Film And Television Promotion: Viral Marketing, Brand Management, And The Case Of Transmedia Fandom

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Abstract : *This article focuses on how fans/consumers are unofficially involved in the promotion of an audiovisual brand. The article describes how both production companies and brand/fan communities simultaneously contribute to the development, establishment and expansion of a brand through a combination of conventional brand management strategies and unofficial content created by fans.*

Keywords: *Film Studies, Television Studies, Viral Marketing, Brand Management, Fandom.*

I.   Introduction

The World Wide Web has three main characteristics: it is digital, personal, and interactive. This paper focuses on how these characteristics were interpreted on film and television promotion through interactive participation of both the production companies and the brand communities. The Internet has conquered the marketing plans of the audiovisual sector and the audience has a new, more interactive role in this new landscape. Since the beginning of the new millennium, filmic and television texts are increasingly using Web 2.0 for promotion. Internet is an example of how an increasing number of people are previewing, buying, and accessing fully customized products and services electronically, while they are generating invaluable personal data profiles that marketers can use to track evolving customer demand (Hanna 1997, 34). Videos, pictures, articles, and other publicity material are conquering social media and the Internet.

Those who become viral have the ability to expand the brand identity of an audiovisual text. A successful promotion of that kind is usually transmitted rapidly through self-replicating viral processes, analogous to the spread of biological or computer viruses. The main difficulty is that usually a brand's viral content is not exclusively created and/or controlled by its production company and many problems can arise. Nowadays, the consumers of an audiovisual text can create their own content that can unofficially expand and influence the brand without the consent of the authority of the official brand management. So, the production company and the marketers do not have full control over their product, since the consumers demand an active role in the process.

II.   Viral Marketing, Brand Management, And The Case Of The Brand Community

Before I go any further, I first have to define three basic terms; viral marketing, brand management, and brand community. Viral marketing is an Internet adaptation of the word-of-mouth effects (Kalyanam, Mcintyre and Masonis 2007, 73), a phenomenon originally identified by Everett Rogers (1995). This term describes any strategy that inspires individuals to transmit a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence, usually via online means (Wilson 2000). In other words, viral marketing uses its consumers in order to promote the brand itself. In our case viral marketing is mainly based on online practices, because the target audience of the American film industry is global. As Marshall McLuhan descripted with his term, "global village", the globe has been contracted into a village by the instantaneous movement of information from every quarter to every point at the same time. Knowledge and information are accessible by everyone that has Internet access (around 40% of the world population, and 88.5% of the U.S. population) and most world citizens have become more active than ever. Viral marketing is starting to gain ground, because people have learned to tune out a lot of marketing communications – and even choose

to avoid them altogether thanks to ad-skipping technologies (Kirby 2006, 91). Unlike traditional marketing techniques, viral marketing focuses on personal experience of the brand and taps into the new power of the consumer (Kirby 2006, 92).

This brings us to what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls media convergence and participatory culture. Nowadays, there is a flow of content across multiple media platforms and an increase in the migratory behavior of audiences who will go anywhere in search of the entertainment experiences, something that mainly depends on consumers' active participation. Participatory culture contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship and its contemporary expression is evident through viral marketing. Producers of audiovisual texts try to engage their audience in an interactive consumer-product relationship, by embracing their need for active participation, while using a plethora of media. These two notions can be better understood under the scope of transmediality. Transmedia storytelling refers to a new trend that has emerged in response to media convergence in which every story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole brand (Jenkins 2006, 96).

This new landscape of media convergence and participatory culture is beneficial for the development of viral marketing plans for the promotion of audiovisual texts. Several films and television series use viral marketing for their advantage. One of the first examples is *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The film's producers created a website full of fake police reports and newsreel-style interviews, while the relevant IMDb page listed the actors as 'missing, presumed dead' for the first year after its release, making everyone unsure of whether this was a real life documentary or a fiction film. This promotion had a positive result, making a film with a $60,000 production budget one of the most profitable horror films, having $248,639,099 grosses worldwide (box office mojo). Of course, as I point out later, this kind of promotion can have unpredictable results, while an active online consumer cannot be limited, and his/her actions can have a negative influence on the brand itself.

The aforementioned framework brings us to the second term, brand management. Brand management is the planning on how the brand is perceived in the market, or in other words the creation of a stable and enduring relationship between the brand and its consumers. According to Daragh O'Reilly and Finola Kerrigan, films can be considered as brands, both artistically and commercially, while these values cannot easily be decoupled. More specifically, films are considered as brands because

> *(they) have a symbolic dimension; are the subject of capital and technological investment; are offered for sale; carry intellectual property rights; differentiate themselves from other films; and are strategic assets for their production studios' brand portfolios. (2013, 772)*

Film and television studios manage their products as brands and use marketing techniques (including viral marketing) in order to further promote and expand them. In addition, studios relay on the participatory culture and the power of the audience in order to promote each brand in several media; the so-called brand community.

As Susan Fournier and Lara Lee point out, from packaged goods to industrial equipment industries, marketers try to build communities around their own brands (Fournier and Lee 2009). A brand community is a specified, non-geographically community, based on a structured set of social associations among consumers of a brand. Consumers are organized into cohesive online communities to share their experiences under the brand's values. Like other communities, members of a brand community share common consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility, while they play a vital role in the brand's legacy (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, 412). The two minimum requirements for the creation of a brand community are a brand, and mechanisms for consumers to engage in a public experience of the brand (Kalman 2009, 1). As Albert Muniz and H.J. Schau (2005, 737-747) comment, members of a brand community determine the agenda and specific activities by the inter-relationships among its members, and as they trade information and meanings about the brand, they form a brand-centered sub-culture, which could be used as a brand management tool (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, 43-61).

A strong tool of studying a brand community is the categorization of its members based on their connection to the brand. David Kalman (2009) speaks about four main categories of a brand community member; the prospect, the non-committal, the brand admirer, and the brand enthusiast. The prospects are possible new consumers, non-committals choose the brand out of convenience or habit, brand admirers truly prefer the brand, and brand enthusiasts both prefer and promote it. This categorization is based on a key parameter; commitment. As Won-Moo Hur, Kwang-Ho Ahn, and Minsung Kim (2011, 1197) point out, "the concept of commitment is used as a predictor of members' actual behaviors in an online community, such as participating in community activities, offering help to the community, and solving problems for others." The more commitment there is, the more interaction between companies and brand communities exists, and that is helpful for the companies to identify consumers' characteristics and needs to eventually create a long term customer relationship at a lower cost (1197).
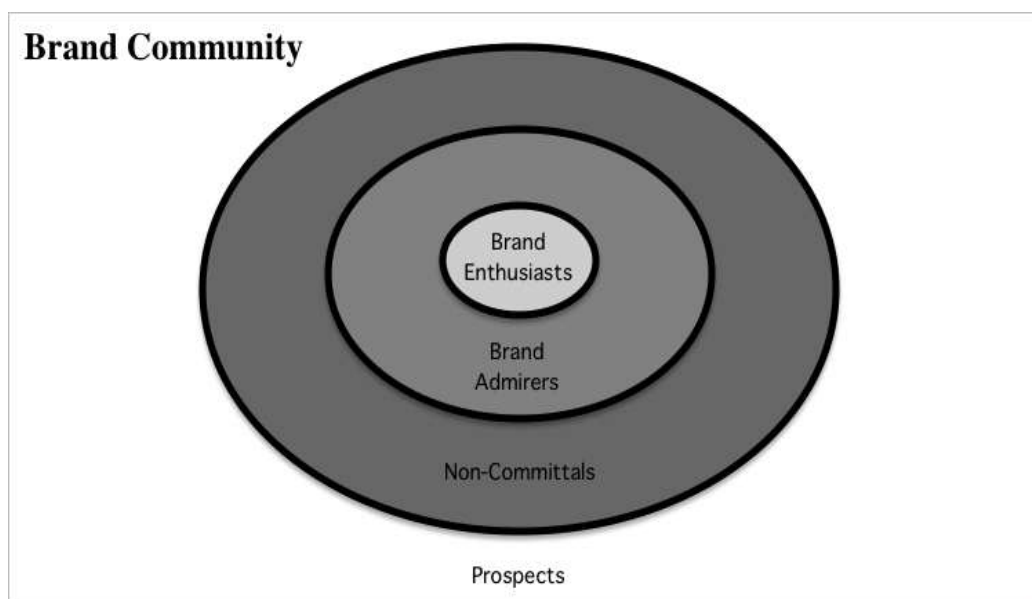

Chart 1: Members of a Brand Community

Chart 1 (above) shows that the brand enthusiasts are the most committed community members and the core of participatory culture. They are not only faithful to the brand, but they try to promote and expand it. This is a double-edged sword for the official brand promoters and marketers; they give freedom to the brand enthusiasts in order to promote the brand through interactive means, but if the brand enthusiasts take over too much control over the brand message, they can "rebel" against the brand owner by creating new unofficial products that may contradict the values of the brand. In other words, when studios demand from consumers to have an active role in the whole process, this can sometimes evolve into an indirect participation to the narration itself.

Fan theories, fan-made art, and fan fiction are only some of the main tools with which brand enthusiasts interact with the brand and even assist in the creation of new stories than can enrich storytelling. A third concept by Jenkins could be useful, that of collective intelligence. Jenkins (2006, 9) notes that where none of us can know everything and by putting the pieces together, we pool our resources and combine our skills. This means that each consumer puts a small piece in the creation of the brand by taking the information and expanding/forwarding it.

III.   Conclusion

Summarizing this theoretical context, these three terms (viral marketing, brand management, and brand community) can help us understand the way audiovisual promotion works these days. Brand management suggests that the brand community should have a more active role in the possess, and the way to do this is by creating and using viral content that concerns the brand identity. My research is based on these three concepts that are fundamental in the way films and television series are promoted in the 21st century. New promotional strategies dictate the use of viral marketing techniques by also incorporating the brand community in their aim of brand expansion.

The activity of a brand's community's activity and especially of brand enthusiasts can provide invaluable assistance but is also unpredictable. An example of a positive outcome is the case of the Netflix show *Stranger Things* (2016-Present). After the unfair killing of Barbara Holland (Shannon Purser), a secondary character of the first season, the fans created a viral campaign under the name "Justice For Barb" that gave much exposure to the brand and even led to an Emmy Nomination for Shannon Purser, the actress that portrayed Barb. Also, this led to the final closure of this storyline at season 2, as the creators decided to give justice by punishing the responsible and letting the truth about her killing out. There are cases, however, that online viral exposure can lead to negative results. For example, the 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters* caused a plethora of online troubles for the production company, since the brand community had a negative response to the new film months before its initial release. More specifically, the trailer of the film is the most disliked trailer on YouTube of all time (Baggs 2016), something that caused a more than a $70 million loss, making a sequel an unlikely possibility (McClintock 2016).

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