entertainment shares with creative and commercial endeavours. It recognises branded entertainment as well as creative and commercial activities as mediated means that can transform the ways identities and social practices are constructed in the context of cultural industries. Moreover, it acknowledges the affordances and constraints inherent in multimodal texts (Jones and Hafner, 2012). By investigating this phenomenon, I adopt the view that there is a reality to the realm of interpretation that I can only partially observe according to my own cultural frames of reference. In doing so, I position my research in a way that aligns with a realist research philosophy. In particular, my realist stance underpins the aims and objectives of this thesis that are influenced by the ontological notions of critical realism.

Such a stance is reflected in MDA, as it regards discursive practice as one type of social practice and thus does not assume that discourse is part of society and culture (Scollon, 2001). Scollon (2003) advocates that critical realism is an appropriate philosophical underpinning for social science research, and MDA in particular, as the idea of mediation is integral to activity theory, and this is the foundation of MDA. Thus, my MDA approach can be grounded in critical realism (Allen et al., 2013; Nunez, 2013; Simeonova, 2018). Critical realism focuses on describing what is seen and experienced concerning the underlying structures of reality that influence observable events (Saunders et al., 2019). Critical realism emerged out of the constructivist/positivist ‘paradigm wars’ in the 1980s (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), and sits

between these opposing positions (Reed, 2005). Critical realism employs components of paradigms to offer a thorough explanation of ontology and epistemology, making it a comprehensive philosophy of science (Brown et al., 2002). It thus locates itself as an alternative paradigm to scientific law-seeking positivism and the strong interpretivism or postmodernism orientation (Archer et al., 2016).

One of the most fundamental principles of critical realism is that ontology (the nature of reality, what is real) is not reducible to epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge, our knowledge of reality). A critical realist perspective regards reality as independent and external, yet not immediately or fully understandable through our knowledge and observation of it. Therefore, human knowledge captures solely a small portion of a vaster and deeper reality. In this regard, critical realism diverges from both constructivism and positivism. Bhaskar (1998, p. 27) criticised positivism for endorsing ‘the epistemic fallacy,’ which is the contentious reduction of ontology to epistemology, or the restriction of ‘reality’ to what can be empirically acknowledged (i.e., through scientific experiments). Constructivism is critiqued in a similar way in that it views reality as entirely constructed through human knowledge or discourse. Regardless of the apparent opposition between the positivist and the constructivist viewpoints, both reduce reality to human knowledge.

In contrast, critical realism views the world as theory-laden instead of theory-determined (Fletcher, 2017), and it does not reject that there is a real social world we can try to understand or approach through social science and philosophy (Danermark et al., 2002). However, some types of knowledge might be closer to reality than others. Critical realists can obtain knowledge ‘in terms of theories, which can be more or less truth like’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 10). The theories that enable us to move closer to reality, that is, that enable us to

recognise the causal mechanisms behind social events, phenomena, or activities are chosen and shaped through the employment of rational judgement of these social events (Archer et al., 1998). The ontology in critical realism is arranged into three levels (Bashkar, 2008; Fletcher, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). The primary level is the *empirical* level, which is the realm of events or objects as we experience them. They can be measured empirically and are frequently described as the result of ‘common sense’; however, these events are constantly mediated through the filter of human interpretation and experience. This is the transitive level of reality in which social ideas, action, meanings and decisions happen, and these can be causal. The second level contains the *actual*. There is no filter of human experience at this level, implicating that events happen whether we interpret and experience them or not, and these true happenings are generally different from what is noticed at the empirical level (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 20). The final, third level is the *real*, in which causal structures or causal mechanisms occur. These are the intrinsic properties in a structure or object, which perform as causal forces to produce events (e.g., those emerging at the empirical level).

The main objective of critical realism is to describe social events in relation to these causal mechanisms and the effect they may have throughout the three levels of reality. This provides an ideal lens through which to understand how branded entertainment has developed and the implications in terms subsequent changes within the marketing and entertainment landscape. It needs to be pointed out that all three levels are part of the same reality, and therefore it does not implicate that one level is more or less ‘real’ or that the levels are not connected. These levels draw essentially on the limitations of epistemic fallacy and, according to Bhaskar (1979), it means that social structures are actually activity-dependent in contrast to the natural world. That is, cause mechanisms “exist only in virtue of the activities they govern and cannot be empirically identified independently of them” (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 48). This means

that causal mechanisms are social products that can be understood primarily through – and *exist within* – phenomena at the empirical level (i.e., human ideas and actions that are created by these mechanisms), making these phenomena pertinent for scientific study.

Moreover, all social structures have causal powers and liabilities. These are ‘potentialities’ intrinsic in a structure or object that permit or limit it from performing in certain ways (Psillos, 2007). Conditions in the open social world may stop or enable the effect of a structure’s causal power, implying it might or might not have a noticeable impact at the empirical level. Therefore, critical realists make use of retrodiction procedure, which examines particular social conditions under which a causal mechanism takes effect in the world. The retroductive approach is also known as abduction (Saunders et al., 2019) and within critical realism it focuses on the historical aspect of a particular study, in which researchers would begin with a surprising phenomenon in the present and move backwards in time to recognise the underlying structures and procedures that may have created it (Reed, 2005).

Overall, critical realists consequently preserve an ontological realism (acknowledging that there is a real world that exists independently of our constructions, perceptions and theories), while accepting a kind of epistemological constructivism and relativism (our understanding of the world is unavoidably a construction from our own viewpoints and position). Critical realism does not suggest a rigid framework, set of beliefs, methodology or philosophy that connects critical realists as a whole, but rather combines interpretation and enquiry into “artefacts, culture, social structures, persons and what affects human action and interaction” (Archer et al., 2016, no page number). It aligns well with MDA because it is a comprehensive philosophical standpoint, which lends itself to applications across several disciplines and to underpinning multiple theoretical approaches such as critical discourse

analysis, conversation analysis, social semiotics and interactional sociolinguistics. Therefore, it enables the use of a combination of different frameworks within MDA because the social issues MDA addresses are multifaceted and it would not be feasible to address them by restraining oneself to one specific perspective (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2011).

Importantly, critical realism offers *explanations* (instead of descriptions or statistical models) of the complex of social mechanisms involved in social interaction and how social structures affect interpretations, which reflects the aim of this study (Sayer, 1999; Rees and Gatenby, 2014; Archer et al., 2016). Causality in critical realism does not portray the positivist stance of a regular sequence of events resulting in ‘social laws’; instead, it is underpinned by Bhaskar’s (1975) stratified ontology, as outlined: that of the *real*, in which causal *mechanisms* with possible powers and properties exist. This is vital, as research enquiry develops into ‘a quest for non-observable generative mechanisms whose powers may exist unexercised or be exercised unrealised’ (Archer 1998, p. 190). It has to be supposed that that ‘structures and mechanisms, then, are real and distinct from the patterns of events that they generate; just as events are real and distinct from the experiences in which they are apprehended’ (Bhaskar 1975, p. 56). By disconnecting the domain of the real, in which causal possibility is present, Bhaskar (1975) avoids the mistake of supposing that observed events are causally related or that causality consists solely of the peculiarity of interpreted individual experience. From a critical realist perspective, causality is intricate, context-dependent and can arise from interrelated entities. Therefore, critical realism consolidates the intrinsic meaningfulness of social life and advocates that all knowledge can only be ‘partial, incomplete, and fallible’ (Maxwell, 2012, p. 5). This aligns well to the aim of this thesis, in seeking to understand how the evolution of branded entertainment has changed the marketing and entertainment landscape.

In terms of the axiological position, which refers to the role of values, critical realists acknowledge that knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning and cannot be understood separate from the social actors involved (Saunders et al., 2019). Adopting the critical realist perspective, therefore, requires that I must be mindful of the way in which my experience and socio-cultural background affects my research, so critical reflexivity is essential. I offer a critical reflexivity account at the end of this chapter, once the research design, methods and analysis are presented and addressed.

### **3.3 Research Design**

The research design defines the route for the research (Thomas, 2017) and aims at transforming research questions into projects (Robson and McCartan, 2016). In order to establish a research design, choices are guided by the research question, theory, data collection and data analysis (King et al., 1994). King et al. (1994, p. 46) helpfully add, that a research design supports researchers to make inferences, which “is the process of using the facts we know to learn about facts we do not know”. Moreover, inference does not depend on the research paradigm, rather it describes the approach in terms of how researchers think about and investigate social phenomena. To scrutinise the participants’ feelings, perceptions and ideas a flexible research design was adopted (Thomas, 2017), as it not solely facilitates rich and comprehensive outcomes but also enables sound examinations of under-investigated topics (Lincoln and Guba, 1986), such as branded entertainment (Hudson and Tung, 2016).

Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative methodology to understand the world from the standpoint of the participants in this particular world. As such, the researcher does not only become more acquainted with participants’ lived experiences but also is able to situate these

experiences within their broader discursive context (Simmons, 1995). As the research area of branded entertainment is constantly advancing, a qualitative research methodology is particularly suitable for advancing understanding of this field. This is because, contrary to quantitative methodology, it is more flexible and attuned to dynamic and ever shifting environments and the discourses that co-shape them. Subjective information from diverse sources is regarded as supporting the comprehension of the nature of reality and the interaction between the investigator, and the participant in the data collection process is perceived as influencing this procedure where ‘the truth’ of a specific phenomenon is seen as dynamic and in flux. Indeed, because of this, a qualitative methodology has been chosen as it is appropriate for carrying out research for this thesis. Creswell (2003, p. 22) advocates that “certain types of social research problems call for certain kinds of approaches and if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach.” As the branded entertainment phenomenon is still in its early research stages, the qualitative approach is the most suitable for further exploring this topic.

### **3.4 Methods**

MDA supports the use of a range of methods such as “close analysis of texts or not, semiotic analyses of visuals, study of the interaction order, ethnographic observations, etc. or any combinations of these” (Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012, p. 11). MDA is not rigid in this respect (Scollon, 2001a), as it allows for multiple methods to be used to investigate a particular phenomenon such as branded entertainment. The following describes the different methods that I have employed for this study, including interviews, observation of a practitioner event and multimodal analysis.

### 3.4.1 Practitioner Interviews

The aim of using practitioner interviews was to determine the active participants, mediational means, actions, events and scenes that are significant for each nexus of practice within MDA. Thus, it was also crucial to determine which social issues and mediational means were important for participants. In particular, the interviews allowed me to understand a variety of perspectives that relate to the creation, development and governance of branded entertainment, thus providing me with a more holistic and broader understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, they helped me to understand how apparently disconnected spaces and contexts of branded entertainment developments would potentially be interconnected through power systems and social hierarchies.

Therefore, my main method of data collection was the interview with practitioners involved in branded entertainment activities. The aim was to recognise discourses, structures and practices that located, guided and influenced practitioners' understandings of branded entertainment. Before each interview, participants were briefly informed about the process and the objective of this thesis – that it was intended to gain an understanding of the development and creation of branded entertainment content, and through this acquire a better understanding of how branded entertainment projects are managed between stakeholders and how commercial and artistic endeavors are balanced.

Participants received a participant information sheet, which explained the purpose of the study. In addition, they had to complete a consent form, which declared that their business and identity remained confidential if requested. The signed consent form would not only protect the identity and business of individuals from whom information was obtained, but also

any names and companies that would be mentioned during the interviews (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). The interviews lasted, on average, approximately 1 hour and 36 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, via telephone or videocall depending on the participant's preference and/or location. Occasionally, interviews had to be broken down into several shorter but multiple interviews due to informants' busy working schedules.

The interviews were semi-structured, and the first two interviews served as pilots to test the interview guide and, where necessary, adjust questions in case they were not clearly understood (Saunders et al. 2019). Open-ended questions allowed an in-depth investigation to be conducted (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thus, questions were designed to gain thorough insights into the trajectories of branded entertainment while simultaneously leaving room for participants to introduce spontaneous narratives and stories, which proved enriching. This strategy further allowed me to get a broad view of their social and cultural influences. The tone of the interviews was mainly casual, with questions occasionally improvised to probe answers given by participants. Moreover, participants were asked to expand on key points in their replies to obtain detailed reflections.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed employing an intelligent verbatim transcription approach, that neglects filler words or hesitations. In addition to the practitioner interviews, I also used a practitioner event observation to complement and enrich my dataset.

### **3.4.2 Practitioner event observation**

In October 2019, I attended a practitioner event where a panel of leading advertising experts, commissioners and producers discussed how talent, entertainment values of editorial television content and other editorial assets are employed to produce more funding and

advertising opportunities across the television industry in the UK. Of particular importance was to identify how branded programming is created to generate new revenue streams to fund television content. Particularly, as technology advances, editorial and entertainment values and brand purpose are increasingly intertwined. This is ascribed to budgets being under pressure, which forces television to rely on brands and advertisers to bridge such financial gaps to fund shows.

In this event, experts discussed in detail the new ways in which television series are being commissioned and funded, and how innovative use of technology for novel and effective television advertising works. Moreover, discussants presented unique ways to use talent in branded programming and how television series could be sold internationally. In doing so, they debated the continuously changing approach in which television is being paid for along with some associated drawbacks, exploring why this is vital for the future of the television industry in the UK. During this event, field notes were taken to further inform my data analysis.

### **3.4.3 Multimodal Analysis of Films and Series**

To further enhance my understanding of branded entertainment, I also collected branded entertainment content through relevant films and series. Such data were analysed through multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodality is not merely a theory but rather a practical field encompassing diverse disciplines and theoretical perspectives, which can be employed to investigate various facets in multimodal domains (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010), such as films and series. It is a concept that is inspired by Kress's (1997, 2001) notion of modes, which relates to the integration of diverse forms of communication, including visual, auditory, written, oral, spatial among others (Kress and Leeuven, 1996).

Multimodal analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed in social and cultural contexts (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006), and multimodal approaches can be used to explore power dynamics, inequalities, and ideologies in human interactions and artefacts (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010). By adhering to the principles of social semiotics and multimodality when analysing branded entertainment content, it is thus important to recognise that signs and codes, including language and visual images, as semiotic resources, are not fixed entities. Instead, they undergo change and transformation, which necessitates an understanding of their significance within distinct social and cultural contexts (Chen and Cheung, 2022). In the context of MDA, addressing various modes and their reciprocal influences thus highlights their unique capacities and limitations, ultimately advancing towards a semiotic approach to the understanding of representation and communication (Scollon and Wong-Scollon, 2003).

Due to the advancements in technology as well as the augmented use of mass media, the Internet as well as film and television, storytelling has become a prominent phenomenon in advertising discourses (Cooper, Sharon and Miller, 2010). In a similar vein, multimodal analysis is being expanded to address the demands stemming from the increased abundance of audio-visual content (Jewitt, 2014), and can be a helpful analytical framework to analyse branded entertainment content. This is because branded entertainment has various modes that create one specific artefact such as a film, which inhabit meaningful intricacies. Messages in branded entertainment, whether promotional or not, employ verbal language characteristics, nonverbal aspects as well as other visual mediums, which thus require a multimodal analysis to comprehend the complexity of branded entertainment.

Jewitt (2014, p. 27) stipulates that multimodal research should focus on “the interplay between modes to look at the specific work of each mode and how each mode interacts with

and contributes to the others in the multimodal ensemble.” As such, analysing how various verbal and non-verbal modes are combined or interact inter-semiotically illuminates how branded entertainment vehicles affect audiences and further reveals how promotional messages are integrated into a particular cultural artefact to create meanings (O’Halloran et al., 2011).

Therefore, due to branded entertainment’s multimodal nature, it has the capability to unveil social meanings through the representation of narratives and storytelling. This multi-perspectivity can considerably aid in elucidating the social meanings (Jabeen and Cheong, 2022) of audio-visual texts. Therefore, close attention is paid to multimodal meaning making and its consequences by investigating branded entertainment with regard to other connected influences. Multimodality thus helps to examine “several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20).

To identify longform branded entertainment formats for this study, I adopted a qualitative approach to sampling to ensure a comprehensive and diverse selection. My primary objective was to create a coherent sample that would encompass various facets of longform branded entertainment and provide meaningful insights into the industry. Conducting a thorough review of existing literature specifically guided my sampling process as it helped me to explore dimensions and boundary conditions of longform branded entertainment, allowing me to understand the broader context and significance of the selected formats.

Firstly, I focused on the coherence of the sample in terms of diversity of longform content. This included a range of formats such as films and series showcased across different platforms, including cinemas, television, subscription video-on-demand services, and digital platforms like YouTube and brand websites. The diversity of the sample was crucial for

understanding the multifaceted nature of longform branded entertainment and its operation across various media channels. By including a wide array of formats, I ensured that the sample could shed light on the different strategies and storytelling techniques employed in branded entertainment.

Given the vast number of branded entertainment products available, it was impractical to cover them all. Therefore, I concentrated on high-profile projects that were highly regarded within the branded entertainment industry. These were typically products that had garnered significant attention and acclaim. To identify these products, I relied on multiple sources to identify branded entertainment formats that had won prestigious industry awards, such as Cannes Lions, D&AD, the Emmys, and the Sundance Film Festival. These awards are indicators of excellence and innovation, which further highlight projects that have set benchmarks in the industry.

I also regularly read articles from leading industry publications such as Campaign, Adweek, The Drum, Fast Company, and The Verge. These journals are known for their in-depth analysis and coverage of significant developments in the branded entertainment sector. Additionally, I subscribed to newsletters from platforms like brandstorytelling.tv, which focuses on the convergence of media, marketing, and technology and provides updates on creative storytelling in branded entertainment. These sources helped me stay informed about notable projects and emerging trends.

Furthermore, I considered qualitative insights gained from interviews with industry informants. During these interviews, informants often mentioned specific longform branded entertainment formats, providing firsthand accounts and detailed descriptions of their

experiences and perspectives. These insights were invaluable in identifying influential projects that might not have been highlighted in mainstream publications or award lists but were nevertheless significant within the industry.

In addition, my personal consumption of films and series played a role in identifying longform branded entertainment formats. By actively engaging with the content, I was able to critically assess and understand the storytelling techniques, production values, and branding strategies employed. This hands-on approach complemented the other methods and provided a holistic view of the landscape of longform branded entertainment.

Overall, my qualitative approach to sampling longform branded entertainment was multifaceted, combining personal consumption, industry accolades, insights from leading publications, newsletters, and interviews, as well as guidance from existing literature. This comprehensive approach ensured that the sample was diverse, coherent, and representative of high-profile and highly regarded projects within the branded entertainment industry.

To narrow down my sampling strategy for longform branded entertainment content, I looked at the four common elements that make up a story, which are a plot, a message or moral, a conflict and characters, which are grounded in a resonant context (Fog, Budtz, and Yakaboylu, 2005; Fog, et al., 2010; Avery, 2019; Mills and John, 2020). These elements are used by storytellers in a deliberate manner to accomplish different outcomes and when it comes to brand storytelling in particular, marketers can purposefully and skilfully manage these elements to attain specific brand objectives such as influencing attitudes or beliefs (Houghton, 2021). Consequently, when examining the four storytelling elements I paid close attention to how these elements were used and manipulated in branded entertainment film and series

formats. In doing so, I created an Excel spreadsheet and asked myself the following exemplary questions:

- *Plot:* How is the brand integrated in the plot? Is it openly seen, discussed or both? Or is it intricately interwoven into the storyline (e.g., it reflects the brand's purpose)? Or is it a combination of visual and/or verbal integration and intricate interweaving?
- *Message/Moral:* What is the message or moral of the story and what is it trying to convey or achieve? Does it concern issues related to different ideological positions? Does the message integrate, e.g., sociocultural norms, ethical values, moral dilemmas, environmental awareness or issues, overcoming challenges, personal growth and self-reflection, family and friendship, consequences of actions, perseverance, hope, etc.?
- *Conflict:* How does the conflict relate to the brand? What is its relevance to brand? What is the position of the brand in regards to the conflict? Is there a resolution to the conflict and, if so, what is it?
- *Characters:* Is the brand the character or part of the character? How do characters endorse or interact with brands? Is it subtle or more overt?

In addition, I examined what the overall purpose of the branded entertainment format was. For example, whether it was about raising awareness, establishing or reinforcing brand meaning, brand associations, increasing brand visibility, connecting with the target audience or creating emotional connections, or a combination of these. I further investigated and included the following information of various television shows and films in the Excel spreadsheet:

- *Title:* Is the brand mentioned in the title?

- *Screen Formats/Distribution:* e.g., theatrical release, television broadcast, streaming/subscription video on demand platforms (e.g., Netflix), online video sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube) or multiple.
- *Audio-visual medium:* e.g., film, television show, etc.
- *Genre(s):* e.g., Action, Comedy, Drama, Thriller, Documentary, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, Romance, Adventure, Historical, Animation, Musical, Western.
- *Director*
- *Talent*
- *Production*
- *Funding*
- *Country of Origin*
- *Release Date*
- *Box Office*
- *Awards*
- *Brand Name/Logo Visibility:* e.g., opening credits, during content, closing credits
- *Partnerships:* e.g., did two or multiple brands establish a formal alliance with shared objectives to collaborate on the branded entertainment project?
- *Cross-promotions:* e.g., did the brand at hand engage in temporary and campaign-based strategies in which it worked together with (an)other brand(s) to promote each other's offerings?

Overall, applying multimodal analysis aided in examining the different story elements as well as film components and characteristics. The holistic analysis of how the audio-visual medium, such as a film, communicates, engages, and conveys the brand as well as its intended promotional messages. It allowed me to appreciate and understand the complexity of the

brand's construction in relation to the cultural artefact and the interplay of different modes in creating branded entertainment content. In doing so, I was able to explore how brand meaning is constructed and conveyed and how each of the analysed elements and characteristics contribute to the overall (brand) message and aesthetic experience of the audio-visual content as well as its potential impact on the audience.

### **3.5 Participant Access and Sampling Strategy**

Gaining physical and cognitive access to participants is a significant primary step in the sampling strategy (Saunders et al., 2019). Firstly, to gain physical access to my research participants (Gummesson, 2000), it was crucial to make sure I possessed familiarity and knowledge of my prospective participants. Research participants were recruited through a hybrid strategy, which incorporated traditional (i.e., face-to-face or telephone) and Internet-mediated (i.e., via email or social media) approaches (Saunders et al., 2019). This meant that I contacted existing contacts, asking my existing networks questions about their work experience and whether they had previously worked on branded entertainment projects. As the project progressed, I also established new networks within the branded entertainment industry. To develop new contacts, I made use of my existing networks and asked them to introduce me to potential participants. I also looked for new contacts on LinkedIn and practitioner websites such as AdAge.com, brandstorytelling.tv, TheDrum.com and Adweek.com to identify potential candidates.

I allowed sufficient time to engage with such participants so that I could thoroughly outline the purpose of my research, explaining what was required from participants and asking them for a suitable time and date to conduct the interview. This incremental procedure (Gummesson, 2000; Marshall and Rossman, 2011) helped me develop relationships and

credibility, which laid the foundation for cognitive access. This meant that I got sufficiently acquainted with informants to gather data that are relevant to address my research questions and aims, but also data that are dependable, credible, transferable as well as confirmable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As an external researcher, it was vital to maintain physical, continuing and cognitive access to participants to demonstrate my competence and integrity as a researcher (Saunders et al., 2019). This is because I was profoundly dependent on the goodwill of participants to accept me as an objective researcher who was not driven by interests of their companies' agendas.

Establishing and maintaining access to informants was extremely important throughout the sampling process. Sampling is defined as "...the process [which] is inextricably linked with the development of analytical ideas and strategies for the collection of data" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 38), and consists of "taking a smaller chunk of a larger universe" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 31). As a small sample is regarded as a prevalent approach in qualitative research, it was fundamental to establish the most appropriate criteria to access participants for the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As I was aiming to predominantly interview well-established global leaders in the branded entertainment field, a combination of homogenous purposive and snowball sampling was employed for this thesis, since both techniques allow individuals with profound insights on branded entertainment practices to be identified.

Within MDA, purposive sampling is particularly useful for identifying key informants for studying social issues and discourses encompassing mediational means (Wohlwend, 2009). In combination with snowball sampling, it facilitated my sampling procedure. Primarily, homogenous purposive sampling was adopted to select individuals based on similar

professional characteristics that would be most appropriate to address the thesis objectives.

After identifying the main criteria needed for participation (practitioners working in the branded entertainment field), the snowball technique was used to ask the initially identified participants to help me identify additional practitioners who would be willing to contribute to this study. I recognise that I use the terms ‘industry practitioners’ and ‘industry stakeholders’ interchangeably to represent professionals (e.g., storytellers, creative producers, brand managers, etc.) involved in various facets of branded entertainment. Moreover, in choosing my informants, my aim was to maintain consistency while ensuring diversity within the sample. Although there is diversity in the sample due to my informants’ different roles, there is consistency because they all contribute to the same goal: branded entertainment. Despite their different roles and approaches to practising branded entertainment, these professionals contribute a wide range of perspectives and voices, thus collectively enriching this study.

The sample was selected based on the following criteria:

- Participants had to be actively involved in branded entertainment projects; and
- Participants had to work within the marketing and/or creative field for a minimum of ten years to be able to discuss branded entertainment evolutions.

Potential candidates were then contacted to confirm their participation and to organise their interview dates and times.

### **3.5.1 Participants’ Profiles**

When approaching participants, care was taken to ensure that the participants would meet the criteria as outlined previously, to obtain detailed and insightful data that would help

to illuminate contemporary branded entertainment developments based on different stakeholder perspectives. Prior to each interview, participants were given the choice to opt in or out of data anonymisation. This is because sometimes participants and companies prefer to be given credit for their perspectives, creative ideas and branded entertainment formats. Indeed, several participants agreed to provide their real names and company details for this study. However, I decided to anonymise all informant details to ensure that participants who did not want their details exposed would not be traced back. Nevertheless, the snowball sampling procedure meant that participants shared their industry contacts to enable further data collection and therefore linkages between individual participants could be unintentionally inferred – and participants were made aware of this issue. *Table 3* shows the pseudonyms of participants, their job titles/roles, company profiles, operating reach and types of branded entertainment my informants worked on.

Table 3: Participants' Profiles

Participant number	Pseudonym	Job Title / Job Roles	Company Profiles	Operating Reach	Types of Branded Entertainment Worked On
1	John	Director of Marketing and Business Development	Creative music service agency	Global	Music events, short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV)
2	James	Creative Director	Creative agency	Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV, series)
3	Susie	Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment	Content, production and distribution company	Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV, series) digital platforms
4	Robert	Creative Director	Agency specialising in virtual, augmented and mixed reality	UK	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV), (immersive) video games, events/festivals
5	Kevin	Senior Director - Client Development and Brand Partnerships	Company specialising in product placement, influencer marketing, partnerships and licencing	Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV), social media platforms
6	Lucas	Creative Director	Branded content agency	UK	Shortform branded entertainment (film, TV), social media platforms
7	Mike	Producer	Immersive story production company	UK	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV), social media platforms
8	Albert	Director of Brand Content, Strategy and Partnerships	Freelance, worked with global online gaming company and global grocery merchandiser	Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV)
9	Peter	Creative Director	Advertising agency	US/Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV)
10	Jim	CEO	Creative agency	US/Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV)
11	Steven	Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services	Television Network Company	UK	Short and longform branded entertainment (film,

					TV, series), digital platforms
12	Christian	Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing	Consumer brand	Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV, series), digital platforms
13	Tom	Storyteller	Freelance	UK	Short form branded entertainment (TV)
14	Anthony	Co-head of Marketing	Professional entertainment agency	US/Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV, series), digital and social media platforms
15	Mary	Storyteller	Technology company / Consultant	Global	Shortform branded entertainment (TV), social media platforms, destinations, podcasts
16	Cooper	Executive Producer	Freelance	UK/Asia	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV, series)
17	Chloe	Head of Brand Partnerships	Media company	US/Global	Short and longform branded entertainment (film, TV, series), books

\* Global refers to the operational reach of branded entertainment activities extending across more than three countries

### 3.6 Research Ethics Considerations

Research ethics are concerned with individual and shared codes of behaviour which are built on a range of principles to be able to carry out research (Creswell, 2013). Ethical issues can appear prior to carrying out the study, at the start of the research process, during data collection, during analysis and reporting, as well as when publishing the study.

Before conducting research, it was vital to scrutinise standards for ethical research conduct in order to thoroughly describe how data would and could be collected, organised, stored and secured. This was the foundation under which I received my ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham for my study under the ethical review number ERN\_18-0354. In the application, I outlined my sampling strategy, how I would gain

access to and recruit participants, as well issues related to participant information and informed consent. My participant information and consent forms were submitted with the research ethics application and received approval from my institution. Additionally, I focused particularly on how confidentiality could be maintained. Confidentiality is not only concerned with protecting the identity of individuals from whom information is being acquired, but also with guaranteeing the protection of people that have been mentioned in the data. It is also concerned with the representations and explanations published in research articles (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). As a result of reflections and conversations about issues of confidentiality, I decided to employ the strategy of anonymisation fully in order to achieve confidentiality. In fact, the thorough explanations required by the research ethics review process strengthened my moral integrity and reasoning as a researcher, which is crucial in the overall research process and can only enhance the credibility of the findings (Hesse-Biber, 2016).

### **3.7 Critical Reflexive Account**

It is important to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher. As a former industry practitioner, I have experienced the beginnings of the evolution of branded entertainment innovations and transformations in practical terms and these experiences have sensitised me to the challenges and ethical issues involved in this communication modality. During my research, I engaged in an ongoing reflexivity process and kept track of my thought process, research choices and alterations as supported by MDA (Scollon, 2001a; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). In doing so, I started to notice that my own political views and sensitivities are different from those of the participants that I have interviewed for this project. I take a more critical stance than most participants and see branded entertainment as a vessel for pro-consumerist attitudes and meanings and the neoliberal ideologies that underpin extractivist

capitalist thinking and structures. Nevertheless, this reflexive awareness of my personal position has enabled me to remain mindful of it throughout the research process, in turn affording a respectful and considerate approach to my participants and their diverse perspectives in the analytical process. While our perspectives might differ, I understand the systemic frameworks within which my participants are operating and the practical challenges they face in their professional lives as well as practices.

I must also acknowledge the impacts that the Covid-19 global pandemic has had on me and my research. This unsettling time was a particularly challenging period, emotionally, physically and mentally. In the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic, I was still in the middle of my data collection. I had arranged interviews with branded entertainment practitioners but unfortunately some of them had to postpone their interviews to a later date or the interviews were cancelled completely. These issues were mostly ascribed to the sudden challenges practitioners faced within their companies (i.e., working from home, reallocation of projects) and the necessary adjustments they had to make to their working conditions and to the projects on which they were working. For these reasons, it was incredibly difficult for me to maintain access to the participants, as some of them would not reply to my emails anymore. Consequently, I had to return to my existing networks and ask them yet again if they would know any other practitioners within the branded entertainment industry who would be interested in and willing to participate in my research. Fortunately, some branded entertainment experts agreed to be interviewed. However, arranging a time and date for the interviews required significant persistence due to practitioners' busy work schedules and it was not uncommon for the interviews to be postponed two or three times.

Moreover, because offices and all public spaces closed down during the pandemic, I was required to work from home. I live in a relatively small flat share and would regularly work in my room. I found it very difficult to have work and rest in one condensed space, which at times made it very challenging to stay focused and concentrated. Before the lockdown, I would regularly work in the British Library or in the libraries of the University of Birmingham and Goldsmiths, University of London, to maintain mental and physical boundaries between work and my personal life. This helped my overall work-life balance and wellbeing, but the pandemic disrupted these practices considerably. Also, not being able to study and work in libraries made it impossible for me to access some essential academic literature, particularly books relating to my research area. This meant I had to rely heavily on various internet sources when online copies of relevant books were unavailable through the online library services of the University of Birmingham. There were important books I could not access at all, but despite these constraints I was still able to carry out the data analysis required for my research.

### **3.8 Analysis**

The analytical focus of MDA offers and assumes data as “multimodal and multiperspectived”, in so far that data should be “gathered in several different modes (audio, visual, textual) and from different points of view or subjectivities” (Norris and Jones, 2005, p. 202). Using a retroductive analytical approach, I applied meaning, depth and insight from marketing and organisational studies, sociocultural studies as well as advertising and media studies to my empirical data. In doing so, I moved between existing theory and my data to identify thoughts that explained themes, patterns, associations and contradictions (Ragin, 1994).

The analytical process was aided by the conceptualisation of branded entertainment and the identification of different branded entertainment examples. Existing academic literature and practitioner articles found on websites such as adweek.com, adage.com, thedrum.com and campaignlive.co.uk helped me to sensitise myself to potential foci for the MDA analysis. This assisted me to refine my arguments and to narrow down the questions I developed for the practitioner interviews and data analysis. The analytical process was not straight forward and did not consist of linear stages. It was a rather challenging and iterative process in which some of my analytical choices were abandoned as I continued to develop insights and refine my argument and understanding of the research topic. When conducting the practitioner interviews, I always took notes on what they did (their social actions and practices), what they used or appropriated (their mediational means), the discourses in place (e.g. all the discourses involved in action or practice) and who was involved in the action and their role and function (interaction order) (Whiteman, 2020). Moreover, I included my own observations and reflections and, as my insights into my research grew, I was able to shape the direction of my research to develop investigative questions that would form my research and assist my analysis. These questions were based on Scollon (2001a), Wohlwend (2014) and Whiteman (2020), who suggest a range of heuristic questions to provide some structure in the interview process as well as for the analysis. These included for example:

- 1) What is the action?
- 2) What social practices for meaning making (semiotic practices) appear routine (expected, natural) are essential for participation?
- 3) How do social actors exercise these routine practices? How do they combine actions with other actions to show expertise and exert power over others? What are their intertextual, polyvocal and interdiscursive relationships?

- 4) How do these actions and semiotic practices fit into cycles of histories and anticipated futures of social practices in this culture?
- 5) Which identities are valued in this discourse? How do identities relate to each other?
- 6) Who decides what matters? Who authorised the rules and roles that operate here?
- 7) Who produces what? How are stakeholder relationships established through cultural artefact production?

To conduct the analysis, I included the notes that I had taken throughout my research process. Furthermore, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and for each interview I included my own analytical insights that reflected my own ideas, reflections and interpretations of the interview (Mason, 2018). The transcription helped me to read the text carefully and to thoroughly interpret and analyse participants' meanings. Transcriptions were generally read multiple times, which was extremely valuable to establish familiarity with my interview data and permitted me to become increasingly reflexive, implicating that I would interrogate my own interpretations and observations (Mason, 2018). In order to organise and code my data, I used manual qualitative data analysis in combination with the data analysis software NVivo. This approach helped me to retrieve certain suitable data as I proceeded with the iterative analysis procedure.

When I completed this stage of data organisation and analysis, I reviewed all fieldnotes obtained throughout my research process to identify recurring and important patterns and themes. I reengaged with the analytical framework literature and further considered what my original motivations and aims for this research were. Based on this reengagement, I developed a coding strategy that was in line with my data and the requirements of the research. I started with a thorough line by line coding in NVivo of my finished data corpus and moved to

observer-informed coding following my MDA principles, in addition to the individual participant coding for personal information. Moreover, I used a code named ‘Reflections’ to distinguish between my analytical observations and participant data. This approach was adopted because of the various data I collected over the extensive research period. After this analytical phase, I re-read the whole data corpus code by code, recognising themes and organising analytical topics as they emerged. Next, I revised the codes and eliminated duplicates and unrelated codes. Finally, the remaining codes were thematically organised to shed light on the research aims and questions.

Through the process of reading, revising and coding my data, patterns, themes, relationships and contradictions became apparent, which spawned ideas and alternative explanations for illuminating interpretations and participants’ actions, and I maintained an iterative analytical style throughout the progression of this thesis (Patton, 2015). What became apparent in this procedure was the importance of internalised discourses of practice in determining and informing interpretation (significant discourses) and the way discourses were identified in the texts (modality) (Whiteman, 2020).

### **3.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined and justified the research approach and methods applied in conducting this study and addressing the research questions. Given the emergent state of the branded entertainment field, employing a broad qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. The study employed MDA as an overarching analytical method, given that branded entertainment functions fundamentally as a communicative and persuasive medium. It was therefore essential for this thesis to prioritise an approach that is capable of examining both intentional and unintentional communication within this context. Moreover, as branded

entertainment involves collaboration among diverse practitioners from various industries, such as film, advertising and marketing, MDA and its focus on the nexus of practice enables the examination of divergent approaches within this collaborative environment. Consequently, this method offered a robust framework for addressing the inherent complexities and dynamics within the analysis.

In terms of ontological philosophical underpinnings, this thesis adopted a critical realist perspective, which allowed for the exploration of branded entertainment as a social phenomenon while simultaneously recognising the influence of human interpretation and experience. Therefore, MDA acknowledges the existence of multiple viewpoints and interpretations. Moreover, this chapter justified the research design and methods employed in the thesis to appropriately address the research aims. Adhering to the acceptable methods within MDA, this thesis incorporated practitioner interviews with global leaders in the field of branded entertainment, a practitioner event observation, and multimodal analysis of films and television shows that comprised branded entertainment. The use of different methods and data forms provided insights into the intricate processes involved in producing branded entertainment and their subsequent positioning within the realms of entertainment and promotion. Finally, the multimodal analysis entailed the application of various heuristic questions to the data, followed by coding to identify the key findings which are presented in the next three chapters.

## CHAPTER 4:

### THE TAPESTRY – UNRAVELLING THE LAYERS OF BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT

#### 4.1 Introduction

This is the first of three findings' chapters, and it presents discourses in action. It illuminates the evolution of branded entertainment based on the perspectives of different industry stakeholders by exploring the interrelationships of their actions within discourses and text. These findings illuminate the significance of discourse in establishing branded entertainment as a significant contemporary cultural artefact. This findings' chapter unpacks practitioners' discourses, allowing us to understand the perspectives and contradictions within them.

#### 4.2 The Need to Operate in the Entertainment Space

I start this section with a note that I wrote during the practitioner event observation, in which panel members reiterated the overall nature of advances within marketing, entertainment and technology, emphasising that *brands must work in the entertainment space* (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019) to be successful and able to connect with consumers using entertainment in their marketing strategies. As brands face difficulties in reaching consumers through traditional advertising, they need to adapt to changing consumer demands by capturing consumers' attention through engaging entertainment formats, to build and retain relationships with their target audience. James (Creative Director) noted that “*they [brands] understand that 'hey we need to be entertaining' or no one's gonna watch your message and 'no one's gonna care about us.*” This quote highlights the need for brands to turn to the entertainment industry in order to stay relevant. This section unpacks the underlying reasons as to why brands must

do so by tracing branded entertainment's historical trajectories through the discourses of practitioners that work within this space. In doing so, particular changes in the media landscape are foregrounded through mechanisms that are specifically related to the production, distribution and consumption of branded entertainment.

#### **4.3 Understanding the Dominant Discourses of Evolving Business Models**

Dominant discourses among my participants referred to the need to continuously experiment to keep up with the rapidly progressing advertising and media environment, which is characterised by rapid and continual changes. James (Creative Director) noted that "*it's all about trial and error at this moment because everything is changing so fast*". In fact, what was apparent throughout the period of data collection was how rapidly things were changing in all aspects of branded entertainment, from production to distribution and consumption, the nature of collaborating on branded entertainment projects and the impact of regulations coming from within the industry as well as from the outside. Kevin (Senior Director – Client Development and Brand Partnerships) emphasised that:

*"You have to accept that the only constant is change, and you have to adapt and adopt and go with the flow. Basically, you have to find your groove within whatever the market dynamic is doing, because if you try to stay the way you were, you gonna get left behind very, very quickly."*

The notion of time (Blommaert, 2009) is a crucial element in these quotes as the speed of changes in relation to branded entertainment developments was continuously reiterated by my informants. Therefore, to understand the notion of time within branded entertainment as a mediated action, it was important to interrogate how it is shaped by historical procedures. In doing so, I returned to the historical body as part of the nexus of practice within MDA, which has been defined as "the abstraction of the aggregation of social practices or repeated

experiences of the social actor in the course of life" (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012, p. 71). As outlined in Chapter 3, the historical body is related to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, yet it distinguishes itself through being positioned in the body of the social actor, as opposed to being preordained by group affiliation, social class or 'field' (Scollon, 2001, pp. 70-71). Whiteman (2020) highlights that both concepts, the historical body and habitus, are thus perceived differently, in which single historical bodies have the ability to coincide, thus yielding in connected and mutual habitus, which nevertheless are unique to the person's lived experience. Consequently, my participants, as industry practitioners, shared various experiences that illuminate how branded entertainment has evolved as a medium in this constantly changing landscape at the intersection of advertising, technology and the media. Therefore, understanding why branded entertainment has evolved in the way it has necessitated such a historical perspective, and as branded entertainment is one of the most prevailing evolutions of the intersection between promotional content and entertainment, it can only be fully understood by tracing its historical developments.

My informants reflected on such historical developments by remembering especially the shifts from linear broadcasting to digital broadcasting accompanied by the inherent developments of enhanced viewing options and the difficulties of reaching audiences through conventional television advertising. Mike (Producer) made it clear that "*TV advertising is declining [and that] people watch less adverts*", while James (Creative Director) reflected on the reasons why branded entertainment has become such a predominant practice. He stated that:

*"Brands have increasingly realised that normal media channels don't really work anymore, and people are ad blocking, like essentially shutting off TV ads. So, all the traditional ways of reaching audiences don't work anymore".*

These historical developments were continuously repeated in practitioners' discourses and further shed light on the shifting of interruptive commercials to the production of branded entertainment content. This is reflected in Steven's (Head of Content Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) excerpt:

*"The old model of interruptive ad spot placement, which people couldn't avoid, has been proving less effective. And secondly, you know, and as a consequence of that the economy of production and making of content and entertainment is changing. And therefore, looking at new ways to invest, find investment for entertainment, where brands and advertisers can become a part of the entertainment or involved in the entertainment and use the entertainment as a way of engaging consumers and audiences".*

These changes have been studied in great detail not only by marketing but also media scholars, who focus particularly on media fragmentation and the mitigatory behaviour of audiences (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012; Batra and Keller, 2016). Further, increased channel capacities have enabled consumers to engage with content via various broadcasting channels as well as digital platforms (Napoli, 2011; Kant, 2014). According to Jim (CEO), this simultaneously created a shift in the role of media agencies as well as of creative and strategic agencies, who had to deal with different requirements when it comes to the production and dissemination of commercials:

*"...The media agencies are separate from the creative and strategic agencies, and they're just buying the most efficient media buy against the target audience. So typically, a creative is getting a brief that says, 'We need four 30 second commercials, we need 27 of these different Facebook and Google and YouTube video formats'.*

This quote highlights not only increased and more diversified content and format production for commercials, but also the steering away from creating commercials to address

a specific target audience via media agencies. One of the most significant shifts within the digital landscape as highlighted by Lucas (Creative Director) was that:

*“Everything's getting video. So that was a massive step change in YouTube. The biggest ones in the last five years, I would argue, are with someone like Facebook or challengers to YouTube. So, Instagram, Vine came and went, and shaped, I think, the lovely format that was Instagram. Now, depending on the age group you're after, is the accessibility to this amount of content consumed”.*

As such, the emergence of digital platforms like YouTube and Vine has enabled the hosting of different video content and has allowed advertisers to create pre-, mid-, and post-roll advertising that is played either before, during or after the consumption of a video. On these platforms, advertisers can place commercials around specific videos or channels based on user demographics and interests. With the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, advertisers began to adapt commercials resulting in shorter ad formats that consist of either photo advertising, short videos in the form stories, or carousel ads. These are often smoothly integrated into users' feeds and provide shorter and more tailored and engaged ways to deliver promotional messages. A further significant change came with the emergence of SVOD platforms, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime or Disney+, which has pushed marketers and advertisers to further amend their promotional strategies. Particularly, the rise of SVOD platforms (Wayne, 2018; Schauerte, Feiereisen and Malter, 2021) forced various companies in the advertising and creative sector to quickly adjust their strategies in order to keep up with the overall shifting content landscape, which meant that they had to rapidly adapt their advertising creation and production to the changing demands. Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) discussed the shift in power which has increasingly moved from brands towards SVOD platforms with the realisation that consumers are moving away from ad supported platforms:

*[...] how the industry has obviously changed with that, obviously technology is a big influence with that. And obviously, you know, the consumer mitigation of, you know, consuming so much content on all these devices and stuff like that. Yeah, I mean, especially for brands and branded entertainment. You know, when you had ad supported platforms, they [brands] had so much power. And now that all top programming is that it is streamers who don't, you know, who are not ad supported business models. Brands no longer get to play in the space in a way where they're in control. That really has been the biggest shift [...]".*

Anthony's (Co-Head of Marketing) discourses related to SOVD and how they have affected both programming and distribution. He argued that brand promotions would usually tie to specific programming types in order to reach target audiences. However, shifting away from terrestrial (or legacy) media has meant that brands have had to alter their approaches concerning the planning of promotional campaigns:

*"It's overwhelming, you know. It depends on what lens and angle you're looking at that question though [the overall shifting distribution landscape of content]. You know, one of the biggest challenges is how the content distribution landscape is shifting, aka more content is shifting to streaming and more consumers are consuming content on streaming platforms, especially because many... are not supported in legacy television and media. It [Advertising] is reaching fewer and fewer people. The biggest challenge is that I spend a lot of my time on what that means for advertisers. And as brands and advertisers have to grapple with the realisation that buying 30-second and 60-second spots on TV around sports is no longer going to work the way it once worked, what are they going to do? And how are they going to reach their consumers? And what are they going to do, to do that when they can't buy ads on streaming platforms like Netflix, and Amazon Prime and Quibi? And whatever? And so that's, you know, a big challenge that I sit in and around most of my day" (Anthony, Co-Head of Marketing).*

Both extracts from Chloe and Anthony reiterate that *things are moving very quickly* (Robert, Creative Director) in regard to digital advancements. Industry practitioners have to observe and understand the changing market dynamics to be able to respond to the developments.

In particular, the emergence of SOVD platforms highlights a significant shift in power from advertisers and brands to SVOD platforms. The primary source of revenue for SVOD platforms is linked to the subscription fee paid by users, which provides a continuous income source for content and creation platform management. Therefore, SVOD platforms are not dependent on incorporating advertising to be sustainable. This is reinforced by Peter, who states that “*they [SVOD services] don't care about if there's an advertiser or not. They care about if the audience likes the content that they have. If the content is good, they run it*”. However, although respondents discussed the changing nature of digital in relation to SVOD platforms, they did not specify how the delivery mechanisms of digital and other video-on-demand (VOD) business models are changing (Jang, Baek and Kim, 2021).

In this regard, OTT is becoming increasingly important, as content is distributed directly to audiences via the internet, which has further resulted in advertising-based video on demand (AVOD) and transactional video on demand (TVOD) business models. AVOD is free of charge for consumers and includes platforms such as YouTube or All 4, which is the video on demand service from Channel Four Television Corporation. Yet, AVOD is similar to linear broadcast television, as consumers are required to endure commercials. Therefore, it is evident that, not only have funding mechanisms of television programmes evolved, but also linear broadcasters have expanded their services to digital platforms due to new platform players in the market. Moreover, TVOD platforms are different to SVOD platforms, as consumers are required to buy content through pay-per-view options. These options are divided into two general sub-categories: electronic sell-through (EST), which involves a one-time payment for permanent content access, and download-to rent (DTR), which allows customers to access content for a limited period at a reduced fee. Examples of TVOD include Apple TV or Sky Box Office. However, many of the VOD platforms use hybrid models in which viewers pay a

predetermined monthly subscription fee to access a range of content, but newly released films and certain sports events may require an extra charge. An example of such a hybrid business model is NOW TV, which is an OTT internet television service managed by British satellite television company Sky Group.

#### **4.4 Considerations of the Commissioning Landscape**

When delving into how the broadcasting landscape has changed, my practitioner event observation notes revealed that, within the UK television broadcasting industry, there are different funding mechanisms for films and television shows. On the one hand, there are programme budgets which are tied to public service programming (PSP). Such programming provides audiences with content that focuses on public interest, education and welfare instead of entertainment or commercial purposes, and must be funded directly by broadcasters. On the other hand, there are alternative arrangements to work with funding partners that are more aligned with entertainment or commercial purposes, in which “*co-funded is equally as important as brandfunded*” (Observation notes, 24 October 2019) to allow for increased global distribution. This means that, generally, longform branded entertainment can be partially or completely funded by a brand. Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) remembered that partnerships on television developed at an increased pace and “*were tied to content*”.

Both co-funded and brand-funded content formats were predominant in my analysis of audio-visual texts. For example, the British television broadcaster Channel 4 and automobile manufacturer Suzuki co-funded *All Star Driving School*. In this programme, celebrities are matched with driving instructors to learn how to drive a car, aiming to successfully complete their driving test within a week. Another example is where grocery retailer Marks & Spencer has entirely funded a television show called *Cooking with the Stars*, a cooking competition that

puts celebrities together with professional chefs so that they can learn to cook to restaurant standard – while Marks & Spencer integrates and showcases their products ranges. Consequently, within the television broadcasting landscape, various shows and programmes are either sponsored by brands or through branded partnerships that broadcasters, such as Channel 4, undertake to provide opportunities for advertisers to get exposure on broadcasting channels and platforms.

However, the continued sponsoring and partnerships unveil the historically rooted dichotomy between a brand's efforts to reach consumers for commercial reasons and the broadcaster's need to obtain funding to produce their programmes (Kerrigan, 2017). Balancing the need for funding while simultaneously aiming to maintain programme quality, integrity and audiences' trust can result in various challenges. It requires meticulous considerations of how broadcasters and brands work together to attain their respective objectives while further taking into consideration the interests of audiences. Otherwise, this dichotomy can result in conflicts of interest, which can have an effect on, for instance, creativity, viewing experiences, economic dependence as well as regulatory concerns.

Moreover, these examples not only illustrate the changing nature of how television programme funding has evolved, but also how brands are more closely aligned with programmes. “*The TV show is putting their name very directly to that brand*” (Cooper, Executive Producer) where brands, producers and broadcasters “*come up with great ideas and clever ways to pay for them, particularly through working in partnerships with a brand and an advertiser*” (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019). These examples further demonstrate the need to find a fit or synergy between the brand and the programme (Bloxham 1998; Olson and Thjømøe, 2012; Chan-Olmsted and Shay, 2015; Dens, De Pelsmacker and Verhellen, 2018).

Consequently, commissioning for film and television shows has also changed in broadcasting over the past years due to advertiser-funded content becoming increasingly important for brands. Commissioning is not only carried out by networks, production companies, studios or streaming platforms, but also by brands. In the context of television broadcasting, it means that, increasingly, networks are required to work with brands and to manage the client's expectations, as it is "*not about selling a product anymore*" (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019). Therefore, a brand can be involved to a greater extent in content creation, which requires commissioners to understand their clients and collaborating partners in order to work towards outcome guidelines. This is further discussed in Chapter 5, as it addresses the nature of collaboration in branded entertainment projects.

#### **4.5 The Importance of Distribution Models for Branded Entertainment Projects**

When examining the developments of commissioning, it is crucial to also take distribution into consideration since these two aspects are closely related. Indeed, commissioning and distribution rely on each other to facilitate the successful production, promotion and accessibility of content to audiences. Therefore, when a film or television show gets commissioned, it becomes vital for the distribution team to make sure that the finished product reaches its intended target audience through appropriate platforms. From a brand perspective, Christian (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) noted how important it was to have built a distribution team from when his company first started producing branded entertainment content. He stated that "*building a distribution team to make sure that the content we developed was as broadly placed globally as possible [...] would [then] become the next step beyond broadcast television*". This excerpt illustrates the importance of building global distribution through which relevant and various platforms can be reached. This distribution involves, for example, cinemas, television networks and streaming services. In the context of television, Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) noted the

historical shift in how conventional distribution models worked: “[...] *the distribution plan, how are you going to get this out to the vehicles. 20 years ago, you could do the creative idea and then go, well, we buy TV spots for it. And we'll put it on TV, and everybody will see it.*”

However, the significant proliferation of non-traditional media channels, the formation of various and continuously increasing digital platforms since the early 2000s, coupled with the underlying historical structures and procedures of distribution have forced branded entertainment producers:

“[...] *to weigh out what you spend money on and your distribution, which is expensive. Yeah. But you have to build in distribution guarantee into your production budget, otherwise, it doesn't reach your audience, no matter how good it is. [...] We saw a lot of beautiful pieces of content, but they'd never seen the light of day because their distribution model wasn't sorted out*” (Susie, Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment).

Susie's excerpt reiterates Christian's notion of the importance of a building and implementing a solid distribution strategy. Christian (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) further addressed the windowing of content, which can help content to be moved to different channels and platforms with the aim to follow changing audience behaviours:

“*So it's getting, it's getting harder and harder for the distribution team. And so, the way all of our deals have been structured in the past, and that's anything that we produce, is we reserve the right to window our content, on digital channels, to try to attract a broader audience and be able to put [the brand] on channels where we know we have an audience that's already engaged with the brand. What's happening as part of this evolution that's going on is that, because the platforms understand that the audience is migratory, they're [VOD services] forcing more and more exclusivity into all their deals.*”

#### 4.6 Merging Film and Television Distribution Models with Traditional Content Promotion

Christian's quote reveals that the brand he works for is attempting to resist the dominant position of VOD services by establishing contracts that allow for content to be available over a certain period of time on a specific broadcasting channel and/or digital platform. Such contracts permit the brand to move its content to other channels or platforms in order to follow and attract audiences. Yet, there was an overall agreement among my informants about how difficult it can be to distribute branded entertainment content. The following quote by Anthony (Co-Head of Marketing) represents one of the challenges and historical shifts in the distribution landscape. The excerpt illustrates the shift from simply putting branded entertainment content on social media or other video sharing platforms to placing branded entertainment content on SVOD. Anthony refers to a particular branded entertainment film example, *Lo and Behold*, by Werner Herzog. The film was mentioned during multiple practitioner interviews due to its great success story, both artistically and commercially:

*“...the challenge is having that content live on premium distribution platforms or finding premium distribution for that branded entertainment and that content. So, historically, where that content lived was online with paid media behind it, dropped on YouTube, you know, put on a .com with them, extensions will go out on social and promote it, and people would see it and then go back to the .com. But what all those brands want to do is to have that piece live on Netflix, to have that piece live on, you know, Disney+, etc. And so, there are some brands that have achieved that through unique ways in the past. One of the most notable is what Internet security company Netscout did with the filmmaker Werner Herzog, when they funded a documentary that he directed, which went to a film festival and then was acquired by a traditional theatrical distributor, Magnolia, and then sold to Netflix for streaming. And so that's the dream of what most brands want, when they start to think about long form branded entertainment”.*

By tracing branded entertainments' historical trajectories through practitioners' discourses, it is evident that practitioners must continuously monitor the changing nature of advertising, which is primarily driven by advancements in technology, shifts in consumer behaviour and evolving market dynamics. Dominant practitioner discourses described ways to navigate from linear television to social media advertising while also grappling with how advertising can be approached through VOD platforms. These changes have forced practitioners to think about new funding models, which simultaneously led to different programming, funding, commissioning as well as distribution mechanisms. However, Christian (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) notes, among other practitioners, the importance of research and how it has revealed that linear television is still crucial for certain markets:

*"We just had some research done by our agency of record, who does a lot of our media research and media placement, and linear television is not dead. And it still is, is very important. Especially in certain markets, it's still as relevant as it's ever been".*

This excerpt reminds us that in some markets, internet penetration may still be low and therefore linear television continues to be the primary source of content access. Moreover, various television networks, from regional to global, remain important on linear television. This is because, for many audiences, linear television remains the main resource to access news and current affairs, local and regional programming as well as live events, such as sports, political debates and talent shows. Moreover, older demographics may be less tech-savvy and have been acquainted with how to access information and entertainment via linear broadcasting television for decades.

However, while linear television remains significant in some markets, as outlined previously, broadcasters are adapting by providing streaming options as well as on demand

content to accommodate changing audience behaviour and viewing preferences. This is why Christian's quote on research is important. Many of my informants discussed the value of research in order to target audiences because, as Mary (Storyteller) emphasised:

*"The idea that your audience is consistently changing, demanding new things, what works yesterday may not work tomorrow, so you're always reactive. In content, you're always reactive, unless you get ahead of the game, and begin to proactively create concepts and start testing them".*

Mary's quote reveals the reciprocal dependency between audience research and content, where she highlights that:

*"There are different types of testing. You can do ethnographic research. Of course, you could do surveys, focus groups. The way that I've tested stories is that [I've] actually collected samples of my own audience. And so, I've said, 'Hey, don't you have like 60 people that represent my audience?' And I tell them, 'Hey, I'm working on this story. I'd love your feedback'".*

In a similar vein to testing stories, John (Director of Marketing and Business Development) also discussed the need to understand audiences in terms of how music is integrated into branded entertainment content:

*"It might be when they're doing surveys and workshops and research agencies testing that piece of content, where they come back to us going, 'Actually, can we try a different piece of music? And you can compose it in a different way? Can you remix in a different way? Can you do a contemporary version that's classical?' These are the things, that's where we're involved where maybe the audience didn't quite react so well to the sound and the music. So that's where we kind of finesse a bit of content with the sound and music because it's, it's so crucial".*

Both, Mary's and John's excerpts demonstrate that research is used to serve audiences with content that is increasingly relevant, engaging and more tailored to the preferences of

intended target audiences. As such, audience research has become a crucial tool for branded entertainment content creators, including brands, to enhance viewership and commercialisation. In the context of audiences, Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) and Christian (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) specifically discussed the importance of reaching and engaging the *four-quadrant audience*, with Christian particularly highlighting that you need to take a

*“...step back and say, in Hollywood, for a studio to have a very successful money-making endeavour, you need a four-quadrant audience. So, you need, you know, moms and kids and teens and everyone, to some extent, to come out if you really want a huge critical success”.*

The term four-quadrant audience in this context is noteworthy, as it is a common term that describes audience segmentation strategies within the film industry, which aids studios and content producers to understand and reach a broad range of viewers. Therefore, the term refers to a broad and diverse target audience that includes all age groups and genders; studios and producers pursue the exploitation of the potential audience size with the aim of generating significant box office or rating (Goetz, 2016), streaming success and expanding the film's reach. In doing so, practitioners aim to target multiple demographic and psychographic groups concurrently. Applying the four-quadrant audience approach goes counter the conventional market segmentation process in marketing, which aims at dividing a heterogenous market into smaller, increasingly homogenous segments based on particular segmentation variables. However, by implementing the four-quadrant audience approach, increasingly, branded entertainment content creation is geared towards commerce and box office to achieve financial success for a film or a television show.

Another significant discourse among my informants was about how audience research applies to linear broadcasting as well as SVOD platforms, and the differences in terms of how information was shared with branded entertainment content producers and brands. It became clear that broadcasters provided content producers with various audience research from different markets, helping creators to make data-informed decisions. Based on the research provided, content producers would adapt content if it was not received well, thus helping to reduce risk in branded entertainment content production and increasing the potential for commercialisation. With regards to the consumer brand he works for, Christian (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) stated:

*“A lot of our information actually comes from our broadcasting partners within those markets. So, for Germany as an example, we were for years and years, we've worked very closely, not only with the [SVOD] platform, but also [linear broadcaster]. And so, before we get too far into development, we'll show what we're working on to our colleagues at [linear broadcaster] and they perform; they have tonnes of knowledge just from doing what they do for as many years as they've done. But they'll also test things before focus groups of [target audience] within their market. And that's, that's pretty consistent throughout the world. Our distribution team has such a close relationship with our platform partners”.*

Christian argued that he is a *resident expert* in particular markets, as he works very closely with broadcasters to understand the nuances of audiences in different markets while working within the company's brand guidelines. He elaborated that the broadcasting partners “*are probably the toughest critics of anything*” and if anything from “*audio signals to visual signals*” are rejected by focus groups in the research phase, certain characters have to be removed from the television show, for example. Long-term partnerships with the broadcaster have allowed Christian's team to “*look at a piece of content before it even gets to them [broadcaster] and determine what they're going to say*”. Working this closely with the

broadcaster emphasises yet again the importance of accommodating the needs of the audience by “*making content that is the right eye level for our audience*” (Christian).

Moreover, the relevance of algorithms, and how algorithms contribute in different ways to branded entertainment productions, was discussed by many of my participants. Kevin (Senior Director – Client Development & Brand Partnerships) conferred that:

*“Using sophisticated machine algorithms [would allow us] to identify which content creators will be right for brands, but secondly, once we've done that, try and test and analyse each piece of content to find out why it was working to make smart predictions for what would work in future [...] What our machines are doing when they analyse all the videos is looking at, you know, ‘Where is the message in this content? What kind of tonality does it have? What's the volume like?’ Things that as humans we're not looking at, because normally we look at, ‘What are the demographics? What was the video, or the click through on it?’ - stick in the spreadsheet. And that's what you call your structured data, you can analyse that. The unstructured data is all these other data points that we're not looking at as humans, and we physically don't have the time, the capacity to analyse these things that a machine can look at and make smart predictions, which then help us to form future content.”*

The discourses around the use of algorithms contribute to the significance of research regarding branded entertainment, which highlight the intricate analyses to provide not only more nuanced information relating to demographics, viewing trends and box office data research, but also to obtain information about stylistic and technical procedures. Kevin’s quote in particular provides a glimpse into the various factors that are considered when mining algorithms, which aim to optimise and determine subsequent branded entertainment content production. In doing so, algorithms are employed to extract and analyse insights from various, large data sources. They are further used to build recommendation systems for audio-visual content, which provide audiences with more personalised content recommendations. The

insights include, for example, user behaviour and preferences, viewing histories and customised content suggestions, characteristics (e.g., genre, cast) of films or television shows to suggest personalised and favoured content to audiences intending to enhance user experience and audio-visual consumption. However, when it came to how SVOD platforms' use algorithms to research and attract audiences, my participants portrayed frustrations because such platforms do not share any data produced by the algorithms to further develop their branded entertainment content. These revelations reflect the ongoing power that SVOD platforms exercise by deliberately withholding information with the aim to protect their intricately crafted algorithms:

*"So, for Netflix, their strategy was the algorithm that they created, that tracks you as a viewer and what you're watching. And what you want to watch is so proprietary in their mind to them, they didn't want to give any information out that could be used for anyone else to be able to create that algorithm. So, if I work for [brand], and I have hard data on my show, and who's watching it, then I leave [brand] and go work for a studio or another platform provider, I can say, 'Hey, based on what I know that worked on Netflix here are the numbers. This type of show is attracting this type of audience' and they felt that if enough of that information got out into the world, a competitor could build a similar algorithm as what they have" (Christian, Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing).*

Branded entertainment practitioners are thus required to find different ways of obtaining information. Therefore, the windowing of content, as mentioned earlier, may prove useful as branded entertainment creators can turn to linear broadcasters to use their audience feedback analyses. Correspondingly, practitioners claimed that SVOD platforms would undermine content that was produced externally by, for example, film studios or independent production companies, as they would allocate additional funds to increasingly promote their own original content. This was highlighted by James (Creative Director), who compared branded entertainment content production to the Marvel and Disney blockbusters as well as to

the Originals of SVOD platforms, and how a brand must essentially challenge these platforms at their own game. For that reason, James argued that “*branded entertainment needs ambition and it needs to understand what you're competing with*”. James's quote demonstrates the highly competitive environment in which branded entertainment operates; it is not only competing with other branded entertainment formats, but also with conventional films and television shows, social media content and other video platforms such as YouTube or TikTok.

Therefore, James argues that it...

“*...means you have to invest more money into it. You have to make it more relevant to your brand. You have to like start thinking about, you know, what people are actually looking for, like, ‘Why do we just assume that people want a certain amount of content then we just build it?’ Like the amount of research that goes into like, a new Netflix series is incredible, like the algorithms that they use, and like the know-how and the talent that they bring in is way, way higher than you would otherwise think*”.

In a comparable manner, Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) states that:

“*...You see the difference between Netflix Originals, Apple Originals, right, they separate originals from the rest of the content. And when something's an original, it means they put a little bit more Marketing Dollars toward it. They're highlighted differently. If it's an acquisition, it can kind of get stuck in the algorithm, right? A lot of the viewing habits are depending on who clicks on it, right? So, it's funny, a lot of brands want that status of having like an Originals tag, but they [SVODS] won't generally do that*”.

These excerpts show that a substantial amount of investment is required for branded entertainment developments to compete with the production and marketing of original content released by SVOD platforms. Moreover, Peter (Creative Director) argued that “*you need to bring like really high-quality stuff. Brands need to find a way to be better in some aspects. More competitively. You need to compete against regular entertainment*”. However, when SVOD platforms first emerged, they were licensing catalogues of existing content, which is

still relevant in today's SVOD environment and this is the reason why, for example, “*Disney bought the Fox portfolio of content*” (Christian, Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing). However, for people to keep subscribing to SVOD platforms, “*they need original content, and they need high quality content*” (Christian). The excerpts reveal the highly competitive nature of content production. Therefore, the notion that “*content is king*” (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019) was a prevalent discourse in the branded entertainment practitioner interviews, and it has meant that production budgets have increased continuously so that premium content can be produced at theatrical levels for both films and television shows. However, Mike (Producer) stated that “*the budgets aren't always there*” to produce longform branded entertainment content and Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) disclosed that “*a publicly traded company [...] can't always afford to, you know, just put a few million dollars into something that doesn't have eyeballs attached at the end of it somehow*”.

Based on these excerpts, certain power dynamics are revealed, as not every brand is able to afford branded entertainment endeavours given the significant amount of investment required to produce branded entertainment formats. This was further evidenced through the film and television examples mentioned by practitioners as well as through my multimodal analysis. Most brands that engage in branded entertainment are well-known and often global, and evidently have bigger budgets than smaller brands, which do not necessarily operate internationally. This divulges that, within capitalist systems, global brands have advantages over smaller brands by having a wider reach and increased international brand recognition due to their financial clout. Indeed, global brands have access to significant financial resources compared to small brands, which helps them with the production and distribution of branded entertainment content, and which in turn leads to a continuous pattern of ever-increasing economic power that is perpetuated over time through market-dominating practices.



#### 4.7 The Continued Conceptual Maze of Branded Entertainment

This chapter so far has discussed historical trajectories through the discourses of my informants as historical bodies in branded entertainment's inception as well as its general developments. As highlighted, these developments are ascribed to continuous technological developments and changes in consumer behaviour, especially concerning audio-visual consumption. With the evolution of the Internet and the upspringing of various digital platforms, advertisers and brands have been pushed to find other ways to reach consumers. Particularly, the developments of SVOD platforms, which allow consumers to evade commercials, have accelerated how advertising has expanded from linear broadcasting to social media platforms. They have also pushed advertisers to find different and more intricate ways to reach consumers through longform branded entertainment content via films and television shows. As a result, branded entertainment has transformed production, commissioning, and distribution processes, which are increasingly led by digital and data-driven approaches. Discourses revealed that audience research is a crucial component for creating and delivering consumer-centric branded entertainment content in order to resonate with intended target audiences while simultaneously keeping pace and evolving with the changing landscape of advertising and media consumption. In addition, branded entertainment content needs to be produced at theatrical level as it competes with regular entertainment, such as films and television shows, video games and music concerts. This section outlines the conceptual particularities around branded entertainment, discussing the need of audience engagement to create emotional connections with audiences. The practitioner discourses revealed that certain genres are particularly useful for branded entertainment. Moreover, branded entertainment endeavours can differ in their genesis, which will be further examined in this section.

In order to provide increased conceptual clarity regarding branded entertainment, it was imperative for me to decipher the various aspects of branded entertainment as a situated and

mediated process (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2013). I examined how my informants accumulated experiences during their trajectory across time and space. In doing so, I analysed how these trajectories unfolded amid evolving social orders, transforming discourses in place, technological innovations, as well as with the dissemination of novel discourses and texts, aiming to identify points of convergence among these partially independent trajectories (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2013).

I asked my informants to provide their own definition of branded entertainment and to distinguish it from other terms such as branded content or product placement. Discourses revealed, early on in my data collection period, that my informants experienced conceptual confusion (Tähtinen and Havila, 2019). Kevin (Senior Director – Client Development and Brand Partnerships) noted that “*there's a lot of buzzwords out there*” and that “*there's a lot of crossover or grey areas*” that will not “*go away anytime soon*”. This was reflected in the discourses of branded entertainment practitioners who had difficulties or were hesitant in defining branded entertainment in their own terms. This translated further into difficulties in discerning and differentiating between different but related modalities as evident in the following quote:

*“I mean, I think branded content, I mean, you could call commercial. I think branded content, right? I think entertainment is meant to be just that, entertaining, right? And I think what, what, what, the term I start to use more is now brand-funded content, right? Because I think a brand can fund a movie or something that's entertaining, but it doesn't necessarily have any of the brand's messaging directly in. It could be very indirect; it could be thematically aligned. I think that, I think they're pretty similar. I mean, it all sort of encompasses, you know, brands wanting to put their message out in an entertaining way. To me, it's, it should be everything but a traditional ad, right? Saying 3.99 for this taco or whatever, you know? [...] [There are so many terms floating around] because it's the ad industry. And they like to, everybody likes to put their name on ‘nothing’, you know? I mean, but at the end of the day, look, I think it's, it's still*

*marketing, right? It's marketing, you know, using content creation as a marketing tool. [...] [Brand integration] I mean, that's very specific of putting a brand inside a piece of content. That to me is not, that's a, that's all part of brand marketing, but it's not. That's not branded entertainment" (Chloe, Head of Brand Partnerships).*

Chloe's quote illustrates that it is challenging for her to define clear boundaries to distinguish branded entertainment from other terms. By using repeating expressions such as 'I mean' or 'right?', Chloe expresses some sort of hesitation or uncertainty, which indicates that she may have explored her thoughts of conceptual boundaries only while speaking and that she is not entirely confident in her explanations, thus, seeking some sort of affirmation or agreement. Moreover, Chloe stated that she uses the term brand-funded content, which is a common term used in practitioner jargon (Kelley, 2023; Wells, Colamarino and Marshall, 2023) to indicate that a film or television show is sponsored by a specific brand seeking to promote its message. The proliferation of terms in the advertising industry was mentioned by several informants, who attributed the abundance of terms to a marketing/selling technique within the industry as outlined in the following quotes:

*"I think, you know, there's like the people sort of trying to understand, you know, it's people giving a label to something, so it's sort of understood, you know, about the differences. I don't actually know all the different definitions very clearly [...] brand integration I don't know, I don't necessarily know what brand integration, what they mean by that. [...] You know, I think, you know, I think it's a way of understanding it, you know, the different labels of what branded... what constitutes it, and it's probably a way to sell it to advertisers as well. You know, it's like, it's an understanding within the industry, and with people, advertisers, and for them to understand, you know, what they're getting, you know, as well, in what, what it sort of means, but, yeah, I mean, I'm not sure of all the meanings exactly" (Cooper, Executive Producer).*

*"I mean, personally, I think branded content and entertainment is kind of the one and same thing to me, maybe it isn't, I'm not an expert. It depends on if you're, if it's not branded entertainment in respect that it's including events and experiential and all the*

*other ways of entertaining consumers, then yeah, then it's not just content. [...] I think a lot of it is the same. I would, yeah, I think a lot of it is one in the same. Essentially, it's about creating stuff and having brands pay for it. So, it's, you know, it's entertainment and content for audiences funded by brands, because there's no other way to fund it. [...] I think it's because you've got terms [floating around] that are relevant to PR terms, that are relevant to communications terms, that are relevant to media buying, terms that are relevant to advertising agencies. It's just that the language vernacular of all these different marketing sectors and marketing disciplines, really. And it's just, just the way for them to express themselves, I guess, what they do, I guess, is to try and have sophisticated ways of pitching to brands, because at the end of the day it was trying to get brand dollars to... maybe it's just, it's just a sales tactics. I'm probably thinking now from my perspective, we use a lot of terms, but essentially, we're in branded entertainment, branded content. [...] So, for us, we think it's, I think it's interchangeable"* (John, Director of Marketing and Business Development).

Both, Cooper's and John's excerpts reinforce the notion of that numerous terms and labels are used in the industry, yet both hesitate to clearly define the different terms that are connected to branded entertainment. Cooper acknowledges that various and terms are employed to delineate differences within the industry. However, despite him working in the film/branded entertainment industry, there appears to be some inconsistency in his statement, as he expresses diffidence in providing clear definitions for these terms himself. John, on the other hand, does not call himself an "expert" and is thus reluctant to define branded entertainment, although he also works within the realm of branded entertainment. Considering the aforementioned points, he regards branded entertainment and branded content as essentially the same and where certain terms are used interchangeably, even within John's own practice; however, he also recognises that different sectors within marketing and advertising use various terms to express and differentiate themselves from other companies working within the same industry. For both Cooper and John, these terms serve as a way for the advertising industry to communicate their offerings. Moreover, John introduces the idea that the proliferation of terms

might be a result of different companies trying to express themselves in sophisticated ways as part of sales tactics, thus using specific terminology to pitch services to brands strategically. Therefore, jargon is used for communication, differentiation, and possibly as a strategic approach to secure funding from brands. The above quotes reflect the notion of conceptual fluidity (Satori, 2009), which links to the evolving and dynamic nature of the advertising and entertainment industries. Practitioner discourses revealed that adaptable and flexible terms in relation to branded entertainment are prominent within these industries. Such terms are used as synonyms, naturally evolve, take on different meanings and/or forms over time and in different contexts, such as “*language vernacular*” within a company and within advertising, marketing or entertainment sectors.

Interestingly, Peter (Creative Director) displayed significant reluctance to define branded entertainment:

*“I think that definitions require some perspective where then perspective requires distance, right? If you’re too close to something, you cannot see the whole thing and you need that vantage point far away, so you can actually - I don’t think that defining is a beneficial effort, I think it’s actually a bad thing”.*

He justified his unwillingness to define branded entertainment based on shortcomings that are inherent to most definitions. Instead, Peter expressed a preliminary understanding of branded entertainment, which is “*related to managing the brand, the money that consumers are putting in, that the brands are putting in the time that consumers are putting in; it’s the effort that tries to balance those two things.*” While presenting these contextual conditions, Peter emphasised that this served as his current working definition, yet he also stated being open to revising or discarding his working definition if the conceptual developments of branded entertainment become incoherent or irrelevant.

Susie (Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment), on the other hand, was more determined to provide a distinct definition of branded entertainment than other informants, as she differentiated it from related terms:

*“Branded entertainment is entertainment, which a viewer will seek out regardless of whether or not it's funded by a brand. [...] I think branded content, content marketing, branded content apart, but content marketing, native advertising, is just something you'd watch anywhere where somebody's a bit of product placement has been inserted, or it's been created specifically as content marketing; it's never going to really move the dial on the brand. And branded entertainment is something that will move the dial through the power of entertainment, so that the entertainment is engaging, and arresting and emotional enough that the brand message will be amplified through that association, because I think content marketing is a little bit more mundane, the digital stuff I see, the stuff with influencers I'd count as content marketing, because it's not entertainment, it's some content with marketing built into it”.*

Therefore, branded entertainment “*should be seamless, authentic and not forced*” (Albert, Director of Brand Content, Strategy and Partnerships). While Susie provided relatively clear and distinguishable conceptual boundaries for branded entertainment, she questioned herself about the provided definitions, which becomes apparent at the end of the quote, as she concludes the sentence with “*perhaps*”. It reemphasises the prevailing conceptual confusion among industry practitioners and sheds light on the challenges my informants face in expressing clear distinctions between branded entertainment and its related modalities.

However, to further unpack the concept of branded entertainment, it was crucial for me to engage in the nexus of branded entertainment practice to understand branded entertainment as a mediated action and to offer increased conceptual clarity by establishing the key conceptual dimensions stemming from discourses in place (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2003;

Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). Here, I highlight quotes that talk about practitioners' experiences of creating branded entertainment pieces. The following discourses reveal that my informants encounter continuous challenges when creating branded entertainment formats, which require different nuances. Christian (Christian, Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) shares the challenges around creating longform theatrical content in the early days, when his company first started branded entertainment productions:

*"We didn't really know what we were doing, or I didn't really know what it was, you know, what was involved in making a theatrical [...] making films is messy. I mean, the studios try to really figure out ways through screenings and audience screenings and different metrics what to change and how audiences are going to perceive the film. [...] It's still much more of an art than a science to be able to figure it out. I mean there are definitely good components to good storytelling, and you want to make sure that you have the most talented people working on your films, but at the end of the day, you know you're never really sure what the audience is going to do with it"* (Christian, Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing).

The quote shows that Christian admits a lack of initial understanding of the theatrical filmmaking process involved in branded entertainment and its inherent complexities. The description of filmmaking as “messy” emphasises the challenges and unpredictability of creative endeavours in relation to branded entertainment. Moreover, Christian states that studios attempt to gauge audience reactions through various metrics, which reflects the constant efforts to decipher how audiences perceive branded entertainment in films. He portrays a sense of uncertainty by concluding that the audience’s response ultimately remains unpredictable. It thus highlights the dynamic nature of storytelling in the context of branded entertainment. Once a film or television show is released, the branded story takes a life of its own, evolving from a mere concept into a living entity shaped by audience interactions. *“The media, social media engages, and people engage in, they can change the narrative, and they will change the narrative”* (Mary, Storyteller). Mary’s quote recognises the power of how people become

active participants, which requires branded entertainment practitioners to embrace strategic foresight to anticipate potential outcomes in terms of how various audiences influence and shape the story's trajectory. The brand has to remain vigilant and adaptive, and must be able to manage and explain unexpected shifts in meaning. Consequently, branded entertainment stories are always dynamic, responsive and subject to interpretation, which necessitates brands to be agile, considerate and prepared to adapt their narratives to maintain authenticity and resonance in the constantly changing landscape of audience engagement, advertising and entertainment.

Similarly, the discussants at the practitioner event emphasised the “*need to talk to social media platforms to engage audiences via algorithms*” and to make sure that “*while a specific television programme is on, the additional created content needs to align with algorithms to be topical and always trending*” (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019). In doing so, the discussants pointed out that this approach has the potential to ensure that “*the right people are seeing the content at the right time*” (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019).

Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) shared his experience of skilfully crafting a branded entertainment piece for television formats. In doing so, he advocated that “*they'll enjoy the entertainment if you make it proper entertainment, and cleverly weave the brand in, but if you try and overdo it, people think they're watching an ad and they lose, they lose that they lose interest*”. Therefore, Steven cautioned against excessive brand prominence by stating that “*we've seen it happen time before, and time and time again when we make a piece of content, we put too much brand into it*”. He justified this by drawing from past experiences where the negative impact of undue branding was reflected in audience feedback via Twitter (now X) as well as through research and post-research analysis. As a

result, Steven emphasised that “*people were not reacting to the content because it goes too commercial, and there's a very delicate balancing*” that needs to be achieved. To create successful branded entertainment content in television formats, Steven mentioned that it is a delicate balancing act in which he relies on his intuition. He reinforces the notion that branded entertainment creation is more of *an art than a science*, as outlined in earlier practitioner discourses.

Anthony (Co-Head of Marketing) talked about algorithms in relation to creating branded entertainment. However, unlike other informants, he argued that the *math and the algorithm* are yet to work and be fully understood in branded entertainment contexts:

*“Now you see more brands pushing the boundaries with storytelling, mostly working with their creative agencies to develop and create, and push out longer messages that feel more premium, aka, a three-to-five-minute version of a commercial. That doesn't feel like a commercial but feels like a short film. Or, you know, that kind of stuff. But I think the, the math and the algorithm for brands is yet, it has yet to fully come together for the branded entertainment space”.*

This was further noticeable in the excerpts of Peter (Creative Director) and James (Creative Director), who also discussed Christian's earlier points regarding the art versus science of branded entertainment, which reflects the overall challenges in, and conceptual ambiguities of, creating branded entertainment. Peter discussed branded entertainment in terms of technical production levels, in his case, merging film making and writing code:

*“I liked the idea of mixing things on technique levels. You know, what happens if you know how to make films and you know how to write code and put them together. ‘What kind of experience, what kind of stuff will come out of it’?”*

The way Peter contemplated *mixing things on technique levels* further highlights the need to produce high quality branded entertainment that is elevated by technological expertise

through computer coding to create and/or influence animations, graphics, and other digital elements. This is done through computer-generated imagery (CGI), for example, which enhances visual effects in films and television shows to augment the overall audio-visual consumption experience. Therefore, the integration of technology and the incorporation of algorithms into conventional film production necessitates a substantial financial investment to produce branded entertainment content at a premium and cinematographic level.

On the other hand, as a Creative Director, James feels that he is increasingly reliant on data and algorithms to steer the creative process:

*“You obviously have a lot more data and a lot more algorithms driving the creative process rather than like instinct (...) You come into this point where it's like, it's so easy to fall into the trap where...where you essentially care too much about creative control and becomes an arthouse film. Or when you care too much about the brand and it's not entertainment. Right? So, I think it's a, it's a balancing, it's really hard, really difficult. And I think very, very few brands do it well”.*

James's statement is interesting as it reflects the dichotomy between algorithms and instinct concerning artistic endeavours of branded entertainment. His quote gives the impression that data and algorithms are prioritised and therefore superior to instinct. The quote draws attention to the commodification of culture, specifically films, which highlights the need to delicately incorporate marketing elements into the artistic expression of film productions. But this seems to limit or prevent branded entertainment creators using their own initiative, where impromptu and unconstrained decisions in terms of initiating ideas or directing artistic choices in their creative work are constrained. James further provides a noteworthy insight where he draws attention to a potential pitfall relating to creative endeavours where one is overly concerned with creative control, which can unintentionally lead to the production of arthouse films. Moreover, this insinuates a risk of giving precedence to artistic expression over

mainstream appeal, which Kevin (Senior Director – Client Development & Brand Partnerships) indirectly refers to that “*people are becoming more homogenised, maybe in terms of what we view*”. However, at the same time, James cautions against concentrating too much on the brand, as this may also compromise the entertainment value. It seems that, for James, branded entertainment endeavours are a fine balancing act, which has the potential to stifle innovation and creativity and can result in a more homogenised film and television landscape. This is due to the increasing pressure to adhere to data-driven outcomes stemming from audience research and algorithms.

Moreover, Peter’s remark about “*managing your own audience and rewarding the time that people are putting into it [consuming branded entertainment]*” resonated with other practitioners, such as Jim (CEO), who said:

“*So let's make things that they [audiences] actually want to engage with. And if those things happen to come from Coca Cola, or Levi's, or Nike or Budweiser, that consumers would reward brands for time well spent*”.

Also, Robert stated, “*I'm saying that branded content, you know, you're rewarded. Yeah. They're gonna have to give more back [to audiences]*”. The excerpts emphasise the relevance and importance of rewarding consumption experiences, particularly because branded entertainment competes with various other activities and obligations in people’s lives. Therefore, in the realm advertising developments, practitioners strive to overcome challenges to capture the attention of consumers. Unlike in the past, where advertising was primarily limited to other brands in the advertising space, their current battle is against everyday sources of regular entertainment. This implies that practitioners are competing against entities from which they used to purchase advertising time. As a result, brands are now facing more intense and direct competition within the entertainment landscape: “*Now we have to fight for every*

*second of attention against Game of Thrones, not inside of Game of Thrones*” (Peter, Creative Director). This further indicates that product placement activities alone are no longer sufficient to draw consumers to brands.

Concerning audience engagement, the notion of time seemed to be an important concept in numerous practitioner discourses. As individuals have limited time available, there is a trade-off between how that time is allocated to various forms of media consumption and other daily obligations and happenings. Hence, the concept of time is relevant in the discussion about capturing and retaining the attention of audiences, particularly concerning branded entertainment content. Albert (Director of Brand Content, Strategy and Partnerships) described how branded entertainment deliberately needs to circumvent persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1995; Um and Kim, 2014). In doing so, he pointed out that branded entertainment consumption should serve as a form of relaxation and, thus, escape, facilitating increased emotional responses and continuous engagement:

*“When you’re looking at branded entertainment, you’re trying to find if you’re part of the brain, you’re playing from slightly different needs. Talking to you know, you’re talking to a consumer, you’re not selling to them directly, you know, you know, you’re not messaging them, you’re going to be part of your relaxation time. And I think you can call deeper and longer lasting engagement by doing that”.*

Interestingly, Albert claims that “*you’re not messaging them*” through branded entertainment. However, when branded entertainment is employed in film and television, the brand or product as well as a message or moral are integrated in such formats, as they are a part of plot elements, as discussed earlier, Albert’s quote pertains to concealed promotional messages, where dialogues, storylines, characters and audio-visual elements, such as composition, framing, costumes or props, are used to convey branded messages. Therefore, the intention is to appeal to audiences, encouraging them to connect with the plot or sympathise

with specific narratives embedded within the story. Albert further stated that, to enhance consumer engagement, branded entertainment should smoothly integrate into viewers' '*relaxation time*'. It involves the tailoring of branding activities to align with individuals' mental states to ensure that brand messages are more appealing and effective in capturing attention during moments of relaxation. Albert's quote reminds me of Debord's (1967) notion of the spectacle, which the author describes as social phenomenon where everyday life is increasingly influenced by images, representations and mediated experiences. In doing so, human experiences, predominantly within modern capitalist societies, are substituted by a relentless proliferation of images and commodities. This is particularly impacted by mass media, advertising and the commodification of culture within contemporary society, which thus offers an ideal foundation for branded entertainment endeavours. Therefore, in order to refrain from intruding in the viewer's moments of relaxation, "*the two elements of brand and entertainment [need to be] so deeply interwoven that they're inseparable*" (Susie, Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment).

To address this inseparability requirement, practitioners highlighted specific genres that are very suitable for branded entertainment endeavours within film and television. Lucas (Creative Director) expressed a preference for comedy to showcase extreme, thought-provoking, funny or emotionally engaging content, as he believes that "*comedy is the least threatening of all of those [genres]*". Similarly, Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) notes that branded entertainment formats typically avoid horror, R-rated content or storylines that are unsuitable for a broad audience. For Chloe, branded entertainment content is "*all the things that are kind of, you would say, family*", thus referring to the notion of four-quadrant films as outlined earlier. She also perceives comedy to be the most effective genre, followed by heart-warming or dramatic stories that resonate well with viewers. Additionally, practitioner

discourses and my observation at the practitioner event indicated preferences for scripted drama and comedy as the branded entertainment sector matures. However, it is important to acknowledge that, through my multimodal analysis, I have also identified factual entertainment, such as documentaries and factual features, as prominent genres.

An example of a documentary as factual entertainment was the collaboration between Timberland, the American outerwear brand, and British music artist Loyle Carner. Together, they created a 2 x 30-minute documentary in 2020 for MTV UK titled “*Nature Needs Heroes*”. In the documentary, Carner, who is known for his social activism, explored the concept of urban greening in his hometown Croydon, in England. During his visit, he went to various locations and sought advice from experts whilst advocating for the creation of green projects to benefit both the local community and the environment in Croydon. As a brand that is deeply connected to nature, Timberland’s aim was to portray the positive impact natural environments can have on personal health and the unity of communities (Televisual, 2019). A prominent example of a factual feature is “*House of Gucci*” (2021), directed by Ridley Scott, which is a biographical crime drama film that follows the true story of the murder of Maurizio Gucci, the former head of the Gucci fashion house brand. These examples demonstrate that branded entertainment lends itself to various genres, provided that brand and entertainment aspects are intricately woven together and well balanced.

Overall, the prevailing discourses among practitioners highlighted the importance of experiential consumption aspects (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992). Specifically, my informants drew extensively from Holbrook’s (2000) comprehensive perspective on experiences to deliver branded entertainment consumption experiences that are characterised by escapism, emotional engagement, and enjoyment. Therefore, it draws

attention to the idea of consumers pursuing ordinary avenues for escapism, incorporating film and television shows, and thereby embracing branded entertainment as part of mass media for everyday forms of escape (Cova, Car, and Cayla, 2018). This further corresponds with Kerrigan et al.'s (2014) conceptualisation of escaping into as opposed to escaping from, which indicates that people seek to explore branded entertainment experiences to escape into relaxation. This is underpinned by Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services), who insinuated that "*branded entertainment is something that people will seek out to watch, and tune into and not actually, not go 'I'm watching an ad'*". As a result, the next section delves into how branded entertainment practitioners attempt to craft compelling, engaging, and successful branded entertainment projects.

#### 4.8 The Soulful Brand – Crafting Engaging and Authentic Stories

This section unravels how branded entertainment endeavours are created to showcase the brand's personality and to strengthen the bond with an audience. In doing so, the role of the brand itself is considered by drawing on practitioner discourses relating to brand personality, identity, and purpose. Moreover, the role of storytelling and its connection to empathy is explored, while also considering the different approaches employed in the genesis of branded entertainment projects for the creation of stories. In doing so, I introduce the different ways in which branded entertainment projects can be initiated using examples from film and television. My informants generally agreed that the nucleus of branded entertainment lies in the merging between brands, advertisers, entertainment, and media to create content that "*allows a brand to share their personality and create a much deeper connection with an audience*" (Lucas, Creative Director).

In this quote, Lucas stated that, in the beginning of a project, he has a set of questions that he asks his clients in order to understand the brand more broadly, but also to determine specifically the brand's personality. By asking questions concerning brand personality, he experienced that brands tend to focus on functional benefits of a particular product instead of discerning and appreciating the importance of having a distinct brand personality. However, to create branded entertainment content, practitioners pointed out that content should express and/or align with the brand's personality and identity, thus going beyond rational and functional appeals:

*"We ask the brand what they want to be famous for, we ask a lot of personality questions because brands get very caught up in their product but they're not about the personality. You cannot engage with your consumers by simply highlighting the product's benefits."* (Lucas, Creative Director)

Similarly, Steven expressed that the kernel of branded entertainment:

*“...Is about bringing to life, a brand ethos or values, and making, you know, making a brand stand for something. When I was working in advertising, I always said, you know, a product or a brand has to have a personality. When somebody says to you that brand name you have to go ‘I know what it is’. If it doesn’t, if that people don’t know, then it has no personality, it has no ethos, it has no value”.*

Both quotes illuminate the importance of having a brand identity, which is rooted in a strong brand personality for consumers to have an affinity towards the brand. Steven’s remark about brand value and ethos in addition to having a distinct brand personality are vital considerations as they influence the brand’s identity and should thus guide the content creation of branded entertainment in a way that it is meaningful and relevant to the brand. In doing so, Steven outlined that a brand needs to possess fundamental values, beliefs and guiding principles that ascertain the underlying identity of a brand to denote the inherent character and essence that conveys what the brand stands for and how it carries itself. Therefore, Steven’s quote draws attention to the idea of traditionally associating certain outward-facing marketing endeavours, especially related to marketing communications as a means of expressing the brand ethos and values (Maclaran, 2009). Consequently, branded entertainment undertakings are underpinned by intangible qualities that are shaped by the distinct personality of a brand which, thus, informs how a brand acts, communicates, and engages with its audience (Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Aaker, 1997; Davies et al., 2018).

Furthermore, I would like to expand on the Steven’s notion of “*making a brand stand for something*”, which was elucidated in multiple practitioner discourses and was also discussed during the practitioner event I observed. This is rooted in Holt and Cameron’s (2010) notion of the ideological zeitgeist of the time, which indicates that a brand should reflect fundamental ideas, values and the cultural environment that shape people’s cognition and experiences throughout a specific time period. Practitioners foregrounded that, in order to

underpin the brand's personality, “*it's for your brand, to make a big statement about what you stand for using the platform of entertainment*” (James, Creative Director). Both Steven's and James's statements point towards the underlying reason for a brand's existence, which refers to brand purpose (Van Loggerenberg, Enslin, and Terblanche-Smit, 2021; Williams, Escalas and Morningstar, 2022), purpose-driven branding (Hajdas, and Kłeczek, 2021; Aaker, 2022) or purpose branding (Narayanan, and Das, 2022). Brand purpose can thus be regarded as a lasting primary objective, intrinsic to its identity, semantic framework, and strategy, which is intended to foster meaningful interactions related to different aspects of the world that extend beyond the brand's financial gains (Williams, Escalas and Morningstar, 2022). As such, brand purpose is often underpinned by the mission, meaning, and core values of a brand, predominantly pertaining to aspects of identity, communication attempts, along with their resulting consequences (Hajdas and Kłeczek, 2021).

Moreover, brand purpose has the potential to be established or communicated in societal and cultural contexts influencing the practices of consumers through various social influences, arrangements, and institutions that are present in the broader societal and cultural landscape (Swaminathan et al. 2020). As film and television formats can be regarded as integral components of the broader societal and cultural landscape, they represent ideal springboards for branded entertainment efforts. Thus, branded entertainment in films and television plays a significant role in shaping and reflecting socio-cultural norms, values, and discourses (Kerrigan, 2017). Moreover, it can actively contribute to exerting influence on, and reciprocally being influenced by, the prevailing societal trends, beliefs, and practices of a particular time period. Consequently, the concept of purpose has garnered substantial attention among professionals in the advertising and entertainment sector (Kelley, 2023), as revealed in earlier discourses. Practitioners in branded entertainment recognised the importance of aligning

brands with meaningful values and a broader sense of purpose to resonate effectively with audiences. This alignment was also observed in the branded entertainment content I analysed, as detailed further in this section.

The connection between having a brand personality and taking a stance is reflected in Mary's excerpt. Mary discussed the importance of brands as well as the connecting ethos. For her, a brand needs to possess various intricate behaviours, characteristics and qualities which reflect those inherent in human beings and are frequently grounded in social, political and cultural orientations:

*"I have to believe in what it goes beyond the product. And so, the industry in itself began to think differently – had to change the way that they were showcasing their features or products or even themselves as a brand. They began to actually think about - and now they have to start thinking more about what their social stances, what their political stances are, if they say something that sends a message. And so now there's, you know, this humanisation of brand is no longer 'let's talk like humans'; this humanisation of brand means the brand is a human, the brand has an entity, the brand feels, the brand talks back, the brand is witty on social media. The brand says, 'I'm sorry', the brand goes through problems, the brand has friends and foes and so it's now a true entity of a human". (Mary, Storyteller)*

Mary's quote reinforces earlier practitioner discourses in that a brand needs to go beyond communicating functional benefits. Therefore, when a brand is portrayed as having a personality, researchers suggest that a brand conveys a specific set of characteristics, which enables consumers to perceive brands as more than just the products or services they offer (Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Aaker, 1997; Radler, 2018). In the context of branded entertainment, it is crucial for the brand's personality to align with the content, ensuring consistent messaging across its marketing communications efforts underpinned by the overarching brand image and its intended personality traits. Moreover, Mary's extract reveals

the importance of brand anthropomorphism, which is a psychological concept that involves attributing human characteristics to entities that are not human (Brown, 2010b). As such, it imbues brands with human-like appearance or mentality, which allows the potential for greater impact (Waytz, Cacioppo and Epley, 2010), such as creating a connection between the audience and the product or brand, thus fostering consumer-brand relationships. An evident example of brand anthropomorphism in a film can be seen in the animated movie *Cars*, produced by Pixar, in which various car characters are brought to life with distinct personalities, voices, and behaviours. An illustrative case within the realm of branded entertainment involves the German toy company Playmobil. They seamlessly incorporated their toys, which lend themselves to being anthropomorphic, into a cohesive brand narrative in the film *Playmobil: The Movie*.

Furthermore, by perceiving a brand as “*a true entity of a human*” that “*has friends and foes*”, Mary attributes cognitive abilities to a brand as a nonhuman entity. It implies that the brand is a moral actor deserving of care and consideration, accountable for its actions, and recognised as a potential force of nominal social influence in public spheres (Gray, Gray and Wegner, 2007). Accordingly, the brand must have human-like qualities such as emotions and beliefs in order to establish a legitimate relationship with consumers (Fournier, 1998). Such a perspective conveys significant consequences concerning a brand’s personality and identity as well as the relationship between consumers and brands. In doing so, a brand needs to contain emotional and experiential aspects that it intends to convey, hence creating a relatable and personified image that permits the brand to transcend beyond functional attributes.

To reinforce a brand’s identity, the narrative power of storytelling is harnessed (Simmons, 2006), and to understand how storytelling is used and applied within branded

entertainment projects, practitioners' discourses revolved around the nuances of what constitutes a good story. Overall, practitioners established that the historical and cultural context within which a brand operates are integral elements of effective brand storytelling. In doing so, it is crucial to *help brands navigate and create opportunities for them in the world of entertainment and culture* (Anthony, Co-Head of Marketing) to further build relationships with consumers by fostering a sense resonance as outlined in the following quote:

*"That's the beauty of stories, they always give societies and groups and tribes a glue, which keeps them together. This is, by the way, how the words started to be used in the tribal days, in the Neanderthals. So basically, they had the function to provide a glue to abide to these values, because societies and groups which are based on the same value system are the strongest there are. And obviously, I mean, apart from that everybody loves stories, right? It's very democratic tool. I mean, literally, everybody loves a good story. And this is the other reason why brands more and more use it".* (Tom, Storyteller)

Tom's reflection not only foregrounds the importance of resonance but also of values, which serve as fundamental principles and beliefs that connect and sustain groups and societies. As such, Tom's excerpt demonstrates the significance of societal orientations in storytelling. However, "*value systems*" are part of broader ideological positions that can go beyond social underpinnings and can also encompass political and cultural spheres. Therefore, when a brand employs storytelling within branded entertainment formats, it becomes a means for a brand to convey its values whereby messages can encompass various ideological stances. Both Tom (Storyteller) and Mary (Storyteller) refer to storytelling as a "*democratic tool*" in which brands convey "*their message, their values and what they stand for*" (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019).

Indeed, storytelling can be seen as a democratic tool that aligns with the desired humanisation of a brand in the brand's attempt to build and foster relationships with consumers

through branded entertainment endeavours. Brands that utilise storytelling as a democratic tool are focused on “*trying to own and retain that audience*” (Chloe, Head of Brand Partnerships). Accordingly, the following practitioner discourses disclosed that storytelling serves as a medium to foster lasting connections, relationships and engagement with diverse audiences through the cultivation of empathy and emotions. This is in line with previous research that investigated notions of empathy (Russell, 1998; Durgee, 2004) and emotions (e.g. Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010; Dessart, 2018; Kang, Hong, and Hubbard, 2020) in relation to storytelling. I specifically want to highlight a more extended excerpt from Mary (Storyteller), as she succinctly recapitulated foundational aspects pertaining to storytelling considerations in branded entertainment. These elements were depicted in varying degrees across many of the practitioner discourses:

*“I love brand storytelling; I have a respect for brand storytelling. I feel that people [companies] don’t get it. And I feel that it’s this formula that they need to understand and they just, they don’t. And so, I’m frustrated at times with it. Because I think it’s like people talk about it, and they don’t truly know what it is. Because if they did, they would approach it differently. They would talk about it differently. So, it’s frustrating for me, looking at it from this side and go: ‘Ah, they don’t get it. No, that’s not it!’ You know? So, it frustrates me because I’m really passionate about it. I’m passionate about democratising it, because of it, like I want to teach people, and this is what I do. I take my time and I really want to get them to understand the elements of storytelling, which it starts with empathy. And most people don’t understand that. [...] My motivation was everybody can design a story - don’t just get stuck by somebody’s idea of a Hero’s Journey. ‘Yeah, that works’. But it may not work for your audience. So, you know, that’s why people don’t know like, they’re like; ‘Oh, I did exactly the same thing. It didn’t work.’ ‘Of course, it didn’t work. You haven’t empathised with your audience.’ So really twofold - to democratise stories, and to keep us human in the process. Because if you stay empathetic, even through digital, even through science and new technologies, we will be able to still keep that humanity afloat. [...] To me brand storytelling is the emotional transfer of information, of data, of assertion, of numbers, of ideas, of facts. And it’s done through the basic elements of a story, which are a character, a plot and a conclusion.*

*So, the emotional transfer of information: the character, plot and conclusion. If it doesn't have those three elements, it's not a story. But to me, if it's not emotional at the centre of it, it probably won't land with your audiences."*

Mary's quote echoes the notion that storytelling is a powerful tool for brands to connect with their audiences while ascertaining character, plot and conclusion as the three key elements of storytelling in branded entertainment. However, she particularly emphasised the importance of empathy as a starting point for storytelling in branded entertainment, which is still overlooked or not understood by brands. She emphasises the relevance of empathy particularly because empathy is what keeps "*humanity afloat*", even in the digital age and with the use of advanced technologies. As such, empathy is perceived as an immutable human trait that remains pertinent and valuable. However, as empathy is shaped by the conditions of capitalism (Adams, 2016) in market-driven economies, companies exploit empathy and thus the use of emotions to meet consumer needs and desires attempting to understand and respond to consumer preferences by creating branded entertainment that resonates with their target audience whilst simultaneously pursuing profit-driven objectives. Therefore, branded entertainment has "*to be part of the emotional journey, and those moments of high emotions when you're interacting with a brand will be much more impactful than an ad will ever be*" (Susie, Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment). This once more emphasises the significance of conducting audience research when creating branded entertainment, as discussed in the preceding section, in which "*you're going to go test [stories] in your market, and your audience will guide you to what you're doing right or what you're doing wrong; they will basically respond or not to the story*" (Mary, Storyteller). In doing so, [branded entertainment practitioners] "*need to create things where they can ideally guarantee that the targeting your audience where they might get quicker returns*" (Mike, Producer).

In addition, Mary evidently expressed her frustrations in that storytelling is often grounded in the Hero's Journey and treated like a formulaic or superficial exercise, which is further highlighted in James's extract:

*"It feels like you're following a formula, which is, I guess, the place where branded entertainment and branded content is really hard, because the formulas don't really exist. It's like you can't just do like, always do content, doing some branded entertainment with it, and then focusing on it and changing it. You really need to like build something and give it meaning. [...] You got people excited about it [a branded entertainment piece], and it got them close to the brand. And I guess that's kind of the thing, like, in the same way as every campaign, I guess, it needs to link to culture and it needs to be relevant, and it needs to link to the brand. I think when you look at branded entertainment, you need to do the same thing. You need to ask yourself really, really hard like: 'Why am I making this?'"*

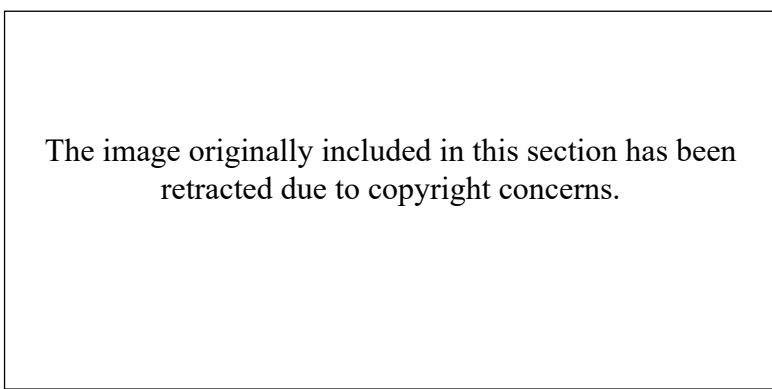
It thus becomes evident that branded entertainment practitioners face the challenge of creating content that ensures quick returns while simultaneously satisfying their target audience. The mention of frustration by Mary highlighted a common sentiment among my informants regarding the use of formulaic approaches, specifically citing the Hero's Journey. James expands on this frustration, stating that traditional advertising formulas for branded entertainment do not work. It highlights that practitioners within the field of branded entertainment must be able to build something meaningful, something that connects to culture as well as the brand's identity, thus going beyond mere content creation. It demonstrates the complexity and requirement to adopt a thoughtful and purpose-driven approach in the realm of branded entertainment.

Here, it is helpful to further illuminate the genesis of branded entertainment projects. As discussed earlier, the conceptual dimensions of branded entertainment remain blurry, primarily due to the complex nature of producing branded entertainment for film and television.

Nevertheless, to shed light on these complexities, it is important to highlight the different methods of initiating branded entertainment projects and delve into the nuances how branded entertainment transcends beyond traditional product placement.

As outlined in the literature review, branded entertainment starts with the creation of the storyline around a particular brand. The creation of storylines can take various forms yet often follow general storytelling principles. However, there are different approaches to how a brand can be integrated into the storyline. A prominent and common example of creating branded entertainment content is when the brand's product is turned into a film. Based on my multimodal analysis, Lego is a brand that has created numerous examples of branded entertainment, such as *The Lego Movie* among other Lego films and television shows like *The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part* or *Lego Ninjago*. In the case of Lego, the storyline is created around the brand, particularly around Lego's toy figures and bricks (see *Figure 8*), which are the products that existed before the audio-visual content.

Figure 8: A scene from the film *The Lego Movie*



The LEGO Movie (2014) Directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Warner Bros. Pictures.  
(Source: New York Times, 2014)

Indeed, Lego is a historical product, which was founded more than 90 years ago, and based on its historical trajectories it unveils the shift from being solely a children's toy to

becoming a transmedia artefact that employs diverse stories to reach various audiences. Consequently, this shift presents a form of contemporary converge culture (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008), as content is distributed across different media and audiences. Lego creates branded entertainment content that appeals to the four-quadrant audience, meaning it appeals to audiences of all ages and genders and can be consumed in theatres, on television as well as on online platforms. Lego's branded entertainment content "*was designed deliberately to appeal to nostalgia to sell toys*" (Mike, Producer). This is because different generations, predominantly in Europe and North America, have bought, played with, and grown up with Lego. The significance of nostalgia within Lego is not only highlighted and shaped through the recollection of their products, but also through their media outlets, whereby nostalgia functions to elevate the inherent capabilities of those remediated texts and commodities (Geraghty, 2018). Therefore, nostalgia can be leveraged within the context of branded entertainment to create poignant and emotional connections with the audience. By incorporating the toy figures and bricks as elements in the films and television shows, Lego evokes nostalgic memories, especially for teenagers and adults.

In addition to selling toys and creating branded entertainment content, Lego engages in various collaborations, such as with Adidas, IKEA or Levi's (Lego, 2023). The brand has different products themes like Architecture, City, Classic and Friends, but also has branded partnership themes that are inherent products, like LEGO Disney, LEGO Indiana Jones or LEGO Super Mario. Partnerships can also be seen in some of the branded entertainment content, such as LEGO Batman, LEGO Jurassic World and LEGO Star Wars. To further connect with consumers of various age groups, LEGO publishes magazines, creates apps, and has attractions such as the LEGO House and LEGOLAND. Overall, LEGO demonstrates that,

through the creation of numerous films and television shows, the brand has evolved into a cultural icon.

Moreover, these LEGO examples show that the brand has managed to create an ecosystem that continuously engages various audiences through the incessant consumption of products as well as branded entertainment formats. In terms of LEGO's branded entertainment formats, they connect with the notion of brand longevity (Preece et al., 2019), as LEGO has accomplished social salience and continuous consumer engagement over a prolonged period of time. It signifies LEGO's ability to remain relevant and adaptable to changing market conditions while maintaining customer loyalty over the years of continued brand success. In a similar vein, Christian (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) talks about The Walt Disney Company and Universal and how both have built strong and long-lasting connections with audiences through various touchpoints:

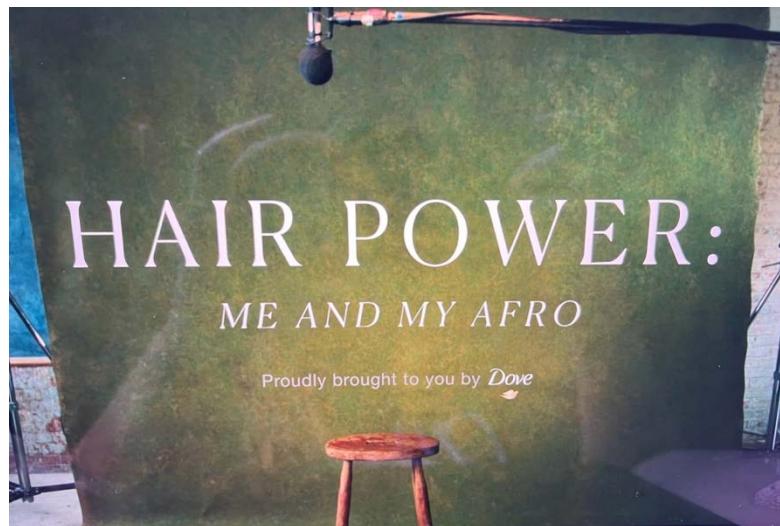
*"If somebody's super into Disney Princess, I can go to Disney on Ice and I can go to, you know, Disney+ and get a lot of content there. I can go to the theatre and see a show. I can go to an amusement park and have an experience there. So branded entertainment really is this all, you know, encompassing growing kind of ecosystem that surrounds anything that a brand is trying to put into the consumer space and so it's a lot of things and the people who do it really well are Disney and Universal in terms of trading these experiences and this content around their brands. That's what holds the consumer into, you know their ecosystem for longer and it also creates adult fans and brings little kids in who, you know, are just experiencing it for the first time and so that that idea is definitely something that's embraced by the folks that Universal call symphony. And what their idea of symphony means is all of those things I've mentioned and more, but an entire ecosystem built around people's experiences with a brand, and they do it very well for things like Jurassic World in creating those pieces of content and engagement".*

I would like to expand on Christian's discussion of The Walt Disney Company and Universal. Both brands have been successful in turning cultural products such as novels or video games into films. For example, The Walt Disney Company owns Marvel Studios who have produced and distributed the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, which encompass, for example, *Iron Man*, *Avengers*, *Guardian of the Galaxy*, and *Black Panther*. These films are all based on the characters that occur in the Marvel Comics. Similarly, Universal has produced and distributed the *Jurassic Park* films, which are based on the eponymous novel written by Michael Crichton. Another popular example is Warner Bros. Entertainment who created and distributed the *Harry Potter* film franchise, which was adapted from the books with the same title, written by J.K. Rowling. Turning these conventional stories into films has led to the creation of various products, as can be seen with *James Bond*, where a wide range of accessories, apparel, and collectibles is available. Other examples, which have lent themselves to longform entertainment formats include the film series *Pirates of the Caribbean*, derived from Walt Disney's theme park ride of identical name, or *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, which is based on Nintendo's *Super Mario* video game franchise. These examples show that cultural products are transformed into films either by drawing on conventional stories to drive the film development or by drawing on the cultural product to create or expand a story. In this way, stories can serve to turn cultural products into brands and, thus, act as vehicles for branded entertainment.

Another example of branded entertainment is when the brand uses and reinforces its purpose or vision to create a branded entertainment artefact. In doing so, the brand and/or its product is generally not obviously integrated into the film or television show, and only appears in opening or closing credits. An example is the documentary *Hair Power: Me and My Afro* by Unilever's brand Dove, as seen in *Figure 9 and 10*. In both images the Dove brand logo is only

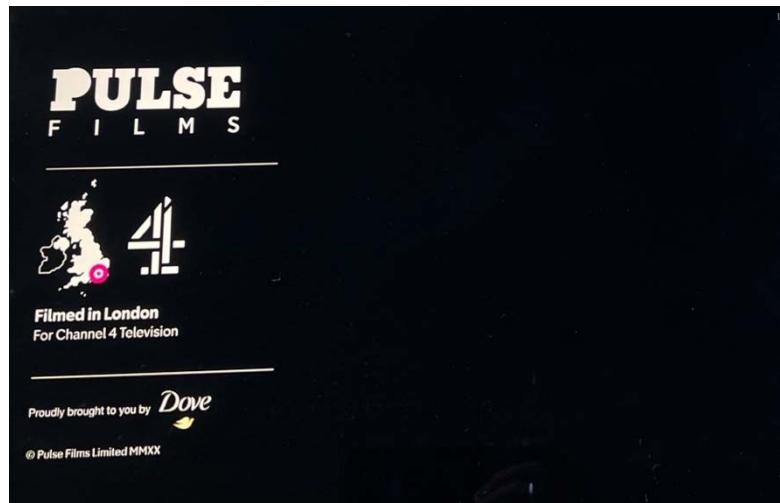
seen for a short amount of time. The documentary is about hair discrimination, which is a common experience for many Black people yet does not feature in any of Dove's products. The documentary aims to raise awareness of this topic by engaging in conversations relating to black hair and its connection to cultural identity and empowerment, but also by addressing sensitive subjects such as fetishization and prejudice in relation to Black hair. The documentary, thus, aligns with Dove's purpose of redefining beauty standards and helping individuals encounter beauty and body image positively (Dove, 2023).

Figure 9: Picture taken of Opening Credits *Hair Power: Me and my Afro*



Directed by Nicole Charles. Pulse Films. (Source: Channel 4, 2023)

Figure 10: Picture taken of Closing Credits *Hair Power: Me and my Afro*



Directed by Nicole Charles. Pulse Films. (Source: Channel 4, 2023)

*Hair Power: Me and my Afro* demonstrates that Dove created a piece that challenged cultural norms by expressing the brand's purpose. The documentary was designed to “*drive awareness and understanding far beyond the media by virtue of taking on an important cultural issue*” (Jim, CEO). This resonates with the film *5B* by Johnson & Johnson presented in the literature review. The notion of purpose is reiterated by James (Creative Director), who advocates that the production of branded entertainment content is most effective for brands that already align with the themes or topics covered by that branded entertainment:

*I think branded entertainment is something that works really well for brands that already have a purpose inside the space that that entertainment fills. So, for Nike it makes sense to talk about sport. For maybe, Volvo, it makes sense to talk about Sweden, right? But when you go into branded entertainment, I find a lot of people splash a lot of money into content without having a purpose.*

These examples highlight that branded entertainment is most effective for brands that already have clear and relevant purposes within the domain that the entertainment content occupies. Therefore, the success of branded entertainment can be closely tied to the congruence between the brand's existing personality, identity or purpose and the themes explored in the entertainment content. This can lead to a more authentic and resonant integration, which can enhance the overall effectiveness of the branded entertainment strategy. Without a clear purpose, brands might run the risk of losing their investments in branded entertainment when there is no meaningful connection between the brand and the content.

#### **4.9 Chapter summary**

Chapter 4 delved into the complex world of branded entertainment, shedding light on the dynamic discourses that shape branded entertainment. It highlighted the challenges practitioners encounter in creating, producing, and disseminating branded entertainment

content. Additionally, the chapter underscored the importance for brands to establish a presence in the entertainment sphere in order to effectively connect with audiences. This necessitates practitioners to adopt innovative business models that can adapt to the continuously changing media and advertising environment. Furthermore, the chapter delved into the evolving dynamics of commissioning and distribution models, which are increasingly crucial for films and television shows incorporating branded entertainment. It examined how traditional models are being redefined to accommodate the integration of brands into entertainment content and discussed the implications of these changes for various stakeholders involved in the production and distribution processes. Moreover, it analysed the emergence of new platforms and strategies for delivering branded entertainment content to audiences, reflecting the shifting dynamics of consumer behaviour and media consumption patterns.

Furthermore, this chapter showcased the perpetual evolution of terminology and practices, alongside the diverse array of practitioners involved. It delved into the underlying motivations driving the development of branded entertainment projects, examining perspectives from brands, film and television producers, and advertising agencies, while contextualising these within the historical trajectories that have shaped the emergence of branded entertainment. While the discourses revealed a lack of definitive boundaries for branded entertainment, it acknowledges the sector's conceptual fluidity, allowing for adaptability in response to evolving marketing and entertainment landscapes. Although the evolution of practices within branded entertainment presents opportunities, the chapter highlights the need for clear responsibility regarding consumer impact and artistic integrity. Additionally, there is a call within Chapter 4 for establishing working definitions to guide academic inquiry, aiming to comprehend the broader implications of branded entertainment's evolution on content creators, consumers, and the branding landscape.

Finally, the chapter explored the multifaceted initiation processes of branded entertainment projects, shedding light on various pathways through which these endeavours can originate. It explored how brands strategically embed themselves within entertainment content, utilising storytelling as a pivotal component to captivate and engage audiences. Through an in-depth analysis, the chapter elucidated how brands are seamlessly integrated into narratives by highlighting methods where brands leverage on their personality, identity, or values to create engaging content. By exploring the intricate interplay between storytelling and brand integration, the chapter provided valuable insights into the dynamic landscape of branded entertainment initiation and execution.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE MECHANISMS UNDERPINNING BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT PROJECTS**

This second findings chapter explores the role of collaborative efforts in relation to branded entertainment projects. As outlined in Chapter 4, the advertising and entertainment industries have undergone rapid developments in recent years, which has prompted my informants to understand the profound shift in collaboration dynamics when working on branded entertainment projects. These changes have further sparked a growing trend of cross-industry collaborations where brands along with advertisers and entertainment creators join forces, thus increasingly blurring the traditional boundaries between advertising and entertainment. Consequently, engaging in branded entertainment requires brands and advertising practitioners to rethink traditional advertising methods by increasingly embracing entertainment-centric approaches to create content that attracts, engages, and resonates with audiences. By employing MDA, it allowed me to explore the historical body illuminating how my informants memorised and experienced changes in collaboration dynamics. As the creation of branded entertainment requires a diverse team of individuals and collaborators, I was particularly interested in examining the interaction order pertaining to collaboration efforts. In doing so, I investigated the role of potential power dynamics and control in the development and creation of branded entertainment projects. This chapter will discuss these collaborative shifts, further highlighting a move towards more dynamic, interactive and mutually beneficial relationships between brands, advertisers and the entertainment industry. The chapter will explore the evolving nature of intellectual property (IP) and its impact on new methods of working, co-creating and collaborating within the advertising and entertainment industry.

## 5.1 Everyone wants their piece of content and to exploit it: From Sponsorship to IP Ownership

IP is a fundamental component in both the advertising and entertainment industries, encompassing various forms such as copyright, patents and trademarks. With advancements in technology as well as the changing advertising and entertainment landscape, collaborative ventures often involve complex negotiations over IP ownership, which emphasise the need for more comprehensive contractual agreements to navigate the intricacies of creative collaborations that are inherent in branded entertainment. However, much of the practitioner discourse stated that IP negotiations have become increasingly complicated as “*you don't just have one funder, you have multiple funders and everybody has a stake and everybody recoups at different points*” (Susie, Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment). Susie's statement suggests that branded entertainment projects have led to a more decentralised and diversified funding structure rather than relying on a single source, which has altered how involved parties think about IP. Kevin (Senior Director – Client Development & Brand Partnerships) emphasised that “*it's not sponsorship, it's ownership*”. His quote signifies a transition towards a more involved role in the shaping and development of IP in the realm of branded entertainment. Investing in such projects is thus not only about providing financial support through sponsorships, but also entails a desire to claim ownership of the IP. This leads contributors, especially brands, to anticipate increased involvement, control, or stake in the outcomes of IP. For instance, American toy and game company Hasbro acquired the production company Entertainment One in 2019 to increasingly transform into a media competitor with the aim of developing entire series and films based on their in-house IP, rather than relying predominantly on external partners (Whitten, 2021).

While the primary motivation in practitioner discourses was related to the pursuit of financial gain from IP, informants pointed out various inherent complexities and intricacies

among the negotiating partners as outlined in the excerpts below. The ability to make money from IP is a valuable asset for all involved partners, including, for example, brands, advertisers, broadcasters, creative producers and talent. If brands hold IP rights, they can monetise the IP by licensing it to other organisations. They may also sell rights to use or replicate their IP, enter partnerships or collaborations, and incorporate it into other products, services, or promotional tools for commercialisation. John (Director of Marketing and Business Development) specifically highlighted the quest for money made from IP among the involved negotiating parties as well as the associated challenges of negotiating splits and percentages:

*They're all in it to make money. They're all in it to leverage their IP and their assets. You know, writers and publishers, publishers, that's their job to exploit IP, make money. Writers write music to make money. So, everyone's in there to make money. You're negotiating splits and percentages. It's really tricky. And that's something I'm learning more and more here. It's not so dissimilar in all the other parts of the entertainment industry where it involves talent. You've got so many stakeholders to deal with, writers and managers and partners. So, it is it's quite a daunting industry. So, you come into it, just seeing kind of the real exciting kind of shiny output. Behind the scenes deals take, you know, months and years to get off the ground.*

John's statement underpins the intricate and time-consuming negotiation environment in which respective collaborators vie to possess and exploit the IP with the aim of achieving financial success. Thus, owning or partially owning creative assets and ideas in the form of IP are crucial for long-term profitability. Moreover, John described these negotiations as common practice in the entertainment industry, given its multifaceted nature. The complex negotiation procedures arise from engaging with various collaboration partners and become especially challenging when dealing with talent. Therefore, dealing with various stakeholders in IP discussions can become overwhelming for John due to the various inherent intricacies and associated concerns.

Cooper (Executive Producer) provided critical insights into more general challenges and pressures associated with managing complex branded entertainment projects, revealing potential communication issues between different stakeholders, such as brands, channels and talent:

*You have to be very patient; you have to be very good with people and read what people want. There's just a huge amount of responsibility that is on your shoulders. You know, dealing with that, it [a branded entertainment project] was the hardest thing I've ever done, because I was dealing with a lack of communication. Issues between what the brand wanted, and then what the channel wanted, and then there was a big international star involved. There was four different countries that we're filming in, you know. So, dealing with all of that, it's just, you just deal with one thing at a time [...], and you try and get your point across.*

Cooper's excerpt emphasises the importance of having qualities such as patience, strong interpersonal skills, and the ability to manage diverse responsibilities within branded entertainment projects. His mention of the project being '*the hardest thing I've ever done*' illustrates the demanding nature of coordinating various elements in these projects. With the '*huge amount of responsibility that is on your shoulders*', individuals may feel personally accountable for different facets of the project's success. This suggests a deeper level of engagement, as seen in Cooper's quote, where a sense of personal responsibility may overshadow collective collaboration. It thus reiterates the challenges of managing the complexities inherent in branded entertainment projects. However, in addressing these challenges, Cooper's approach aligns with Chloe's, advocating for streamlined decision-making and a methodological approach to problem-solving, with the aim of communicating

effectively when overseeing such intricate projects. Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) stated that when you have a lot of different players involved, ...

*... it slows the process down. It just becomes a very, it can become a very slow process, because there's a lot of people that need to approve stuff. There's a lot of people on when you're on these creative calls and conference calls, you know. There's just, you have the agency and the PR person and the brand person and then the, you know, the production team. There's just a lot of people that weigh in, but for the most part like there are a few people that will make the decisions and that's established upfront.*

Chloe critically reflects on the challenges associated with the decision-making process in branded entertainment collaborations. She points out a notable drawback in which processes can slow down significantly due to cumbersome and prolonged approval procedures, resulting in a diverse range of opinions and inputs when multiple stakeholders are involved. However, this can pose a disadvantage for practitioners, as “*branded entertainment is so fast*” (Anthony, Co-Head of Marketing), underlining the need for agility and close collaboration, as further highlighted by James (Creative Director) who stated that “*working quite fast and quite closely with clients*” is imperative to ensure successful execution amidst the rapid industry pace. The timely execution and delivery are essential in branded entertainment, given the highly competitive landscape it faces alongside traditional advertising and mainstream entertainment.

The following excerpt from Peter (Creative Director) details his experiences working in an advertising agency and echoes John’s perspective on the multitude of stakeholders involved in negotiation processes. Consequently, this has led to an increasingly uncertain IP landscape, resulting in more complex and unique negotiation processes:

*It's [IP] honestly, it's very unclear. There are lots of lots of possibilities. And we don't know what it is yet. [...] I think there's again, it's a negotiation, that is case by case,*

*and there's the producers or the talent, there's so many parts involved. I don't think there's any, any consensus. And maybe there will never be, maybe it's going to continue to be a case-by-case scenario, because all those three parts [agency, brand, talent], they have very different ways of evaluating the benefit for themselves. And it's always going to come down to who has more power and who has more leverage and who and how that person or that element can influence the other ones to move the negotiation towards themselves. Unfortunately, the agency tends to be one of the weakest links. But it's getting better. I think that once you do more and more, I think we'll be able to earn some, some respect back on the on the process and these conversations".*

The diverse interests of stakeholders involved in the production of branded entertainment contribute to the absence of standardised procedures for negotiating IP. Drawing from his personal experience working in a global advertising agency, Peter acknowledged that power dynamics and leverage play crucial roles in shaping the direction of negotiations. Reflecting on his personal historical trajectories, he asserted that advertising agencies are in a weaker position when it comes to negotiating IP rights. His mention of respect within the IP negotiation process is intriguing, as Peter suggests a shift in the standing of advertising agencies concerning negotiations within the branded entertainment field, where other industry players may demonstrate a lack of acknowledgement or respect towards advertising agencies.

Chloe similarly notes this shift when talking about the move away from ad supported platforms to streamers:

*"It's the fact that brands had all this power. So if you were Coca Cola, and you were spending, you know, \$25 million a year on ABC, they were going to call you first and try to plug you into their shows. And if you represented Coke, you've got to do those deals, and you cherry pick the right shows to do but so much of that was still based on an ad buy. And now with all the streaming partners, they don't care about the brands. And so brands are having to figure out other ways to do it. And I think what's interesting*

*is they've all started to create these content studios, and they want to be storytellers and create content."*

Chloe and Peter's observations align with Ghaffari, Hackley and Lee's (2019) notion of 'control power' where the relationship between the advertising agency and the client (brand) resembles a service provider-customer dynamic. In this context, the advertising agency holds a subordinate position to the client, which affects control over the creative aspects of the output. Consequently, it appears that there is a need for Peter to substantiate the value of an advertising agency's work in the realm of branded entertainment through the successful planning and execution of negotiation processes, which subsequently contribute to gaining more experience and earning increased respect over time.

Correspondingly, Anthony (Co-Head of Marketing) added that anyone who is funding branded entertainment typically desires ownership of that idea or project:

*"Whoever is paying for it wants to own the idea. So, I think that, you know, most of the times, if we're talking about brands and advertisers, yes, they want to retain their IP. You know, I think they're willing to share, let other share the success of those projects. But, you know, that's everything they have is their IP. So, no one's ever really giving that up."*

He pointed out that brands and advertisers, in his opinion, tend to remain in control over their IP, thus contradicting Peter's discourse. Anthony's statement thus suggests a potential lack of awareness regarding the challenges advertising agencies face in negotiating IP matters. For Anthony, both brands and advertising agencies have the power to accept collaborative efforts and to share the success of projects; however, the underlying notion is that they are not willing to completely relinquish their IP. His thinking stems from more traditional business practices within advertising, where the established approach includes a dyadic client-agency

partnership (Grant and McLeod, 2007). However, in such cases, the brand as a client typically holds exclusive and proprietary ownership of the IP, as opposed to the advertising agency. This strategy ensures that the value generated from the IP remains integral to the brand's overall strategy, which contributes to the brand's hesitancy to give up control over their IP.

In terms of the management and utilisation of IP, the discourses among my informants exhibited somewhat varied approaches. Many of the practitioner discourses revealed that there was a lack of understanding regarding how IP could be managed and utilised, often resulting in uncertainty and confusion about determining the appropriate course of action, as is apparent in Lucas's (Creative Director) quote:

*"We don't tend to hang on to the IP, because as I said, my approach is that if you take the brand out of it, it doesn't exist anymore. Yeah. That has to do with that brand. So, I don't know what I can do with that anymore. That's maybe a little naïve [...]."*

Lucas stated that his company generally does not retain ownership of the IP associated with a particular project. His rationale behind this decision is his belief that without the brand's association, the IP loses its essence. However, Lucas also acknowledges the potential limitations of this approach, stating it may be '*naïve*', which suggests his awareness of missed opportunities in not holding onto the IP. His choice of words thus reflects a certain level of self-awareness and recognition that, despite the perceived benefits of dissociating the IP from the brand, there may be downsides and unrealised potential in relinquishing control.

Interestingly, Susie, the Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment of a global content, production, and distribution company, noted that her company's approach to IP differs from that of small production companies, like Lucas's, which usually sells the IP after production for a one-time profit:

*“Our business is IP. So, we never make something which is not returnable and scalable. Yeah, we'll never make something just for the UK to run for one series, because we're too big for that. We only make stuff, and we have a very, we have a tight team who stress test our new ideas to see if they'll work across seasons and countries before we even make them. Yeah. So, for me, you know, that's our *raison d'être* [...]. If we were a small production company, you get your production margin, you sell it, you're done. Just fine. Yeah, but it's, it's not. It's not how we operate”.*

Susie's excerpt represents that the individual business strategies at the company she works for are shaped by a multifaceted interplay of factors that are aligned with underpinning neoliberal principles. To contribute to the company's sustained growth, Susie's emphasis on profitability and scalability reflects her aspiration to create and retain IP in branded entertainment content. Moreover, she highlighted the importance of adopting a global perspective, thus broadening the reach of the branded entertainment content to avoid it being exclusively tailored to a specific region or for short-term runs. In doing so, Susie reiterated the importance of conducting rigorous testing, as discussed earlier, to assess the potential success of new ideas across various seasons and countries before actual production. This approach reaffirms the commitment to endorsing international market opportunities and adapting to market demands, creating content that is competitive and positioned to succeed across markets.

At the practitioner event, the discussants also explored the significance of IP, particularly in the context of television formats, expressing their ambition to produce content with enduring value. Like Susie, they outlined the importance of having formats that have *“a life beyond TX, creating programmes that have IP where the brand is involved going forward”* (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019). TX is a term that is used in broadcasting and stands for transmission of a television programme to the audience. Having *“a life beyond TX”* implicates that practitioners aim to create a television programme that has ongoing value and impact beyond

its initial broadcast. This approach reflects a strategic mindset underpinned by a commitment to crafting television programmes that have a lasting resonance, fostering continued engagement and cultural impact in the long term. At the event, discussants emphasised the need to produce shows for multiple territories where “*brands have an option to fund it in those territories*” (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019), allowing their television brand to extend across various regions. This also pertains to the discussion of windowing, as outlined earlier, as this is concerned with the strategic release of content across different distribution platforms and regions to optimise its global reach and revenue potential. This approach represents a departure from more conventional distribution strategies, where channels traditionally purchase content outright, which is commonly referred to as buyout. In such cases, content producers are faced with the decision of whether to present their best ideas to a channel, aware that they might lose control over content once it is acquired. To avoid buyouts, increasingly, content producers now have the opportunity to approach brands to present their concepts and to obtain funding. This approach allows both the brand and the producer to retain ownership stakes in the IP of branded entertainment. This not only facilitates the adaptation of content for various markets but also provides funders and creators with control over the entire production and distribution process. Susie (Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment) referred to the frequently cited example that several informants mention, which is NetScout’s film *Lo and Behold* that

“[...] went to Sundance, and there it got bought by Magnolia, which is a traditional distribution. They treated it as a feature film. They released it in cinemas, and then they put it onto Netflix.”

It thus reiterates the significance of distribution models for branded entertainment projects as discussed in Chapter 4. Moreover, Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content

and Creative Services) also recognised a significant shift marked by a growing involvement of brands and producers in discussions related to IP. Steven's discourse revealed that brands actively seek ownership of the IP, reflecting their pursuit of control in the evolving dynamics inherent in branded entertainment. Simultaneously, partnering with a brand provides producers with an appealing opportunity to secure funding and potential international distribution for their projects:

*"And sometimes the brand says, 'Actually, what I want out of this is I want something that I can do again, and again and again, and I can do in 20 different countries'. So, we're talking to a big multinational, big, big group. And they're going, 'We want to try this in the UK and if it works in the UK, we want to take this format idea and run it in Australia, one in the US, Germany, and replicate the television format, but with our marketing assets. So, the producer is asked at the beginning of that meeting, 'Are you interested in entering into a [...] commercial partnership, where you create an intellectual property, TV show?' [...] And I'd say probably 90% of producers go 'brilliant, I love to', because not often you get somebody saying, 'I'll pay for it' and also 'I'll take it around the world for you'. [...] [B]rands are probably already guaranteeing you that success because they'll say, 'If we like it, we'll do it in other markets'. So that is all new territory, but territory that we're all now into, creating intellectual property that producer and brand share."*

Multiple practitioner discourses, including those of Steven, Susie, Anthony and Jim, consistently referenced prominent multinational brands involved in such negotiations. These brands possess the financial means to fund, distribute, and promote branded entertainment projects across different markets. This interplay suggests that brands with substantial financial resources exert a considerable influence within the branded entertainment landscape, thus ultimately determining which types of branded entertainment content receive attention. Consequently, influence is shaped and ascertained by both financial viability and market preferences. This, in turn, can contribute to a power imbalance within the branded entertainment field, as economic strength plays a crucial role in shaping creative endeavours.

Moreover, Steven's reference to replicating successful television formats with the integration of the brand's own marketing assets amplifies the notion of having financial resources. He suggests that successful television formats, which incorporate their own marketing assets, can be a strategic approach to taking existing formats to different countries and adapting them to the cultural and market dynamics of each country. Some of my informants specifically referred to *activations* or *360 activations*, denoting strategies to engage and connect with target audiences. The term 360 signifies a comprehensive marketing and advertising approach that comprises of various channels and platforms, both online and offline, with the aim to maximise brand visibility, engagement, and impact. Consequently, such activations complement branded entertainment formats by expanding the scope to include a broader range of marketing and advertising channels, thus requiring significant financial resources to produce branded entertainment formats and their corresponding activations.

Drawing on my multimodal analysis of television shows in relation to Steven's excerpt, examples of successful branded entertainment television formats include Uber's *Where to Britain?* (2018) and Hellmann's *Cook Clever, Waste Less* (2021). These examples can be seamlessly adapted to diverse markets given the international presence of these brands. However, certain brands are not conducive to international expansion. In the landscape of UK television, numerous native charitable and commercial organisations have consistently participated in branded entertainment television formats. Examples include the British Heart Foundation's *24 Hours in A&E* (2020), along with notable national brands such as British Gas with *Phil Spencer's Home Hacks* (2015). While these examples demonstrate successful application and integration into the UK market, the inherent nature of these brands pose challenges for international expansion. This is because these brands are exclusive to the UK

market, and the cultural and contextual elements that resonate domestically may not be globally applicable, thereby limiting the appeal and adaptability of these brands in different markets.

Therefore, this puts less prominent brands at a disadvantage, as they may lack resources to engage in branded entertainment projects or may suffer from insufficient brand awareness. This means that the brand is not necessarily known by the target audience, which leads to a limited understanding of the brand's existence. These shortcomings not only affect smaller brands on a national level but also have an impact on an international scale. As such, negotiation processes among brands and producers can be challenging, as they must be able to navigate this '*new territory*'.

One the one hand, brands must consider brand awareness, financial resources and the potential for international adaptability, for example. On the other hand, producers must possess a comprehensive understanding of the brand, ensuring its alignment with the content while simultaneously evaluating the scalability of the IP. Concerning the development and dissemination of IP, both parties need to work towards a balance between promotional integration and the preservation of content integrity. Therefore, it is important to reach agreements on aspects such as ownership, usage rights, and revenue sharing for the integrated marketing assets. With regards to international adaptation and dissemination of branded entertainment, it is essential to ensure that promotional strategies do not compromise the integrity of the show's IP while aligning them with country-specific adaptability and legal constraints. This is fundamental for creating scalable IP that permits content to span across multiple seasons, territories, and various platforms (Glynne, 2018).

Moreover, practitioners further discussed the role of the brands in relation to IP. Discourses revealed that sometimes “*brands don't know what to do with IP*” (Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment). In such instances, some of my practitioners felt obliged to educate the brand about the benefits of IP ownership; whereas other practitioners felt that “*it's for people who understood the value of some of the IP* (Robert, Creative Director) and how “*the IP is properly exploited*” (Albert, Director of Brand Content, Strategy and Partnerships). However, practitioner discourses from Susie, Steven, Jim, Anthony and Robert highlighted Unilever as a brand that increasingly positions itself as a creator and owner of IP within the branded entertainment domain. This example was also discussed during the practitioner event where discussants talked about how “*Unilever want to own the IP, or part of it, to then take it to another country*” (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019). Positioning itself as a creator and owner, Unilever demonstrates deliberate efforts to gain control of ownership over the content it produces. By owning the IP, brands can exercise greater autonomy over the use, distribution, and adaptation of its branded entertainment content across different markets, allowing them to leverage their IP assets on a global scale.

Christian shared his experience working for a global consumer brand involved in IP discussions concerning branded entertainment:

“*[If] it's something that is purely our IP, then we always maintain all of the rights to be able to create the content and ultimately determine, you know, to some extent, how it gets distributed. [...] If we produce something with a partner like [mentions multimedia franchise] content, or any of the [mentions film production and distribution company] then, of course, it's a 50/50 development process with each of us, you know, making sure that our brand and our IPs are protected in line. [...] we have to mutually agree pretty much on every major decision.*”

Christian's excerpt underpins his company's commitment to fully owning the IP, thereby granting them the authority and control over exclusive rights and the ability to make decisions regarding the creation and distribution of branded entertainment content. However, when collaborating with brands, a more egalitarian power dynamic emerges among franchises or film production and distribution companies, which is evidenced by the 50/50 split in the development process and the need for mutual consensus on major decisions. This collaborative governance structure conveys a shared responsibility and commitment to protecting the interests of both companies, particularly in terms of the respective brand and IP. Hence, joint control and shared decision-making illustrate a strategic understanding of both control and governance dynamics in the management of IP. This suggests that collaboration between two brands is underpinned by dedicated efforts to maintain control over proprietary content. Additionally, it involves leveraging partnerships to formulate and to work toward mutually beneficial outcomes by perpetuating the integrity and value of brand and IP assets.

Overall, the increasing convergence between advertising and the media industries has led to changing dynamics in the conception, ownership and use of IP in branded entertainment projects. In response to these evolving dynamics, various brands are undergoing a strategic shift from conventional sponsorship models to IP ownership. This transformation signifies a desire to maintain exclusive rights while also asserting control over the wide-ranging management of branded entertainment related content, demonstrating a deliberate effort to have authority and direction of every facet of how the content is handled and utilised. By drawing on the nexus of branded entertainment practice, the transition from traditional sponsorship approaches to the ownership of IP allows brands to tailor their narratives, protect their unique assets and explore diverse revenue streams, marking a significant departure from the limitations of traditional sponsorship engagements.

In summary, stakeholder discourses revealed that the creation, production and dissemination of branded entertainment requires the various industry players, including brands, producers, broadcasters, media owners, and advertising agencies to increasingly navigate these developments in collaborative efforts with the common goal of producing successful and scalable branded entertainment projects. As such, a prevailing consensus among my informants was that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to IP negotiations and splits. Instead, it necessitates a tailored approach based on the unique circumstances of each collaboration. However, there was an awareness that multinational brands, such as Unilever, seek to position themselves as creators and proprietors of IP, as established through the discourses in place. This approach aims to exert greater control over the creation, distribution and adaptation of branded entertainment content to fully exploit their IP.

As practitioners are not necessarily clear about how to utilise IP, this can lead to lack of clarity regarding ownership rights and the potential to result in legal issues or disputes. Consequently, the lack of understanding of the changing nature of IP can hinder collaboration, innovation and effective utilisation of IP within branded entertainment projects. Industry stakeholders involved in branded entertainment need to pursue a comprehensive understanding of appropriate use of IP that complies with different legal frameworks to facilitate ethical and legal responsibility. This encompasses, for example, educating stakeholders about IP laws to encourage transparency in IP-related agreements as well as promoting responsible branded entertainment practices to avoid misuse or unintentional infringement.

## 5.2 Saying Goodbye to Work-for-Hire

Through the exploration of my informants' individual trajectories within the historical body, my data revealed a noteworthy shift that demonstrated a growing transition towards an IP ownership model. As illuminated in section 5.1, the discourse on IP involves diverse parties engaged in negotiations, in which terms are reshaped in a manner that entails the sharing or retention of specific rights or permissions among the involved industry stakeholders. The intricate process highlights the complexity inherent in the collaborative aspects of IP agreements, where branded entertainment practitioners actively participate in defining the boundaries and allocations of rights and ownership.

Drawing on insights from the individual historical trajectories of interview participants, this evident shift towards IP ownership was signified through a departure from conventional work-for-hire frameworks, which traditionally have been the standard practice within the advertising industry. Both Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) and Jim (CEO) referred to the notion of work-for-hire specifically, "*which means you're getting paid for your work, and the actual property is going to live with the brand*" (Jim, CEO). In a work-for-hire scenario, the hiring party, such as the brand, automatically owns the IP rights to the work created by the hired individual or contractor, such as an advertising agency. This means that the brand commissioning the work retains full ownership of any developments or creative output produced during the contractual period, whereas the contractor completely surrenders their rights to intellectual property. This means that the brand owns and retains 100% of the IP and the agency is solely paid to execute the idea, thus providing its creative services. As such, the brand has sole control over its use, modification and distribution, where generally an arrangement is established through a contract that explicitly outlines the transfer of IP ownership from the creator to the brand. Consequently, work-for-hire arrangements serve a dual purpose by providing clarity and ensuring legitimacy for the terms that govern the IP, thus

providing a solid foundation for the management and protection of creative assets. Jim (CEO) specifically shared frustrations related to work-for-hire arrangements as:

*“Intellectual property and the way advertising and marketing think about intellectual property versus the way entertainment thinks about intellectual property; that difference is very much part of what drove me to leave the advertising agency ecosystem.”*

Jim's statement reflects a critical perspective on the divergence in how IP is treated between advertising and the entertainment industries. He expresses a certain level of discontent with the prevailing norms and practices related to IP within the advertising industry, which suggests that his departure from a traditional advertising agency was influenced by industry-specific attitudes towards IP. This steering away was driven by a desire for a different and possibly more aligned ethos with the entertainment industry, where IP is approached and valued differently. Hence, it suggests a departure from Ghaffari et al.'s (2019) notion of 'control power' where mere interactions between an advertising agency and a client are no longer sufficient, thus challenging traditional service provider-customer relationships, as is the case with work-for-hire arrangements.

Miri (Storyteller) highlighted the challenge in a purely work-for-hire approach to creative work saying:

*“The ethics of storytelling is creating those parameters of who you are to the brand, what you bring to the brand as an intellectual, and then what actually belongs to the brand, right? Because, again, just like a product or technology or piece of you know, anything hardware, you've left some intellect there, but that belongs to the brand. How much of that can they claim? It's what's interesting in this in this scenario, because storytelling is a very human intangible product. It's, it's not a, it's not a consumer product, the way that we see it. So, there's a lot of that that we bring in, that doesn't go away when we leave the company.”*

Moreover, Chloe (Head of Brand Partnerships) highlighted that the work-for-hire approach “*doesn't work that way with entertainment, when you work with actual content creators and producers.*” Chloe’s quote reemphasises the divergence from work-for-hire approaches, particularly when collaborating with content creators and producers in the entertainment sector. Her use of “*actual*” when talking about content creators and producers is interesting, as it suggests a distinction from other types of contributors. This signifies a recognition of the unique and specialised role of content creators and producers in the branded entertainment field. Consequently, Chloe hints at a need for a more tailored and equitable approach that appreciates and adequately values the creative outputs of content creators and producers. This quote, thus, challenges the adequacy of a one-size-fits all approach, as outlined in Chapter 5.1, such as work-for-hire agreements within the complex and dynamic landscape of branded entertainment.

By drawing on their individual trajectories of working in the branded entertainment field, my informants disclosed the adoption of more dynamic and responsive frameworks. These frameworks aim to cater to the evolving needs and complexities that require practitioners to experiment with different collaboration styles or devise innovative approaches to structuring partnerships and project ownership. John (Director of Marketing and Business Development) highlighted that it is:

“*...always interesting to map out the landscape and who are all the different players. And certainly, we do that. We present that to a client, there's a page, a slide in the deck, we say 'Here are 50 people trying to speak to you every day, and this is what everyone's role is'. That's usually interesting, and very useful that to bring up straightforward when you're speaking to a client or partner and explain the complexity straightforward.*”

John's quote emphasises the importance of understanding the intricate branded entertainment landscape. He expressed the need to discern and identify the diverse industry players, which becomes particularly important at the beginning of a project, where outlining the myriad roles of contributors is crucial, especially when presenting to clients. In doing so, John's approach suggests a proactive stance in acknowledging and navigating the challenges inherent in collaborative pursuits. In doing so, he advocates transparency, aiming to foster effective communication among the various contributors involved. However, there might be a fine line between providing useful insights and overwhelming clients with information or, conversely, oversimplifying intricate processes. Therefore, it is crucial that clients gain a balanced yet nuanced understanding without feeling burdened by excessive details, which demands a thoughtful and tailored approach to communication in branded entertainment collaborations.

### **5.3 Next Stop Hollywood: Where the Talent Takes Centre Stage**

By further claiming that "*ad agencies can't deliver what brands want*," Chloe's (Head of Brand Partnerships) statement reflects early industry discussions, which highlighted that "traditional agency structures are breaking down", as "clients are ever-more demanding of their agencies" (Barnes, 2003, p.1). It also brings to mind Peter's statement in Chapter 5.1, where he expressed the need to showcase the value of an advertising agency's endeavours in branded entertainment through successful planning and execution, with the aim of earning increasing respect over time. This need for respect is driven by a desire to differentiate the advertising agency and establish credibility in order to attract more opportunities in the competitive branded entertainment landscape. Anthony, who works at a professional entertainment industry, stated that:

*[...] advertising agencies are trying to build functions and practices to collaborate more directly with creatives and creators, as their clients, the brands, are insisting on demanding that. [...] I think there's a willingness more than ever to be more flexible when working with, you know, true artists versus a creative executive at a creative agency. ”*

Interestingly, like Chloe, Anthony uses the word *true* when he talks about artists involved in branded entertainment, which suggests that both professionals question the perceived authenticity of creative output within advertising or creative agency settings, as they are perceived as more commercially driven. This can also indicate a perception of constraints on the creative processes within traditional agency structures. For example, hierarchical structures or client approval processes may limit the creative freedom of team members, which can restrict their ability to explore unconventional or innovative ideas.

Such discourses convey a preference for talent within the entertainment industry, who are directly involved in the creation of branded entertainment content. This is because their work is potentially regarded as more rooted in genuine creative expression than that of intermediaries or executives within the advertising and creative industries. As a result, to collaborate with *actual* or *true* artists or talent, my American informants often mentioned that “*a lot of brands started turning to Hollywood*” (Chloe, Head of Brand Partnerships) for branded entertainment endeavours. As Peter (Creative Director) acknowledged:

*You may still follow Madison Avenue guidelines; you may follow Hollywood guidelines. It may be a third kind that is a combination of those two. But we all need to be very aware that we are part of this adventure, in defining the business model and stay open to new ideas. ”*

Here, Peter reiterates the dynamic nature within the field by suggesting the possibility of following Madison Avenue or Hollywood guidelines or combining elements from both.

Madison Avenue relates to a street in New York City that has been long associated with the advertising industry and is used metaphorically to refer to conventional advertising practices and principles. Such practices and principles can relate to traditional and established aspects of creative strategies, client relationships and campaign planning. Hollywood guidelines, on the other hand, relate predominantly to established conventions and practices in the American entertainment industry, particularly in film and television. It includes various facets from casting, storytelling norms, genre specification, high production standards, market considerations to production values and distribution strategies. As such, Peter's excerpt reveals that there is still no fixed or one-size-fits all solution, as with IP negotiations, as practitioners can adhere to either set of guidelines or adopt a hybrid approach that combines elements from both. Moreover, his mentioning of being "*very aware that we are part of this adventure*" not only emphasises the dynamic and continuously evolving branded entertainment landscape, but also hints at an awareness of the impact and implications of the chosen guidelines, which signifies a simultaneous dichotomy of both empowerment and responsibility for establishing new business models. Through his quote, Peter displays an underlying understanding of ethical considerations and societal shifts that requires industry practitioners to give attention to the broader implications of their creative choices. Therefore, practitioners need a nuanced understand of the intricate balance between artistic freedom and social responsibility within the branded entertainment field.

Nevertheless, what became evident in various practitioner discourses is that, increasingly, branded entertainment projects draw inspiration and guidelines from Hollywood due to the industry's long-standing success in capturing the attention of audiences and creating compelling narratives. However, such a shift also requires adjustment to new ways of working as expressed by Mary (Storyteller):

*“You have players from all over the place. They are very opinionated. So, it was really around, the success was building trust, building trust, you know, ‘who are you and why are you here’, consulting and building trust. And once you gain their trust, they see you as one of theirs.”*

As there is a diverse array of stakeholders, each with their own distinct viewpoints and ideas, this could result in potential friction or conflict among players. Mary's quote gives the impression that collaborating members are regarded as opponents or rivals, which contradicts the essence of collaboration. However, over time, collaboration leads to smoother working relationships and mutual understanding. Merging the worlds of advertising and entertainment require a resetting of such relationships. It is imperative to foster relationships and mutual respect among collaborating members to effectively manage potential differences, establish a sense of belonging and unity in order to succeed in branded entertainment collaborations. In doing so, collaborations extends beyond conventional brand-advertiser partnerships, as articulated by Susie (Senior Vice President Branded Entertainment):

*“It all depends on the visionary, getting inside the brand who gets it, and trusts us as format creators to carry on that journey for them. They implicitly trust their advertising agencies. They've got such a co-dependent relationship with them. They're not used to having a production company as their partner. But I'm seeing more and more people move across, people from brands move into production, production to brands. And so that, that circle is closing, and the understanding of each other's industries is becoming bigger.”*

Susie's quote emphasises the crucial role of visionary individuals who understand the essence of the brand and entrust format creators to execute their brand's vision. However, she sheds light on the co-dependent relationship that brands often have with their advertising agencies which reveals the historical and deep-seated trust they place in these partnerships. Her observation that brands are not accustomed to partnering with production companies signals a

notable shift in industry norms, which implies a reassessment of conventional roles in content creation and the emergence of production companies as strategic collaborators.

Furthermore, the trend of practitioners transitioning between roles in brands and production companies illustrates the growing convergence of industries in the branded entertainment field where traditional working boundaries becoming less distinct. In doing so, it has the potential to broaden the understanding of each other's industries, yet also raise questions about the implications and complexities of such shifts. For example, if a branding executive transitions to a production company, they can bring valuable insights into branding strategies, but may face challenges in adopting to the creative processes and constraints concerning the branded entertainment production environment, which can lead to tensions and misunderstandings.

Consequently, it requires individuals, especially those working for a brand, to possess forward-thinking perspectives and innovative ideas while also demonstrating a willingness to take risks to realise their visions rather than adhering rigidly to conventional approaches. Returning to Mary's (Storyteller) discourse, she further added:

*[There are] lot of old school people, we have people that have said: 'This has worked. Why break it?' Right? 'So no, it's not broken, why fix it?' So, there's always that mentality, a contending mentality of the executive level. Brands that just don't see it that way that are not disruptive, and they don't, they don't want to be 'don't tell me how to do it'. I've been doing this for 25 years. So that is the biggest challenge. It's ego and legacy. Where you see brands succeeding, even if they're big corporate brands, are those leaders that will say, 'You know what, the times are changing, the tide is changing'."*

Mary shared that senior employees and executives, in particular, are more resistant to change due to traditional mindsets and established promotional strategies that have served them well in the past. Their resistance can stem from factors, such as fear of failure, reluctance to disrupt, or a desire to preserve their legacy. As such, diverging from established practices or the prospect of exploring unfamiliar promotional strategies, like branded entertainment, may evoke apprehension or scepticism. Moreover, Mary's reflection unveils that executives' attitudes can be linked to power dynamics, wherein prolonged tenure may result in a sense of entitlement or superiority due to accumulated experience. Rather than embracing disruption and innovation, senior employees and executives of brands may prefer to uphold control and preserve the status quo within the organisation, as well as in their interaction with other participating industry stakeholders. However, Mary among other informants, advocated that the competitive branded entertainment landscape demands constant evolution and thus prioritise agility and responsiveness.

This shift in power necessitates recognition of the role of the talent within branded entertainment projects in a way that is not the case in traditional advertising contexts.

*“You don't do [branded] entertainment without headliners. Right, and, in order to bring the right talent, you need to give them some ability to change and bring their vision to it [the branded entertainment project].”* (Peter, Creative Director)

Additionally, Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) noted that:

*“More and more talent are prepared to work with brands and advertisers, as long as it's, you know, a symbiotic relationship where both parties benefit. So, talent wants to do something, wants to appear, and wants to, is keen to appear in a film. And so, more and more talent is comfortable working with brands, as long as they're not expressly endorsing the brand. Although they might have to get paid extra money, but what they*

*are doing is, you know, is endorsing a piece of entertainment that the brand is also endorsing.”*

Steven's excerpt demonstrates the evolving relationship between talent, brands and advertisers in the context of branded entertainment, in which talent is increasingly more open to work with brands. His emphasis of “*symbiotic relationship*” draws attention to the fact that deriving value from the collaboration is a priority for both talent and brands. However, Steven expressed concerns that talent is willing to engage in branded entertainment as long as the endorsement is not explicit. He did not further specify what he means by “*expressly*”, but it reminds me of what I briefly described in the introduction when reflecting on my experience working in a talent agency.

Actors tended to avoid television commercials due to concerns about potential overexposure, roles lacking artistic depth, or harm to their artistic image. Moreover, it could lead to increased associations with commercialism which, in turn, might compromise actors' credibility within the entertainment industry. This cautious stance may further stem from a desire to maintain credibility and authenticity within the industry as well as in the eyes of the audience, even if there are financial incentives involved. Nevertheless, Steven recognises that talent is increasingly willing to collaborate with brands, especially when the focus is on endorsing the entertainment itself. This approach permits for a more subtle integration of the brand into the narrative, which demonstrates a growing convergence between commerce (brands, advertising) and art (entertainment, talent). Furthermore, discourses surrounding talent often revolved around engaging in:

*“...a partnership between a brand and a major A-list piece of talent, like Jennifer Aniston or LeBron James, or, you know, the talent at that level, will insist on creative*

*control, approvals over content, you know, that sort of stuff, right?"* (Anthony, Co-Head of Marketing).

Anthony's quote provides a glimpse into the intricate power dynamics inherent in partnerships between A-list talent and brands. He brings to attention the demands of A-list talent highlighting their insistence on non-negotiable aspects such as creative control and content approval. While this demonstrates the significant influence well-known talent can have on branded entertainment projects, it also raises questions about the extent to which brands need to give up or compromise their autonomy, messaging integrity or overall identity for the sake of aligning with the talent's vision for the project.

This growing convergence between commercial logics (brands, advertising) and artistic logics (entertainment, talent) can be grounded in what Dolbec et al. (2022) call 'nested coupling', which describes how established organisations navigate the complexities of marketisation by balancing competing demands for differentiation and conformity. It is a strategic approach that enables organisations to integrate new market-oriented practices without abandoning their foundational logistics to ensure that they remain competitive in the market while adhering to their original purposes. In doing so, Dolbec et al. (2022) identify four mechanisms of nested coupling, which are core subsumption, core integration, peripheral integration, and peripheral separation. Core subsumption involves deeply embedding the new logic into the organisation's core functions to ensure it permeates essential operations, while core integration blends compatible elements of the new logic with existing core practices, modernising without altering fundamental identities. Peripheral integration, on the other hand, incorporates the new logic into supplementary activities while keeping the core unchanged, whereas peripheral separation maintains a clear distinction between the new and existing logics

by managing them in different organisational parts. These mechanisms collectively allow organisations to balance demands for conformity to new logics with the need to maintain differentiation based on their unique characteristics.

Anthony's discourse on A-list talent having creative control and approval over content in the creation of branded entertainment illustrates a nuanced form of nested coupling mechanisms. When A-list talent is involved, brands often employ core integration, which blends the artistic logic of the talent with the brand's commercial logic, with the aim to increasingly shape, for example, the film without altering the brand's fundamental identity. Alternatively, core subsumption can occur when the artistic logic of the talent is deeply embedded into the core functions of the branded entertainment, thus permeating essential operations and influencing the overall direction. Peripheral integration might be used to incorporate the talent's creative input into supplementary activities in order to ensure that the core brand identity remains unchanged, while peripheral separation could manage the artistic and commercial logics in distinct parts of involved organisations and maintain clear boundaries between them.

However, these strategies reflect a significant departure from conventional nested coupling towards fostering more balanced partnerships within the realm of branded entertainment. A-list talent not only contributes to but actively drives the creative process. This represents a fundamental change where the influence of talent extends beyond mere performance or endorsement, shaping and influencing the strategic direction and vision of branded entertainment.

The deep involvement of A-list talent thus fundamentally alters the dynamics of branded entertainment. Traditionally, the development of film and/or television shows has navigated the delicate balance between artistic creativity and commercial imperatives, wherein brands often exert control over content to align with communication goals. However, with A-list talent exerting significant influence, there emerges a symbiotic relationship where creative integrity and commercial viability converge more organically.

This convergence of artistic and commercial logics underpins the emergence of new collaborative frameworks and business models in branded entertainment. Unlike traditional approaches that compartmentalise creativity and commerce, these new models embrace a holistic integration where creative excellence enhances brand appeal and market penetration simultaneously. Brands increasingly recognise the value of aligning with A-list talent not only for their star power but also for their creative vision and ability to resonate authentically with audiences. Synergy plays a crucial role here, as A-list talent not only bring their celebrity status but also their artistic sensibilities and audience insights, enriching the storytelling capabilities of branded entertainment. Moreover, this synergy amplifies the narrative impact and emotional resonance of branded entertainment content, which elevates it from mere promotional efforts to compelling cultural artefacts that resonate deeply with consumers.

The resulting collaborative frameworks and business models are characterised by their adaptive nature and flexibility. They allow brands to respond quickly to changing consumer preferences and market dynamics while leveraging the enduring appeal and influence of A-list talent. This agility is crucial in today's fast-paced advertising and entertainment landscape, where brands must continuously innovate to stay ahead of competitors and capture audience attention.

This convergence does not diminish the distinct identities of brands or talents but rather enhances them through mutual collaboration and mutual respect. Brands benefit from the authenticity and credibility that A-list talent brings, while talents gain access to broader platforms and resources to amplify their creative visions. As such, this mutually beneficial relationship fosters a creative ecosystem where the artistic and commercial logics do not cohabit but rather increasingly converge with the aim to push the boundaries of what branded entertainment can achieve through embracing new forms of collaborations and business models.

However, increasing levels of convergence could potentially lead to imbalances in collaborations, as asserted by Peter (Creative Director), who provided insights into the dynamics of talent-brand-agency partnerships in the context of branded entertainment:

*"It depends on who the talent is, if you're talking, if it's Coca Cola, versus a kind of small agency of three people that have never done anything, versus not versus, versus a bad word, with a small agency and Meryl Streep, Meryl Streep wins. Because in the end, she's going to look at that, like, 'I don't need your money, you want to talk it's on my terms', and if Coca Cola wants to do it with her, it's gonna be on her terms. If we're talking about an up-and-coming talent, and it's a Tesla doing something and Tesla is like, 'Oh, it's gonna be the first thing that Tesla is doing that Red Bull was doing', then we're, you know, the advertiser has a better setting. You know, it all depends on who are the players and who can say no" (Peter, Creative Director).*

Peter's excerpt draws comparison between a large corporation like Coca-Cola, a small (advertising) agency and A-list talent like Meryl Streep, stressing the pivotal role of well-known talent having the ability to dictate the terms of collaboration. Peter's repeated use of 'versus' in the quote draws attention to a kind of comparative framework where he contrasts different scenarios against each other to illuminate the variability in negotiation dynamics. The

comparison between the Coca Cola brand and a small agency with Meryl Streep exhibits the disparity in negotiating power, suggesting that established and reputable talent can set their conditions, especially due to their financial independence. However, when dealing with emerging talent, it seems that the bargaining power of the advertiser improves, particularly if the brand has not previously engaged in branded entertainment as is the case with Tesla. This can be potentially attributed to the advertiser's experience working in the branded entertainment field and thus may be more likely to negotiate terms on their own conditions.

Hence, the statements from both Anthony and Peter reiterate the complexity and multifaceted nature of power dynamics and the ability to exert control, especially concerning talent, in branded entertainment collaborations. Peter's assertion of "*it all depends on who are the players and who can say no*" highlights the influence of individual players in determining the terms of collaboration. It also highlights that the ability to dictate terms is not solely decided by the brand's prominence or financial standing but is intricately tied to the individual A-list talent's influence and willingness to dictate their own terms. Therefore, it suggests my informant's understanding of negotiation power, indicating that talent with established reputation may hold greater influence in shaping collaboration, even when dealing with major brands. This is because A-list talent can be regarded as a celebrity brand (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013) and when major brands collaborate with such talent, they essentially harness the power of the celebrity brand. Both, the reputation and personal brand of A-list talent plays a crucial role in shaping collaborations. Their pre-existing reputation, fan base and cultural influence become instrumental in determining how a brand or the collaboration among multiple brands is perceived, which is common in branded entertainment projects. Therefore, when the audience's admiration or trust in the celebrity is transferred to the brand that pursues branded

entertainment endeavours, it can create a symbiotic relationship where both parties benefit from each other's image and influence.

This awareness thus challenges conventional assumptions about the unilateral dominance of large brands in advertising collaborations, which illustrates the evolving power dynamics in negotiation efforts where potential inequalities could undermine a fair and balanced negotiation process. Furthermore, it sheds light on how bargaining power can be disproportionately skewed toward renowned talent, brands or agencies that have unique standing in the branded entertainment field, thus potentially marginalising smaller industry players. However, *“talent is what brings the story to life, and talent is also the headliner that will make people get interested in watching it”* (Peter, Creative Director). For Kevin (Senior Director – Client Development & Brand Partnerships) it was about:

*“...understanding, you know, what it is that they [talent] bring to this [branded entertainment project] that's unique; that's relevant to the brand. And that will help the brand communicate to their end audience in an authentic and realistic way, and the talent that do that best are the ones that sit down with you and go, 'Okay, tell me about, tell me about this project. Tell me about the brand'.*

Kevin's quote shows the importance of talent in branded entertainment projects and the need to understand what the talent can bring to the collaboration. Employing terms like *“unique”* and *“relevant”* to the brand insinuates a discerning approach to talent selection, which focuses on the talent's distinct attributes and alignment with the brand's identity. Moreover, the expectation that talent should inquire about branded entertainment projects indicates a desire for collaboration. Yet, it also can imply a reliance on the talent to take a lead in understanding and shaping projects, thus influencing creative output, as evidenced in Anthony's and Peter's excerpts. Moreover, to attract audiences, there not only needs to be a perceived fit between the talent and the brand but also with the plot and content type to facilitate

a genuine, authentic and realistic connection that resonates with the intended audience. Therefore, “*you want to make sure that you have all the most talented people working on your, your films [...] to be able to give the talent that leeway*” (Christian, Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing).

In the discourses related to talent, Tom (Storyteller) referred to directors, stating that “*companies are spending a lot of money in hiring these Hollywood directors who are obviously storytelling experts*”. This quote, thus, emphasises the strategic importance of aligning not only talent but also the storytelling expertise that directors bring to enhance the overall connection with the audience in the context of branded entertainment. Moreover, engaging Hollywood talent in branded entertainment projects requires brands to make significant financial investments, which conveys the perceived value and impactful contributions that these renowned individuals can bring to branded entertainment endeavours.

A noteworthy example showcasing the successful utilisation of Hollywood talent in branded entertainment is Turkish Airlines’ short film, *The Journey* (2019). Turkish Airlines collaborated with advertising agency Anomaly and global commercial production company RSA films founded by renowned directors Ridley and Tony Scott. The short film coincided with the inauguration of the new Istanbul Airport, which is Turkish Airlines’ new hub. The goal was to elevate a standard advertising brief into a compelling storytelling experience that celebrates the airline, the new airport, and Istanbul’s iconic city landmarks. The plot was written by Olivia Milch, renowned for her production work on *Ocean’s Eight* (2018). Ridley Scott, famous for directing Hollywood movies like *Blade Runner* (1982), *American Gangster* (2007), *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and *House of Gucci* (2021), marked his return to commercial directing after a 15-year hiatus with *The Journey*. In addition, the short film featured actress

Sylvia Hoeks who is known for her roles in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *The Girl in the Spider's Web* (2018).

Another prominent example is *The Lego Movie* (2014), starring Chris Pratt (known for roles in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Jurassic World* (2015)), Will Ferrell (known for roles in *Zoolander* (2001), *Elf* (2003)) and Elizabeth Banks (known for her role in *The Hunger Games* (2012)) as voice talents. The movie was both written and directed by Christopher Miller and Philip A. Lord, who also collaborated on other films, including executive producing *21 Jump Street* (2014) and producing *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018).

By intertwining the trajectories of the historical body, interaction order and the discourses in place, it became evident that the work-for-hire approach in the realm of branded entertainment is inefficient for the evolving dynamics in content creation. The convergence between advertising and entertainment requires a more nuanced, partnership-oriented approach that reflects collaborative efforts prevalent within the entertainment industry. Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) notes this need for collaboration in saying:

*“And in terms of creative control ... brands be very, like, dominant or patronising in a way because they think they know how they want to show their brand to the audience? Yeah, they can be. And then it's down to the producer and the entertainment maker and the entertainment writer to, it's a negotiation between those two parties. And they need to negotiate between them. A good advertiser, good client, understands where they're welcome, and acceptable in the editor, entertainment editorial, and where they should step back. And a good producer knows where they can, they can dial up the brand, where actually the storytelling and the audience engagement, and the narrative is far more important than a clunky advertising message.”*

Consequently, these advancements require brands and advertisers to move away from conventional transactional relationships. Instead, both parties need to embrace novel and dynamic forms of collaboration and be willing to give up some control and ownership over their projects. This shift is significant as branded entertainment pursuits increasingly align with Hollywood guidelines. My informants brought attention to the growing relevance of A-list talent in branded entertainment. Due to their established star power, credibility and dedicated fan base, A-list talent plays a crucial role in enhancing the brand's ability to resonate with and capture the attention of the wider audience.

In some cases, the response to the shifting models of collaboration has led to the creation of the so-called in-house or full-service agencies has been noted in multiple practitioner discourses. Those type of agencies either resides entirely inside a brand or is created by the holding company. However, informants voiced their concerns in the establishment of in-house agencies. Anthony (Co-Head of Marketing) stated that:

*“Recently brands like Nike, AB InBev and Saint Laurent have launched their own in-house entertainment studios to create stories that will reach audiences beyond a commercial break. Our clients are beginning to ask for it too.”*

However, while acknowledging the benefits and skillset within Hollywood talent, the preference for established directors and actors introduces an additional layer of complexity in negotiating creative freedom and content approval. The discourses in place revealed a distinct power dynamic within the branded entertainment landscape, where established talent holds a dominant position during the collaboration processes. This influence often grants them ultimate authority over key decisions, allowing talent to play a pivotal role in shaping the direction and execution of branded entertainment initiatives. Yet, this influential role raises concerns about the substantial financial commitment involved in securing Hollywood talent, specifically

posing financial challenges for smaller brands or those with limited funds. Consequently, this may create an entry barrier for such brands as it limits their ability to engage in high-profile collaborations. Additionally, smaller and less affluent brands might find it challenging to compete with their larger counterparts in creating impactful branded entertainment.

As a result, the financial implications of involving Hollywood talent reveal potential inequalities within the branded entertainment landscape. Smaller or disadvantaged brands may need to explore alternative strategies, such as using up-and-coming talent or managing creative storytelling with budget constraints to be able to sustain in the competitive branded entertainment environment. This financial reality highlights the need for a more inclusive approach, where industry stakeholders must balance securing renowned talent with fostering a creative landscape that accommodates a broader array of talents and perspectives. For instance, brands could actively form partnerships with smaller production houses, up-and-coming talent or independent filmmakers who may offer unique storytelling approaches that can enhance the richness and diversity of branded entertainment content.

#### **5.4 Chapter Summary**

Engaging in the nexus practice, my data revealed that IP considerations differ between the entertainment and advertising/marketing industries. The details of this transition are typically articulated in a revised or supplementary agreement, ensuring clarity and mutual understanding regarding the ownership and usage of the intellectual property. This evolving trend underscores a notable transformation in the industry's approach, emphasising a greater recognition of the value and importance of intellectual property as opposed to the more traditional reliance on work-for-hire structures. By engaging specifically in the historical body through my informants' individual trajectories, my data revealed nuanced perspectives on IP

and work-for-hire arrangements within the context of their professional experiences, shedding light on the evolving dynamics and implications of creative ownership in diverse industries.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of many projects often calls for a more nuanced approach to ownership, making a strict work-for-hire model less adaptable to the dynamic and evolving nature of creative collaborations. As a result, businesses and creatives increasingly prefer more flexible agreements that acknowledge and balance the interests of both parties, fostering a more equitable and mutually beneficial working relationship. However, such relationships result from collaboration and require effort to reach this stage. Here my participants acknowledged the advantage of the entertainment industry professions who were much more used to such loose forms of collaboration. Long standing advertising agency practitioners were seen as needing a period of adjustment (if willing) to shift their working practices away from the work-for-hire approach. Another part of this trend is the establishment of some in house content studios to incorporate the Hollywood production model but within the control and oversight of the brand.

Following on from the previous chapter, we can see that the ever-shifting industry landscape which results in challenges in terms of offering concrete and definitive definitions of branded entertainment as a concept, impact on the organisation and operationalisation of such projects, requiring new ways of working for those involved. Through increased collaboration and shared ownership of IP, the ability of those involved to work together, understand each other's perspectives and working practices will improve.

The following chapter steps back from considerations of the day-to-day workings of those involved in branded entertainment projects to consider the ethical implications of these

shifts and the ever-increasing convergence between promotional media and entertainment media.

## CHAPTER 6: BOUNDARIES OF LEGITIMACY AND RESPONSIBILISATION IN BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT

This final findings' chapter examines the boundaries of legitimacy and responsibilisation in branded entertainment. Just as there was a lack of clarity around definitions of what constitutes branded entertainment, when it came to questions about the ethics of branded entertainment and where responsibility lies for ensuring that consumers are not deceived and that they understand the commercial drivers of branded entertainment, there was no real consensus. In the sections that follow, I unpack the taken-for-granted perspectives of practitioners regarding issues of legitimacy and responsibility in branded entertainment discourses. In order to shape these findings, I deployed the mediated discourse analysis questions to illuminate the actions that are connected to ideology, legitimacy and awareness among practitioners, foregrounding how discourse affects action and classifying the function of discourse in shaping awareness of legitimacy and responsibility issues in the context of branded entertainment. I utilise emic quotes to illustrate participants' diverse discourses on the production, distribution, and consumption of branded entertainment, revealing practitioners' perspectives on processes of responsibilisation. Such discursive practices illuminate ideological legitimisation and the ways that branded entertainment practitioners shift responsibility for branded entertainment actions, and their consequences, onto stakeholders other than themselves. Practitioners do so by invoking neoliberal ideologies which are socio-culturally constructed, and which legitimise such perspectives and their responsibility shifting actions.

As discussed in the earlier finding's chapters, branded entertainment continues to evolve in line with shifts in technology and the practices of consumers, and this means that regulation of this space is challenging. As is apparent from the findings presented below, while some

practitioners (mainly those from European countries) were very aware of the need to consider ethical issues and responsibility towards consumers, others (mainly US practitioners) did not see this issue as particularly relevant to their day-to-day practices.

The chapter starts by outlining the invisibility of brands within branded entertainment, despite their hiding in plain sight. This is followed by participants' accounts of the ethical issues involved in branded entertainment, which reflect a shifting of responsibility from practitioners onto consumers or other practitioners. In many cases, consumers are viewed as being fully informed and capable of distinguishing branded entertainment from conventional entertainment, while 'other practitioners' are seen as more culpable for safeguarding consumers against deception. This discussion then leads to a section introducing my participants' considerations of regulation and how regulation influences practitioners, followed by another section highlighting the role of awareness of consequences and alternatives among interviewed practitioners. The chapter concludes by drawing these findings together and linking them to conceptualisations of epistemic responsibility as discussed in Chapter 2.

## 6.1 Hide and Seek: Brand (In)visibility

A key consideration which impacts issues of legitimacy and responsibilisation is concerned with how identifiable the brand is to consumers in branded entertainment content. Practitioners highlighted that branded entertainment vehicles need to be credible and authentic where you "*need to understand both sides of making great entertainment and making a strong piece of marketing*" (Steven, Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services). Therefore, there are "*a lot of sensitivities and nuances around things like product placement, and how brands appear and content that [...] needs to feel authentic to the story and not so obviously paid*" (Anthony, Co-Head of Marketing). Thus, the brand should not interrupt the

entertainment content implicating that it should be woven into the storyline (Hudson and Hudson, 2006), and “*brands know when they have been around enough to understand that it's just gonna get used as a marketing technique*” (Mary, Storyteller). Mary is pushing an ideological position that legitimises the beliefs and interests of brands to use branded entertainment to engage consumers. This relates the notion that consumers are encouraged to seek pleasurable experiences in the marketplace. Consequently, practitioners did not necessarily regard branded entertainment as a deceptive practice, which is further reflected in the following quote:

*“I don't think anyone's trying to put one over on consumers. I'm not like you know, by...they're not trying to be sneaky by just telling a story in a different format. So, I don't think, I don't look at it like that.”* (Chloe, Head of Brand Partnerships)

In this example, Chloe portrays an amoral stance in which she attempts to legitimise branded entertainment endeavours, deflecting from potential negative outcomes that may emerge through branded entertainment. This links to notions of what Drumwright and Murphy (2004) label “moral myopia”, in which moral issues are either not seen or are blurred. In Chloe's case, moral issues are completely denied. According to some philosophers (i.e., FitzPatrick, 2008; Sher, 2009; Murray, 2017; Rudy-Hiller, 2017), it can be argued that blameworthiness for ignorant wrongdoing can be attributed to Chloe, as she could or should be aware of branded entertainment's capacity to deceive consumers. However, the necessity for branded entertainment to be enjoyed and entertaining requires content to mimic the format of conventional film or television programming. Therefore, the very nature of branded entertainment does require an element of deception to be accepted as a form of entertainment.

Moreover, although participants did not always fully take responsibility for the potentially deceptive nature of branded entertainment, they did take responsibility for the

brands or practices being promoted in branded entertainment offerings. Participants drew lines around the use of branded entertainment to promote dangerous products or ideologies. In terms of dangerous products, Susie (Senior Vice President of Branded Entertainment) stated:

*“If it's brainwashing people to go and buy guns, then I've got a problem with it. If it's suggesting that they might want to buy Coca Cola, or Pepsi, you know, it's not like the rest of their life is free of advertising. They are being targeted every time they pick up a phone or walk down the street.”*

Ideology, however, was linked to propaganda as highlighted in Chloe's quote: *“I guess if you're making a propaganda, political propaganda films, that gets scary, you know.”* Nevertheless, the use of the word propaganda is unclear in the context of branded entertainment. As branded entertainment by its very nature is a vessel of consumerist practice, it can be seen as promoting capitalist, neoliberal ideology. Therefore, the distinction between propaganda as overtly ‘political’ position and such projects which do in themselves support a neoliberal, consumerist agenda becomes blurred. Moreover, engaging in specific branded entertainment content is often seen as a personal choice, as reflected in Mike's quote: *“I think if there was ever something we really were against, you know, we're not going to sign up and help to promote something like the Nazi regime, you know what I mean, or something like that, that we think is genuinely like hateful”.*

These quotes illustrate discourses and awareness of moral significance and reflect a doctrine of branded entertainment which involves specific ideologies of power and persuasion. By centring ‘we’, Mike's quote recognises the role of moral significance in creating boundaries around what is and is not permissible. Branded entertainment practitioners must hold a belief about the wrongness of the action or a belief about the existence of any features that make the action, in this case branded entertainment, wrong. The data demonstrates that practitioners

maintain awareness of an act's moral significance (Arpaly, 2003, 2015; Harman, 2011; Talbert, 2013): they believe that a branded entertainment act has certain features that can make it wrong, but they do not believe that the act is wrong. In this case, practitioners' discourses revealed that they do not perceive branded entertainment as immoral *per se* unless it is used to promote dangerous products, propaganda or ideologies. Interestingly, practitioners did not think of the wrongness of branded entertainment; however, it seemed that they understood the moral significance of what branded entertainment could achieve.

In addition, branded entertainment can be linked to moral trade-offs depending on the content of the format. According to practitioners, if the quality or entertainment factor of branded entertainment is high, it is worth the trade-off between ethics and consumer engagement efficacy, whereas if it is too commercial, consumers lose interest in the content. This is reflected in Steven's (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) quote:

*"They (the audience) enjoy the entertainment if you make it proper entertainment, and cleverly weave the brand in but if you try and overdo it, people think they're watching an ad and they lose, they lose that, they'd lose interest. Yeah, I think it's quite simple, they lose interest. And we've seen that happen time before time and time again, when we're making content. You put too much branding into it. And then people, you know, they can use Twitter now to tell you, but we've seen it before, we saw it, you know, when we did research and when we did post-research or when we saw the results. People were not reacting to the content because it was too commercial. And there's a very delicate balance."*

As such, brand (in)visibility was frequently connected to the epistemic conditions of awareness of action and awareness of moral significance, in which participants conveyed discursive strategies of legitimising branded entertainment practices. In order to hold branded entertainment practitioners responsible for their actions, practitioners must be aware of the fact

that branded entertainment can be deceptive and/or manipulative. However, when looking at the epistemic condition of awareness of action, practitioners deny or even ignore potential deception and manipulation through entertainment products. Practitioners exhibited an antonymous relationship between brands and entertainment: on the one hand, brands must be integrated subtly to not destroy the entertainment experience; yet, on the other hand, practitioners frequently advocated that brands were visible in entertainment formats. However, these two aspects contradict each other so practitioners must be at least partially aware of what they are trying to achieve with branded entertainment. Nevertheless, their discourses denied branded entertainment's potential to deceive or manipulate consumers, thus reflecting a low awareness of action, in which practitioners are not aware of the consequences of their actions when creating branded entertainment.

## 6.2 Responsibility Shifting across Stakeholders

During the interviews practitioners relied on discursive strategies and shifted responsibility for awareness of the nature of branded entertainment to other stakeholders, such as the consumer or industry stakeholders. Consumers are depicted as shrewd because they *“realise when something is advertising pretty fast”* [James]. However, Eisend et al. (2020) demonstrated that consumers may not be able to grasp the commercial nature of sponsored content. This is despite practitioners advocating that consumers should be able to make their own judgements to identify branded entertainment content as well as making their own decisions about whether they want to engage with that content, thus, supporting neoliberal ideologies. For example, Cooper's (Executive Producer) quote reflects a broader ideological narrative in which he imbues the consumer as well as the commissioner with responsibility for identifying branded entertainment content, hence diverting from his own professional responsibility:

*"I think that they [consumers] should understand the, you know, see, for what it is [branded entertainment], you know, but to be honest I don't, I don't think about the consumer, I think about the viewers, in terms of me being a viewer and watching something, what I like and what I don't like. You know, and I understand, I think I have a handle on what viewers will like in a show, what people would find interesting. But in terms of like, we're selling this documentary, but actually, it was all paid for by [the brand]. Well, you know, it's up to them (the consumer), whether they decide if they can't see that that's what it is. You know, and I don't have any control over that anyway, you know, I can say: "Well, I think we should be flashing below, you know, throughout [name of the documentary]. This is being paid for by [brand]". It's just not gonna happen. And, you know, everything's paid. You know, the thing is, that, as I said, it's a very cynical sort of industry, you know, things are paid for by a commissioner and their personal tastes and what they think, things are going to do, they have editorial sort of control, you know, about things and that's, you know, not to do with advertising and a brand, but maybe it's to do with a brand to a certain degree, you know, and that's the brand of the channel."*

The frequent use of the filler 'you know' in this quote reinforces the idea to the interviewer that they would understand what Cooper is referring to in terms of his ideological position. By putting himself in the shoes of a consumer, Cooper aims to produce and address the everyday needs and desires of consumers in the marketplace (Colbert, 2007).

Whereas Cooper shifts the practitioner's responsibility to the commissioner, Mary (Storyteller) claims that responsibility belongs *at the brand level*. Moreover, Susie (Senior Vice Present Branded Entertainment) states that:

*"It's the responsibility of the producer to limit the amount of brand integration to make it always authentic to the story. You can't just have something slapped as seen from our shows as well. But as long as it is done in a subtle and responsible manner, I think we're in a universe where advertising exists everywhere."*

Susie (Senior Vice Present Branded Entertainment) further mentions “*the power of producers*” and highlights the connection between power and ethics. Responsibilities and power reside among market actors instead of governments. Susie’s following quote provides an illustrative example in which her narrative touches upon different epistemic conditions, particularly in regard to awareness of action, of moral significance and consequences:

*“The stuff that we get away with on [two TV shows] on [TV channel] amazes me, because it's a tried and trusted brand. And they're used to it. And it also depends on what the commercial team of [TV channel] are getting out of them. So, in the case of [the two TV shows], they have a big revenue share with us on those placements, and they're also selling all the advertising around it. So, you know, they've got the, we had a [brand integrated in TV show] for the first time in the UK this year. But [TV channel] let that happen because [the brand] are paying so much for sponsorship and extra advertising. So, it's a commercial game. [...] We gonna have to do more (in the future). I was chatting to someone yesterday from the US [...] he used to run [a media agency] in the US and did some big deals. And we were actually talking about the use of pharmaceuticals on air in America. And I was saying, it's quite shocking. When I look at (...) data around our shows in the US to see what brands are advertising around the shows. Yeah, you know, a really high percentage of pharmaceuticals. But he said: “Did you know that it wasn't legal until a number of years ago?” And it was the networks who campaigned with the government, for the government to get pharmaceuticals allowed to be on air for the simple reason they were running out of brands who would spend cash, and now America has a prescription, prescription drug problem? So, the power of broadcasters, if they want it, and they need the money, they will make stuff happen.”*

This quote illustrates that all stakeholders have some degree of responsibility for their action whether it is producing or consuming branded entertainment content. Specifically, in terms of branded entertainment consumption, practitioners assume consumer sovereignty. They follow the discursive strategy that consumers can make autonomous choices in neoliberal

markets (Carrington et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2016; Voola et al., 2018; Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019).

Overall, the shifting of responsibilities was a dominant discourse in which participants either responsibilised other practitioners, such as producers or commissioners, for limiting brand integrations, or portrayed consumers as savvy enough to understand branded entertainment formats. The range of participants engaged in shifting the focus of responsibilisation echoes Caruana and Chatzidakis' (2014) argument regarding the range of stakeholders engaged in shaping consumer responsibilisation. The responsibilisation of consumers was highlighted through the trade-offs mentioned by participants. They argued that consumers expect branded content on free online platforms such as YouTube and that this necessarily entails having to view commercial content. Practitioners further claimed that high quality and entertainment factors played a crucial role in these trade-offs, as they would lead to more acceptance of commercial content among consumers when viewing branded entertainment formats. Therefore, participants reflect low awareness of action, legitimising their actions through the shifting of responsibility, which is rooted in moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 1999). This is when participants exhibit the view that ethical standards do not apply to themselves when creating branded entertainment. Here, individual agency is overshadowed as responsibility is diffused cognitively (Alnuaimi et al., 2010), by moving accountability for the amount and/or understanding of brand integrations within branded entertainment to others. As a result, practitioners feel less responsibility for their individual actions since there are other stakeholders that can be made responsible for the ethical issues related to branded entertainment. As Bandura (1999, p. 198) points out, "when everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible." Moreover, when considering the shifting of responsibility, there is a tendency for responsibility to be seen in liability terms, as Young

(2011) would argue, as market actors try and assign blame for a certain action and its consequences to other actors. However, if responsibility is considered from a political lens (Young, 2011), it implies that different actors and their interactions all have a role to play in producing responsible or irresponsible branded entertainment content. This point, thus, illuminates that the shifting of responsibility neutralises or facilitates practitioners' disengagement in responsibility for a more just kind of branded entertainment (Young, 2011).

### 6.3 Walking the Regulatory Tightrope

Practitioners recognise that branded entertainment is poorly regulated and that "*it's gonna probably get out of control first before there's regulations*" (Mary, Storyteller). There is a recognition that it may be difficult to regulate, and responsibility is again shifted towards the consumer as "*there can often be a bit of self-policing that happens online, where the audience will go "hang the f\*\*\* on". They will report it*" (Lucas, Creative Director). Moreover, there were different perceptions around regulations between Europe and the US. In terms of the European context, Steven (Head of Partnerships, Sponsored Content and Creative Services) highlights tensions and restrictions of regulations concerning branded entertainment:

*"The industry has certainly evolved slowly, more slowly than it should because I think some of the regulations on broadcast particularly are a little, quite out of date. And they're quite restrictive. So, you know, you've got, so if we're looking at the broad linear broadcast, and Vimeo and the big platforms like [television online video on demand platforms] and obviously we're slightly skewed in the UK, because we've got the BBC [...], but if you look at our, our regulated platforms, our biggest platforms, entertainment platforms, they're regulated by Ofcom and Ofcom are very 20th century. [...] And I think, you know, we're now in a world, 2020 is here and we've got Netflix, you know, we've got YouTube, we've got a lot of other platforms who are not regulated the same way. And I think it's time for us to take, take some of the kind of restrictions off the Ofcom codes for broadcasters like ourselves. We can do more than this. Because*

*we're losing opportunities to the digital platforms and the US because they're already doing it. So, they're doing this [branded entertainment] on a global scale. ”*

However, practitioners in the US, like Peter, state that they hardly encounter regulatory issues in terms of branded entertainment. Yet, they acknowledge that some form of regulation could be beneficial. Nevertheless, Peter (Creative Director) fails to describe under which circumstances these regulations should apply:

*“I'm not saying that this is not important (regulation). I'm just saying that it is not an issue that I've seen or been part of any discussion so it's hard for me to come in. So, I understand how, how that is important and why that could be an issue and I hope that we can find some kind of work on standards that doesn't mean kind of destroying the experience for consumers.”*

What becomes evident here is that different discourses around regulations emerged in which US practitioners hardly encountered any regulatory issues compared to the UK. This demonstrates that when commercial interests merge with artistic considerations, cultural artefacts that obtain protection from regulation due to their artistic value may no longer have that immunity. Following Stiegler (2014), we can see the clear potential for branded entertainment to contribute to symbolic misery. This is because as soon as commerce enters entertainment products, cautious scrutiny is necessary to ensure that commercial interests are not attaining undue advantages in the market. This means that the legitimacy of branded entertainment could be challenged, at least in the UK context or in countries where mediatised modalities are increasingly regulated. Therefore, practitioners' pertinent awareness of the moral issues involved in branded entertainment is blurred and translates into the denial of the moral knowledge requirement for responsible conduct to occur.

Industry practitioners working in the UK context are conscious of the regulatory environment within which they operate. During the industry event observation in my fieldwork, Ofcom's Section 9 became a focal discussion point. Industry practitioners highlighted that, when working on television projects, compliance has a significant role from the start of the development of a programme. The code was discussed in terms of "*what is possible and what is not, to establish specific scenarios and work through them*" (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019). The reason for this is that they sought to understand instances in which brand integrations were "*editorially justified*" while at the same time being cautious about the creation of content that foregrounds products and brands too prominently (Observation Notes, 24 October 2019).

#### **6.4 Awareness of Consequences and Alternatives**

Awareness of the consequences of branded entertainment practitioners' actions is highlighted through the implicit connections that practitioners make between their actions and branded entertainment outcomes. Practitioners seemed to have a belief about the outcome of their actions and the ensuing consequences of branded entertainment content. For example, Christian's (Senior Director of Entertainment and Licensing) quote emphasises the potential for manipulation specifically regarding children:

*"It's scary that a brand can do that to a young child because he is just completely hypnotised by this whole thing (TV show). But exactly what brands are trying to do, I mean, he is in that world. And the engagement of that show is just translating, of course into: Sure, as soon as the show's over, he's going to play with that toy. He's going to still think about that world. And that's, that's the reason brands are doing this."*

Additionally, Christian notes that "*it's dangerous if brands are doing it in a harmful way*" but he does not disclose what he means by 'harmful.' Nevertheless, he implies an awareness of moral significance, pointing again to *de re* awareness of moral significance

(Arpaly 2003, 2015). Moreover, Christian states: “*We are a business. We do have to make money to be able to stay in business.*” This statement is interesting in terms of what it conveys about the ‘consequences’ of branded entertainment. Rather than focusing on ethical outcomes, he focuses on consequences related to the company’s financial health. In doing so, he legitimises that the production of marketing activities, such as branded entertainment, are vital to sustain culture production in today’s neoliberal marketplace. Once again, what becomes evident in Christian’s quote is a form of moral disengagement (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996) and the distortion of consequences mechanism (Kish-Gephart et al., 2014) in which he minimizes his own role in harmful actions and its consequences. Theoharakis et al. (2021) associate this with the pressure to strive for legitimacy based on individual and situational aspects and how context may result in moral disengagement and lead to misconceived narratives of legitimacy.

For most practitioners it was clear that there are not only alternatives to branded entertainment but also alternative ways of producing and/or communicating that content is branded entertainment. Practitioners would often refer to mediatised modalities and technology, depicting product placement or influencer marketing as worse alternatives by pointing out their disapproving practices, yet justifying branded entertainment’s difference and legitimacy. This becomes evident in Peter’s (Creative Director) quote:

*“I like to know, for example, if an influencer on Instagram is doing a paid, a paid post. So, I understand the intention of that [regulation], which is your question about ethics, I get it. But I think if the brand is doing it right and branded entertainment in particular, that is not just product placement, and someone else's thing has been sneaking in. If you're the producer and you announced that you're the producer, the whole thing is set up so I that's why I feel like I have less ethical concerns on that respect, because that's, that's what you say, this is mine, right? You don't need to make a statement on an ad to say this is my ad, right? Because you know, that's a f\*\*\*\*\* ad (...) I think for me, it's*

*the same thing. It needs to be clear. If it's, if it's clear you shouldn't have to make that statement. If you're having to make that statement you f\*\*\*\*\* up a long time ago."*

Peter's discursive strategy is contradictory because influencer marketing and its paid-for promotions are relatively clear compared to what occurs in branded entertainment formats. This discursive strategy is further emphasised in Chloe's (Head of Brand Partnerships) quote:

*"I think what's more, what's more shady, so to speak, is when you have talent promoting something on social media, and they're being paid for it and not tagging it, which you're not allowed to do, but it happens sometimes, right? That to me is like a direct endorsement and being paid for. But if you don't tell people that that's where I think it is shady. But branded entertainment is made by the brand and they want, the brand wants you to know that. So, I don't feel like that's like, there's... I don't have an ethics issue with that. (...) Like brands have been funding episodes and doing branded content and integrations and all that for so many years. Our media and the types of media and the ways you can tell stories now is so much more than just television, right? Or movies right now. It's all the short form and the streamers and the internet, you know, all the snapchats and that you know, snapchats making series, TV, you know, has their, you know. There's so many different places now to tell stories and I think production of content has become much more democratised."*

It is important to highlight that product placement, influencer marketing and branded entertainment's commonalities are in the nature of their influence. Product placement, influencer marketing and branded entertainment are immersive and concealed forms of influence in which audiences are entertained or follow someone's life. Indeed, all modalities embrace mediated influence to promote a brand or product, or even an ideology. This study was focused on branded entertainment, yet participants would frequently draw attention to these other forms of marketing communications. Often, they highlighted the unregulated experimental sphere of the push-pull of wanting to be free to innovate versus a recognition that there needs to be some form of regulation or guidelines underpinning innovation. This leads

back to the awareness of moral significance and the flawed regulations that resemble the “*Wild West*” (Lucas, Creative Director).

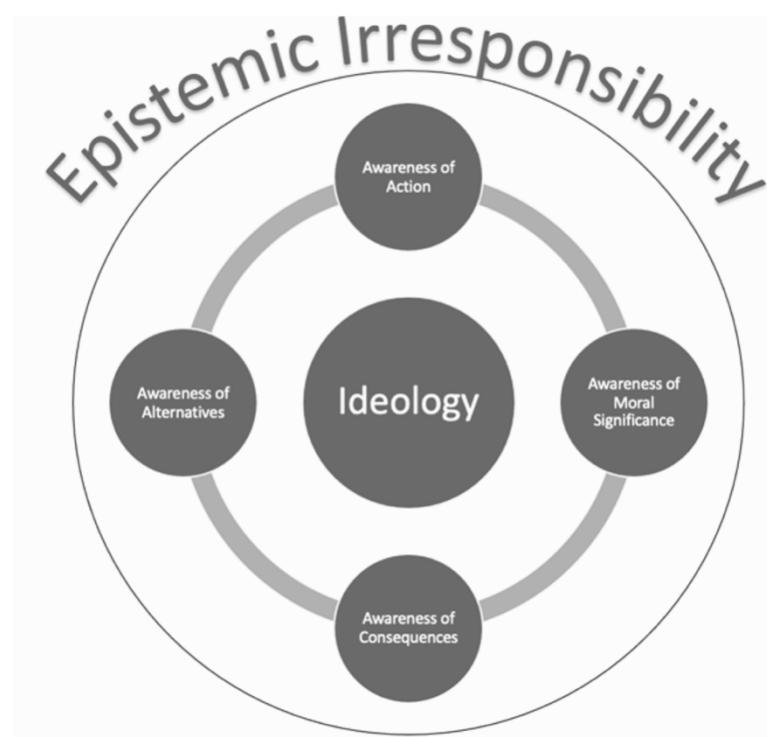
We know from other fields that the media is deeply grounded in, and used, ideologically in order to shape and influence ideological positions particularly in relation to positive positioning of capitalist messages (see Dean, 2005 on communicative capitalism). However, the field of branding largely neglects the prevalence of ideological work done by entertainment media.

## 6.5 Reflecting on Epistemic Responsibility and Branded Entertainment

Chapter 2 summarised the four requirements of epistemic responsibility: awareness of action, awareness of moral significance, awareness of consequences and awareness of alternatives. The findings of this chapter suggests that they are not separate categories. Instead, these requirements are interrelated implicating that one condition cannot exist in isolation of the others. This has become apparent through the kind of discourses that participants exhibited when talking about different aspects of epistemic responsibility.

The findings also revealed epistemic gaps that lead to epistemic irresponsibility in terms of the moral assessments that practitioners make about branded entertainment. This is reflected in the fluidity of the epistemic conditions which do not represent the logical opposite of epistemic responsibility. Instead, moral ideologies are at the core of practitioners’ understandings which cause epistemic irresponsibility (*Figure 11*).

Figure 11: Epistemic Irresponsibility



(Author's own, 2024)

While central to moral analyses of responsibilisation, to date epistemic condition remains largely neglected in relevant existing literature (Sher, 2009), particularly in consumer and marketing ethics research. The increasing use of branded entertainment as a marketing communication tool demands that marketing ethics scholars scrutinise the epistemic conditions necessary for analysing the ethical and responsibility issues that emerge through this dynamic communicative modality, including how and which market-based actors can be held accountable for branded entertainment's potentially detrimental consequences.

The findings establish that a process of responsibility shifting occurs alongside a concurrent responsibilisation of consumers, 'other' practitioners and policymakers through moral judgements that reflect how moral, immoral, and non-moral boundaries are discursively negotiated and continuously reinvented. Further, this process is inherently entwined with

neoliberal ideologies, in line with Dean's (2005) perspective the media and mediated products are deeply grounded in, and used ideologically to, the positive positioning of capitalist messages. Yet, branded entertainment practitioners largely neglect the ideological work they perform through their mediated practices. In this way, markets are constructed as amoral level playing fields where consumers are sovereign, free and fully informed, and where idealised policymakers have the necessary resources and technological expertise to regulate branded entertainment.

To summarise, to assess the epistemic responsibility of branded entertainment practitioners, it is essential to address the four awareness types as outlined by Rudy-Hiller (2018): awareness of action, awareness of moral significance, awareness of consequences, and awareness of alternatives. These dimensions are crucial boundary conditions that determine the ethical framework for evaluating practitioners' actions. Specifically, within the context of branded entertainment, the discussed epistemic conditions are critical for addressing the notion of epistemic irresponsibility.

Epistemic irresponsibility arises when these conditions are inadequately fulfilled and particularly concern issues of intentionality and ambiguity. When practitioners deliberately disregard or maintain ambiguity regarding their marketing objectives in persuasive actions – a critical type of awareness according to the first condition (Mele, 2010; Sliwa, 2017) – they may be deemed to behave epistemically irresponsibly. This intentional neglect conflicts with the necessary reflective awareness emphasised by Hetherington (2002) and Sher (2008), which is essential for assessing responsibility at both individual and collective levels (Kidd, 2016; Fleisher and Šešelja, 2020). Moreover, the second condition, awareness of moral significance, becomes crucial. Epistemic irresponsibility occurs when branded entertainment practitioners

fail to acknowledge or misinterpret the moral implications of their content (Rudy-Hiller, 2018). This misalignment stemmed from both a lack of *de dicto* awareness of explicit moral values or *de re* awareness of societal constructs of morality (Arpaly, 2003; Talbert, 2013). Such lapses contribute to a scenario where moral boundaries in branded entertainment are blurred, potentially perpetuating ethically dubious practices. Similarly, inadequate awareness of consequences, the third condition, can lead to epistemic irresponsibility. When practitioners overlook or underestimate the foreseeable outcomes of their actions (Zimmerman, 1997; Vargas, 2005), they are inadvertently or knowingly contributing to negative societal impacts, such as reinforcing neoliberal ideologies through covert persuasive strategies within branded entertainment. The fourth and final condition, awareness of alternatives, highlights the possibility of epistemic irresponsibility when practitioners disregard or are unaware of morally permissible alternatives (Levy, 2011), as shown in the data. This neglect limits ethical discourse and innovation within branded entertainment, thus potentially perpetuating practices that prioritise commercial interests over societal well-being.

Consequently, integrating the concept of epistemic irresponsibility into discussions of branded entertainment emphasises the critical importance of rigorous epistemic standards. These standards not only delineate boundaries of ethical responsibility but also highlight the ethical imperative for practitioners to engage thoughtfully with the moral and societal implications of their actions. By adhering to these stringent criteria, stakeholders in branded entertainment can effectively navigate and mitigate the risks associated with epistemic irresponsibility to foster a culture of accountability and promote industry practices that are not only ethically informed but also responsive to broader societal concerns.

## 6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined developments in branded entertainment through an ethical lens and focused on the boundaries of legitimacy and responsibilisation in branded entertainment. The chapter shows the invisibility of brands within branded entertainment, and how this contributes to the storytelling message becoming the medium for the delivery of branded communications and, thus, the reversing of McLuhan's (1964/2010) idea that the medium is the message. In this way, branded entertainment can contribute to symbolic misery (Stiegler, 2014), by necessitating cautious scrutiny due to its commercial, persuasive nature.

This chapter also illuminates participants' accounts of the ethical issues involved in branded entertainment. While European practitioners tended to be more aware of the need to consider ethical and responsibility issues in branded entertainment, their American counterparts did not believe that such issues were particularly relevant to their everyday practices. The findings shed light on participants' views regarding regulation and how they are influenced by such regulatory frameworks. Participants acknowledge the challenges involved in attempts to regulate branded entertainment given the ongoing shifts in technology in this area and the ever-changing media consumption practices of consumers. Indeed, the findings show no consensus about practitioners' moral perspectives on branded entertainment and where they believe responsibility lies for ensuring that consumers are not deceived by the commercial drivers of this form of marketing communication.

Nevertheless, the findings reflect a shifting of responsibility from practitioners onto other branded entertainment actors and consumers, where consumers are viewed as being fully capable of distinguishing between branded and conventional entertainment. The findings illuminate the discourses and actions that are connected to ideology, legitimacy and awareness of moral responsibility among practitioners, foregrounding how their discourses affect their

(im)moral actions in the production, distribution, and consumption of branded entertainment. In doing so, the findings reveal practitioners' processes of responsibilisation, illuminating ideological legitimisation and the ways that branded entertainment practitioners shift responsibility for branded entertainment actions, and their consequences, onto stakeholders other than themselves.

Finally, the chapter draws these findings together by highlighting how epistemic irresponsibility can occur. As practitioners show awareness of action, awareness of moral significance, awareness of consequences and awareness of alternatives, they can be considered epistemically responsible for their actions. Yet, findings revealed epistemic gaps that enable epistemic irresponsibility through the morally myopic and ideologically driven assessments that practitioners make about their branded entertainment practices.

## CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The media and entertainment landscape are in a period of sustained change. Central to this thesis and to this change is what Jenkins (2006) termed convergence culture. The development of branded entertainment can be seen as part of this convergence of cultural formats and the primary aim of this thesis was to establish a theoretical lens through which to understand how branded entertainment developments have changed the marketing and entertainment landscape by exploring the interrelationships of practitioners' actions within discourse and text. This thesis has examined the growing importance of branded entertainment, as a relatively novel phenomenon, within global marketing communications and branding strategies. This final chapter summarises the key findings of the previous chapters, addresses the research questions posed at the outset and articulates the theoretical, managerial and policy implications of the thesis.

### 7.1 Return to the Research Aim and Questions

The introductory chapter set out the aim of the thesis and the underpinning research questions and the following section returns to these to indicate how they have been answered within this thesis. The overall aim of this thesis is to understand how branded entertainment developments have changed the marketing and entertainment landscape by exploring the interrelationships of practitioners' actions within discourses and text. The following guiding research questions were employed to address the aim:

RQ1: How has the conceptualisation of product placement evolved into branded entertainment according to industry stakeholders?

RQ 2: What are practitioners' key considerations when creating branded entertainment?

RQ 3: How are branded entertainment projects governed by industry stakeholders?

RQ 4: Where does responsibility lie, according to industry practitioners, in terms of how consumers engage with and understand branded entertainment?

Chapters 2 and 4 addressed question one in terms of illustrating the evolution of product placement into branded entertainment from the perspectives of participants and analysis of industry documents and branded entertainment projects. Chapter 5 largely deals with question two through outlining the new forms of collaboration that are required and how different stakeholders work together to develop such projects. Similarly, Chapter 5 illuminates the governance of branded entertainment projects while Chapter 6 addresses the final research question. The following section provides a detailed summary of the thesis, indicating how these questions have been addressed.

## 7.2 Summary of Findings

The research question that informs this thesis is; how have branded entertainment developments changed the marketing and entertainment landscape? Chapter 2 set out to position this study in relation to underpinning theory. As branded entertainment is a promotional media, the chapter begins through reviewing hybrid marketing communications in order to conceptualise current thinking around branded entertainment. The links between branded entertainment and sponsorship are established and the shift away from product placement to brand integration is outlined. This discussion is set within broader discussions of sociocultural approaches to branding, where the idea of the brandscape as it relates to film and entertainment marketing is discussed, thereby moving us towards understanding the distributed nature of branded entertainment. This is followed by a discussion of the stakeholders and approaches towards brand governance within branded entertainment. Such a review of the

stakeholders leads us to discuss the historical tensions between art and the market and how this relates to such a commercial promotional phenomenon as branded entertainment. Moving on from an understanding of the tensions within branded entertainment, comes a discussion of regulation, ethics and consumer literacy. This discussion is central to the theorisation of the thesis. In fact, the thesis began as discussed in Chapter 1 and three with a focus on the consumer. However, due to the significant challenge even for highly engaged consumers to differentiate between standard film and television productions and branded entertainment, the focus of the study shifted towards practitioners in the field. Chapter 2 concludes by demonstrating the prevalence of this model as a promotional and entertainment mode, and the complexity involved in theorising based on the underlying dynamics. Therefore, the justification for this thesis and its focus on understanding practitioner approaches to branded entertainment is established.

Following the articulation of the research, context and underpinning theory in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 moves on to outlining and justifying the research approach taken. As this is a developing an under-theorised area adopting a broad, qualitative approach is justified. Within this, the overall analytical approach adopted is mediated discourse analysis. As branded entertainment is a communicative medium, adopting an approach which centralises a focus on communication, both intentional and unintentional is highly appropriate. As branded entertainment brings together practitioners from different industries and perspectives, taking an MDA approach and a focus on the nexus of practices allows us to account for the divergent sets of practices that they bring. Thus, this approach further comes with a sense of assurance and proficiency in addressing such divergence within the analysis.

The research adopts the ontological philosophy of critical realism, which facilitates the description of social events and the examination of their underlying mechanisms while acknowledging that these events are filtered through human interpretation and experience. This allows for different perspectives and interpretations. Chapter 3 continues to justify the research design and methods applied in addressing the research questions. In line with permitted methods within MDA, the study consisted of practitioner interviews, a practitioner event observation and multimodal analysis of films and TV series that constituted branded entertainment. This range of methods and forms of data allowed me insight into the complexity involved in producing such projects and in how they are subsequently positioned within the entertainment and promotional landscape. The multimodal analysis involved the application of a range of heuristic questions to the data. Following this, the data were coded with the key findings sections identified.

Chapter 4, the first findings chapter, sets out the complex landscape of branded entertainment. This presents the ‘discourses in action’ in the field, demonstrating the continuing shifting nature of terminology and practice as well as the range of practitioners involved. This chapter illustrates the motivations behind the development of branded entertainment projects from the perspectives of brands, film and television producers and advertising agencies, positioning this within a discussion of the historical trajectories leading to the formation of branded entertainment. As discussed in Chapter 4, practitioners lack a coherent and definitive definition of the boundaries of branded entertainment. It demonstrates the lack of conceptual clarity that exists within the sector and recognises the benefits of that in terms of the ability of the branded entertainment to evolve and adapt as the media landscape adapts. The evolution of practices within branded entertainment does not inherently pose a problem; however, the lack of clear responsibility concerning the impact on consumers and the

artistic nature of entertainment products require further consideration. At the same time Chapter 4 establishes a need for some working definitions to inform academic exploration of the field and this is specifically in order to understand the broader impact of this evolution both in terms of the implications for those developing and consuming entertainment products and in how this impacts the promotional landscape for brands.

Chapter 5 moves on to illustrate the nature of new forms of collaboration that have come about due to the development and evolution of branded entertainment. The chapter starts by outlining the findings related to the nature of intellectual property and the shift from brands engaging with film and television as forms of sponsorship to a situation where joint ownership has become more prevalent. Chapter 5 also demonstrates the move away from work-for-hire contracts as collaborative approaches to developing and exploiting IP have become more prevalent. It highlights the importance of merging of the historical trajectories from distinct industry backgrounds, as they navigate and adapt to novel modes of collaboration. Linked to this is a shift in power dynamics where the logic of Hollywood has resulted in ‘talent’ or stars becoming more central to the development of branded entertainment projects than is (was) the case in conventional promotional media such as advertising. In doing so, the worlds of art and commerce come together and shape the nature of collaboration that is preferred within this context. The findings not only reveal a shift from the “Madison Avenue” paradigm to the logic of “Hollywood”, but they also demonstrate that practitioners frequently move between working on the brand side and moving into production.

Chapter 6 completes the findings section with a focus on legitimacy and responsibilisation within branded entertainment. What becomes evident from both earlier chapters and the focal point of this chapter is that branded entertainment media, given the level

of brand integration and the portrayal of these projects as entertainment films or television shows, demands careful scrutiny from regulatory and ethical perspectives. The chapter highlights the invisibility of the brand as commercial sponsor in these projects, as well as the shifting of responsibility for interpreting branded entertainment as promotional media onto the consumer, or other practitioners or regulators, a pattern prevalent among my participants.

The need for a regulatory framework to inform branded entertainment was acknowledged and links to other evolving promotional media made by participants. These findings were situated within the context of responsibilisation within the marketing and consumer literature. The lens of epistemic irresponsibility was then applied to move to the development of an ethical framework to inform the understanding of branded entertainment.

### **7.3 Theoretical Contributions**

In order to illuminate the findings of the thesis, the theoretical lens of responsibilisation was used. Using responsibilisation as a lens allows to contribute to the understanding of the evolution from product placement to branded entertainment. Within this context, it is crucial to highlight the importance of responsibilisation in understanding the roles and actions of those involved in creating and developing branded entertainment. This includes examining the evolving conduct of practitioners and how this has influenced existing product placement models. It thus necessitates an exploration of how these changes have led to the adoption of new working practices, which finally culminates in the examination of ethical considerations, which have been an ongoing concern in related product placement research (Gupta and Gould, 1997; Wenner, 2004; Hackley, Tiwsakul and Preuss, 2008; Eagle and Dahl, 2018; Sharma and Bumb, 2022).

As highlighted in the literature review, current theorisation efforts of branded entertainment lack a comprehensive definition and adequate conceptual frameworks to explain these processes (Arhio and Raunio, 2015; Kunz, Elsässer and Santomier, 2016; Asmussen et al., 2018; Dias and Harrach, 2018; van Loggerenberg, Enslin, and Terblanche-Smit, 2021). Navigating the discourses of theorisation surrounding branded entertainment involves a careful examination of pivotal research articles that have shaped our understanding of this multifaceted concept. Hudson and Hudson's (2006) seminal article was instrumental in providing a foundational perspective on the transition from product placement to branded entertainment, elucidating branded entertainment's evolution and impact on marketing communication practices by highlighting the level of brand integration. Branded entertainment comprises of high levels of brand integration, which entails a profound embedding of brands within storylines, and is influenced by the type of media utilised, brand attributes, promotional efforts, consumer perceptions, regulatory constraints, and placement characteristics (Hudson and Hudson, 2006). Branded entertainment thus draws on Russell's (1998) plot placement dimension where the brand significantly influences the storyline by occupying a central role in the plot.

Building upon Hudson and Hudson's (2006) work, research from Kunz et al. (2016) has further refined my understanding of the branded entertainment complexities by examining the intertwining of advertisement and content in various hybrid messages (Balasubramanian, 1994) such as programme sponsorship, advertisement, product placement and native advertisement, with branded entertainment representing the most intricate form of advertisement-content intertwining. Similarly, Russell (2007) explored advertainment, which represents the merging of advertising and entertainment through varying levels of brand

integration, thereby identifying product placement, product integration and branded entertainment as distinct typologies. More recently, she highlighted that product placements modalities are progressing into wider entertainment marketing pursuits which requires agencies to expand their expertise (Russell, 2019). Branded entertainment represents the highest level of integration, where the brand actively shapes content creation to achieve seamless integration, thus marking a significant evolution in the relationship between advertising and entertainment. The most recent attempt, to my knowledge, of further theorising branded entertainment was by van Loggerenberg et al. (2021) who define branded entertainment as brand-driven interactions that offer the opportunity to establish brand resonance through authentic storytelling.

The findings reveal ongoing conceptual confusion (Tähtinen and Havila, 2019) regarding branded entertainment, as participants either approached definitions cautiously or struggled to articulate their own definitions of the concept. This became especially apparent when discussing different hybrid modalities, where my informants observed a proliferation of terms leading to conceptual fluidity (Satori, 2009). Companies strategically employ specific terminology, such as branded entertainment, to pursue their own strategic objectives (Ho, Pang and Choy, 2020), including communication, differentiation, and other strategic efforts. In doing so, they reiterate collective ambiguity (Satori, 2009). This ambiguity was also seen among my informants, as they offered similar definitions while presenting alternative terms for their definitions. As such, product placement, brand placement, branded content and branded entertainment were often used interchangeably to describe various forms of product or brand integration into entertainment content. This inconsistency in terminology underpins the confusion or uncertainty about distinctions between different hybrid modalities, which potentially complicates theoretical advancements concerning the branded entertainment phenomenon.

Despite valuable contributions, notable gaps persist in our understanding of branded entertainment, particularly regarding the nuanced interplay between advertising and entertainment. Patsiaouras' (2019) assertion that the lack of universal definitions indicates a dynamic research area resonates with these observations. This suggests that while there have been commendable attempts to study branded entertainment, the evolving nature of its definitions highlights ongoing challenges in conceptualisation. Consequently, based on an extensive literature review and my findings, I have unpacked dimensions and boundary conditions of branded entertainment to enhance its conceptualisation as outlined in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Branded Entertainment Dimensions

Dimension	Description
Type of Content	Film/TV shows, web series, music videos, video games, books, plays
Brand Integration	Peripheral, Moderate, Deep
Brand Placement Transparency	Covert, Discreet, Overt
Content Intent	Educational, Informative, Entertaining, Inspirational
Engagement Level	Passive, Active

Table 4 outlines different dimensions of branded entertainment, which refers to specific elements that help shape the conceptualisation and execution of branded entertainment content in film and television. It encompasses a wide range of *types of content* including films, TV shows, web series, music videos, video games, books, and plays. These content types must employ storytelling techniques that enable different levels of *brand integration* and *brand placement transparency*, which are closely aligned.

Further, brand integration focuses on the strategic incorporation of the brand into the content's narrative structure and involves how deeply and meaningfully the brand is woven into the storyline or overall plot development. Different levels of brand integration, such as deep, moderate, or peripheral, describe the extent to which the brand's presence influences the content's narrative flow and engagement with the audience.

Also, brand placement transparency focuses on how subtly or prominently the brand is presented to the audience within that narrative framework. In other words, it refers to how the brand is presented to the audience, whether through covert, discreet, or overt methods. Covert placement subtly integrates the brand by predominantly reflecting its values, identity or purpose, without disrupting audiences' immersion in the story. Discreet placement ensures that the brand is noticeable but does not overshadow the main narrative, maintaining a balance between brand visibility and narrative coherence. Overt placement makes the brand highly visible and is acknowledged within the storyline or dialogue, ensuring that the audience unmistakably recognises the brand and its attributes.

Both levels of brand integration and brand placement transparency work in tandem. Peripheral brand integration and covert brand placement transparency complement each other, emphasising no or subtle brand appearances that blend seamlessly into the content without disrupting the audience's experience. An example is Chipotle's *RAD Lands* (2017), an iTunes-exclusive limited series that highlights the brand's core values of fresh food, ingredients, and responsible farming without promoting the brand itself. Moderate brand integration and discreet brand placement transparency align closely; it ensures the brand is noticeable yet integrated naturally into the narrative. For example, Spanish beer brand Estrella Damm produced the short film *Vale* (2015) featuring Rachael, portrayed by renowned actress Dakota

Johnson, who is travelling alone through Spain. The story unfolds as Rachael arrives in Ibiza and meets a group of Spanish friends who accompany her around the island to show her its cuisine, beaches, and beverages, including Estrella Damm beer, which is discreetly woven into various scenes.

Deep brand integration and overt brand placement transparency are interconnected and integrate the brand deeply into the storyline or character development while prominently featuring it to ensure clear recognition and impact on the audience. The short film *The Tail of Thomas Burberry* (2016) is an example, which chronicles the journey of Thomas Burberry, the founder of the renowned Burberry brand. It portrays significant moments that have influenced the brand's history and ethos, transcending different eras, individuals, and locations, with the iconic trench coat prominently featured throughout the film. Another example is the film *Air* (2023), which highlights Michael Jordan's career and his profound impact on basketball, including his iconic tenure with the Chicago Bulls. It delves into his journey, achievements, and enduring cultural influence, solidifying his status as a celebrity brand both in sports and beyond.

Moreover, *content intent* plays a crucial role, with media being created to educate, inform, entertain, or inspire the audience. These content creations can often overlap, blending multiple intentions to enhance their appeal and effectiveness. Educational content primarily aims to teach or provide knowledge to the audience, with examples including documentaries, educational shows, or films with strong educational themes and messages. Informative content, on the other hand, focuses on delivering factual information or insights about a particular topic or event, such as factual television series, and informative documentaries. Entertaining content is designed to amuse, engage, or provide enjoyment to the audience, with comedies, dramas,

reality TV, and action films serving as typical examples. Inspirational content aims to motivate, uplift, or inspire the audience, often through powerful stories, emotional journeys, or messages of hope and perseverance, as seen in biographical films, or films and TV shows with strong positive themes that encourage personal growth and reflection.

Finally, *engagement levels* also differ, ranging from passive, where the audience consumes content without interaction, to active, where the audience engages directly with the content. Passive engagement involves merely watching without any form of participation, while active engagement includes activities such as commenting, sharing, or interacting with the content in a meaningful way. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities and strategies of branded entertainment.

In addition, I have established boundary conditions for branded entertainment projects to provide a structured framework that addresses challenges and limitations within specific dimensions. These conditions ensure that the integration of brands into entertainment content aligns seamlessly with creative goals and practical constraints. For example, by defining clear objectives, navigating practical limitations such as budget and regulatory requirements, and maintaining authenticity in brand integration, stakeholders can foster initiatives that enhance audience engagement and brand impact. In other words, these boundary conditions facilitate a balanced strategy that aligns creative expression with commercial goals, ensuring that branded entertainment projects are engaging, impactful, and sustainable, thereby enhancing both the audience experience and brand value. The boundary conditions including descriptions are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Boundary Conditions of Branded Entertainment

Boundary Condition	Description
Objectives	Goals of branded entertainment, such as enhancing engagement, building brand affinity, raising awareness, or delivering specific messaging objectives
Relevance	Brand must be relevant to the storyline and audience
Consistency	Ensuring branded entertainment aligns with the brand's values, message, and/or identity
Narrative Fit	Brand should fit naturally into the plot
Authenticity	Ensuring that the brand's presence feels natural and authentic within the content
Audience Acceptance	Integration must be acceptable to the audience
Regulatory Compliance	Adherence to advertising regulations and guidelines to avoid misleading
Ethics	Transparency with the audience, avoiding misleading content, and respecting cultural sensitivities
Financial Constraints	Budget limitations that impact production quality and distribution scope
Format and duration specification	Format (such as genre, style, or medium) and the length (duration or runtime) that branded entertainment should adhere to within media contexts and/or platforms

By first defining the dimensions of their branded entertainment, practitioners can then establish the boundary conditions that ensure the project aligns with both creative and commercial goals as well as practical constraints. This sequential approach helps in crafting effective and engaging branded entertainment content to resonate with both audiences and stakeholders. Additionally, building on the literature review and based on my research, I provide a definition of branded entertainment that guides the establishment of these dimensions and boundary conditions as follows:

*Branded entertainment is a form of integrated marketing communications which is a collaborative effort between the brand, the producer, the agency, the platform and talent to create entertainment content that employs creative storytelling techniques. It reflects the brand's purpose, value and identity by providing culturally resonant and authentic (brand) messages to attract and engage consumers on a global scale. The*

*main aim is to produce a convincing, independent, creative cultural artefact whilst simultaneously achieving communications objectives for the brand.*

Moreover, my research unpacks the conceptual boundaries of branded entertainment through the lens of responsibilisation. In doing so, it places consideration of ethics and regulation at the centre of this theorisation.

### **7.3.1 Convergence and Theory-Building**

My findings highlight the ongoing confusion in theorising branded entertainment. Acknowledging that the main purpose of theory-building and terminology usage is to establish clear definitions, which in turn serve as the basis for articulating and conducting research on branded entertainment poses significant challenges. This is due to constantly evolving nature of the field, leaving little opportunity to solidify a definitive understanding of what branded entertainment entails. Thus, by following an abductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019), it allowed me to explore branded entertainment and its historical roots to uncover the underlying structures and processes that have contributed to how branded entertainment has evolved over time. Using MDA as the analytical framework provided insight into the complexities and contradictions inherent in the discourses in action.

Consequently, the significant theoretical contribution of this thesis is in establishing clearer conceptual boundaries to aid in the development of a more nuanced theoretical framework that captures the complexities inherent in the branded entertainment phenomenon, which further contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of its underlying dynamics. This was particularly important concerning responsibilisation because unpacking and

illuminating the conceptual boundaries of branded entertainment helped to delineate roles, responsibilities and expectations. As ambiguous concepts can lead to confusion regarding responsibilities, it can be challenging to hold individuals or groups accountable. Therefore, it was crucial to offer a clear understanding of the ever-continual shifting branded entertainment endeavours by drawing out key features to delineate its complexities and evolution over time to unpack and further clarify branded entertainment conceptualisations.

Building on Jenkin and Deuze's (2008) notion of convergence culture, which has accelerated since the beginning of the media evolution (Stöber, 2004), the growing convergence has blurred traditional boundaries between promotional and entertainment media, continuing historical trends where these domains have become increasingly intertwined over time. As convergence is further fuelled by the intersection and merging of various media platforms, industries, and technological advancements, this has led to new modes of content creation, distribution and consumption patterns, which is inherent in branded entertainment developments. However, while Jenkin's saw the evolution of the media landscape from convergence to 'spreadability' (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013) where the power of media conglomerates diminished while user generated content gained increasing momentum, my thesis establishes the need to continue to focus on shifting power dynamics within the promotional media, entertainment and branding industries. My findings indicate a merging of the historical bodies of industry knowledge from the entertainment and promotional media and mainstream brands, resulting in new forms of media which is not fully understood by regulators or consumers. Therefore, this thesis adds to the discourse on media fragmentation and audience response strategies (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012; Batra and Keller, 2016), highlighting the increasing difficulty faced by media owners (Chipp and Chakravorty, 2016) and brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011) in managing consumers as well as the ethical implications derived

from such fragmentation and the pursuit of new avenues to connect (and ultimately sell) to consumers.

### 7.3.2 The Message is the Medium

A secondary contribution relates to considerations of storytelling and emotions in marketing. Storytelling is understood as central to persuasive marketing communications (Woodside, 2010), and is an essential element of cultural branding and how iconic brands establish themselves to remain relevant and resonant in an ever-changing marketplace (Holt, 2003; Holt and Cameron, 2010). By tapping into the ideological zeitgeist, brands can forge deeper emotional connections with consumers. Therefore, this strategic approach has been instrumental in the management of cultural branding strategies (Ganassali and Matysiewicz, 2021) and highlights the significance of storytelling where narratives are aligned with prevailing cultural trends and values. In the context of branded entertainment, conventional storytelling frameworks are employed wherein elements like characters, plot, conflict, and resolution are intentionally adapted to fulfil brand objectives (Houghton, 2021).

However, to date, the marketing literature has predominantly focused on other promotional modes like advertising or influencer marketing, examining how storytelling is utilised for persuasion within marketing communications or campaigns. While narratives in commercial settings are designed to achieve persuasion, narratives in non-commercial settings, such as in film and television, generally aim to provide escapism, enjoyment, or astonishment (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) without any underlying or hidden motives. In this context, the role of narrative transportation (Escalas, 2007; Van Laer et al., 2014) is crucial as it facilitates persuasion by reducing negative cognitive reactions, thereby enhancing the realism of the experience and eliciting strong emotional responses. In doing so, brands specifically

exploit empathy by the condition of capitalism in market-driven economies to meet consumer needs and desires while simultaneously pursuing profit-oriented goals (Adams, 2016).

Therefore, storytellers and marketers craft narratives that not only entertain but also influence attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of branded entertainment efforts in film and television shows. As evident from my findings, branded narratives can differ in how the brand is woven into the storyline, ranging from overt integrations, as seen in *The Lego Movie*, to covert integrations, as exemplified by the documentary *Hair Power: Me and My Afro*. In the case of covert integration, the content generally reflects the brand's personality, identity, or values. Consequently, the concealment of brands within branded entertainment highlights the transformation of storytelling becoming the medium for delivering branded communications. It thus emphasises that 'the message is the medium' takes precedence over McLuhan's (1964/2010) "the medium is the message". Consequently, branded entertainment may fuel symbolic misery, which urges its careful examination due to its commercial and persuasive character (Stiegler, 2014).

Given the growing significance of storytelling in both branded entertainment and marketing communications overall, it requires increased vigilance and a more nuanced understanding concerning the ethical implications of branded entertainment initiatives. In doing so, this calls for greater scrutiny and attention to the moral considerations and potential consequences associated with the integration of brands into entertainment content. This is particularly important due to increased notions of consumer responsibilisation (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), which not only encourages consumers but also expects them to be more informed, critical and active in their decision-making processes. This implies that consumers can make autonomous choices in neoliberal markets (Carrington et al. 2016; Eckhardt and

Dobscha, 2019; Shaw et al., 2016; Voola et al., 2018), thereby holding them accountable for the consequences of their actions as consumers.

As my initial focus for this thesis was on the consumer, it became evident through my primary data collection phrase that they struggled to articulate the content they were consuming. This means that, despite consumers often being depicted as media and advertising literate, there exists a significant gap in their understanding of the persuasive strategies employed in branded entertainment. Consequently, it means that consumers are not necessarily able to identify, analyse, and comprehend persuasion attempts, which could lead to uninformed decision-making. Without this awareness, consumers may remain unaware that their perceptions and behaviours are being influenced by marketers' persuasive strategies.

However, as current trends of individualisation persist, it reinforces the idea that individuals can be held accountable for their actions within these complex and deregulated markets, perpetuating a cycle where consumers bear the burden of navigating market dynamics and their consequences (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). Consequently, there is an expectation that the consumer possesses a sophisticated understanding in terms of how the intricacies of how marketing communications function, particularly within the realm of branded entertainment. As such, due to the complexities and evolving nature of branded entertainment initiatives, it raises questions about who should be held responsible for their ethical implications, further challenging traditional notions of responsibility where regulations are usually overseen by government agencies or industry bodies.

Thus, it necessitates a deeper examination of ethical frameworks to ensure not only consumer and societal welfare but also the preservation of artistic integrity and the promotion

of transparency in marketing practices within the entertainment industry. It is important to address these ethical implications to uphold trust and integrity within the branded entertainment ecosystem, as well as within marketing communications more broadly. In doing so, it is crucial to acknowledge that consumer responsibilisation is influenced by various intersecting agents, (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014) such as media, brands, and governments, all of which have a stake in safeguarding various stakeholders, and broader society.

### 7.3.3 Advancing the Complexities in the Film Brandscape

A third contribution is to the development of the film brandscape (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2013). O'Reilly and Kerrigan outline how the various components of a film can collectively constitute a brandscape within which individual brands fight for meaning. Moreover, the brandscape assists consumers in comprehending what a film offers, the various brands such as actors, directors, genre, etc. all communicate certain meanings. However, this theoretical framework falls short in addressing new persuasion techniques, such as branded entertainment, which further impact the theorisation of the film brandscape.

While the conceptualisation of the film brandscape acknowledges the diverse stakeholders engaged in film production and consumption, I have demonstrated how novel forms of collaboration are prompted by the rise of branded entertainment. In doing so, I examined how collaborating brands are affected by their involvement in branded entertainment projects. Therefore, the novel and different forms of brand governance identified accommodate the changes - and increased merging - of the advertising and entertainment industries. As brand governance entails a set of management practices aimed at integrating various brand components to provide value to both consumer and other stakeholders (Ind and Bjerke, 2007), the thesis has demonstrated how it is imperative to examine how these practices operate within the context of branded entertainment.

Furthermore, the film brandscape illuminates the profoundly collaborative nature of film and branded entertainment, which demonstrates the essential role of co-creation and the imperative for stakeholder engagement to foster an interactive exchange of access and dialogue among pertinent parties (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). In doing so, the film brandscape helps to illuminate how co-creation and stakeholders drive creative endeavours while ensuring that all

relevant parties actively participate in, for example shaping narratives, integration of the brand and so on to enhance the overall brand experience.

Therefore, this collaboration encourages novel possibilities for brand alliances (Bernazzani, 2019), moving beyond transactional relationships and in which industry stakeholders, such as brands, advertising agencies, talent and creative producers form temporary relationships in order to achieve varied marketing goals through cross-disciplinary cooperation (Grabher, 2002; Hadida, Heide, and Bell, 2019) but rather, fosters longer-term perspectives. While the central brand may have considerable influence in decisions regarding collaboration and content creation, this dynamic also affects other brands within the film brandscape. For instance, brands may carefully choose their partnerships to align with their strategic positioning and desired brand image. This consideration extends not only to commercial brands involved in branded entertainment, but also to talent and actors, who are themselves regarded as brands and thus carefully evaluate their affiliations within the film brandscape. In this sense, it is no longer about placing a corporate brand within the film brandscape but rather, placing filmic brands or branded elements within the corporate brand.

This thesis has thus further illuminated changes in power dynamics in advancing the understanding and intricacies of the film brandscape, where individual actors within the film brandscape are increasingly forced to either give up and take on control. This was particularly evident in my findings when my informants discussed the integration of A-list talent into branded entertainment formats who would often negotiate substantial creative input in exchange for their involvement.

This dynamic further highlights the importance of management of IP ownership, marking a noticeable shift in power dynamics. Particularly, the transition from traditional work-for-hire arrangements to ownership of intellectual property signifies a substantial investment for brands, which signifies a shift towards long-term strategic planning. Moreover, it suggests that brands are increasingly recognising the value of securing ownership rights to wield greater control and influence over their marketing assets in the evolving branded entertainment landscape. This move not only enhances brand longevity (Preece et al., 2019), but also transforms branded entertainment via films and television shows into lasting cultural artefacts that can shape narrative, ideologies and consumer perceptions. In this sense, the final product can be regarded as a marketplace icon (Kerrigan, 2018; Yalkin, 2021).

#### **7.4 Managerial Implications**

In the contemporary landscape of marketing communications and branding, practitioners are faced with the crucial tasks of articulating and defending the value of branded entertainment efforts as well as communications efforts more broadly. When participating in branded entertainment, brands are putting their investments at stake, as results are neither guaranteed nor easily traceable, especially when compared to more traditional advertising methods such as a television commercial. Therefore, to substantiate the impact and effectiveness of branded entertainment, practitioners should establish robust metrics that can help demonstrate return on investment.

Moreover, storytelling has evolved as a significant and increasingly creative form of promotion within marketing communications and branding. It has emerged as a distinctive and powerful tool; however, the depth and nuances of storytelling within marketing are often overlooked or not fully recognised. Unlike conventional narratives, storytelling in marketing

communications purposefully operates within a unique realm where narratives serve to subtly promote a brand or product while simultaneously engaging audiences. Therefore, practitioners in branding and marketing communications could benefit from developing the necessary skills, such as creative writing, visual and verbal communication, digital literacy and market intelligence to effectively use storytelling within marketing communications to attract and engage audiences.

Conversely, creatives and storytellers have the opportunity to realise that their roles can extend beyond mere artistic expressions by developing and embracing fluency around promotional approaches, such as branded entertainment. Adopting a broader skillset allows creatives and storytellers to attract additional clients, including brands, providing them with new opportunities to realise their creative visions while also serving as an additional source of income. As the marketing communications industry is likely to further converge with the entertainment industry, the expansion of new skillsets will assist creatives and storytellers in sustaining and meeting the changing demands of the industry. To bridge the gap effectively, skillsets in both the advertising and entertainment industries need to encompass broader competencies. This includes proficiency in utilising data analytics and algorithms for content creation, mastering storytelling across various platforms and channels, developing multimedia production skills, and being adaptable to new technologies, trends, and audience preferences.

As creative practitioners engage in the development of promotional content, a critical consideration involves the ethical dimensions surrounding specific industries, brands, products and narratives. Issues related to alcohol, drugs, guns, and other sensitive subjects require practitioners to develop an informed awareness of their own ideological positions in the creation of branded entertainment. This involves a thoughtful examination of the ethical

implications associated with promoting certain brands or products and further requires a general understanding of the broader potential impact branded entertainment can have on societies. By adopting a conscientious approach and pursuing a code of ethics, which increasingly addresses the dynamic nature of marketing communications and persuasion attempts, practitioners can actively contribute to promoting societal responsibility. Simultaneously, this will foster a branding and marketing communications landscape that is increasingly ethically informed and responsible. In doing so, government agencies, industry bodies, and self-regulatory organisations should increasingly collaborate to address developments in sponsorship deals, modes of brand integration, affiliations, or potential conflicts of interest. This collaboration is necessary to provide timely and relevant laws, regulations, and industry standards governing marketing practices, including advertising standards, data protection laws, and consumer protection regulations.

Finally, the exploration of the branded entertainment phenomenon contributes to existing research emphasising practitioners' perspectives (Um and Kim, 2014; Van Loggerenberg, Enslin and Terblanche-Smit, 2022). This thesis introduced innovative and dynamic modes of creative output in the form of branded entertainment. These modes evidently align with industry professionals' expectations regarding the need to adapt to changing consumer demands and technological advancements, as indicated in the earlier data. Moreover, by incorporating different practitioners involved in branded entertainment endeavours, this thesis advances understanding of how practitioners navigate new collaboration processes and sheds light on how responsibilisation is shifted among different stakeholders.

## 7.5 Limitations and Future Research

As branded entertainment continues to evolve rapidly, I have endeavoured to keep pace with its advancements throughout my PhD studies. This effort not only involved collecting data over time but also maintaining regular communication with my informants. In addition, I continuously sought novel and innovative examples of branded entertainment, like the *Barbie* film, which became an integral part of my research. While *Barbie* was initially excluded from my data set, its relevance became instantly apparent with the film's release, further coinciding with the write-up phase of my PhD. This recognition prompted me to incorporate it into the thesis as a highly contemporary and illustrative example of branded entertainment.

As outlined in the introduction, the original intention of this PhD thesis was to explore consumers and their perspectives on branded entertainment. To achieve this, I recruited consumers who were heavy media users, particularly in film and television. However, after the initial round of consumer interviews, it quickly became evident that a significant challenge emerged due to the proliferation of branded entertainment content with exceptional levels of authenticity when brands were seamlessly woven into storylines. As a result, my informants faced significant difficulties distinguishing between branded entertainment and conventional television and film formats. The complexity of branded entertainment made it difficult for participants to discern its distinct nature within an ever-evolving landscape.

While the exclusion of consumer data from this thesis might be perceived as a limitation, it provided an opportunity to explore and recognise the confusion experienced by consumers with branded entertainment as a relatively novel yet continuously developing modality. This confusion allowed me to shift my focus to practitioners involved in the creation, production, and dissemination of branded entertainment, which enabled me to provide a nuanced analysis from the industry practitioner data. This analysis revealed that the responsibilisation of the

consumer was, in fact, misplaced. These insights not only added credibility to my findings but also highlighted the importance of attributing greater responsibility to the practitioners involved in branded entertainment endeavours.

Although data were collected from a range of markets, a primary focus was placed on Northern European and North American markets, which allowed me to concentrate on English speaking branded entertainment activities. However, this thesis inadvertently excluded other markets such as Africa, South America, Asia, and the Middle East in the examination of branded entertainment, which would have provided a comprehensive understanding of how branded entertainment is evolving globally. Thus, future research endeavours that deliberately incorporate these and other geographical areas would significantly contribute to the overall understanding of the branded entertainment landscape, providing insights into diverse cultural contexts and adding to a more thorough and nuanced understanding of branded entertainment as a global phenomenon.

As part of the methodological approach, this thesis focused on individual projects encountered by my informants during their years of work in the branded entertainment field. Participants were asked to share insights from specific projects, offering detailed views based on their first-hand experiences. Additionally, participants provided overarching observations on the broader evolution of branded entertainment modalities. Through the application of nexus analysis, this study revealed that the ongoing evolution of branded entertainment was giving rise to novel and innovative organisational structures. These new organisational forms incorporate both the need for sophisticated development of entertainment products as well as an understanding of the promotional strategies undertaken by brands. Subsequent research

could explore how these organisational forms manifest and how practitioners navigate both creative and strategic aspects in the development of branded entertainment.

Other future research could explore how story developments resonate with audiences, especially given the intersection between Hollywood and the advertising industries, as the latter demands audience insights to ensure return on investment. This signifies a further advancement of what Jenkins (2006) terms convergence culture, demonstrating the dynamic intersection and increasing overlap between Hollywood and the advertising industries, where two previously distinct sectors increasingly collaborate and influence one another. This also points to the need to further investigate the skills gap within the sector, as industries increasingly converge.

Finally, it is essential to examine the broader role of ethics and responsibilisation within the fast-evolving domains of marketing communications and entertainment. Future research should provide robust theoretical frameworks and identify crucial policy implications necessary to adapt to the continually changing industrial landscape. Such exploration becomes imperative to ensure that ethical considerations and responsible practices are not only integrated into evolving industry norms but also serve as guiding principles to navigate the changing marketing communication and entertainment industry more broadly.

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