



# MARVEL

## CINEMATIC UNIVERSITY

**Caroline Reid explains what we can learn about the film industry by studying Scarlett Johansson and *Black Widow*.**

Over the last few years, cinema distribution and theatre exhibition has been forced to evolve, and quickly. Traditionally, audiences liked nothing more than settling themselves down in the seats of darkened cinemas, popcorn in hand, to indulge in the latest big blockbuster, keen to be the first to see exclusive content. The pandemic changed all of that.

Cinema closures due to Covid restrictions, meant that companies had to re-think their distribution and exhibition business models to claw back lost revenue. Many delayed releases or chose to bypass the theatre release window altogether, instead focussing on reaching their audience in the comfort of their own homes. Many films that would normally have hit the cinemas went straight to streaming sites.

*Black Widow* (2021), starring Scarlett Johansson as former Russian spy, Natasha Romanoff, is Marvel's 24th feature-length instalment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the first solo outing for Johansson's *Black Widow* character. Originally scheduled for a highly anticipated theatrical release in May 2020, *Black Widow* was set to kick-start phase four of the MCU; however the pandemic delayed its release by over a year, and the film didn't hit theatres until the following July. Due to the delayed distribution, it was Marvel's first mini-series, *WandaVision* (2021), that introduced the new phase instead, premiering on the Disney+ streaming site.

Cinemas re-opened in the summer of 2021, and it was hoped that the delayed release of Marvel's latest juggernaut, *Black Widow*, would help to draw audiences back to the struggling theatres, relying on the loyalty of Marvel's fan base to boost box office ticket sales, despite many Covid restrictions still being in place.

Disney, who bought out Marvel Entertainment in 2009, demonstrating the company's use of horizontal integration, adding Marvel Studios under their umbrella of smaller companies, were concerned about a theatre release. So, they made the decision to release *Black Widow* both on the big screen and on their Disney+ streaming site simultaneously, establishing their use of vertical integration, as Disney were able to distribute and exhibit the film on their own streaming site, as well as in cinemas across the globe.

Disney's decision to offer Disney+ viewers the chance to access *Black Widow*, the first MCU film to be dual distributed in this way, for an additional 'premier access' cost, was controversial. Pre-pandemic, theatrical releases would have a window of time that would pass, usually 90 days, before being released onto streaming sites, for a film to garner revenue from ticket sales.

The dual release of *Black Widow* prompted Scarlett Johansson to file a lawsuit against the Disney conglomerate, claiming that it breached her contract, as she was promised by Marvel Studios that it would be a 'theatrical' release, and part of her wage was tied to box

office sales. Johansson believed that she was deprived of potential earnings, with sources claiming she lost an estimated \$50 million in profit. However, *Black Widow* maintained Marvel's previous successes, and it set a box office record for release during the pandemic, grossing over \$200 million in its opening weekend. But box office receipts fell sharply after that, in part due to its release to video on demand (VoD) on Disney + Premier. The Premier streaming service racked up an additional \$60 million in profit during *Black Widow's* first 20 days of release, but none of this revenue went to Johansson.

Disney denied that they had breached Johansson's contract, saying that her claim had 'no merit.' However they later settled with Johansson outside of court for an undisclosed amount. Alan Bergman, content chairman for Disney Studios said:

**We appreciate her (Johansson's) contributions to the Marvel Cinematic Universe and look forward to working together on a number of upcoming projects.**

What makes Disney's decision to release a blockbuster Marvel film straight to their streaming site at the same time as the cinema so important, is that it comes at a time when the film industry faces questions about how audiences will continue to consume entertainment in the future, as cinema chains such as Cineworld, who have suffered a staggering \$3 billion loss due to pandemic closures, continue to struggle.



Never, ever breach  
my contract

Many companies have continued to cut their exclusive theatrical window as we come out of the pandemic. Warner Bros. has cut their window from 90 days to 45 in the US, Paramount has a maximum of a 45-day window and Universal has slashed their theatrical window even further to just 17 days. Instead, film companies are opting to prioritise their on-demand streaming sites, with Marvel Studios being no exception. In the last few years, Marvel have focussed much of their phase four of the MCU on the production of big budget mini-series, all releasing straight onto the Disney + global streaming site. As well as *WandaVision*, titles have included *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), *Moon Knight* (2022) and *Ms. Marvel* (2022), and with Disney + generating an estimated \$5.2 billion in revenue as of 2021, it is easy to see why the integrated companies are keen to focus their efforts on VoD.

Cinema certainly isn't dead yet, but exhibitors will need to continue to adapt by investing in VoD deals with distributors. Disney and Marvel are paving the way for dual theatrical and straight-to-streaming-site releases, and what *Black Widow* showed, is that there is a way to accommodate both the domestic and theatrical experience, if your fan base is strong enough, and your film big enough. Something that Marvel and Disney certainly do not have a problem with.

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