

Black Panther (2018)



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AS Component 1: Investigating the Media A level Component 1: Media Products, Industries and Audiences

Focus areas: Media Industries Media Contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- Black Panther is the 17th film in the 'Marvel Cinematic Universe', the highest-grossing film **franchise** in history. It was directed by Ryan Coogler (Creed) and released in February 2018.
- The film shows us the fictional African kingdom of **Wakanda**, which has avoided European colonisation and achieved a technological superiority through the use of a mineral called Vibranium. T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) must fight a number of foes who oppose him becoming king after the death of his father.
- Black Panther (T'Challa) first appeared in Fantastic Four #62, released July 1966.
- The film was produced by Marvel Studios, a famous comic book **brand** that is also a **subsidiary** of the Walt Disney Company.
- Black Panther was extremely successful, broke records for the highest opening weekend in the USA, and also performed well globally. The film has grossed well over \$1 billion worldwide, with 48% in non-US countries.
- It was also one of the only superhero films to be nominated for a 'Best Picture' **Academy Award**. It won three Oscars for Costume, Production Design, and Original Soundtrack.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Industries

Historical Context:

- From 15th-20th century, European powers **colonised** African countries and exploited the continent for both resources and slave labour. Africans were branded 'savages' by the European invaders, their cultures dismissed as 'primitive'.
- During the early 20th century, African-Americans attempted to establish a new black **cultural identity** with movements such as the Harlem Renaissance.

- The Black Panther Party (October 1966-82) was a **political activist** group established initially to provide armed monitoring of police behaviour and prevent police brutality in the US. It was controversial, with many Panthers being arrested or killed in confrontations with police.

Cultural context:

- The science fiction blockbuster and superhero **genres** have traditionally been dominated by white, male characters. In the 1990s, actors like Will Smith and Wesley Snipes did break ground playing black characters, but recent action films and especially superhero films have rarely featured African-American actors in lead roles.
- For the last 15 years, Marvel films have topped the box office. Though these regularly featured non-white characters, they were often sidekicks (e.g. The Falcon in the Captain America films). There have also been very few superhero films with a female lead (Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel being exceptions).
- Black cinema has traditionally consisted of issues-based **social realism** (e.g. the films of Spike Lee) or have been '**arthouse**'/'**prestige**' pictures (e.g. Moonlight, 2016). Blade (1998) is one of the few superhero films to have a black main character.
- In 2016, the #oscarssowhite meme drew attention to the **lack of diversity** in the films nominated.
- US/European news media tends to portray Africa as an under-privileged, developing country, focusing on civil wars, famine and terrorism. The Victorian branding of Africa as '**the Dark Continent**' has not evolved very far. Very few feature films from Africa reach the Western mainstream, and films like Blood Diamond (2006) and Captain Phillips (2013), though featuring sympathetic African characters, still portray Africa as a dangerous and barbaric place.
- Further study: research the cultural movement of '**Afrofuturism**'. What does this term mean? How have artists explored the idea in music, art, film and other media? To what extent is Black Panther an Afrofuturist film?

Economic and Political Contexts:

- Barack Obama (2009-2017), America's first African-American president, created many initiatives that aided minority

and women's groups: from universal healthcare, to college and entrepreneurship access funds for the under-privileged.

- Donald Trump, the current president, has vowed to reverse many of these, winning support from mostly white, right wing Americans who consider such initiatives unfair. In addition, Trump has insulted other countries (including many in Africa), and refused to condemn violent racist attacks in American cities.
- Worrying statistics about the amount of unarmed 'people of colour' (POC) shot by US police led to the **#blacklivesmatter** campaign, which has utilised **social media** to raise awareness of an issue that has often been ignored by **mainstream media**.

Consider the significance of patterns of ownership and control, including conglomerate ownership, vertical integration and diversification:

- *Black Panther* was produced by Marvel Studios, who became a subsidiary of Disney in 2008. They are also the film's **distributor**, which makes this a good example of **vertical integration**.
- Marvel has historically sold **options** on individual characters or comicbook titles e.g. Spiderman to TV and then to Paramount (and who is still partly owned by Sony). *Black Panther* was one of those owned fully by Marvel; in 2009 a new team began developing T'Challa and lesser known characters.
- In early 2000s, Marvel Studios began to **produce** films, starting with *Blade* (1998) and the *X-Men* films (2000).
- When Disney bought Marvel, they agreed to minimal creative influence over Marvel products.
- in 2013, Marvel also signed a deal with **streaming** service Netflix to develop TV series for six more characters (including *Daredevil* and *Punisher* who had already been made into films). This may have caused conflict with Disney, who has their own streaming channel, and in 2019 Netflix cancelled their Marvel shows.

Consider how media organisations maintain, including through marketing, varieties of audiences nationally and globally:

- Disney, the film's **distributor** adopted a '360-degree consumer experience' to their marketing (i.e. wherever you look, there's *Black Panther*!)
- The concept was to make the film into

a '**cultural event**' across a variety of media and platforms and raising its profile from being 'another superhero' film into something more **politically resonant**.

- Here are some of the **brand association** deals Disney used to target a **diverse audience** who may not be 'fanboys'. How do these a.) appeal to a different spectator than other Marvel films?: Hasbro toys <https://io9.gizmodo.com/this-black-panther-toy-commercial-is-moreimportant-tha-1821802836> ; Lexus cars <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/lexus-introduces-two-newvehicles-inspired-by-marvel-studios-black-panther-ahead-of-sema-2017-300542095.html> Interscope records (Universal Music) <https://www.factmag.com/2018/02/13/ryancoogler-kendrick-lamar-black-panther/> and b.) how do they combine in a **synergy** to make *Black Panther* 'more' than a superhero film?
- Black Panther's teaser trailers were shown between NBA games and a special collaboration with Lexus called 'Long Live The King' was shown during the Superbowl. What kind of audiences normally watch these programmes? How are they different to the usual Marvel **fanbase**?
- The film's release also harnessed a political element to add gravitas. **Crowd-funding** projects to buy under-privileged children a ticket won support from celebrities; the film was released during **Black History Month**; plus Coogler, the stars and the costume, hair/make-up, production designers all gave detailed interviews about how the film celebrates African culture. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/why-fashion-is-key-tounderstanding-the-world-of-black-panther/553157/>
- There was also a 'Welcome to Wakanda' catwalk show at New York Fashion Week and features in numerous fashion magazines. (On opening weekend 44% of ticket buyers were female)
- Look at the preview posters and the trailer - (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjDjIWPwcPU>) - how does the film celebrate African culture? Why might it be important to black children to have characters like Black Panther? How does it also represent black women in a powerful way? How does it also appeal to fans of blockbusters?
- Disney are adept at identifying **nuanced demographic** groups and strategies for targeting them. Many of their products are '**intercultural**' i.e. they strongly represent one cultural tradition

but in a way that resonates with audiences from other cultural / national / ethnic backgrounds.

- Disney has used recent Nielsen research to challenge conventional ideas about the ethnic diversity in mainstream America. 53% of Americans live in a multicultural or 'blended' household. 67% indicated they were enthusiastic about encountering and experimenting with '**diverse cultures**'.
- Think about recent Disney releases like *Moana* (2016) or *Coco* (2017): how do they represent a **cultural tradition** positively? What **universal** themes or story elements would audiences not from that culture still engage with?

Consider the regulatory framework of contemporary media in the UK and the role of regulation in global production, distribution and circulation:

- The **BBFC** (an independent, non-governmental body) **classifies** film and video releases in the UK. However, local councils have the power to overrule BBFC decisions and rate films differently (e.g. *This is England* was rated 18 by the BBFC but several councils rated it 15).
- The theatrical release of *Black Panther* gained a **12a certificate**. Look at the BBFC website for what constitutes a 12a - why do you think they awarded this to *Black Panther*? (<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/>)
- The film, like many recent Marvel films, features very little romantic drama and no sex or nudity. It is fairly violent, but the combat is fantastical (hard to imitate) and there is a strong **moral code** to most of the conflict. The film was classified as PG-13 in USA, and similarly in other territories. Why do you think the film was regulated this way, even in countries with stricter rules and censorship like China or India?

Consider processes of production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent platforms:

- The **teaser trailer** was released in June 2017 by Disney's sister channel ABC, during NBA Finals. Within 24 hours it had been viewed 89 million times on Youtube.
- Just before release, *Black Panther* was the most-tweeted about film of 2018 with more

than 5 million tweets globally. In mid-March 2018, it became the most-tweeted about film ever with 35 million tweets.

Consider how film/film marketing is circulated and distributed:

- Where and how is film/film marketing most likely to be **consumed** by audiences?
- How has this **consumption** changed/ been impacted by the internet, including YouTube and smartphones?
- Are audiences now more likely to seek out, for example, new trailers online as **active consumers**? (Think about 'reaction' videos of people watching trailers!)
- Consider the way people **share** trailers or movie gossip (casting decisions, plot elements etc.) especially those with a strong **fan community**. How is this an example of '**word-of-mouth**' marketing.
- How does this impact the relationship between audience and product?
- How did *Black Panther* harness other, more political **social media campaigns** to create a 'cultural event' rather than just another summer blockbuster?

Theoretical perspectives:

A level only:

Cultural industries - David Hesmondhalgh

- Further explore the concept of profit in relation to the film industry and in this case specifically to the film **franchises**. Often films within a series can become formulaic and lack risk. Is this the case with Marvel Studios? Or Disney?
- Explore Hesmondhalgh's idea that media conglomerates operate across a range of cultural industries by considering the way the film was released as part of a **synergy** - with fashion, music, videogames, sports tie-ins, even a car!
- You might also usefully introduce the idea that this film has a very low risk for the producers. The character of T'Challa and Wakanda were introduced in *Captain America: Civil War*, the comic is over 50 years old, and all previous Marvel films have been hugely successful. On the other hand, having such an **Afrocentric**

film could have been seen as a commercial risk, especially outside the USA and Africa.

Curran and Seaton - Media and power

- How does the film's much celebrated diversity challenge Curran and Seaton's idea that domination by a small number of media institutions limits creativity and variety?
- How could the **conglomerate model**

(Marvel as a separate brand to Disney)
offer a more complex pattern of ownership than Curran and Seaton describe?

- To what extent does the dominance of Marvel in the sci-fi/superhero genre limit the opportunities for alternative, riskier **independent** films in these genres?