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# Social Media Strategies that Lead to Success in the Film Industry

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Elisa O'Keefe-Smith

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Review Committee
Dr. Janie Hall, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Wen-Wen Chien, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University 2023

### Abstract

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by

Elisa O'Keefe-Smith

MBA, Eastern University, 2007

BA, Immaculata University, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2023

#### Abstract

Social media influence is important to movie industry leaders as it directly affects film revenues. The problem is that independent film managers often fail to increase revenues due to limited resources and a lack of social media marketing strategies. Grounded in the conceptual framework of social media marketing management (SMMM), this multiple case study was an exploration of the social media strategies used by independent film managers to increase film revenues. Participants were 10 U.S.-based independent film managers who successfully leveraged social media strategies in the film industry. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, publicly available documentation, data found on websites, and social media. Through thematic analysis, three themes emerged including social media platforms as related to target audiences, social media marketing tactics, and use of other platforms, services, and media. Independent film managers should first understand their audiences and the nuances around the social media platforms their audiences use. A key recommendation is social media platform optimization as related to target audience. Implications for positive social change include audience empowerment, inspiration, and knowledge. Film content that addresses social causes and issues can influence activism for social good, widespread conversation, public awareness, funding of programs, and changing of laws that benefit those adversely affected.

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#### Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my family and friends who have believed in me, supported me, and loved me through the years. To my reason for everything, my daughter Bryanna, you motivate me to show you that anything can be achieved if you work hard and want it enough. To my mum who paved the way, my angel in heaven, an educator who left too soon, over 30 years now, I wish you could see me achieve this monumental degree, as your love for education was so apparent. I feel your spirit right here with me. To my dad, my other angel in heaven, fiercely protective, strong, resolute, the person who had such high expectations of me, you always pushed me to excel. And to God, the Universe, always coming through for me!

#### Acknowledgments

Thank you to my doctoral committee members: Dr. Janie Hall (Doctoral Chair), Dr. Wen-wen Chien (2nd Committee Member), and Dr. Charlie Shao (University Research Reviewer) for your thoughtfulness and wisdom. Dr. Hall, thank you for being a great support and for holding me accountable when needed. I appreciate your belief in me. Thank you for cheering me on and helping me to finish strong. To Dr. Lisa Burnside, thank you for being a coach and mentor, for sharing your advice, wisdom, and tips, for hearing me, encouraging me, and believing in me. I thank all the instructors and peers I came across while completing my journey. To my participants, thank you for agreeing to be part of my study, and for sharing your experiences and insights as film makers. To my Diva Docs, my sister/friends who have achieved their doctorates ahead of me and believed in my vision, you have set the bar for me, and there is so much ahead to achieve. Finally, thank you to God, Jesus, and my guardian angels, for providing and protecting me through this journey!

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The film business landscape has rapidly changed with increased social media use, transforming how people distribute, share, and access information, news, and points of view (Clifton-Ross et al., 2019). Independent films are not financed, produced, or influenced by the major, established Hollywood studios; therefore, independent films are made with a minimal budget (Green, 2021). Film managers are responsible for business decisions that ensure a movie's success. These business decisions include budget allocation, distribution, marketing, advertising, and promotions. Social media has greatly impacted the film business, so the rationale for film managers' decisions in the past that did not consider social media no longer applies. Film managers need to consider the importance of social media to film marketing when making business decisions. My focus in this study was to explore social media strategies that independent film managers use to increase revenues.

### **Background of the Problem**

Traditionally, independent film managers achieved film success with a strategic and traditional marketing mix, including help from intermediaries such as film critics, public relations, advertising agencies, and distribution companies (Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). Much of the marketing mix expenditure was on publicists and distributors who would secure prime theater screening locations and attract audiences with heavy promotion and advertising leading up to opening weekend (Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). High-profile film critics and journalists provided traditional one-way word of mouth and were often paid to publicly review films for advertising and exposure (Deng, 2020).

Hiring high-profile actors and directors was a big part of the budget expenditure because research had shown that a movie star in a lead role heavily influenced consumer preference and choice (Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018).

According to Reznik (2018), in the recent movie landscape, film managers could distribute and promote without the help of intermediaries; however, the low-cost and easy market entry had resulted in more competition with supply exceeding demand in an oversaturated movie market. Film managers faced challenges including an abundance of film offerings, intense competition for funding, and several social media platforms (Reznik, 2018).

Consumers sought to trust the information they found online and through social media (Pyle et al., 2021). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) had gained traction with reviews from social media influencers (whom consumers see as peers) often considered more trustworthy than company sites (Pyle et al., 2021).

There is a need to understand which social media marketing strategies are the most impactful on an independent film's release and ultimate success. When film managers better understand the different social media platforms, the user demographics, and the benefits and risks of each platform, they can determine optimal social media marketing strategies that result in increased revenue with fewer inherent risks.

### **Problem Statement**

Independent managers' failure to optimize social media influence for new releases affects films' revenues (Nanda et al., 2018). Managers' failure to strategically leverage social media for movie trailer content can result in 55.9% decreased ticket purchases,

which negatively impacts film revenues (Liao & Huang, 2021). The general business problem was the lack of strategic social media resource assignment that could negatively impact film revenues. The specific business problem was that many independent film managers lacked social media strategies to increase film revenues.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues. The target population consisted of 10 independent film managers from 10 different film organizations located within the United States. The implications for positive social change include empowerment, inspiration, and knowledge delivered to disenfranchised groups through film. The relatable characters and stories in films serve to create awareness and inspire decisions and actions that may improve individuals' quality of life.

#### **Nature of the Study**

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. I selected a qualitative method for this research study. Qualitative research is inductive in nature and used to detect patterns and develop understanding about experiences, beliefs, and behaviors (Bazen et al., 2021). The exploratory openness of qualitative research is ideal for examining the research questions from the experiences and perceptions of participants (Kingstone et al., 2020). A quantitative method is data driven with researchers using numbers to objectively describe a situation (Insani & Arnan, 2023). Quantitative research often involves the use of probability sampling in the form of surveys (Rahman et al., 2022). A quantitative method was not appropriate because of the

structured questions that prevent the participants' thorough descriptions. Researchers use a mixed methods approach to combine both quantitative and qualitative elements (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). A mixed method approach was not appropriate because of the quantitative and structured study design elements needed.

I considered three qualitative research designs to explore the research question: case study, ethnography, and phenomenology. I did not select a single case study because I wanted to capture a variety of common experiences. Instead, I selected multiple case studies for my research to understand diversity and variety in research outcomes through the perceptions of participants. Inductive research as a subjectivist approach is best to collect specific descriptions of the strategies and perceptions of the success of the strategies (Varpio et al., 2020). Ethnography is inductive in reaching conclusions, interpretative in approach, and involves group participant observation seeking to understand people and cultures through studying human behaviors (Brooks & Alam, 2015). Ethnographic research design was not appropriate for my study because I did not require a focus on a cultural event or story. Phenomenology involves the study of individuals' experiences, seeking to understand the human experience of phenomena, often through interviews, and is interpretive in analyzing the data (Tee et al., 2019). Phenomenological research design was not appropriate for my study due to the focus on individuals' experiences related to phenomena.

### **Research Question**

What social media strategies do independent film managers use to increase film revenues?

#### **Interview Questions**

- 1. What social media strategies do you use to increase film revenues?
- 2. How did you decide on the social media strategies to increase film revenues?
- 3. How did you use social media strategies to increase film revenues?
- 4. How did you communicate social media strategies used to increase film revenues to your employees?
- 5. How did you communicate social media strategies used to increase film revenues to your stakeholders?
- 6. How do you measure increased film revenues in response to social media strategies?
- 7. What are the processes to change social media strategies to increase film revenues?
- 8. What additional information would you like to add about social media strategies and increased film revenues?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was social media marketing management (SMMM) by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018). The SMMM framework was developed to be leveraged by managers in using social media as an effective marketing tool (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). As contended by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018), strategic focus and direction is the independent factor that determines how managers apply principles of the SMMM framework. The four tenets of the SMMM framework include messaging or projecting, monitoring, assessing, and

responding (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). SMMM was an ideal framework for my study. Based on my literature review, I expected SMMM theory could provide the lens to understand the attraction of new customers and the retention of established customers.

## **Operational Definitions**

Chat generative pre-trained transformer (ChatGPT): Chat generative pre-trained transformer, usually referred to as ChatGPT, was launched in November 2022 by OpenAI and is a large language artificial intelligence system with a conversational interface used to provide relevant information to user questions in real time (Chavez et al., 2023).

*Crossmedia:* Crossmedia is the use of a combination of multiple media platforms or channels for marketing products (Diehl et al., 2022).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM): Electronic word-of-mouth is an online exchange of communication and information that is shaped by customer experiences, opinions, observations, beliefs, and assessments about a subject, product, service, or experience, with trust in the source being an essential factor (Pyle et al., 2021).

*Independent films:* Independent films are not financed, produced, or influenced by the major, established Hollywood studios; therefore, independent films are made with a lower budget, even minimal budget (Green, 2021).

*Metaverse:* A metaverse is an interactive and immersive digital interface in which users are represented by avatars, to socialize and perform actions, as if actual events in the real world (de la Fuente Prieto et al., 2022).

*Movie trailer*: A movie trailer, is a short highlights summary video of a movie, used for a preview, and to captivate and interest potential audiences (Afifaha et al., 2022).

Social media influencer: A social media influencer is an individual who has interactive relationships with a large number of enthusiastic subscribers and followers on social media channels, with the ability to influence and persuade their attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors (Chang et al., 2020).

*TikTok*: TikTok is a globally popular Chinese-owned, short video-based social network, influenced by trends based on sound bites associated with distinct actions (such as dance moves), with 40% of users between 10-19 years of age (Haenlein et al., 2020).

User-generated content: User-generated content is media content on social media platforms and networks created by end-users and available to the public (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2020).

#### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are research vulnerabilities and can potentially weaken a study. To manage vulnerabilities and potential weaknesses, researchers should aim for upfront transparency through the disclosure of assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The purpose of this section is to define, explain and disclose the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations specific to this research study.

### Assumptions

Assumptions are inbuilt into any research study; therefore, they are usually expected, and can be an idea, issue, or stance accepted and taken for granted (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Researchers must endeavor to challenge, clarify, and document all

assumptions that are facts considered to be accurate but are not verified, as stated by Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018). Assumptions carry risk and should be considered potential weaknesses (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

I made five main assumptions made about this study. My first assumption was that a qualitative methodology was appropriate for exploring the factors related to the lack of information available to independent film managers to optimally leverage social media to connect with current and future fans and generate new revenue. My second assumption was that case studies research was an appropriate design for the study and my third assumption was that the 10 participants chosen for the study would represent an appropriate number of individuals for saturation and sufficiency purposes. My fourth assumption was that the participants would participate and provide honest responses, and my fifth assumption was that the participants would partake in the study in a comfortable environment without distractions.

#### Limitations

Researchers expect limitations within all studies, which can be potential weaknesses (Shahriari & Rasuli, 2020). Researchers should address limitations allowing readers and future researchers to understand the findings within context, according to Shahriari and Rasuli (2020).

Limitations for this specific study included participant interviews limited by potential participant bias and participant ability to recollect events accurately. Further limitations included participant discomfort in disclosing information about lack of success in the film business and subsequently participant inaccuracy in recollecting

experience conducting business. Geographical boundaries and COVID-19 impact on restricting travel and in-person interviews served as limitations, as well as time and budget constraints when collecting data. The transferability of research results to other businesses may be a limiting factor, and limitations may also include sourcing interview participants with successful film industry expertise.

#### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are restrictions or boundaries that researchers impose on a study to focus on the scope and may test assumptions and reveal shortcomings in the research (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations for this study included a limited geographical area, restricted to the United States, a limited time window to collect data from participants, and a limited channel to conduct interviews.

#### Significance of the Study

Film managers could add immediate, transformational value to a business with the strategic implementation of social media marketing. Stronger relationships with consumers, increased brand awareness, and improved consumer insights aligned with increased film revenue.

#### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Leaders may use the findings of this study to learn how film managers are using social media to increase film marketability. Prabowoa et al. (2020) found that conversation, online engagement, and interactivity positively impacted customers and established brand attachment and loyalty. Two-way communication has manifested in new relationships between film creators, actors, and fans. Many customers engage

through social media in personal interactions with the actors and become vested in the characters, and the film itself. As the audiences become more engaged and interactive, the opportunities to market film franchises increase. Leaders use integrated marketing communications and consumer generated media including user-generated content on different social media platforms to encourage customer interactions and involvement in brand building (Rehman et al., 2022). Film managers should implement different strategies and tactics according to the audience demographics and the preferred social media platforms used, as one approach does not work for all (Pelletier et al., 2020). Film managers may use the findings of this study to envision, plan, and execute social media marketing strategies to enhance social outreach, attract new customers, and retain existing customers.

#### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for positive social change include empowerment, inspiration, and knowledge delivered to disenfranchised groups through film. The relatable characters and stories in film serve to create awareness and inspire decisions and actions that may improve individuals' quality of life.

Consumers use several social media platforms for communication (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Accessing consumers through multiple social media channels potentially results in informing and supplying consumers with important information, education, and knowledge. Consumers can choose to become involved in the continued distribution of important information and knowledge that directly affects the environment in which they live. A film company can connect with and deliver information to large groups of people

quickly and effectively, bringing many voices together through social media and technology. Alignment in social media groups about social issues and injustices depicts how the influence of film employees such as actors can affect consequential change.

#### A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section is a review and analysis of literature associated with the research problem, related topics, the chosen conceptual framework, and supporting and competing theories. The literature review begins with a description of the search process and analysis of the relevant literature, followed by a discussion of the conceptual framework. Common topics and themes related to the film industry and social media strategies are separated into subsections, including an overview of the current film landscape, the historical film landscape, and how social media has impacted the business. I conclude the literature review with a summary of the subsections and a transitional overview of the next chapter, including the research methodology.

I found supporting literature through searches of online databases, including ABI/Inform, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, EBSCO, Sage, ScienceDirect, Springer, and Taylor and Francis. I used the Walden University Online Library and Google Scholar to access most of the databases listed. The keywords used in this review of the literature include *social media, marketing, strategy, independent film, movies, COVID-19, streaming services,* and *influencers.* I confirmed journal peerreviewed status using *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory*. See Table 1 for literature review sources grouped by published year and category.

**Table 1**Literature Sources by Year and Category

	2018 ≤	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Peer- Reviewed Journal	33	47	51	51	34	14	230
Book	3	1	2		1		7
Report	2			1	1		4
Website/Other				1	4	1	6
All	38	48	53	53	40	15	247

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues.

Independent film managers strive to grow audience size, which generates increased revenue (Mateer & Haillay, 2019); therefore, film managers need an effective social media strategy to engage current and potential fans, followers, and audiences. The conceptual framework that I chose for this study was SMMM. I used the conceptual framework to explore film managers' social media marketing strategies to engage, attract, retain, and build audiences.

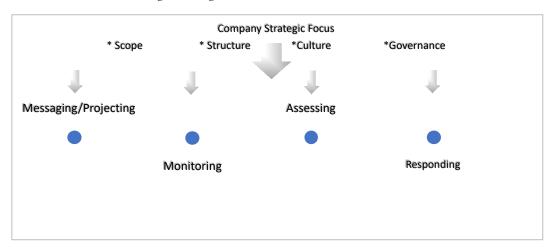
## **Social Media Marketing Management Theory**

SMMM theory was the conceptual framework for my study. Introduced as a framework, Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) contended that SMMM is composed of four tenets: (a) messaging/projecting, (b) monitoring, (c) assessing, and (d)

responding. All four tenets are actionable and are used for the management of social media activity. The driver of SMMM is the relationship between social media marketing strategy and the marketing outcomes (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). There is a need to understand social media marketing strategy from a marketing outcomes perspective. I used the key tenets as a lens to view the research question and expand my perspective in understanding the social media marketing strategies that led to success in the film industry.

Figure 1 illustrates how the SMMM framework fits in with the overall strategic focus of a company, including scope, structure, culture, and governance. It also shows how the four SMMM tenets consecutively flow into each other and how the fourth tenet, responding, can flow back to any of the earlier three tenets, messaging/projecting, monitoring, or assessing.

Figure 1
Social Media Marketing Management Framework



Note. The aspects of strategic focus are shown as top-level macro input feeding into the four social media marketing management tenets, which flow consecutively from messaging/projecting to monitoring to assessing to responding, which can then flow back to any point in the ordered flow, resuming the cycle continuously. Adapted from "Social Media Marketing Management: A Conceptual Framework," by A. L. Parsons and E. Lepkowska-White, 2018, *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 17(2), p. 83 (https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2018.1433910). Copyright 2018 by the Taylor and Francis Group, LLC.

## Messaging/Projecting

Messaging is an intentional projection of an idea or thought and is the first SMMM tenet. According to Dearlove et al. (2021), the sender uses messaging to convey an aspect of a desirable brand through words, phrases, images, and the associated feelings and emotions. Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) noted that messaging involves generating awareness about a brand and constructing a brand identity. Independent film managers can use a social media marketing strategy such as customer communication channel focus when messaging to connect with current and potential customers, which can lead to effective cost use, marketing operational excellence, increased customer satisfaction, and ultimately improved marketing performance (Chanthinok et al., 2015).

Social media messaging strategy can potentially influence customer engagement and behavior. According to Liao and Huang (2021), filmgoers were more attentive to information from different sources about a movie and were more likely to purchase box office tickets if the official social media sites had a high activity level. In comparison,

film managers who released infrequent messaging and little information on the official social media sites found that third-party media promotional messaging did not connect with potential audiences, who were less interested and less likely to purchase box office tickets (Liao & Huang, 2021). Tafesse and Wien (2018) identified three messaging strategies used by marketing managers to boost brand posts on social media: (a) informational messaging, (b) transformational messaging, and (c) interactional messaging. Film managers can intentionally use these types of messaging on official social media accounts to capture potential audience attention, increase audience knowledge about a movie, change customer attitudes, and motivate filmgoers to purchase tickets.

Informational messaging is the distribution of information. Tafesse and Wien (2018) described informational messaging as sharing meaningful and factual information about a product or service in an unbiased, clear, and concise manner. A brand name contained in a social media post is informational messaging (T. Kim et al., 2019). Branded messaging on social media platforms through sharing product information via videos, audio, text, and images is most informative when posted to a brand's main social accounts (Ansari et al., 2019). Independent film managers can use informational messaging to promote release dates, movie trailers, teasers, action snaps, and actor profiles.

Transformational messaging is the communication of affective messages. Tafesse and Wien (2018) defined transformational messaging as the sharing of meaningful information where the objective is to create a connection between the customer and the

product based on emotions, shared values, and desirable characteristics. Transformational messaging fosters sentimental or sensory feelings (Periaiya et al., 2020). An example of transformational messaging is the social media messages shared by community activism which can change individual lives and affect society (Waani & Wempi, 2021). World famous lawyer/author Brian Stevenson's book recently turned movie, *Just Mercy*, touches on the injustices faced by the poor, disenfranchised, imprisoned, and accused (Chiteji et al., 2021). The movie is aligned with hashtag social justice movements such as #blacklivesmatter and #socialjustice and inspires the audience while at the same time eliciting sadness, despair, hope, and an awareness of the unfairness and injustices of the world against which people must stand. Independent film managers can include transformational messaging with film promotion either in alignment with social themes from movie content or in alignment with the target audience's interests and issues.

Interactional messaging is multidirectional communication between at least two parties where the participants alternate between sender and receiver (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Interactional messaging generally includes both the presentation of information and feedback on the information. Independent film managers can use movie stewards, including the main actors, to conduct interactional messaging with potential audience members. The act of receiving information and providing feedback, which is then responded to by stewards, can help people feel more connected to the film. According to Dynel and Chovanec (2021), comedy audiences are likely to interact with celebrities and brands; therefore, interactional messaging via social media may be an excellent promotional tool for managers of comedic films.

Messaging can be informational, transformational, transactional, or even a mix of these approaches. Marketing managers can use a social media messaging strategy mix with a transformational focus to create an emotional connection between the customer and the film brand, leading to customer engagement (Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

Independent film managers can reach a broader audience using a social media messaging mix of informative, transformational, and interactive messaging as aligned with the audience and with the social media platform.

#### Monitoring

Monitoring is a continual observation of the messaging and is the second SMMM tenant (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). Monitoring is an active approach to gathering real-time, relevant information about customers' feelings and behaviors in response to brand messaging (Li et al., 2021). Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) described monitoring as tracking responses to messaging strategies to help understand market trends. Social media monitoring was a strategy implemented by the makers of the film, *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Siikilä-Laitila, 2022). According to Shetty and Gupta (2021), social media gives audiences power, leading to changes in existing content. In the case of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, film producers released the movie trailer on YouTube in advance of the movie's release. Audiences, familiar with the video game version upon which the movie character was based, were unhappy about the imperfections in *Sonics's* design, tweeting and hashtagging negative feedback about the character, to which the film managers delayed release (Siikilä-Laitila, 2022). Social media monitoring revealed to film managers that the audience vision of *Sonic the Hedgehog* was not in alignment with

the film character, and after changes were implemented to align and capture the audience vision, the film went on to huge success (Shetty & Gupta, 2021). Film managers can use social monitoring to obtain useful information and feedback on customer sentiment about a movie or character, upon which management can further assess and respond quickly to resolve problems (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018).

Social media monitoring strategy is integral to customer relationship management (CRM). According to Perakakis et al. (2019), effective social media monitoring allows for a thorough understanding of customers and competitors and guarantees optimized and improved social media marketing strategy. Social media managers can respond and react quickly to customer reviews, requests, opinions, and sentiments when they manage through CRM, establishing loyalty which results in increased productivity and revenue (L. Yin, 2018). According to Castillo et al. (2021), the film managers of *The Hunger Games* movie created a fantasy world in which fans and followers became part of as members of the Facebook page. All users who joined were divided into teams competing against each other, becoming an incentivized community, monitored by stewards, with more incentives for participants, advancing customer engagement and better movie performance (Castillo et al., 2021). Independent film managers can use social media monitoring to be responsive to customer needs which in turn helps to create loyal relationships between customers and the film brand.

Social media monitoring is a tactic that marketing managers can use to maintain awareness of general and specific customer sentiment. Kim et al. (2021) described social media monitoring as the level marketing managers oversee across different social media

platforms to observe and track interactions, engagement, conversations, inbound visitors, and referrals. Marketing managers can monitor social media engagement to understand customer needs, desires, and grievances more thoroughly and mitigate false narratives, negative sentiment, and untruthful rumors about their brand (Kim et al., 2021).

Independent film managers can use social media monitoring as a tool to understand potential customer sentiment about a movie before its release, gaining insights from listening to audiences, leading to better decisions about promotion, marketing, release, and distribution.

#### Assessing

Assessing is an ongoing evaluation and analysis of the messaging and monitoring and is the third SMMM tenant. Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) explained assessing as analyzing, evaluating, and projecting outcomes based on knowledge acquired through messaging and monitoring that is integral to decision-making. Delanoy and Kasztelnik (2020) explained that social media customer feedback assessment provided a greater understanding of the one-dimensional, technological big data that delivered facts without context. In assessing social media messaging and monitoring, film managers can respond to customers accordingly and direct, adjust and redefine strategy.

Social media assessing allows marketing managers to determine the effectiveness of messaging and monitoring tactics and adjust accordingly. According to Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018), 39 primary assessment criteria were identified, with eight criteria determined to measure the effectiveness of social media strategic campaigns. The eight identified key assessment criteria in order of effectiveness were: (a) sales, (b) reach, (c)

website traffic, (d) impressions, (e) frequency, (f) relevance, (g) leads, and (h) audience growth (Raudeliūnienė et al., 2018). The eight effectiveness assessment criteria descriptions and definitions are detailed below.

Sales refer to the exchange of products or services for currency or money.

Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) determined that sales were the leading assessment criteria used to measure social media strategy effectiveness. Yao et al. (2019) found that smaller companies benefitted more from new-media marketing, including social media marketing in relation to sales, than medium- or large-sized companies. Independent film managers can use sales numbers to assess social media marketing strategy effectiveness.

Reach refers to the number of individual users who view an individual account holder's social media content. Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) determined that reach indicated the success of messaging and communication. Vyas et al. (2020) noted that companies and brands could become more powerful due to the reach available through social media platforms. Independent film managers can measure reach as an assessment criterion to help determine the effectiveness of social media marketing strategy.

Website traffic refers to the number of internet visitors to a site. Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) directly connected website traffic user visits and engagement with sales. Businesses can convert website visitors into customers: direct visit or branded search visitors are most likely to purchase immediately, unbranded competitive search visitors are more likely to not make an immediate purchase but visit again in the future (Goić et al., 2022). Independent film managers can use website traffic as assessment criteria to measure social media marketing strategy effectiveness.

Impressions refer to content display count. Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) explained that social media impressions indicated the number of times a message was displayed on a screen. Klaassen et al. (2022) found that when visual abstracts on social media graphically represented key data, impressions were significantly increased compared to key figures presented on social media without a graphic. Independent film managers can include graphics and videos in their social media posts to increase impressions to a larger audience.

Frequency refers to the average number of occurrences of a repetitive event.

Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) clarified that frequency indicated the average number of times an advertising message appeared to social media users. Aydin et al. (2021) confirmed that social media post frequency significantly impacted consumer engagement. Film managers can take actionable and measurable steps such as timing the frequency of social media posts to increase marketing effectiveness and influence consumers.

Relevance refers to the importance or significance of someone or something to a person or situation. Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) described relevance in a marketing communications context as a tally indicator used by social media managers to compare advertising messages within a market on a 1-10 scale. Santos et al. (2022) found that content relevance influenced consumer engagement, separate from what a brand represented. Film managers can track the relevance of their messaging to consumers to increase social media marketing effectiveness.

A lead is a potential customer. Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) defined leads as a count of potential customers who gave their contact information in exchange for a value

offer (gift, discount, e-book). According to Fraccastoro et al. (2021), marketing managers often obtain new leads through relationships with existing customers. Film managers can generate measurable leads through existing customer messaging.

Audience growth is an increase in the number of consumers. Raudeliūnienė et al. (2018) found audience growth related to message communication, target audience identification, and associated reach. According to Ouvrein et al. (2021), marketers could benefit from partnerships with future social media influencers early in their careers and take advantage of their explosive growth while increasing audience numbers in parallel with the social media influencer partner. Film managers can strategize marketing campaigns to grow audience numbers, which are measurable and can be an indicator in assessing social media marketing effectiveness.

Film managers use social media data assessing techniques to make critical decisions. According to Simon and Schroeder (2020), film managers analyze social media data to forecast movie popularity and measure audience engagement. Furthermore, film managers assess social media data and apply that knowledge to the movie editing and pre-release processes to exceed audience expectations through connection, engagement, and emotions (Simon & Schroeder, 2020). Film managers can assess social media messaging and monitoring data to gain insight into audiences and make calculated decisions that lead to marketing success and increased revenue.

### Responding

Responding can be pro-active or reactive messaging and is the fourth SMMM tenant. Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) described responding as a person's reaction

to an event that has occurred and that responding addresses information through customers, business stakeholders, and competitors, maintaining transparency for all to see and understand. Marketing managers rely on social media platforms as customer listening tools to help implement response strategies to address customer needs (Li et al., 2021). Hertz Rent-a-Car proactively adopted a 24/7/365 (24 hours a day/7 days a week/365 days a year) social media customer care platform that allowed for faster and more effective responses and increased customer loyalty (Li et al., 2021). Film managers can respond and react more quickly to meet filmgoers needs when utilizing social media platforms.

Social media marketing responsiveness to customers can help to build customer loyalty. According to Athwal et al. (2019), consumers expect to find answers to questions on social media platforms. Consumers do not expect brand managers to respond to inquiries, so when a business response occurs, the customer's expectations are exceeded (Athwal et al., 2019). The marketing managers for Louis Vuitton, a high-end fashion brand, set up a dedicated Twitter account as a communications platform to address customer queries, comments, and complaints in a timely manner, exceeding customer expectations (Athwal et al., 2019). Independent film managers can use social media platforms as communication channels to quickly respond to fans and customers and build customer loyalty.

Successful social media marketing includes responsiveness to customer communication. Liao and Huang (2021) suggested that when marketing managers ignore and neglect customer interactions on social media, the resulting outcomes could lead to fewer purchases. Social media marketing managers who are responsive to customer

queries and share more information have successfully increased their customer base, including retaining existing customers and attracting new customers (Ninan et al., 2020). Film managers can grow their movie audience fanbase by keeping an open line of communication on social media with all followers and customers, sharing relevant information with timely responses to queries and interactions.

#### Social Media Marketing Management Applied in Practice

SMMM framework was the conceptual framework chosen for this study. Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) created and implemented SMMM using the four tenets to explore how business managers use big data analytics, including social media analytics, to support leadership and management innovations and decisions (Delanoy & Kasztelnik, 2020).

Researchers can use SMMM as a framework for other social media studies. In a hospitality industry study, an SMMM framework and a strategic orientation framework were used together to research how small restaurant managers managed social media (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). The application of the SMMM framework to the study showed that most small restaurant managers focused on promotional social media posting aligned with the messaging tenet, though few managers monitored or analyzed social media data and lacked overall strategy (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Film managers can use SMMM as a 360-degree communication tool to deliver messages, monitor and measure data, analyze the data, and appropriately respond.

#### **Alternate Frameworks and Theories**

In arriving at a conceptual framework or theory, researchers consider multiple

options, comparing the options before making the final decision. Researchers can use a conceptual framework as a lens to examine marketing strategies (Morgan et al., 2019). SMMM theory, as presented by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018), was the framework chosen for this study; however, in searching social media marketing literature, several frameworks were considered in making the decision, as outlined below.

An alternative theory that could have served as a lens for this study was social media marketing strategy and marketing outcomes (SMMS-MO), as presented by Chanthinok et al. (2015). SMMS-MO is a conceptual framework that holds that social media marketing strategy and marketing outcomes are related and that strategy affects outcomes. Similar to SMMM, there is a focus on communication with four elements attributed to social media marketing strategy: (a) customer communication channel focus, (b) product diversity presentation awareness, (c) pro-active competitor learning capability, and (d) market response timeliness orientation (Chanthinok et al., 2015). Unlike SMMM, SMMS-MO includes marketing outcomes as part of the framework, including cost use effectiveness, marketing performance, marketing operational excellence, and increased customer satisfaction (Chanthinok et al., 2015). The decision to choose SMMM and not SMMS-MO was due to the alignment of SMMM's four tenets with social media communication in its entirety. SMMS-MO is reminiscent of a SWOT analysis, considering the competitor focus. In comparison, the SMMM framework entailed a two-way customer-focused approach, not focusing on competitors, which aligned with a social media strategy focus, around which this research paper was based.

A third theory that could have been used as an optional lens for this study was

strategic social media marketing (SSMM). In a holistic framework, SMMM is driven by a need to understand the function of social media within the marketing mix from the managers' perspective (Felix et al., 2017). There are four tenets pertaining to SSMM as described by Felix et al. (2017): (a) social media marketing scope, (b) social media marketing culture, (c) social media marketing structures, and (d) social media marketing governance. The decision to choose SMMM and not SSMM was due to the SMMM relationship approach with 2-way customer communication through the use of social media, compared with SSMM, which focused on stakeholder influences on social media and was more removed from customer feedback.

Strategic social media influencer (SMI) communications, as proposed by Enke and Borchers (2019), is a conceptual framework founded on SMIs and SMI communications related to strategic organizational communications. Enke and Borchers (2019) contended that SMI communication must be strategic and purposeful, or the value exchange is minimal. As with SMMM, customer messaging is a focus of the strategic SMI framework. The decision to choose SMMM over the strategic SMI framework was due to the all-encompassing customer focus through social media as a conductor, with messaging being only one of four equally essential tenets. In contrast, strategic SMI communications involved external message communicators delivering unmanaged messages, with messaging being the primary tenant.

# Film Industry Landscape and Social Media Marketing Management

Film delivery has changed since its inception, and the film industry is in a state of evolution. Mateer and Haillay (2019) found that since the appearance of on-demand

distribution on an already oversaturated market, it has become increasingly difficult for film managers to reach target audiences. Following the entire SMMM framework of messaging, monitoring, assessing, and responding, leads to more effective social media marketing campaigns (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). Ma et al. (2018) discovered that while major studios tend to be the most successful when entertainment media is launched in high season, there is a window of opportunity for independent film managers to generate more revenue when they launch their films in low season. SMMM, which includes initial messaging, should be planned before and around a movie launch for optimal outcomes.

Independent film managers can release their movies through different channels. According to Christian (2020), independent film managers often create shorter, less expensive films to release to smaller, online, niche audiences, accessible through mobile devices, marketing through the leading social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, to increase audience size. Independent film managers can use several platforms to distribute and market their films.

#### **Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)**

eWOM is an essential consideration for all brand marketers in this social media era. eWOM ties in with all components of the SMMM framework and is most aligned with the messaging component, as discussed by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018). According to Daowd et al. (2021), eWOM significantly influences consumer purchasing behavior. There are several types of eWOM, including online reviews, blogs, retailer reviews, and independent reviews across multiple social media and networking platforms

(Pyle et al., 2021). eWOM can be positive or negative consumer statements on social media networks (Ansari et al., 2019). According to Park et al. (2020), eWOM through social media influencers is one of the lowest-cost, most effective marketing approaches for film managers to deliver impactful messages to consumers. Independent film managers can use eWOM tactics for maximum effectiveness and low spending in their movie marketing efforts.

Film managers can use many eWOM tactics to spread messages about their movies. Zhang et al. (2020) suggested launching marketing activities and programs such as discount coupons and free giveaway drawings to encourage consumers to post about their experiences. Many consumers will search for information and reviews about a movie on social media, making the decision to watch the film (or not) based on their exposure to eWOM (K. Kim et al., 2019). Film managers can employ eWOM tactics for extended messaging reach.

eWOM has become a prevalent component of film marketing with social media growth. K. Kim et al. (2019) found that eWOM is crucial for success in the film industry as consumers will research information before deciding to watch a specific film.

Consumers are heavily influenced by eWOM relayed by other consumers on their social media networks, and they trust this information more than paid advertisements, with the volume of eWOM directly impacting film revenues (K. Kim et al., 2019). Independent film managers should strategically plan paid advertising and both grassroots and paid eWOM to generate conversation before and after the release of a film.

eWOM is an influential marketing tool when the source is credible, as friends

consider friends. According to Verma and Yadav (2021), consumers have become opinion leaders, sharing information and insights about their experiences with their peers. Sardar et al. (2021) found a lack of trust in online retail interactions between consumers and sellers. Despite the lack of consumer confidence in businesses, credible eWOM could alleviate this (Sardar et al., 2021). Independent film managers can adopt strategies and tactics across social media to encourage eWOM.

## Social Media and Applicability to SMMM Framework

Social media has become a significant form of communication for the global population. Social media incorporates and facilitates all components of the SMMM framework: messaging/projecting, monitoring, assessing, and responding, as developed by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018). Social media are internet-based communication applications and platforms that allow users to create and share their own content, participating and engaging in global social networks and online communities, synchronously in real-time and asynchronously, when convenient (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022). According to Appel et al. (2020), social media is relevant because of the leading means through which much of the world's population obtain substantial amounts of information and news, including shared content, thoughts, opinions, and parts of their lives. Social media users in January 2022 numbered 2.95 billion globally, which is expected to increase to 3.43 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2022b). Further, the global population was 7.8 billion in 2020 and is expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 (Gu et al., 2021). The calculation shows that over one-third of the global population in 2021 are social media users. In 2020, Generation Z (Gen Z) were the largest age demographic to

use social media (Jacobsen & Barnes, 2020). Gen Z consists of 74 million young people in the United States born between 1995 and 2015 who have grown up with digital technology and are heavily influenced by social media (Jacobsen & Barnes, 2020). The number of people who use social media is the reason that independent film managers should leverage social media platforms and tools to keep, retain, and understand the behaviors of current and future audiences.

In contrast, Holmene (2018) suggested that independent film managers view and use social media as a channel to place advertisements, heavily relying on unpaid word-of-mouth, whereas major studio film managers optimize and use all the opportunities offered by social media, including paid and organic word-of-mouth, in addition to purchasing analytics and surveillance data about potential audiences, when creating social media strategies before a film's release. The status quo between independent film managers and the major film studio managers is solidified rather than broken down because the power dynamics remain in place, with the social media purchasing power and resulting knowledge obtainable by the major studio film managers far outweighing the social media reach and resources an independent film manager can ever hope to obtain.

In a study exploring relationships between paid search finances, social media presence, and online success, researchers found that there are two types of business managers: big-budget spenders with resulting high visibility and low-budget spenders with low visibility (Bicen & Gudigantala, 2018). Big budget spending business managers made up 5% of the total study population but had twenty-seven times more return customers, three times the return on investments, and accounted for more than 50% of

sales (Bicen & Gudigantala, 2018). Independent film managers can spend a limited budget in a niche market for more visibility on a smaller scale.

Social media engagement implies interest since a person must actively focus on another party to interact and engage. Castillo et al. (2021) studied customer social media engagement before a film's release and found that personal engagement and interactive engagement can work together to predict a film's economic performance. It was determined that interactive social media engagement, such as commenting, which involved customer time and thought, had a higher association with a successful film release than personal customer engagement, such as liking a social media post (Castillo et al., 2021). Social media managers can regularly engage audiences with interesting, informational posts and videos. Independent film managers should use social media data to implement social media marketing management strategies and tactics to reach and engage current audiences and build future audiences through the reach provided through social media platforms.

#### Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms have become an integral part of daily life. Bayer et al. (2020) found that social media interconnects with most aspects of modern human experience. The most popular social media networks are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Weixin/WeChat, and TikTok (Statista, 2022b). Although WhatsApp and Weixin/WeChat are included in the Top 6 list, these applications are focused on cross-platform instant messaging rather than broader social media content sharing, so these networks do not apply to this study. This literature review focuses on social media

platforms embraced in the United States of America.

Facebook. Facebook is a social media platform people use to connect with each other regularly. Facebook is the world's most popular social media platform, with 2.91 billion global monthly users as of 2021 (Statista, 2022a). Facebook brand communities that provided members with informative, trustworthy, entertaining, and fun content, resulted in higher frequency visits, with more engagement time (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019). Facebook users socially interact, correspond, share information, create content, and align with like-minded users in groups and on pages, sharing suggestions and experiences with each other, providing connection, enjoyment, satisfaction, and relaxation for themselves (Voorveld et al., 2018). Nanda et al. (2018) found that Facebook movie fans could connect with each other through fan groups and the organization of events. Independent film managers can connect with filmgoers through Facebook movie fan pages and film groups they create and through the organization of group events.

Independent film managers share Facebook posts to communicate information about crowdfunding campaigns. Jin et al. (2020) found that crowdfunding project creators rely heavily on social media networks to advertise their fundraising campaigns. Most online traffic to crowdfunding webpages hosted on platforms like Kickstarter was driven by social media referrals, with Facebook accounting for most visitors (Jin et al., 2020). Film managers can use Facebook to share content and promote movie funding efforts with followers and fans.

YouTube. YouTube is an open platform for video creators to post original

content. YouTube is the second most popular global social media platform with 2.56 billion monthly users as of January 2022 (Statista, 2022b), the second most popular search engine behind Google (Karol & Norman, 2019), and it is the largest usergenerated content video platform. YouTube is available to uploaders for free, advertisers produce revenue, and the income split is 55% for the content creators and 45% for YouTube providing the creator meets a minimum number of content hours (Srivastava, 2021). Independent film managers can use YouTube to market and distribute movies and trailers as there is no cost barrier.

Content creators can efficiently distribute films through the social media platform YouTube. Many independent content creators launched film projects, noticeably web series on YouTube, which resulted in more success than traditional film and television creators (Craig, 2018). Issa Rae started her own independent, low-budget YouTube Series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, which resulted in a lucrative HBO multi-film contract and a successful made-for-television series, *Insecure* (Tounsel, 2018). Independent film managers can use YouTube as a platform to market and distribute film projects with no entry barriers.

YouTube is a popular platform for marketing major and independent film projects, with movie trailers and teasers provided before launch. According to Singh and Goyal (2019), movie trailers are promotions to garner viewer interest and are advertisements for feature films. Movie trailers viewers consider to be highly emotional are related to higher box office revenues compared to trailers with little to no emotional impact on the audience (Singh & Goyal, 2019). According to Ahmad et al. (2020),

YouTube movie trailer review data based on viewer sentiments are effective predictors of film revenue. The film managers of Sonic the Hedgehog movie used negative customer feedback from the YouTube movie trailer to re-design the main animated character (Shetty & Gupta, 2021). The multi-award-winning film was successfully released in 2020, with the second movie in the series released in April 2022, with Box office revenue of \$319.7 million in only eight weeks (Shetty & Gupta, 2021). Film managers can use trailers to anticipate box-office success, fine-tune characters, and update storylines to align with audience feedback.

Instagram. Instagram is a visual social media platform focusing on video and photo content. Instagram is the third most popular social media platform and the fourth most popular social network, with 1.48 billion users as of January 2022 (Statista, 2022b). Instagram is the most popular image-based, immediate social network site, popular with influencers that allows for image and short-video posts, as well as longer video stories which are excellent channels for basic advertisements, reviews, and tutorials (Santiago & Castelo, 2020). Five hundred million people are daily users, with over 70% of these users representing the 35 and under demographic (Bhatia et al., 2022). According to Rahman (2021), the Instagram platform had a visual focus consisting primarily of photographs and videos appealing to the younger generation. Film managers can use Instagram to post pictures and short film clips promoting and sharing information about upcoming movie users on the platform.

Instagram has time limits for video content; therefore, movie clips need to be modified for the platform. According to Putri and Adani (2021), film managers often

use Instagram to leak movie spoilers that disclose a snippet of a film's storyline, which can spark a user's curiosity to watch a show. Movie trailers are formatted especially for Instagram to attract high user engagement, which increases further with hashtags and links, making content easier to find (Rahman, 2021). Film managers can use promotional movie trailers and spoilers to engage Instagram audiences and combine these videos with hashtags and links.

Instagram has become synonymous with the term social media influencer. The Instagram platform has been the top social media platform host to the recent rise of influencer marketing (Haenlein et al., 2020). Social media influencers are regular people who, through posting content on visual social media platforms such as Instagram, attract many followers (Argyris et al., 2020). Film managers can leverage Instagram influencers to generate eWOM about upcoming movie releases. Social media influencers are addressed in more detail in a separate section below.

**TikTok.** TikTok is the most recent social media platform that has gained the attention of the masses. TikTok is currently the fourth most popular social media platform and sixth most popular social network, with one billion users as of January 2022 (Statista, 2022b). TikTok is a platform that allows users to create short spontaneous, creative videos, capturing human connection and authenticity (Su et al., 2020). The TikTok platform primarily attracts users in their 20's and teens, a younger demographic than Instagram (30's), Facebook (40+), and Twitter (40+) (Haenlein et al., 2020). Film managers can use TikTok to reach a younger demographic for movies.

The TikTok platform is light-hearted entertainment for users. According to Peng

(2021), the TikTok platform is primarily fun short video snippets, where users watch mostly film fragments while relaxing. Creators film and distribute short videos of themselves dancing and miming to snippets of sound or music (Mackenzie & Nichols, 2020). Independent film managers should consider TikTok marketing if their movie's target audience comprises a predominantly younger demographic.

Twitter. Twitter is a social media platform where users share their thoughts through brief messages called tweets, which other users can retweet. Nanda et al. (2018) found that Twitter allows for and encourages eWOM, where positive and negative audience messages are retweeted and have been found to impact movie success. Film managers can use Twitter to push out all positive messaging about their films and impact movie success.

Twitter usage has changed over time. Twitter was one of the major global social media platforms; however, its ranking has slipped to where it is now the seventh most popular social media platform and the 15th most popular social network with 436 million monthly users as of January 2022 (Statista, 2022b). Twitter has become very popular with CEO influencers who use it strategically to influence the opinions of customers, employees, investors, the media, legislators, and voters and communicate information in a direct, rapid, unfiltered manner (Craig & Amernic, 2019). Take the recent example of self-made billionaire, entrepreneur, and influencer Elon Musk, who tweeted his deference for Dogecoin and Bitcoin which resulted in substantial and immediate gains for short-term trading of these cryptocurrencies (Huynh, 2022). Musk tweeted that his company SpaceX would put Dogecoin on the moon and dubbed himself the "Dogefather," which

negatively affected the stock price that may have been intended (Cary, 2021). Film managers can use the Twitter platform to share condensed headlines to swing opinions and capture information about their movies while sharing positive user content on various social media platforms quickly and easily.

Twitter is undergoing directional changes, which could heavily influence its future as a prominent social media platform, as seen by Musk's efforts to sway public opinion positively and negatively (Huynh, 2022). Entrepreneur, influencer, and activist, Elon Musk, has offered to purchase Twitter, noting that free speech is essential to democracy, along with stating his intentions to add new and improved features as well as the intention to privatize the platform with a deal close to being finalized (Poon & Kohlberger, 2022). Film managers can use Twitter to communicate the political and social aspects of movies. Independent film managers are an essential tenet of creativity.

#### Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are regular people who create and post content, acquire a significant number of followers, and are considered to have an influence on social media networks. Haenlein et al. (2020) described a social media influencer as someone with a considerable and participatory fan base who would not be widely known if not for the specific social media platform on which the followers are engaged. Social media influencers are increasingly sought after, with global industry spend for social media influencers increasing from approximately \$2 billion in 2017 to a predicted \$15 billion in

2022 (Scholz, 2021). Researchers have found that using social media influencers to disseminate compelling and persuasive messages is one of the most profitable and effective marketing tactics independent film managers can use (Park et al., 2020). Film managers should consider engaging social media influencers to spread eWOM resulting in awareness about their film before and after release.

A social media influencer is an integral part of a marketing campaign; however, managers looking to partner their brands with "microcelebrities" should research any person they are looking to hire (Rayasam & Khattri, 2022). At face value, a social media influencer may have an impressive number of followers; however, since there is a lack of regulations around social media influencer practices, the reach and social capital implied with a large following may not be authentic (Rayasam & Khattri, 2022). According to Soygazi et al. (2021), it is well-known that many social media influencers inflate numbers on their profiles by purchasing "fake followers," which they believe makes them appear more influential, attractive to companies looking to advertise, and appealing to potential followers. While independent film managers can benefit significantly by using social media influencers to spread the word about a movie, caution must be taken to ensure the microcelebrity of choice has mostly real followers so that the marketing dollars spent are not wasted.

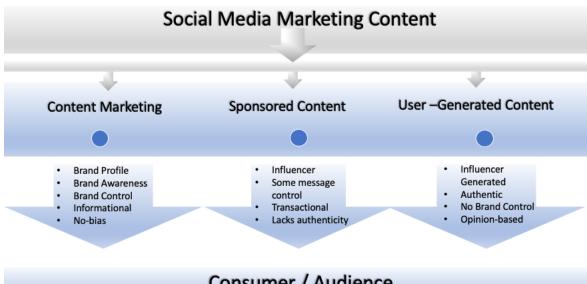
Another type of influencer who uses social media for self-promotion, not to be confused with a social media influencer, is the celebrity influencer, well-known outside of the social media realm and otherwise known as a mega influencer. Celebrity influencers are already famous, and sponsored social media posts are an additional source

of income for them (Ouvrein et al., 2021). According to Appel et al. (2020), a top celebrity influencer such as Selena Gomez, a famous actress and singer, can earn more than \$800,000 for a single branded post. In contrast, a social media influencer with 100,000 - 500,000 Instagram followers can earn an annual average of \$4,700 (Bratu, 2019). Considering these numbers and a film manager's limited budget, although hiring a celebrity influencer for a marketing campaign may be too expensive, engaging a social media marketing influencer for paid-for-hire messaging is a reasonable expense.

# Social Media Marketing Content

Social media content is anything shared on social media. Social media content includes text, images, and videos (Kaufhold et al., 2020). According to Müller and Christandl (2019), there are three main classifications of marketing content that can be applied to social media: (a) content marketing, (b) sponsored content, and (c) usergenerated content, and all have a place in brand marketing. Film managers can use a mix of marketing content through social media networks to generate movie awareness.

Figure 2 Social Media Marketing Content



# Consumer / Audience

*Note.* The three content types prominent in marketing literature. Created from "Content is king – But who is the king of kings? The effect of content marketing, sponsored content & user-generated content on brand responses," by J. Müller & F. Christandl. Adapted from "Social Media Marketing Management: A Conceptual Framework," by A. L. Parsons and E. Lepkowska-White, 2018, Journal of Internet Commerce, 17(2), p. 83 (https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2018.1433910). Copyright 2018 by the Taylor and Francis Group, LLC.

**Content Marketing.** Content marketing builds brand awareness. Marketing managers control branded messaging through content marketing, creating profiles on various social media platforms where they share product information and insights through videos, images, audio, and text, to gain target audience attention and conversion into sales (Ansari et al., 2019). Independent film managers can use several types of social media content to promote movies, announce release dates, share teasers and highlights, share on-set footage, informational interviews, and facilitate sales of movie merchandise.

Movie trailers and short video clips are two forms of marketing media for movies. According to Liu et al. (2018), movie trailers are 2-3 minutes long, from which short video clips of between 10-30 seconds, also known as teasers, can be cut to promote films on social media platforms where user attention span is more limited. Film managers can use both movie trailers and short video clips targeted at specific social media platforms.

Sponsored Content. Sponsored content is paid advertising, as the name suggests. Social media influencers are known for sharing opinions about brands and products, and it is becoming industry standard to disclose whether a post is sponsored or not (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). According to Coco and Eckert (2020), marketing managers pay social media influencers to promote their brands and to have access to the social media influencer's followers. Yang et al. (2023) found that business-to-consumer companies often used social media influencers to establish closer interactions with followers, and potential audiences. Independent film managers can consider paying social media influencers a fee for sponsored posts about an upcoming movie, so the communication is relayed to the followers.

Sponsored content is the brand message communicated through a third party, most often a social media influencer, and the relationship between the marketing managers and the spokesperson is transactional. The downside to social media sponsored content is that followers have less trust in the genuineness of these posts compared to content marketing and user-generated content, which are viewed as more authentic

(Müller & Christandl, 2019). According to Kay et al. (2020), influencers promoting sponsored content tend to be more knowledgeable about a product and share more product information than influencers who share non-sponsored opinions and content, with consumers more likely to purchase when paid sponsorship is disclosed than when sponsorship is not disclosed. Furthermore, the Federal Trade Commission has recently issued guidelines for social media influencers to be more transparent and disclose sponsored advertising (Kay et al., 2020). Disclosure of sponsored content is an essential factor in consumer trust; therefore, independent film managers should work to ensure that any third parties promoting their product in exchange for payment should be transparent about the sponsored partnership.

User-Generated Content. End-users create user-generated content on social media platforms. User-generated content can be produced by professional and non-professional users and refers to media provided by any content creator or user on a social media platform, regardless of purpose (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2020). Film managers should monitor user-generated content for authentic audience communication about a movie and opportunities for further branding.

User-generated content is less controlled than content marketing and sponsored content; therefore, it is viewed as more authentic since no transaction is involved.

According to Brunt et al. (2020), consumers often make decisions based on recommendations and are likely to seek out online social media reviews, which are a common evaluative type of user-generated content that influences peer-to-peer purchasing behavior. Managers can observe user-generated content to identify customer

needs (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019). Independent film managers can embrace usergenerated content, monitor consumer sentiment, and adjust content marketing and sponsored content accordingly.

## The Hashtag as Part of the SMMM Framework

The hashtag is ingrained in social media communications, connecting users through common themes. All SMMM Framework elements apply: messaging/projecting, monitoring, assessing, and responding (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). According to Rauschnabel et al. (2019), Twitter launched in 2006 with the hashtag developed as a topic classification tool, allowing users to search for all related posts grouped together. Since then, the hashtag has become popular with users on multiple social media platforms (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). The most popular hashtagging social media platforms include Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook (Celuch, 2021), with Instagram having become the most prominent (Sheldon et al., 2020). The hashtag has evolved further to become an effective strategy for social media managers in creating brand awareness through hashtag campaigns (Naraine et al., 2021). Independent film managers can use relevant hashtags for the promotion of their movies.

Social media users are motivated to use hashtags with their posts for many reasons. According to Rauschnabel et al. (2019), social media users were motivated to use hashtags for the following ten reasons, in order of importance: (a) amusing, (b) organizing, (c) designing, (d) conforming, (e) trendgaging, (f) bonding, (g) inspiring, (h) reaching, (i) summarizing, and (j) endorsing. Independent film managers can use these

ten factors to determine what motivates their target audience members and create unique branded social media hashtags in alignment with what drives them.

Social media users can share a hashtag for a purpose. Some social issue hashtags have even become viral in recent years (Waani & Wempi, 2021). Hashtags can be used to share personal health and fitness stories across social media, with health and fitness at the top of the list, examples including #GymLife, #Foodie, and #FuckCancer (Muralidhara & Paul, 2018). Hashtag activism is purposeful and used to generate awareness about social issues, with #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo effectively becoming massive movements and precursors to societal change (Waani & Wempi, 2021). Independent film managers can incorporate hashtag activism into their social media marketing strategies and tactics if their movies align with these topics and movements.

## **COVID-19 Film Industry Impact and the Application of SMMM**

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted people around the world. COVID-19 is caused by the highly infectious severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), which the World Health Organization (WHO) officially announced as a global pandemic on March 12, 2020 (Kuofie & Muhammad, 2021). As of April 14, 2022, the United States cumulative data stood at over 80 million reported cases and almost one million deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). As of April 14, 2022, the global cumulative data stood at over 500 million reported cumulative cases and over 6 million reported deaths (World Health Organization, 2022). Due to the pandemic, people changed their personal and business lives.

The Covid-19 pandemic devastated, changed, and revolutionized the film

business (Akser, 2020). Companies were forced to close, and people were told to stay home. Movie theaters were closed, and film releases were halted due to lockdowns while streaming video-on-demand platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime gained viewers and subscribers (Kaur et al., 2020). Some film managers released movies on the more exclusive streaming, premium video-on-demand platforms, to be listed for a surcharge (Halama & Hudíková, 2020). With lockdown, the use of the SMMM framework was applicable to influence consumers, including the four components: messaging/projecting, monitoring, assessing, and responding (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). Independent film managers were impacted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as were most members of the entire entertainment industry, with limited live venues available to release or show movies and oversaturation of content on streaming channels and social platforms.

#### **Video Streaming and the Applicability of the SMMM Framework**

The use of video streaming for film premieres was an option for film managers through the pandemic as movie theaters shut down. While consumers have been able to stream movies for years, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated online consumer consumption, with many films premiering on streaming platforms (Mikos, 2020). Consumers were forced to switch entirely to online consumption while cinemas across the United States and worldwide closed down (Mikos, 2020). Film managers turned to subscription-based streaming platforms, including NetFlix, Hulu, Disney+, Amazon Prime, and HBO, all of which showed substantial customer increases in the millions (Johnson, 2021). Video streaming is a popular film distribution format for major and

independent film managers.

Ekinci (2020) stated that social media networks are a regular aspect of everyday activities and that the power and reach of social media could be used as advertising media or as the box office medium. The SMMM framework developed by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018), including all four components, including messaging/projecting, monitoring, assessing, and responding, has been applicable in marketing film on video streaming platforms throughout the pandemic. YouTube is both a social media platform and a video streaming platform used by independent film managers to distribute film and web series and used by major studio film managers to upload movie trailers 12 months in advance of release dates, allowing consumers to stream trailer videos as a major social media marketing tactic (Adıgüzel, 2021). In a study determining the relationship between social media consumer engagement and box office sales, Adıgüzel (2021) found that 78% of YouTube users were influenced in their movie choice decisions through streaming movie trailers on the platform. Independent film managers can use video streaming to promote movies with teaser videos and to release the movies themselves. Film managers should continue to use streaming platforms for film distribution but become more strategic in utilizing social media in conjunction with streaming platforms for optimal success.

#### **Transition**

Section 1 included details about the reason for this study. The section began with the foundation of the study and the background of the problem. The problem statement and purpose statement were introduced, followed by the nature of the study. The research question was followed by interview questions and the conceptual framework overview. A discussion about operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, was followed by a perspective regarding the significance of the study, including contributions to business practice and implications for social change. Finally, a review of the professional and academic literature organized into themes finished the section. Section 2 is next and addresses methodology and design, data collection and analysis, and details the protocols for the study. Section 3 includes the results of the study, the application of the research findings to real-world professional practice, the implications for social change, recommendations for future research, and lastly, a personal reflection.

# Section 2: The Project

Section 2 is an overview of the main inputs and processes that make up a qualitative research study. The section starts with a restatement of the study purpose and is followed by subsections about the role of the researcher, study participants, the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

# **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues. The target population consisted of 10 independent film managers from 10 different film organizations located within the United States. The implications for social change include empowerment, inspiration, and knowledge delivered to disenfranchised groups through film. The relatable characters and stories in film create awareness and inspire decisions and actions that may improve individuals' quality of life.

#### **Role of the Researcher**

A researcher takes on the challenge of multiple roles and tasks in the research process. Qualitative researchers perform studies within frameworks or paradigms to comprehend the nature of reality for participants (Stenfors et al., 2020). Researchers and scholars have a responsibility to identify, define, understand, and report on participant findings (Stenfors et al., 2020), in addition to disclosing researcher role self-bias.

A researcher's philosophical worldview inherently impacts the study design, approach, and methods. Therefore, it is essential that a researcher's self-awareness of biases and assumptions that have led to the choices throughout the study process be acknowledged and disclosed (Moon et al., 2019). A researcher should strive to prevent personal views from affecting or influencing the research.

A qualitative researcher is paradoxically both the research tool and instrument (Geddis-Regan et al., 2022); therefore, there is an inherent bias in occupying both roles. Researchers must strive for transparency and authenticity in their studies by addressing and acknowledging any possible conflict of interest or bias, to establish trust (Geddis-Regan et al., 2022). The researcher's responsibility is to establish dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability for the research (Stenfors et al., 2020).

In this qualitative multiple-case study, I assumed the role of researcher and became the tool for conducting and collecting data through interviewing participants. I also became the analyst, interpreted the data, became the reporter, and disseminated the analysis of my findings. Due to the inherent potential for bias, I reflected on my own upbringing, values, perceptions, and experiences, disclosing information about myself that led me to decisions in conducting my study. Korstjens and Moser (2018) addressed researcher self-awareness and reflexivity as significant to the quality of the study. Researcher reflexivity entails open, self-questioning curiosity regarding assumptions, motivations, influences, and interests, and in order to produce an ethical study, reflexivity is essential (Roberts et al., 2022).

The connection I had with the research topic was one of interest and passion that I made into a hobby. I had been creating self-financed web film projects for about 5 years in my free time. My film budgets were limited, so I was interested in the steps taken by independent filmmakers who had seen audiences rivaling the major studios, who had a significant social media presence despite no major corporate support. My relationships with participants ranged from no standing relationship, to knowing someone in common with the participant, to having met someone I would consider an acquaintance through networking at film and web festivals.

It is important to maintain a high standard of ethics, as detailed in *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I completed the Health and Human Services certificate comprising human research protection training, based on *The Belmont Report* findings. In alignment with the guidelines set forth in *The Belmont Report*, I undertook an ethical decision-making approach to my research, driven by the principles of respect of persons, justice, and beneficence.

Wadams and Park (2018) suggested possible mitigation strategies to address researcher bias including unstructured or semistructured, open-ended interviews and bracketing, which I used for my study to minimize the impact of any assumptions or preconceptions I may have held without awareness. As detailed by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), the semistructured interview method requires equal attention to the relationship between interviewer and participant and attention to detail. Researchers and scholars use interview protocols as guides to help facilitate standardization and

consistency between study participants (Dolczewski, 2022). A semistructured interview approach was appropriate for my research and was driven by a flexible interview protocol (see Appendix). Additionally, I used semistructured interviews to allow for open-ended data collection and further investigate study participants' feelings, thoughts, understandings, experiences, and beliefs about the research topic.

## **Participants**

The participants for this qualitative, multiple-case study included independent film managers, also known as producers. Film managers are the economic, operational, and organizational decision-makers of production companies who strategize to promote the visibility and monetization of the films they manage (Mateer & Haillay, 2019). Independent films are not financed, produced, or influenced by the major, established Hollywood studios; therefore, independent films are made with a lower budget than the major studio film productions (Green, 2021).

Eligibility criteria for study participants were: (a) must have been an independent film manager, (b) must have been associated with independent film releases in the previous five years, and (c) must have implemented successful social media marketing strategies resulting in independent film profitability. Independent film managers conceptualize social media marketing strategies prior to a film's release, and it is the implementation of these strategies that can influence a film's financial success (Holmene, 2018).

Researchers use directories, social software systems, and intranets to search for and locate experts (Ehrlich & Shami, 2008). I identified potential study participants using

the professional version of Internet Movie Database (IMDb), a subsidiary of Amazon.com. IMDbPro is a film industry directory, the most comprehensive source of global film data employed by entertainment professionals and includes film credits, film performance, revenues, awards, and events, listing contact and representation details for film managers (producers), as well as directors and actors (IMDb, 2021). I contacted film managers to assess their eligibility and selected 10 participants for my research who met the study criteria.

I connected with the film managers individually through email, telephone, and social media prior to study selection and asked each of them if they would be interested in participating in my research. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) suggested that a researcher's first contact with potential participants could be made through telephone or email, and if participant interest is determined, more details can be provided. I provided potential participants with a brief overview of the purpose of the study, advised participants on what was expected, and informed participants of the estimated time needed to conduct the interview, establishing my researcher-participant relationships through direct contact. I approached participants through telephone, email, and social media with prepared templates and scripts. After I obtained study participant agreement from selected film managers, I emailed the participants individually, providing a link to an online folder containing documents including a study outline, the approved purpose statement, an informed consent form, example of what type of questions the participant should expect in the interview, and a document detailing interview protocols and rules. Research ethics requires informed consent, information disclosure on the part of the

researcher, and voluntary participation where there is an understanding of what involvement entails (Xu et al., 2020).

Trust and rapport are essential in establishing a successful researcher and participant relationship, as sensitive and personal information may be shared (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I was guided by *The Belmont Report* principles of respect of persons, justice, and beneficence, and practiced active listening while leading with authenticity (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Data security included no inappropriate personal information access and is an integral part of a trusting and successful researcher and participant relationship (Wallace & Miola, 2021). In adhering to *The Belmont Report* guidelines to protect participant identity and privacy, I provided my study participants with identity protection, privacy, confidentiality, and security of all data and information using encrypted data storage and devices. Meetings were secured and in private locations. I protected confidential information and ensured an environment in which the participant could speak without distractions and interruptions. All records and data were protected through electronic encryption and storage in a safe and will be destroyed 5 years from the date of publication.

# **Research Method and Design**

# **Research Method**

A researcher's responsibility when planning a study is to choose the most appropriate research method. Researchers conduct studies using one of three traditional methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Lan, 2020). I compared the three

research methods and chose the qualitative method for this research study to understand and analyze the business problem at hand.

Qualitative research is often described as inductive in nature (Young et al., 2020) and used to detect patterns and develop understanding about experiences, beliefs, and behaviors (Bazen et al., 2021). The exploratory openness of qualitative research is ideal for examining the research questions from the experiences and perceptions of participants (Kingstone et al., 2020). The data collected in qualitative studies result in emerging themes that are fluid in time and can be built upon after the publication of the initial research (Lan, 2020). The qualitative research method aligned with the open-ended line of research questions, and the qualitative approach was chosen.

The quantitative method is often described as deductive in nature (Young et al., 2020). Quantitative researchers use numerical representations derived from observations to describe phenomena (Taherdoost, 2022). Researchers use quantitative data to create a snapshot in time, static in time and place. Quantitative research is data driven by researchers using numbers to objectively describe a situation (Insani & Arnan, 2023). Quantitative researchers often use probability sampling such as surveys and experiments to conduct studies (Rahman et al., 2022). Objectivity is the main feature of quantitative research, with no allowance for the subjectivity of individual experience (Lan, 2020). I did not choose a quantitative research method as the approach is too structured to allow for the subjectivity of participant experience.

Researchers using mixed methods combine both quantitative and qualitative elements (Timans et al., 2019). Mixed methods research is inductive and deductive,

potentially overcoming the limitations of using only a qualitative or quantitative approach (Lan, 2020). Younas et al. (2021) defined three mixed method approaches: integrated, segregated, and contingent mixed methods. The integrated mixed method approach involves qualitative and quantitative research outcomes analyzed together, the segregated mixed method approach uses separate analyses of the qualitative and qualitative research outcomes, and the contingent mixed method approach implies cyclical analysis of the qualitative and quantitative research outcomes.

Mixed method research comprises a qualitative aspect, with some degree of subjectivity, and a quantitative element which is the more structured and objective approach (Younas et al., 2021). I did not choose a mixed method approach due to the inflexible, structured aspect of the quantitative study portion. Additionally, the extra time and resources needed to implement both a qualitative and quantitative approach would take more time to finish.

# **Research Design**

I compared four qualitative research designs and selected the case study approach. Specifically, a multiple case study approach was chosen to conduct in-depth research to better understand the business problem. Qualitative researchers frame studies using one of several research designs: case study, ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry (Kegler et al., 2019).

Case study researchers require a comprehensive understanding and exploration of social human experiences, perceptions, and attitudes (Alam, 2021). It is fitting for my research that case study approaches are most aligned with answering "how" and "why"

questions (R. K. Yin, 2018). I selected multiple case studies for my research, so I could gain insight into the social media marketing strategies and resulting outcomes as perceived by each participant. I did not select a single case study approach because I wanted to capture a variety of experiences and find the commonalities between experiences, therefore more robust findings, which a single case study would not provide.

Ethnography involves group participant oservation, seeking to understand people and cultures through studying human behaviors (Brooks & Alam, 2015). The ethnographic approach often requires extended fieldwork, and the resulting findings are represented in a cultural, historical, or political context (Monrouxe & Ajjawi, 2020). Ethnographic research design was not appropriate for my study because I did not require a focus on a cultural event or story.

Phenomenology involves the study of individuals' experiences, seeking to understand the lived experience of phenomena, often through interviews, and is interpretive in analyzing the data (Tee et al., 2019). A phenomenological research approach often aligns with philosophy and insight into human existence and experience surrounding phenomena (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Phenomenological research design was not appropriate for my study due to the focus on individuals' experiences related to phenomena.

Narrative inquiry involves the study of individuals' personal stories or narratives related to specific phenomena (Haydon et al., 2019). A narrative approach is often associated with participant vulnerability and researcher subjectivity (Douglas et al.,

2019). Narrative inquiry was not appropriate for my study due to the focus on the unique stories of the participants.

Data saturation is the common justification for sample size and should be achieved for research study viability (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation is realized when new codes and themes no longer emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Despite the support for data saturation, there is also an argument against the use of data saturation as justification for sample size; however, for the purpose of this paper, I used data saturation to support my sample size of 10 participants. (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I collected the information, analyzed, and monitored for new and emerging themes. I reached data saturation when no new themes emerged from the data.

# **Population and Sampling**

In research, the population often referred to as the target population, is an extensive group of individuals who share an experience, a characteristic, a condition, or something in common, which is the focus of a research problem (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). In most research cases, it is not possible to include the entire population in a study; therefore, employing a representative population sample is practical.

Based on the target population and research design, I considered qualitative sampling approaches. There are four primary qualitative sampling approaches: convenience sampling; opportunistic sampling; theoretical sampling; and purposeful or purposive sampling (Farrugia, 2019). Qualitative sampling approaches are fluid concerning the sample size and are continually assessed after starting and throughout the

research as to the adequacy of having fully answered the research question (Staller, 2021).

Convenience sampling is efficient and often used due to difficulty in sampling processes; however, it is considered the most biased participant selection approach (Winton & Sabol, 2022). Shaw and Holland (2014) dismissed convenience sampling as weak and that it could only serve in the case of an inability to secure a more purposeful sample due to a lack of resources (p. 87). I did not choose convenience sampling for my study due to the high association of bias with convenience sampling.

Opportunistic sampling is flexible and exploratory and involves the researcher taking advantage of circumstances and opportunities to engage participants as the study moves forward (Farrugia, 2019). There is a component of opportunism in qualitative research as the selection is non-random; however, a specific sampling approach is defined by whether the sampling is conceptually driven or not (Farrugia, 2019). I did not select opportunistic sampling as my intention was purposeful and structural within the sampling approach.

Theoretical sampling is a conceptually driven approach that uses the framework on which the study is based to develop further or challenge emerging themes while in parallel coding the data (Farrugia, 2019). Theoretical sampling often involves interviews; however, theoretical sampling is closely aligned with the grounded theory research approach (Foley et al., 2021). I did not choose theoretical sampling, as I preferred to code after data collection and not while it was still in process.

Purposeful sampling was the sample method chosen for this study. As Kegler et al. (2019) discussed, purposeful sampling involves choosing research participants based on the study purpose. The researcher can select suitable participants who will provide the most relevant data aligned with the study problem (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021). I used purposeful sampling to identify and select 10 independent film managers who had successfully used social media marketing strategies to increase film revenues.

Researchers achieve data saturation when new codes and themes are not presenting from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Hennink et al. (2017) broke data saturation into two approaches: code saturation and meaning saturation. Code saturation was reached at nine interviews, and meaning saturation was arrived at between 16-24 interviews. Researchers define code saturation as the point when all emerging themes are exhausted; researchers arrive at a deep understanding of all the themes. I interviewed 10 participants based on the findings above, though there was no standing consensus on how many participants are needed for data saturation.

The criteria for selection of participants were based on my research purpose, which was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues. Moser and Korstjens (2018) noted that the selection of settings, situations, and environments where participants can be recruited, who are likely to provide rich study data, is integral. Selected participants should have expert and specialized knowledge in the area of study and should be open and available to share their experiences, information, and insights with the researcher conducting the interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

In line with selecting participants as detailed by Moser and Korstjens (2018), I used IMDbPro, the professional version of Internet Movie Database (IMDb), a film industry directory, to locate potential candidates and verified that they met the criteria I had set. As discussed earlier, eligibility criteria for study participants were: (a) must have been an independent film manager, (b) must have been associated with independent film releases in the previous five years, and (c) must have implemented successful social media marketing strategies resulting in independent film profitability.

#### **Ethical Research**

The Belmont Report was commissioned by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1979, providing a blueprint for ethical decision-making in the research process relative to human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The Belmont Report contained guiding principles for research, including respect of persons, justice, and beneficence.

The Belmont Report resulted in recommendations including informed consent, respect for participants, privacy, beneficence, and risk-benefit balance. In adhering to *The Belmont Report* guidelines, I emailed my potential research participants the required information as deemed ethically necessary, including a study outline and a consent agreement form, to obtain an agreement to participate in my study. The agreement is known as informed consent.

Researchers have several options when addressing study participant withdrawal, including data retention and specific data removal associated with participant withdrawal,

allowing for study continuance, or discontinuing the study completely (Thorpe, 2014). Study participants could have requested to withdraw from my research through email, phone, or in person at any time. If a request for withdrawal occurred, I would have returned all documentation and destroyed all study records for that person.

Incentive payments to research participants may be ethically acceptable if they can be considered compensation for time and burdens, reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses, or incentive to motivate participation; however, they must not be considered excessive, coercive, or to have created undue influence (Gelinas et al., 2018). Study participants received a thank you email and a nominal amount of \$20 in the form of a Visa eGift card in appreciation for their time and participation in my research study. According to Hem et al. (2019), in a Norwegian study of 515 research project applications, 12% of researchers applied to use incentives, and 82% requested a value equal to or less than NOK 500 (approximately \$57.56 USD), an amount considered acceptable and unlikely to create excessive or gratuitous influence on research participants. The \$20 value of the Visa eGift card could not be perceived as a coercive or influential factor in participants having agreed to be part of my study.

The study participants for my research were not individually part of a shared protected group; however, I may have encountered protected individuals with characteristics and conditions such as pregnancy, gender, and race; however, this did not have any relation to or impact on the information they provided for the research study.

Ethical measures can be taken to ensure privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality and include not revealing participant names or associated details that may identify

participants in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the research (Knott et al., 2022). I provided participant anonymity with this research study through data coding and transcription. Interviews were conducted privately, and audio recordings were listened to through earphones, with no interviews or data accessible to outsiders. Participant and organizational details are locked in a cabinet, and digital data included data encryption, password protection, the substitution of codes in place of names, storing names and identification separately from the data, and discarding names if and where possible. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years, as required by the university. The Walden IRB approval number is 10-05-22-0289248.

#### **Data Collection Instruments**

I was the researcher and served as the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative study. I selected a qualitative, multiple case study method for my research. In qualitative research, there are multiple data collection instruments; the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (McGrath et al., 2019). The idea that the researcher is the primary data collection instrument is synonymous with qualitative research (Ahmadin, 2022).

Qualitative researchers seek to explore and understand participants' experiences using interviews, focus groups, and observation (Ningi, 2022). I used interviews and observation as data collection tools for my research. Interviews are structured, semistructured, or unstructured and are often used in qualitative research (Dursun, 2023). The structured interview approach includes predetermined questions for all participants with identical phrasing (McGrath et al., 2019). However, the structured interview is the

most rigid of the interview approaches and may not allow for transparency or full participant expression (Sharma, 2022). The semistructured interview entails the interviewer using predetermined questions as a guide while allowing participants freedom of expression and perspective in answering the questions. However, the researcher using a semistructured interview approach has less control than in a completely structured interview, since although incorporating pre-determined questions, the approach allows for open responses (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Researchers use participant answers to customize questions in an unstructured interview, which entails an absence of advanced question planning. An unstructured interview can in turn reveal insights that would probably not have been captured in either a structured or semistructured interview (Mutiaraningrum & Meniwati, 2021). The unstructured interview approach is prone to bias and more time-consuming in analysis (Bihu, 2020).

Researchers and scholars use semistructured interviews to conduct and collect data from the participant conversations and collect additional data through observation, including publicly available documentation. This study used a semistructured interview approach and the interview protocol for this study is detailed in the Appendix. Peterson (2019) suggested that an interview protocol used to collect data should be included as an appendix or in the body of the research paper.

Reliability and validity are important measures used in qualitative research to identify and enhance the data collection instruments and process, to ensure trustworthiness (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Reliability techniques may comprise of subjectivity, reflexivity, and positionality, recording inspection, consistent procedure

documentation, and defined analytical codes/themes; validity techniques may include rich descriptions, member checking, triangulation, critical reflexivity, subjective positionality, peer debriefing and auditing (Rose & Johnson, 2020). A pilot test taken before official research begins may be used to establish the reliability and validity of a qualitative research data collection tool (Gani et al., 2020). According to Hong et al. (2018), a researcher may use an interview pilot test to: clarify questions; ensure the order of questions is logical and flows easily; use as a baseline for timing; and check the visual and audio quality of the communication platform or device used to conduct the interview. Interview transcription is an essential step in the research process, taking place after the interview but before analysis (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). Interview transcription involves the conversion of audio files to text, which can be accomplished with software such as NVivo or purchased as an additional service for interviews provided by Zoom, which must then be checked by the researcher for context, accuracy, and readability (McMullin, 2021). Researchers and scholars use member checking to ensure the correct interpretations of participant responses to establish validity (McGrath et al., 2019). I used a pilot test interview, transcription software, transcript review, and member checking and had each participant confirm that my interpretation of their responses was accurate to establish trustworthiness for my research study. Additionally, I used the same member checking methods in the official research phase of the study.

## **Data Collection Technique**

I collected data for my research about social media strategies that lead to success in the film industry through semistructured live interviews. Each interview included an

identical set of eight questions conducted over the Zoom conferencing platform. I recorded the Zoom interviews, capturing both audio and visual components. I additionally collected data using social media and website content.

There are arguments for and against semistructured interviews. The advantages of using the semistructured interview as a data collection technique include the researcher's ability, through open-ended questions, to investigate and capture the participants' experiences, understandings, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and assumptions about a research topic in real-time (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semistructured interviews are a combination of structured and unstructured interviews and can be more open-ended or restrictive as needed (Chauhan, 2019). The disadvantages of using the semistructured interview as the data collection technique can include the challenges a researcher faces in accurately and appropriately comparing data (Bihu, 2020). A researcher's lack of interview experience could be disadvantageous to the resulting interview data collection, and researcher bias is a disadvantage when the participants' experiences are not understood and misrepresented (Wadams & Park, 2018).

I had initially intended to conduct these interviews face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the most comfortable, safe, and secure place to interview was over the Zoom conference platform, where I observed each participant while conducting each interview. Howlett (2022) reflected that many qualitative researchers have traditionally used in-person interviews to collect data; however, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated alternative approaches. Archibald et al. (2019) found that researchers and participants

preferred Zoom to other data collection methods due to the ability to record and capture data, easy accessibility, ease of use, cost-effectiveness, and time-saving benefits.

Prior to the official interviews, I pilot tested the interview questions over Zoom with a film industry business manager. Qualitative researchers may use interview pilot testing prior to conducting participant interviews (Hui et al., 2022). I conducted a pilot test prior to interviewing research participants to check for timing and ensure that I was using the correct industry terms.

The interview protocol involved many steps. An initial step was arranging for an introductory Zoom meeting with each participant at a predetermined time in advance of the actual interview. I confirmed each participant's written consent, and I used the opportunity to ask if there was a convenient day and time to schedule the official interview. I asked each participant the same questions in the same order when I conducted the official interviews. I reiterated interview recording details and data security measurements with the participants.

I provided each participant a timeframe to expect to receive my interpretations of the interview data, allowing each participant to confirm that my understanding was as they intended in a process called member checking. McGrath et al. (2019) noted that member checking validates the researcher's interpretation of the participant responses is correct. I sent each participant a unique and encrypted link with the interpreted data through WeTransfer.com.

#### **Data Organization Technique**

I used a USB flash drive to store, sort, and classify files and folders. I used Microsoft Office programs, including Word and Excel, to track and synthesize data collected, including interview data, research logs, lists, and reflective journals. Yang et al. (2020) acknowledged that users leverage cloud technology without using their local drives, which can present security concerns. According to Lobe et al. (2020), researchers should consider the privacy of participants, the confidentiality of data, and data security with password protection and data encryption used for files and information stored online and on local storage devices. I used a labeling system with code in place of identifiers, encrypted and password protected. I saved and backed up information on a USB flash drive that I will keep in a locked safe in my home, and I will destroy this data five years after research completion.

#### **Data Analysis**

Researchers and scholars use data analysis to provide meaning to information compiled in a research study. Data analysis consists of a sequential process that includes examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or recombining facts to conclude the preliminary study propositions (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). Case study researchers use strategies to analyze the data, including developing case descriptions, theoretical propositions, examining competing explanations, and using qualitative and quantitative data (R. K. Yin, 2018). The appropriate data analysis process for a multiple case study design is methodological triangulation, in which researchers use several data collection instruments (Denzin, 1970). The data collection instruments I used for this study included

semistructured interviews, audio recorder, participant observation, publicly available documentation, data found on websites, and social media.

Researchers can interchangeably use tactical techniques to support overarching analysis strategies. R. K. Yin (2018) proposed five case study analysis techniques: explanation building, pattern matching, logic models, time-series analysis, and cross-case synthesis. Qualitative researchers use explanation building to construct theory through a systemic process and can be considered a distinct type of pattern matching (Andrade, 2009). Researchers also use pattern matching to compare an empirical pattern with an anticipated or predicted pattern (R. K. Yin, 2018). Logic models are also a type of pattern matching, with the difference that they have sequential cause and effect stages (R. K. Yin, 2018). Time-series analysis is an approach researchers use to compare increasing or decreasing trends against time (Mudelsee, 2019), while case study researchers use cross-case synthesis to link and validate data across separate cases to confirm theories.

I implemented cross-case synthesis, also referred to as thematic analysis, to examine the research data. Thematic analysis was first identified and written about by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving a six-step approach to qualitative data. Thematic analysis steps include familiarization with the data, code creation, grouping and arranging codes with support data, grouping codes according to analysis themes, reviewing and revising themes accordingly, and creating the narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Conducting research requires data organization, of which there are a variety of options available to researchers. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo, are effective tools to help with coding and categorizing

research and are suitable to help with case study research (Lwakatare et al., 2019). Many CAQDAS brands are available, all with similar capabilities, including but not limited to ATLAS.ti, DeDoose, MAXQDA, NVivo, QDA Miner Lite, and Quirkos (Clarke et al., 2021). Since CAQDAS software capabilities are similar, software choice is an individual preference. Qualitative researchers widely recognize NVivo as a leading CAQDAS (Cypress, 2019). NVivo was the data analysis software program of my choice for coding, mapping, and identifying themes from the literature and the research data output since it was recommended and used successfully by many peers.

To ensure that my research was current at the time of publication, I continued to search the online databases listed at the beginning of the literature review for current academic publications containing keywords as of the time of publication. I explored additional keywords as new themes emerged through my research, analysis, and findings. I updated my literature review as needed in parallel with conducting my research and reporting the findings.

#### Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity, historically the domain of quantitative research, are equally pertinent to qualitative research (Nassaji, 2020). Qualitative researchers use various strategies to enhance rigor to establish reliability and validity (Hamilton, 2020). Reliability and validity are key criteria used in qualitative research to guarantee trustworthiness (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

## Reliability

I ensured my research reliability by asking specific interview questions in the same order to all participants and followed all interview protocol procedures. Reliability in qualitative research is related to the consistency and dependability of the data collection and study findings (Nassaji, 2020). The interview protocol is a tactic used to enhance and ensure reliability and dependability (Lindgreen et al., 2021).

I used semistructured interviews as primary data collection instruments and followed an interview protocol (see Appendix). I asked each participant the same interview questions in the same order. Semistructured interviews are organized by a set of predetermined questions but guided by the ensuing interactive discussions as new experiential insights and information are revealed (Ahlin, 2019). After completing the interview questions and answers, I implemented a process called member checking. Participant feedback was obtained after the interview, which confirmed that the researcher's interpretation of participant responses was correct. Reliability tactics were included in the interview protocol to establish trustworthiness and ensure dependability.

#### Validity

I proved my research validity through rigorous checking and consistently confirming my data and findings throughout the research process. Validity in qualitative research is synonymous with data suitability and relevance, and ultimately refers to the implications, practices, and uses that stem from the results (FitzPatrick, 2019).

Researchers should implement tactics through multiple stages of a study, including data collection, composition, data analysis, and research design, to ensure validity (R. K. Yin,

2018). Reliability is critical in ensuring validity, as to be valid, data must be reliable. Researchers can apply tactics to ensure validity, including multiple sources of evidence, pattern matching, explanation building, logic models, theory in case studies, repetition logic in multiple case studies, and case study protocol (R. K. Yin, 2018).

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is integral to enhancing validity and consists of four criteria: credibility, which establishes confidence in the findings; transferability, which demonstrates through robust description and detail that research findings can be transferred to other situations and people; dependability, which involves external audits to assess accuracy in data and findings; and confirmability, used to mitigate researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity is a self-awareness tactic that I used to uncover any potential biases, assumptions, or beliefs I may unknowingly have that could potentially have impacted my interpretation of the research. As discussed by Korstjens and Moser (2018), reflexivity is a technique that applies to the four trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Dependability techniques include audits and reflexivity (Amin et al., 2020), the latter of which I used for this research study. Taquette and Borges de Matta Souza (2022) addressed researcher self-awareness and reflexivity as significant to the quality and validity of a study, in addition to ethical mindfulness and continuous consent. Researcher reflexivity entails self-questioning regarding assumptions, motivations, influences, and interests, and in order to produce a study that mitigates bias through transparency,

reflexivity is essential (Roberts et al., 2022). Reflexivity is a tactic I used to mitigate potential bias throughout the research process.

## **Credibility**

Qualitative researchers seek to establish study credibility through establishing confidence in their findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility techniques include member checking and triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020), which I incorporated in my research. I showed research credibility with accurate, checked, and triangulated data analysis to establish the findings.

Researchers use member checking to validate that their own interpretations of participant response data are accurate (McGrath et al., 2019). To ensure validity, I used member checking to corroborate my interview data interpretation, in a tactic known as a summary review, which is a summary of the participant interviews. I supplied each participant with a timeframe to expect to receive the summary review, allowing them to confirm that my interpretation of the interview data represented their responses as they intended.

I implemented triangulation to alleviate bias by using multiple research validation data collection techniques. Fusch et al. (2018) noted the significance of triangulation in confirming reliability and validity in research. Triangulation, when used successfully, can ensure in-depth, rich data, and it can mitigate against researcher bias, lending to validity (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation may be sorted into four basic categories: data triangulation, which involves time, space, and people, using multiple data sources in a single research study; investigator triangulation, in which there are multiple researchers

in a research study; theory triangulation, which uses multiple theories in a research study; and methodological triangulation, which uses multiple data collection instruments in a study (Denzin, 1970).

To ensure the validity of the research, I used methodological triangulation. The multiple data collection instruments included semistructured interviews, participant observation, and publicly available documentation and data found on websites and social media. The researcher used methodological triangulation for deeper insight into the research question.

## **Transferability**

Researchers use transferability to apply the path in arriving at results from one study to another study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that qualitative researchers could apply transferability as a research technique, demonstrating through robust description and detail that research outcomes and findings can be transferred to other situations and people. Qualitative researchers supply rich data and in-depth descriptions of the study process, assumptions, and findings to reach a level generative to transferability (Nassaji, 2020). Researchers achieve transferability when their study interpretations, conclusions, or results can be applied to future studies, contexts, conditions, and situations (Maxwell, 2021). I applied transferability to my research study by providing rich data and robust descriptions through an exhaustive list of emerged themes leading to findings and outcomes that could be transferred to other studies, situations, and people.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is achieved when researchers use different techniques to mitigate bias and confirm the accuracy of the research. Qualitative researchers aim to establish study confirmability to mitigate researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Nassaji (2020), researchers establish confirmability when the accuracy of data, results, and findings can be evaluated and confirmed by other researchers. Researchers ensure confirmability through transparent, in-depth descriptions of the data, research processes, and findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

I implemented all three confirmability techniques within my research process.

Amin et al. (2020) noted that confirmability techniques include audits, triangulation, and reflexivity. The researcher included an audit trail in stored notes, including documentation of the entire research process. To implement triangulation, I used multiple research validation data collection techniques including semistructured interviews, participant observation, and publicly available documentation and data found on websites and social media. Researchers achieve reflexivity through continued self-questioning throughout the study process to mitigate potential bias.

#### Data Saturation

Data saturation is reached when emerging themes are exhausted. Braun and Clarke (2021) established that researchers realize data saturation when no new themes emerge from the data. Researchers use data saturation to establish validity, justify sample size, and prove study viability (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Hennink et al. (2017) divided data saturation into code saturation and meaning saturation: code saturation was reached at

nine interviews and meaning saturation between 16-24 interviews. Researchers achieve code saturation when all emerging codes, categories, and themes are exhausted, and a thorough understanding of all themes is attained (Nadrian et al., 2019). I interviewed 10 participants to reach data saturation. I collected and analyzed data until no more themes emerged.

# **Transition and Summary**

Section 2 included details about the research study process. The section began restating the purpose of the study, followed by the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity. Section 3 is the application of the study findings to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, personal reflection, and finally, a conclusion.

# Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues.

Semistructured interview participants included 10 independent film managers from U.S.-based film organizations who successfully applied social media strategies to increase film revenues. Data collection included semistructured interviews, personal observations, publicly available information on company and movie websites and social media, and personal observations. I followed data collection and analysis protocols, as detailed in Section 2. Additionally, I used alphanumeric codes in place of participant names, to protect their names and identifiable information: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10.

The main themes that emerged from the data analysis about social media strategies that lead to success in the film industry were (a) social media platform optimization as related to target audiences, (b) social media marketing tactics, and (3) use of other platforms, services, and media. I used NVivo software to code and theme the data pulled from interview transcripts, social media accounts, websites, and observation notes. I used various sources, including websites and social media accounts, to triangulate the data. Findings revealed that independent film managers who sought to effectively use social media marketing strategies should promote on the social media platforms that their target audiences tend to frequent, manage both paid and unpaid social media marketing

tactics to expand audience reach, and use other media platforms and services in conjunction with social media marketing to expand their audience and revenue.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching research question for this study was: What social media strategies do you use to increase film revenues? The participants in this study provided answers to interview questions about their experiences using social media strategies to increase film revenues. I additionally obtained data from social media platforms and websites to include in the data analysis.

Words are the basic building blocks from which qualitative researchers develop codes, with both words and codes further developing into themes. Qualitative researchers can identify and confirm early ideas and obtain an initial overview and understanding of the data when using CAQDAS, such as Nvivo, to conduct word frequency searches graphically represented with word clouds (O'Kane et al., 2021). Nvivo and other CAQDAS software are helpful tools for qualitative researchers.

In order to prepare the collected data in Nvivo, I uploaded the 10 individual transcripts into the software as files and copied them over to cases. Additionally, I copied all 10 transcripts into one general document. After uploading all 10 interviews to NVivo, I initially ran a word frequency query for the most used words overall and included stemmed words. Figure 3 represents the resulting word cloud.

Figure 3

Nvivo word cloud for participant interviews overall



The initial word cloud query (Figure 3) includes participants repeated questions, and therefore words included in the questions appeared with the most frequency. It was appropriate to run another word query on the same dataset. However, there was a need for delimiters: words contained in the questions were removed (social, films, revenues, strategies, and increase), a four-character minimum rule was applied, and word strings were associated with single words. Figure 4 represents the word cloud output.

**Figure 4**Nvivo word cloud for top 50 words through all interviews



"People" was the most repeated word used across participant interviews, as shown in Figure 4. This outcome illustrated that the focus of a successful social media marketing strategy is the people. The second, third, and fourth most frequent words in respective order were "posts," "hashtags," and "audience." These word cloud results provide high-level insights suggesting that a film manager's social media marketing strategies should be created with people in mind, particularly the audience. Posts, which serve as a primary communication method, should include hashtags in the captions to obtain more reach.

Nvivo word clouds generated from word frequencies are visualizations often used by qualitative researchers to present data findings. Word clouds help to describe phenomena and Nvivo is recommended as a complement to qualitative research (Vignato et al., 2022). The twenty most frequent words for the ten participants were queried - with the resulting outputs displayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Nvivo Word Cloud - Top 20 Words for Each Participant

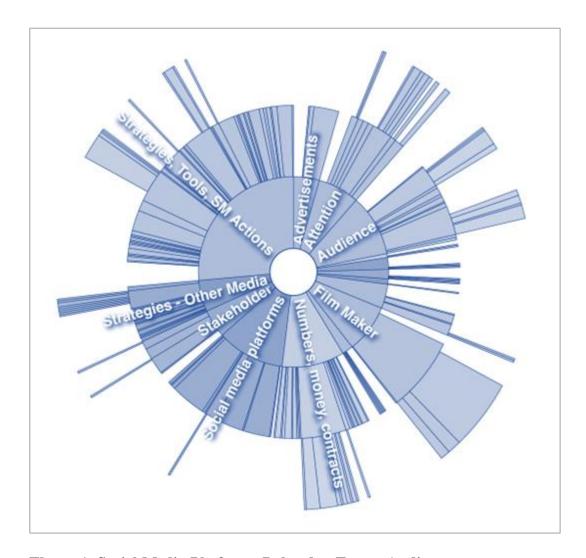
Participant 1  Inkedin or crowdfunding crowdfunding audience actors of the control of the contro	Participant 2  Participant 2  Independent Speople Conference of Conferen	Participant 3  Seroup	Participant 4  Who have the property of the pr
Participant 5  Participant 5  The streaming of the stream of the str	Participant 6  Credits  Pase POST  Pase Post  Pase Post  Person rectors  Collaborators	Participant 7  Partic	Participant 8  to provide the second of the
	Participant 9  Partic	Participant 10  Open Control of the	

The individual participant word queries in Figure 5 show that five of the 10 participants used "people" more frequently than other words when answering the interview questions—the word frequency ranking for "people" placed third for four of the remaining five participants.

Word clouds are based on word frequency, and not importance to the study, so qualitative researchers should consider consolidating the data. Vrain and Lovett (2020) found that word clouds can be misleading as synonyms are not grouped together, so frequency may be split. Coding is where words with similar meanings are grouped together. After coding the 10 participant interviews, I saved hundreds of initial codes. This number was too large to work with, so I consolidated codes into subcodes under generalized umbrella codes, bringing the total number down to 51. The number was still too large, so I continued to group codes, putting those that I categorized as less significant into a spare, miscellaneous bucket, which, although the intention was not to use, I could easily place them back into the analysis if warranted. After multiple rounds of coding, 15 main categories developed, of which nine were the most significant.

Word frequency in qualitative data, and the resulting codes and category sorting, lead to theme development. Williams and Moser (2019) found that qualitative researchers used coding to categorize, classify, and develop themes. Through the main categories of this study, as seen in Figure 6, three themes emerged, which all aligned with social media marketing strategies: (a) social media platforms as related to target audiences, (b) social media marketing tactics, and (c) use of other platforms, services, and media. In qualitative research, the themes developed from the data tie into the research purpose.

**Figure 6**Sunburst graphical representation of emerging categories



Theme 1: Social Media Platforms Related to Target Audiences

Independent film managers use social media platforms to market and promote their work to a broad audience. Social media platforms have contributed to the democratization of media, information, and the redistribution of power (Yan, 2021).

Social media is, therefore, the channel that independent film managers can use to share content with other users without gatekeepers keeping them out of the game.

Independent film managers can adopt the identification and targeting of specific demographic groups and the respective social media platforms these groups use as a strategy to ensure they reach the intended audiences; and that the related tactics they employ are not wasted. Pelletier et al. (2020) noted that for business managers to optimize social media marketing, the overarching strategy must be understood, consumer usage intent with each specific platform must be considered, and based on these inputs, tactical decisions and actions implemented that not only align with the overarching strategy but also engage an optimal number of target users.

The conceptual framework I chose, SMMM, can be applied to social media platforms related to the audience. Messaging, monitoring, assessing, and responding are the four tenets that aid managers in using social media as an effective marketing tool (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). Film managers can progressively know audiences better by applying the tenets.

#### The Audience

Film success is contingent on audience interest. All the participants in the study indicated how critical social media was in marketing their films and how understanding the audience was imperative and should be in alignment with how content was delivered. When running a word frequency query at the outset of the analysis, the word "people" was the most frequently used word throughout all transcripts. When stating "people" in their answers, the participants referred to the audiences and followers on social media.

Participants often used the word "people" instead of "audience" and bucketed into the same audience category. Since the audience is so influential concerning the choice of social media platform, I have included relevant comments containing "people" or "audience" from all 10 participants.

P1 stated, "Start thinking about the audience as soon as possible. Who is the audience, and how are we going to attract them?" P2 commented, "Know your audience, know the value of the content you're creating, and know the hypothetical people that it might appeal to. Don't fall into stereotypes, as it's about the content and the aligned audience, not who you are." P3 mentioned, "We do tests, A and B campaigns, a lot of trial and error, testing what works on audiences, doing focus groups." P4 noted, "You have to go where the excitement is, follow where people are excited." P5 emphasized, "Know the target demographic and define them. For something to go viral and get five million views, your target audience needs to relate to what you put out there. Engagement is the most important thing." P6 detailed the importance of "Staying relevant on social media, to get people interested." Film managers can market more successfully on social media by being relevant and relatable in social media communications to a specific target audience rather than a general audience, including many who may not be interested.

P7 observed, "Social media shrinks the world, it's the way we all communicate. When you can target that group and see what their trends are, that's a good way to increase your market and increase your audience." P8 specified, "Target the audience that will be most likely to watch/buy/stream your film. Know where the people are that may be more susceptible to your content." P9 remarked, "You need to put 100% in, research

what is going on and identify social media communications around your film themes."

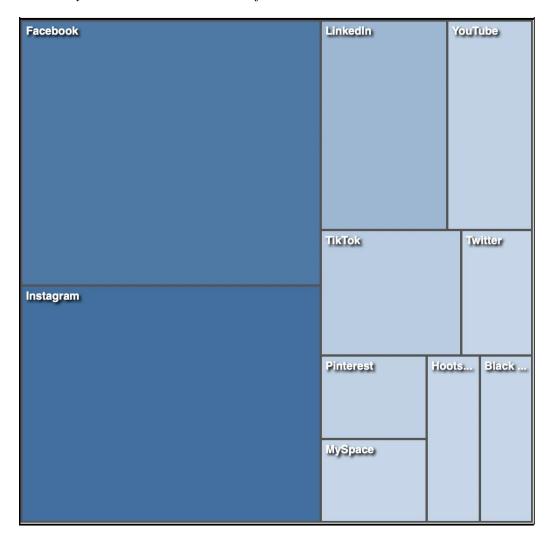
P10 mentioned, "Figure out who my audience is, my target audience. Understanding how powerful social media is, the reach of it is. You can get so many eyes and views just by sitting there, behind the computer and phone." P10 then summed up the relationship between social media and audience, noting, "To be able to sit here and figure out how to reach thousands of people is the best tool." In summary, participants acknowledged that to optimize social media marketing, defining the target audience and understanding what motivated them, how they communicated, and what platforms they used most frequently was an essential first step before tactical implementation.

### Social Media Platforms

The ten participants in this research study used different mixes of social media platforms for different reasons to market and communicate with audiences about their films, with Facebook and Instagram consistently mentioned. Most mentioned that the social media insights available through the Facebook and Instagram platforms helped make marketing decisions and finetuning strategies and tactics, which aligns with all tenets of SMMM. All the participants indicated that it was essential to know their audience and focus on the platforms they frequented.

Figure 7

Hierarchy Chart – Social Media Platforms



**Facebook.** Facebook was one of the two top social media platforms participants used for several reasons. Nine of the 10 participants emphasized Facebook, with 19 total mentions throughout the interviews. In a study of university student moviegoers, 50% used Facebook as a social outlet (Shill & Dey, 2023). As independent film managers should be looking to market on their target audiences' social media platforms, it would be fair to suggest that 50% would be a reason for an independent film manager to

concentrate efforts in that direction. Facebook as a social media platform aligns with the conceptual SMMM framework developed by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018) in that it allows for messaging (posts), monitoring (keeping track of audience likes, comments, and reactions), assessing (using the robust data analytics tool available), and responding (answering feedback through actions and communication).

P1 noted, "Facebook is awareness, to keep top of mind. If our aim is funding, Facebook is part of the strategy. We utilize Facebook to make announcements, ask for funding, and to direct them back to the crowdfunding page." P3, P6, P7, and P10 stated that Facebook was one of two social media platforms with the most significant focus. P4 mentioned early on using Facebook exclusively, then adding another social media platform. P5 remarked, "You have to understand the settings of Facebook, use Facebook ads, but know the target demographic, and define them." P8 observed, "Older audiences tend to be on Facebook.... that's where the people are that you can count on to spend money." P9 mentioned that Facebook was one of the five social media platforms they preferred for social media marketing.

Instagram. The Instagram platform is image-based, and the impact of images on the audience is more significant than text-based features (Wang & Lee, 2023), which aligns with P1's mention that Instagram was a top social media platform of choice because "it is so visual." P1 further observed that "Instagram is about awareness" but "doesn't seem to work well for funding." Instagram as a social media platform aligns with the SMMM framework developed by Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2018): messaging (posts), monitoring (keeping track of audience likes, comments, and

reactions), assessing (using the robust data analytics tool available), and responding (answering feedback through actions and communication), are all integrated into the communications flow.

P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10 stated that they focused on Instagram as one of the two preferred social media platforms. P4 commented on Instagram hashtags noting, "the more you hashtag things, the more attention you get" and further asserted that Instagram influencers make millions "hashtagging photos and content." P6 acknowledged that Instagram users are into reels and that "if I have one picture, I post it as a reel, since reels get more views and interactions." P10 contended that Instagram insights were easy to read: "I'll check one post to another, check the numbers to get a feel for how content is doing." All participants acknowledged that Instagram was a powerful tool because of its large user base. The platform's visual nature allowed for showcasing videos and images, which helped them attract and retain audiences.

LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a professional networking social media platform where users are encouraged to share content about business, industry news, and awards and connect with business peers. In contrast, personal content is discouraged (Mudra, 2022). LinkedIn incorporates the messaging tenet of the SMMM framework, wherein a film manager can curate a movie's industry image, create industry discussion around themes in a movie, and keep industry peers informed about progress, release dates, nominations, and awards. LinkedIn was the third most discussed social media platform in this study, mentioned by three of ten participants with seven references through these interviews.

P1 and P8 considered LinkedIn users to be professional audiences with more money than audiences on other social media platforms. P1 said of the LinkedIn platform, "We look for people who may be potential investors and reach out to them. We'll link them back to the crowdfunding page or share a digital deck to get them interested – more businesses tend to be on LinkedIn." P8 noted that older audiences tended to be on LinkedIn and could be counted on to spend money. P8 continued to observe that "...you have free thinkers on Linkedin, more geared towards films with more substance, because they're more business-minded." P9 mentioned using LinkedIn as one of the various social media platforms used to market films but did not discuss specifics.

In summary, as LinkedIn user profiles contain business and company-related information for professionals, there is the opportunity for independent film managers to target potential sponsors and investors based on industry alignment with subject matters and specific issues in a film and also to connect and partner with potential influencers.

**TikTok.** TikTok is a short-form video social media platform best known for its dance and music videos; popular with young people, allowing users to create and share content around their interests, activism, political expression, and just for fun (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). TikTok embodies the messaging tenet of the SMMM framework, as film managers can post relevant short videos about movies. In addition, TikTok allows for the monitoring of video posts and offers creator analytics, through which creators can adjust and respond accordingly, in alignment with all four SMMM tenets.

TikTok was the fourth most discussed social media platform used to market films, discussed by two participants for three total mentions. P8 stated that many people used TikTok, and later in the interview, concluded, "TikTok came along and took over users that previously used Snapchat." P9 noted TikTok first of several social media platforms used to market films. TikTok is the newest social media platform, launched onto the global market in 2017, and continues to evolve, attracting and expanding into different and older demographics (Ng & Indran, 2022). TikTok has quickly become one of the most popular social media platforms with possible viral marketing options, including sponsored hashtag challenges in which users generate and share their video content incorporating the hashtag, and further, users can browse and buy items related to the hashtag (Chu et al., 2022). TikTok continues to evolve, and although most popular with younger users, it is becoming more established with older age groups.

YouTube. YouTube is a video-sharing social media platform where users can have their channels to create, upload, and share video content, subscribe, and respond to other users' channels and content (Pires et al., 2021). YouTube combines the four SMMM framework tenets of messaging, monitoring, assessing, and responding, with easy-to-use functionality that ensures quick upload of content and messaging, analytics readily available to monitor and assess reactions, and the ability to respond through messages and live streams.

YouTube was the fifth most discussed social media platform used for film marketing, noted by two participants for two mentions. P4 mentioned posting behind-the-scenes footage and pushing marketing material full blast at launch to three main social

media platforms, including YouTube. P9 listed YouTube second of several social media platforms used for film marketing.

In summary, YouTube is a powerful platform used by film managers. It can be used for many marketing strategies, including trailers, behind-the-scenes videos, advertising to potential audiences on other YouTube channels, influencer collaborations, and user engagement.

Other Social Media Platforms. While the list of social media platforms film managers use for movie marketing is not limited to the social media platforms I have listed above, the landscape continues to change and evolve with the newest technologies and latest fads. The participants mentioned other social media platforms, but no themes or patterns developed around them since they were each only referenced once. These platforms included Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, Myspace, and Black Planet, most of which were spoken of as having been used in the past but no longer being used.

## **Theme 2: Social Media Marketing Tactics**

Social media marketing tactics should support and align with business objectives and strategies (Goldman et al., 2021). While social media marketing strategies are essential for independent film managers to plan for success, implementing social media marketing tactics aligned with the directional strategies are the building blocks for achieving that success. Where the strategy provides clarity and is the overarching direction from a macro level, the tactics are the actions and steps taken regularly at the micro level; tactics are the execution of strategy.

Numerous groupings of tactics as an output of the interview data were bucketed under social media strategies. Table 3 below details the social media marketing tactics discussed by participants (Note: tactics discussed by one participant with one mention are not included).

Table 2
Social Media Marketing Tactics

Tactic	Number of Participants Who Referenced Tactic	Number of Mentions
Hashtags	3	15
<ul> <li>Social Issue</li> </ul>	1	4
Posts	3	14
Share	6	14
Views	4	11
Likes	4	8
Influencers	4	8
Tags	3	8
Comments	2	4
Credits	2	3
Content	10	20
<ul> <li>Videos and Reels</li> </ul>	5	7
<ul> <li>BTS Footage</li> </ul>	3	3
<ul><li>Photos</li></ul>	2	3
• Trailer/Sizzle Reel	2	2
<ul> <li>Marketing Content</li> </ul>	2	2
• Graphics	1	3

Social media marketing tactics are tools used to implement a strategy (Cartwright et al., 2021). Many of these tactics may support several social media strategies; for example, to achieve success, most independent film managers would have a social media strategy of "Increased audience awareness and growth." The tactics above are the actions

taken to implement the strategy. These tactics align with and incorporate at least one or more of the tenets of the SMMM framework.

Hashtags can be an essential strategy or tactic in social media marketing and can be used to reach potential audiences and attach conversations to a brand (Naraine et al., 2021). Hashtags are used frequently with specific platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

Hashtags as a tactic were brought up by three participants for a total of 15 mentions. Participant 4 noted, "The more you hashtag things, the more attention you get," and continued to explain the use of hashtags for local areas, short films, and anything specific about a film that may align with community hashtags used by many. Participant 7 detailed that they had used social media hashtags for the most recent film projects. Participant 9 was most emphatic about the use of hashtags and shared some valuable information, emphasizing that 2.5 million people had seen a customized unique hashtag over the course of five years. Participant 9 continued, "I use some broad-based hashtags related to the social issue, and I use them with my own hashtags also..... cross promotion can help your numbers.... a few large organizations aligned with the social issues my films are aligned with, asked if the can put my film on their website and social media.....I'll even use their hashtags and we cross-promote, using each other's hashtags."

Posts, shares, views, likes, tags, comments, and credits are social media marketing tactics, and audience responsiveness to these tactics is measured with ease. These tactics are tracked as multiple data points through social media insights and analytics tools

(Moran et al., 2020). Social media analytics tools can help film managers understand audience engagement and interactions, adjusting social media marketing tactics accordingly. These social media marketing tactics embody the SMMM framework tenets, from messaging, to monitoring, assessing, and responding.

Posts were discussed by three participants with 14 mentions; sharing was discussed by six participants with 14 mentions; views were discussed by four participants with 11 mentions; likes were discussed by four participants with eight mentions; tags were mentioned by three participants for eight mentions, comments were mentioned by two participants for four mentions; and credits were mentioned by two participants for three mentions.

P6 discussed posting, tagging, likes and sharing, saying, "I'm intentional about posting, so I'll tag them (film cast and crew) in a post – that way I can get likes and interaction. Tagging them in a post is my way of communicating with them. And they may share it as a post or in a story." P7 discussed posting, reposting, and sharing, and considered using paid advertising in the future to increase numbers stating, "We will look at paying for more advertising, promoting on Facebook, and I will be using the tools to determine the responsiveness with regard to likes, shares, and views, to determine if change is needed." P10 noted that consistency was important, detailing, "I'll check feedback, what's being said, number of comments and views.... I look at the numbers, try to figure out which post or what post would look like to get more likes and views, and be consistent with that." P5 mentioned a heavy use of tagging, stating, "I give the more successful actors more scenes and they in turn tag the film scenes in their social media

posts," continuing to note that all people involved with the film were tagged, and it brought awareness to the film and attention to others in the project. P7 noted posting daily and sharing all video social posts with all producers, cast, and crew to get the word out.

There are many content choices, from videos, still images, and graphics, to text and plain information. In a study on effective social media use, researchers found that video marketing led to higher audience engagement (Aydin et al., 2021). These findings are in alignment with the findings of this study.

Choice of content to post was mentioned by most of the participants with 20 total mentions. Videos and reels were discussed by five participants for a total of seven mentions; behind-the-scenes (BTS) footage was mentioned by three participants for three mentions; photos were discussed by two participants for three mentions; trailer/sizzle reel and marketing content both were discussed by two participants with two mentions, and one participant spoke about graphics with three mentions throughout the interview.

#### Theme 3: Utilization of Other Platforms, Services, and Media

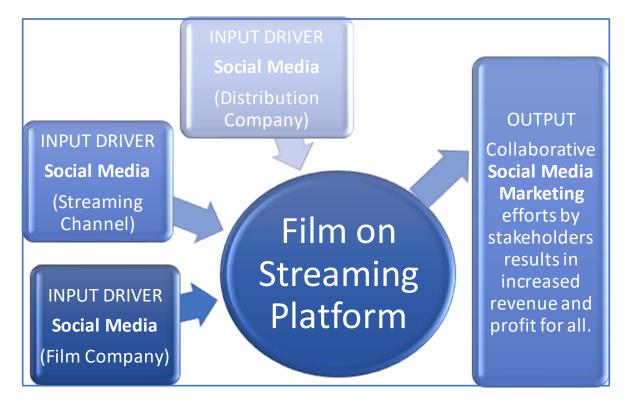
A theme that developed in researching social media marketing strategies used by independent film managers, was that other platforms, services and media were used in combination with social media. These strategies included streaming services, crowdfunding platforms, and interviews through any format. Although not social media, streaming services align with social media marketing, which pushes awareness and audiences to the streaming platform. The streaming services have promotion teams that

utilize their own social media accounts to push out marketing about films on their platforms.

Streaming services were mentioned in general by four participants for 13 mentions with Tubi being the most discussed platform. P2 stated that the distribution company dealt with the streaming company and that all stakeholders had incentive to succeed and generate revenue. P3 mentioned using a platform called Pay Portal to track streaming purchases on Apple TV including tvods, Vudu, Google, Tubi, and Pluto. Through the Pay Portal platform, sales and downloads in relation to social media strategies could be analyzed. This was an excellent tie in noting that effective social media marketing from all stakeholders resulted in more streams and downloads. P4 noted that successful social media strategies broadened audience exposure, which equates to more revenue, as there is more awareness more people are likely to see the film on a streaming platform. P5 noted that streaming services were stakeholders, and that Tubi, Amazon Prime, and Peacock were being considered as potential streaming service. P5 also informed that distributors were also stakeholders, and for 15-20%, distributors could get you on the streaming platforms and promote the film, which was in addition to the social media marketing already being done by the film production company.

Figure 8

Social Media Accounts Driving Audiences to Streaming Platform



Film managers can use transmedia and cross media approaches to increase brand awareness across digital platforms and share the output through official social media accounts. Hellín-Ortuño et al. (2019) described transmedia as storytelling across multiple digital platforms allowing for audience collaboration, involvement, and interactivity, in comparison to crossmedia, which they described as expanded branding and promotion across multiple digital platforms, programmed with some involvement, but less interactivity. Marketing and promotion on streaming platforms, crowdfunding sites, podcasts, television interviews, radio interviews, newspaper articles and magazine features create buzz, provide visibility, and should be shared on social media platforms.

Entering independent film and web series competitions, receiving nominations, attending awards shows, and winning award categories can help to gain industry recognition, and create public buzz. Early in the production process, if an independent film manager needs to raise finances to produce a film, creating a crowdfunding account, posting relevant, exciting content and sharing the links to the social media platforms, can engage potential investors and is recommended. Film managers can implement these activities from a transmedia or crossmedia approach, allowing for more audience interactivity, or consistent programming across digital platforms. Other platforms services and media are aligned with the SMMM framework tenets, from pushing out the messaging, to monitoring and assessing views and downloads which result in increased revenue.

## **Applications to Professional Practice**

Film managers can use social media as a communication tool to post content and establish relationships with audiences. Most independent film managers have embraced social media tactics to promote their films and broaden audience awareness (Gupta, 2021). Prodanova and Van Looy (2019) determined there should be synergy between social media marketing management and business process management with a focus on social media marketing tactics aligned to specific, overarching business strategies. If the social media marketing tactics do not align with overarching long-term strategies, then efforts taken can lack clarity and be unfocused, with less success achieved than desired. The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues. Social media marketing strategies serve as intentional, broad guidance which steer a company's

cohesive activities, communications, and interactions on social media with clear focus on achieving specific, desired business outcomes (Wibowo et al., 2021). Where strategies are the growth drivers, tactics are the end products, as planned actions, taken to execute the strategies, and can overlap each other and even feed into more than one strategy (Rizvanović et al., 2023). According to Drummond et al. (2020), if managers do not share social media marketing strategies with business-to-business partners, the operational outcome may be at risk. Independent film managers could improve a film's success by articulating their social media marketing strategies with stakeholders and partners, explaining how the tactics funnel back into the aligned strategies.

Social media continues to evolve and for film managers to find success, they must intentionally keep up to date with the latest platforms, audiences, and technologies, ensuring alignment with each. Zhang et al. (2023) found that there are five major current social media trends: (a) content is the central tenet of social media marketing communication, and content is visual; (b) artificial intelligence leads competitive advantage; (c) established networks are powerful, but innovative new platforms can overcome the vast user counts on major platforms by offering novel and modern business models; (d) the broadening of income sources; and (e) the push to become an "everything" application.

## **Implications for Social Change**

Independent film makers who use the findings of this study to implement social media strategies can contribute to positive social change. Alignment on social issues with major corporations, sponsors, investors, and influencers, who may be vested in a specific

problem, can influence widespread conversation, public awareness, funding of programs, and changing of laws that benefit those adversely affected by the topics at hand.

Independent film managers who have incorporated social issues and themes into their content can implement social media marketing tactics with purpose. Hashtag activism is purposeful and used to generate awareness about social issues, with #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo effectively becoming massive movements and precursors to societal change (Waani & Wempi, 2021). The findings in this study discussed the use of purposeful, social issue hashtags connecting an independent film manager with large organizations. Social issue alignment with large organizations may result in investment, cross promotion, larger audiences, and funding for programs for these specific social issues.

The implications for social change from the audience perspective include empowerment, inspiration, and knowledge delivered to disenfranchised groups through film and related social media marketing content. The relatable characters and stories serve to create awareness and inspire decisions and actions that may improve individuals' quality of life. Consumers use social media platforms daily for communication (Voorveld, 2019). Accessing audiences through social media platforms potentially results in informing and supplying the public with important information, education, and knowledge. Individuals can choose to share and become involved in the continued distribution of important information and knowledge that directly affects the environment in which they live. A film can connect with and deliver information to large groups of people quickly and effectively, bringing many voices together through social media and

technology. Alignment in large social media groups about important social issues and injustices depicts how the influence of film managers and employees such as actors can affect a positive and consequential change.

#### **Recommendations for Action**

The results and findings from this study highlighted the importance of managers being purposeful in determining the social media marketing strategies for success in the film industry. The recommendations for action that managers use to achieve success in the film industry include: (a) social media platform optimization as related to target audiences, (b) social media marketing tactics, (c) use of other platforms, services, and media. All participants noted that social media was the main communication channel from themselves to their target audiences. In planning social media marketing strategies, independent film managers should consider the recommendations for actions, to optimize and leverage tactics opportunities that lead to a film's success.

Social media platform optimization as related to target audience is key to success, and therefore the first recommendation. In determining the target audience, independent film managers should identify the preferred social media platforms, the communication styles on these platforms, and the motivators for these groups. As an illustrative example, teen films are based on the lives of adolescents and young adults, and so relatable to this specific demographic. Since teens and young adults tend to use TikTok and Instagram heavily, advertising spend would be optimal on these platforms but would probably be wasteful on Facebook, which tends to have an older demographic of daily users.

Independent film managers should seek to understand the communication norms on the

preferred social media platforms of the target audiences, and utilize targeted advertising and analytic services offered, so that they can communicate the right messages to the right audiences.

The second recommendation is for independent film managers to use effective social media marketing tactics. Film managers should consider using an overarching strategy to maintain effective social media marketing tactics. A key tactic, social media marketing content, should encompass multiple formats with a focus on videos/reels. Specifically, timely reels should include Behind-The-Scenes (BTS) footage to build social media follower anticipation and engagement while filming, and trailer/sizzle reels that add to the audience excitement in the weeks leading up to the launch of a film. Pictures and graphics should also be utilized as marketing content to be shared on social media. Film managers should ensure social media marketing content is shareable, as it optimizes marketing content tactics. Hashtags to accompany posted marketing content are a tactic that can connect new and aligned followers with an official social media account. Hashtags that tie into social issues if possible are another effective tactic recommended.

The third recommendation is the use of other platforms, services, and media as tactics to use in parallel with and shareable on social media. Podcasts, television interviews, radio interviews, newspaper articles and magazine features create buzz, provide visibility, and should be shared on social media platforms. Entering independent film and web series competitions, receiving nominations, attending awards shows, and winning award categories can help to gain industry recognition, and create public buzz.

Early in the production process, if an independent film manager needs to raise finances to produce a film, creating a crowdfunding account, posting relevant, exciting content and sharing the links to the social media platforms, can engage potential investors and is recommended. Streaming platforms such as Tubi, Vudu, Pluto, Roku, Amazon Prime, and Peacock have large selections of independent films and are recommended for distribution. The streaming platforms do have marketing budgets and the content housed is promoted, however film managers should collaborate with other stakeholders to continue to push marketing content on their own social media accounts, driving followers to where they can watch the movies or series.

Keeping up to date with technology is recommended for independent film managers. A recent newcomer to the world of social technology is the metaverse, which can be defined as a shared virtual space that connects virtual worlds where digital avatars personifying users can socialize, communicate, and collaborate with each other (Cheng et al., 2022). Metaverse users can create avatars that are virtual representations of themselves which interact on platforms including Meta (formerly FaceBook), The Sandbox, Spatial, and Decentraland (Mystakidis, 2022). Independent film managers have opportunities to set themselves apart from the crowd by adopting the metaverse in its infancy, as part of a social media marketing strategy. Whether the metaverse is considered an extension of social media, or whether the tools are used to generate audience curiosity and interest, sharing the link on social media to a metaverse event such as a film premiere, giving away a limited number of exclusive seats in a virtual movie

theater, where the audience attend as digital avatars, would get attention through social media posts, competitions, and hashtags.

Independent film managers should consider the results and findings of this study and the recommendations for action. After publication of this study, I will create several articles from the content and findings and submit to academic and professional journals where, if accepted, will be accessible to independent film managers. I will also seek to present at industry conferences and film festivals, and seek to speak about the study in interviews, on podcasts, radio, and television.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the social media strategies that independent film managers used to increase film revenues. Further research is warranted into any new social media platforms that gain popularity, as these popular new platforms embraced by audiences are where socialization and peer communication occur within communities. The audiences on social media platforms are active participants in the marketing communications process, whereas historically audiences were passive recipients (Rosário & Dias, 2023). It is important as a marketer to stay proactively ahead of social media trends, rather than lag.

The relationship between number of social media followers and a film's success, taking into account the authenticity of followers for film makers' social media accounts, or their hired influencer accounts, is an area of research which could provide immediate actionable findings. Two participants in this study hired outside marketing services to promote their films but neither had outlaid measurable results; however, these film

managers believed the increase in their followers indicated the promotion had been successful. I would challenge the assumption that the increase in social media followers was directly related to film success, since marketing companies and influencers can easily boost follower numbers in the thousands, even millions, through buying them.

Anand et al. (2022) researched social media influencer faking level and found that high-profile celebrities and obscure influencers with extremely high and low follower numbers respectively, were the most authentic, in comparison to the moderately known group who were most likely to have purchased followers and inflated their numbers. Social media influencers commonly purchase fake followers to increase their apparent influencing power (Zhou et al., 2023). Influencers are motivated to obtain a high number of followers which is correlated with a perception of associated influence, so inflating numbers is common practice, however an account comprising of a large percentage of fake followers will have limited effectiveness and negatively impacted credibility. There is a lack of research into the negative impact of fake followers on a company's revenue.

Limitations were identified in Section 1 of this study which included participant interviews limited by potential participant bias and participant ability to recollect events accurately. The recommendation is to conduct two interviews with each participant, wording the questions differently, but similar enough to compare and vet against each other. Another option would be to obtain two unique participants from each company, both working in an equal capacity.

Another limitation identified in this study included participant discomfort in disclosing information about lack of success in the film business and subsequently

participant inaccuracy in recollecting experience conducting business. The recommendation is for researchers to include some structured questions regarding publicly available data.

An additional limitation of this study included geographical boundaries and the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted the way people meet, work, and socialize, restricting travel and in-person interviews. The recommendation is the researchers conduct in-person interviews if logistically possible. Time and budget constraints when collecting data are a limitation. Researchers could extend the length of time allotted to collecting data and look for industry funding for the research, which would enable research of a larger participant group, conducting in-person interviews in multiple locations.

The transferability of research results to other businesses was identified as another limiting factor. The recommendations would be report general findings about social media strategies not specific to the film industry but business in general. Finally, sourcing interview participants with successful film industry expertise was identified as a limiting factor. The recommendation may be that researchers interview the most successful film marketers from major studios.

Finally, research into the successful integration of artificial intelligence (AI) with social media marketing management is recommended as a potential area of research.

There is contentious argument between scholars about how to define AI, but all acknowledge that AI can be explained as the imitation of human intelligence (Namatherdhala et al., 2022). Although AI has been around for years in such forms as

Siri and Alexa, the large language model ChatGPT by OpenAI was launched to the public in November 2022, quickly becoming a household name and gaining immediate attention for its ability to not only provide a conversation with the user, but its capacity to create content (Zimmerman, 2023). According to a Reuters analyst article, ChatGPT had reached 100 million users within two months of launching publicly, the most viral and rapid adoption of any application (Bartz, 2023). ChatGPT is already impacting a range of industries and fields including healthcare, education, customer service, content creation, language translation, entertainment, financial services, atmospheric science, chatbots, and computer coding (Hariri, 2023). The integration of AI with social media marketing can result in more efficiency with automation, creating content and analyzing customer data quickly (Rivas & Zhao, 2023).

In summary, AI is already transforming social media marketing, combining technology and efficiency, however it is only as good as the input data from which it pulls, which can be biased and inaccurate. As AI advances into the future and impacts technology, research into capabilities, implications, legislation, and ethical considerations will likely be undertaken in most business areas.

### Reflections

The DBA Doctoral Study process was a journey I could not have anticipated at the outset. I have learned through life experiences that any amazing success takes huge sacrifice. The completion of the DBA Doctoral Study is no exception. Life events and challenges due to personal and business obligations, financial conditions, family events, including life, death, sickness, and divorce were all competing priorities over the course

of years while in the DBA program. The DBA Doctoral Study was not a direct journey but one of twists and turns, stops and starts, and years of sacrifice.

I intended to write a study on music, but my interests changed soon after I started the program. The future was visual with an audio component, music artists were no longer the sum of their songs, but were now considered brands. My interest in independent film and social media began in 2015. I was given an opportunity to executive produce a romantic comedy web series. I took the opportunity and enjoyed the film process so much that I decided to turn a radio talk show I hosted into another web series. I had no experience, but I had passion and vision. The first two film projects and all subsequent projects I was involved with, were nominated and won awards between 2015 - 2019. Despite the accolades, I was not making money from film. I worked in corporate pharmaceutical advertising so I could only dedicate a limited amount of energy to my own projects, as the money coming in from corporate advertising was my priority. Still, the fire had been lit. I wanted to create a blueprint for independent film makers to follow when using social media as their main marketing tool. And so, I arrived at my research topic.

The recruitment and interview process itself was more tedious than I originally thought. I was able to initially obtain many agreements from film managers to take part in the study; however, obtaining signed consent was challenging. The process took much back-and-forth communication to obtain participant consent, with some potential interviewees initially agreeing, however afterwards, some participants were unavailable to lock a time down. Some prospective participants responded quickly and eagerly and

made my task easy. Other prospective participants never responded after the first communication. I remained positive and continued to recruit participants. Verifying times and fitting in with participant schedules was challenging. I successfully rescheduled five interviews. In the end, completing data collection was about persevering through the recruitment and interview process to move forward. The option to conduct interviews over Zoom post-pandemic ensured the data collection process and interviews were convenient in comparison to the pre-pandemic process where interviews would be conducted in person.

With regard to the analysis phase of the DBA Doctoral Study, I determined that I was going to use the data analysis software called Nvivo. As the purchase allowed for a limited time period, I did not want to purchase too early, so needed to learn the software when I reached the analysis phase. I purchased a learning course, which I completed in order to understand how to operate the software. I was very glad I learned Nvivo, but I did not expect to have to do this at the outset. The additional learning was challenging, but it was manageable.

In reflecting on the background, personal biases, and preconceived ideas I had prior to conducting the study, I saw social media as a potential equalizer with the intermediary removed, but I believed independent film-makers were not optimizing their efforts in social media marketing. I also thought that many were only relying on grass roots marketing to people known within their own circles. Relying on these circles to spread the word was less than optimal. I believed that without allocating resources to social media marketing, financial success would be hard to achieve. I was open to what

the research would reveal and I was careful to remain neutral throughout the data collection phase and interviews. The film managers I interviewed all had different approaches and perspectives about social media marketing. There were commonalities among several of the participants, and some were specific to the individual film managers. I came away with some great insights, understandings, and found that while some of my assumptions were correct, others were incorrect, and there were many takeaways I previously hadn't considered.

At the end of the data collection phase, I had developed relationships with the participants and look forward to potentially collaborating with some of them in the future. I remain connected with all my study participants. Additionally, independent film is a recent passion and I look forward to not only sharing my research in the published paper but implementing my knowledge on my own future projects.

#### Conclusion

Social media marketing strategies should be thought out ahead of a film's launch and align with the implementation of tactics, to achieve success. It is important that independent film managers know their target audiences, and the social media platforms they frequent, implement tactics thoughtfully and accordingly. The findings of this research study revealed three themes aligned with the overarching social media marketing strategies and direction. These themes were (a) social media platforms as related to target audiences; (b) social media marketing tactics; and (c) use of other platforms, services, and media. To attain success, independent film managers must consider the needs and wants of their audiences, understand the platforms their audiences

use, and realize that although social media marketing is a vehicle to promote and advertise film content, it is always about the people, the audience. Audience engagement is key.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

- Communicate with the participant over Zoom conference platform at a predetermined time and day before the interview
- Confirm the completed consent form
- Explain to the participant the interview process including set up, and note the time
   needed to set up beforehand usually 10-15 minutes
- Advise the participant that I will record the interview with Zoom tools available
- Advise the participant to access Zoom for the interview through the platform itself to ensure encryption
- Advise the participant that withdrawal from the research study, is an option at any time until analysis
- Answer any questions or concerns the participant may have about the interview in advance
- In lead-up to interview, send communications (reminder emails/text messages) of upcoming interview
- Check the time of the interview, ensuring no confusion, especially across different time zones
- Be prepared for interview at least 15 minutes in advance, with an open line for participant to call at any time
- Ensure all relevant documentation is within reach and ordered on your desk

- Ensure a neat background or choose one of the many simple Zoom backgrounds available, so as not to distract the participant
- Dress professionally and remain focused with no distractions, looking into the camera as much as possible.
- Keep a bottle of water nearby
- Ask interview questions in the same order for each participant
- Ask participant follow-up questions or any clarification needed
- At end of the interview, ask participant if they would like to add anything they
  may have missed, and may be important for me as the interviewer/researcher to
  understand
- Ask participant for any relevant documents or links
- Stop the recording device and thank the participant for the interview and documentation.
- Confirm a member checking appointment with the participant