

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the relatively short time since their invention at the end of nineteenth century, films have rapidly evolved from a temporary novelty to the most dominant visual form of modern popular culture worldwide (Radner, 2010, p. 12). Unlike the print mass media, for instances, book, newspaper, magazine, which require literate audiences, or even radio, which require audiences who understand the originating language, film is an almost universal language of moving visuals along with its genres that was immediately embraced and popularized around the world (Galicain & Natharius, 2008, p. 31). In the recent years, superhero films have gained so much attention globally (Muniz-Gonzales, 2017, p. 65). This type of sub-genre film, which features action, adventure, fantasy or science elements has soaked up the industry and audiences' attention. The fictions have proven to get promising result for Hollywood Studios. For instance, a single film such as *The Avengers (2012)* achieved a box office of \$1,511,409,272 worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2012).

Gaining such an expansive interest, Marvel Studios as the leader of the production created Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to release individual films for their superhero characters and then merge them together in a crossover film. To be more specific, MCU is a media franchise and shared universe that is centered on a series of its superhero films; crossing over the plot, setting, and characters (Murray, Phipps, & Singer, 2013, p. 11). This means that Marvel Cinematic

Universe (MCU) is basically tended to put together their superhero characters into one frame with shared plots and settings (i.e. *The Avengers*, 2012). In addition, President of Production for Marvel Studios once explained that this construction of a shared film universe is the first of its kind and this is what everyone has been waiting for:

It is never done before and that is kind of the spirit everybody is taking it. The other filmmakers are not used to getting actors from other movies that the other filmmakers have cast, certain plot or certain location are connected... but I think everyone was on board for it and thinks that it is fun. If the fans want to look further and find connections, then they are there. – Kevin Feige, 2010

The basic idea of this franchise is to fulfill fans' curiosity and to have a fresh vision, a unique tone, and the fact that stand-alone films of Marvel Cinematic Universe can interconnect each other (Philbrick, 2010, p. 3).

Becoming the first massive superhero films franchise, questions emerge from cinema, communication, cultural, media, and marketing fields with various issues towards Marvel Cinematic Universe. For instances, Muniz-Gonzales (2017) examined the ideology that is carried in Marvel Cinematic Universe. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach by Fairclough, he analyzed both plot and characters in *Iron Man* (2008) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). He found that Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) as American based-production and political culture points out capitalism with inconsistency between moral and ethics. This means that MCU invents superheroes that challenge alleged ideals with their thinking (i.e. refusing loyalties to an institution to fulfill a more logical goal). Meanwhile, Davies (2016) discovered a new paradigm of production and storytelling while fusing cultural and economic elements of Marvel. He explains what makes Marvel different is that their franchises operate a spherical model of

production. This spherical model means that numerous franchises (MCU's stand-alone films) are being linked together through the characters, crossing over in between films in different franchises.

As an addition, Johnson (2012) combined an analysis of Marvel's film narratives and production strategies with examination of the self-reflexive trade stories that Marvel executives have deployed to legitimate their invasion to Hollywood production communities. Focusing on articles between 2005 and 2009 from *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*, he found that Marvel Studios' offer for creative and economic independence in the film industry facilitated a specific form of convergence between cinema and comic books both compatible with revolutionary to the existing production cultures of Hollywood and other related industries. Although Marvel's group of installment narratives engaged with some Hollywood traditions, the corporate hierarchies and relations of work with which Marvel pursued, that content distracted institutional power away from majors to external position in another media industry. Therefore, these previous studies open an opportunity to examine how Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) gains such a position in the industry, as well as how their consumer perceive their image through media convergence.

Even though MCU is the first massive superhero films franchise, still, there must be some strategies in gaining such success and popularity. Seeing it under the term of so-called 'studio system', producers and studio heads are acutely aware that the success of most films are depend on the actors and actresses and their ability to attract audiences (Radner, 2008, p. 15). Meanwhile, from the view of marketing

strategy, there is a term called brand positioning or branding. It essentially relates to the mind of consumer (Akpoymare et al., 2012, p. 46). This term refers to the art and science of fitting the product of service to one or more segments of the brand market in such a way to set it meaningfully apart from the competition (Dias, 2010, p. 20). Brand positioning or branding is formed by producing an identical image through media, for instance advertising or film review (Kotler & Keller, 2012, p. 243). In this case, Marvel Cinematic Universe' film reviews can be seen as a corpus to study the brand positioning of the franchise.

Talking about film review, film critics compete to create a valuable review to construe their point of view towards film (Pentheny, 2015, p. 5). He explains, it is happened since film reviews give influence to the consumer thinking process. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2004) film review as analytical exposition text, contains objective analysis of the film's formal techniques (cinematography, editing, and so on) and thematic content (ideas, plot, effects, and so on). However, this kind of review can merely be found in professional film critics' review just like in *Rotten Tomatoes* aggregation website (Verboord, 2013, p. 923). He examined the impact discourse employment in online and offline film reviews, and found that professional critics tend to be more analytical and use specific idioms in wording, while amateur reviewers more often refer to their own watching experiences or expectations. In line with these previous findings, this study also uses *Rotten Tomatoes* as the media platform for film reviews that will be examined, however focuses on the brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

This study investigates ten film reviews— *Double Live: “The Avengers”* (1); *Superheroes, Super Battles, Super Egos* (2); *“Iron Man 3”: A Shell of Himself* (3); *Bang Boom: Terrorism as a Game* (4); *Fighting On: “Avengers: Age of Ultron”* (5); *‘Avengers: Age of Ultron’ Gets the Superband back together* (6); *Transformers: “Captain America: Civil War”* (7); *In ‘Captain America: Civil War,’ Super-Bro Against Super-Bro* (8); *“Spiderman: Homecoming” Hedges Its Bets* (9); and *Spider-Man (Again) and All That Sticky Kid Stuff* (10)— that are published in the top critics category on *Rotten Tomatoes’* aggregation website. These reviews are written by four professional film critics— Anthony Lane, A.O. Scott, Manohla Dargis, and Richard Brody— and are chosen since the reviews are the most visited reviews in its category. The writer chooses *The Avengers* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017) as the films that are reviewed in the film reviews since those films represent the most popular characters from Marvel Cinematic Universe, and are included to the top five box office worldwide of its franchise (Box Office Mojo, 2017).

This research analyzes the ten film reviews deploying Michael Halliday’s Transitivity System of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine the ideational metafunction, and Appraisal Theory, as the derivative study of SFL, to examine the interpersonal metafunction, specifically to find out how film critics situate the brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) through their film reviews in *Rotten Tomatoes’* Top Critic Category. Transitivity system and three interacting domains of Appraisal— attitude, engagement, and graduation—

are deployed as methods in textual analysis. In this case, the film reviews can be perceived as a social semiotic system that the choice of words and the structure of the text signify certain meanings. The writer assumes that the four film critics situate the brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) through their review by portraying the identity/image of the franchise as an overload yet entertaining media franchise.

As brand positioning is identical with consumer, an analysis related to consumer in media consumption is required. In order to do that, Decoding Theory by Stuart Hall is also deployed in this study as transactional system to find out the reactions of the readers; how the reviews are consumed, specifically the effects of the reviews towards the readers. Positive, negative, and negotiating effects towards the image of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) are expected to be occurred, since these effects lead to whether the position is accepted, rejected, or negotiated.

1.2 Research Question of the Study

Based on the background of the study and the reasons for choosing the topic, the study tries to answer these following questions:

1. How do the four film critics situate the brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) through their film reviews in Rotten Tomatoes' Top Critic Category?
2. How do the readers respond to the brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) through the ten film reviews in Rotten Tomatoes' Top Critic Category?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to scrutinize:

1. The brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) situated by four film critics in Rotten Tomatoes' Top Critic Category.
2. The responses (or positions) of the readers, whether they accept, reject, or negotiate the brand positioning of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) situated by four film critics in Rotten Tomatoes' Top Critic Category.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on ten film reviews—*Double Live: “The Avengers”* (1); *Superheroes, Super Battles, Super Egos* (2); *“Iron Man 3”: A Shell of Himself* (3); *Bang Boom: Terrorism as a Game* (4); *Fighting On: “Avengers: Age of Ultron”* (5); *‘Avengers: Age of Ultron’ Gets the Superband back together* (6); *Transformers: “Captain America: Civil War”* (7); *In ‘Captain America: Civil War,’ Super-Bro Against Super-Bro* (8); *“Spiderman: Homecoming” Hedges Its Bets* (9); and *Spider-Man (Again) and All That Sticky Kid Stuff* (10)— written by Anthony Lane, A.O. Scott, Manohla Dargis, and Richard Brody. These ten film reviews are published in the top critic category on *Rotten Tomatoes*' aggregation website; representing the top five worldwide box office of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the most visited reviews in the top critic category. Beside the chosen reviews, this study also focuses on the sixteen readers of the ten film reviews; their role in the text consumption.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The writer hopes this study would be useful for reference study related to language and brand positioning in the media discourse perspective, the function of film review as a medium to both evaluate and appreciate a production of a film, American-based production, and popular culture. The result of this study is aimed to give an academic input in media and cultural studies field through a construction of discursive text. This study is also expected to be useful for the readers who are interested in Media and Cultural Studies, and its aspects.