


## Article

# Building Brands with Superheroes, Building Superheroes with Brands: The Brands of Iron Man and Captain America in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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**Abstract:** The use of product and service brands by popular movie characters has long been a powerful marketing tool, boosting brand awareness and enhancing brand image. Product placement—the appearance of brands in films—not only increases visibility but also provides vital financial support for film production, particularly in big-budget blockbusters. However, an interesting question arises: to what extent do filmmakers and brands align brand values with the personalities of film characters? Is the goal solely to maximize exposure, or is there a conscious effort to create authentic pairings that resonate with audiences? This study examines the appearance of product and service brands in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, focusing specifically on two main characters: Iron Man (Tony Stark) and Captain America (Steve Rogers). We analyzed 11 Marvel Studios films released between 2008 and 2019, documenting brand appearances and evaluating their alignment with the characters' personalities. By applying personality typology models (Aaker, Mark and Pearson, MBTI, NERIS Type Explorer), we developed detailed profiles of both the movie characters and the associated brands. The findings reveal that while brand placements are extensive, there is often a deliberate effort to pair them with characters in ways that reinforce authenticity and strengthen audience connections. This benefits filmmakers, audiences, and brands alike by enhancing credibility and fostering emotional engagement.

**Keywords:** product placement; brand placement; brand–character alignment; Marvel Cinematic Universe; superheroes; character branding; consumer engagement; movie sponsorship; personality typology



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## 1. Introduction

It has long been known that associating a brand with a popular character from a successful movie can be highly beneficial (Karrh, 1998; Lehu, 2009). This form of brand appearance, also known as product placement or brand placement, can increase brand awareness and enhance the brand's image. Naturally, this is also an important financial resource for filmmakers, especially for American blockbusters.

However, the question arises: how much attention do filmmakers and brands pay to aligning the values and personalities of the featured product and service brands with those of the film characters? Are authentic brand–character pairings created, or is the sole aim to maximize brand visibility by ensuring frequent and prominent appearances? Answering

this question is challenging, as it is best examined through a series of films rather than a single production. A multi-film series allows for drawing more comprehensive conclusions, particularly when brands become integral to the cinematic universe.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) provides a fitting case study, as it has undoubtedly produced some of the greatest cinematic successes of the past decade. The first film in this franchise was *Iron Man* (2008), and by the second quarter of 2024, a total of 33 films had been released, with 11 more in production. However, the 22nd film, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), marked a turning point: it became the most successful superhero movie of all time and one of the highest-grossing films in history—second only to *Avatar*, according to some statistics, surpassing *Titanic* and *Star Wars*. *Avengers: Endgame* also featured the highest number of superheroes, with several meeting their demise, including *Iron Man* himself. Ultimately, the film served as the true “endgame”, concluding the so-called Infinity Saga. Subsequent Marvel Cinematic Universe films belong to the Multiverse Saga. Our focus is limited to the earlier period, specifically the films produced between 2008 and 2019. Within this timeframe, we concentrated on the 11 films featuring one or both of the two main characters—Captain America (Steve Rogers) and Iron Man (Tony Stark). These movies are as follows: *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Our ambitious task was to thoroughly analyze these films, catalog the brands that appeared, and identify which characters they were associated with.

Simultaneously, we conducted another study: using various well-known typologies, we aimed to determine the archetypes of Captain America and Iron Man. Our objective was to compare these findings with the product and service brands featured alongside the two characters, assessing how well these brands align with their cinematic personalities and archetypes. To achieve this, we employed multiple models, including:

- Jennifer Aaker’s brand personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness
- Rogers’ innovation adoption curve: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards
- DISC personality categories: blue, red, green, and yellow classifications
- Jungian archetypes: extraversion and introversion combined with thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuitive personality types
- The 12 archetypes from Mark and Pearson’s book *The Hero and the Outlaw—Building Extraordinary Brands through the Power of Archetypes*, based on Carl Gustav Jung’s system
- NERIS Type Explorer: a five-letter typology similar to MBTI, using five opposing trait pairs

This study contributes to branding theory by demonstrating that strong alignment between brand and character enhances perceived authenticity and consumer trust. It also advances consumer psychology by illustrating how parasocial relationships with superheroes influence brand attitudes. Within media studies, the research explores product placement as a strategic component of transmedia storytelling, where characters and brands co-create meaning.

Drawing on the comparative character-brand framework, a set of research hypotheses was developed to test potential patterns of brand alignment, as detailed in the Methods section. These include:

- More brands are associated with Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) through product placement than with Steve Rogers (*Captain America*).

- At least one brand is represented by both characters.
- The majority of brands associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man) are of foreign origin, whereas those linked to Steve Rogers (Captain America) are predominantly American.
- Tony Stark (Iron Man) is more frequently connected to vehicle brands and technology companies than Steve Rogers (Captain America).
- Futuristic, cutting-edge products appear exclusively in connection with Tony Stark (Iron Man).
- Some real-world market competitors are associated with opposing characters in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).
- Brands embodying the traits of ruggedness and sincerity are predominantly linked to Steve Rogers (Captain America), while competence and excitement are traits more frequently associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man).
- The characters' use of specific brands can be directly justified by their personality traits, as revealed through character analysis.

Before turning to the methodology, a literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical foundation of the study and to contextualize its interdisciplinary approach. The following literature review was intentionally structured to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of this research—situated at the intersection of branding theory, consumer psychology, and media studies. Rather than adhering to a strictly linear narrative, a modular format was adopted to sequentially introduce the relevant theoretical domains. Section 2 outlines the evolution and conceptual scope of product placement, including its definitions and growing strategic significance. Section 3 presents the genre-specific context of superhero films and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), illustrating how the MCU provides unique opportunities for transmedia storytelling and brand integration. Section 4 introduces the interpretative frameworks—such as Jungian archetypes, Aaker's brand personality dimensions, MBTI/NERIS, among others—that form the analytical foundation for the character-brand alignment. This layered structure mirrors the architecture of the MCU itself, where independent storylines converge within a shared universe.

## 2. The Concept and Growing Significance of Product Placement

Product placement has been defined in numerous ways by various experts. According to [Baker and Crawford \(1995\)](#), product placement refers to the insertion of products or services into television or film productions for advertising purposes, with the advertiser providing compensation in some form for this appearance. [Papp-Váry \(2008\)](#) highlights that product placement is a form of advertising in which a company pays to have its product or service featured within the plot of a film or show. [Kenton \(2018\)](#) further elaborates that product placement, also referred to as embedded advertising or marketing, aims to reach a large audience by seamlessly integrating brands into entertainment content. Similarly, [Balogh \(2006\)](#) argues that product placement involves the strategic integration of brands into entertainment communication channels, ensuring a seamless consumer experience without overtly disrupting the narrative or being perceived as a traditional advertisement. This ability to blend into real-life situations enhances the effectiveness of product placement as a marketing tool.

Scholars have increasingly debated whether product placement should be seen as merely a form of advertising or as a broader branded content strategy that aligns with storytelling. [Del Pino-Romero et al. \(2013\)](#) define product placement as the punctual and accessory or integrated presence of a brand in the spatial or narrative context of the fiction genre, especially film and television. This perspective aligns with [Martí's \(2010\)](#) argument that product placement serves as a hybrid communication tool that enhances

brand credibility by integrating it into the storyline without being perceived solely as an advertisement.

Karniouchina et al. (2011) and Kretchmer (2004) emphasize that product placement uniquely combines elements of traditional advertising while leveraging entertainment content for delivery. Indirect advertising embedded within entertainment environments can help circumvent consumer resistance to conventional advertising formats, as audiences often engage more favorably with brands subtly integrated into storytelling. Muzellec et al. (2012) further expand on this idea, suggesting that product placement introduces real brands into fictional, imaginative worlds, allowing them to become part of the audience's emotional and cognitive engagement with the narrative. This supports Russell's (2007) concept of para-social attachment, where audiences develop strong emotional connections with fictional characters, thereby influencing their attitudes toward brands that appear alongside them.

The shift from traditional product placement to enhanced integration has also been noted in the literature. Hudson and Hudson (2006) question whether branded entertainment is a new advertising technique or merely an evolved form of product placement, while Lehu (2009) argues that brands must be seamlessly embedded into narratives to maintain authenticity. More recently, Hardy (2018) asserts that well-executed branded content fosters consumer engagement by delivering valuable and immersive storytelling experiences, making the product a natural part of the plot.

Despite these various definitions, even the terminology surrounding product placement remains a subject of debate. Karrh (1998) argues that "brand placement" is a more accurate term, as the primary objective is to reinforce brand identity rather than merely promoting a specific product category. He provides the example of Ray-Ban, where the intent is to strengthen the brand's presence in consumers' minds rather than simply advertising sunglasses as a general product category. The transition from passive brand placement to active brand engagement has been further explored by Nelli (2012), who identifies enhanced product placement as an intermediate step between traditional placement and full product integration. This evolution is particularly relevant in transmedia storytelling, where brands become embedded across multiple platforms, reinforcing consumer loyalty and brand recall (Hardy, 2022; Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito, 2023).

As product placement continues to evolve, scholars emphasize its strategic role in media and advertising. Muzellec et al. (2012) argue that introducing real-world brands into fictional narratives strengthens consumer identification and brand recall. Moreover, the integration without separation model described by Hardy (2022) illustrates how digital advancements have increased the need for seamless collaborations between media producers and brands, allowing for more organic and effective brand messaging.

The increasing prominence of branded content and product placement reflects a significant transformation in the advertising and entertainment industries. No longer confined to traditional commercials, brands now integrate seamlessly into films, television shows, and digital media, shaping consumer perceptions in a more immersive manner. This shift is driven by multiple factors, including changing audience behaviors, technological advancements, and evolving industry practices. What is clear is that this field is rapidly expanding. The global branded content market is projected to reach USD 402 billion worldwide by 2025, underscoring its growing relevance in modern marketing strategies. This exponential growth in branded content is not merely a trend but a strategic response to evolving consumer behavior. As Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito (2023) explains, modern audiences actively avoid traditional advertisements due to saturation, leading brands to seek more integrated and engaging approaches. The shift from disruptive advertising to content-driven

engagement allows brands to build deeper relationships with audiences, making branded entertainment a dominant force in contemporary marketing ([Martí-Parreño et al., 2015](#)).

[Papp-Váry \(2014\)](#) attributes the expansion of product placement to several key factors in his book *Branded Entertainment*:

- Changing consumer attitudes toward advertising: While advertising has become more prevalent, people are increasingly resistant to it. Ads often irritate audiences, trust in traditional advertising is declining, and consumers are more conscious of how advertising influences them. Many actively avoid ads, particularly television commercials.
- Technological advancements and digitalization: The rise of streaming platforms and the growing influence of social media platforms such as YouTube have transformed content consumption patterns, pushing advertisers to find new ways to engage audiences.
- Shifts within the advertising industry: Traditional 30-s ad spots are losing their dominance as the industry moves toward fragmented and more subtle methods of reaching consumers.
- Regulatory changes: Legal environments influence product placement. For example, Hungary's 2011 media law significantly expanded the scope of product placement in television and film.
- The financial needs of film and television producers: With rising production costs, filmmakers increasingly rely on brand partnerships to fund their projects.

Among these factors, the last point is particularly relevant to this study, as it directly relates to the motivations behind product placement in the film industry. From the perspective of producers and filmmakers, product placement offers two primary advantages.

#### (1) Revenue Generation

Product placement serves as a crucial financial resource for film production. This does not always involve direct monetary compensation; instead, brands may provide props, equipment, or sponsorships that reduce production costs. The financial demands of major Hollywood films have increased over time, with the average cost of blockbuster productions reaching nearly USD 100 million between 2000 and 2010, and rising further since then ([Lehu, 2009](#)). To offset these costs, filmmakers actively integrate brands into their narratives, making product placement an essential aspect of modern movie-making. [Hardy \(2022\)](#) further explains that branded content has grown at twice the rate of traditional advertising worldwide, illustrating its increasing dominance in the advertising ecosystem.

#### (2) Enhanced Realism and Narrative Authenticity

Beyond financial considerations, product placement enhances the realism of films. The appearance of well-known brands can increase authenticity, reinforcing the idea that a story takes place in a recognizable and believable world. A well-documented example is Steven Spielberg's 2002 sci-fi film *Minority Report*, set in the year 2054. Spielberg deliberately included real-world brands in the film to anchor the futuristic story in a tangible reality. As he explained, the presence of brands helped indicate that the depicted future was not too distant ([Lehu, 2009](#)).

Similarly, contemporary films use brands to reflect modern consumer culture. We live in a branded world, where people often define themselves through the products they purchase and the brands they associate with ([Neumeier, 2006](#)). [Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito \(2023\)](#) argues that brands are now narrative devices, shaping audience perceptions by reinforcing character identities and story authenticity. This phenomenon is particularly evident in superhero films, where the characters, though fictional, exist within a world that closely resembles our own. While superheroes possess extraordinary abilities, their environments often reflect contemporary urban landscapes, technologies, and cultural

norms—many of which are shaped by commercial branding. This aligns with [Hardy's \(2022\)](#) argument that entertainment industries increasingly function as promotional vehicles, embedding brands in media content in ways that are both commercial and narrative-driven.

However, it is important to acknowledge that while product placement is increasingly noticeable, brand recall remains inconsistent. Research suggests that an increasing number of consumers recognize product placements during films, yet once the movie is over, they struggle to recall specific brands ([Tyler, 2019](#)). This paradox highlights the complex psychological dynamics behind product placement, where brands benefit from visibility but may still face challenges in long-term consumer retention. [Hardy \(2022\)](#) further notes that “the effectiveness of branded content depends on balancing visibility with subtlety, ensuring that advertising is perceived as part of the storytelling rather than a commercial intrusion”.

Additionally, while product placement can be profitable, it may also negatively impact the audience or potential consumers. This underscores the importance of marketers understanding the optimal number and type of brand appearances. One key principle is ensuring seamless brand integration, with marketers and directors carefully considering how a brand fits into a scene or cinematic environment. A well-integrated brand can foster a positive consumer attitude and enhance brand recognition and recall, meaning how well consumers remember the brand after watching the film.

Recent studies indicate that Generation Z, particularly in animated content, forms strong cognitive associations between product placements and purchasing intentions, further emphasizing the importance of strategic alignment between brands and media formats ([Cheng & Nagai, 2024](#)). [Zhang et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that product placement strategies significantly shape consumer behavior, especially when tailored to the product's level of involvement and emotional appeal, as outlined in the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) grid model. For example, in a Transformers movie, an inappropriately placed Xbox advertisement that lacks synergy with the film's world or is not featured in a relevant gaming scene will likely generate minimal impact, with few viewers recalling it ([Jalan, 2020](#)).

This aligns with findings from [Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito \(2023\)](#), who emphasizes that brand placement must be natural and emotionally compelling to drive engagement. She argues that audiences are highly aware of overt advertising, and forced product placements often backfire, making viewers feel manipulated rather than immersed in the narrative. Furthermore, the increasing dominance of branded entertainment means that successful placements must feel intrinsic to the story, rather than an external commercial intrusion.

A crucial element of product placement is the role of film characters and actors, particularly celebrities. Consumers frequently use the terms actor, star, and celebrity interchangeably, even though they have distinct meanings. Additionally, viewers often perceive film characters as real people ([Quentin, 2019](#)). This perception can create a parasocial relationship, where consumers feel as if they personally know the actor or the character they portray, including the character's consumption habits. As a result, an illusory bond forms between consumers and film characters, enhancing the effectiveness of product placement. This effect becomes even stronger when the same brand is consistently associated with a character across multiple films, particularly in franchises.

[Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito \(2023\)](#) expands on this by highlighting how audience engagement increases when branded content is embedded into transmedia storytelling, where brand associations extend beyond films into social media, video games, and digital experiences. This creates a continuous brand exposure cycle, strengthening consumer-brand relationships and reinforcing the credibility of product placements within entertainment.

Building on consumer psychology theories, product placement leverages the mere exposure effect ([Zajonc, 1968](#)), wherein repeated exposure to a brand fosters familiarity and



preference. Furthermore, aligning a superhero's traits with a brand's personality enhances brand credibility, making the placement feel more authentic and emotionally engaging.

Another important factor is the product's placement on screen—whether in the foreground or background—as this can trigger different perceptions among consumers depending on their cultural background and cognitive style. A recent research study concluded that background product placements generate stronger brand perception among holistic thinkers than among analytical thinkers (Hur et al., 2019). This perspective aligns with Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito's (2023) argument that brand prominence must be strategically adjusted for different audience segments. She notes that subtle product placements are often more effective among audiences who engage deeply with storytelling, while high-profile placements work better for casual viewers.

A study analyzing 106 product placements from 104 companies across 18 films (with a combined first-week box office revenue of USD 200 million) found that product placement does not have a statistically significant short-term impact on companies (Aktas, 2015). However, in some cases, a sharp increase in brand interest was observed after the film's release. Overall, the study concluded that while product placement positively influences brands, these results are not statistically definitive. The author recommended focusing on long-term effects, an area with limited research, and considering various marketing factors (Aktas, 2015). Rodríguez-Rabadán Benito (2023) similarly argues that branded content should be measured by long-term consumer engagement rather than immediate sales impact. She suggests that future research should explore how product placements contribute to brand equity over multiple years, rather than just short-term recall or purchase intentions.

### 3. Superhero Films as a Genre, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Unique Product Placement Opportunities

Large crews, massive budgets, extensive distribution, grand visuals, and significant revenue—these have been essential elements of blockbuster films from the very beginning. Since the 1980s, this list has been supplemented by substantial marketing and advertising costs associated with film promotion.

Comic book movies have undeniably played a pivotal role in the evolution of Hollywood blockbusters, laying the conceptual foundations for 21st-century box office hits and transforming these action-fantasy films into cultural events (McAllister et al., 2006). Superhero films exemplify the growing trend in which blockbuster productions increasingly take the form of serialized films that incorporate various interconnections yet can still stand independently as unique pieces within contemporary Hollywood cinema. This serialized storytelling approach provides a significant competitive advantage over standalone productions (Denson & Leyda, 2016).

The characters in the comic books that serve as the foundation for Marvel films exist within an interconnected, shared universe, allowing the paths of characters with different narratives and identities to intersect. When developing the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the goal was to create a similar shared universe—not within the pages of comic books, but on the big screen and television. “We are trying to create something that has never existed before—a new idea where a character can appear in countless franchises”, stated Kevin Feige, President of Marvel Studios, in 2009 (Johnson, 2012).

Marvel Studios, which emerged as the flagship of 21st-century superhero films, successfully built a franchise and cinematic universe that aims to remain unrivaled. This franchise strikes a balance between cinematic genres, comic books, writing, and subplots, fostering a creative partnership that continuously harnesses the economic opportunities presented by dedicated fans. These factors have turned superhero films into the gold

standard of Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking, blending cutting-edge film production technologies with innovative storytelling strategies. While this approach might suggest that the genre is immune to franchise fatigue (Smith, 2017), this is not entirely the case. By 2017, Marvel had already planned to increase its annual film output, scheduling three releases per year. Even at that time, fans considered this insufficient. However, one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the increased production of films each year, not to mention series and content for various streaming platforms. If the franchise fails to maintain a steady output, it risks losing audience loyalty (Smith, 2017).

According to Nii (2021), Marvel Studios employs three rhetorical elements—ethos, pathos, and logos—to feature different brands in their films. These Aristotelian principles, foundational to effective public speaking, are also essential in persuasion—in this case, persuading consumers. Ethos represents the credibility and character of the speaker (or brand), pathos establishes an emotional connection with the audience, and logos refers to logical argumentation. Naturally, these elements are interpreted within the context of the film and its characters. Nii's research (Nii, 2021) identifies various ways these elements are used in Marvel films, including visual representation, dialogue, music, and sound effects. For example, in *Thor*, various Acura car models and logos are frequently featured, while in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the nearly exaggerated destruction of Nick Fury's car symbolically demonstrates the brand's resilience and functionality.

In his book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006, 2011) introduces the concept of “transmedia storytelling”, in which integral parts of a story are distributed across various channels to create a unified and immersive entertainment experience. This storytelling method perfectly aligns with Marvel's productions, as their narratives extend beyond the big screen to platforms such as Netflix and Disney+. The present study contributes to media studies by demonstrating how product placement in the MCU aligns with transmedia storytelling. Unlike traditional advertising, both superhero brands and classic product and service brands become integral to the narrative universe, engaging audiences across multiple platforms and enriching brand storytelling.

The films within this shared cinematic universe are built around specific characters, placing them at the center of the narrative and even in the titles of the films (Denson & Leyda, 2016). Rather than relying on a linear storyline driven by a single, continuous plot across successive films, the foundation of the cinematic universe lies in creating films with distinct stories that occasionally intersect to support an overarching narrative. Cameos, subtle references, and post-credit scenes serve as breadcrumbs, hinting at the interconnectedness of this shared universe (Denson & Leyda, 2016; Jenkins, 2011). Directors crafting these films ensure their works fit seamlessly within the continuity demanded by the universe's concept while preserving the intrinsic value of each standalone film. This ensures that the cohesion of the broader cinematic universe never comes at the expense of the individual viewing experience (Katerynych, 2024). Marvel often hires directors who, while not necessarily experienced with large-budget films, bring unique expertise in specific cinematic styles that no one else at Marvel possesses (Han, 2017).

This approach aligns with transmedia storytelling, which plays a crucial role in the MCU's success. As Hernández-Santaolalla and Barrientos-Bueno (2020) discuss, transmedia storytelling expands a fictional universe across multiple platforms, engaging audiences through interconnected narratives. This strategy strengthens audience loyalty, as consumers actively seek out different content extensions across movies, TV series, and digital media. The MCU has mastered this approach by maintaining narrative continuity while allowing each film to serve as an entry point for new audiences.

As the previous part suggests, superhero films are not low-budget productions by small studios but rather high-budget blockbusters produced by major studios, and almost



all of them become box office hits (Harrison et al., 2019). As a result, many critics now regard superhero films as a distinct genre, often offering negative opinions on the entire trend. “If you love big muscles and even bigger explosions, superhero movies are made for you!” McGettigan summarized in a satirical tone (Bukatman, 2011). A superhero film can blend multiple cinematic genres, but there are core elements that serve as the building blocks of most such productions. Genre-wise, they are primarily action films, enriched with dramatic elements that develop character arcs, with humor frequently employed to provide relief. The settings and extensive use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) often justify the incorporation of science fiction elements, while character-driven events set in different time periods introduce aspects of historical drama.

But how do products and brands fit into all of this? The character-centric storytelling approach in superhero films offers numerous opportunities for product placement, integrating brands into characters’ environments—or even directly into their hands. Recent research has demonstrated that superhero characters actively shape brand alliances and influence consumer attitudes toward local brands, reinforcing the effectiveness of product placement as a strategic marketing tool (McGettigan, 2011). Because these films originate from comic books featuring multiple protagonists, their shared appearances in films provide even more opportunities for advertisers to secure strategic placements. Changing locations throughout the narrative further expands brand visibility, as familiar logos and products can appear in both contemporary and near-future settings (Monika & Antonio, 2022).

Transbranding, as discussed by Hills (2016), is an emerging strategy where brands intersect across multiple franchises, forming a creative dialogue between different intellectual properties. This can be particularly relevant in superhero films, where brands do not merely exist in the background but actively participate in world-building, reinforcing their association with the heroic identity of the characters.

Films within the shared universe span significant time periods and evolving story arcs, reflecting the development of individual characters. Consequently, viewers feel as if they are embarking on a life-long journey with the characters, following them across numerous films. For brands, this presents a unique opportunity—they are not confined to a single film or scene but can appear repeatedly across multiple moments closely associated with a particular character (Clark, 2019).

Of course, product and service brands are not the only ones benefiting from product placement. Beyond generating significant revenue, product placement allows Marvel to bridge the gap between reality and a world inhabited by superheroes. This, in turn, enhances the perceived realism of these larger-than-life characters, fostering a stronger emotional connection with audiences and increasing the likelihood that they will see superheroes as role models.

As explored by Valentová (2021), superheroes reflect broader societal values and cultural narratives, including representations of aging, strength, resilience, and evolving perceptions of heroism over time. This cultural lens enriches the analysis of brand alignment with superheroes, demonstrating that product placement not only generates revenue but also reinforces societal archetypes. Marvel’s recent productions have embraced multiculturalism and utopian ideals, using mythology to confront rising nationalist ideologies and craft a more inclusive vision for the future.

What makes superheroes truly special to audiences is not their superpowers alone—since power does not equate to heroism—but their complex, morally inspiring personalities that embody courage, humanity, self-sacrifice, and responsibility. There is also a relatable aspect in the sense that their decisions carry consequences, forcing them to confront dilemmas similar to those faced by ordinary people. Even if saving the world is not at stake,

average individuals also encounter moral questions where they must choose the right course of action (de Beus, 2022; Yogerst, 2017).

#### 4. The Theoretical Background of the Research: Character Analysis Models, and Archetype Systems

Whether fictional or real, every individual can be classified into different archetypes based on their inner motivations, personality, and behavioral style. Each person possesses and exhibits various traits and habits that allow for classification into different character types. Personality and behavior typology models help identify which behavioral patterns and traits correspond to particular individuals, revealing the archetypal characteristics they embody.

Looking back through history, the concept of archetypes dates back thousands of years, with its foundations in Hippocrates' theory of four temperaments and Plato's four-element theory. The term archetype, derived from Greek, means "original pattern" or "prototype". According to Carl Jung, archetypes represent image patterns derived from the collective unconscious, appearing as shared motifs across different cultures' mythologies. Their significance lies in the fact that these archetypes are universally recognized, regardless of geographical location (Jung, 1921/1971). Archetypes are recurring human characters rooted in the unconscious, each possessing distinct values, personalities, and meanings. It is important to emphasize that everyone has a dominant archetype governing their personality, while also exhibiting traits from other archetypes (Gutai, 2015).

Although there are numerous ways to categorize archetypes, the most popular and methodologically appropriate models were chosen for analyzing the characters of Captain America and Iron Man, which form the central theme of this study. The character analysis models examined include:

- Rogers' innovation adoption curve
- Carl Gustav Jung's personality types and the derived DISC model
- Archetypes defined by Mark and Pearson
- The MBTI model and the combined methodology of the NERIS Type Explorer, based on it.

##### 4.1. Rogers' Innovation Adoption Curve

Rogers' innovation adoption curve represents openness to novelty and the degree of acceptance. According to Rogers' definition (Rogers, 1995), the diffusion of innovation is the process over time during which a new product gradually becomes accepted by the target market, potential buyers, and society as a whole. Rogers identified five types of consumers based on how early or late an individual adopts an innovation. These groups, classified by their adoption speed, are as follows (Rogers, 1995; Gerdesics & Pavluska, 2013; Hoshino & Hirao, 2024):

- Innovators—Those most open to new ideas and products, striving for leadership rather than settling for follower status. They gather information from outside social groups and are the ones who introduce innovations to their group members.
- Early Adopters—Similar to innovators, early adopters trust and promote products during the early stages of the product life cycle. They are characterized by high income, higher education, and strong social connections, allowing them to act as opinion leaders within broader groups.
- Early Majority—Cautious and informed buyers who need to be addressed and persuaded through marketing tools. They form a significant segment, contributing to the growth of product sales.

- Late Majority—Characterized by lower income, skepticism, and general distrust. They are more convinced by word-of-mouth recommendations than by expert opinions. They adopt new products or innovations only after seeing widespread use.
- Laggards—Suspicious of new products, they purchase only when the product is no longer considered novel. Their lower income and strong adherence to tradition define them.

Rogers' innovation adoption curve can also be used to categorize film characters based on their openness and acceptance of new ideas and innovations.

#### 4.2. Carl Gustav Jung's Personality Types

A student of Freud, Carl Gustav Jung introduced a pioneering perspective on understanding human nature, influencing many areas of human culture, including art, mythology, religion, and philosophy. Jung's personality types emerge from the combination of two main categories (Jung, 1921/1971). One of these categories he called general attitude types, while the other was designated as functional types. Within the general attitude types are the classifications of extraversion and introversion. The functional types include the psychological functions of thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuition.

In its original sense, extraversion is characterized by objectivity and reliance on external factors. Subjective views are suppressed, and external experiences and events play a defining role. The behavior of extraverted individuals aligns with the expectations and moral views of their environment, but they avoid conflict and friction by steering clear of adaptation. In contrast, for an introverted individual, subjective interpretations hold primary importance alongside objective perception, interpreting internal processes triggered by the external world or impressions.

Based on the above, Jung's personality theory distinguishes between rational, judgmental types (which include thinking and feeling pairs) and irrational types (encompassing sensing and intuitive pairs). The common characteristic of rational, judgmental types is their inclination toward judgment and evaluative orientation. The following character types are classified under this category (Jung, 1921/1971; Péter, 2019; Lee & Shin, 2024):

- Thinking Type—In this category, thinking dominates psychological functions, with actions preceded by thorough reflection. An extraverted thinker bases conclusions on objective facts and observations, drawing intellectual inferences. This type tends to think in patterns and may suppress emotional individuals, often repressing their own emotions. In contrast, the introverted thinker leans on subjective factors, seeking depth rather than expansion, and considers facts secondary.
- Feeling Type—Emotional motivations dominate in the case of feeling types. This type suppresses thinking, and an extraverted feeler aligns their emotions with widely accepted traditional norms. If a rational perspective interferes, the subject of their emotions loses value. An introverted feeler seeks to rise above material emotions. Quiet demeanor, general inaccessibility, and strong negative biases may characterize them. Their experiences are shaped by their thoughts, with their emotions centered on themselves.

In contrast, irrational types are characterized by their unconscious judgment functions, with behavior driven by perception and intuition rather than defined decisions (Jung, 1921/1971). There are two types:

- Sensing Type—When sensory perception is dominant, the sensing type emerges. Extraverted sensing types are motivated by the continuous pursuit of vivid new experiences, while introverted sensing types are marked by calmness, passivity, and selective emotional engagement.

- Intuitive Type—The function of unconscious perception is intuition, and dominance of instinct or hunches defines the intuitive type. The extraverted intuitive individual is an observer who directs their intuition toward external objects, while the introverted intuitive type focuses on internal, unconscious elements not easily measured by external experience.

#### 4.3. The DISC Model

Building upon Jung's typology, Dr. William Marston introduced the DISC model in his 1928 book *The Emotions of Normal People*, creating what is perhaps the most well-known behavioral analysis method (Marston, 1928). Today, DISC is widely used globally in areas such as relationship building, team composition, negotiations, and workplace HR (Mirnics, 2006; Jonge & Peeters, 2025). DISC is an acronym representing Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness. These behavioral types help identify which category an individual belongs to based on observable traits and characteristics. To simplify the differentiation between categories, the DISC method assigns colors to each classification:

- Red—Represents the Dominant group. These individuals prefer to take control and lead.
- Yellow—Marks the Influential group. They are characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, creativity, and a tendency to lose enthusiasm for specific projects or causes.
- Green—Represents the Steady group, which includes sensitive, conflict-avoidant, and calm individuals known for their reluctance to embrace new experiences.
- Blue—Denotes the Conscientious group, characterized by precision, analytical thinking, and critical tendencies (Rohm, 2013; Mészáros, 2016).

It is clear that the color-coded DISC categories align closely with the traits found in Jung's typology. A comparison between Jung's and DISC models reveals the following associations:

- Red aligns with the feeling types,
- Yellow corresponds to the intuitive types,
- Green matches the sensing types,
- Blue represents the thinking types.

Naturally, all of these styles exist within every individual, but in varying proportions. No one fits exclusively or entirely into a single category, as they may exhibit traits from other behavioral styles, even if those traits are not the most dominant in shaping their personality. The association of Jung's typology with colors has made the DISC model an easy-to-use and accessible tool. The following sections will introduce additional methodologies that also draw from Jung's system as a foundation.

#### 4.4. The Archetypes in the Mark and Pearson Model

In their 2001 book *The Hero and the Outlaw—Building Extraordinary Brands through the Power of Archetypes*, Margaret Mark and Carol S. Pearson built on Jungian typology to create archetypes that can help shape both corporate and personal brands through continuous practice (Mark & Pearson, 2001).

In the context of personal branding, the archetypes in this model are formed based on how we behave in our professional lives. These character types are more often evoked through our actions rather than something we inherently become. It is important to emphasize that these archetypes are not oppositional forces but simply differ from one another. Over the course of our lives, we may embody different archetypes depending on the situation. However, there is typically one dominant archetype that defines how we

behave most of the time. The Mark and Pearson model's archetypes, heavily influenced by Jung's system, include (Purkiss & Royston-Lee, 2015; Papp-Váry, 2020):

- The Caregiver—Aims to help others and protect them from harm.
- The Creator—A visionary artist who believes in self-expression and strives to produce lasting works.
- The Explorer—A restless, curious individual who values independence and constantly searches for what feels right.
- The Hero—Stands firmly by their convictions and seeks out chaotic situations to demonstrate their bravery.
- The Innocent—Aspires to create a paradise of purity and goodness.
- The Jester—Speaks truths others avoid, provokes, and critiques while conveying important messages. They quickly tire of things and enjoy breaking the rules.
- The Lover—Seeks sensual pleasure and emotional connection, displaying passion and affection for others.
- The Magician—Transforms and advances the current state of affairs by changing the world around them.
- The Everyman—An adaptable and relatable person who easily connects with others, often using self-deprecating humor.
- The Rebel—Defies traditions and rules, challenging the status quo to create something new.
- The Ruler—Brings order to chaos and seizes every opportunity to take control. Their drive is to create something greater than themselves that they can lead.
- The Sage—Helps others understand the world, suggesting that through their wisdom, we can become more knowledgeable and enlightened.

#### 4.5. The MBTI Model and the NERIS Type Explorer Methodology

Building on Jung's method, Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers developed the MBTI model, which labels Jungian types using four-letter acronyms (derived from the initials of each type pair). Retaining the three bipolar scales (extraverted—introverted, thinking—feeling, sensing—intuitive), they added a fourth scale with endpoints labeled as “judging” and “perceiving”. This additional dimension measures how individuals interact with and respond to the world around them. Judging types are characterized by quick decision-making and organization, while perceivers tend to wait patiently until they gather enough information, keeping their options open (Thomas, 1984; Stracqualursi & Agati, 2025).

For the analysis of the two characters under study—Captain America and Iron Man—we applied an extension of the MBTI model developed by its creators, known as the NERIS Type Explorer. This methodology adds an additional type pair to the Myers-Briggs four, providing even greater precision in analysis. Each of the five personality type pairs defined by the NERIS Type Explorer includes two endpoints, with individuals positioned between them according to their inclinations (NERIS Analytics Limited, 2020).

- Mind: This category includes Jung's two general attitude types, describing whether a person is extraverted or introverted. It indicates how someone relates to others and what type of interaction energizes them. An extraverted individual recharges through social interactions, is generally enthusiastic, and easy to engage. Conversely, an introverted person prefers solitary activities and is more sensitive to external stimuli.
- Energy: The two endpoints in this category reflect how individuals perceive and process the world. Intuitive people are imaginative, open-minded, and curious. They prefer novelty over stability and focus on hidden meanings and future possibilities. In



contrast, sensing individuals are practical and pragmatic, with well-established habits, living firmly in the present.

- Nature: This category assesses how decisions are made. Thinkers prioritize objectivity and rationality, consistently placing logic above emotions. For them, achieving results is more important than harmonious cooperation. Feelers, on the other hand, are more sensitive, less competitive, and prioritize empathy and harmonious collaboration in all cases.
- Tactics: Personality traits related to work, planning, and decision-making fall into two extremes, labeled as judging and perceiving. Judges are meticulous, highly organized, forward-thinking, and value predictability and careful planning. In contrast, perceivers are far more spontaneous, open to possibilities, good at improvisation, and relaxed nonconformists.
- Identity: The fifth personality pair reinforces the previous categories by indicating confidence in one's decisions and abilities. Assertive individuals are self-assured, resilient to stress, and do not worry excessively. They do not overburden themselves even when facing challenges. Turbulent individuals, by contrast, are self-conscious and highly sensitive to stress. They experience a wide range of emotions and are often driven by perfectionism and a constant need for achievement (Boyle, 1995).

#### 4.6. Brand Anthropomorphism and Characterology Based on Jennifer Aaker's Classification

For a brand to align itself with the right character—whether fictional or real—it must first understand the personality traits that define it as a product or service brand. Consumers tend to attribute human qualities to inanimate objects, making it essential to assess the personality and behavioral characteristics of a given brand. A brand's anthropomorphism can be examined on three levels:

- Rational—The functional benefits and performance of the product/service.
- Emotional—The psychological and emotional benefits associated with the brand.
- Moral—Values defined at the level of social responsibility and ethics.

Assigning human traits and qualities to a brand allows it to communicate its attributes to consumers in a relatable, human-like way. A well-chosen and consistently expressed brand personality distinguishes the brand in the consumer's mind, making it instantly recognizable and fostering emotional connections. We tend to like those who are similar to us or represent who we aspire to become—and this applies not only to people but also to product and service brands (Pringle, 2005). For this reason, it is crucial for a brand to build its personality around values that resonate with the public.

The Mark and Pearson model is not the only framework for defining brand personalities. In her study *Dimensions of Brand Personality*, Jennifer Aaker identified five dimensions of brand personality, categorized based on specific traits (Aaker, 1997; Kunsági et al., 2000):

- Sincerity—Down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful, family-oriented, trustworthy, genius.
- Excitement—Daring, bold, imaginative, spirited, modern.
- Competence—Reliable, intelligent, successful, responsible, trustworthy, efficient.
- Sophistication—Upper-class, charming, glamorous, prestigious, dazzling, conceited, romantic.
- Ruggedness—Outdoorsy, tough, strong, basic.

A brand can be placed into one of these five dimensions based on the traits it communicates through its products, appearance, and marketing messages.

The theoretical models presented above form the conceptual foundation for the analysis of Captain America and Iron Man's personalities and their alignment with various

brands. This groundwork not only justifies our methodological choices but also directly informs the hypotheses explored in the following sections.

## 5. Character Analysis: Captain America and Iron Man

With the previously outlined frameworks serving as interpretative tools, we now turn to a detailed analysis of Captain America and Iron Man. This examination aims to determine how each character aligns with the categories defined within the respective typologies.

### 5.1. Captain America's Brand Character

Captain America (Steve Rogers) first appeared in the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger*. This movie introduced us to his journey toward becoming a hero, showing how Steve Rogers—eager to enlist in the army but repeatedly rejected due to his frail physique—transformed into Captain America through a biological experiment. While this experiment granted him exceptional physical strength and superhuman abilities, it is important to note that the moral foundations of his personality remained intact throughout the films, despite attempts by other characters to alter or question them.

Captain America is the quintessential “good guy” of the Marvel films, driven by his belief in fighting for freedom and justice, regardless of the potential consequences or losses. With impeccable morals, he stands up for the weak, and his ultimate goal is to protect others from harm. When not acting as a superhero, he is calm, reserved, humble, and avoids the spotlight. However, when faced with challenges, he immediately steps up, serving as the leader of the Avengers, a team of vastly different characters.

Based on his character and traits, Captain America aligns with the laggards category in Rogers' innovation adoption curve. As a soldier originally fighting in World War II, Rogers must navigate the modern era after being awakened, but his adaptation process is slow and often challenging. In personal relationships, he is old-fashioned and feels alienated in the unfamiliar, contemporary world.

Among the archetypes defined by Mark and Pearson, Captain America embodies three: The Hero, The Caregiver, and The Innocent. Throughout the films, he adopts characteristics of all three. As Captain America, he primarily represents The Hero, while The Caregiver and The Innocent reflect traits he exhibited before acquiring his powers and continues to demonstrate afterward.

According to Carl Gustav Jung's psychological interpretation, Captain America falls into the sensing group, which corresponds to the green category in the DISC model.

The NERIS Type Explorer classifies him as a Defender personality type. Based on a detailed analysis, the following characteristics apply to him across the five personality pairs:

- **Mind:** Captain America is introverted, avoiding the spotlight and preferring to work behind the scenes. Although he collaborates well with others, social events do not energize him, and he is notably shy around strangers. However, when necessary, he naturally assumes leadership, earning respect and loyalty from his peers.
- **Energy:** He is an observant, sensing individual, grounded in practicality rather than driven by innovation or abstract possibilities. He focuses on the present and approaches tasks methodically. Once he understands what needs to be done, he fully commits to carrying out the task.
- **Nature:** As a feeling type, Captain America makes decisions based on emotion, prioritizing the well-being of others and adhering to his strong personal sense of justice. His life revolves around values such as loyalty, friendship, duty, honor, and responsibility. He confronts others when necessary and stands unwaveringly by his beliefs. Empathetic by nature, he consistently sides with the vulnerable against oppressors and tyrants.

- Tactics: In terms of work, planning, and decision-making, he exemplifies the judging type. Captain America is meticulous, organized, and feels lost without a clear plan. He tends to view the world in black and white to simplify decision-making. Tireless and resolute, he feels a profound obligation to use his abilities for good, as he did not earn them but was granted them through experimentation.
- Identity: Captain America exhibits the traits of an assertive personality. He is stable, consistent, and reliable, capable of performing without emotional instability. Even under stress, he remains calm and composed. Despite his confidence, he often feels like an outsider due to the decades-long gap he experienced while being frozen from 1945 to 2011. However, he is able to set aside his doubts and rise to the occasion whenever a mission or situation demands it.

This combination of traits shapes Captain America into a superhero capable of leading and managing teammates with different personalities and motivations, leveraging both their strengths and weaknesses (Monica, 2019a).

### 5.2. Iron Man's Brand Character

Iron Man (Tony Stark) represents a near-opposite pole to Captain America throughout the films. The 2008 film *Iron Man*, which depicts the origin story of a flamboyant billionaire weapons manufacturer turned superhero, revitalized the superhero genre and launched the successful Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of Stark became synonymous with the character, making him one of the most popular superheroes.

Unlike Captain America, Iron Man's values undergo significant transformation over the course of the films. Initially self-centered, arrogant, and dismissive of collaboration, Stark embarks on a path of change following a personal tragedy. By the end of his journey, he becomes far more cooperative, even willing to sacrifice himself when necessary.

Based on his character and traits, Tony Stark fits firmly within the innovators category on Rogers' innovation adoption curve. As an inventor and technological genius, Stark not only dictates trends but actively creates them.

In Mark and Pearson's model, Stark aligns with three archetypes: The Creator, The Jester, and The Outlaw:

- The Creator—Stark seeks to change the world through revolutionary inventions, such as the Iron Man suit that gives him his name.
- The Jester—Known for his sharp wit and humor, even in dire situations, Stark's playful personality is part of what makes him so beloved by fans.
- The Outlaw—Stark frequently breaks rules and disregards conventions, embodying the rebellious spirit of an outlaw.

According to Carl Gustav Jung's psychological theory, Stark falls under the thinking personality type, corresponding to the blue category in the DISC model.

The NERIS Type Explorer classifies Stark as a Commander personality. His traits across the five type pairs are almost the direct opposite of Captain America's, which may explain why their relationship escalates to physical confrontation in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). This conflict and its aftermath play a central role in subsequent films.

- Extraverted: Stark thrives in the spotlight and enjoys being the center of attention, often relishing public displays. Notably, he is the first superhero to openly reveal his identity, declaring, "I am Iron Man".
- Intuitive: Stark refuses to accept the world as it is and continually reshapes it according to his vision. He constantly innovates, improves, and reinvents.
- Thinking: Despite his emotional depth, Stark makes decisions based on logic, quickly processing information, projecting consequences, and focusing on solutions.

- Judging: Like Captain America, Stark exhibits judging-type traits when it comes to work, planning, and decision-making. However, he also displays perceiving traits, showing spontaneity and improvisational skills. He works quickly, strives to stay ahead, and willingly makes sacrifices to achieve success.

A central element of Stark's character is the Iron Man suit, which holds a complex and multifaceted metaphorical meaning. The comics delve deeper into this symbolism, but elements are also present in the films. The suit represents the perfect fusion of man and machine, symbolizing Stark's unity with his creation. Alternatively, the armor can be seen as an evil alter ego or doppelgänger. Stark's heroism is fragile, balancing between a vulnerable man and an unfeeling robot. Politically, Stark embodies the archetype of the exceptional American soldier—often at odds with the system but representing exaggerated masculinity, turning perceived weakness into strength (Nowotny, 2016).

Unlike Captain America, Tony Stark is classified as having a turbulent personality. His intense emotional expressions can destabilize his environment, and his primary motivation stems from emotional drives, often fueled by guilt over past actions. This turbulence makes him unpredictable, moody, and at times self-destructive. His impulsive behavior and internal conflicts make him one of the most complex characters in the MCU (Monica, 2019b).

## 6. Materials and Methods

The goal of our primary research was to investigate whether there is a visible connection between the personalities and behaviors of the two main Marvel superheroes described above—Captain America and Iron Man—and the personalities of the product and service brands associated with them throughout the films. In simpler terms, beyond the financial profit derived from product placement, we aimed to determine whether there is evident intentionality on the part of the filmmakers or brands to align the products with the film characters, ensuring authenticity in their appearance. Understanding this dynamic sheds light on the strategic integration of branding within cinematic universes and offers broader insights into branding theory, consumer psychology, and transmedia storytelling.

Our analysis covered 11 films produced by Marvel Studios between 2008 and 2019, all featuring either Captain America (Steve Rogers) or Iron Man (Tony Stark). By covering multiple films rather than isolated instances, the research allowed for a longitudinal assessment of brand–character alignment, revealing whether such placements were consistent over time or varied based on the character's development and the franchise's evolving themes. Given the MCU's commercial success and cultural influence, these films provide a rich dataset for examining branding strategies within a large-scale, interconnected cinematic universe.

To systematically document brand placements, the films were meticulously reviewed in multiple sessions, with frequent pauses to identify and catalog each instance of product placement. Every important brand appearance was photographed and timestamped, ensuring precise reference points for subsequent analysis. In addition to visual confirmation, qualitative notes were taken to describe the nature of each placement, including its contextual integration within the narrative. This process, while time-consuming, was essential for ensuring comprehensive data collection. Since most MCU films exceed two hours in length, the viewing process for each film was extended significantly due to the detailed documentation required.

Following data collection, all identified product placements were categorized based on multiple criteria. First, placements were classified according to sensory impact, distinguishing between visual appearances, auditory mentions, and audiovisual placements where the brand was both seen and referenced in dialogue. Second, placements were coded by level of involvement, differentiating between active placements, where a character directly interacts

with the brand, and passive placements, where the brand appears in the background or is casually mentioned. Third, the brands were classified according to product and service categories, such as automotive, technology, apparel, and beverages. Additionally, the study considered the national origin of the brands, identifying whether they were American or foreign (non-U.S.), a factor that was particularly relevant given the patriotic identity of Captain America and the globalized persona of Tony Stark.

A key aspect of the analysis involved assessing how brand placements aligned with character identities. To achieve this, brands were evaluated using Jennifer Aaker's brand personality framework, which categorizes brands based on five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Additionally, Mark and Pearson's archetypal model was applied to examine whether the personality traits of the brands corresponded to those of the characters. By integrating these frameworks, the study was able to determine whether certain brands were strategically paired with characters to enhance credibility and emotional engagement.

To ensure reliability and minimize researcher bias, the films and product placements were reviewed by two researchers. This process ensured that brand placements were consistently categorized and interpreted. In cases where discrepancies arose, the researchers engaged in discussion to reach a consensus, refining the coding scheme to enhance objectivity.

While this study focuses on the Marvel Cinematic Universe, its findings have broader implications beyond this franchise. The MCU serves as a model for contemporary blockbuster filmmaking, where transmedia storytelling and character-driven branding play an increasingly important role. The strategies observed in this study reflect broader industry trends in the integration of brands within entertainment media, extending beyond Marvel to other franchises such as the DC Extended Universe, James Bond, Fast & Furious, and Mission: Impossible. Furthermore, the relationship between product placement and parasocial relationships suggests that similar branding strategies can be applied across various media formats, including streaming platforms, video games, and virtual reality experiences. As audiences develop strong emotional attachments to recurring fictional characters, brand placements that align with these characters' traits can enhance credibility, foster consumer engagement, and strengthen long-term brand associations.

Based on our initial assumptions, we formulated the following hypotheses:

- (1) More brands are associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man) through product placement than with Steve Rogers (Captain America).
- (2) There is at least one brand represented by both characters.
- (3) Most brands associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man) are of foreign origin, whereas the majority of brands linked to Steve Rogers (Captain America) are American.
- (4) Tony Stark (Iron Man) is associated with more vehicle brands and technology companies than Steve Rogers (Captain America).
- (5) Futuristic, cutting-edge products appear exclusively in connection with Tony Stark (Iron Man).
- (6) Some brands that compete in the real market are also associated with opposing characters in Captain America: Civil War (2016).
- (7) Brands that embody the traits of ruggedness and sincerity are predominantly linked to Steve Rogers (Captain America), while competence and excitement are traits more frequently associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man).
- (8) Brands actively used by the characters can be directly justified by the personality traits revealed through the character analysis.



## 7. Results

The first research hypothesis examined whether Tony Stark (Iron Man) is associated with significantly more brands over the course of the 11 films than Steve Rogers (Captain America). Our primary research, conducted through careful viewing of the films, provided a clear answer. Tony Stark's character is linked to 108 brands, 18 of which demonstrated a particularly strong and organic collaboration with the character. In contrast, Steve Rogers' character is associated with 50 brands, with only 8 of these relationships considered notably strong or integrated.

Our second hypothesis explored whether any brands appeared in association with both characters. We identified ten brands that, in our interpretation, supported both characters through meaningful placements. These brands include Audi, Apple, Dr. Pepper, Everlast, JBL, Harley-Davidson, Acura, Under Armour, Vivo, and Doritos.

For the third question, we investigated the origins of the brands. We hypothesized that most brands linked to Tony Stark (Iron Man) would be of foreign (non-American) origin, while Steve Rogers (Captain America) would primarily be associated with American brands. This hypothesis was partially disproven. Where brand origins could be identified: 70 American brands were linked to Tony Stark (representing 64.8% of the total brands associated with him). A notable scene highlights Stark's preference for American brands—after requesting an “American cheeseburger”, he is seen holding a Burger King product. In the case of Captain America: 35 American brands were associated with him (constituting 70% of his total brand affiliations), while 15 brands were foreign (making up the remaining 30%). While Captain America's associations with American brands were indeed dominant, this was equally true for Iron Man.

The fourth research focus was the distribution of vehicle and technology brands between the two characters. We hypothesized that Tony Stark (Iron Man) would be linked to more vehicle and tech brands than Steve Rogers (Captain America), as this aligns more closely with his character. Upon viewing the films: Tony Stark is associated with 9 vehicle brands, while Steve Rogers is linked to 8. For instance, Captain America is frequently seen riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle across multiple films. Hence, no significant difference emerged in the number of vehicle brands. However, there was a notable disparity in electronic devices. Tony Stark uses 13 different electronic gadgets, while Steve Rogers—coming from the World War II era and having been frozen for decades—uses only 3 modern electronic devices.

For the fifth research focus, we examined the presence of futuristic products—brands that exist in reality but with fictional, advanced capabilities exceeding current technological limits. We hypothesized that such products would appear exclusively in association with Tony Stark (Iron Man). This hypothesis was confirmed, with four instances of futuristic products linked to Stark. The most striking example is the Tokyoflash Japan wristwatch, which functions both as a futuristic timepiece and a weapon on Tony Stark's wrist. Additionally, the sci-fi-like capabilities of Vivo smartphones used by Stark further emphasize this theme. Even sunglasses reflect futuristic elements—data scrolls across the lenses, imbuing them with technological prowess worthy of Stark. Initium Eyewear and Police sunglasses appear with similar advanced capabilities. Beyond these four examples, a fifth could arguably be the Tesla Roadster, which appeared in Stark's garage in the 2008 Iron Man film, despite being only a prototype at the time in the real world.

Our sixth hypothesis stemmed from Captain America: Civil War, in which the two lead characters—Steve Rogers and Tony Stark—clash ideologically and physically, pitting the MCU's two central figures against each other. We explored whether certain brands took a stance in this fictional conflict, potentially mirroring real-world market competition. In this regard, no explicit brand rivalries emerged through product placement in the films.

However, an intriguing observation was made in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*: while Audi vehicles prominently display logos when associated with both characters, logos from competing brands like BMW and Mercedes were either removed or conspicuously absent from other vehicles featured in the film. This subtle detail, while not confirming brand rivalry, hints at strategic brand positioning.

Our seventh hypothesis addressed personality and character alignment—specifically, whether the archetypes of brands linked to the characters reflect intentional alignment according to Jennifer Aaker’s brand personality dimensions. We predicted that brands embodying ruggedness and sincerity would primarily align with Steve Rogers (Captain America), while those representing competence and excitement would be associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man). The films validated this hypothesis, as summarized in Table 1. While the overall number of rugged brands linked to Rogers is lower than those linked to Stark, their proportional representation relative to his total brand affiliations is higher. The correlation between Rogers and sincere brands was even clearer. Similarly, Stark’s associations with brands embodying excitement and competence were dominant in both absolute and proportional terms, reinforcing our initial assumptions.

**Table 1.** Brands Categorized by Jennifer Aaker’s Dimensions and Their Connection to the Two Superhero Characters.

	Steve Rogers (Captain America)		Tony Stark (Iron Man)	
	Number of Brands	Percentage of Brands Relative to Total Brand Appearances	Number of Brands	Percentage of Brands Relative to Total Brand Appearances
Total Number of Brands Associated with the Character	50		108	
Sophistication Brands	2	4%	17	16%
Sincerity Brands	20	40%	17	16%
Excitement Brands	14	28%	32	30%
Competence Brands	2	4%	24	22%
Ruggedness Brands	12	24%	17	16%

Source: Based on the examined Iron Man and Captain America movies.

The last and eighth research hypothesis allowed for a more extensive explanation. In this section, we examined whether the placement of brands actively used by the characters can be clearly justified by the personality traits revealed through character analysis, or if there are instances of product placements where the brand is incompatible with the personalities of the characters.

The conclusion drawn was that there is complete harmony between the brands and the character of Iron Man. Vehicles, technology, and electronic devices are as characteristic of him as sunglasses and clothing that reflect elegance, sophistication, or even rebellion—not to mention his association with the famous MIT university or his encounter with Elon Musk, the head of Tesla, in one of the films. If a brand were to deviate from his personality, the playful nature of the character allows for the pairing with a touch of irony, and these

placements tend to serve as sources of humor on screen rather than create a sense of forced advertisement. The character himself is immersed in pop culture, frequently referencing video games, consoles, or films. He navigates the world of movies and music effortlessly, staying up to date with trends, which significantly contributes to his versatility. In one instance, he even wears a borrowed Dora the Explorer watch on his wrist—this unique accessory becomes a recurring source of humor in several scenes.

Regarding Steve Rogers, or Captain America, as mentioned earlier, significantly fewer brands are associated with him compared to Iron Man—though not an insignificant number. This can be attributed to his wartime past and decades spent frozen, limiting the opportunity for product placements that could have shaped his character from the outset. However, it is worth acknowledging that period-appropriate brands and organizations appeared in his first film, which takes place entirely during World War II. In later films, while there are product placements specifically tied to his character, he often uses brands that also appear with Iron Man—and it is almost always the case that these brands first appear with Iron Man, which aligns better with his innovator persona. This can also be attributed to the fact that the success of the first Iron Man film in 2008 was the catalyst for the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe. Without this success, the number of product placements and characters might be significantly lower. Tony Stark's character can thus be considered the flagship of the MCU, as everything began with his film.

In light of this, the quantity and frequency of product placements and brands collected and categorized during the research suggest that, of the two characters examined, Iron Man garners the most central attention. The data indicate that when brands became involved, their personalities primarily had to align with Tony Stark's character. Brands that were satisfied with this collaboration and whose values and identities did not conflict were able to extend their presence to other characters as well.

Audi, Apple, Dr Pepper, Everlast, JBL, Harley-Davidson, Under Armour, Vivo, Samsung, and Dell are all brands that received strong visibility in the films, primarily associated with Tony Stark but sometimes also appearing alongside Captain America or other Marvel characters. For example, JBL speakers, Apple and Dell computers, and Vivo phones appear in connection with Captain America. However, Vivo phones only display futuristic capabilities when in Iron Man's hands, and he is the only one with a personalized Audi license plate reading "Stark".

In summary, while the expanding fan base and audiences of the films may see Tony Stark and Steve Rogers as the two main protagonists of the MCU, in terms of brand associations, Stark plays a much stronger role. This also means that product placements contribute more significantly to the financial and economic support of the MCU through Stark's character. A thorough viewing of the films, meticulous note-taking on product placements, and the analysis above lead to the conclusion that when selecting significant product placements, Tony Stark's personality consistently served as the benchmark.

## 8. Discussion

At this point, it is worthwhile to revisit the hypotheses and systematically review each one. This is summarized in Table 2.

Based on the research, it can be concluded that product and service brands were not solely focused on maximizing exposure, nor were filmmakers solely driven by maximizing revenue from product placement. Instead, there was a conscious effort from both sides to create authentic character-brand pairings in the films. It has been proven that not only can heroes serve brands, but brands can also serve heroes. Product and service brands helped make superheroes more authentic and bridged the gap between reality and a world inhabited by superheroes (Clark, 2019). Through brands, these larger-than-life and

exaggeratedly portrayed superheroes can appear more realistic to the audience, who may then sympathize with the characters more easily and adopt them as role models they aspire to emulate. It is important to note that this desire to emulate can be most quickly satisfied by acquiring products associated with the characters. One thing is certain—the superhero genre offers ample opportunities for further research. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has continued to release new films since this study, with more expected in the future.

**Table 2.** Hypotheses and Their Validation.

Hypothesis	Character	Validation
Significantly more product placements are associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man) than with Steve Rogers (Captain America).	Both	Validated
There is a brand that is represented by both characters equally.	Both	Validated
The majority of brands associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man) are foreign, while the majority of those with Steve Rogers (Captain America) are American.	Iron Man	Refuted
	Captain America	Validated
More vehicle and technology brands are associated with Tony Stark (Iron Man) than with Steve Rogers (Captain America).	Both	Validated for technology brands but not for vehicles
Futuristic, forward-looking products only appear in association with Tony Stark (Iron Man).	Both	Validated
There are brands that, although competitors in the real market, appear on opposite sides in Captain America: Civil War (2016).	Both	Refuted
Brands characterized by durability and sincerity are more likely to appear with Steve Rogers (Captain America), while brands representing expertise and excitement are linked to Tony Stark (Iron Man).	Both	Validated
The placement of brands actively used by the characters is clearly justifiable based on the personality traits identified through character analysis.	Iron Man	Validated
	Captain America	Refuted

Source: Based on the examined Iron Man and Captain America movies.

The findings of this research align with and expand upon previous studies examining the intersection of product placement and character–brand alignment within the cinematic universe. Prior research, such as [Monika and Antonio \(2022\)](#), highlights the significant impact of brand alliances on consumer perception when paired with influential characters, a trend that has proven effective in markets beyond the United States, including Indonesia. This study similarly finds that the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) leverages character-driven narratives to embed product and service brands in a way that resonates with audiences, fostering deeper engagement and brand recall. Furthermore, [Valentová \(2021\)](#) examined the representation of aging superheroes and their evolving roles in society. Although this study primarily focuses on Iron Man and Captain America, the alignment of their personalities with product brands reflects a conscious effort to maintain the authenticity of character arcs. This reinforces the idea that product placement tran-

scends mere advertising, becoming an essential part of the narrative fabric that contributes to character development and audience connection.

Cheng and Nagai (2024) highlighted the importance of product placement in engaging Generation Z, revealing that subtle and well-integrated placements drive stronger emotional and cognitive connections. This research mirrors those findings by showcasing that character congruency plays a pivotal role in ensuring product placements feel natural rather than forced. Tony Stark's association with cutting-edge technology brands and Steve Rogers' alignment with heritage-driven, resilient brands further support this argument. The results also corroborate Zhang et al.'s (2023) exploration of the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) grid model, emphasizing that high-involvement products benefit significantly from placements linked to emotionally compelling characters. This study's identification of Stark as an innovator and Rogers as a traditionalist aligns well with Zhang's categorization of brand placements by involvement and emotional appeal.

However, this research highlights a notable divergence from prior studies by underscoring the contrast in brand alignment between Iron Man and Captain America. While previous literature emphasizes broad product placement strategies, this study narrows the focus to character-driven placements, revealing that brand congruency is often stronger in MCU films compared to other cinematic universes. This distinction underscores the MCU's deliberate approach to fostering brand loyalty and character immersion. Future research may explore the long-term impact of such placements on brand equity and audience loyalty, particularly as the MCU expands its multiversal narratives and introduces new characters. Additionally, the role of cultural factors in brand–character alignment warrants further investigation, as different regions may perceive brand associations differently based on local values and cultural archetypes. While this study focuses on two of the MCU's central figures, we acknowledge that this scope limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should examine other characters and franchises to assess whether similar brand–character alignment patterns emerge. Additionally, the typological frameworks applied here can serve as a replicable model for comparative brand analysis across diverse cinematic universes.

## 9. Conclusions

This study represents a unique and comprehensive examination of product and service brand placement within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, specifically focusing on its two central figures, Iron Man and Captain America. Through meticulous analysis of 11 films spanning over a decade, this research highlights the nuanced relationship between character traits and brand alignment.

The findings confirm that product placements in MCU films are not purely opportunistic but are carefully curated to align with the core attributes of key characters. Tony Stark's association with advanced technology brands and luxury products mirrors his character's innovative and extravagant persona, while Steve Rogers' alignment with durable, heritage-focused brands reflects his grounded and resilient nature. This conscious pairing fosters authenticity and strengthens the emotional bond between audiences and the brands featured on screen.

This research breaks new ground by applying personality typology models (Aaker; Mark and Pearson; MBTI; NERIS Type Explorer) to analyze brand–character congruence. The results indicate that the interplay between character development and brand placement enhances viewer engagement, creating a symbiotic relationship that benefits both filmmakers and brand partners.

By integrating branding theory, consumer psychology, and media studies, this study provides a novel framework for analyzing product placement in cinematic universes. As



the Marvel Cinematic Universe continues to grow and evolve, the insights from this study provide valuable implications for brand strategists and filmmakers alike. This research underscores the importance of authentic brand–character alignment, paving the way for more meaningful and effective product placements in future cinematic endeavors.

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