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Los Angeles

Social Media Marquee:

Marketing and Film

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Daniel Zweifach

2021

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2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Social Media Marquee:
Marketing and Film

by

Daniel Zweifach

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Denise R. Mann, Chair

This dissertation explores the intersection between social media and traditional media, focusing on Hollywood studios' increasing adoption of social media platforms—including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter—to promote their films. In an age when a YouTube trailer or celebrity Instagram post regularly receives more views than a feature film, we cannot understand a movie's cultural influence without interrogating its digital, promotional surround. Situating my work within the emerging field of critical media industry studies, I draw on interviews with marketing professionals, ethnographic research at industry conferences, trade journals, and textual analysis to uncover the recent history of social media marketing at the Hollywood

studios. Innovative digital promotional campaigns for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *The Lord of the Rings* (2001) highlighted the early promise of internet marketing. Yet, with studio bosses burned by early internet investments and nervous about online file sharing, most film marketers approached social media with caution, even as consumers embraced the new platforms. As I illustrate, the turning point came when mini-major studios Summit and Lionsgate harnessed social media's precision, efficiency, and unpaid user labor to build *Twilight* (2008) and *The Hunger Games* (2012) into major studio franchises, without major marketing budgets. Finally, Summit's and Lionsgate's success inspired the Big Six studios to expand their social media efforts, a phenomenon I explore with a detailed marketing case study of Universal's *Jurassic World* (2015). By tracing the studios' slow embrace of social media marketing, this dissertation reveals the cultural, industrial, and scholarly significance of the uneasy but increasingly unshakable marriage between Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Social media has shifted the power balance in Hollywood production. Today's connected social media platforms obscure the algorithms, data collection, and advertising relationships that drive the tech economy. Even savvy social media users often cannot distinguish between paid advertising and "free" content. Film marketers use this blurred line to their advantage, quietly steering online conversations in a preferred direction. As a result, studio marketing departments that have mastered social media strategies maintain enhanced influence over the viewing experience, in some instances challenging the creative contributions of the above-the-line production personnel, including the director.

The dissertation of Daniel Zweifach is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2021

In loving memory of my mom, Jane Amsler,
whose warmth, intelligence, and boundless curiosity continue to inspire me.

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Introduction

In *The Hunger Games*, a small group of elites exploits the impoverished masses—and leverages the media to spread violent propaganda disguised as entertainment. However, Lionsgate Entertainment’s digital marketing campaign for *The Hunger Games* films tells a very different story. The elites' brutality goes largely unmentioned in the studio’s online promotions for the 2012 to 2015 film series. Instead, social media posts flaunt a mock fashion magazine, “Capitol Couture,” replete with lavish photos of the wealthy characters’ fashions—most available for purchase in real life. Lionsgate intended “Capitol Couture” to be satirical, but the disconnect between text (the film) and paratext (the advertising) is striking nonetheless. Moreover, this marketing campaign was not an afterthought. Suzanne Collins, the author of *The Hunger Games* books that inspired the films, frequently discussed marketing strategy with Lionsgate executives before selling the film rights. Jason Dravis, Collins’s agent, recalls that when Lionsgate marketing chief Tim Palen “told us he had mapped out exactly how they would market it, [Collins] felt it would be in good hands.”¹

This study explores the intersection between social media and traditional media, focusing on how Hollywood studios have used social media platforms—including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter—to promote their films. Movie marketing has, in my view, long deserved more scholarly attention. The few comprehensive studies to date, notably monographs from Justin Wyatt and Lisa Kernan, convincingly demonstrate the power of older forms of advertising such as trailers, posters, and television spots. However, if film scholars could ever afford to

¹ Ronald Grover and Peter Lauria, “How Lions Gate won 'Hunger Games.’” *Reuters*, March 23, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/lionsgate-hungergames-idUSL1E8QL2G320120323>.

ignore marketing, they certainly cannot in the social media age. A YouTube trailer for *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) recorded 289 million views within its first 24 hours, eclipsing the number of tickets the blockbuster film eventually sold over its entire run. Likewise, more fans are likely to see a movie star's Facebook post than the film she promotes. So, social media marketing strongly mediates and modifies the cultural influence of a movie.

Social media has also altered film production. Studios have increased their focus on marketing in general and digital marketing in particular, with marketing considerations intervening earlier and more often in the production process. For example, social media marketing efforts usually begin before the screenplay is complete or shooting begins for high-profile franchise films. Thus, digital marketers—and crucially, the social media data they collect—can influence the finished film, not just how it is promoted. By contrast, surveying and promotion generally began much closer to a movie's release date with traditional marketing methods. Thus, social media has granted studio marketers more power to control the messages viewers receive.

More broadly, social media marketing sits at the intersection of two competing economic systems: legacy Hollywood and the new tech platform economy. Paradoxically, studio marketing executives seek to exploit interactive new media while also holding on to traditional, one-directional mass media, still the lifeblood of most studios. Meanwhile, the tech firms have disrupted the entertainment industry but remain at least partially beholden—perhaps more so than they would wish—to the enduring popularity of Hollywood content.

After considering 20th-century marketing milestones and the similarities and differences with contemporary practices, this study will turn to two early web marketing campaigns, for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *The Lord of the Rings* (2001). The innovative efforts previewed

social media's ability to engage and constrain online fan labor simultaneously. Even so, risk-averse studio marketing departments generally stuck to traditional marketing methods, limiting digital experimentation to horror films and other lower budget, youth-targeted fare. In the meantime, powerful new entrants sprouted in Silicon Valley: first Google, then Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Still, the Big Six Hollywood studios remained cautious. Then, two upstart mini-major studios, Summit and Lionsgate, leveraged the precision and reach of social media to transform the young-adult novels *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* into lucrative, global movie franchises. The Big Six finally expanded their social and digital marketing efforts in the wake of the mini majors' success. By 2015, the major studios, particularly Universal and Sony, regularly devoted half of a film's marketing budget to digital and social media. I will track this shift, and its implications, with detailed case studies of the social media marketing campaigns for *Twilight* (2008), *The Hunger Games* (2012), and Universal's *Jurassic World* (2015).

I suggest the term "social media marquee" first to bring to mind the movie palace era of the 1920s through 1940s when elaborate outdoor marquees announced current films and coming attractions. Sometimes local theater owners promoted films in unexpected ways, using imagery and language they felt would best sell a movie in the local neighborhood. Similarly, many social media marketing campaigns seek to reframe a film in ways advantageous to the studio and its marketing department in particular. Often, the reframing serves short-term business goals such as co-marketing agreements with other companies, merchandising, or theme park tie-ins. *The Hunger Games* "Capitol Couture" campaign, for example, helped Lionsgate sign co-marketing deals with beauty and fashion brands. In other instances, studios deploy social media to promote the same film in very different ways to different target audiences, often drawing distinctions around race, gender, or age.

I use “marquee” for another reason as well. Marquees *promote* what’s inside, but they also *hide* what’s inside. That aptly describes the social media platforms, which the tech firms have carefully designed to obscure the algorithms, data collection, and advertising relationships that drive their profits. Even savvy social media users often cannot distinguish between paid advertising and “free” content. Film marketers try to use this blurry line to their advantage, quietly steering user conversations in a preferred direction, even as they compete to control the data and algorithms hidden behind the social media marquee.

Since this opaque advertising model combines with social media’s unprecedented interactivity and scale, contemporary digital marketing can significantly alter how the audience understands a film. *The Hunger Games* may critique media violence and social inequality, but social media promotion turns the focus to fashion. *Jurassic World* depicts a disaster at a theme park, but Universal’s social media campaign for the film softens the content to make it more palatable for inclusion at Universal’s real-world theme parks. Certainly, contradictions between on-screen content and business objectives are not new. Studios have long sought co-branding deals and peddled mass merchandise even alongside film narratives that embrace individuality. The corporate irony of *Jurassic World* also applied to its pre-internet forbearer, *Jurassic Park* (1993). In the past, studios might simply ignore these tensions or perhaps seek to resolve them within the film narrative or via a public relations campaign. Now they can aspire to resolve these tensions via social media, and the internet’s reach and scale make that task much more manageable.

The social media marquee also enables highly targeted marketing, the neighborhood theater marquee at a massive scale. Social media’s data mining and demographic ad-targeting abilities, much remarked upon in American politics, aid the film industry, too. For example,

Disney's public relations teams extensively promoted the on- and off-screen diversity of *Black Panther* (2018). However, the early online marketing for the film focused heavily on the movie's only two white characters, perhaps an attempt to reach existing fans of the less diverse Marvel superhero universe.² Conversely, targeted social media marketing can suggest racial or gender diversity not present on the big screen. For instance, online trailers and social media promotion for Disney's recent *Star Wars* trilogy emphasized Black and Asian American characters who received relatively little screen time in the actual films. "What I say to Disney is do not market a Black character as important and then push them aside," commented actor John Boyega, whose character, Finn, seemed more central to the marketing campaign than to the films themselves.³

Studying these examples and others, I deploy a critical media studies framework to argue for social media marketing's powerful influence over film production and reception. Drawing on production studies methods, I explore studio marketing professionals' daily decisions as they simultaneously collaborate and compete with the social media firms. I also use close textual analysis of social media campaigns, traditional marketing, and the films themselves to highlight the complex and often contradictory relationship between a movie and its promotional surround. As Hollywood and Silicon Valley collide, studio marketers are cultural interpreters seeking to shape the future of popular entertainment. Even if their names remain buried deep in the end credits, marketing executives' authorial role increasingly rivals the director's.

² The first teaser trailer for the film, broadcast on television but released simultaneously on YouTube with over 42 million views, is structured around a conversation between the only two white characters in the movie, Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman) and Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis). See Marvel Entertainment, "Black Panther Teaser Trailer," YouTube video, posted June 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxWvtMOGAhw>.

³ "John Boyega: 'I'm the Only Cast Member Whose Experience of Star Wars Was Based on Their Race,'" *British GQ*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/john-boyega-interview-2020>.

Defining Social Media Marketing

Marketing, including advertising and promotion, has always been an essential part of the commercial film business, and marketing executives have long chosen to emphasize certain aspects of a film while deemphasizing others. Still, marketing has become even more significant to film studios in the 21st century. Film production costs have skyrocketed since 1975—but marketing costs have risen even more quickly.⁴ As films become more expensive and hence riskier, studios view huge marketing pushes as essential. Moreover, thanks to media convergence and industry consolidation, a single movie—even one with a budget of \$200 million or more—is but one piece of a larger, transmedia franchise that may include television shows, merchandise, books, comic books, video games, websites, and theme park attractions. In many cases, these “ancillary” properties are far more profitable than is the film itself.

Despite that fact, entertainment companies still spend far more marketing films than they do on television programs, video games, or theme parks. Marketing costs on big event movies can reach as high as \$300 million.⁵ In a sense, Hollywood films have become very expensive advertisements for other products. As a result of these trends, marketing considerations and marketing personnel have taken on more prominent roles throughout the film production process. Indeed, nearly everyone involved in commercial filmmaking—from screenwriters to directors to

⁴ Janet Wasko, “Financing and Production,” in Paul McDonald, and Janet Wasko, eds, *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 15. See also Pamela McClintock, “\$200 Million and Rising: Hollywood Struggles With Soaring Marketing Costs,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/200-million-rising-hollywood-struggles-721818>.

⁵ James Rainey, “The Perils of Promotion: Pricy TV Campaigns, Fear of Change Shackles Movie Spending,” *Variety*, March 08, 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/film/features/movie-marketing-advertising-tv-campaigns-1201724468/>.

development executives—must think about marketing and promotion more often than ever, increasing the likelihood that such considerations will significantly impact the resulting films.

Social media has multiplied this effect. On films with extensive social media campaigns, marketing executives joined key meetings earlier and more often, weighing in on crucial filmmaking decisions. This focus on social media marketing and the resulting increase in marketing's overall influence began with films targeting young adults under 25, including *Twilight*, *Paranormal Activity* (2009), and *The Hunger Games*, but quickly expanded to medium-budget films and finally big-budget, broad releases such as *Jurassic World* (2015) and the *Star Wars* and *Fast and Furious* franchises. Social media became important even though film studios—top marketing executives included—have generally been reluctant participants in new online platforms that challenge their dominance of consumer entertainment. Studio leadership's initial reluctance provided an opening for web-savvy junior marketing executives and outside digital firms to seize more control. Much as studios may wish it were not so, online social networks can profoundly influence consumer choices, including which movie to see (or not see). For instance, according to industry research, 87 percent of Twitter users said tweets influenced their movie-going choices.⁶

Some definitions and historical context will underscore why social media has been such a significant development in the history of film marketing. *Marketing* broadly refers to activities that support an organization's objectives by anticipating customer needs and directing a flow of

⁶ Pamela McClintock, "\$200 Million and Rising: Hollywood Struggles With Soaring Marketing Costs," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/200-million-rising-hollywood-struggles-721818>.

goods to those customers.⁷ Durie et al. define film marketing as “any activity that assists a film in reaching its target audience at any time throughout its life.”⁸ In 1927, Robert H. Cochrane, a vice president at Universal Pictures, described his studio's three main marketing functions: advertising, publicity, and exploitation.⁹ These categories have not changed all that much.

Advertising today refers to paid commercials on T.V., radio, outdoor billboards, print media, and digital media. *Publicity* connotes any *unpaid* form of nonpersonal presentation of ideas or goods.¹⁰ Publicity includes, but is not limited to, free coverage of events in the news media. Studio publicity executives work aggressively to court press coverage. In 1933, Fox advertising executive Charles Einfeld invented the “junket,” inviting journalists to interview actors at premieres or flashy promotional events.¹¹ *Exploitation* in 1927 indicated merchandising or other promotional tie-ins; most studios today use less alarming terms such as *co-branding*, *co-marketing*, or simply *promotions*. While these practices thus have a long history, social media’s precise targeting and expansive reach render them more visible than ever.

Often, co-branding arrangements incorporate in-movie product placement and an agreement that the brand partner will promote the movie using its own advertising dollars. For

⁷ William D. Perreault, Joseph P. Cannon, and E. Jerome McCarthy, *Essentials of Marketing*, 13th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2011), 4.

⁸ John Durie, Neil Watson, and Annika Pham, *Marketing and Selling Your Film around the World: A Guide for Independent Filmmakers* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2000), 5.

⁹ Robert H. Cochrane "Advertising Motion Pictures," in *The Story of the Films*, ed. Joseph P. Kennedy (Chicago: A.W. Shaw Co., 1927), 237.

¹⁰ Perreault, Cannon, and McCarthy, *Essentials of Marketing*, 8.

¹¹ “Charles Einfeld, Fox Executive Who Originated ‘Junkets,’ Dies,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1974, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/12/28/archives/charles-einfeld-fox-executive-who-originated-junkets-dies.html>.

example, Mercedes-Benz vehicles appear in *Jurassic World*, and the company ran print and television ads highlighting both the film and the featured cars.¹² In a licensing arrangement, a company will pay the studio for the right to use the movie name, logo, or characters. For example, the cosmetics brand Cover Girl (then owned by Procter & Gamble) created and promoted a line of makeup inspired by *The Hunger Games*, paying a fee to Lionsgate for the privilege.¹³

Co-branding and merchandising are intertwined. Most studios, like Lionsgate, do not manufacture or distribute their own consumer products, instead licensing the rights to existing consumer goods companies such as Procter & Gamble or a toy manufacturer such as Mattel. Even the largest merchandiser, Disney, relies heavily on such licensing agreements, though it does sell merchandise directly to consumers at its theme parks and mall retail stores. Media scholar Derek Johnson even argues that franchise films such as the *Harry Potter* series increasingly organize themselves around merchandise and shopping, ready-made for theme park integration.¹⁴ Nevertheless, merchandising has long played a role in Hollywood. Walt Disney signed his first licensing deal in 1929 for Mickey Mouse writing paper, and the resulting popularity of Mickey merchandise helped fund the studio.¹⁵ In press books for the 1940s

¹² “Mercedes-Benz Launches Campaign to Support Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment’s Jurassic World: The Dinosaurs Are Back,” Daimler, May 18, 2015, <https://media.daimler.com/marsMediaSite/en/instance/ko/Mercedes-Benz-Launches-Campaign-to-Support-Universal-Pictures-and-Amblin-Entertainments-Jurassic-World-The-dinosaurs-are-back.xhtml?oid=9920227>.

¹³ Marc Graser, “CoverGirl Pretties Up ‘Hunger Games: Catching Fire,’” *Variety*, May 17, 2003, <https://variety.com/2013/film/news/covergirl-pretties-up-hunger-games-catching-fire-1200483152/>.

¹⁴ Derek Johnson, “Retail Wizardry: Constructing Media Fantasies from the Point of Sale,” in *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail*, ed. Daniel Herbert and Derek Johnson (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 257.

¹⁵ Mary Beth Culler, “Look Closer: Mickey Mouse Memorabilia from the 1920s & 30s | The Walt Disney Family Museum,” November 28, 2011, <https://www.waltdisney.org/blog/look-closer-mickey-mouse-memorabilia-1920s-30s>.

“women’s films,” studios encouraged exhibitors to arrange cosmetics or fashion tie-ins with local department stores.¹⁶

At most studios, marketing and publicity are distinct departments that work closely together. The marketing department may include a division focused on advertising and another focused on co-branding. For instance, under Lionsgate’s president of worldwide marketing, Tim Palen, sit divisions responsible for advertising and merchandising/tie-ins across film and television. Free publicity, from magazine stories to stars appearing on late-night talk shows, is significant to film marketing, and on a given film marketing and public relations (or P.R.) employees will collaborate on strategy and execution. In the digital and social media age, free publicity and paid advertising very much intermingle.¹⁷ For example, movie studios can post to Twitter for free (publicity), but in many cases, they will also pay Twitter for promoted Tweets (advertising). Indeed, social media has blurred the line between unpaid content and advertising. In this study, I use the term “social media marketing” to encompass both advertising and publicity initiatives.

Janet Staiger points out that the 1930s firmly established many familiar standards of film promotion.¹⁸ By 1915, film studios had generally decided to advertise the features of each particular film (genre, stars, plots, spectacle, or realism) rather than establish a “brand” for Paramount or Universal in the way a soap manufacturer might. That best practice indeed held for

¹⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 29.

¹⁷ Another complication, somewhat less relevant to this study, is advertising on *owned* media, for example when Disney promotes one of its films on the ABC television network, which it also owns. Broadly, such activity still falls under paid advertising.

¹⁸ Janet Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 3 (1990):, doi:10.2307/1225178.

many decades. However, in *Brand Hollywood* (2008), Paul Grainge suggests that between 1995 and 2003, studios turned away from promoting single films and focused on “brands” such as *Batman*, *Harry Potter*, or even studio monikers like “Disney.”¹⁹ The digital era and the resultant transmedia content helped drive the shift. The focus on studio brands has only increased as studios launch direct-to-consumer streaming platforms such as Disney+ and Paramount+.

More broadly, the rise of the internet and the widespread availability of connected digital technology such as smartphones has profoundly impacted the Hollywood media industry. New, well-funded competitors such as Netflix, Amazon, and Google undercut profitable DVD and Blu-Ray sales—not to mention the television business that was important to most studios. The internet also fostered new marketing methods, in general, and certainly for the entertainment industry. The first websites promoting a film emerged in 1994 (advertising *Stargate* and *Star Trek: Generations*). *The Blair Witch Project* may have been the first film to “go viral” online after producers used a promotional website and related P.R. campaign to generate word-of-mouth for the low-budget horror film. In addition, it was the first movie to extensively leverage digital user labor, a practice that would be essential to social media marketing. Other early digital promotional formats, such as display ads or search text ads, bore some similarities to traditional forms like print ads—but still required studio marketers to master new pricing models and contend with detailed data they never previously received.

While the early web included blogs and personal webpages, features *Blair Witch* exploited, user-generated content expanded exponentially around 2006, with the emergence of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Social media are computer-mediated technologies that

¹⁹ Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), 15.

facilitate the creation and sharing of information through virtual communities and networks. The term only emerged in 2004, so precise definitions vary. Still, standard features of social media platforms generally include interactivity, user-generated content, service-specific profiles for the website or app designed and maintained by the social media corporation, and the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals or groups.²⁰ The major social media platforms are for-profit companies that make money via advertising and data collection about user interests and actions. By definition, social networks require scale: their utility and appeal increase as more people join them. That is distinct from websites, which designers can code from scratch and make fully functional at launch.

According to the Pew Research Center, 26 percent of U.S. adults used at least one social media platform in December 2008, when Summit released *Twilight*. By mid-2015, when Universal premiered *Jurassic World*, the share using social media climbed to 65 percent. By early 2021, 72 percent of U.S. adults used a social media service, with little change since 2019. Initially, younger consumers were far more likely to use social media—59 percent of 18-29 year-olds did when *Twilight* premiered in 2009—but by 2021, a majority of all age groups except 65+ use social media.²¹ The pioneering social media service MySpace, acquired by Fox-parent News Corp. in 2005, enjoyed a brief run as the leading platform until Facebook overtook it in early 2008.²² Since 2008, Facebook and YouTube have been the dominant connected platforms. As of

²⁰ Jonathan A Obar and Steve Wildman, "Social Media Definition and the Governance Challenge: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Telecommunications Policy* 39:9 (2015): 745–750.

²¹ "Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States" (Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

²² Caroline McCarthy, "Facebook Overtakes MySpace Globally," ZDNet, June 23, 2008, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/facebook-overtakes-myspace-globally/>.

2021, 81 percent of U.S. adults use YouTube, 69 percent use Facebook, and 40 percent use Instagram (owned by Facebook since 2012). Following Instagram in popularity: Pinterest, LinkedIn, Snapchat, WhatsApp (also owned by Facebook), Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit.²³

Snapchat, released in 2011, initially grew quickly in popularity, especially with younger users, before plateauing. Video-focused TikTok, first available globally in 2017, has, in turn, attracted younger fans. Hollywood studios have used all of these platforms to promote their films (although rarely the career-focused LinkedIn). YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have drawn the most studio attention. While not top-ranked in user share, Twitter is relevant to Hollywood marketers because it is a powerful and flexible publishing tool. Popular Tweets can be embedded on other web pages, multiplying their effect far beyond Twitter's official user base.

As noted, film studios can theoretically participate in these platforms for free. For instance, a studio can upload a trailer to YouTube at no cost. That might be sufficient for a widely anticipated film such as the latest *Star Wars*. In most cases, though, the studio will pay YouTube for a promotion on the home page or embedded in popular videos. The other platforms sell similar ad products.²⁴ The social networks' most valuable commodity, however, is their user data. Studios have always been interested in data about their customers, obtaining insight from box office returns, Nielsen ratings (for television), test screenings, and customer surveys. Social media changes the calculation by providing far greater quantities of data about many more customers or potential customers. Perhaps even more importantly, the Hollywood studios no

²³ "Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States."

²⁴ "Digital marketing" includes social media marketing as well as search marketing and display advertising (e.g. banner ads). The latter two are not my focus, though search or display ads often encourage viewers to take an action on social media.

longer control the data; technology firms do. To obtain the granular analytics offered by digital media, studios often rely on large tech companies or intermediaries such as digital ad agencies.

Social media has altered film marketing in three significant ways. First, social media is *interactive* in a way earlier film marketing was not. Users can create their own content, respond to a promoted Twitter post, or share a film star's Facebook feed. Granted, interactivity is not entirely new. Fans have long written letters to movie stars or fan publications like *Photoplay*. For the first three *Star Wars* films, George Lucas sold the toy rights to Kenner, then owned by the cereal company General Mills, which asked users to collect cereal boxes and then write in for toys like a plastic Admiral Akbar. What *is* new is the scale and speed of social media. In the past, interactive elements would be a small part of a more extensive marketing campaign for a film or television program. And, it would mainly focus on the most dedicated fans. Today social media can be a substantial part of film marketing efforts and budgets. By early 2017, the major studio Sony reported spending as much as 50 percent of its film marketing budgets on digital media, with a lot of that earmarked for social platforms.²⁵

Second, social media amplifies the *scale* of promotional efforts. Many older forms of film promotion, such as posters, print ads, or outdoor billboards, required physical production and distribution. Digital marketing can be launched nearly instantaneously and updated frequently at little cost. Moreover, Facebook and YouTube have dramatically amplified the impact of an old promotional format: the film trailer. Recall the *Avengers: Endgame* trailer netting 289 million views within just 24 hours.²⁶ No film has ever sold 289 million tickets; *Gone*

²⁵ Matt Kapko, "Why Facebook is key to Sony's movie marketing," *CIO*, January 10, 2017, http://www.cio.com/article/3155960/marketing/why-facebook-is-key-to-sonys-movie-marketing.html#tk.drr_mlt.

²⁶ Data from Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/554148/movie-teaser-trailer-view/>.

with the Wind (1939) still tops the list with 202 million tickets sold.²⁷ *Avengers: Endgame* itself sold 93.7 million tickets across its theatrical run, just a third the number of views the trailer received in 24 hours.²⁸ Thanks to social and digital media, studios spend more on trailers and produce them earlier in the production process. Thus, the promotional format—and the trailer houses behind it—enjoy rising influence.

Finally, social media has altered film marketing because it brings its own “logic,” where the distinction between advertising and other content becomes increasingly blurry.²⁹ As José van Dijck and Thomas Poell point out, it is often hard to tell the difference between a “paid” video or post and one that is not on social media. Studios and tech firms alike exploit the confusion. Moreover, every action a user takes on most social media platforms becomes inherently commercial since that action is collected, stored, and later resold to advertisers. As a result, Hollywood studios and social media firms increasingly fight to control this valuable consumer data. In 2014, Disney acquired YouTube-focused Maker Studios primarily to obtain user data.³⁰ Meanwhile, sales teams at the social media companies offer data access in exchange for advertising buys. Twitter, for example, invites “select advertisers” to use its Reach & Frequency

²⁷ Data from Box Office Mojo and Cinemablend, <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2477203/the-10-movies-that-sold-the-most-tickets-avatar-and-avengers-endgame-dont-make-the-cut>.

²⁸ “All Time Top Ticket Selling Movies | Ultimate Movie Rankings,” *Ultimate Movie Rankings* (blog), January 23, 2016, <https://www.ultimatemovierankings.com/top-movie-ticket-sellers-of-all-time/>.

²⁹ José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” *Media and Communication* Vol 1, No 1 (2013), doi <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v1i1.70>.

³⁰ Marc Graser, “Bob Iger Explains Why Disney Bought Maker Studios,” *Variety* (blog), May 6, 2014, <https://variety.com/2014/biz/news/bob-iger-explains-why-disney-bought-maker-studios-1201173389/>.

tool to buy demographically targeted ad impressions, data that otherwise would not be available outside of Twitter.³¹

The Entertainment Ecosystem in the Digital Age

As much as scholars and industry insiders speak about “convergence,” important distinctions remain between the leading entertainment and technology firms. On-demand streaming services, led by Netflix, have attracted much attention and consternation from the Hollywood studios, who have responded with their own over-the-top (OTT) services. Initially a joint venture between NBC Universal and then Fox-parent News Corp., Hulu marked the first response in 2008. Much more recently, between 2019 and 2021, all of the major studios except Sony introduced new streaming platforms: Disney+, HBO Max (Warner Media), Peacock (NBC Universal), and Paramount+. As of 2021, Netflix has over 209 million global subscribers. Despite launching 12 years after Netflix’s streaming service, Disney+ boasts 116 million subscribers, a reminder of the continued power of Hollywood intellectual property. Add in ESPN+ and Hulu (now majority controlled by Disney), and the company’s total combined streaming subscribers are close to nearly 174 million.³²

My study focuses on studios’ initial adoption of social media marketing, which generally focused on theatrical releases and predated the recent spate of OTT platform launches. However, social media marketing practices remain relevant to the streaming platforms. Netflix usually releases an entire season at once to encourage binge-watching and generate social buzz. As a

³¹ Twitter case study, <https://marketing.twitter.com/na/en/success-stories/bad-moms-creative-campaign-starts-movement-on-twitter>.

³² Kelsey Sutton, “Here’s How the Biggest Streamers Stack Up in Mid-2021,” *AdWeek* (blog), August 16, 2021, <https://www.adweek.com/convergent-tv/how-the-biggest-streaming-services-stack-up-in-mid-2021/>.

result, there are significant time gaps between season releases. For example, fans of *Stranger Things*, one of Netflix's biggest original hit series, needed to wait at least 18 months between its seasons. Likewise, the second season of *Bridgerton*, Netflix's most popular series in 2020, won't premiere until late 2022.³³ For its most prominent properties, then, Netflix's promotional strategy looks much more like traditional *film* marketing than traditional *television* marketing, which contends with weekly episodes and relatively short summer breaks between seasons.

Most streaming platforms rely on subscription revenue; a few offer advertising-supported "free" tiers, a model more similar to traditional television broadcasting. However, the most crucial distinction is between the OTT services and the social media platforms. Facebook and YouTube rely primarily on advertising revenue driven by collecting user data. And they dwarf all of the streamers in viewership: both of the leading social media platforms attract over 2 billion users each month.³⁴ Moreover, while professional content, including some from the Hollywood studios, is significant to YouTube and Facebook, they rely upon user-generated content and a relatively diverse and global group of entrepreneurial content creators.³⁵ That key distinction sets them apart from Netflix and Disney+, which almost exclusively feature longer-form, professional content.

³³ Rea Park and Quinci LeGardye, "'Bridgerton' Season 2: Everything We Know," *Marie Claire*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a35004828/bridgerton-season-2/>.

³⁴ Christina Newberry, "25 YouTube Statistics That May Surprise You: 2021 Edition," *Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard* (blog), February 3, 2021, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/youtube-stats-marketers/>.

³⁵ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig suggest the term "social media entertainment" to describe Facebook, YouTube, and similar platforms. See Stuart Cunningham and David Randolph Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

Thus, while this study focuses on Hollywood’s use of social media, that activity occurs in the shadow of a long-term battle for consumers’ attention and entertainment dollars. Via social media, Hollywood invites fans to enter the fictional worlds of *The Hunger Games* or *Jurassic Park*, but in limited ways that (they hope) ultimately benefit the studios. Silicon Valley has a different agenda, inviting Hollywood into social media—but in limited ways that ultimately benefit the platform owners. The tech firms boast much bigger cash reserves and control of valuable user data. On the other hand, the Big Five studios—Disney, Warner Bros., Universal, Paramount, and Sony—still finance (sometimes with partners) the vast majority of films and television programs and control most global distribution.³⁶ Many of these companies have survived, in one form or another, for 100 years, and they own valuable intellectual property. Meanwhile, social media platforms have made limited efforts to move into long-form, premium quality content. In short, traditional Hollywood content, and the studios behind it, remain an essential part of the media landscape—even for tech firms who ultimately hope to disrupt that landscape.

The Big Five studios operate diversified entertainment portfolios, with divisions focused on television, on-demand streaming, music, video games, merchandise, and—in the case of Universal and Disney—theme parks. Some of these business units generate more profits than do the film divisions. Nevertheless, film, and indeed film marketing, retains a unique role within these conglomerates. Multi-platform franchises generally premiere as movies before they arrive online, on television, or in a theme park (though there have been some notable exceptions.) Film marketers have a minimal time window to promote a new release; opening weekend box office

³⁶ Disney acquired the 20th Century Fox film studio in 2019, so the “Big Six” has become the “Big Five.”

gross predicts the success, or lack thereof, for most major films. Even if later digital releases, Blu-ray sales, T.V. rights, and theme park attractions equal or exceed revenue from the theater run, the theatrical opening usually sets the value for the markets that follow. Although television programs also have premiere dates (and streaming platforms may release entire seasons at once), feature films still cost more to produce and offer less opportunity to adjust promotional strategies over time. That film marketing budgets almost invariably dwarf those for even high-profile television and video game releases suggests the value the media industry still places on film.

This study will focus on films released not only by the Big Five studios but also the “mini-majors” such as Lionsgate (distributor of *The Hunger Games*), Summit Entertainment (acquired by Lionsgate in 2012), and STX Entertainment.³⁷ Although I will not generally focus on independently produced films, I will discuss some films produced independently but acquired by a Hollywood distributor (*The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity*) because the marketing campaigns influenced the industry. Such films were often the first to receive extensive social media pushes. In the early years of social media, and even to some extent today, digital and social marketing received scant attention from studio marketing divisions with established relationships in T.V. and print advertising. As a result, small studio divisions or outside firms often led social media strategies. The innovative marketing for *Paranormal Activity*, for example, required technology from the startup Eventful, a user-generated entertainment-booking site.

³⁷ “Mini-major” is an informal term for independent film distributors ranking just behind the “Big Five” conglomerates in global box office share. Occasionally such a studio may actually outperform one of the majors. In 2012, the year *The Hunger Games* was released, Lionsgate ranked 4th in box office share, ahead of Fox and Paramount. Other independent studios ranking in the top ten at some point during the period I am discussing include The Weinstein Company, Relativity Media, Open Road Films, Roadside Attractions, and FilmDistrict.

Meanwhile, global distribution and marketing are critical to Hollywood studios today and a significant part of my discussion. However, I will not be focusing upon films distributed by studios based outside of the United States. The ten largest Hollywood studios still control about two-thirds of the global film box office. Moreover, many social media platforms launched in the U.S. first, and movie studios first deployed them as domestic advertising. As a result, the U.S. still receives a significant share of film marketing spend. Despite the massive growth in international business, the U.S. remains, for now, the largest film market, and the second-largest—China—has significant restrictions on marketing efforts there.

Nevertheless, the social media marketing practices I discuss dovetail with the rise of global distribution. Some social media marketing campaigns receive global or multi-country launches. Alternatively, a localized social media campaign in India or Germany might reframe a Hollywood film to make it more appealing to audiences in those countries. Furthermore, movies intended for global audiences generally emphasize visuals and special effects while deemphasizing dialogue; the result: relatively simple texts (the films) ready for reinterpretation on social media.

Methodology

In tracing the rise of social media and its influence on the Hollywood film industry, I ground my work within the emerging field of critical media industry studies. I examine social media marketing through a combination of sources, including interviews with marketing professionals, ethnographic research at industry conferences, trade journals, and textual analysis. I draw on production studies to paint a picture of the studio marketing departments. Texts I interrogate include films, digital advertising, trailers, and social media posts made by studios,

stars, and fans. My primary interest is the social media marketing practices of the Hollywood studios—and their collaborators at outside ad agencies—but I have included some interviews with workers at the social media firms. Advertising sales teams at Facebook, Google, and YouTube, for instance, regularly speak with studio marketers and often serve as gatekeepers to their employers’ rich troves of data. Indeed, I was a product marketing manager and analyst at Google before graduate school. As a result, I met regularly with marketing teams from the Hollywood studios to discuss Google and YouTube ad products, and that experience informed my research and interviews.

Media industry studies, according to Alisa Perren, “blends political economy’s critical approach to the production and distribution of culture with cultural studies’ concern with the power struggles that occur over the value of and meanings within specific texts.” Media industries scholars emphasize “historical specificity” and “empirical research,” Perren continues, “balancing the ‘top-down’ approach of political economy with the ‘bottom-up’ perspective of cultural studies.”³⁸ Drawing from political-economic analysis, I look “top-down” at the economic motivations of the competing, and sometimes overlapping, entertainment and technology industries. In the cultural studies tradition, I also look “bottom-up” to understand how social media marketing changes the lives of those who create and consume it.

Political economy takes a macrolevel view of the media and its connection to capital interests, focusing on regulatory issues, media ownership, and broad historical shifts. This high-level perspective proved valuable in the early years of media scholarship and once again at the dawn of digital media, for example, in understanding the social media platforms’ business

³⁸ Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: UT Press, 2012), 5-6.

models and relationship to governmental regulation (or lack thereof). Critical media industry studies, however, focus on midlevel fieldwork. Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic describe the methodology as a “helicopter view,” allowing for finer detail compared to the broad “jet plane” view of political economy.³⁹

Critical media industry scholars focus on “particular organizations, agents, and practices *within* what have become vast media conglomerates operating at a global level.”⁴⁰ My research of marketing professionals at the studios takes just such a helicopter view, interrogating the real people and practices at the intersection of old and new media. Moreover, critical media industry scholars generally embrace the Gramscian perspective that corporate power is not absolute but contested, a push-and-pull between power and resistance. In many respects, social media marketers actively negotiate this balance of power, competing with each other, CEOs, and even consumers to set the terms of the media future.

Critical media industry studies often incorporate close textual analysis, reflecting cultural studies’ interest in unlocking the meaning of specific texts. For example, Derek Johnson, Jennifer Gillan, and Timothy Havens have productively used in-depth textual analysis to elucidate specific midlevel media practices such as franchising, branded storytelling, and television targeting Black audiences. Moreover, the studios’ social media marketing practices and film marketing, in general, can hardly be considered *without* textual analysis. By definition, film marketing extends the bounds of the film text, expanding a two-hour movie into thousands of social media posts, posters, trailers, and publicity appearances. Marketers themselves must

³⁹ Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (June 2009): 239.

⁴⁰ Havens et al., 236.

analyze the original text, looking for creative ways to modify and broaden its appeal. In film marketing, product and promotion are inevitably intertwined.

With this in mind, I draw upon text-centric theories of film analysis but apply them in two relatively new ways. First, I will pay attention to the narrative and stylistic properties of *paratexts* such as online film trailers, Twitter images, or even Facebook pages. According to Jonathan Gray, paratexts encompass advertisements as well as merchandise, podcasts, fan blogs, and reviews—in short, everything that surrounds a film or television program.⁴¹ In *Show Sold Separately* (2010), Gray argues that paratexts create meaning, helping viewers decode a film or television program before they even see it.⁴² *Intertextuality*, a related theory that every text is related to other texts, began in literary scholarship with Julia Kristeva's 1969 interpretation of Mikhail Bakhtin's earlier work on "dialogism."⁴³ Building on this work, Gérard Genette in 1982 proposed "paratextuality" to describe accessory messages surrounding the text, including, for instance, book jacket designs.⁴⁴ Then, media scholars, including Gray and Lisa Kernan, expanded the concept into film and television paratexts.⁴⁵

In addition to careful analysis of social media paratexts, I will consider how promotional factors may intercede in film style or form. For instance, Trish Summerville, the costume

⁴¹ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 6.

⁴² Gray, 3.

⁴³ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon Samuel Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora and Alice A. Jardine (New York: Columbia University press, 1980), 36.

⁴⁴ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Stages, v. 8 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 186.

⁴⁵ Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, 1st ed, Texas Film and Media Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

designer for several films in *The Hunger Games* series, met with marketing and merchandising executives while creating outfits for the movies. Summerville designed the film's costumes and related merchandise simultaneously.⁴⁶ Marketing became part of *mise-en-scène*. In recent years much has been made in both industry and academia of the increasingly confusing boundaries between screen "content" and marketing. My case studies will systematically uncover differences between a film's narrative and narratives created by the promotional surround. In the critical media industry studies tradition, I use this ground-level analysis to illuminate broader cinema and social media practices.

My research also wades into audience studies, perhaps to a degree that might make some critical media industry scholars uncomfortable. Certainly, some audience studies are rather the opposite of the "jet plane" view of political economy: they never leave the ground at all, focusing on narrow interpretative communities or generally ignoring the industry's structuring influence. However, I find audience scholarship quite relevant to a critical interrogation of marketing workers and practices. After all, marketers spend a lot of time thinking about audiences: who is watching and not watching, and who they wish were watching. Thus, the most successful marketing professionals are audience scholars, even if they rarely use the terminology of the academy.

For instance, online marketers think hard about when, where, and how often a viewer encounters a particular film property. Several scholarly conceptions of audiences, such as Abercrombie and Longhurst's notion of "diffused" audiences or Jonathan Gray's suggestion that

⁴⁶ Cheryl Wischover, "Costume Designer Trish Summerville on Making 'The Hunger Games: Catching Fire' Into a 'High Fashion U.N.,'" *ELLE*, November 15, 2013, <http://www.elle.com/fashion/news/a18822/hunger-games-costume-designer-trish-summerville/>.

viewers “recode” a text in multiple viewings, cover very similar terrain.⁴⁷ Recent academic debates about a vital subset of audience scholarship, fan studies, also dovetail with industry conversations. The distinction between fans, anti-fans, and more casual viewers is also essential to marketers, who seek to attract (or at least not annoy) all of the above. Indeed, Henry Jenkins’s scholarship about fans and media convergence has attracted followers in the industry as well as the academy.⁴⁸

In addition, online data collection has made audience research more accessible and more quantifiable. In the pages that follow, I employ many of the same audience measurement tools used by the studio marketers themselves. Third-party services such as Social Clout and Feedly help advertisers track trending topics and hashtags, while the social media platforms selectively make valuable data available via their advertiser dashboards and a few public tools such as Google Trends. Of course, while marketers generally use such tools to measure the success or failure of a particular ad campaign, I focus on more significant industry trends. Still, audience data—particularly the ways social media marketers use and respond to that data—is an integral part of the specific media practice I am studying. For example, if *The Hunger Games* marketers introduce a new social media campaign around the film’s fashion, do fans start talking more about fashion? The answer is interesting for two reasons. First, it would bolster my general argument that social media marketers are influential cultural interpreters, helping direct the conversation about particular media. Second, marketers themselves care about the answer. Over

⁴⁷ Jonathan Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, Comedia (New York: Routledge, 2006), 35; Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*. (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 159.

⁴⁸ For example, Jenkins’s *Spreadable Media* expressly targets industry practitioners as well as academics (with the most scholarly discussions relegated to the companion website). See Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Postmillennial Pop (New York ; London: New York University Press, 2013).

time, they will adjust their practices based upon how they perceive their collective successes and failures.

Although I situate my work in critical media industry studies, several closely related approaches also influence my methodology. Cultural industry theorists in the United Kingdom, including David Hesmondhalgh, Paul Grainge, and Catherine Johnson, effectively outline the ways commercial media can limit creative freedom and produce, in Hesmondhalgh's words, "complex, ambivalent, and contested" content.⁴⁹ Indeed, that ambivalence and complexity play out in the studios' social media marketing. Ironically, though, the social media landscape arguably lends marketing teams (if not screenwriters and directors) *more* creative freedom, a bit of a departure from Hesmondhalgh's model. As with critical media industry studies, production studies seek to balance top-down and bottom-up approaches, emphasizing the connection between what John Caldwell calls the "microsocial level" and broader media trends.⁵⁰ If there is a difference between the two approaches, it is one of emphasis; Caldwell focuses on creative workers, particularly "below-the-line" personnel, while critical media industry studies more often encompass executives such as the marketers I study.

Caldwell's methodological advice on production studies certainly applies to marketing teams, and I deploy it throughout my research. He describes a fourfold research technique involving "textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts; interviews with film/television workers; ethnographic field observation of production spaces and professional gatherings; and

⁴⁹ David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 2nd ed (Los Angeles ; London: SAGE, 2007).

⁵⁰ John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

economic/industrial analysis.”⁵¹ Caldwell reminds scholars to critically evaluate all of the above industry interactions in the larger political, business, and social context.⁵² “Industrial disclosures to scholars,” he observes, “should first be approached as performance, as trade ‘stagings.’”⁵³

Indeed, a marketing executive has particular motivations and incentives for presenting his work in a certain way, and those incentives vary between an academic interview, the trade press, or an industry conference. As I discovered through my ethnographic research, it even matters *which* industry conference. When speaking in a public forum where directors, screenwriters, or fans are likely listening, marketers sometimes *understated* their artistic influence to avoid offending creative laborers (and, in some cases, to prevent violations of union rules about credits). I seemingly encountered more frank conversations at two smaller conferences I attended, the Digital Pixels Awards and the *Variety* Marketing Summits, which cater almost exclusively to industry marketing professionals. However, these events came with their own incentives: to impress potential colleagues or future bosses—and perhaps even *overstate* marketing’s importance relative to other job functions.⁵⁴

Many of my interviewees, especially workers at the major studios, spoke to me on background, given non-disclosure agreements and concerns about offending their managers or creative talent. As a result, I believe they were more candid but certainly not free of the trade

⁵¹ Caldwell, 4.

⁵² John Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” *Cultural Studies* Vol. 28, No. 4 (2014): 721.

⁵³ John T. Caldwell, “Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood’s Blackwaters,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 162–63.

⁵⁴ The events for industry marketers, especially the awards-focused “Digital Pixels,” are examples of the subtype of social capital sociologists call “bounded solidarity.” Workers in a particular industry support each other, but the support is “bounded” since their altruism generally only extends to their immediate professional cohort. See Alejandro Portes, *Economic Sociology: A Systematic Inquiry* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2010), 33.

“stagings” Caldwell describes. As Denise Mann points out, digital intermediaries—ad agencies and consultants promoting themselves as new media interpreters for old media executives—are often more eager to speak to scholars (and journalists, for that matter).⁵⁵ I found these sources helpful. But of course, the intermediaries have an agenda of their own: since they usually seek future industry employment, they promote and perhaps exaggerate their expertise, perspicacity, and involvement in high-stakes decisions. Even an article in trade publications like *Variety* likewise has specific motivations since the author relies on industry contacts and knows her work will primarily be consumed within the entertainment industry. For all of the above reasons, it can be especially challenging to determine who deserves credit for a particular marketing strategy or work product, though I certainly try to do so whenever possible.

In short, I applied close cultural analysis to all of my sources, aiming to triangulate public statements with multiple perspectives and textual analysis. Moreover, industry spin and staging aren't just obstacles; they can be revealing. Caldwell and other production researchers emphasize the importance of “industrial reflexivity,” a notion partially inspired by the interpretative anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who encouraged researchers to focus on “self-interpretation” and “thick description” of cultural forms.⁵⁶ Geertz further argues that cultural forms both reflect and reconfigure society.⁵⁷ Building on Geertz's key point, my methodology does not imply a one-way relationship, industry producing text. On the contrary, the marketers I study critically respond to industrial and creative developments as often as they shape them. Social media has

⁵⁵ Denise Mann, “Introduction,” in *Wired TV: Laboring over an Interactive Future*, ed. Denise Mann (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 7.

⁵⁶ Clifford Geertz, “Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁵⁷ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 95.

upended the film industry; studio marketers seek to regain control, but their task is not easy. Indeed, the film marketing enterprise is inherently unstable and prone to change—despite the public, corporate pressures to signify brand stability.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 highlights the relevant milestones of 20th-century film marketing, explaining that promotional paratexts have always mediated film production and reception, though in more limited ways than now possible. A case study of RKO Radio Pictures' marketing campaigns for *King Kong* (1933) illustrates these points. RKO's initial campaign presented *Kong* as a jungle adventure, accentuating racist and Eurocentric tropes even more than the film itself. For later re-releases, particularly in the 1950s, the studio elided the jungle context and completely reframed the movie into a straight-up horror pic. The marketing adjustments took years and even decades, though, compared to the split-second algorithmic adjustments that social media would later enable. After the case study, I turn to the “New Hollywood” period and the “high-concept” marketing identified by Justin Wyatt. This period, roughly the last 25 years of the 20th century, laid the groundwork for today's digital film marketing practices, but I will explore essential distinctions.

Chapter 2 begins with two early, innovative web marketing campaigns. For *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), co-directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez developed a marketing gimmick—blurring fact and fiction with clever use of early web media—before they had a script or movie, previewing the marketing-centric filmmaking typical in the social media era. The massive success of *Blair Witch*, distributed by the upstart Artisan Entertainment, also underscored the potential power of fan labor and online word-of-mouth. Meanwhile, at New

Line Cinema, Gordon Paddison—who founded the first digital marketing department at any studio—developed a unique strategy for simultaneously engaging and controlling J.R.R. Tolkien fans eagerly awaiting *The Lord of the Rings* (2001). But the dot-com stock market bubble quickly turned the Hollywood conglomerates into internet skeptics. As a result, most studio marketing departments stuck to traditional promotional methods just as a new crop of tech firms—first Google, then Facebook and YouTube—reordered the media ecosystem. In addition to tracing the initial history of digital film promotion, the chapter introduces essential scholarly frameworks around “free” user labor, digital surveillance, transmedia storytelling, and social media logic.

Chapter 3 focuses on the “mini-majors” Lionsgate and Summit Entertainment (now merged). To promote a series of young-adult franchises, these studios introduced the first multi-layered social media campaigns to comprise a significant percentage of a film’s marketing budget. For *Twilight* (2008), Summit offered distinct demographic campaigns that make a good case study of how different paratexts might influence audience understanding of the text itself. The studio also carefully cultivated relationships with online fan sites and, beginning with *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009), leveraged social media success to attract co-branding partners who had previously been skeptical of the vampire romance franchise. To promote *The Hunger Games* (2012), Lionsgate took problematic subject matter—so problematic that major studios like Disney passed on the project, despite the source book’s popularity—and made it palatable for co-branding and merchandising. Thanks in no small part to social media, the two series became the *only* Hollywood franchises with a female lead actor. At the same time, Summit and Lionsgate marketers relied on gendered assumptions about online labor and fandom.

Chapter 4 turns to the major studios and Universal’s digital marketing strategy for *Jurassic World* (2015), a successful revival of a franchise that had been dormant since 2001. Universal’s Adam Fogelson was the first marketing executive ever promoted to studio chief, and he and Donna Langley led the company towards a marketing-centric filmmaking approach. By 2015, the studio increasingly embraced social media marketing. To promote *Jurassic World*, Universal and its agency partners mirrored many of the strategies pioneered by Summit and Lionsgate. A carefully staged, years-long social media campaign cultivated “authentic” relationships with older millennials and Gen-Xers nostalgic for the first *Jurassic Park* (1993) while broadening the appeal to a new generation. The marketers also leveraged social media logic—particularly the blurry line between advertising and content and the platforms’ constant demand for self-promotion—to advance their agenda with fan and creative labor assistance.

As the **Conclusion** explains, social media logic became more fully embedded in major studio marketing practices after 2015. At Sony, Josh Greenstein became the *second* marketing executive elevated to studio chief. He and his team proved particularly willing to experiment with new promotional formats from the tech platforms. I also discuss two digital intermediaries, the social data tracker PreAct and the creative agency Trailer Park, that exemplify two essential and interrelated features of the social media marquee: datafication and marketing’s increasing involvement early in film production. In the final section, I examine the ways social media marketing mediates racial and ethnic representation on the big screen. The programmability, connectivity, and precise targeting of the new tech platforms helped studio marketers better recognize the economic power of diverse audiences. Simultaneously, microtargeting allowed nervous marketers to quietly appeal to white audiences, possibly displeased with the new

multicultural content. I end my discussion here to summarize the complex impact of social media on Hollywood while also underscoring the significant cultural and scholarly stakes.

Chapter 1. The Film Marketing Marquee in the 20th Century

Introduction

It is one of the most iconic images in film history: King Kong atop the Empire State Building, Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) in one hand as he swats away incoming fighter planes with the other. Yet when the original 1933 *King Kong* premiered at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, Sid Grauman framed the film not as a monster movie or city spectacle but as an exotic jungle adventure, a genre that had been popular in the early 1930s. A live prologue, "A Scene in the Jungle," trading on racist and colonialist tropes with dance numbers titled "Eccentric Dance of the Zulus," "Studies in Ebony," and "Goodbye Africa."⁵⁸ Other exhibitors emphasized romance, explicitly referencing the film's human love story but likely reflecting audience identification with Kong and his forbidden attachment to Wray's blonde ingénue.

The exhibitors and the distributor, RKO Radio Pictures, foregrounded racist appeals because they believed they would sell, a reminder that marketers play a significant and often under-examined role in reinforcing institutional discrimination and stereotypes. When the expensive film did not perform quite as well as RKO hoped, the studio and local theaters tried other promotional framings, a luxury afforded them by the slow regional rollouts standard at the time. Nearly 20 years later, in 1952, RKO re-released *King Kong* with a groundbreaking (and prescient) rollout strategy: saturation booking in many theaters at once combined with a wave of TV and radio ads. This time, RKO's marketing uniformly described *King Kong* as a straight-up horror picture, with virtually no mention of jungle adventure. While they were undoubtedly

⁵⁸ *King Kong* Opening Night Program, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, 23 March 1923, Production File, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

cashing in on the 1950s horror cycle, RKO executives likely also realized that the explicitly racist messaging had become less acceptable.

Film promotion and publicity have always had the power to shape audience expectations and interpretation. Likewise, promotion and publicity have always responded to audience feedback in a way the film itself, locked on celluloid, cannot. This chapter will outline key developments in film marketing from the silent era until 1999, illustrating the marketing marquee before the internet age. A case study of *King Kong* will offer specific archival examples and engage with scholarship about racism, colonialism, and studio relationships to censorship boards. Throughout the 20th century, theater marquees—alongside posters, lobby cards, trailers, print ads, TV spots, merchandise, and more—informed the ways audiences understood particular films. Of course, marketing campaigns also reflected the industry’s business goals, some obvious (selling theater tickets), others less so (fueling soap sales or home video rentals).

The history of film marketing reminds us that the social media marquee is not *new* but rather *amplifies* and *expands* earlier practices. For instance, social media allows marketers to target promotional messages to distinct demographic or behavioral groups. On the other hand, the limits of mass media constrained 20th-century film marketers, who could only target cities, or, at best, the demographics claimed by a particular TV channel or print publication. Similarly, while social media offers extensive data about audience responses to a new movie, pre-digital marketers had to rely on test screenings or simply box office receipts.

Media industries scholars José van Dijck and Thomas Poell compare “mass media logic,” as articulated by David Altheide and Robert Snow in 1979, with today’s “social media logic.” Features of social media logic include programmability, popularity, connectivity, and

datafication, all *modifications* of mass media logic.⁵⁹ And, the logic incorporates powerful new entrants, tech-media firms such as Facebook and Google. As Mark Andrejevic explains, the tech giants structure their business and profitability around “forms of productive data gathering enabled by private ownership of and control over” interactive, digital enclosures.⁶⁰ For van Dijck and Poell, the critical differences between mass media and social media logic are *invisibility* and *speed*. Social media logic is even less transparent than was mass media logic; that includes one of the central premises of my project, the blurring line between promotion and other content. Studio marketers have benefited from this blurry line since it grants them the license to reshape a finished film continually. Thanks to social media’s breakneck speed and constant surveillance, today’s studios collect more data, more frequently than any Classical Hollywood marketer could have imagined.

Early Marketing Milestones

During the “classical era” of the Hollywood studio system, from the 1920s to the 1940s, the biggest studios vertically integrated production, distribution, and exhibition. By the 1930s, the film industry was effectively controlled by a “mature oligopoly” of eight firms.⁶¹ Notably, the most powerful of these, the “Big Five” studios—MGM, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Paramount, and RKO—not only produced and distributed their films but owned theater chains. Without their own theaters to guarantee a home for their pictures, the remaining “Little Three”

⁵⁹ José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” *Media and Communication* Vol 1, No 1 (2013), 2-14.

⁶⁰ Mark Andrejevic, “Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure,” *The Communication Review*, 10 (2007): 299.

⁶¹ Thomas Schatz, “The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood,” in Paul McDonald, and Janet Wasko, eds., *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 15.

studios—Universal, Columbia, and United Artists (UA)—produced fewer high-budget films with big stars (so-called “A” pictures) and trailed in market share.

Many classical era marketing techniques remain in use today, and indeed some practices were standardized even earlier, during the silent film era beginning in 1895. During that period, the major film companies standardized their practices by forming the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC, also known as the Edison Trust) in 1908. The Trust included the leading film distributor, film stock manufacturer Eastman Kodak, and all the major studios as of 1908, including Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, and American Pathé. Notably, however, many key marketing innovations arose at the “independent” studios founded around Los Angeles after 1910, including Carl Laemmle’s Independent Moving Pictures Company, or IMP (later Universal Pictures) and Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players (later Paramount Pictures).

Robert Sklar, Tom Schatz, and other film historians have documented the “Fordist,” factory-like production practices of the classical Hollywood studio system. Studios often specialized in certain types of films, thus enjoying cost savings from reusing sets, props, costumes, and even scripts. So, for example, Warner Brothers focused on gangster films, MGM on musicals, and Universal on horror. Scholars have devoted many pages to the production histories of the golden age studios, with some disagreement about precisely how the factory system operated. For example, Douglas Gomery emphasizes the vision and power of top studio executives like Adolph Zukor and the Schenck brothers. On the other hand, Tom Schatz sees classical Hollywood as a functioning system, as “a melding of institutional forces.”⁶² For Schatz,

⁶² Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 6.

studio-lot production executives like Irving Thalberg at MGM had crucial roles, but it was the profit-generating system as a whole that truly defined film production.

Gomery and Schatz agree, however, that vertical integration underpinned the success of the classic Hollywood studios. Gomery says that the movie theaters largely financed the major studios with assistance from such ancillary factors as stage shows, popcorn, and air conditioning. National theater chains benefited from the same economies of scale that gave rise to mass merchandising more broadly in the first part of the 20th century.⁶³ Indeed, Gomery argues that from the 1920s onwards, vertical integration enabled the studios to engage in “price discrimination”: charging consumers as much as possible to see a film.⁶⁴ Initially, this meant charging the highest prices for first-run pictures, a bit less for the second run, and so on. Taken together, Gomery says, vertical integration and price discrimination allowed Hollywood studios to dominate global entertainment in the classical studio era—and variations on the practices have continued into the modern era. Likewise highlighting the importance of vertical integration, Schatz notes that Universal Pictures dominated film production in the 1910s but then faded into a “Little Three” studio by the 1920s in large part because its chief, Carl Laemmle, steadfastly resisted acquiring movie theaters.⁶⁵

The industry structure of the classical era profoundly influenced marketing and promotional practices. Three-tier vertical integration (production, distribution, and exhibition) gave Hollywood studios a built-in audience for their films. For instance, an MGM film would be

⁶³ Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 35.

⁶⁴ Gomery, 294.

⁶⁵ Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 28.

assured a slot at an MGM (Loew's) theater. Since movies were the dominant form of entertainment, that meant guaranteed ticket sales for every MGM film, which also meant fewer sales staff and lower distribution costs. It is important to note that there *were* still many independent theaters in the studio era, though the studios tended to own the largest, most opulent picture palaces. This is where the studios' control of *distribution* and not just *exhibition* became crucial. In selling to theaters they did not own, the studios required "block booking," meaning an independent exhibitor who wanted to run a studio's "A" picture with a top star would also have to rent other, less promising films. Since no one studio produced enough movies to fill a theater's calendar, the major studios cooperated. Meanwhile, with World War I harming European film production, American firms opened distribution offices abroad, cementing their vertical control of international filmgoing. Thus, for all the production efficiencies afforded by the factory system of the studio era, Hollywood would have been at sea without its control of distribution and exhibition.

Film Marketing Practices Standardize

By 1915, except for the yet-to-be-invented radio and television media, many familiar advertising formats were already in place, including posters, theater decoration, lobby cards, and pressbooks. The typical pressbook included images of the various advertising items available to promote a movie, such as film posters, lobby cards, and film stills. They also contained various newspaper advertisements an exhibitor could use in local newspaper advertising plus feature pieces for inclusion in local newspapers (usually with the studio picking up the tab). Pressbooks often included ideas for so-called exploitation campaigns, including souvenir giveaways, contests, and even live promotional stunts. Film trailers emerged in the mid to late teens, with Famous Players one of the earliest studios to introduce moving picture ads instead of the still

slides exhibitors deployed in the nickelodeon era.⁶⁶ Even early on, studios hired intermediaries—outside agencies—to develop the trailers (although in the late 1920s, Warner Bros. took charge of its trailer production).⁶⁷

Silent and classical era executives created unique promotional campaigns for each new film, rather than emphasizing the studio's brand. As Universal vice president Robert Cochrane theorized in 1927: "We cannot standardize our pictures as a soap manufacturer standardizes his soap. They must all be different. So must all our advertisements. Each picture requires a new advertising treatment, a new approach. We may standardize 'brand' advertising, but each film presents a new problem."⁶⁸ Studios would submerge brand names in favor of product features such as stars, realism, genre, plots, or spectacle. Although brand advertising has arguably increased in the franchise era, today's executives generally still follow Cochrane's logic. Therefore, Hollywood studios typically have less brand equity than other significant advertisers, a marketing challenge that persists today.

In the silent era, local exhibitors paid for and controlled most film advertising. As a result, some films received starkly different ad campaigns depending on the market, a very early version of the social media marquee. Scholar Mark Fenster compares film ads in *The New York Tribune* and *The Austin [Texas] Statesman* between 1907 and 1915. While the New York and Austin ads shared some themes, including realism, spectacle, and stars, Fenster notes that the ads in Texas were much more likely to include "expert" testimonials or certification by religious or

⁶⁶ Janet Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 8.

⁶⁷ Staiger, 9.

⁶⁸ Robert Cochrane, "Advertising Motion Pictures," in *The Story of the Films*, ed. Joseph P. Kennedy (Chicago: A. W. Shaw Co, 1927), 234.

educational organizations. By contrast, *The New York Tribune* ads often focused on titillating subjects with language such as "real drama with a punch."⁶⁹

Beginning in the mid-teens, some studios began national campaigns promoting their overall slate; in 1913, Universal spent \$250,000 to promote the "superior worth of the Universal program" through "newspapers, magazines, billboards and miscellaneous" media.⁷⁰ Some firms, especially Paramount and Universal, continued limited national advertising in the 1920s, but it was not until the 1930s that national advertising of individual films, not just company brand names, became widespread.⁷¹ Two fundamental industrial changes led to this shift in marketing strategy. First, vertical integration meant that studios cared about local box office receipts and began monitoring advertising results more closely. A second incentive to advertise nationally arose in the late 1920s when distributors shifted the fee basis for most film rentals from a flat rate to a percentage of gross box office receipts, a change also made possible by vertical integration since firms were able to audit the theaters they owned. And since the majors ran the first-run exhibition, they could time ad campaigns to coincide with first-run release dates. Thus, although national advertising was already standard at the turn of the 20th century, Hollywood only found the practice worthwhile and profitable once it vertically integrated distribution and exhibition.

As studios gained more control over local theaters, they began enforcing industry regulations for advertising content. Shortly after the film industry instituted the production code for film content in March 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association

⁶⁹ Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," 13.

⁷⁰ "Universal Starts Big Advertising Campaign," *Motion Picture World* 18, no. 6 (8 Nov. 1913): 618.

⁷¹ Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," 14.

(MPPDA) adopted a lesser-known 12-point ad code enforced by the International Motion Picture Advertising Association (IMPAA). Vertical integration strengthened enforcement of the code; by 1935, even independent theater owners could be fined for advertising violations.⁷² The film studios and the MPPDA lost control over local advertising by 1948 due to the Paramount Decree scuttling vertical integration. However, rental contracts between distributors and exhibitors continued to include some advertising guidelines. Overall, the classical era saw Hollywood's historically tightest control over the ways their films would be discussed and marketed, contrasting with studios' diminished control in the social media era.

Adapting other properties into films, so familiar today, was common in the silent and classical eras. By the early teens, studios purchased and adapted famous plays, short stories, or novels. The classical period also saw product placement and co-branding agreements, even if they did not reach the scale of the post-1975 blockbuster era or the social media marquee. Movie serials in the United States started began life as jointly produced and published ventures. By 1916, promotional tie-ins included songs composed for films and new fashions advertised by stars and department stores. The film studio Pathé, for example, hired Florence Rose, "the country's famous fashion expert," to discuss forthcoming film fashions in the *New York Evening Mail* and the *New York Globe*. The clothes were available for sale in local stores. Starting in the 1920s, cigarette manufacturers encouraged actors and actresses to smoke in films, believing the example would influence consumers.⁷³

⁷² Staiger, 15–16.

⁷³ Staiger, 11-12.

In 1930 (the earliest year from which accurate and credible data exists), weekly cinema attendance was 80 million people, approximately 65% of the resident U.S. population.⁷⁴ By 2016, while 71% of the U.S. population attended movies at least once a year, only 11 percent of the U.S. population visited the cinema once a *month*, and those individuals were still responsible for 48% of all tickets sold.⁷⁵ Frequent moviegoing has become much less common. In some ways, therefore, classical studio marketers had an easier task than do today's marketing teams. Classical studio executives focused on retention marketing in today's parlance: making sure moviegoers kept up their weekly habits. (Today, retention and reducing churn is a significant focus of subscription-based streaming services such as Netflix.)

By contrast, contemporary film marketers face infrequent filmgoers and generally focus on *acquisition* marketing, reaching new customers for their product. As a result of vertical integration and the built-in weekly audience, classical era Hollywood studios released far more films per year than contemporary Hollywood; many were low-budget "B" pictures packaged via block booking with star-led "A" pictures. In 1939, the Hollywood majors and minors released 365 films; by 1988, half as many.⁷⁶ In December 1939, *Gone with the Wind* began a remarkable cinematic run and still holds the record for the number of tickets sold.

Some of the first scholarship to tackle film marketing and promotion focused on the classical era, particularly the marketing practices of the "factory system" at the Hollywood majors. Because classical studios tended to focus on particular types of films, genre figures

⁷⁴ Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, New ed. (London: Wallflower, 2003), 288.

⁷⁵ Christopher J Dodd, "Theatrical Market Statistics," *Motion Picture Association of America*, 2016, 31.

⁷⁶ Jack Matthews, "1939 : It Was the Greatest Year in Hollywood History," *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-01-01-ca-223-story.html>.

heavily into the scholarly discussion of studio promotions in this period. As Rick Altman recounts, silent film distributors began promoting “cowboy pictures,” and by 1910, westerns “quickly became the name for a loosely defined film genre capitalizing on public interest in the American West.”⁷⁷ By the 1920s, studio promotions often mentioned genre, coupling the “lure of familiar generic worlds or spaces” with the “lure of the new,” as Lisa Kernan puts it.⁷⁸ To give one example, a newspaper ad for Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937) trumpets a *Time* magazine quote claiming that the film is “more exciting than a western” and “funnier than a hay-wire comedy.”⁷⁹

In an early study of film paratexts, from 1985, Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci consider Warner Brothers’ 1930s gangster films, demonstrating how “the initial encoding of generic conventions and expectations provides audiences with determinant signals for any subsequent reading of the gangster cycle.”⁸⁰ Lukow and Ricci see advertisements as a crucial part of this “encoding,” noting that film promotion and publicity forms an “intertextual relay” designed to attract and maintain audiences—a relay that relies heavily on the genre.⁸¹ Expanding upon Lukow and Ricci, Steve Neale argues that intertextual relay not only begins “the immediate narrative process of expectation and anticipation” but “also helps to define and circulate, in combination with the films themselves, what one might call ‘generic images,’ providing sets of

⁷⁷ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 36.

⁷⁸ Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Austin: UT Press, 2004), 79.

⁷⁹ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* press book, distributed by RKO Radio Pictures. Production file, core collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

⁸⁰ Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci, “The Audience Goes ‘Public’: Inter-Textuality, Genre, and the Responsibilities of Film Literacy,” *On Film* 12 (1984): 29.

⁸¹ Lukow and Ricci, 29.

labels, terms, and expectations that will come to characterize the genre as a whole.”⁸² Thus, marketing is an important, though often overlooked, part of the studio factory system. Warner Bros. was able to dominate gangster films and reuse sets and even scripts because its marketing teams successfully defined and circulated the critical features of the gangster picture. The same process applied to MGM and musicals or Universal and horror films.

Stars and Fan Magazines

During cinema's early years, studio bosses avoided naming silent screen actors, mainly because they anticipated (correctly) that fame might lead actors to demand higher wages. Perhaps the first “movie star,” Florence Lawrence, appeared uncredited in many Biograph Studios films, including most of D.W. Griffith’s early silent work. Fans even wrote to the studio trying to find out Lawrence’s name, particularly after the success of *Resurrection* (1909), but Biograph demurred. Instead, fans named her the “Biograph Girl.”⁸³ Carl Laemmle, founder of the Independent Moving Pictures Company of America (and later Universal Pictures), saw a marketing opportunity. Laemmle lured Lawrence away from Biograph with the promise that he would indeed publicize her name. Next, he orchestrated an elaborate publicity stunt, starting a false rumor that Lawrence had died in a streetcar accident. Laemmle used ads for *The Broken Oath* (1910) to announce that Lawrence was alive after all and scheduled Lawrence for a personal appearance in St. Louis, making her one of the first movie actors to be publicly identified.⁸⁴ Due to Laemmle’s stunt, the Hollywood “star system” was born, and Florence

⁸² Steve Neale, “Questions of Genre,” *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (New York: Blackwell, 2000), 160.

⁸³ Jeanine Basinger, *Silent Stars*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1999), 7.

⁸⁴ Eileen Bowser, *History of the American Cinema, 1907-1915 (Volume 2)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 112–13.

Lawrence became a household name. Though independent studios such as Laemmle's were the first to move towards a star system, even the members of the Edison Trust (Thomas Edison's Motion Picture Patents Company) eventually recognized the marketing advantage of actors' fame. As film industry historian Tino Balio notes: "The star craze took the industry like a storm and forced even the conservative members of the Trust to change with the times."⁸⁵

Although the star system led to higher salaries, classical Hollywood studios retained remarkable control over actors' images and careers, another stark contrast with the social media era, when the most successful stars cultivate their online presences and often have more digital followers than the studios themselves. In the classical period, studios signed the most promising stars to exclusive seven-year contracts; actors could not work for another studio without permission, meaning studio bosses controlled the star's career and casting.⁸⁶ The agreements also gave studios rights to exploit a star's image or likeness, and "morality clauses" even set limits on an actor's personal conduct. Studios even tried to control stars' careers for decades, arguing that the "seven years" in a contract referred to active working days, not calendar days. In 1944, when actress Olivia de Havilland successfully sued Warner Bros., California courts finally enforced a contract cap of seven calendar years.⁸⁷

Fan magazines helped the studios cultivate star images. In 1911, J Stuart Blackton, the chief of Vitagraph Studios, established the first fan title, *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, which included summaries of popular films, advice on entering the film business, and star

⁸⁵ Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 106.

⁸⁶ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, New ed (London: BFI Pub, 1998), 197.

⁸⁷ Matthew Belloni, "De Havilland Lawsuit Resonates through Hollywood," *Reuters*, August 24, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/industry-lawsuit-dc-idUSN2329585820070824>.

profiles. Renamed *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1914, it remained in publication until 1977.

Photoplay, founded a few months after *Motion Picture*, proved to be even more successful by the 1920s and 1930s. *Photoplay* combined studio tie-ins with “independent” editorials that claimed to speak for the fans. Since the 1920s, studio publicity and promotion staffers worked to get paid and unpaid material into fan magazines, which, by 1946, had a combined sales of at least seven million copies, a circulation of up to 10 million copies, and 45 million readers.⁸⁸ Although many fan magazines were nominally independent, studio executives wrote or closely supervised much of the content. Studios even required copy approval in the 1930s and 1940s, though film historian Mary Desjardins points out that the magazines began to assert more independence after 1945.⁸⁹ Moreover, local newspapers also introduced pages of movie news. By 1915, most large city papers had one to three pages of film news.⁹⁰

Seven-year contracts, combined with the studios’ tight control over the fan magazines and other publicity avenues, meant that studios enjoyed extraordinary control over a star’s public image. Richard Dyer coins the term “star image” and notes that “a star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films, and criticism and commentaries.”⁹¹ Dyer recognizes the importance of paratexts, including advertising, in crafting a star’s image. Scholar Joshua Gamson explains that studios in the 1940s manufactured star

⁸⁸ Mary Desjardins, “‘Fan Magazine Trouble’: The AMPP, Studio Publicity Directors, and the Hollywood Press, 1945–1952,” *Film History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 30.

⁸⁹ Desjardins, “‘Fan Magazine Trouble’: The AMPP, Studio Publicity Directors, and the Hollywood Press, 1945–1952.”

⁹⁰ Staiger, “Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising,” 10.

⁹¹ Dyer, *Stars*, 60.

images through carefully constructed biographies and staged publicity events. Studio executives would then cast stars in roles that fit the manufactured star image.⁹² Many top stars became closely intertwined with their employer. Elizabeth Taylor was described as MGM's "most dutiful daughter" since "she went to school in the Culver City studio, held her birthday parties on MGM's sound stages, and even met her first dates and husbands through studio publicists," according to Aida Hozic.⁹³

By the late 20th century, Gamson observes a "decentralized star system" in which power had shifted away from studios and towards stars and their talent agencies.⁹⁴ As I will discuss in more detail later, the social media era has further strengthened a few influential stars (not to mention the tech platforms) and weakened most studios' ability to control publicity. It has also introduced a new kind of "micro-celebrity," described by Alice E. Marwick as a "state of being famous to a niche group people, but it is also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention."⁹⁵ With weaker control over star personas, contemporary studios must find new strategies to manage conversations about their products; social media marketing is one such strategy.

⁹² Joshua Gamson, "The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, no. 9 (1992): 1–24.

⁹³ Aida Hozic, "Hollywood Goes on Sale; or, What Do the Violet Eyes of Elizabeth Taylor Have to Do with the Cinema of Attractions?," in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, ed. David Desser and Garth Jowett, Commerce and Mass Culture Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 205–6.

⁹⁴ Gamson, "The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America," 13.

⁹⁵ Alice Emily Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 114.

Postwar Hollywood: Demographics Emerge

After World War II, the Hollywood studio system faced significant threats to its dominance of American and global cultural production. In the U.S. Congress, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)'s 1947 hearings into alleged communist ties in the film industry led the studios to blacklist over 300 artists, particularly screenwriters. The U.S. Supreme Court's 1948 *United States v. Paramount* decision forced the studios to divest their theater chains, ending vertical integration (at least temporarily). Many Americans moved towards the suburbs and away from urban movie theaters. New Wave cinemas around the world introduced fresh approaches to filmmaking. Perhaps most significantly, the arrival of television and its rapid spread in the 1950s permanently challenged cinema's dominance of popular culture.

The looming threat of television, combined with the official end of the Production Code in 1968 (replaced by the rating system), led studios to experiment with new formats and edgier content. The something-for-everyone approach of the classical era gave way to films targeting specific demographics, a marketing-centric system that remains relevant in the social media era. In the late 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood began paying particular attention to youth audiences: teenagers at drive-ins and college-educated urbanites drawn to art and international cinema. By the early 1970s, blaxploitation films such as Melvin van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) reflected the industry's initial attempts to reach the long-marginalized Black audience. Responding to the industry shake-up, studio marketing departments shifted in two dramatic ways. First, just as some filmmakers did, marketers began targeting specific demographics. Second, statistical marketing research became more and more critical to industry decision-making. These changes have lasted and even been amplified in the social media era.

The 1948 Paramount Decree anti-trust ruling, which forced the Big Five studios to sell their theater chains and abolished anti-competitive practices like block booking, led to a sharp and dramatic drop in studio profits. Other factors contributed to the film studios' decline (which began in 1947), though scholars debate the cause and effect. Many naturally blame the new competition from television, but Douglas Gomery argues that a far more critical factor was the migration of Americans to the suburbs—away from urban movie theaters—as well as the post-war baby boom.⁹⁶ All of the major film studios except RKO survived the turmoil, but they did so by adjusting their business model, focusing on financing and distribution while outsourcing much production to independent producers. (United Artists had followed such a model since its founding in 1919, but now other, larger studios followed suit.) Lacking their former built-in audience, the studios focused on fewer, bigger-budget films, a trend that has continued to this day.

Without control over exhibition and the leverage it had given them, the studios ceded power not only to independent producers but also to big stars and their talent agents—MCA's Lew Wasserman, most prominently—who could now negotiate for a larger slice of profits. Media industries scholar Denise Mann notes that entrepreneurial independent producers, many of them former actors or directors, produced films outside of the studio system's direct creative control, a fundamental departure from the classical era. Some even produced films critical of big business and mass media. However, these new filmmakers still relied upon studio financing and distribution.⁹⁷ Mann elucidates a dynamic that remains highly relevant in the social media era.

⁹⁶ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 83.

⁹⁷ Denise Mann, *Hollywood Independents: The Postwar Talent Takeover* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

Even when producers wrangle more creative control over film production, the big studios quite often retain control of distribution. In addition to deciding when and where a film will be available, the distributor controls marketing spend and decision-making. Through marketing, studios can reassert a degree of creative control.

In the shadow of the Paramount Decree, the film studios recognized both the threat and promise of television. As of 1948, Paramount itself owned four out of the first nine TV stations in the United States, including KTLA in Los Angeles and WBKB in Chicago. However, the Communications Act of 1934 allowed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to deny television or radio licenses to companies convicted of monopolistic activities. As a result, the FCC denied or threatened to deny many of the studios' applications for TV licenses. Nevertheless, the studios profited by selling their film catalogs to the TV networks. Even more importantly, the studios soon expanded into television production, an example of *horizontal* integration. By 1960 the studios produced far more hours of TV programming than of feature films.⁹⁸

Although horizontal integration was not a new idea—Douglas Gomery, Ross Melnick, Michelle Hilmes, and other historians have traced the film studios' much earlier integration with radio and even live theater—the late 1950s and 1960s foreshadow the media convergence of the 1980s and beyond. For example, *Walt Disney's Disneyland* (ABC, 1954–1958), one of the film industry's first successful forays into television, was a promotional vehicle for the new Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California. Even more importantly, the 1962 merger of Universal Pictures with the talent agency MCA created a model for the successful integration of

⁹⁸ Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," 17.

film and television. Led by onetime agent Lew Wasserman, MCA-Universal purchased a library of film titles to resell to broadcast television and introduced made-for-TV movies, two steps that helped it weather the theatrical box office downturn of the 1960s.

Even as some studios branched out into television, film marketers aimed to convince consumers to turn off their televisions and come to the theater. In the 1950s, marketers emphasized spectacular color and widescreen technologies that could not be duplicated on a TV set. FOX introduced and heavily promoted the widescreen CinemaScope format. A poster for FOX's 1953 *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* (see Figure 1), the third film released in CinemaScope, emphasizes technology more than the film title or stars. "Staggering Beyond Belief in CinemaScope" trumpets the poster. "You see it without glasses!" Highlighted in red next to the title is "Technicolor," another proprietary technology widely promoted in this period. Studios also bet on lavish, big-budget films to stand apart from television. By the 1960s, that strategy saw decidedly mixed results, with the Elizabeth Taylor-starring *Cleopatra* (1963) initially losing money due to its high costs; FOX later recouped its costs by selling the television rights.⁹⁹ *Sound of Music* (1965) was perhaps the last big-budget success of the studio era.

Advertising to "Someone-in-Particular"

Finding their traditional playbook outmoded, some studio marketing and development executives began targeting films to specific demographics, a crucial shift that remains important today. As Janet Staiger puts it, starting in the 1950s, film marketers reconceptualized "the

⁹⁹ Alex Ben Block, Lucy Autrey Wilson, and George Lucas, *George Lucas's Blockbusting: A Decade-by-Decade Survey of Timeless Movies, Including Untold Secrets of Their Financial and Cultural Success* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2010), 434.

customer" from "everyone" to "someone-in-particular."¹⁰⁰ Television and the Paramount Decree, along with advances in strategy across the advertising industry, drove the shift. Smaller, independent studios initially led a turn to youth audiences, focusing on self-consciously campy horror and sci-fi films that would play well at suburban drive-ins. Firms began to see teenagers as valuable consumers.¹⁰¹ American International Pictures released many of Roger Corman's early low-budget horror films, including the Edgar Allen Poe-derived *House of Usher* (1960). Allied Artists Pictures saw success with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and Corman's *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957). Promotion often reflected the films' cheerful shlock; a poster for *Attack of the Crab Monsters* promises "A Tidal Wave of Terror" (see Figure 2). As film historian Ed Lowry observes: "Tacitly acknowledging that television, not cinema, had become the true mass medium of the period, these independents filled a gap left open by the majors, focusing on a target audience instead of the public-at-large to which Hollywood had traditionally appealed."¹⁰²

By the late 1960s, the major studios themselves began to court youth audiences. At first, they followed the narrowcasting model of American International and Allied, fueled by the success of Arthur Penn's violent *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), distributed by Warner Bros., and especially Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), distributed by Columbia. By 1975, the major studios began to redirect their youth focus to big-budget spectacles. At the same time, new

¹⁰⁰ Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," 17.

¹⁰¹ Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 11, no. 1 (1989): 61-83.

¹⁰² Ed Lowry, in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2005), 41.

independent studios emerged to focus on low-budget genre films. In 1970, Corman founded New World Pictures and immediately targeted youth sub-genres with the biker film *Angels Die Hard* (1970) and the exploitation film *The Student Nurses* (1971). Three early New World employees quickly left and founded their own small studio, Dimension Pictures, aiming to produce youth-targeted exploitation films with budgets around \$250,000.¹⁰³ Troma Entertainment, founded by Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz in 1974, remains in business and is one of the longest-lasting American independent studios. Media scholar Ian Conrich argues that Troma embraces low culture production values while projecting populist social values.¹⁰⁴

Targeting youth demographics was a new marketing strategy, but postwar independent filmmakers also found other ways to innovate promotion and distribution. Producer Brad Krevoy recalls that Roger Corman "knew all aspects of his profession, from development to the actual filmmaking, to postproduction and marketing. That really set him apart."¹⁰⁵ In the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly as the majors turned to wide saturation releases, some small studios turned to four wall distribution, meaning they rented all "four walls" of movie theaters for some time and received all of the box office revenue. Sunn Classic Pictures, in particular, deployed this strategy.¹⁰⁶ Media scholar Justin Wyatt traces several other unique marketing strategies at

¹⁰³ Lowry, 41. Dimension Pictures is not related to Dimension Films, a genre label founded by Bob Weinstein in 1992.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Conrich, "Communitarianism, Film Entrepreneurism, and the Crusade of Troma Entertainment," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Michael Mink, "Roger Corman Took A Fast And Furious Route To Hollywood Success," *Investor's Business Daily*, October 28, 2016, <https://www.investors.com/news/management/leaders-and-success/roger-corman-took-a-fast-and-furious-route-to-hollywood-success/>.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences* (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1989), 12–13.

independents of the early 1970s. George C. Scott directed and starred in *The Savage is Loose* (1974). Scott cleverly generated publicity by loudly objecting to the film's "R" rating, even taking out full-page newspaper ads offering a "money-back guarantee" from his personal funds to any parent who took a child under 17 to the film and agreed with the rating. Scott also sought to cut the distributor out of the revenue stream and license prints directly to theaters.

Meanwhile, noticing a dearth of "G" rated films, Joe Camp cleverly pitched his *Benji* (1974) to a family market most studios had ceded to Walt Disney, itself creatively dormant in the decade following its founder's death.¹⁰⁷ Camp distributed *Benji* himself after finding no interest from the majors. The adventure film about the titular dog grossed \$45 million on a budget of \$500,000. With these examples, Wyatt points out that independent filmmakers should be "searching for new ways to enter the marketplace, challenging business norms just as much as aesthetic and social ones."¹⁰⁸

In addition to a new focus on "someone-in-particular," postwar Hollywood increasingly turned towards statistical marketing analysis to measure and segment potential customers. Silent and classic era studios had conducted some audience research, but the practice expanded greatly during WWII.¹⁰⁹ Beginning around 1940, George Gallup's Audience Research, Inc. sold its services to Hollywood companies; MGM employed Leo Handel's Motion Picture Research Bureau exclusively after 1942. In 1946, the MPPDA even established a Department of Research

¹⁰⁷ Justin Wyatt, "Revisiting 1970s' Independent Distribution and Marketing Strategies," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 236–37.

¹⁰⁸ Wyatt, 243.

¹⁰⁹ Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," 17.

to obtain accurate statistical analysis for its members.¹¹⁰ The increasingly competitive marketplace, and the arrival of television, certainly encouraged studios to quantify their spending decisions. In 1946, Leo Handel also argued that the Paramount Decree, which prohibited block booking, required studios to predict box office receipts more accurately to set their rental percentages for a given film.¹¹¹ The postwar turn to statistical analysis has continued to influence studio marketing departments in the decades since. Market research became even more critical in the 1980s. New tools promise even more detailed consumer data in the digital and social media eras, but that data is often in the hands of tech platforms rather than research companies employed by the studios.

Early Marketing Marquees: *King Kong*

Before turning to the vital industry developments after 1975, I will consider specific advertising for Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's original 1933 *King Kong*. The film makes a particularly useful case study because it received four major, successful re-releases before and after the Paramount Decree. Moreover, RKO Radio Pictures significantly changed its advertising creative between the releases, an example of the ways marketing can reframe and mediate the meaning of a film. Critical scholarship often overlooks the promotional framing, a key point of my study and one well illustrated by *King Kong*, since (unlike with some of my more recent examples) many media scholars have written about the film. At the same time, *King Kong* illustrates the *limitations* of the marketing marquee in the pre-social media era. RKO and

¹¹⁰ William R. Weaver, "Studios Use Audience Research to Learn What Pleases Customers," *Motion Picture Herald* 164, no. 3 (20 July 1946): 37; William R. Weaver, "Audience Research Has Hollywood Renaissance," *Motion Picture Herald* 175, no. 6 (7 May 1949): 29.

¹¹¹ Marjorie Fiske and Leo Handel, "Motion Picture Research: Content and Audience Analysis," *Journal of Marketing* 11, no. 2 (October 1, 1946): 129–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224294601100202>.

local exhibitors changed their marketing approach over time and in different markets within the country. But they lacked robust data or today's ability to micro-target specific audiences, one of the critical developments of the social media marquee.

Where did the fictional King Kong come from? The original film devotes significant screen time to the answer. Before his capture by a filmmaking crew, Kong inhabits a jungle isle off the coast of Indonesia. Coexisting with dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures, Kong rules over his island and “primitive” natives who worship him as a god. When *King Kong* first opened, RKO heavily promoted this backstory and the film's many jungle scenes. This was no great surprise; jungle adventure films were popular in the early 1930s, and Cooper and Schoedsack had already made several of them. Moreover, the marketing exploited racist and Eurocentric tropes, arguably even *more* so than the film. However, the jungle-themed promotional campaign did not last.

As we'll see, the marketing campaigns for *King Kong*'s four theatrical re-releases make virtually no mention of Kong's jungle origin—despite its prominent role in the film. *King Kong*'s re-releases —1938, 1941, 1952, and 1956—are notable for several reasons. First, though successful in 1933, *King Kong* actually became more popular in later years, particularly during the 1950s. Despite this, most existing scholarship focuses only on *Kong*'s reception and promotion at its first release. Second, *King Kong*'s jungle adventure backstory plays a central role in many critical film analyses. Such studies are complicated but certainly not negated if later audiences were not particularly interested in Kong's jungle narrative, as my marketing examples suggest. Finally, my findings highlight how marketing changes to reflect the social values of each decade.

***King Kong* as Racialized “Jungle Adventure”**

In Cooper and Schoedsack’s movie, filmmaker Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) leads an expedition searching for Kong’s island. His companions include a young actress, Ann Darrow (Fay Wray), and his first mate, Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot). They reach the island, where Kong kidnaps Ann and becomes infatuated with her. Denham and Cabot eventually find Ann alive, capture King Kong, and take the massive creature back to New York City. Denham displays Kong in a Broadway theater, but Kong escapes and rampages through the city searching for Ann. Finally, Kong climbs to the top of the Empire State Building, where he is eventually killed. Much more screen time is devoted to the jungle than to the scenes in New York, and initially, the marketing reflected that.

In her reception study *Tracking King Kong*, Cynthia Erb explains: “Though often construed as a classic horror film, *King Kong* was probably more likely to have been grasped in the 1930s according to the two genres within which Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack specialized—that is, travel documentaries and jungle adventure films.”¹¹² Fatimah Tobing Rony suggests that *King Kong* is the culmination of decades of documentary-style films on non-Western indigenous people, often set in faraway jungles.¹¹³ Similarly, Mark Vaz, in his biography of Merian C. Cooper, highlights the autobiographical elements of *King Kong*, tracing its cinematic origins to Cooper and Schoedsack’s *Grass*, a 1925 silent documentary about the Bakhtiari people of Persia. As Vaz puts it: “The ultimate true-life movie expedition team would

¹¹² Cynthia Marie Erb, *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*, 2nd ed, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Television Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 16.

¹¹³ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996).

be making a picture about the ultimate movie expedition."¹¹⁴ Not only do these treatments emphasize *King Kong's* jungle locale, but they also focus squarely on its original 1933 release by situating the film with other jungle and travel films of the time.

Even scholars who do not explicitly categorize *King Kong* as a jungle adventure film often focus on the *symbolism* of the jungle. This is particularly true in the large body of work exploring race and post colonialism in the film. To David H. Stymeist, the film is a mythical tale of contrasts: the advancing technology of New York set against the naïve idol worship of the “primitive” natives.¹¹⁵ James Snead sees the film as a fantastic retelling of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹¹⁶ Among others, David Rosen and Rhonda Berenstein argue that Kong and Ann Darrow’s relationship stokes fears of “miscegenation” between Black men and white women.¹¹⁷ The shocking trope comparing African Americans to gorillas or monkeys may be limited to the racist fringes today, but Erb argues that it was “ubiquitous” in the 1930s.¹¹⁸

In 1927, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) released a list of "Don'ts" and "Be Carefuls" that expressly prohibited members from depicting miscegenation. The MPAA began rigidly enforcing the self-censoring Production Code in 1934, just after *King Kong* hit theaters. However, as film historian Ellen C. Scott illustrates in an analysis of 1930s to 1940s

¹¹⁴ Mark Vaz, *Living Dangerously: The Adventures of Merian C. Cooper, Creator of King Kong* (New York: Villard, 2005), 198.

¹¹⁵ David H. Stymeist, "Myth and the Monster Cinema," *Anthropologica* 51 (2009): 395-406.

¹¹⁶ James Snead, "Spectatorship and Capture in King Kong: The Guilty Look," *Critical Quarterly* 33-1 (1991): 53-69.

¹¹⁷ David N. Rosen, "King Kong: Race, Sex, and Rebellion," *Jump Cut* 6 (1975): 7-10. Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 160-204.

¹¹⁸ Erb, *Tracking King Kong*, 189.

releases, including *Chain Gang* (1932) and *Imitation of Life* (1934), correspondence between the regulating boards and studios as well as script revisions reveals a pattern of careful compromises that did not ban, but rather "muted and dampened" references to black-white racial conflict and miscegenation.¹¹⁹ Erb explains that "the jungle film tradition is dominated by sensational moments of 'sexy' contact. Images of physical contact were so crucial to the genre that it took a number of direct hits when the Production Code was more rigorously enforced after 1932."¹²⁰ So, *King Kong* premiered at a time of ambivalence in Hollywood; producers wanted to comply with the Production Code or avoid negative publicity, but risqué content remained popular at the box office.

Indeed, *King Kong* seems to have been partially inspired by the success of *Ingagi* (1930), an independently produced "documentary" directed by William S. Campbell. The film purports to show a ritual in which African women are given over to gorillas as sex slaves. In reality, it was a fabrication primarily filmed in Los Angeles with men in gorilla suits. Nevertheless, the promotion unambiguously traded on racist titillation; "Wild Women – Gorillas- Unbelievable" touts the poster above a drawing of a gorilla holding a nearly nude woman (see Figure 3). In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, ads further underscored the film's prurient and racist aspects, suggesting evidence of a missing link between humans and apes and asking, "Was Darwin Right?"¹²¹ A week after *Ingagi*'s Chicago debut, the MPPA modified the Production Code to

¹¹⁹ Ellen C. Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 66.

¹²⁰ Erb, *Tracking King Kong*, 90.

¹²¹ Andrew Erish, "Movies; REEL HISTORY; Illegitimate Dad of 'Kong'; One of the Depression's Highest-Grossing Films Was an Outrageous Fabrication, a Scandalous and Suggestive Gorilla Epic That Set Box Office Records across the Country.: [HOME EDITION]," *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2006, sec. Sunday Calendar; Part E; Calendar Desk.

expressly state that "sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden." The film lacked a distributor, so the producers negotiated directly with theaters.

Despite that limitation, the film earned around \$4 million, among the best returns of Depression-era films. Moreover, RKO profited from *Ingagi* and knew its success, despite the MPAA's objections. At RKO's palatial Orpheum Theater in San Francisco, the film earned almost \$4,000 on its opening day and outgrossed the competition throughout its month-long run. So impressed, RKO had additional prints made and booked the movie into at least seven more of its theaters, including the Oakland and Los Angeles Orpheum theaters.¹²²

Cooper and Schoedsack never explicitly admitted that *Ingagi* had been one of their (or RKO's) inspirations. However, an early draft of the screenplay specifically referenced the earlier film. Denham describes Kong's promise as a documentary subject: "They [the natives] worship this trick animal like a God. Boy, when we shoot that, they'll boil down *Ingagi* and *Trader Horn* for the celluloid."¹²³ *Trader Horn* (1931, MGM), another jungle adventure, also influenced *King Kong*'s stylistic choices, particularly in costume. So, the parallels strongly suggest that the filmmakers traded on "forbidden" sexual relationships and racist tropes about Black men. Moreover, since RKO promoted the film as a jungle adventure, 1933 viewers likely associated *King Kong* with *Ingagi*.

In a 1989 interview, Fay Wray claimed that *King Kong* "didn't have any deep meanings as far as Merian Cooper was concerned." But Cooper did think Kong's island was an essential part of his film. According to Wray, Cooper described *King Kong* as an "adventure fantasy...

¹²² Erish.

¹²³ Erb, *Tracking King Kong*, 49.

about the jungle and the far away.”¹²⁴ Such a focus was typical for Cooper and his partner Ernest Schoedsack. Their earlier work, including *Grass* and the jungle adventure *Chang* (1927), certainly reflected their oft-repeated filmmaking motto: “Keep it distant, difficult, and dangerous.”¹²⁵ As they filmed *King Kong*, Cooper and Schoedsack focused much of their energy—and budget—on the jungle scenes. RKO’s production records demonstrate this. For example, a budget report from August 29, 1932, records actors’ salaries for the film. The final scene atop the Empire State Building had yet to be shot, but the report covers most of the film, including Kong’s appearance in the crowded Broadway theater. So, it’s striking to note that of the \$20,225 RKO spent for actors, only \$3806 went towards scenes in New York City.¹²⁶ Kong rampaging through New York may dominate our collective memories of the film, but the jungle scenes dominated the actual budget.

More generally, *King Kong* anticipates possible objections to its content—certainly top of mind for filmmakers early in the Production Code era—by engaging in what John Caldwell would later term the “reflexivity, self-reference, self-scrutiny and posed transparency” of the media industries.¹²⁷ Since the fictional Carl Denham was a filmmaker known for wildlife documentaries in remote and exotic locations—a hard-to-miss parallel to Cooper and

¹²⁴ Fay Wray, video interview with Andrea Walsh, Women in Film Foundation Collection at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, 1989 July 24-28. Videocassette.

¹²⁵ *Living Dangerously*, introductory page.

¹²⁶ “Report to Mr. Scheussler at Studio,” 29 August 1932, Box 18P, RKO Studio Records ca.1928-1958, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹²⁷ John T. Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 4 (July 4, 2014): 720–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.888922>.

Schoedsack themselves—layers of reflexivity pervade the movie. Cooper even debated with producer David O. Selznick about how *much* self-reference to include.

For example, as literary scholar Mark McGurl observes, “Denham stages an elaborately self-reflexive rehearsal before his camera of his young actress's horror before a still-imaginary monster, a scene that Selznick worried might ruin the film but that Cooper insisted upon retaining.”¹²⁸ The scene, which McGurl terms an “ironic self-defense on the part of the film against claims of its own dangerousness,” wasn’t enough to appease RKO and the MPAA, which cut gorier and sexually suggestive scenes just before the premiere. The *Jurassic World* filmmakers would try a similarly ironic self-defense 82 years later, hoping that a few winking jokes about product placement and effects-driven blockbusters would inoculate themselves against those same critiques.

Remarkably, Cooper wanted to double-down on the reflexivity by including a scene of Kong destroying the brand-new Radio City Music Hall in New York. The Music Hall was owned by RCA, which also controlled a majority stake in RKO Pictures, and *King Kong* was to premiere there. So, the first audiences would watch Kong destroy the very building they sat in, a theater intertwined with the broadcasting and film industries. Selznick convinced Cooper this would be an affront to RCA executives.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, societal concern about movies often centered on children. The Payne Fund distributed its report *Our Movie Made Children*, which would influence the MPAA, in May 1933, just after *King Kong* premiered. McGurl explains that one argument favoring censorship was that children lack the “adult discount,” the ironizing

¹²⁸ Mark McGurl, “Making It Big: Picturing the Radio Age in ‘King Kong,’” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (1996): 442.

¹²⁹ Ronald Haver, *David O. Selznick's Hollywood*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 1980), 101.

judgment that what is put on the screen is fiction. *King Kong* seems to address these arguments head-on, with more reflexivity.¹³⁰ When Denham takes the young Ann aboard his ship, a side character accuses him of abuse. Denham sarcastically replies: "I suppose there's no danger in New York. Why, there's dozens of girls in this city that are in more danger than they'll ever see with me."

At first, *King Kong's* marketing campaign emphasized the jungle adventure genre and racial tropes, the latter even more blatantly than the film. When the film premiered at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, Sid Grauman presented a live prologue, "A Scene in the Jungle." According to the opening night program, the dance numbers had titles like "Eccentric Dance of the Zulus," "Studies in Ebony," and "Goodbye Africa."¹³¹ The racial undertones are hard to miss. Grauman's program explicitly ties Kong to Africa. On the other hand, the movie never names Kong's Island; an on-screen map locates it at approximately 12°S 78°E – the middle of the Indian Ocean, closest to Periuk, Indonesia. So, the promotional surround more clearly ties Kong to stereotypes about African Americans.

The promotional copy in the opening night program is likewise racially tinged, highlighting Kong's otherness and exotic origins. It reads: "Will civilization conquer this savage menace? Or will he destroy humanity? Ensnared by white man's cunning...Kong snaps man-made chains with demonical strength...[He] roars sinister defiance to puny humanity and crashes out in search of the fleeing girl!"¹³² One of RKO's original posters from the global 1933 release

¹³⁰ McGurl, "Making It Big," 442.

¹³¹ *King Kong* Opening Night Program, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, 23 March 1923, Production File, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

¹³² *King Kong* Opening Night Program.

vividly depicts Kong's jungle home. In it, Kong challenges the white visitors as they attempt to cross a lush ravine.¹³³ In addition to Grauman, other exhibitors followed RKO's lead and focused on the jungle. Outside the FOX Theater in Pomona, CA, in May of 1933, filmgoers could pose with a life-size Kong amidst faux jungle grass (see Figure 4).

By referring to Kong as a "savage menace" with "demonical strength" directly opposed to "white man's cunning," the marketing leans into a racist and colonialist narrative. Although the film is clearly Eurocentric, critics have observed that Cooper and Schoedsack display considerable sympathy for Kong. Analyzing a scene later in the movie, Lary May says: "The great ape... transported from Africa and chained like a crucified Christ before the alter of commercial spectacle in New York City. Here the monster, victimized and exploited by scientists and businessmen, is more sympathetic than his captors."¹³⁴ By contrast, the Kong of RKO's marketing "roars sinister defiance to puny humanity and crashes out in search of the fleeing girl." In the movie, Kong's love for Ann Darrow hints at an interspecies relationship coded as interracial. Kong never purposely harms Ann. In the marketing, he is hunting her down.

So, the marketing mediates the film in a notably ambivalent fashion. On the one hand, it avoids direct reference to the "miscegenation" and "sexy" jungle contact increasingly prohibited by the MPAA. But, on the other hand, it emphasizes the jungle setting to titillate the audience with racist appeals about exotic African "menaces." Thus, in the marketing, we see executives' vision of the product, which often does not match the director's or screenwriter's vision. In my

¹³³ Stone lithographs, 63" x 94" and 81" x 41," Poster Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

¹³⁴ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 65.

later case studies, we will likewise uncover corporate goals and vision in social media marketing campaigns.

One RKO executive encouraged theater owners to play up *King Kong's* romance angle: “There truly is a love story in the picture, and unless this is brought to the attention of the public, a number will stay away from the theater because they believe it to be just another animal picture.”¹³⁵ Later remakes would directly address the love between Kong and Ann, and some of the 1933 marketing hints at their relationship without quite saying so. A co-branded advertisement for Lux soap depicts Fay Wray as Ann, wearing her most glamorous outfit from the movie. In the film, Wray wears the ensemble during a screen test when she (famously) screams in feigned terror. However, in the Lux ad, Wray stares calmly at the audience. The ad copy reads, “Even the chills and thrills of King Kong pale before the Thrill Supreme...Fay Wray’s matchless blond loveliness!”¹³⁶

The ad underscores the link between Ann and Kong, not Ann’s actual love interest in the movie, Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot). Moreover, the suggestion that Kong would “pale” in the face of Ann’s “blond loveliness” suggests Ann’s white beauty would somehow conquer Kong’s Blackness. So, like other examples of the 1933 marketing, the Lux ad imagines an audience at once frightened and intrigued by the forbidden, racially coded relationship. The Lux ad also reminds us that co-branded advertising, essential in today’s Hollywood, is a longstanding practice and that co-branded ads can also reframe a film. Separately, an Indianapolis theater operator ran an ad describing *King Kong* as “A Love Story of Today That Spans the Ages!”

¹³⁵ *Radio Flash*, 22 April 1933: 4-5. Quoted in *Tracking King Kong*, 55.

¹³⁶ Advertisement, *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 March 1933.

Notably, the ad depicts Fay Wray and Robert Armstrong, again *not* the film's ostensible romantic couple.¹³⁷

In another parallel to social media marketing, RKO publicized Merian Cooper as the film's artistic visionary—even while behind the scenes, Selznick and other executives frequently overruled his decisions. The studio promoted Cooper to head of production around the time of *King Kong*'s release, leading to a series of news articles, Erb says, “often characterizing him as a kind of restless, visionary individual, slightly eccentric, and happier out-of-doors than in a studio office.”¹³⁸ A story in *The Hollywood Reporter* described Cooper as “a camera explorer at heart,” adding: “Today he is chained by contract to the management of a huge studio. And are his feet fidgety?”¹³⁹ Film reviewers, more likely to be read outside of the industry, similarly emphasized Cooper's exotic exploits in their discussions of *King Kong*. In the digital era, marketers would deploy social media and publicity to a similar effect. For example, Universal marketers would overemphasize *Jurassic World* director Colin Trevorrow's artistic independence and fan credentials as a way to earn points with longtime franchise fans nervous about the reboot.

In the weeks after *King Kong*'s initial release in March of 1933, some local exhibitors began to drift away from the jungle-centric message employed by RKO and Grauman at the premiere. Many theater ads promoted the film as a pure visual spectacle. The Palace Theater's display advertisement in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* was typical: “You haven't seen anything until you see Kong.”¹⁴⁰ In fact, RKO quickly became concerned about its jungle adventure

¹³⁷ Advertisement for *King Kong*, *Indianapolis Star*, 21 April 1933, 10. Quoted in *Tracking King Kong*, 54.

¹³⁸ Erb, *Tracking King Kong*, 48.

¹³⁹ W.E. Oliver, “Legend of Beauty and Beast is Given Astounding Turn,” *Hollywood Reporter*, February 15, 1933, I.

¹⁴⁰ Display ad 17 -- no title, *Chicago Daily Tribune* 26 April 1933: 18. Retrieved from ProQuest.

marketing campaign, in part because the genre had cooled at the box office. (*Variety* observed that “animal shows are about washed up.”¹⁴¹) A likely reason for the pivot away from the jungle campaign is that *King Kong* was not a runaway financial success. In assessing *Kong*’s opening week performance in New York, *Variety* wrote that the film “was not doing so bad, considering” the economic climate.¹⁴² (The film was released amid The Great Depression; on March 9, 1933, exactly one week after *King Kong*’s New York opening, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an emergency act to prevent massive bank closures.) Releases in other cities saw mixed results.

On March 21, *Variety* proclaimed that *King Kong* was Baltimore’s “first sidewalk holdout in months.”¹⁴³ However, a week later, the paper described early Los Angeles results as “disappointing.”¹⁴⁴ A major exhibitor offered this measured appraisal: “The pictures that have given the most satisfactory returns for the first part of the year are *42nd Street*, *State Fair*, *King Kong*, and *Rasputin*.”¹⁴⁵ By the end of its initial release, *King Kong* earned \$745,000 in the US, and another \$1.1 million in foreign earnings—strong results, to be sure, but not record-setting.¹⁴⁶ The musical *42nd Street*, released around the same time, made significantly more money.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, popular wisdom—and even some scholarship—have exaggerated both *King Kong*’s

¹⁴¹ *Variety*, 28 March 1933: 3.

¹⁴² *Variety*, 10 March 1933: 2.

¹⁴³ *Variety*, 21 March 1933: 1.

¹⁴⁴ *Variety*, 28 March 1933: 3.

¹⁴⁵ “Grainger urges studios to follow exhibitors’ advice,” *Film Daily*, 19 April 1933: 6.

¹⁴⁶ Richard B. Jewell, “RKO Film Grosses, 1929–1951: The C. J. Tevlin Ledger,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14:1, 39. *King Kong*’s strong performance in foreign markets (especially Western Europe) was unusual, and an interesting foreshadowing of the effects-driven films of current day.

¹⁴⁷ IMDB roughly estimates *42nd Street*’s US box office gross as \$2.3M.

initial success and its role in “saving” its studio, RKO. The struggling company surely welcomed *King Kong*’s net profit of \$650,000,¹⁴⁸ but, as Edwin J. Perkins explains: “Some film historians later claimed that *King Kong* had saved RKO from probable dissolution. That conclusion seems to be an exaggeration given the studio’s progress toward profitability in 1933 and the overall tone of managerial correspondence. “¹⁴⁹*Little Women*, released later in 1933, actually brought RKO more profit than had *King Kong*.¹⁵⁰

The shifts in *King Kong*’s promotional strategy, common in an era when movies premiered gradually across the country, resemble later social media marketing tendencies. RKO changed its marketing emphasis after finding consumer response lacking. Of course, the change took weeks, if not months. By contrast, algorithmic A/B testing on social media alters advertising messages in real-time, potentially thousands of times per day. RKO, like other studios, also relied on local exhibitors to customize promotions to their audiences—often on the actual marquees that inspire the title of this dissertation. In comparison, social media automates regional and demographic targeting. RKO also drew upon exhibitor labor in a small-scale preview of the ways studios would leverage user and creative work-product on social media. As John Caldwell observes, “media production has deployed and monetized crowdsourcing as an internal labor strategy for decades.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Richard B. Jewell, “RKO Film Grosses, 1929–1951: The C. J. Tevlin Ledger,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14:1, 39.

¹⁴⁹ Edwin J. Perkins, “Writing the Script for Survival and Resurgence: RKO Studio and the Impact of the Great Depression, 1932-1933,” *Southern California Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Fall 2011), 289-311.

¹⁵⁰ “RKO Film Grosses,” 43. *Little Women* generated a profit of \$800,000.

¹⁵¹ Caldwell, “Para-Industry,” 161.

Reframing the Re-releases

Given that it was only a moderate success in 1933, *King Kong's* enduring place in cinema history and popular memory has less to do with its initial release and more to do with its subsequent reissues and television airings. So, it is imperative to understand how RKO marketed the film in these later releases. Kong's jungle origin, so central to RKO's 1933 release marketing, is all but absent in the advertising of subsequent years. Instead, particularly by the 1950s, marketing reframed the film as straight-up horror. Indeed, the choice reflected the horror genre's popularity in that decade. But it also reminds us that paratexts can alter the generic identity—even if the movie doesn't change.

Moreover, genre cycles were not the only reason to alter *King Kong's* framing. By the 1940s, Black novelists and filmmakers increasingly commented upon racial stereotypes in popular media, and several directly referenced *King Kong*. Harold Hellenbrand argues that *Native Son* (1940) appears to be novelist Richard Wright's "meditation on a particular film, *King Kong* (1933) and, more generally, racial mythology as it was manufactured and ingested in America during the late 1920s and 1930s."¹⁵² In the story of 20-year-old Bigger Thomas, a Black youth living in poverty on Chicago's South Side, Hellenbrand identifies direct references to *King Kong*. When reporters surround Bigger outside a courtroom, it resembles a scene when the "white glare" of photographers' flashes enrage Kong, and he bursts out of his cage.¹⁵³ When police officers chase Bigger, he evades them by climbing a water tower—paralleling Kong atop the Empire State Building. "But no planes shoot Bigger down," Hellenbrand observes. "Instead,

¹⁵² Harold Hellenbrand, "Bigger Thomas Reconsidered: 'Native Son,' Film and 'King Kong,'" *Journal of American Culture* 6, no. 1 (1983): 85, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1983.0601_84.x.

¹⁵³ Hellenbrand, 93.

blasts of cold water pound him senseless in the wintry night; they push him off the tank, and he falls onto the snow-covered roof. It is no little irony, with the contrast of King Kong's death in mind, that Bigger falls from a tenement water-tank and not a skyscraper."¹⁵⁴ Five years later, in his novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, about a Black shipyard worker in Los Angeles during World War II, Chester Himes compares his protagonist to Kong, referencing the racist fears of miscegenation that undergirded the film. "She deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look and backed away from me as if she was scared stiff, as if she was a naked virgin and I was King Kong" Himes writes.¹⁵⁵

Back on celluloid, *Son of Ingagi*, a 1940 monster movie with an all-black cast, satirized *King Kong* by combining the titles of the notorious 1930 *Ingagi* with *Son of Kong*, a sequel RKO released just nine months after the first movie. Scripted by Spencer Williams based on his own short story, Alfred N. Sack distributed the 1940 film; his Texas-based Sack Amusement Enterprises specialized in so-called "race films," which targeted Black moviegoers. (Director Richard Kahn was white. Then near the end of his career, Oscar Micheaux remained one of the very few Black directors.) As Cynthia Erb explains, "the film's credit sequence features an image of a large, grotesque monster hovering over an urban skyline. This image is a visual citation of one of *King Kong*'s most famous publicity stills. The title *Son of Ingagi* appears to refer to both *Son of Kong* and to *Ingagi*, the latter a notoriously racist silent film about an African safari, featuring nude black women and a man in a fake ape costume."¹⁵⁶ Even though Cooper

¹⁵⁴ Hellenbrand, 92.

¹⁵⁵ Chester B. Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (Berkeley, Calif.: Thunder's Mouth Press ; Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2002), 19.

¹⁵⁶ Erb, *Tracking King Kong*, 193.

and Schoedsack never acknowledged *Ingagi* as an inspiration, *Son of Ingagi* quite explicitly makes the connection.

Thus, RKO's re-releases came amidst more significant pushback on the racist tropes *King Kong* trafficked in. Ditching the jungle framing helped align *Kong* with the popular horror cycle, but it also minimized the most problematic elements of the original text. Starting with the first reissue, in 1938, RKO made some edits to the film itself to comply with the Production Code, by then rigorously enforced. Some of the cuts involved violence (Kong crushing natives in close-up). Perhaps the most notable deletion is when Kong removes Fay Wray's clothes, the original's most direct reference to sexual activity. The footage would not be restored until the late 1960s.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, most of the film was unchanged for the reissues. So, by far, the bigger shift came in the promotional surround. Studios would later use social media marketing to deemphasize similarly problematic elements. For *Hunger Games*, Lionsgate marketers quite explicitly downplayed violence and media critique while emphasizing fashion.

RKO's campaign book for the first re-release, in 1937, focuses on the grand spectacle of Kong in New York.¹⁵⁸ Display ad templates, provided for exhibitors' use, include taglines such as, "The ape as big as a battleship is loose in our world today!" RKO suggests the following for theater marquees: "Terrifying! Giant monster razes city." (Interestingly, the 1937 campaign book also overstates the success of the first release, with hyperbole such as: "Shattered records everywhere! King Kong, Giant Box Office Attraction!") Most notably, the campaign book offers 12 new promotional posters—and not one of them depicts the jungle or the natives of Skull

¹⁵⁷ Version comparison by Turner Classic Movies, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/2690/King-Kong/articles.html>.

¹⁵⁸ *King Kong* 1937 campaign book, published by RKO Pictures, Production File, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

Island. Most of the posters show Kong in New York; the rest are close-ups of Kong and Ann Darrow together. The 1937 reissue earned \$306,000 and \$200,000 in profit—nearly a third of the profit generated when the film was new.¹⁵⁹

RKO's campaign book for the 1941-1942 release maintains a similar focus, ignoring the jungle themes and focusing on King Kong in New York.¹⁶⁰ This time RKO offers exhibitors a choice of eight lobby cards, all with the title "King Kong is loose." Only one of these cards depicts the jungle. In addition, five posters are offered; none represent the jungle. Finally, a suggested radio script, provided for exhibitors to record locally, nicely illustrates the marketing focus:

Attention! Men, women and children! You can see him again! King Kong, the mighty prehistoric ape is loose once more on the screen. The mastodonic animal, the eighth wonder of the world, is at his old tricks, throwing New York into a panic. With Ann Darrow in his clutches he climbs on the spire of the Empire State Building, where the government uses Army airplanes in an attempt to dislodge him. And don't miss the jungle battle to the death between the giant ape and the prehistoric dinosaur. Thundering Thrills will never die!

The jungle scenes do get a mention here, but only briefly and at the end. The rest of the radio spot focuses on the final scenes in New York. Fascinating is the description of Kong as a "mastodonic" animal. Whereas the opening night program in 1933 described King Kong as a "savage" ensnared by the "white man," the 1941 copy equates Kong to an extinct, prehistoric creature. Kong's origins in the jungle are not mentioned. The racist appeals are subdued if not

¹⁵⁹ "RKO Film Grosses," 39.

¹⁶⁰ *King Kong* 1941 campaign book, published by RKO Pictures, Production File, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

dropped. This marketing approach seems to have worked; the third reissue did even better than the second, generating \$685,000 in sales and \$460,000 in profit.¹⁶¹

King Kong's biggest conquest came in 1952, after the Paramount Decree and amidst the increasing threat of television. New advertising and distribution approaches fueled tremendous success for a film that was already 19 years old. Encouraged by several successful reissues of older films, RKO decided to re-release *King Kong* and advertise it aggressively, particularly on TV and radio. The trade magazine *Sponsor* described RKO's technique of saturating the airwaves: "Using mostly 50-second film excerpts from *Kong*, one TV outlet was signed for from 150-175 announcements to be used during the seven-day period."¹⁶² This approach, *Sponsor* reported, "was an immediate success in every market used."¹⁶³ In 1952, RKO's Terry Turner also introduced a new distribution approach, "saturation booking," similar to today's wide nationwide releases but on a regional scale. As a result, RKO expanded rapidly to over a thousand theaters, an innovation that would later become commonplace.¹⁶⁴

Several press accounts pegged *King Kong's* 1952 gross at \$3 million, well above the \$1.8 million earned in the original release.¹⁶⁵ Of course, ticket price inflation accounts for some of the difference, but by any measure, the aging ape was a genuine smash in 1952. What's more, the trade and mainstream press took note of *Kong's* success in a way they notably had not in 1933.

¹⁶¹ "RKO Film Grosses," 39.

¹⁶² "Movies on the Air," *Sponsor*, 6 June 1952: 38.

¹⁶³ "Movies on the Air," 39.

¹⁶⁴ "Play Fast Playoff For WB 'Beast,'" *Variety*, June 17, 1953: 5.

¹⁶⁵ See *Ibid.*, 39, and also *Los Angeles Daily News*, 31 July 1952: 3.

Film Daily said the reissue “smashed record after record” in much of the country.¹⁶⁶ *Variety* called the financial performance “sensational” and “huge.”¹⁶⁷ *Time* magazine even named *King Kong* “Movie of the Year.”¹⁶⁸

RKO’s 1952 marketing blitz continued to eschew *Kong*’s jungle storyline. In fact, RKO explicitly repositioned *King Kong* as a straight horror film. RKO’s 1952 campaign book begins with this suggested headline: “Spectacle and Terror Take Over as *King Kong* Returns.”¹⁶⁹ One of the recommended newspaper ads proclaims: “This is it! The Greatest Gooseflesh THRILLER of All Time!” As with its predecessors, the campaign book offers a selection of lobby cards and posters; of the 12 depicted, only one contains jungle or boat sequences. Even more telling, much of the campaign book focuses on a double-feature package: *King Kong* combined with another reissue, the 1943 horror film *I Walked with a Zombie*. “Giant Ape and Zombie Suspense Companions,” RKO suggested in one headline. *Sponsor* indicated that the radio and TV ads echoed the themes of the campaign book: “In both media the horror element was played up, spectacular elements were emphasized...”¹⁷⁰ If *Kong* was once marketed as a jungle adventure, by 1952, it was clearly positioned as a monster film. And the marketing context is not just a footnote. Producer Tomoyuki Tanaka, of Japan’s Toho studio, says the success of the 1952 *Kong*

¹⁶⁶ *Film Daily*, 18 July 1952: 1.

¹⁶⁷ “King Kong Huge \$22,000, Cincy Ace,” *Variety*, 25 Jun 1952: 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Time*, 14 July 1952: 92.

¹⁶⁹ *King Kong* 1952 campaign book, published by RKO Pictures, Production File, Core Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.

¹⁷⁰ “Movies on the Air,” 38.

reissue gave him the impetus for *Godzilla* (1954).¹⁷¹ Indeed, Toho went on to create the monster mash-up *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962).

In 1956, *King Kong* hit the small screen. Broadcast as “The Million Dollar Movie” on New York station WOR, the televised film was an overwhelming ratings success. Station memos suggest that 80 percent of all television-owning families watched *King Kong* during its first week of broadcast.¹⁷² The television broadcast (plus another on WHBO in Memphis) was so successful that RKO temporarily pulled the film from the airwaves for one final theatrical reissue—again combined with *I Walked with a Zombie*.¹⁷³ The 1956 pressbook (see Figure 5) features a drawing of a menacing, fanged Kong—a far cry from the docile fellow outside the FOX theater in 1933—clutching a modernized version of a terrified Fay Wray. The poster proclaims, in all caps red letters written as if in blood: “King Kong is Here Again!”

Interestingly, although the new promotional framing avoids the jungle and racist depictions of natives, it also elides the film’s sympathy for Kong. In any case, press coverage from this period likewise illustrates just how successful RKO had been in re-branding *Kong* as a pure monster film. *The Saturday Evening Post*, commenting in 1958 on the “horror movie craze,” claimed that the 1956 *King Kong* TV broadcast had single-handedly started the trend.¹⁷⁴

Between 1933 and 1956, the film *King Kong* mainly remained unchanged; the text was static. But the paratexts—the promotional surround—changed dramatically, reimagining the

¹⁷¹ Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski, *Ishiro Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 86.

¹⁷² WOR-TV Memorandum to Sales Staff, 23 March 1956, *King Kong* files, Turner Entertainment. Quoted in *Tracking King Kong*, 126.

¹⁷³ “*King Kong* Yanked from TV for Theatre Re-Runs,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 3 April 1956.

¹⁷⁴ Raoul Tunley, “TV’s Midnight Madness,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 16 August 1958, 20.

movie from a jungle adventure into a horror film. The 1933 marketing emphasized the colonialist and racist tropes already implicit in the film, including the suggestions of a sexual relationship between Kong and Ann. Scholars have tended to focus on the original release if they consider the marketing and distribution context at all. Yet the 1950s monster version of Kong had perhaps the more significant influence on the industry, leading to a horror movie cycle in the U.S. and abroad. A cinematic icon with remarkable staying power, King Kong has been reimagined many times since 1956, in cartoons, theme parks, and more films, including *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021). Thus, analyzing marketing is vital to understanding the audience and industrial impact of the film.

It is worth emphasizing, meanwhile, that *King Kong's* marketing evolved over 23 years of re-rereleases. In 1933, exhibitors and RKO made adjustments throughout the original extended release, aided by the classical era practice of slow national rollouts. In general, though, the marketing changed *between* releases. As my analysis of the pressbooks illustrated, RKO offered fairly unified messaging for each release. That suggests the limitation of mass media; marketers must focus on one or two messages they think will be most broadly appealing, lest consumers become confused. The social media era has reordered that paradigm, allowing film advertisers to target multiple audiences with multiple messages at once. Today, films can be reframed constantly, depending on who's looking.

New Hollywood and the High-Concept Blockbuster

The endurance of King Kong presaged Hollywood cinema of the late 20th century when spectacle and readily marketable iconography (much like Kong astride the Empire State Building) increasingly dominated the industry. Steven Spielberg's 1975 *Jaws*, generally

considered the first summer blockbuster, introduced marketing and distribution strategies that would come to define Hollywood through the end of the century. Meanwhile, deregulation during the Reagan administration (1980-1988) ushered in a wave of mergers and acquisitions, consolidating media ownership in the hands of a few large companies. The last quarter of the 20th century set the template for today's Hollywood: massive conglomerates, big-budget franchises, and transmedia storytelling. At the same time, the launch of the Netscape Navigator web browser in 1994, and the growth of early digital services America Online (AOL), Prodigy, and CompuServe, hinted at the nascent technology that would soon challenge Hollywood's dominance of popular entertainment.

“New Hollywood,” a term bandied about by the press since at least the 1950s, broadly captures the American film industry's various attempts to recover from the Paramount Decree and the collapse of the studio system.¹⁷⁵ Film historians generally begin “New Hollywood” in the late 1960s or 1970s, when the industry turned to young filmmakers in hopes of reaching the teenagers making up more and more of the filmgoing public. Influenced by European new wave cinemas, films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) departed from classical Hollywood in form and content. However, according to industrial historian Thomas Schatz: “The key to Hollywood's survival and the one abiding aspect of its postwar transformation has been the steady rise of the movie blockbuster.”¹⁷⁶ In the classical era, by contrast, runaway hits were the exception; studios made most of their profits

¹⁷⁵ For an early popular press usage of the term, see Eric Hodgins, “Amid Ruins of an Empire a New Hollywood Arises,” *LIFE*, June 10, 1957.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Collins, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8–9.

from a steady stream of A-class features. Schatz, therefore, suggests 1975 for the onset of New Hollywood, noting that the “blockbuster syndrome went into high gear in the mid-1970s,” making it “the first period of sustained economic vitality and industry stability since the classical era.”¹⁷⁷

High-Concept Promotions

Starting in 1975, the major film studios reorganized their advertising and release patterns to encourage moviegoers to see a film in its first one or two weekends of release, with the benefit of increasing home video and cable sales. Driving crowds to opening weekends required a renewed focus on marketing, particularly national advertising. As a result, the most successful blockbusters were usually those that were easy to promote. Justin Wyatt’s *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (1994) describes the “high concept” films that emerged in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s; Wyatt defines the term as “a striking, easily reducible narrative that also offers a high degree of marketability.”¹⁷⁸ Media conglomeration, risk avoidance, the weakening of independent film, and reliance on market research all contributed to the growth of high-concept filmmaking. Providing examples of promotions and more detailed visual analysis of some “high-concept” films, Wyatt suggests that these films include key elements such as an image or song that the potential audience associates with the film and a slick, self-conscious style of cinematography characteristic of television/magazine advertisements and music videos.¹⁷⁹ According to Wyatt, high concept filmmaking incorporates

¹⁷⁷ Schatz, 9.

¹⁷⁸ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 13.

¹⁷⁹ Wyatt, 109.

a close connection between marketing imagery and the film itself, that tight connection being one reason such films prove commercially successful.¹⁸⁰

For *Jaws*, Universal Pictures executives executed a marketing, publicity, and distribution plan still mirrored today. Before 1975, most Hollywood features opened in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, or London, with a small set of prints subsequently circulating as a roadshow among regional cinemas over a few months. Studios increased the number of circulating prints only to accommodate the demand for the most popular features, which might be "held over" beyond their initially scheduled run. What is more, most distributors viewed the summer as the off-season. In May of 1975, Columbia Pictures challenged the norm with its release of *Breakout*, starring Charles Bronson. Columbia released 1,300 prints simultaneously, crucially combined with an extensive nationwide advertising campaign on the opening week. Noting Columbia's modest success, Universal deployed the same technique to distribute and promote *Jaws* in June.¹⁸¹ Spielberg's film opened on 464 screens in the U.S. and Canada, expanding to around 1000 by August.¹⁸² *Jaws* became the highest-grossing movie of all time until it was surpassed by *Star Wars* two years later.

Universal spent \$1.8 million to promote *Jaws*, including a then-unprecedented \$700,000 on nationwide television advertising.¹⁸³ Over 20 spots aired each night on primetime television

¹⁸⁰ Wyatt, 117.

¹⁸¹ Justin Wyatt, "From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents, and Marketing/Distribution Innovations," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 78.

¹⁸² Sheldon Hall and Stephen Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History*, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Television Series (Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 108.

¹⁸³ Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*, 1st Da Capo Press ed (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 255–56.

between June 18, 1975, and the film's opening two days later.¹⁸⁴ The film was based upon a bestselling 1974 novel by Peter Benchley, and the filmmakers closely coordinated publicity and promotion with Benchley and his publisher, Bantam. Benchley and producers Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown visited TV and radio talk shows as early as October 1974 to promote the paperback version of the novel and the upcoming film.¹⁸⁵ Universal and Bantam also agreed on a title logo to appear simultaneously on the book's paperback edition and in all advertising for the film (an approach later followed by other literary adaptations including *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*).¹⁸⁶ Even more famously, Universal and Bantam cooperated to design the film's iconic poster of the shark approaching a lone female swimmer (see Figure 6), among the most famous in cinematic history. Bantam employee Roger Kastel drew the image, also used on the paperback cover.¹⁸⁷ The newly founded Seiniger Advertising agency spent six months designing the poster; principal Tony Seiniger realized that "you had to actually go underneath the shark so you could see his teeth."¹⁸⁸

The iconic poster exemplifies one of the key marketing strategies behind high-concept films. Wyatt explains that marketers abstract one key, recognizable image and then repurpose it in ads and packaging to extend the film's shelf life.¹⁸⁹ He notes that the *Jaws* poster "conveys the

¹⁸⁴ Searle Kochberg, "Institutions, Audiences and Technology," in *An Introduction to Film Studies*, ed. Jill Nelmes (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

¹⁸⁵ Tom Shone, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 26–27.

¹⁸⁶ Kochberg, "Institutions, Audiences and Technology," 31.

¹⁸⁷ Reed Tucker, "How the Famous Poster from 'Jaws' Was Created — and Lost," *New York Post* (blog), July 26, 2015, <https://nypost.com/2015/07/26/how-the-famous-poster-from-jaws-was-created-and-lost/>.

¹⁸⁸ Bruce Horovitz, "Poster King Dreams up Images to Grab Audiences," *USA Today*, July 21, 2003, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/media/2003-07-20-poster_x.htm.

¹⁸⁹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 19

enormous threat of the shark” given its size and menacing teeth below the unsuspecting, nearly naked woman.¹⁹⁰ “Most significantly,” Wyatt adds, “*Jaws* was capable of being reduced successfully to a single image, since the film embodied many high concept traits: a generically based story and characters, strong contrast between good and evil, and arresting imagery.”¹⁹¹

The poster, perhaps the first thing many people picture when they think of *Jaws*, is also a great example of the power of advertising to frame our understanding of a movie. After all, the poster image never appears in the film itself. In fact, there is no shot of anything like it. Spielberg’s film went far over budget, with the mechanical sharks proving especially temperamental.¹⁹² As a result, Spielberg only suggests the shark’s presence until near the end of the film. The poster broadly reflects an opening scene when the shark attacks a young skinny-dipper, but viewers don’t see the creature then. Due to the malfunctioning effects, the scene was rewritten, a moving buoy and the woman’s thrashing (helped by unseen cables) the only signs of the shark.¹⁹³

Interestingly, despite the lack of similar footage, the original theatrical trailer tries to replicate the poster as much as possible by beginning with the solo swimmer, depicting several drawings of sharks, and superimposing the title logo just above the water, as in the poster.¹⁹⁴ Just as Wyatt suggests, the marketers were trying to circulate the single recognizable image as much

¹⁹⁰ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 113.

¹⁹¹ Wyatt, 115.

¹⁹² Laurent Bouzereau, *A Look Inside Jaws, Jaws 30th Anniversary Edition*, DVD (Universal Home Video, 2005).

¹⁹³ Bouzereau.

¹⁹⁴ “Jaws Official Trailer #1 - Richard Dreyfuss, Steven Spielberg Movie (1975) HD - YouTube,” accessed January 27, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch/U1fu_sA7XhE.

as possible. The trailer, and many TV spots, also make extensive use of John Williams's menacing orchestral theme; Wyatt points out that recognizable music (often pop songs in later releases) is another aspect of high-concept marketing.

Jaws further previewed the industry's increasing focus on merchandising and co-branding. Graeme Turner writes that the film was accompanied by "probably the most elaborate array of tie-ins" to that date, including "a sound-track album, T-shirts, plastic tumblers, a book about the making of the movie, the book the movie was based on, beach towels, blankets, shark costumes, toy sharks, hobby kits, iron-transfers, games, posters, shark's tooth necklaces, sleepwear, water pistols, and more."¹⁹⁵ The impressive selection of branded merchandise would be surpassed by *Star Wars* two years later.

Miramax and the “Independent” Marketing Strategy

Another effective marketing strategy developed by the early 1990s was branding films as “independent” even if the moniker was misleading. Variations of the approach remain prominent in the social media era. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, for example, Universal Pictures positioned young director Colin Trevorrow as a fanboy turned independent *auteur* with extensive creative control over *Jurassic World*, even though studio executives constrained him in reality. The “independent” marketing strategy developed partly because the conglomerates and their big-budget blockbusters crowded out many smaller distributors by the 1980s, though a few “mini-majors” such as Orion and New Line competed effectively for a while.

In the 1990s, the majors began paying closer attention to the remaining independent studios, fueled by the increasing visibility of the Sundance Film Festival and the success of

¹⁹⁵ Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 3rd ed, Studies in Culture and Communication (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 8.

Harvey and Bob Weinstein's Miramax. Reflecting the broader trend towards conglomeration, some big studios simply bought successful independents. Disney acquired Miramax in 1994. That same year, the Turner Broadcasting System picked up New Line; in 1996, both merged with Time Warner. Other major studios started specialty subsidiaries—Fox Searchlight, Sony Pictures Classics, Paramount Classics, Warner Independent—to distribute both international films and low- to mid-budget art cinema. Thus, “independent” became more a marketing concept than an industrial reality. Geoff King advances “Indiewood,” first coined in the trade press, to describe the phenomenon¹⁹⁶ Media industries scholar Alisa Perren, suggesting the word “indie” for the divisions within major studios, identifies a “three-tier structure of independents, indie divisions, and big-budget studio distribution arms” in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁹⁷ The remaining “true” independents, such as Strand and Cinepix, focused on micro-budget works that generally saw small scale art-house exhibition. Conglomeration nearly subsumed independent cinema.

Along the way, independent studios introduced marketing innovations that the majors would soon copy. Indeed, Perren largely attributes Miramax's rise to effective marketing and publicity, combining a “sex sells” angle with an emphasis on “quality.” Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989), which Miramax bought at Sundance, fit the mold and certainly caught the industry's attention. Even more critical to Miramax's initial success, Perren says, were a handful of British films acquired through a partnership with Palace Pictures. In particular,

¹⁹⁶ Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*, International Library of Cultural Studies 2 (London ; New York : New York: I.B. Tauris ; Distributed in the USA by Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁹⁷ Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 15.

Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) set the Miramax marketing template.¹⁹⁸ Weinstein's team played up the film's controversial content, "begging" reviewers and viewers not to reveal the twist that Dil (Jaye Davidson), who presents as a woman at the beginning of the film, is transgender.¹⁹⁹ Perren argues that the financial success of *The Crying Game* encouraged Disney to buy Miramax.²⁰⁰

Disney-era Miramax, still led by Harvey Weinstein, continued to innovate new marketing and publicity strategies. Some, such as aggressively campaigning for Oscar nominations and wins, were quickly copied across the industry. The Weinsteins also took a page from George C. Scott's playbook (*The Savage is Loose*, 1974) and often loudly complained about ratings. Dimension Films, Bob Weinstein's subdivision unrelated to the 1970s Dimension Pictures, brought marketing savvy to the teen demographic with horror genre fare such as *From Dusk till Dawn* and *Scream* (both 1996). In 1997, half a dozen Dimension films brought in \$190 million; two dozen Miramax films earned a total of \$229 million. That year, the always self-mythologizing Harvey Weinstein called himself "the Robin Hood of film distributors, robbing from the rich—my brother—and giving to the poor—foreign language movies."²⁰¹

In many ways, marketing and branding *defined* the indie divisions. Their very purpose was to insulate the mainstream brand from edgier fare—and vice versa. What if Disney slapped its own name on Miramax's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or Dimension's *From Dusk till Dawn*?

¹⁹⁸ Perren, 63.

¹⁹⁹ Jeff Giles, "Jaye Davidson: Oscar's Big Surprise," *Rolling Stone*, April 1, 1993, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/jaye-davidson-oscars-big-surprise-172819/>.

²⁰⁰ Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 63.

²⁰¹ Perren, 136.

Certainly, the pairing would strain the parent company's family-friendly image. Perhaps even more to the point, it would challenge the "cinema of cool" ethos around directors like Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, and Kevin Smith. Scholars argue that the indie divisions released fairly mainstream fare wrapped in an "independent" package in many cases. Perren points out that as Tarantino, Rodriguez, and Smith gained popularity, independent female directors such as Jane Campion, Allison Anders, and Nicole Holofcener fell by the wayside.²⁰² She adds that Miramax's "foreign language imports often were the most classical in style, unambitious in structure, and conservative in politics."²⁰³ Geoff King notes that Miramax's hit *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) offered a conventional love story but gave viewers the chance to mark their cultural capital by recognizing literary in-jokes and references.²⁰⁴

Studio Marketing in the Nascent Web Era

In 1994, the same year Disney bought Miramax, a technological revolution gathered steam in Silicon Valley. Marc Andreessen and James H. Clark released Netscape Navigator, the first widely used web browser. Jeff Bezos founded Amazon.com to sell books via the nascent internet. While the web browser would radically transform commerce and entertainment, adoption began slowly. By 1995, the Pew Research Center found, only 14% of U.S. adults had internet access, almost all via slow, dial-up modem connections. At the time, 42% of U.S. adults had never heard of the internet, and another 21% only vaguely understood the concept.²⁰⁵ Most

²⁰² Perren, 95.

²⁰³ Perren, 192.

²⁰⁴ King, *Indiewood, USA*, 101.

²⁰⁵ "Americans Going Online...Explosive Growth, Uncertain Destinations" (Pew Research Center, October 16, 1995), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1995/10/16/americans-going-online-explosive-growth-uncertain-destinations/>.

of those who accessed the internet used CompuServe, Prodigy, or America Online (later AOL), the “Big Three information services” of the early digital era. CompuServe, the oldest of the three, charged \$8.95 a month for news, sports, weather, travel, reference libraries, stock quotes, and games; bulletin boards and even email cost extra (15 cents per email, incoming junk email included).²⁰⁶

Within a few years, AOL became the clear leader thanks to aggressive promotion—famously mailing millions of unsolicited installation disks to U.S. households—and its popular chat rooms. By 1997, half of the American homes with Internet access got it through America Online.²⁰⁷ Although the three providers offered some direct access to the web, they mainly focused on a “walled garden” of their own services. For example, AOL users would see CBS content for sports, ABC for news, and 1-800-Flowers products if they searched for a florist. Each company paid AOL for the privilege, resulting in one of the most lucrative early digital advertising models.²⁰⁸

The Hollywood studios’ digital marketing efforts began as early as 1994, often encouraged by a few tech-savvy staffers but usually met with disinterest by studio leadership. As a result, there is some debate about the first movie to have a promotional website. Paramount has claimed it was first with *Star Trek: Generations*, released in November 1994. A 2004 post on startrek.com recalled that staffers at Paramount Media Kitchen, a tech-forward satellite office

²⁰⁶ Peter H. Lewis, “PERSONAL COMPUTERS; The CompuServe Edge: Delicate Data Balance,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 1994, sec. Science, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/29/science/personal-computers-the-compuserve-edge-delicate-data-balance.html>.

²⁰⁷ Alexis C. Madrigal, “The Fall of Facebook,” *The Atlantic*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/12/the-fall-of-facebook/382247/>.

²⁰⁸ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads*, First edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 210.

notably located in Palo Alto, demonstrated the concept to Sherry Lansing, then chairman of Paramount Motion Picture Group, and received her personal greenlight.²⁰⁹ Available in archival form (see Figure 7), the 1994 *Star Trek: Generations* website proclaims: “To herald this unprecedented adventure, Paramount Pictures is proud to present this World Wide Web site. Featuring the official movie preview, exclusive sights and sounds from the motion picture, behind the scenes information, and more, this site brings the Final Frontier to the cyber frontier.”²¹⁰

At a marketing industry event I attended, a panel of studio executives—all of them active in the industry in the 1990s—debated whether or not the *Star Trek* site actually had been first, with some giving the edge to MGM’s *Stargate*, released in October 1994.²¹¹ Notably, both films are sci-fi, reflecting an initial industry belief that web usage was limited to computer nerds, at best. At the conference, one executive, an early digital marketer for Disney, noted another detail not mentioned in Paramount’s history: the studio, thinking the effort was “worthless,” actually fired the first *Star Trek* web developers, who kept working on the site anyway.

Indeed, studio marketers commonly recall executive suite skepticism to their early digital initiatives. Gordon Paddison, then a junior publicity staffer at New Line Cinema, founded the film industry’s first interactive marketing department in 1994. How did Paddison convince New Line bosses to approve the department? By promising that he would save them money on FedEx

²⁰⁹ “The First Movie Web Site: ‘Star Trek Generations,’” *StarTrek.com*, October 2004, <http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/features/specials/article/7647.html>; *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090227104351/http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/features/specials/article/7647.html>, accessed December 10, 2020.

²¹⁰ *StarTrek.com*, October 2004 [repost of original 1994 website].

²¹¹ Panel discussion at the 1st Annual Hollywood In Pixels Digital Disruptor Awards, Los Angeles, CA, October 27, 2015.

shipping costs.²¹² The publicity department would ship 600 to 800 envelopes, full of video tapes and press kits, to local TV stations and newspapers every week. Paddison proposed sending the content electronically via File Transfer Protocol (FTP), saving millions of dollars in shipping costs annually. Executives signed off. On the side, Paddison experimented with other digital promotion techniques, primarily posting on bulletin boards on AOL, CompuServe, or Prodigy.

It turned out the shipping cost savings were not as significant as Paddison hoped (many of the stations and papers still requested hard copies). But by early 1995, internet marketing was gaining enough momentum that New Line bosses kept the department in place. However, executives still viewed digital as niche marketing, a way to reach groups less receptive to traditional TV or print ads; Paddison calls them “malcontents” or “geeks.”²¹³ Video gamers fit the bill, so Paddison’s first website promoted the arcade game spin-off *Mortal Kombat* (August 1995). He recalls that the site generated 100,000 hits in the days when that modest number was “unbelievably cool.”²¹⁴

Following New Line, the big studios gradually and tentatively expanded their digital presence. In August 1995, Disney formed a new online unit, appointing a former magazine executive to develop the company’s web presence.²¹⁵ In February 1996, the company launched a

²¹² Gordon Paddison, in person interview with the author, conducted on behalf of the Oral History Program of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, May 13, 2016.

²¹³ Paddison.

²¹⁴ “Gordon Paddison, New Line Cinema,” *Variety* (blog), August 1, 2000, <https://variety.com/2000/digital/news/gordon-paddison-new-line-cinema-1117784472/>.

²¹⁵ Richard W. Stevenson, “THE MEDIA BUSINESS: ADVERTISING -- ADDENDA; Chief Named at Disney On-Line Unit,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 1995, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/24/business/the-media-business-advertising-addenda-chief-named-at-disney-on-line-unit.html>.

ten-day preview of Disney.com through America Online and Netscape. “AOL members can take part in a daily scavenger hunt and chat with Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters,” CNET reported at the time.²¹⁶ Meanwhile, at Warner Bros., New York-based Don Buckley, vice president for advertising and publicity, started a small web team in 1995.²¹⁷ “I spent way too many hours deep into the night exploring this netherworld. I was a movie guy and I thought, ‘Oh, wait a minute, we can do some things here, we can market movies on the internet.’ It became as much a creative exercise as anything else,” Buckley recalls. His colleagues were initially unenthusiastic. “Some of the people in publicity kind of considered us a pain in the ass.... I had to convince people within the studio that it was a good idea to put the website address on the poster,” he says. “There was a lot of resistance to that.”²¹⁸

Buckley hired one web designer, Dara-Lynn Weiss, and they created Warners’ first website, for *Batman Forever* (July 1995). “The job was awesome, but the drawback was that no one cared what we did,” Weiss remembers.²¹⁹ By the summer of 1996, Buckley’s team had grown to five people, and they focused their attention on a particularly elaborate site for the November release *Space Jam* (featuring the unlikely pairing of Michael Jordan and Bugs Bunny). Competing executives still fondly recall the *Space Jam* site, which remained active for decades.²²⁰ In addition to “Jam Central” for filmmaker bios and “Lunar Tunes” for soundtrack

²¹⁶ “Mickey Mouse Makes Web Debut,” CNET, accessed January 29, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/news/mickey-mouse-makes-web-debut/>.

²¹⁷ Erik Malinowski, “‘Space Jam’ Forever: The Website That Wouldn’t Die,” *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 19, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/space-jam-forever-the-website-that-wouldnt-die-70507/>.

²¹⁸ Malinowski.

²¹⁹ Malinowski.

²²⁰ At the 1st Annual Hollywood In Pixels Digital Disruptor Awards in 2015, an event I attended, industry colleagues gave Buckley their inaugural award, for the *Space Jam* site.

info, there was a 360-degree tour of Jordan's practice court, an unusual feature for the early web. The fledgling digital marketing departments continued to experiment. Gordon Paddison recalls a popular promotion for *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997). In a co-branding partnership with the airline Virgin Atlantic, New Line released a Shockwave application for home computers. "Austin could be on your desktop, and he'd walk around," Paddison explains. "We had him where he'd...knock on your screen from the other side, and he'd interact with you, and he'd go, 'Yeah, baby,' and all these different things."²²¹

Conclusion

Groovy Austin Powers screen savers notwithstanding, digital marketing remained on the sidelines as the new millennium approached. Most marketers still focused on the usual television and print ad buys. However, the conversation would change in 1999 when viral online promotion drove the independent, micro-budgeted horror film *The Blair Witch Project* to \$250 million in box office returns. The next chapter will explore *Blair Witch* and the studios' cautious, halting turn towards digital and social media. Parts of the story may seem like a sequel, reminiscent of the film industry's response to television in the 1950s or even radio in the 1920s. Each new medium was both a competitor for leisure time and a promising promotional avenue. So, risk-averse marketers and studio bosses approached tentatively.

Given the typical caution of the most prominent industry players, studios opposed in some way to the filmmaking mainstream have been particularly important to the introduction of new marketing ideas and approaches. For example, the original independents, the upstart

²²¹ Paddison, interview.

Hollywood-based studios established outside the reach of the 1908 Edison Trust, introduced the star system and all its associated promotional benefits. Not incidentally, Carl Laemmle's pointedly named Independent Moving Pictures Company, the first studio to embrace stars, eventually morphed into Universal Pictures, the oldest member of today's Big Five and the oldest surviving film studio in the United States.

In the decades after the Paramount Decree, American International and Allied Artists Pictures, among other small independent studios, led the turn to youth audiences. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the independent Miramax established publicity and branding techniques that the majors would soon copy. Indeed, a willingness to embrace underserved demographics has often marked successful independent studios. In the following chapters, we will meet a new crop of independents—including Artisan Entertainment, Summit Entertainment, and Lionsgate Films—who will lead Hollywood's embrace of digital and social media.

As the *King Kong* case study illustrated, many 20th century practices foretold social media marketing. By analyzing the promotional surround, we find the movie marketers want—which may or may not resemble the director's cut. At *King Kong*'s release in 1933, RKO and exhibitors not only framed the movie as a jungle adventure, but they also played to their audiences' perceived racism and Eurocentrism. RKO even publicized co-director Merian C. Cooper as a rugged adventurer above the studio system, "a camera explorer at heart." Yet, marketers avoided the jungle context and sold Kong as a monster picture for later re-releases—some of which were more financially successful than the original. While the reframing cashed in on a horror movie cycle, it also elided the suggestions of "forbidden" miscegenation and the racist correlation between Kong and Black men, a discourse that had become less acceptable in the intervening years. In the digital era, Lionsgate marketers similarly deployed social media to

sidestep *The Hunger Games'* violence and media critique. For its 2019 live-action remake of *Aladdin*, Disney used social media marketing to paper over the racial stereotypes and Eurocentrism of the 1992 original while still tapping into nostalgia for the earlier feature.

For all of the continuities to earlier practices, social media logic would eventually revolutionize film marketing. After all, RKO marketers reframed *King Kong* over decades, across four theatrical releases and a significant television debut. Local theater marquees and newspapers allowed exhibitors to customize their promotions to regional, neighborhood, or demographic tastes. Such diffuse promotional labor benefited the studios. However, social media algorithms make similar adjustments in nanoseconds. Of course, the programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication of Facebook, YouTube, and other tech-media platforms enrich Silicon Valley. But social media logic also enables savvy digital marketers to target demographics and fan groups with invisible precision. And they can overhaul failed promotional strategies in minutes, not weeks or years.

Figures



Figure 1. 1950s marketing emphasized technology such as CinemaScope. Source: www.amazon.com collectibles marketplace

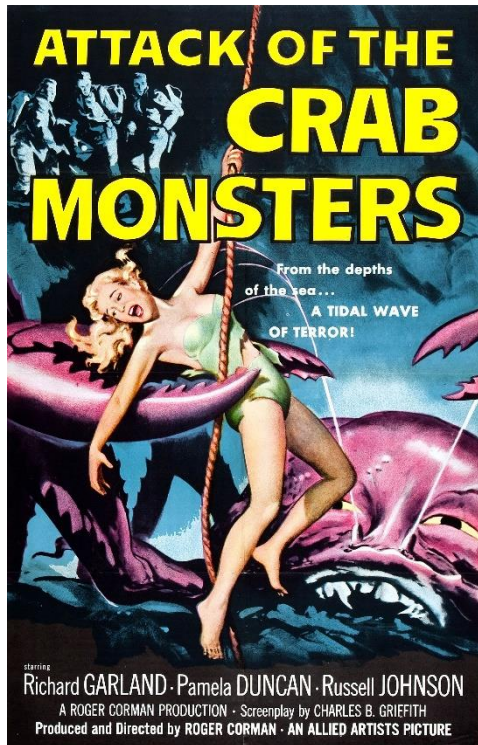


Figure 2. In the 1950s and 1960s, Roger Corman directed low-budget horror films popular with youth audiences. Source: iMDB.com.



Figure 3. *King Kong* contains stylistic and narrative parallels to the racist "documentary" *Ingagi*, released three years earlier. Source: Heritage Auctions.



Figure 4. King Kong Marquee at the FOX Theater, Pomona, CA, May 1933. Source: www.forgottenHollywood.com.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Figure 5. RKO pressbook from 1956 re-release of the original film. By this time, the film is positioned as pure horror. Source: Heritage Auctions.

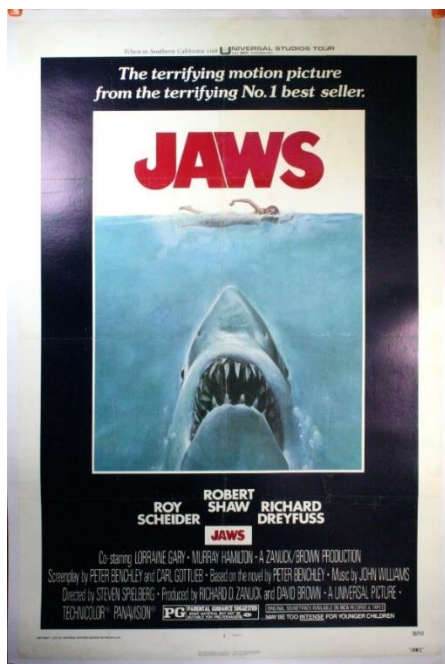


Figure 6. The theatrical poster for *Jaws* (1975) exemplifies the kind of instantly recognizable image used to promote high-concept blockbusters. Source: originalvintagemovieposters.com.



From Paramount Pictures...

STAR TREK GENERATIONS

The "Star Trek" generations converge in "Star Trek Generations" starring Patrick Stewart and William Shatner. In the futuristic adventure film, a mysterious astronomical phenomenon bridging different time frames brings the two famous captains of the Enterprise face-to-face: Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Stewart) and Captain James T. Kirk (Shatner).

To herald this unprecedented adventure, Paramount Pictures is proud to present this World Wide Web site. Featuring the official movie preview, exclusive sights and sounds from the motion picture, behind the scenes information, and more, this site brings the Final Frontier to the cyber frontier.

Don't forget to give us your input on Star Trek and this Web site.

Enjoy -- we'll see you at the movies for Star Trek Generations!



[Starship Console](#)

Star Trek (R) is a registered trademark of Paramount Pictures registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

Figure 7. Paramount's 1994 website promoting *Star Trek: Generations*, among the first efforts at online promotion.

Chapter 2. From Witches to Snakes: The Slow Rise of Digital Marketing

Introduction

The website www.blairwitch.com launched in June 1998, with a few lines of text and a handful of low-res photos amidst an early internet of dial-up access, AOL chat rooms, and simple GeoCities homepages. The webpage purported to document the true story of three young filmmakers who disappeared in the Maryland woods. It actually promoted an independent (and very fictional) horror film, shot on Hi8 video cameras for \$32,000. No studio had expressed any interest in the movie. But web surfers who came across the page were undoubtedly interested in the three “missing” filmmakers. Thirteen months of viral marketing later, *The Blair Witch Project* opened in movie theaters nationwide, eventually grossing \$249 million globally for the best profit margin in film history.²²² On a per-screen basis, it outperformed *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace*, perhaps the most anticipated studio blockbuster of the decade.²²³ Leveraging online word-of-mouth, transmedia storytelling, and most especially audience participation, the *Blair Witch* filmmakers illustrated just how powerful and profitable digital marketing could be. And they did so at a time when fewer than 25 percent of Americans had internet access. It was an early preview of the social media marquee (while Mark Zuckerberg was just a freshman in high school).

The stunning success of *The Blair Witch Project* captured Hollywood’s attention, but it did not immediately revolutionize marketing practices. Far from it. New Line’s Gordon

²²² Stephen Galloway, “What Is the Most Profitable Movie Ever?,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/what-is-profitable-movie-ever-1269879>.

²²³ “Domestic Box Office For 1999,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/1999/>.

Paddison, still leading a small digital marketing department, thought *Blair Witch* had captured “lighting in a bottle” with a promotional strategy unlikely to succeed twice.²²⁴ Many other studio marketers agreed. Nevertheless, all major studios soon established a digital marketing department; nearly every movie had an “internet strategy,” if not always a robust one. Even as he expressed skepticism about the *Blair Witch* model of transmedia storytelling, Paddison innovated a new way to cultivate online fandoms with his approach to *The Lord of the Rings* franchise (2001-2003). He selectively released production photos, clips, and news to a collection of fan websites, popularizing a strategy that would be common in the social media era.

If marketing departments approached the internet gingerly in the early 2000s, top studio brass were even more reluctant. Many had been burned by the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s, forced to take huge losses on their early investments in the web. Disney had moved most aggressively into the early internet business but shuttered many of its first ventures by 2001. Moreover, the 2001 merger of AOL and Time Warner promised web/entertainment synergies that never materialized, becoming a cautionary tale for other conglomerates. Although Hollywood content was always integral to the web, most major studios took a wait-and-see approach to the internet landscape that emerged after the dot-com bust. While they waited, a new wave of Silicon Valley companies emerged. Google, founded by Stanford Ph.D. students Larry Page and Sergey Brin in September 1998 (three months after the first *Blair Witch* website came online), grew quickly. By 2002, the search engine was the fourth-most visited site on the web. On Google’s heels came social media platforms focused on user-generated content and connections between users. MySpace, an early leader, was acquired by News Corporation (Fox’s

²²⁴ Paddison, interview.

parent) in 2005 but soon lost ground to Facebook, founded in 2004. Twitter came online in 2006. YouTube premiered in 2005, attracting particular attention from Hollywood studios concerned about the unauthorized sharing of copyrighted videos.

In retrospect, the copyright disputes (which earlier focused on online music sharing) were another distraction that prevented studios from developing sustained social media strategies. Meanwhile, the emergent social media platforms introduced a much more lasting change: a new media logic, marked by programmability, popularity, connectivity, and—above all—datafication.²²⁵ This last shift likely represented the greatest threat to the studios, handing Silicon Valley *insight into* and invisible *control over* the entertainment content people consume online. The studios were undoubtedly correct to be nervous about the increasing power of the tech platforms, but they might have worried more about data and less about copyrighted content.

C-suite skepticism restrained studio marketing departments, even as sales teams increasingly approached them from the growing tech platforms. Digital marketing remained a persistently small part of most studio marketing strategies, still accounting for just two or three percent of ad spend by 2005. Most big studio marketers continued to pour their ad dollars into television, still uncertain that online activity would translate into ticket sales. The skeptics felt vindicated by New Line's 2006 *Snakes on a Plane*, a campy Samuel L. Jackson thriller that generated huge online buzz but fizzled at the box office. For many in Hollywood, the muted returns from *Snakes* confirmed that *The Blair Witch Project* had indeed been a flash in the pan. "'Witch's' spell haunts. But 'Plane' truths point out Internet marketing perils," proclaimed a

²²⁵ José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, "Understanding Social Media Logic," *Media and Communication* 1, no. 1 (August 12, 2013): 2–14.

Variety headline.²²⁶ Never mind that the latter digital campaign lacked any trace of *Blair Witch*'s transmedia storytelling or that the film itself paired uneasily with the one fans had imagined in advance. Nevertheless, the watercooler takeaway—online buzz does not equal ticket sales—reinforced Hollywood's skepticism about digital marketing at a pivotal moment. *Snakes on a Plane* hit theaters one month before Facebook became widely available and two months before Google acquired YouTube.

The Blair Witch Project: Marketing as Transmedia Storytelling

An on-screen note opens the film: "In October of 1994 three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found." Of course, there were no such student filmmakers nor any documentary; the story was the brainchild of two Florida film students. But when *The Blair Witch Project* hit movie theaters in 1999, many in the audience thought the events were real, the result of a clever online marketing campaign that blurred fact and fiction. Even more importantly, the campaign invited audience participation in a way no film before had.

Through a combination of promotional savvy, luck, and fortuitous timing, *The Blair Witch* campaign previewed many elements of Hollywood studio marketing in the social media era. First, marketing intervened early and often in the production process. Much of the Blair Witch mythology began as a pitch to investors. The website central to the promotional campaign, www.blairwitch.com, debuted six months before the film even had a distributor. Second, not only did the marketing campaign blur the line between fact and fiction, but it also blurred the line between content and advertising, an example of van Dijck and Poell's "social media logic" more

²²⁶ Ian Mohr, "'Witch's' Spell Haunts," *Variety*, September 28, 2006.

than five years before Mark Zuckerberg would create Facebook in his Harvard dorm room. Finally, the *Blair Witch* marketing campaign expanded the bounds of the film text to a website, fan-made GeoCities sites, and online bulletin boards. Marketers invited viewers to participate in crafting and deciphering the legend of the Blair Witch.

The Blair Witch Project is an early digital example of what media scholar Henry Jenkins would later term “transmedia storytelling.” It also previews scholarly debates about “free” user labor in the internet and social media eras. Intrigued by the legend, fans built elaborate web pages, spent hours on bulletin boards, and generally helped the producers promote their movie. Yet, the fans received no monetary compensation. After discussing the unique Blair Witch campaign, I will explore digital user labor and transmedia storytelling in-depth, as both concepts are critical anchors for the social media marketing campaigns to follow.

For all of the similarities between *Blair Witch* and later social media promotional campaigns, much was different in 1998 and 1999. Many consumers remained entirely offline, there were no smartphones, and “sharing” and “liking” digital content required much more than a button push. Website visitor counts were about the only data available. Perhaps most notably, the future giants of internet commerce were either in their infancies or still a glimmer in their founders’ eyes. Yet, these very limitations also benefited the *Blair Witch* marketers, granting them an authenticity and “viral” word-of-mouth that would be often imitated but never truly duplicated. It all began with a simple website: just a few paragraphs of text and a handful of low-res photos.

The Legend of www.blairwitch.com

Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez developed the initial idea for *The Blair Witch Project* in 1993 when both were film students at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.

Earlier media that blurred the line between fact and fiction inspired the two students. “We loved that show *In Search Of*,” recalls Sánchez, referring to a syndicated television series (1977-1982) focusing on mysterious phenomena and hosted by Leonard Nimoy. That show explored UFOs, Bigfoot, and the Loch Ness Monster, lending a degree of credibility to legends with little factual basis. “We’re big Bigfoot fans,” adds Myrick. “I had a UFO club when I was a kid. We just liked those old reality-based shows and how they kind of creeped us out as kids. So, we wanted to make a horror movie that kind of tapped into that. That fear.”²²⁷ Studio executives would later compare *Blair Witch* to Orson Welles’ infamous 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, supposedly so realistic that listeners believed space aliens were actually attacking the country.²²⁸

Blair Witch did not invent the found-footage format. The filmic device extends at least as far back as 1980 and Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust*, which follows a team of anthropologists who journey to the Amazon rainforest searching for missing filmmakers.²²⁹ What was new: Myrick and Sánchez first developed the Blair Witch mythology as an advertising and publicity gimmick—before the film had been cast or shot. Their innovation was in marketing technique, not filmmaking. So, just as they blurred the line between fact and fiction, they blurred the line between marketing and content. As José van Dijck and Thomas Poell explain, that blurry line would be a fundamental feature of social media.²³⁰ The social media marketing campaigns I

²²⁷ Tom Conroy, “The Do-It-Yourself Witch Hunt : Rolling Stone,” *Rolling Stone*, July 14, 1999, http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5924486/the_doityourself_witch_hunt.

²²⁸ In fact, the broadcast was not widely heard and any panic likely minor, trumped up by newspaper headlines. See Jefferson Socolow and Michael J Pooley, “Orson Welles’ War of the Worlds Did Not Touch Off a Nationwide Hysteria. Few Americans Listened. Even Fewer Panicked.” *Slate Magazine*, October 29, 2013, <https://slate.com/culture/2013/10/orson-welles-war-of-the-worlds-panic-myth-the-infamous-radio-broadcast-did-not-cause-a-nationwide-hysteria.html>.

²²⁹ Jake Kring-Schreifels, “‘The Blair Witch Project’ at 20: Why It Can’t Be Replicated,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2019, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/movies/blair-witch-project-1999.html>.

²³⁰ Dijck and Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic.”

discuss later will follow *Blair Witch* in exploiting the collapse of distinctions between advertising and content.

Before developing a script, Myrick and Sánchez created an eight-minute faux documentary about the supposed disappearance of three kids. “We really played it off as real. We had fake newspaper articles, news footage, crazy stuff like that,” says Sánchez.²³¹ The pair showed the video to investors alongside other marketing material, suggesting the backstory might be real. “We made up these fake postcards, from Blair County, Maryland, [pretending] it was an actual, real place, and then we had these flyers that we sent out to investors,” Myrick says. “It was like an invitation to go hunting at this resort in Blair, Maryland, and it had the zucchini festival that’s held up there every year, and by the way, visit the Blair Witch Museum.”²³² One investor, Independent Film Channel host John Pierson, initially assumed there was an actual Blair Witch legend in Maryland. To the directors, Pierson said: “I can’t believe all of this. I’ve never heard about it.” Myrick replied: “John, we made it all up.”²³³

Soon, Myrick and Sánchez formed production company Haxan Films with producers Gregg Hale, Robin Cowie, and Michael Monello. Myrick and Sánchez developed a 40-page screenplay for the film, intending for improvised dialogue. “It was effectively a script without the dialogue written in,” explains Myrick.²³⁴ The film school grads felt improvisation would give the film a raw feel, mirroring the techniques of earlier filmmakers, including Federico Fellini (8

²³¹ Conroy, “The Do-It-Yourself Witch Hunt.”

²³² Mark Caro, “Frightfully, Frightfully, Frightfully Real: The Bewitching Story Behind the ‘Blair Witch Project,’” *Chicago Tribune*, July 14, 1999, sec. TEMPO.

²³³ Caro.

²³⁴ Scott Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project: An Oral History,” *The Week*, January 12, 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/531471/blair-witch-project-oral-history>.

1/2, 1963) and John Cassavetes (*Shadows*, 1959). Casting began in 1996. Myrick and Sánchez selected actors Heather Donahue, Michael C. Williams, and Joshua Leonard, who would play fictionalized versions of themselves, a point marketers would later exploit to sow confusion about the story's veracity. In the screenplay, three student filmmakers hike into the Black Hills near Burkittsville, Maryland, to film a documentary about the Blair Witch legend; all three disappear, though their equipment and footage are recovered a year later. Shooting began in Maryland on October 23, 1997, and lasted just eight days. The actors shot all of the footage themselves; cinematographer Neal Fredericks gave them CP-16 film and Hi8 video cameras. Heather Donahue explained that "the guys would program way points into the Global Positioning System, and then we would use a map to find those places." At each waypoint, the directors left a milk crate with supplies and private instructions for each actor. The notes contained such information as, "You should be in charge of the compass today, or today let Mike be in charge of the map, or when you get to the pine trees, make sure the camera is on as soon as you enter and be prepared to see something."²³⁵ "Story-wise, we wanted to keep it as 'method' as we could," co-director Myrick recalls.²³⁶

Initially, the filmmakers planned to present their film as a narrated documentary in the style of the *In Search Of* television program that had inspired them. That changed in the editing room. "The most important piece of filming the movie was the edit," remembers producer Gregg Hale. "That's when we really started to realize that there was something special about the footage of the kids themselves. We started to mess around with the idea of the kids, alone, being the

²³⁵ Caro, "Frightfully, Frightfully, Frightfully Real."

²³⁶ Meslow, "The Blair Witch Project," January 12, 2015.

movie. Just their footage. It actually took us quite a while to land on that and be comfortable with that idea, because it was so different than what we had originally planned on doing.”²³⁷ The choice to drop omniscient narration surely added to the film’s fan appeal since it allowed viewers to participate more actively in figuring out the mystery.

The Blair Witch Project premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1999.

Through a combination of chance and savvy, the public marketing campaign had actually begun a year and a half earlier. In August 1997, early investor John Pierson ran two segments about Blair Witch on the Independent Film Channel’s *Split Screen* show, without explicitly stating it was all fiction. Pierson says that police detectives even called in offering their assistance in finding the missing trio.²³⁸ Pierson, who had produced early works from “independent” filmmakers including Spike Lee, Richard Linklater, Michael Moore, and Kevin Smith, understood how to generate publicity.

“I think John started to get a little concerned about the way he was playing it,” producer Michael Monello recalls. “And so, at the end of the [second] segment, he says: ‘So are the Haxan guys pulling our leg or is there really a witch out in the woods of Maryland killing film students? Go to SplitScreen.com and let us know.’”²³⁹ Interestingly, Pierson’s solution to his “concern” about bending the truth was to make the debate participatory, a preview of social media behavior in which facts get lost in a sea of posts. Thus, *Blair Witch* was an interactive, transmedia project

²³⁷ Scott Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project: An Oral History, Part 3,” *The Week*, January 14, 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/531459/blair-witch-project-oral-history-part-3>.

²³⁸ Caro, “Frightfully, Frightfully, Frightfully Real.”

²³⁹ Alyssa Berezna, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing,” *The Ringer*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/3/28/18280988/blair-witch-movie-marketing-1999>.

from the beginning—at a time when fewer than 25% of American households had internet access.²⁴⁰ While fanzines, fan clubs, and promotional giveaways had long offered fan participation, new technology afforded real-time discussion: fans could debate the truth on SplitScreen.com’s bulletin boards. In the process, web users performed promotional labor.

Driven by Pierson’s call for fan speculation, the Blair Witch mythology began to spread across the early internet. Each time IFC reran the *Split Screen* episode, viewers flooded the show’s online community bulletin board, wanting to know more about the mysterious witch and her alleged victims. Pierson called Monello and asked him to build a website. “He’s like, ‘Your Blair Witch fans are destroying my film community and I need a place to send them,’” remembers Monello. “‘They should be over on your site anyways.’”²⁴¹ While the film was still in the editing room and with no distributor yet attached, the producers and directors began work on a website that would soon become a milestone in film marketing. Explains Eduardo Sánchez: “I just started building the website. It was very crude and rudimentary, but it worked, because that’s what it was all about. A lot of the mythology was built by building the website. It got to the point where you had to fill in the gaps. The website had a mythology timeline, to document what had happened in the whole case leading up to the kids’ disappearance, so I just wrote a lot of stuff.”²⁴²

²⁴⁰ “Internet Household Adoption Rate United States 1997-2011,” Statista, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/214662/household-adoption-rate-of-internet-access-in-the-us-since-1997/>.

²⁴¹ Berezna, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing.”

²⁴² Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project,” January 14, 2015.

The website launched in June of 1998, still 13 months before the film would be in theaters.²⁴³ The producers couldn't afford to host streaming video, and in any case, online video quality was relatively poor in the 1990s. So, as illustrated in Figure 8, they posted stills from the film and captioned them "twelve photos recently released by the Frederick County Sheriff's office." They scanned pages of what they said was Heather's journal, allegedly found "buried beneath a 100-year-old cabin in the woods." Also on the site: pictures of rusty 16mm film cans and damaged Hi8 tapes, supposedly found by University of Maryland anthropology students. Under the header "The Filmmakers," the site featured a photo of the three actors, using their real names, captioned: "Montgomery College film students Michael Williams, Joshua Leonard, and Heather Donahue less than a week before their disappearance."²⁴⁴ The original site also included a bulletin board, a popular feature on the early internet. Posting on the board, the directors and producers claimed that their company, Haxan Films, had been contracted by the families of the missing students to edit the found footage and investigate the events. Basing the forum on Kevin Smith's "View Askewniverse," where that indie director hosted discussions about his movies, the Blair Witch crew frequently posted new "developments" in their investigation. "We had written ourselves into the mythology," Monello says.²⁴⁵

In addition to the bulletin, early fans had other ways to participate in the story. The producers encouraged site visitors to sign up for an email mailing list. Notably, the email list

²⁴³ Michael McCarthy, "IQ News - Analysis: The Blair Web Project," AdWeek, November 15, 1999, <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/iq-news-analysis-blair-web-project-23184/>.

²⁴⁴ Lionsgate Entertainment, which acquired Artisan Entertainment in 2003, maintains a slightly updated version of the original website: www.blairwitch.com. There is still no explicit statement that the information is fictional. Michael Monello also describes the original site in Bereznak, "How 'Blair Witch' Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing."

²⁴⁵ Bereznak.

became the place for honest information about the actual film production. That allowed the website to maintain the fictional narrative, a clever and early example of segmenting digital audiences. “We created this destination for people to converge on, and after a while, when we had a mailing list for people, and those folks realized it was a movie,” explains Dan Myrick.²⁴⁶ The Blair Witch team effectively managed audience engagement, an essential practice for today’s email and social media marketers, but producer Monello claims that it mostly happened accidentally. “As an indie filmmaker in Orlando, Florida, with no prospects of where [the film] is going to be sold, just kind of having anyone interested in your work is very flattering,” Monello says. “We were able to talk to people, but still kind of maintain the world that we were building. We made intentional marketing decisions but interacting with fans online was not an intentional marketing decision.”²⁴⁷

Intentional or not, the Blair Witch producers established a digital playbook that would inspire many future marketers. In addition to the website encouraging audience participation, they zeroed in early on a logo for the film, depicting a twig figure that is also heavily featured as a prop in the film (see Figure 10). “Basically that was our Nike swoosh,” Monello says.²⁴⁸ On that point, the independent filmmakers were taking a page from big-budget Hollywood, choosing a reproducible image that audiences would associate with the film, just as Justin Wyatt describes in his analysis of high concept filmmaking.²⁴⁹ The producers also exploited viral digital marketing techniques long before they became formulized and routinized.

²⁴⁶ Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project,” January 14, 2015.

²⁴⁷ Berezna, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing.”

²⁴⁸ Berezna.

²⁴⁹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 109.

Kevin Foxe, who had joined the film as executive producer in May 1998, had a post-production background and decided that quietly circulating “bootleg” copies would juice demand. So, in the weeks ahead of the Sundance premiere, Foxe encouraged friends and former colleagues to distribute early cuts of the film, telling them: “Make copies, show it to your friends, do whatever you want.” Not surprisingly, an unfinished version of the movie made its way to online file sharing sites, seemingly authenticating that it was indeed “found” footage. Then, just ahead of the Sundance Festival, Ain’t It Cool News, a popular film and popular culture website, posted an article about Blair Witch. Foxe recalls that the number of daily visitors on the Blair Witch website grew from 10,000 to 60,000.²⁵⁰ The producers had successfully built word of mouth ahead of Sundance, priming them for success at the festival. Nonetheless, knowledge of Blair Witch remained on the digital fringe. That would soon change.

After Sundance: Artisan’s Marketing Strategy

The Blair Witch Project officially premiered at the Sundance Festival, its midnight screening on January 25, 1999, generating by far the biggest buzz of that year’s event. Artisan Entertainment bought the distribution rights for \$1.1 million at Sundance, nailing down a deal at 6 am, just four hours after the screening finished.²⁵¹ Although Hollywood had been chattering about the film at least since October 1998, when Sundance selected it for its Midnight Movies program, the directors and actors say the festival response surprised them. Explains Dan Myrick: “Like most independent filmmakers, you see the Sundance deadline looming and say, ‘Let’s try to submit.’” Adds star Joshua Leonard: “I don’t think any of us could anticipate the response that

²⁵⁰ Bereznak, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing.”

²⁵¹ Caro, “Frightfully, Frightfully, Frightfully Real.”

we got. That was the first year I heard the term ‘buzz film,’ and all of a sudden we were the buzz film.”²⁵² Despite the warm reception, plenty of Sundance buyers passed, including all the major studios’ indie divisions. Todd McCarthy’s Sundance review in *Variety* captured some of the hesitations. While praising the “intensely imaginative piece of conceptual filmmaking,” McCarthy speculated that “this resourceful ultra-low-budgeter is probably too raw and lacking in the clockwork visceral jolts to go over with the general horror audience....”²⁵³

Scholar Thomas Schatz observes, “Artisan proved to be the ideal distributor for *Blair Witch*, a true independent with the personnel and the resources to exploit the peculiar property.”²⁵⁴ The private equity firm Bain Capital formed Artisan in 1997 by combining several companies that mostly had experience in home video distribution, including low-budget horror. Artisan CEO Amir Malin took charge of *Blair Witch*, spending some \$150,000 to enhance the film, including additional shooting and editing, remixed sound, color correction, and a blowup to 35 mm film.²⁵⁵ Malin also convinced the filmmakers to move the credits to the end of the film, further emphasizing the stylistic sense of found footage. Although press accounts emphasized Myrick, Sánchez, and their low-budget beginnings, Artisan’s fingerprints were all over the film that premiered in theaters.

Artisan leaned into the viral, participatory strategy pioneered by the producers. In fact, the studio’s marketers were even more blatant in suggesting that the story might be true. Jessica

²⁵² Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project,” January 14, 2015.

²⁵³ Todd McCarthy, “The Blair Witch Project,” *Variety*, January 27, 1999, <https://variety.com/1999/film/reviews/the-blair-witch-project-1200456384/>.

²⁵⁴ Thomas Schatz, “Going Mainstream: The Indie Film Movement in 1999,” in *A Companion to American Indie Film*, ed. Geoff King (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley Balckwell, 2017), 272.

²⁵⁵ Charles Lyons, “Season of the ‘Witch,’” *Daily Variety*, September 8, 1999.

Rovello, the 24-year-old director of online services at Artisan, led the design of an expanded website.²⁵⁶ Rovello added phony police reports, photos, and detailed 200-year history of the Blair Witch herself. And with a studio budget, Artisan uploaded 16 hours of videos using extra footage from the film.²⁵⁷ As a result, the website now held more footage than the film itself. The site relaunched on April 1, the only obvious indication that it was all made up.

“Most people use the Internet as a promotional tool to provide information about a movie,” explained John Hegeman, Artisan’s executive vice president of worldwide marketing, in 1999. “We used it as a tool to establish the Blair Witch phenomenon. On the Internet, it’s easy to establish your own reality. That’s what makes it so much fun.”²⁵⁸ In a small-scale preview of the social media marketing adage that content must always be fresh, Rovello and her team kept adding new tidbits, like one of Heather's diary pages or an interview with someone involved in the “case.” At the time, Hegeman contrasted Artisan’s approach with other studios’ static websites. “A lot of studios create a Web site, people visit once and that’s it,” he said. In retrospect, Rovello (now CEO of the online gaming company Arkadium) sees parallels between her Blair Witch work and social media. “In our case it was like fans had to go [visit the website] because they wanted to be the first to see it,” she says.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Rebecca Stewart, “How the Original Blair Witch Project Ushered in a New Era of Viral Movie Marketing,” *The Drum*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2016/09/23/how-the-original-blair-witch-project-ushered-new-era-viral-movie-marketing>.

²⁵⁷ Amy Wallace and Richard Natale, “Internet Powers Success of ‘Blair Witch Project’: Hollywood: Campaign Appealing to New Generation Helps Turn \$50,000 Horror Film into a Blockbuster,” *Los Angeles Times (1996-Current)*, August 5, 1999, sec. Orange County.

²⁵⁸ McCarthy, “IQ News - Analysis.”

²⁵⁹ Stewart, “How the Original Blair Witch Project Ushered in a New Era of Viral Movie Marketing.”

As mainstream publicity about the film grew following Sundance, visits to Artisan’s Blair Witch website soared. By November 1999, blairwitch.com had logged more than 180 million hits and over 20 million unique visitors.²⁶⁰ It would be hard to overstate the importance of media coverage in spreading awareness about the film. The novelty of internet-based marketing combined with the producers’ winking approach to the Blair Witch “legend” led to thousands of articles and television news stories. For example, in 1999, *The New York Times* alone published 89 articles referencing *The Blair Witch Project*.²⁶¹ The press coverage and how the phenomenon entered the societal zeitgeist help explain why other studio marketers did not rush to copy the strategy. They knew it would be difficult to duplicate.

Meanwhile, fans began creating their own Blair Witch websites, particularly on GeoCities' popular web hosting service. Of course, in the pre-social media era, “sharing” or “liking” took more than a push of a button. Still, many people found the Blair Witch story engrossing enough to justify the effort. Essentially, first Haxan Films and then Artisan introduced an “expanded universe” for Blair Witch, long before that term was popular. Producers filled out the storyline with enough lurid details to fuel endless debate. Soon enough, web users became scholars of the mythology, sifting through the clues that blairwitch.com fed to them. The creator of one fan page, “The Blair Witch Project Chronicle,” explained how he became interested in the legend after his son showed him the movie trailer, which—like of all Artisan’s marketing—did not disclose that the story was fictional. “As I browse the history of the legend,

²⁶⁰ McCarthy, “IQ News - Analysis.”

²⁶¹ Based upon archival search on NYT.com; data collected August 1, 2021.

which tells the creepy story starting with the witch’s first attacks on children, I slowly realize that I have goosebumps,” he wrote on his GeoCities site.²⁶²

After relaunching the official website, Artisan slowly added to the promotional mix in an attempt to maintain viral buzz up until the film’s wide release on July 30, 1999. The studio released the first trailer not on television but on the Ain’t it Cool News website on April 2. A month and a half later, it turned to more traditional publicity by releasing a five-minute segment to MTV, which replayed the extended trailer many times and prominently displayed the Blair Witch web address. Finally, on June 11, Artisan aimed a 40-second teaser trailer to a broader audience by placing it before the year’s most anticipated movie, *Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace*. The marketers took an equally gradual and modest approach to print, radio, and TV advertising. The first print ads appeared in alternative weeklies on June 23; the studio dropped radio ads and print ads in mainstream papers a few weeks later. There was little television advertising until after the wide release.²⁶³ All told, Artisan spent \$15 million on prints and advertising.²⁶⁴ To build viral word-of-mouth and propagate the Blair Witch myth, Artisan also plastered “missing person” posters around college campuses (see Figure 11). Many of the signs included a call-to-action: “Evidence exists. Log on to www.blairwitch.com to see and hear.” In one of the more controversial moves, Artisan even updated the three actors’ IMDb web pages to list them as “missing, presumed dead.”²⁶⁵

²⁶² Bereznak, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing.”

²⁶³ McCarthy, “IQ News - Analysis.”

²⁶⁴ Wallace and Natale, “Internet Powers Success of ‘Blair Witch Project.’”

²⁶⁵ Rebecca Hawkes, “Why Did the World Think The Blair Witch Project Really Happened?,” *The Telegraph*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/07/25/why-did-the-world-think-the-blair-witch-project-really-happened/>.

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to expand storytelling beyond the movie was an hour-long television special, *Curse of The Blair Witch*, premiering on the Sci-Fi Channel (now Syfy) on July 11, 1999. At the time, studios often promoted new films with behind-the-scenes specials, typically on cable channels such as Comedy Central or Sci-Fi. Artisan pitched something similar to Sci-Fi, with a critical twist: rather than a traditional “sneak peek,” this would be a “documentary” presenting the Blair Witch legend as fact.²⁶⁶ Ben Rock, *Blair Witch* production designer and creator of the iconic twig man logo, wrote *Curse of The Blair Witch* in two months; Myrick and Sánchez helped with the script and directed. The resulting film resembled many low-budget cable documentaries: pans across archival images, talking-head interviews, ominous music, and even reenactments, explaining the Maryland town’s supposed history of witch-driven tragedies. “The fact that something I wrote was on Sci-Fi Channel at all was insanely exciting to me,” Ben Rock recalls. The “documentary” was a success; Sci-Fi replayed it many times over the summer. Says film producer Monello: “I think it was one of the highest-viewed originals on Sci-Fi... the ratings were so good.”²⁶⁷ On air, Sci-Fi never acknowledged that the “documentary” was a mockumentary.

Artisan also introduced transmedia storytelling to other film tie-ins; many launched after the film’s release, given the short turnaround time the studio had between the Sundance deal and the July opening date. For example, Oni Press released a comic book offering an account of another character (unmentioned in the film) who met the witch. Even the soundtrack, rarely a site

²⁶⁶ Andrew Paul, “Before The Blair Witch Project Hit Theaters, a TV Special Reinforced Its Ingenious Deception,” *The Onion AV Club*, July 9, 2016, <https://film.avclub.com/before-the-blair-witch-project-hit-theaters-a-tv-speci-1835852476>.

²⁶⁷ Paul.

of narrative development, was presented as Joshua's mix tape, supposedly found in his abandoned car. After Sundance, Artisan's marketing team developed many of these co-branding and merchandising deals without the filmmakers' involvement.

"Keep in mind: We no longer owned the movie," says Dan Myrick. "Artisan is making all the decisions and conferring with us out of courtesy. That's another reality we were having to face. We really didn't have any decision-making authority. The books, and the magazine, and comic books, and the Joshua mix tape, and all the stuff that was coming out was sort of overwhelming. Some of it, I thought was cool. Some of it, the fans really embraced. And other things felt totally exploitative, in my opinion. Everything from the Blair Witch pocketknife to the Kubrick [brand] action figure dolls. It just got ridiculous."²⁶⁸ Myrick's point that "Artisan is making all the decisions" highlights a recurring feature of transmedia storytelling: disputed ownership between marketers and creatives. Media scholar Denise Mann traces similar clashes between television writers and network marketers in the decade following *Blair Witch*.²⁶⁹

Artisan's transmedia extensions and viral marketing stunts complemented a unique release strategy developed by the studio's distribution president, Steven Rothenberg. Artisan screened the film at college campuses during the spring, hoping to generate buzz amongst the audience most likely to have regular internet access. Then in mid-July, Artisan released the film in 27 single-screen art houses in downtown locations. The platforming tactic would have been typical for an art cinema distributor such as Miramax, but it was unusual for a youth-targeted horror film. The gamble paid off when the art houses engaged in elaborate promotional stunts to

²⁶⁸ Scott Meslow, "The Blair Witch Project: An Oral History, Part 4," *The Week*, January 15, 2015, 4, <https://theweek.com/articles/531460/blair-witch-project-oral-history-part-4>.

²⁶⁹ Mann, "Introduction," 5–13.

draw viewers. One Philadelphia theater installed flickering candle-flame bulbs in the theater's light fixtures and served "blood" popcorn. Landmark's NuWilshire in Santa Monica, California, decorated its marquee with a three-person tent (representing the missing filmmakers) and bloody handprints.²⁷⁰ The distribution strategy generated further word-of-mouth, feeling more organic than a traditional Hollywood opening night.

Moreover, it reinforced the "independent" branding the producers had cultivated since the "legend" first appeared, fittingly, on the Independent Film Channel. As I discussed in the previous chapter, "independent" is often a studio marketing pitch more than anything else. Indeed, one of Artisan's overall goals was to target savvy young filmgoers by inviting participation and eschewing a Hollywood "hard sell." Explained marketing VP Hegeman: They are very sharp; they know when they are being fooled and their B.S. antenna are always up. But they embraced this as a multimedia event because they were privy to it before anybody else."²⁷¹ So, even though Artisan was "making all the decisions," the studio's PR team continued to emphasize Sánchez and Myrick and the movie's low-budget origins. Print and television journalists regularly interviewed the pair. For instance, the *New York Times* published a lengthy feature article on Sunday, July 11—three days before the film's release.²⁷² Although it credits Artisan with launching "an elaborate publicity campaign," the article mainly focuses on Sánchez and Myrick, with quotes about the origins and bare-bones filming process. The first-time directors remained Artisan's front men even though they no longer had authorial control. And

²⁷⁰ Wallace and Natale, "Internet Powers Success of 'Blair Witch Project.'"

²⁷¹ McCarthy, "IQ News - Analysis."

²⁷² Justine Elias, "FILM; Making Horror Horrible Again: Into a Forest Full of Witchery," *The New York Times*, July 11, 1999, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/11/movies/film-making-horror-horrible-again-into-a-forest-full-of-witchery.html>.

it's another way *Blair Witch* previews the social media era. As I will illustrate in later case studies, studios often emphasize directors' or other creative personnel's artistic independence even as executives pull strings in the background—a bid to make studio projects feel more “authentic” to skeptical audiences.

Speaking of “B.S. antenna,” *did* viewers think the Blair Witch story was true? Certainly, plenty of people were taken in. “It’s like ‘War of the Worlds.’ It’s become an instant urban legend,” said Chris Pula, Disney’s marketing chief, comparing *Blair Witch* to Orson Welles’ famous 1938 radio broadcast about an alien invasion that many Americans thought was real.²⁷³ Star Heather Donahue remembers her least favorite part of the Blair Witch experience: “People being angry at you for being alive. This overarching feeling that it would have been more convenient for people if you were actually dead.”²⁷⁴ Kevin Foxe recalls a screening event in Los Angeles where he and Donahue chatted with a partygoer who believed she had died in the film. They couldn’t convince him otherwise, even when Donahue showed him her driver’s license.²⁷⁵ Explains actor Michael C. Williams: “The internet was new! So, if you think back, some of the things you read on the internet you go, “Oh that must be true. I saw it on the internet.” Just like when newspapers came out. You believed what you read.”²⁷⁶ Now, it wasn’t too hard to find out the truth. Many mainstream news and entertainment outlets explained that the story was fictional, including in their reviews of the film. Still, misleading marketing had a powerful effect. Dan Myrick says, “we ‘fooled’ — if you want to call it that — a large swath of the public, who

²⁷³ Wallace and Natale, “Internet Powers Success of ‘Blair Witch Project.’”

²⁷⁴ Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project,” January 14, 2015.

²⁷⁵ Bereznak, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing.”

²⁷⁶ Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project,” January 14, 2015.

thought it was real. We'd do interviews where people asked if the story was real, and I'd say, 'Didn't you see the cover of TIME magazine? Didn't you see that story in USA Today? It's obviously a movie, right?' But if you wanted to believe it was real, it allowed you to do that.”²⁷⁷

That the promotional surround “allowed” viewers to believe the story was real parallels the social media era when closed-loop information silos fuel conspiracy theories and false information. In retrospect, the directors and producers somewhat distance themselves from their tactics. Foxxe claims that some of the more morally questionable choices, such as faking the actors’ IMDb pages, were Artisan’s doing—without the producers’ knowledge. “Were we the harbinger of fake news? I hope not,” he says. “But that’s what you do, right? You start to slowly erode the trust factor.”²⁷⁸ Director Eduardo Sánchez noted in 2015: “We never lied. It wasn't like we were trying to do a hoax. We always thought, ‘You trick people into the theater, and they find out it's not real, they're going to be really angry.’”²⁷⁹ But in 1999, a few weeks before the film’s release, Sánchez told *The New York Times*: “It seems real, it looks real, it feels real. We're not saying it's the truth, and we're not saying it's not.”²⁸⁰ The filmmakers walked a fine line in the name of marketing.

Blair Witch was a marketing strategy before it was a movie. Long before filming, Sánchez and Myrick created the eight-minute faux-documentary and fake postcards. They added the website shortly afterward. Most significantly, they found a way to turn user labor into an advertisement. At Sundance, Artisan arguably bought a marketing technique more than a film.

²⁷⁷ Meslow.

²⁷⁸ Berezna, “How ‘Blair Witch’ Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing.”

²⁷⁹ Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project,” January 14, 2015.

²⁸⁰ Elias, “FILM; Making Horror Horrible Again.”

Digital marketing drove the studio's subsequent decisions. Said John Hegeman, the Artisan VP of worldwide marketing: "Everything we did—including the movie itself—fed off the Web site."²⁸¹ Blairwitch.com was not the first website to promote a film, but it was the first website to *create* a film.

Michael Monello, one of the *Blair Witch* producers, later founded Campfire, an interactive marketing agency that has created transmedia fan experiences for HBO's *Westworld*, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and many other entertainment and consumer brands. Not surprisingly, Monello prefers to call the work storytelling or, even better, fan interaction. Recalling Blair Witch, he explains: "I think it was easy to look at the website and the fan base online and call it marketing. The story that was missed was how the internet was going to connect fans.... The idea that fans are now connected was going to be so important to the future of the film industry. It was going to change the kinds of movies that Hollywood was going to make."²⁸² Monello's claim reflects a sleight-of-hand that social media marketers still use today. He's right that fan interactivity would be important to the internet and influence film production. Yet, he also suggests that fan connections are not part of "marketing." They are, of course. Marketers aim to turn fan labor into industrial capital. They just don't want to be obvious about it.

User Labor in Web 1.0

Even in the early years of Web 1.0, technology firms were already profiting from user-generated content without compensating the creators. The *Blair Witch* producers found a way to

²⁸¹ McCarthy, "IQ News - Analysis."

²⁸² Berezna, "How 'Blair Witch' Became a Horror Sensation—and Invented Modern Movie Marketing."

profit from user labor, too. In a prescient journal article published in 2000, scholar Tiziana Terranova recognized that internet users' "free labor" via chat rooms, fan fiction, and digital mailing lists generated real monetary value for private corporations. The sociologist Manuel Castells, among other theorists, had already noted the early internet's impact on knowledge workers in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, including increased workforce flexibility, the need for continuous reskilling, a reliance on freelancers, and the pressure to work beyond the office.²⁸³ In and of themselves, these practices would give emergent technology companies a labor advantage over established industries, Hollywood included.

However, Terranova recognized that the digital economy also expanded "labor" well beyond paid knowledge workers. She begins with an early example, AOL's reliance on volunteer "chat hosts" (paid only with free AOL usage) to police its chat rooms, one of its most popular features. In 1999, seven of the fifteen thousand "volunteers" asked the Department of Labor to investigate whether AOL owes them back wages.²⁸⁴ In focusing on user labor's benefit to corporations, Terranova draws a contrast with more utopian analyses of the early internet, such as Richard Barbrook's belief that the net would foster a gift economy without the mediation of money or politics.²⁸⁵ Kevin Kelly's notion that the internet would nurture a beneficial "hive mind" had also been influential in some early academic analyses and amongst tech leaders themselves; Kelly co-founded *Wired* magazine in 1993.²⁸⁶

²⁸³ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Information Age, v. 1 (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 395.

²⁸⁴ Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33.

²⁸⁵ Terranova, 35–36.

²⁸⁶ Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World*, 1., paperback printing, March (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1994).

Terranova highlights several specific features of early digital labor that would be relevant in the social media era. First, she notes that “the Internet is about the extraction of value out of continuous, updateable work, and it is extremely labor-intensive.” Second, labor is not equivalent to employment, and only some are “hypercompensated by the capricious logic of venture capitalism.”²⁸⁷ Third, the early internet already had a voracious appetite for new content—one that would only increase with social media. Free labor fed much of the need, then as now. What the internet cares about, Terranova says, is “an abundance of production.”²⁸⁸ The “mystery” of *The Blair Witch Project* encouraged web users to create content, from bulletin board posts to GeoCities websites, that producers then turned into economic value. An abundance of production would become even more critical in the social media era.

Recognizing an early contrast between traditional mass media and digital media, Terranova admits that “old media” such as TV and newspapers draw on the free labor of their audiences or readers, say via reality shows or news coverage of police chases. However, she says, old media tends to structure “the latter’s contribution much more strictly, both in terms of economic organization and moralistic judgment. The price to pay for all those real life TV experiences is usually a heavy dose of moralistic scaremongering: criminals are running amok on the freeways and must be stopped by tough police action; wild teenagers lack self-esteem and need tough love.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Terranova, “Free Labor,” 48.

²⁸⁸ Terranova, 53.

²⁸⁹ Terranova, 47.

Still, as media scholar Mark Andrejevic notes, reality and competition television programming prefigured the ways social media platforms would later exploit user labor. The genre proved especially popular around the turn of the millennium, with breakout hits including *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-present), *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000-present), and *American Idol* (FOX, 2002-2016; ABC, 2018-present). Writing about such non-scripted programs, Andrejevic argues that reality TV—and even personal webcams in Web 1.0—blurs the lines between “domesticity, leisure, and labor,” an observation ever more relevant in the smartphone era.²⁹⁰ Andrejevic further contends that exposing private space to public view is the price an average person pays to participate in an industry otherwise unavailable to them; that applies to reality TV and equally so, but with more significant economic implications, to contemporary social media. Traditional television networks view reality programming as a low-cost addition to their lineups of scripted shows. User-generated content would soon create a self-sustaining system of amateur broadcasters targeting their own, often small, social media communities on Facebook and other social media platforms.

Terranova’s and Andrejevic’s emphasis on the economic value of digital user labor – particularly the power imbalance between media producers and consumers—contrasts with Henry Jenkins’s early scholarship on fan activity. In his seminal *Textual Poachers* (1992), Jenkins draws upon Michel de Certeau’s notion of “poachers” to argue that fans poach popular media content to become producers themselves, creating new cultural materials like art and fiction. Thus, fans “become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual

²⁹⁰ Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 81.

meanings.”²⁹¹ Jenkins’s argument led to a new scholarly emphasis on fan studies but, at least in its initial form, tended to understate the media industry’s power over the audience. Even as *Blair Witch* producers greatly benefited from user labor, they sought to constrain and redirect it into economic value. For example, Artisan greatly expanded the film-world website once it bought the rights, so a studio-controlled environment, rather than fan creations, would be the definitive source for information about the upcoming release. I will return to this debate later in the chapter and throughout my study, as questions about fan labor underpin much of the scholarship about social media.

Transmedia Storytelling

Jenkins released another highly influential book, *Convergence Culture*, in 2006, just as social media platforms were emerging. The work built upon and refined *Textual Poachers* and popularized ideas about “transmedia storytelling.” Jenkins explains that the “concept of transmedia storytelling first entered public dialogue in 1999 as audiences and critics tried to make sense of the phenomenal success of *The Blair Witch Project*.”²⁹² Following Jenkins’s book, “transmedia” became a buzzword in both industry and scholarly circles. As Jenkins explains, transmedia “means simply ‘across media’ and implies a structured or coordinated relationship among multiple media platforms and practices.”²⁹³ He adapted the term from

²⁹¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Studies in Culture and Communication (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.

²⁹² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Updated and with a new afterword (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2008), 101.

²⁹³ Henry Jenkins, “The Reign of the ‘Mothership,’” in *Wired TV: Laboring over an Interactive Future*, ed. Denise Mann (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 244.

Marsha Kinder, who observed in 1991 that popular children's characters were operating within "transmedia supersystems" that crossed between video games, television, and movies.²⁹⁴

The widespread use of "transmedia" has somewhat diluted Jenkins's original meaning. Note that Jenkins focuses on "transmedia *storytelling*," and indeed, stories are essential to his definition. "Transmedia storytelling," he explains, "represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."²⁹⁵ The same character might appear in a movie, TV show, and online game, but that does not meet Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling unless each medium adds something new to the audience's understanding of the character and its place in the fictional world. "As we think about defining transmedia, then, we need to come back to the relations between media and not simply count the number of the media platforms," he summarizes.²⁹⁶ *Blair Witch* encompassed a film, a website, a soundtrack, comic books, and a faux television documentary. Crucially, each piece introduced new plotlines or characters that gave fans more information about the Blair Witch legend. Even posters advanced the story rather than just promoting or describing the film. While Jenkins discusses *Blair Witch* briefly in *Convergence Culture*, he summarizes the key point: "To think of *The Blair Witch Project* as a film is to miss the bigger picture."²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 38.

²⁹⁵ Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," Confessions of an Aca-Fan, March 21, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

²⁹⁶ Jenkins.

²⁹⁷ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 101.

While the term is still relatively new, the concept of transmedia storytelling certainly predates the digital age. Even in the middle ages, Jenkins points out, worshipers might have encountered religious figures in “stained-glass windows, a tapestry, psalm, a sermon.”²⁹⁸ Long before the famed movie version, L. Frank Baum expanded his *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) into multiple stories, poems, stage plays, and musicals. Nevertheless, transmedia storytelling departs from our usual understanding of classical narrative cinema, where we expect to leave the theatre with all of the knowledge required to make sense of a particular story.²⁹⁹ Although transmedia storytelling does not strictly *require* digital or social media, the internet’s scale and interactivity have significantly increased its impact. Moreover, as Jenkins observes, fans have long been early adopters of new technology: “their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production, ranging from costumes to fanzines and, now digital cinema.”³⁰⁰

Instead of pursuing closure, transmedia storytelling recognizes the pleasure of discovery, of finding that some aspects of a story are just beyond our grasp. *The Matrix* film trilogy (Warner Bros., 1999-2003) comprises one of Jenkins’s central case studies in *Convergence Culture*. In addition to the three films, Warner Bros. and its licensees issued two comic book collections, a series of animated shorts, and several video games. Each of these, Jenkins demonstrates, added something new to the Matrix story world.³⁰¹ Even watching all three movies would leave the viewer with missing information and an incentive to engage with the other media. As the *Blair*

²⁹⁸ Jenkins, 119.

²⁹⁹ Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101.”

³⁰⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 131.

³⁰¹ Jenkins, 93–130.

Witch example illustrates, marketing efforts can also fill this role, adding new story details that go beyond the bounds of the film itself.

While the *Blair Witch* website is a clear example of marketing as transmedia storytelling, not all digital film marketing campaigns qualify as such. Certainly, all online film promotion is “transmedia” in the broadest sense: it crosses between cinema and digital platforms. But not every online promotion meets Henry Jenkins’ definition of “transmedia *storytelling*.” The distinction is an important one. Jeff Gomez, a founder of the digital transmedia agency Starlight Runner, puts it this way: “Transmedia doesn’t replace marketing, it is infused into it, turning marketers into storytellers who are helping to enrich and expand the franchise.”³⁰² Marketers’ new role as storytellers is one of the reasons I argue social media can significantly impact the ways audiences understand a film. Indeed, I find that the most successful social media campaigns—usually measured by digital user engagement, or in some cases, other business objectives—are those that tell transmedia stories, meaning that the social media presence advances the narrative in some meaningful and exciting way. *The Blair Witch Project* is a template for social media campaigns to follow.

Mini-major and independent studios have been most likely to experiment with cross-platform narratives, as Artisan’s *Blair Witch* campaign highlights. The major studios have been much more guarded. Overall, Hollywood has focused on what Jenkins terms the “mothership” approach, with the film itself taking clear precedence over any surrounding media. “Other media should deepen the audience’s engagement without ‘cannibalizing’ the market,” Jenkins explains. “The mothership should not depend for its dramatic pay-off on something that consumers have to

³⁰² “Jeff Gomez on Transmedia Producing,” Producer’s Guild of America, http://www.producersguild.org/?jeff_gomez.

track down elsewhere. The mothership must be perceived as self-contained, even if other media add new layers.”³⁰³ Since film marketing departments still primarily measure their success by box office return—the mothership—marketers only care about digital engagement to the extent they can argue it drove ticket sales or at least ancillary revenue. However, savvy marketers have recognized that transmedia storytelling can help them frame their movie in a way that drives ticket revenue *and* even aids other business goals, such as co-branding deals or simply avoiding bad publicity.

Most film marketers recognize the promise of fan engagement—*Blair Witch* offered the industry an early, compelling example—but they also fear losing control of the discussion around their film. In *Convergence Culture*, and even more so in his later writings, Jenkins distinguishes between “interactivity” and “participation.” He argues that “interactivity has to do with the properties of the technology and participation has to do with the properties of the culture. Obviously, in practice, both may come into play in the same text.”³⁰⁴ For example, a video game is highly interactive, but the consumer has no control over the story; the experience is preprogrammed. By contrast, Jenkins explains, “Fan culture is high on participation, where fans take the resources offered by a text and push it in a range of directions which are neither preprogrammed nor authorized by the producers.”³⁰⁵ However, some scholars, including Mark Andrejevic, argue that even this definition overstates fans’ power in the face of corporate control, a debate I will return to later in this chapter.

³⁰³ Jenkins, “The Reign of the ‘Mothership,’” 246–47.

³⁰⁴ Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia 202: Further Reflections,” Confessions of an Aca-Fan, July 31, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

³⁰⁵ Jenkins.

Meanwhile, film marketers often think about Jenkins's distinction between interactivity and participation. They welcome interactivity, fans engaging in the story world in ways authorized by the studio. However, they are usually much more skeptical of participation since fans may take the text in directions the marketers do not anticipate—or perhaps directions the marketers fear, such as problematic political, gender, or racial subject matter. Usually, marketers' concerns result in an ambivalent approach to fan activity, as when Artisan solicited fan engagement but corralled it into approved directions, like the studio-controlled website.

Jenkins argues that participation can enhance the audiences' pleasure in and engagement with a media property. The *Blair Witch* creators indeed found that out. "What we've learned from Blair Witch is that if you give people enough stuff to explore, they will explore. Not everyone but some of them will," explains co-director Eduardo Sánchez. "The people who do explore and take advantage of the whole world will forever be your fans, will give you an energy you can't buy through advertising.... It's this web of information that is laid out in a way that keeps people interested and keeps people working for it. If people have to work at something, they devote more time to it. And they give it more emotional value."³⁰⁶ Today's social media marketers would likely agree with Sánchez—although they would also point out that "keeping people interested" is pretty hard, and it can backfire.

In the case of *Blair Witch*, Artisan experimented with audience participation on a low-budget genre film with no established intellectual property or fan base. As a result, it was relatively low risk. As we will see in later chapters, the calculus changes when marketers must contend with existing fandom, higher budgets, or valuable franchises. Studio marketers often

³⁰⁶ Quoted in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 103.

focus on “continuity” rather than “multiplicity,” even when inviting fan participation. Jenkins explains, “They make the author or some designated agent an arbiter of what counts within the canon.”³⁰⁷ For *Twilight*, an early example of the social media techniques I will explore in the next chapter, the studio published detailed character guides and social media templates to control the conversation while inviting user-generated content.

The promise and peril of transmedia storytelling are one of the reasons marketing has become more central to film production. As Jenkins says, “Many transmedia projects are funded through promotional budgets and judged by their success in attracting audience attention.”³⁰⁸ Therefore, “marketing logics still exert strong pulls, at every stage, in shaping what kinds of transmedia extensions are produced and distributed.”³⁰⁹ Certainly, that was the case with *The Blair Witch Project*; the filmmakers created their story-driven website to attract funding, and Artisan’s marketing department expanded it to drive box office. If, as *Starlight Runner*’s Jeff Gomez suggests, transmedia allows marketers to be storytellers, the flip side is that storytellers—screenwriters, directors, costume designers, even development executives—must increasingly think like marketers. As John Caldwell puts it, “Today all films and series market other versions of the same films and series in various franchises and brands.”³¹⁰ Echoing this, Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson note that the merging of marketing and creative content “has made the division between the ‘creators’ of film and television programs and those who make paratexts far

³⁰⁷ Jenkins, “Transmedia 202.”

³⁰⁸ Jenkins, “The Reign of the ‘Mothership,’” 246.

³⁰⁹ Jenkins, 248.

³¹⁰ John T. Caldwell, “Screen studies and industrial “theorizing,” *Screen* 50:1 (2009): 174-175.

less clear.”³¹¹ Denise Mann points out that even transmedia producers at digital agencies such as Starlight Runner find themselves caught between artistry and promotion, publicly arguing for highly participatory transmedia even as they partner with Disney and other big studios concerned about tight control of IP.³¹² The blurry line between marketing and content will be another recurring theme in this study, both in early digital campaigns such as *Blair Witch* and later examples of the social media marquee.

The Hollywood Studios and Web 1.0: Early Convergence

Artisan Entertainment and CEO Amir Malin sought to quickly capitalize on *the Blair Witch* phenomenon, greenlighting a sequel and prequel, securing \$600 million in financing, and founding new consumer products, home entertainment, and digital media divisions. Directors Dan Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez opted out of the first sequel. Explains Sánchez: “We realized that this was not going to be Blair Witch. This was going to be ‘Pick a release date, start working on the movie.’ We gave a few notes on earlier drafts of the script, and they didn't listen to any of them. So we said, “Okay. Well, invite us to the premiere when you're ready.”³¹³ Artisan released the resulting film, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*, in October 2000 to poor reviews and a disappointing \$47.7 million box office gross despite another significant online and offline marketing push. The studio shelved the prequel. After several other box office disappointments, Artisan’s fortunes fell quickly. In December 2003, another independent studio, Lionsgate

³¹¹ Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries* (London: Routledge, 2015), 8.

³¹² Mann, “Introduction,” 9.

³¹³ Meslow, “The Blair Witch Project: An Oral History, Part 4.”

Entertainment, bought it for \$220 million.³¹⁴ Scholar Thomas Schatz observes that the “fate of Artisan and its would-be Blair Witch franchise well indicated the challenges facing even a successful independent at the turn of the new century, and the consequences of a single miscalculation for a company without a deep-pocketed parent to cover its losses.”³¹⁵ The fate of Artisan and the Blair Witch franchise also reminded Hollywood marketers that digital promotion was no guarantee of box office success.

Studios began investing a bit more in promotional websites, but most executives were uncertain that they could or even should replicate the formula. As she was leading successful efforts to promote the *Blair Witch* DVD release, Artisan home entertainment marketing chief Naomi Pollock offered this prediction: “This probably won’t change the marketing of the big blockbuster movies, but there won’t be a single film from now on where the head of the studio won’t ask, ‘So what’s our Internet strategy?’”³¹⁶ Pollock was right on both counts. Every studio marketing department *was* asked about its internet strategy; by the early 2000s, all major studios had dedicated digital marketing departments. However, digital remained a small piece of most film marketing campaigns, and surprisingly few emulated the transmedia storytelling approach of *Blair Witch*. Many executives viewed digital as a niche play for young audiences or a few genres such as horror or sci-fi. Even Artisan chairman Amir Malin argued in 2001: “You need

³¹⁴ Sharon Waxman, “With Acquisition, Lions Gate Is Now Largest Indie,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2003, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/16/movies/with-acquisition-lions-gate-is-now-largest-indie.html>.

³¹⁵ Schatz, “Going Mainstream: The Indie Film Movement in 1999,” 274.

³¹⁶ McCarthy, “IQ News - Analysis.”

the product that matches the audience. I'd say that 95 percent of the films in the marketplace don't really lend themselves to an Internet marketplace."³¹⁷

The newly minted digital marketing departments faced a changing and rapidly growing internet. Tech firms and Hollywood studios alternatively converged and collided in the early web era, much as they do today. All Hollywood conglomerates invested in internet ventures in the 1990s, only to sustain losses in the wake of the early 2000s “Dot-com bubble” and subsequent stock market crash—another reason the industry’s *Blair Witch*-fueled digital optimism didn’t last. Time Warner took the biggest swing and miss, with a disastrous 2001 merger with AOL. Shaken, many studios retreated from the web, ceding precious ground to Silicon Valley upstarts Google (founded 1998) and Facebook (founded 2004).

The Lord of the Rings: A Digital Approach to Franchise Marketing

In 1999, just a few months after *The Blair Witch Project* opened in theaters, New Line Cinema debuted lordoftherings.net to promote its upcoming adaptations of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* novels. The first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, would not be released until December 2001, but Gordon Paddison—still heading a small digital marketing department at New Line—wanted an early start on reaching Tolkien’s devoted fans. Or perhaps *placating* fans might be the better term; many were nervous that the film adaptation would not do justice to their beloved novels. At the time, many studios took a hard line to fan websites, going so far as suing webmasters for trademark infringement for repurposing film images or dialogue. Paddison convinced New Line bosses to try a different tack, providing production images and even

³¹⁷ Rick Lyman, “Movie Marketing Wizardry; ‘Lord of the Rings’ Trilogy Taps the Internet to Build Excitement,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2001, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/11/movies/movie-marketing-wizardry-lord-rings-trilogy-taps-internet-build-excitement.html>.

coveted set access to a selected group of fan websites. The result was a new digital marketing playbook that would highly influence other studio franchises, especially in the social media era.

Star Trek fan sites were prevalent on the early web, and Paramount's initial response was to threaten legal action against fans who posted copyrighted images or video clips. In a 1996 cease-and-desist letter sent to multiple fan sites, Paramount claimed trademark violations included "full scripts or excerpts therefrom ... detailed summaries of the works ... photographs, artistic renditions of *Star Trek* characters, or other properties ... images, sound bites, and video."³¹⁸ Seeking to prohibit fans from posting any images or even personal *drawings* of *Star Trek* characters was a highly aggressive interpretation of copyright law, not to mention alienating to fans.³¹⁹ Moreover, Paramount's stance reflected widespread industry concern about unauthorized file-sharing of video or music, threatening revenues. Music received the most attention initially, partly because the smaller files were easier to share and partly due to the popularity of the audio-focused site Napster, founded in 1999.

Moreover, Paramount's response was notable since *Star Trek* is arguably the most enduring example of fandom in popular media. Passionate and persistent fans helped a low-rated television series (NBC, 1966-1969) morph into 13 feature films and eight television series, even after Paramount let the franchise lay fallow for years at a time. The franchise has also been important to media scholarship. *Star Trek* fanart, fanfic, and fan "meta" essays comprise many of

³¹⁸ Steve Silberman, "Paramount Locks Phasers on Trek Fan Sites," *Wired News*, December 18, 1996, <http://www.wired.com/news/story/1076.html>.

³¹⁹ Viacom-owned Paramount took similar legal actions in Australia and the UK. The studio generally took a more permissive view of fan activity in the 2000s, although in 2015 it sued a filmmaker for his *Star Trek* YouTube short film. See Eriq Gardner, "CBS, Paramount Settle Lawsuit Over 'Star Trek' Fan Film," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/cbs-paramount-settle-lawsuit-star-trek-fan-film-966433>.

Henry Jenkins's examples in *Textual Poachers*. Ironic, then, that Paramount was suing the digital creators of the very fan material Jenkins celebrates just a few years after the book's publication. Hollywood's ambivalence towards digital fan participation pervades the marketing examples I will present in this study. Gordon Paddison successfully lobbied his New Line bosses to view online fans as assets rather than enemies. Even so, his cooperation with fans was limited, cautious, and methodical, an approach later social media marketers would follow.

The internet increased the importance of franchising, when studios leverage stories or characters across multiple media. While the practice is not new, franchises have become increasingly integral to Hollywood film production and a central tenet of film marketing in recent decades. Media scholar Derek Johnson offers four broad explanations for the rise of franchises: media conglomeration; the rise of new technologies like video games and the web; the related focus on smaller, often online fan communities; and the adoption of franchise business logic (a la McDonald's) to the entertainment industry.³²⁰

Consolidation, in particular, has led to more blockbusters and franchises for several reasons. Perhaps most obviously, since a single company like Disney has holdings in film and television production, a TV network, and theme parks, it seeks out properties that can be successfully adapted and cross-promoted in multiple platforms. In the theatrical market, another explanation is that as the number of annual film releases has dropped, the per-movie cost has skyrocketed; between 1975 and 2007, the average negative (actual production) costs for a

³²⁰ Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 4–6.

Hollywood film rose from \$5 to \$65 million. As a result, marketing costs rose even faster.³²¹ Therefore, each film carries more risk, and studio executives believe a known quantity (a sequel, a comic book adaptation, and even an adaptation from a theme park ride) will have a greater chance of success. The increase in megaplex movie theaters and the number of screens also encourages studios to “open big” with a recognized property rather than one that will grow with word of mouth. Recognizable franchises are also easier to promote in international markets, which have become increasingly important to the studios. As scholar Paul McDonald puts it, modern conglomerate Hollywood is “too big to be just American.”³²² Johnson makes the point with a chapter on *Transformers*, a film franchise that has become far more successful internationally than in the U.S.

International distribution and production is also a fundamental tenet of Kristin Thompson’s *The Frodo Franchise* (2007). In a detailed consideration of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Thompson argues that the films are historically important and “reveal a great deal about the changes going on in Hollywood in this transitional era of globalization and new media.”³²³ In the films themselves, she sees a pastiche quality that makes Tolkien’s detailed fantasy storytelling more accessible to general audiences by incorporating various popular action genres such as martial arts, horror, swashbuckler, war films, and Westerns.³²⁴ I would add that

³²¹ Janet Wasko, “Financing and Production,” in Paul McDonald, and Janet Wasko, eds, *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 15.

³²² Paul McDonald, “The Production of Hollywood Stardom in the Post-Studio Era,” in Paul McDonald, and Janet Wasko, eds, *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 170.

³²³ Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2007), 10.

³²⁴ Thompson, 57–59.

this tendency makes movies easier to reframe via paratexts, which I will revisit during the social media era.

Thompson's main project, though, is tracing the transmedia layers of the franchise. Peter Jackson's detailed approach—and the fact that he filmed all three films simultaneously—allowed for an unusually cohesive approach to the various franchise components, from video games to merchandise. For example, Jackson and his colleagues created a detailed style guide for licensees, specifying colors and designs for various film characters and locations. Thompson also argues that the convergence of filmmaking and gaming, both of which use computer graphic imaging, allowed the franchise to produce high-quality games efficiently. Video games, she says, have become the “most important component of a franchise's licensed products.”³²⁵

Thompson and Johnson both explore the vital role of fan communities in shaping franchises, though Johnson more directly interrogates theoretical questions raised by fan labor. He sees franchises as a site of negotiation between fans and studios, with studio marketing one crucial subset of the negotiation. Building on John Caldwell's *Production Culture* (2008), he argues that franchise participants, unpaid and paid, form a distinct culture and creative community. Johnson explains: “The multiplied media production under examination here will highlight franchising not just as industry and business, but as shared and iterative culture.”³²⁶ Although franchises are often dismissed as blandly repetitive, Johnson makes a case that franchises offer room for creativity and personal identity, both for fans and creative personal such as Ronald D. Moore, showrunner of a *Battlestar Galactica* remake (2004-2009).

³²⁵ Thompson, 233.

³²⁶ Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 8.

Even as he points to the creative possibilities within franchises, Derek Johnson argues that franchise transmedia campaigns often exploit fan labor. As Caldwell reminds us, “media production has deployed and monetized crowdsourcing as an internal labor strategy for decades,” for example, by relying on short-term contractors for essential job roles.³²⁷ For Johnson, digital media offers yet another way for producers to monetize crowdsourcing. He even compares fans “collaborating” with studios to Vichy France collaborating with the Nazis during World War II. Building on the war language, Johnson argues that media industries “increasingly occupy the spaces of collaborative user creation in emerging media environments.”³²⁸ He says that content owners seek to redirect fan passion into specific outlets, generally to the financial benefit of the producers. I argue that social media marketing often functions similarly. Johnson offers the example of the “Battlestar Galactica Videomaker Toolkit.” The Sci-Fi network (owned by NBC Universal) offered fans a collection of video and audio clips from the show and invited them to create their own short movies. Fans could upload their creations to the network’s website, and producers promised to pick a few to run on television.³²⁹ NBC-Universal benefited in two ways: it placed approved guardrails around fan creativity and could use the fans’ work product for free.

As Johnson suggests, if franchise fans comprise a cultural community, marketers must figure out how to approach that community. How to navigate online fandom was top of Gordon Paddison’s mind when, in 1998, New Line Chairman Bob Shaye Cinema committed upward of \$130 million to produce a trilogy based upon J.R.R. Tolkien's LOTR novels, the most ambitious

³²⁷ Caldwell, “Para-Industry,” 162.

³²⁸ Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 198–99.

³²⁹ Johnson, 212.

and costly film project in the studio's history. Paddison's idea? Rather than aggressively police fan activity, New Line should actively distribute production images to online fan sites. This model—in which studios “occupy” fan spaces (to use Derek Johnson's term) rather than seek total control of their trademarks—was successful and subsequently imitated by some other studios.

Paddison recalls that “every studio in '97, '98 did not distribute and disseminate information to fans.” So, he wrote a “memo to our head of legal at the time, it was Judd Funk and Ben Zinkin, and to our head of licensing, Dave Imhoff, requesting if I could do something different and actually disseminate images and materials from the set directly to Tolkien fandom sites and fans of the book and allow them to post these materials to feel ownership over the assets.”³³⁰ New Line's leadership signed off on the strategy, in part because digital marketing was not highly visible at the time. Paddison explains: “You know, nobody's going, “What's the internet saying?”

Thus, timing mattered in New Line's early tolerance for digital experimentation. Imhoff's initial sign-off even predated *Blair Witch* as well as the dot-com bust. New Line's unique status as a quasi-independent studio within a larger conglomerate also informed the strategy. Although Time Warner acquired it in 1996, New Line retained operational control and its own corporate departments, including marketing. When I asked Paddison to describe New Line during his tenure, he replied: “I don't want to say an independent spirit because that sounds like positioning, but certainly, it...had a little bit of the maverick style to it.” And purely practically, the studio's smaller film slate meant Paddison could devote time to a digital strategy even if some higher-ups

³³⁰ Paddison, interview. Unless otherwise noted, quotes and observations from Paddison regarding *Lord of the Rings* come from this interview.

were skeptical it would matter. "This has taken 30 percent of my time for over a year, and the commitment of materials and resources has been massive," Paddison said in 2001.³³¹ In later campaigns, some executives would question whether or not the time investment paid off, particularly if the effort focused on existing fandoms rather than expanding a potential audience.

Paddison knew that Tolkien's novels had a dedicated fandom, with a significant online presence even by the 1990s. Moreover, many fans were skeptical that any film adaptation could do justice to Tolkien's fantasy world. Fan Scott Edelman described his attitude in *Sci Fi* magazine: "So when I first heard that director Peter Jackson was going to tackle filming the trilogy, I grew fearful. I had long since given up the dream. Perhaps, I told myself, turning those particular words into cinematic reality was unfeasible. Not every story is filmable... Even though I had enjoyed Jackson's earlier films, I was confident that when *The Fellowship of the Ring* appeared on the screen, it would cause me to weep."³³²

Particularly for franchises or adaptations of famous literary works, marketing strategy is often more about avoiding *negative* publicity than generating *positive* publicity. Kirstin Thompson devotes a whole chapter of *The Frodo Franchise* to digital marketing. She observes that "studio marketing relies on control over publicity, but control is hard to maintain." A studio's "need to keep many things confidential clashes with the fans' desire to know every last detail, and the Internet has become the main arena for this struggle," she explains.³³³ Certainly, such a struggle played out for New Line and LOTR. Melissa Booth, an assistant publicist on the

³³¹ Lyman, "Movie Marketing Wizardry; 'Lord of the Rings' Trilogy Taps the Internet to Build Excitement."

³³² Scott Edelman, "Taken by Tolkien," *Sci Fi*, February 2003, 6.

³³³ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise*, 133.

first film and unit publicist for later releases, puts it this way: “Unlike some productions, where you’re trying to encourage people to come to the set and have a look and cover it, our main job was to not be in the press every day. Because otherwise, with the Internet, as soon as you’ve got something in a local newspaper, you’ve got it all over the world.”³³⁴ The struggle for control would also come to define many later uses of the social media marquee.

Paddison’s decision to “disseminate images and materials from the set directly to Tolkien fandom,” then, was not as simple as giving fans unfettered access to New Line’s trademarks. *Variety* described Paddison’s strategy in 2002: “There are global armies of devotees who view the Tolkien epic not as a corporate asset but as holy writ, and Paddison straddles the line between their needs and the demands of AOL Time Warner’s global marketing machine.”³³⁵ Alyson McRae, the film’s first marketing coordinator, adds that Paddison had to develop relationships with fan sites because New Line “really wanted to control the release of information, and a lot of these fan sites were very effective in cutting across that. It was very important to him to build a relationship so that he could say, ‘All right, you’ve got that, but we’d like you to hold off,’ or ‘I can give you this, but—.’”³³⁶ Social media marketers would apply similar fan management strategies to the book adaptations *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, as discussed in the next chapter.

Kristin Thompson argues that there were actually three “rings” of websites surrounding the first film: New Line’s official or sanctioned sites, “quasi-sanctioned” sites, and up to 50

³³⁴ Thompson, 135.

³³⁵ Dana Harris, “Rings’ Wizard Weaves Web of Magic,” *Variety*, December 6, 2002, 8. AOL officially acquired Time Warner, New Line’s parent, on January 11, 2001. However, much of the initial digital strategy was planned prior to the merger.

³³⁶ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise*, 160.

“multiplier” sites to whom Paddison would distribute images and news. New Line’s official website, lordoftherings.net, included downloadable screen savers, wallpapers, interviews, short behind-the-scenes clips, and trailers. Paddison told me that the “initial website for the film intentionally was almost in the same style as a Tolkien fansite. It was extremely lo-fi.” That design decision reflected Paddison’s overall goal to appear as a partner to fan sites rather than an opponent. Reminiscent of *Blair Witch*, New Line also launched the official site very early, over two years before the first film’s planned release date. In addition to the official site, New Line officially sanctioned three other websites. The studio paid Decipher Games to run an online Lord of the Rings Fan Club. It also fed scoops and set access to E! Online, the website for the entertainment cable channel, and the personal website of star Ian McKellen. The latter arrangement developed gradually—McKellen was one of the few actors from the film even to maintain a web presence—and involved ongoing negotiation between McKellen’s webmaster and New Line over what could be published.³³⁷ Through E! Online, popular with young women, New Line hoped to attract a secondary audience beyond the hard-core, primarily male fan base. Later, studios will similarly use social media to target specific demographics and broaden a film’s appeal. Paddison says he used digital insights to refine his pitch to the non-fan audience, particularly leveraging actor Orlando Bloom’s online popularity. More unusual at the time was New Line’s unofficial cooperation with fan sites such as Harry Knowles’s Ain’t It Cool News and TheOneRing.net; the latter became by far the most popular LOTR fansite.³³⁸ The relationships were bumpy at first; TheOneRing.net had even sent spies to the film set in New

³³⁷ Thompson, 144–48.

³³⁸ Thompson, 155.

Zealand. Eventually, though, New Line granted TheOneRing, Harry Knowles, and a few other “quasi-sanctioned” sites limited access to the set and production news.

Gordon Paddison’s most significant innovation was reaching out to a larger group of fan sites that grew from about 25 early on to 50 by the end. The marketing team sent press releases and images to the webmasters. Paddison recalls that he searched for “QEIB,” or “quantifiable early Internet buzz,” to identify the sites he would target. “It’s nice simple science.... I look for which Websites index highest for frequent moviegoers in this target demographic: 17 to 24 males who are 220% more likely to attend this movie based on genre.”³³⁹ By not blasting the content to everyone, Paddison granted a measure of prestige and exclusivity to his selected sites. The goal is not to convince fans to go to the movie—they almost certainly will—but rather to convince them to share their enthusiasm with others. It was a viral marketing strategy and a predecessor of the now common practice of using social media “influencers” to spread the word about a product.

New Line, competitors, and the press generally viewed the digital marketing campaign as a significant success. The first achievement: avoiding major blowback or complaints from Tolkien fans. Second: generating positive, viral word-of-mouth. Paddison well remembers the big turning point on April 7, 2000. Peter Jackson and his colleagues in New Zealand had developed new animation software, MASSIVE, to generate realistic crowd scenes, for example, to depict a phalanx of warriors on the battlefield. On April 7—still 20 months before the film’s release—Paddison and his team posted a clip of the new technology in action to the official website. Fans, serious and casual, were impressed. He recalls that the clip received 1.5 to 1.75

³³⁹ Quoted in Thompson, 160.

million views in 24 hours, a record, and represented nearly a third of internet traffic for a time. A year later, a traditional online trailer—released exclusively on the official site—also set a record. It received about 1.7 million downloads on the first day and 6.6 million on the first week.³⁴⁰ Paddison himself received personal and press accolades for the campaign. He recalls that, before LOTR, he was a “department of one,” a director reporting up to the head of PR. His efforts received enough attention that *The New York Times* called the studio to speak to “that internet guy,” resulting in a feature story. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, released in December 2001, grossed \$315 million domestically and \$888 million worldwide. New Line spent only 2 percent of its marketing budget on the web campaign, but exit polls suggested that more than half of spectators had gleaned some information about the film from the internet.³⁴¹

As we saw with *The Blair Witch Project*, New Line’s successful digital strategy did not immediately change other studios’ marketing playbooks. Some studios remained quite protective of their trademarks. Slowly, though, marketers became more willing to cooperate with fan sites. A 2004 *Variety* headline proclaimed that “Net Heads Finally Get Some Respect.” The article asked fan webmasters about their experiences with the major studios; they replied that Sony, New Line, and Warner Bros. were most receptive to their sites, DreamWorks and Universal the least.³⁴² TheOneRing fan site experimented with an offshoot, TheOneLion.net, for Disney’s *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005). Although Disney allowed four set visits, the marketing department became so restrictive and slow to respond that the site’s

³⁴⁰ Thompson, 141.

³⁴¹ Thompson, 141.

³⁴² Ben Fritz, “Net Heads Finally Get Some Respect,” *Variety*, April 12, 2004, 9.

creator quit updating it.³⁴³ Social media, just around the corner, would make online fan reactions even harder to ignore.

On either side of the new millennium, *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Lord of the Rings* both demonstrated the promise of digital marketing. But the two strategies were quite different. The *Blair* team leveraged transmedia storytelling—and the mystique of the early web—to build word of mouth for an unknown independent film. On the other hand, New Line made few efforts to expand the LOTR storyworld via its marketing or web presence. Instead, Gordon Paddison and his colleagues focused on fan management for an existing property, finding ways to control the online conversation. In the social media era, marketers would eventually incorporate both strategies.

Web Surfing, Web Marketing, 2000-2005

The turn of the millennium was a period of rapid but tumultuous growth in the worldwide web. In 2000, 52 percent of U.S. adults used the internet, including 70 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds and 61 percent of 30- to 49-year olds. By 2005, the usage had increased to 68 percent of U.S. adults, including 83 percent of those 18 to 29 and 79 percent of those 30 to 49. Workplaces and colleges often had high-speed broadband internet by 2000—one reason the *Blair Witch* marketers had focused on college campuses—but only 1 percent of homes did. The rest were using slow, dial-up internet. By 2005, 37% of Americans had high-speed broadband at home.³⁴⁴ Although AOL remained the leading internet service provider in the early 2000s, users gradually

³⁴³ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise*, 162.

³⁴⁴ “Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States” (Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>. In percentage terms, Canada and some parts of Europe and Asia slightly outpaced the U.S. in internet usage, but most countries were far behind.

turned away from its “walled garden” of curated (and often sponsored) content and towards the worldwide web. Tim Berners-Lee, the English computer scientist who invented the hyperlinks and websites of the world wide web in 1989, had originally envisioned a “read-write web” that would emphasize content *creation* as much as content *consumption*.³⁴⁵ In some respects, the early web was more “read-only,” focused on finding news, information, or products. However, many internet users created and shared their own content long before the rise of the current social media sites. Blogging platforms were widely available by the late 1990s. GeoCities, which allowed users to create simple websites for free, was the 3rd most popular website in the U.S. when Yahoo bought it in 1999.³⁴⁶

The table below compares the 10 most popular websites in the U.S. in 2000 and 2005.

| Top Websites in 2000 | ...2005 |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. AOL | Yahoo |
| 2. Yahoo | Microsoft/MSN |
| 3. Microsoft/MSN | Time Warner (inc. AOL) |
| 4. Excite (portal) | Google |
| 5. Lycos (search engine) | eBay |
| 6. About (content portal) | Amazon |
| 7. Amazon | Ask Jeeves (search engine) |

³⁴⁵ Mark Lawson, “Berners-Lee on the Read/Write Web,” BBC News, August 9, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4132752.stm>.

³⁴⁶ Philip Bump, “From Lycos to Ask Jeeves to Facebook: Tracking the 20 Most Popular Web Sites Every Year since 1996,” *Washington Post*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/12/15/from-lycos-to-ask-jeeves-to-facebook-tracking-the-20-most-popular-web-sites-every-year-since-1996/>. Original data is from Media Metrix/Comscore. Unless otherwise noted, webpage visitation data in this section comes from this source.

| | |
|---------------------|----------|
| 8. Disney | Walmart |
| 9. CNET (tech news) | Viacom |
| 10. eBay | NY Times |

In 2000, most of the top 10 were “portals” that offered some combination of news and entertainment content, email access, and web search. AOL.com benefited from being the default homepage for AOL customers, while MSN.com was the default homepage for the Internet Explorer browser bundled with the Windows operating system. The only Hollywood studio to appear in the top 10 at the beginning of the millennium was Disney, in part because of popular online content from its ESPN and ABC News units and in part because Disney had invested most aggressively in the early web, purchasing the online content developer Starwave in 1997 and the search engine Infoseek in 1998.³⁴⁷ Universal, then controlled by Vivendi and before its merger with NBC, made an appearance in 2001. Viacom, which included CBS, MTV, and Paramount Pictures, first cracked the top 10 in 2002. Time Warner temporarily rocketed to the top three in 2003, following its merger with AOL. The most notable entrant, though, came not from Hollywood but Palo Alto. Google, founded by Stanford Ph.D. students Larry Page and Sergey Brin in 1998, entered the top 10 in 2001 and climbed to #4 by 2002, quickly eclipsing other search engines such as Lycos.

The key takeaway is that the early web was unstable—and the Hollywood conglomerates had a solid opportunity to compete, given their extensive control of entertainment and news content. In fact, many of the leading portals relied on established television networks for content,

³⁴⁷ Roger Smith, “It’s Only Money,” *Variety*, March 19, 2001. Starwave had developed the ESPN website, among others. See also Jeff Peline, “Disney Buys Stake in Starwave,” CNET, April 3, 1997, <https://www.cnet.com/news/disney-buys-stake-in-starwave/>.

such as AOL's partnership with Disney-owned ABC News and Microsoft's tie-up with NBC News (resulting in MSNBC). Indeed, contemporary claims that media and tech firms are "converging" often ignore that they have been closely intertwined since the web began. Hollywood's initial enthusiasm for the internet was at least somewhat dulled by the "dot.com bubble" that had seen internet stocks rapidly rise—and then crash after a peak in March 2000. Many early online shopping companies, such as Pets.com and Webvan, went bust; other tech firms, including Amazon and Cisco Systems, saw huge drops in their market valuations but survived. The big studios generally suffered financially from their first forays into the internet business.

Disney had initially invested most aggressively, with its purchases of Starwave in 1997 and Infoseek in 1998. It eventually combined all of its internet activities, including content from ABC and ESPN, into a separate company, GO.com. In Disney's fiscal 2000, GO—eventually renamed Walt Disney Internet Group--reported revenues from all Internet activities of \$ 254 million, on which it lost \$ 371 million from operations, plus an \$ 800 million write-off in stock losses. GO's stock fell 80% in 2000 alone.³⁴⁸ Viacom (owner of Paramount) and Time Warner had also created internet divisions (the latter before AOL acquired it), and they did not fare much better than had Disney. For the first nine months of 2000, Viacom reported a loss of \$144 million on revenues of \$64 million. Over the same period, Warner's Digital Media division managed to lose only \$62 million, but its revenues from its website, Entertaimdom.com, were a relatively modest \$20 million.

³⁴⁸ Smith, "It's Only Money."

In March of 2001, *Variety* columnist Roger Smith analyzed Hollywood's internet experiences this way:

The Internet... is an extraordinary method of reaching thousands or even millions of tiny audiences with incredibly specific needs or desires. Want to know the average annual rainfall in Katmandu? Need the 1987 GNP of Brazil? The Internet's the place. What AOL and a very few others have shown is that you can make money from the Internet --- provided someone else is supplying the product. (Think chatrooms and message boards.) As an outlet for traditional entertainment products, the Internet is quite simply inferior to every other known method of distribution, certainly so if you insist on the old-fashioned concept of being paid for your efforts.”³⁴⁹

Smith acknowledged that the internet would *eventually* be a more helpful medium for Hollywood and even correctly anticipated the value of user-generated content but suggested that the studios stand down until a revenue model was clear. Many studio bosses shared the skepticism described here by Smith, particularly after being burned by the dot.com bubble. In early 2001, Disney shuttered GO.com and laid off its 400 employees. Robert Iger, then Disney's chief operating officer, told CNN that the company had “underestimated the advantage of in effect being a first mover” in the internet portal space.³⁵⁰ Around the same time, News Corp., The New York Times Co., and AOL Time Warner all cut hundreds of online jobs to reduce the costs of their internet operations.

The fallout indeed reached the studio marketing departments, where digital marketing spend remained modest. Recognizing the centrality of blairwitch.com to the success of that film, initially, the major studios devoted much of their small digital spend into building elaborate websites. In the late 1990s until 2000, many studios spent 2% of a pic's average \$30 million

³⁴⁹ Smith.

³⁵⁰ “Disney to Abandon GO.Com - Jan. 29, 2001,” CNNMoney, January 29, 2001, https://money.cnn.com/2001/01/29/technology/disney_go/.

prints & advertising (P&A) budget on website development. By 2001, studios were still spending a mere 2% of their P&A budget on digital but were focusing more on digital advertising partnerships than on their own website. "We're trying to identify who the audience is, where they live online and how to get that audience to see our movies," Dwight Caines, VP of Internet marketing strategy at Columbia Pictures, explained at the time. "It's like finding the fish where the fish are. We're not trying to build communities anymore. It's about going to the community that already exists and deploying them on your behalf."³⁵¹

Meanwhile, studios bought clickable banner ads that ran across the tops of the leading web portals, Yahoo, MSN, and AOL. "Homepage takeover" ads were popular on cinephile sites, including Ain't It Cool News, Dark Horizons, and Coming Attractions. "Hitting those sites has been really powerful," said Caines. "Not only do the large portal communities put you on the map with consumers, the cinephile sites put you in front of the opinion leaders. Buzz is buzz. If people are talking about our movie, that's one less conversation that you have to start."

DreamWorks and Disney even cut deals with Microsoft so their competing animated characters from *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.* would appear in the toolbars of Microsoft's Internet Explorer web browser.

Even before YouTube, studios found that posting trailers online—users would typically have to download to watch—was effective and not exclusively for known franchise films. For instance, Sony's teaser trailer for its parody *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001) was downloaded a million times.³⁵² Such results encouraged marketers to stick to the longstanding trailer format even as they moved online, a decision that would persist into the social media era.

³⁵¹ Marc Graser, "Studios Spin Wider Web for Auds," *Variety*, December 17, 2001.

³⁵² Graser.

Note that as the studios stopped “trying to build communities,” as Columbia’s Caines put it, emerging tech firms were doing just that. The point highlights an ongoing challenge for the Hollywood studios: a disconnect between the marketing department’s short-term goals and the long-term strategic interests of the company. Certainly, Caines was right that it is hard (though not impossible, as *Blair Witch* demonstrated) to build an online community to promote a single film, particularly for properties without existing fan bases. For a marketing staff trying to open a film in a few months, it’s much easier to buy ads on the Yahoo homepage or curry favor with a cinephile fansite. However, then the studios lose the opportunity to build an ongoing relationship with the fans—and their data.

What of transmedia storytelling, the complex web and movie integration that had worked so well for *Blair Witch*? Studios made remarkably few attempts to replicate the depth or the website-first approach. More common were one-off interactive games involving film characters. Warner Bros. often leveraged its AOL merger into promotions on AOL’s Instant Messenger, the most popular real-time communication service before social media or even widespread mobile texting. For example, AOL users could “chat” with the villain (a cyber hacker played by John Travolta) from Warner’s *Swordfish* (2001).³⁵³ Why didn’t marketing departments more fully embrace web storytelling? Caines’ comment about the difficulty of building communities is again illustrative. The *Blair Witch* effort had begun years before the film release, and even then, Artisan wasn’t able to parlay the fan community into a successful franchise.

New Line’s Gordon Paddison, then focused on planning for *Lord of the Rings*, remembers the aftermath. He describes *Blair Witch* as “a seminal event in digital marketing” and

³⁵³ Graser.

“the first time anybody did an integrated campaign calling to the web.” Asked if New Line tried its own integrated web campaigns after *Blair Witch*, Paddison replied: “Of course not. Nobody did. I mean, you know, that was lightning in a bottle.... Probably two or three people went and lost a lot of money doing something similar, but it wasn't the answer yet.”³⁵⁴ Paddison’s catching “lightning in a bottle” descriptor seems to capture a common sentiment amongst marketers at the time: *Blair Witch* benefited first from novelty and second from a perfect melding of product and medium. Grainy found footage complemented the technical limitations of the 1999 web. Moreover, the mystery of the “missing” filmmakers captured the sense of discovery that drove early web surfers (perhaps not incidentally, the first major web browsers were Netscape *Navigator* and Internet *Explorer*).

When the Hollywood conglomerates did turn to online transmedia storytelling in the first years of the web, it was usually to promote television programs rather than movies.³⁵⁵ In part, this reflected skepticism about the format; promotion for TV shows was generally less expensive and could be adjusted over time. Web-based storytelling also seemed to be a more obvious fit for serial television since it allowed the creators to fill in story gaps between weekly airings. One of the earliest examples, actually premiering just before *Blair Witch*, was “Dawson’s Desktop,” a website tie-in with the buzzy teen drama *Dawson’s Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003). Fans could log in to read the characters’ emails and even instant message with them; the site was frequently updated and reflected events shown on TV. In 1999, at the end of the show’s second season,

³⁵⁴ Paddison, interview.

³⁵⁵ In addition to the *Dawson’s Creek* example discussed here, other early 2000s TV programs with extensive transmedia websites included *Smallville* (The WB and CW, 2001-2011); *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010); and *Ghost Whisperer* (CBS, 2005-2010). See Mann, “Introduction.”

Dawson's Desktop attracted 1.5 million page views per week, an impressive tally given that *Dawson's Creek* itself averaged 5.4 million TV viewers a week.³⁵⁶ Notably, the site was developed not by The WB network marketing department but by Columbia TriStar Interactive, the new media unit within Sony Pictures Entertainment, *Dawson's* producer. Initially an assistant to one of the show's scribes, writer Arika Mittman created most of the content alongside web producer Ann Glenn.³⁵⁷ As media scholar Jennifer Gillan points out, Sony directly monetized Dawson's Desktop, selling advertising to the hair products line Dep and 1-800-Flowers (which offered six bouquets from the "Dawson's Desktop Capeside Collection"). Gillan explains that the site "was emblematic of a movement toward impression-based marketing in which advertisers pay for the exposure of their products to a specific audience," in this case, the young consumers devoted to Dawson and his pals.³⁵⁸

Like the Blair Witch website, Dawson's Desktop hints at a path not taken by the major Hollywood studios. Dawson's Desktop writer Mittman said in 2014: "We knew we were doing something cool that hadn't been done before — but I don't think we had any idea how much it would serve as a template for so many future interactive web extensions that would follow it." Ann Glenn, the site producer, speculated on how social media might have changed their approach. "It's funny," she said, "I will see somebody touting a site or campaign and think 'oh we did that for 'Dawson's' or, 'wow, if that platform was around today, like Tumblr, that's

³⁵⁶ Michele Botwin, "'Creek' Hits Fan Pay Dirt With Dawson's Desktop Web Site," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1999, sec. California Style.

³⁵⁷ Adam Flomenbaum, "Throwback Thursday: Looking Back at 'Dawson's Creek,' Connected Content Pioneer," November 20, 2014, <https://www.adweek.com/lostremote/throwback-thursday-looking-back-at-dawsons-creek-connected-content-pioneer/48584>.

³⁵⁸ Jennifer Gillan, *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 40.

where I would have put their diaries.”³⁵⁹ However, there is a crucial difference between the early open web and the closed social media platforms such as Tumblr or Facebook. Sony Pictures Entertainment controlled Dawson’s Desktop: it could directly sell advertising and collect data about the users. Today, when a transmedia campaign runs on social media, a studio must cede control and data to the tech platforms. If studios had invested more consistently in early digital storytelling, they might have been better positioned to compete with the rising tech firms.

By 2005, when YouTube was founded, 68 percent of U.S. adults--and 80 percent of those under 50—used the internet regularly.³⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the studios’ digital marketing spend remained notably low. That year, the Nielsen Company tracked the major studios’ media buys, capturing expenditures for advertisements (for example, buying ad time on CBS or a display ad on Yahoo) but excludes other marketing expenses such as overhead, premieres, or publicity events. The North American expenditures were as follows:

1. Network television (national): \$1.179 billion
2. Cable television: \$804.2 million
3. Spot television (regional and local ads): \$556.2 million
4. Print newspapers: \$538 million
5. Syndicated television: \$104.1 million
6. Outdoor advertising (billboards): \$92.7 million
7. Radio: \$66.2 million
- 8. Internet: \$52.3 million**
9. Print magazines: \$30.2 million ³⁶¹

Internet media buys accounted for a mere 1.5 percent of the studios’ total, 50 times less than television, ten times less than old-fashioned newspapers, and even lagging behind radio.

³⁵⁹ Flomenbaum, “Throwback Thursday.”

³⁶⁰ “Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States.”

³⁶¹ Stephen Galloway, “Several Million & Change- Movies and the Media,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 9, 2006.

Remarkably, the internet's share had declined slightly since 2004, when the studios directed 2.1 percent of their media buys online. Amongst the top 10 distributors in 2004, the percent of digital media buys ranged from a tiny 0.8 percent at Disney to 4 percent at New Line.³⁶²

What types of digital advertising were available to the studios in the early 2000s? Display ads, the clickable banners alongside website content, dominated online advertising at the beginning of the decade. By 2003, however, keyword search advertising had rapidly grown into the tech industry's biggest advertising moneymaker. In keyword search advertising, search engines like Google display ads they deem relevant to the terms a user has just entered. Search ads accounted for 35 percent of 2003 online ad revenue, followed by display ads at 21 percent and classifieds at 17 percent. Rich media ads, which include video or other interactive components, stood at 8 percent. Sponsorships also accounted for 8 percent of 2003 revenue.³⁶³ Sponsorships were waning in popularity by the middle of the decade, but studios remained some of the most significant users. Some continued to sign customized sponsorship deals with the still popular, if fading, AOL Instant Messenger. For the slasher film *Cry Wolf* (2005), for example, Universal's Focus Features unit introduced a game playable through the messenger, mimicking the film's storyline about terrorized students at an elite boarding school.³⁶⁴

Even adding in expenses beyond ad buys—for example, the cost of developing a promotional website or game—studio executives estimated they were generally spending 2 to 3 percent of their marketing budgets on the internet by the mid-2000s, only a slight increase since

³⁶² Stephen Galloway, "Money Matters," *The Hollywood Reporter* 389, no. 5 (May 10, 2005): S1–3.

³⁶³ "IAB Internet Advertising Revenue Report, 2003 Full-Year Results" (Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), April 2004).

³⁶⁴ Galloway, "Several Million & Change- Movies and the Media."

2001.³⁶⁵ So was digital advertising just dirt cheap? No, though it indeed remained less expensive overall than television. Yahoo! said in 2003 that it was charging as much as \$30 CPM (cost per thousand views), actually more costly than top-rated primetime television on a *per viewer* basis.³⁶⁶ However, since advertisers could target digital ads to specific demographics or interest groups (albeit with less precision than is possible today), the total cost would still likely be lower online.

Of course, there was some variation between films and genres; digital campaigns typically focused on younger filmgoers. Trying to lure advertisers, the Online Publishers Association claimed that by 2004, 40 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds looked up reviews and movie information on the Internet, and 28 percent looked for celebrities and personality information. Association president Michael Zimbalist advised studios: “The core moviegoing audience is 12-24, and that's where you really want to saturate.”³⁶⁷ Indeed, given how vital younger consumers were to Hollywood, it is surprising that the studios did not move more quickly into digital. Even the relatively low cost of early digital marketing did not sway most executives, despite widespread concern about rising marketing expenses. The average cost of marketing a studio picture was \$36.2 million in 2005, down slightly from a 2003 record high.³⁶⁸

To be fair, studios’ preference for traditional methods and fear of new competition were not the only reasons their digital ad spend remained modest relative to other business sectors.

³⁶⁵ Stephen Galloway, *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 18, 2004, <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:4CFM-K7G0-01V4-X0RH-0000-00&context=1516831>.

³⁶⁶ Galloway.

³⁶⁷ Galloway.

³⁶⁸ Galloway, “Several Million & Change- Movies and the Media.”

Most digital advertisers highly valued the relative ease of tracking online ad performance, but this process was less straightforward for movies. Tech firms had usually sold display ads on a CPM basis. Search ads led a shift to performance-based pricing, most commonly cost-per-click (CPC). In this model, advertisers only pay when a user clicks on an ad and visits the advertiser's website. Advertisers typically "bid" how much they are willing to pay per click for a particular search term ("new action movies," for example) or web page. By 2003, performance-based became the dominant pricing model.³⁶⁹

Performance pricing works especially well for transactions that can be fully completed online since advertisers can track whether or not a click led to a sale. However, because movie tickets were still mostly purchased offline, it was harder for studios to track whether or not their ads were working. To be sure, they couldn't effectively track their TV or print ads, either. But for the studios, it blunted one of online advertising's most significant selling points. Moreover, many studio marketers—highly sensitive to their brand reputation—disliked online auction advertising models in which they could not guarantee their placement on a search results page.

For example, eBay, Amazon, or even a no-name website might outrank Disney's ads on Google for a term like "The Lion King" because they bid more, sell more relevant products, or just write better ad copy. That outcome unsettled Hollywood executives accustomed to guaranteeing specific ad spots on television and print. Even if a studio digital marketing team didn't mind, they would often hear from senior executives who did ("Why are we the fifth result on Google for our own movie?"). When I worked at Google, my colleagues and I regularly heard these concerns from studio contacts. Another major issue: advertisers often couldn't *see* their ad

³⁶⁹ "IAB Internet Advertising Revenue Report, 2003 Full-Year Results."

on Google or YouTube.³⁷⁰ That was a widespread problem for advertisers used to print or television. But it was especially acute for the Hollywood studios, where visibility was and is highly prized. (A poorly kept secret is that Hollywood marketers often buy outdoor advertising along their CEO's or VP's drive to work.)

Online retailers spent the most on digital advertising because of their inventory and ability to track sales conversions at a specific product level. However, the Hollywood studios were laggards even amongst *offline* businesses. For example, in 2003, auto companies spent nearly twice as much on digital advertising as offline entertainment companies.³⁷¹ Notably, Google's first Southern California office was in Irvine, near the U.S. headquarters of many foreign auto brands, not in Hollywood or Los Angeles.

As "Web 1.0" drew to a close, six years after *The Blair Witch Project* and 11 years after New Line established the first studio digital marketing department, skepticism and caution remained widespread in Hollywood. "People are using the Internet much more, like the way they used to use newspapers," Miramax chief operating officer Rick Sands said in 2005. "But it still hasn't become a primary medium in terms of advertising and placing your hard dollars there. Will it be? I don't know."³⁷² Added Adam Fogelson, then Universal's president of marketing (and later the first marketer to head a major studio): "I can make you a compelling argument that traditional methods continue to work remarkably well. It is true that the market is changing in

³⁷⁰ Since most advertisers didn't spend enough to show their ad all the time, Google's ad system would rotate in different ads. So, even if an ad was running on (for example) the search term "movie showtimes," a studio VP wouldn't necessarily see their company's ad when searching the term. "Where's my ad?" was among the most common questions received by Google Ads' customer service employees.

³⁷¹ "IAB Internet Advertising Revenue Report, 2003 Full-Year Results."

³⁷² Galloway.

every way—we are all looking to find ways to be more efficient and take advantage of the latest trends and technologies...but from where I sit, there is no need to throw out the old models simply because the general landscape is changing."³⁷³

Social Media Emerges

“Social media” is often conflated with “Web 2.0,” a term coined by web designer Darcy DeNucci in 1999 but widely popularized by business consultants Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty in 2004.³⁷⁴ However, Web 2.0 is an imprecise and changing term; O’Reilly and Dougherty initially used it to describe Google and various other web-based platforms that had emerged since the dot-com bust. The definition of “social media” also varies but is slightly easier to pin down. In their introduction to a special 2015 issue of *Telecommunications Policy*, Jonathan A. Obar and Steve Wildman survey recent literature and suggest that social media encompasses the following features:

1. Internet-based
2. Focus on user-generated content
3. Users create service-specific profiles for the social media site or app
4. The site or app connects a user’s profile with those of other individuals or groups.³⁷⁵

Popular and even some scholarly definitions often focus on the first two features, imagining social media as any website or app focused on user-generated content. However, the latter two features are arguably the more critical. Blogging platforms and hosting services such as

³⁷³ Galloway, “Several Million & Change- Movies and the Media.”

³⁷⁴ Tim O’Reilly, “What Is Web 2.0,” September 30, 2005, 9, <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>. For more on DiNucci’s writing, see Web Design Museum, “Web 2.0 - 1999 | Web Design Museum,” 9, accessed March 6, 2021, <https://www.webdesignmuseum.org/web-design-history/web-2-0-1999>.

³⁷⁵ Jonathan A Obar and Steve Wildman, “Social Media Definition and the Governance Challenge: An Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Telecommunications Policy* 39:9 (2015): 745–750.

GeoCities supported user-generated web content (no coding required) since the 1990s. What truly sets Facebook or Twitter apart are user-profiles and their ability to connect users on and even off their platforms. Those features allow social media posts to spread rapidly—and even more importantly, grant the platform owners valuable user data. Media scholar José van Dijck, whose *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013) remains one of the most detailed historical accounts of social media, draws further distinctions between *types* of social media. In particular, she contrasts “social network sites” (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter with “user-generated content” (UGC) platforms such as YouTube and Flickr. The former, she says, focus more on interpersonal contact, encouraging connections between weak ties. YouTube and the ilk concentrate more on creative output.³⁷⁶ Even if the distinction has become increasingly blurred in recent years, differences in emphasis remain.

Throughout this study, I will trace the development of social media platforms as they relate to Hollywood studios. Here, I will outline the beginnings of the most significant platforms, as well as Hollywood’s initial response. I will also introduce critical theoretical debates around social media logic, user labor, and participatory culture. Facebook (founded 2004) and YouTube (2005) have been the dominant social media platforms for the last 16 years and have received the most attention from studio marketers. Twitter (founded 2006) has far fewer active users than Facebook or YouTube, but because it is popular with celebrities and Tweets are often reposted on other platforms, it has also been an essential part of studio marketing strategies. In the first years of social media, some marketers experimented with other social platforms, including

³⁷⁶ José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8. Van Dijck also suggests “trading and marketing sites (TMS)” for buy/sell platforms such as eBay and Amazon.

Friendster (founded 2002), MySpace (2003), photo-focused Flickr (2004), video-focused Vimeo (2004), Reddit (2005), and Tumblr (2007). MySpace, in particular, grew rapidly and was purchased by Fox-parent News Corporation in 2005. It was the largest social networking site between 2005 and 2008, but it quickly lost ground to Facebook after that.³⁷⁷

YouTube, Hollywood, and “The Long Tail”

Because it focused on video from the beginning (unlike Facebook), YouTube initially presented the most direct challenge to the Hollywood studios’ core businesses. As José van Dijck outlines, YouTube’s first years saw an ongoing tension between user-generated content (the seemingly ubiquitous funny cat videos) and professional content, often shared without explicit permission from the rights holder.³⁷⁸ Although van Dijck focuses on the service’s turn towards professional content after its acquisition by Google, the tension existed even in YouTube’s brief life as an independent startup. Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim, all early employees of PayPal, founded YouTube. Karim later said the inspiration for YouTube first came when he could not find video clips of an infamous Janet Jackson/Justin Timberlake performance at the 2004 Super Bowl or news video of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (professional content).³⁷⁹ Hurley and Chen, meanwhile, said the idea came when they wanted to share videos of a dinner party with their friends (user content)—although Chen acknowledged that particular narrative was “probably very strengthened by marketing ideas.”³⁸⁰ While there was plenty of user-

³⁷⁷ Dan Farber, “Top Social Networking Sites in US in February 2007,” ZDNet, March 26, 2008, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/top-social-networking-sites-in-us-in-february-2007/>.

³⁷⁸ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 110–20.

³⁷⁹ Jim Hopkins, “Surprise! There’s a Third YouTube Co-Founder,” USA Today, October 11, 2006, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-10-11-youtube-karim_x.htm.

³⁸⁰ John Cloud, “The YouTube Gurus,” *Time*, December 25, 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570795,00.html>.

generated content on early YouTube, one of the first breakout viral videos was "Lazy Sunday," a satiric rap video starring Chris Parnell and Andy Samberg that had originally run on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. In December 2005, YouTube users watched the video five million times in a few days. At the time, YouTube said it contacted NBC Universal to strike a deal to feature its clips on the site; instead, the studio threatened legal action, and YouTube removed "Lazy Sunday" by February of 2006.³⁸¹

On October 9, 2006, Google acquired YouTube for \$1.65 billion in Google stock. Google's first slogan for YouTube was "Broadcast Yourself," clearly positioning the service as a user-generated alternative to traditional broadcasting. Van Dijck seems to regard this as a largely empty slogan, useful particularly while Google was battling copyright lawsuits by several Hollywood and global studios (Viacom, most prominently). However, I would argue that several factors gradually pushed Google executives towards more professional content. The first was actual user data the company gathered after acquiring YouTube.³⁸² The company's initial impulse towards user-generated content reflected the "long tail theory," described by *Wired* editor Chris Anderson in an influential 2004 article and 2006 book. Anderson argued that the "future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream," or "the long tail."³⁸³ In a digital economy, Anderson reasoned, consumers will be able to find the niche products they desire (whether video, music, books, or manufactured goods), and as a result, the big blockbuster hits will be less popular. "Hits are starting to, gasp, rule less,"

³⁸¹ John Biggs, "A Video Clip Goes Viral, and a TV Network Wants to Control It," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2006, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/20/business/media/a-video-clip-goes-viral-and-a-tv-network-wants-to-control-it.html>.

³⁸² Google also had its own video service, Google Video, which was eventually retired in favor of YouTube.

³⁸³ Chris Anderson, "The Long Tail," *Wired*, October 1, 2004, <https://www.wired.com/2004/10/tail/>.

Anderson claimed.³⁸⁴ Naturally, the idea enchanted Silicon Valley and frightened conglomerate Hollywood. If valid, after all, Anderson's theory would transfer power towards Google's digital distribution network and away from the stars and big budgets of Hollywood. Indeed, the long tail's admirers included Google CEO Eric Schmidt, who said in 2006: "Anderson's insights influence Google's strategic thinking in a profound way."³⁸⁵

Despite Anderson's predictions, however, most consumers continued to embrace blockbusters, including on YouTube and other social media. As a result, Google executives realized the popular content at the "head" of the demand curve—not the long tail—dominated their traffic.³⁸⁶ Management researchers generally echoed this finding. For example, Harvard's Anita Elberse investigated sales patterns in the music and home video industries, two markets that Anderson and others often cited as examples of the long-tail theory in action. Elberse summarized her conclusions this way: "In general, most people are perfectly content with the most popular products" and "consumers of obscure products generally appreciate those products less than they appreciate popular products."³⁸⁷ In other words, most people *like* popular videos, films, and music. More to the point, they like them even when they have other options.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁴ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, 1st ed (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 2.

³⁸⁵ Quoted on cover of Anderson, *The Long Tail*, 2006.

³⁸⁶ Anderson Anderson, 192.

³⁸⁷ Anita Elberse, *Blockbusters: Hit-Making, Risk-Taking, and the Big Business of Entertainment*, First edition (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 164.

³⁸⁸ Certainly, digital distribution has helped some niche products find audiences, but the debate is whether this has fundamentally changed entertainment business models. For further discussion and a response from Chris Anderson, see "Rethinking the Long Tail Theory: How to Define 'Hits' and 'Niches,'" Knowledge@Wharton, September 16, 2009, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/rethinking-the-long-tail-theory-how-to-define-hits-and-niches/>.

So, Eric Schmidt and Google quickly realized that they, like Hollywood, were in the business of finding hits. Just two years after he praised Anderson’s long-tail theory, Eric Schmidt reversed course. “I would like to tell you that the internet has created such a level playing field that the Long Tail is absolutely the place to be — that there’s so much differentiation, there’s so much diversity, so many new voices. Unfortunately, that’s not the case,” Schmidt said in 2008. “When you get everybody together they still like to have one superstar.”³⁸⁹

While that conclusion sounds like great news for Hollywood, Chris Anderson also argued for a “long tail” of amateur *production*.³⁹⁰ On that point, he was on to something. User-generated content often outperformed professional content on social media. In other words, a YouTube “blockbuster” could be an SNL skit *or* a viral piano-playing cat. A YouTube “superstar” could be Miley Cyrus *or* a beauty vlogger in her bedroom. Indeed, Google kept trying to find and promote previously unknown superstars recording in their bedrooms. Thus, user-generated content remained a threat to legacy Hollywood. That’s a big reason studio executives remained leery of YouTube even as the long-tail theory fizzled. It also previews a running theme in the social media marketing case studies I will present: studio marketers are forever trying to corral online labor, hoping to turn social media users into collaborators rather than competitors.

While Google experimented with winning content on YouTube, it soon faced a second challenge: advertisers. YouTube had sold advertising since its early days, and Google added several new ad formats: in-video ads in 2007, then pre-roll video ads and promoted videos (advertisers could pay for videos to appear in search results) in 2008. By 2008, YouTube was

³⁸⁹ James Manyika, “Google’s View on the Future of Business,” *The McKinsey Quarterly*, November 2008, 4.

³⁹⁰ Anderson, *The Long Tail*, 2006, 192.

highly popular—81 million monthly visitors, according to Nielsen—but advertisers remained skittish. Google’s large advertiser sales teams, tasked with promoting YouTube ad products as well as Google’s search and display network ads, often found YouTube to be the hardest pitch.³⁹¹ As *The New York Times* put it, “advertisers have found that user-created videos of pet pratfalls and oddball skits are largely incompatible with commercials for cars and other products. Revenue at YouTube has disappointed Google investors since the company bought the start-up in 2006.”³⁹²

As a result of the disappointing revenue, YouTube began striking deals with Hollywood studios to host clips, TV shows, and even movies. With a new feature called VideoID, media companies could also spot unauthorized clips and either remove them or leave them up and sell ads on them. At first, mostly smaller studios signed on, including Lionsgate and MGM. The majors remained hesitant. “A lot of studios have taken the position that they won’t embrace YouTube until everything is perfect and the copyright protection is ironclad,” Curt Marvis, Lionsgate’s president of digital media, observed in 2008.³⁹³ In May 2007, YouTube launched its Partner Program, allowing the video’s uploader to share the advertising revenue. YouTube typically takes 45 percent of the advertising revenue from videos in the Partner Program, with 55 percent going to the content provider. The agreements with the studios often included larger revenue shares, a sweetener Google would largely abandon by 2013.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Google account executive, interview with the author, March 3, 2019; former YouTube marketing manager, interview with the author, November 10, 2018.

³⁹² Brad Stone and Brooks Barnes, “MGM to Post Full Films on YouTube,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2008, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10mgm.html>.

³⁹³ Stone and Barnes.

³⁹⁴ Tim Peterson, “YouTube to TV Networks: No More 'Sweetheart' Ad Deals for You!,” *Advertising Age*, October 31, 2013.

In the first few years of Google’s ownership of YouTube, the major studios arguably lost an opportunity to carve out a more prominent role for themselves on the burgeoning platform.³⁹⁵ After all, YouTube was quickly amassing users but struggling to find the right monetization formula—and Google was, at least temporarily, willing to pay extra for Hollywood IP. Most studios, however, were looking elsewhere. In addition to their copyright concerns about YouTube, the studios directed much of their initial attention to Hulu, the streaming video website founded by News Corporation and NBC Universal in 2007.³⁹⁶ In September 2008, Hulu had 6.3 million monthly visitors—just 7% of YouTube’s tally—but more studios signed advertising deals with Hulu than with YouTube. And much more studio content ended up on Hulu. Even as he announced his agreement with YouTube, Jim Packer, MGM’s co-president, said: “We will have some long-form videos up on YouTube, but I don’t think that’s the platform to have 30 or 40 movies up at once. I feel much more comfortable doing that on a site like Hulu.”³⁹⁷ Indeed, Hulu focused on longer TV shows and films. It never emphasized short-form content, as did YouTube, and it never had significant social media functionality such as comments or reaction sharing. And users could never upload their own content to Hulu. So while Hulu has been reasonably successful as a streaming service, it was never a social media platform—and likely distracted Hollywood from crafting an early social media strategy.

³⁹⁵ Within the Hollywood conglomerates, music record labels had more success with music videos. Vevo, founded in 2009 by Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and EMI, remains one of YouTube’s top syndicators.

³⁹⁶ Disney became a stakeholder in 2009 and as of 2019 has a controlling stake in Hulu.

³⁹⁷ Stone and Barnes, “MGM to Post Full Films on YouTube.”

Facebook, Twitter, and “Social Media Logic”

Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook in 2004 with his Harvard College classmates Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollum, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. The nascent company initially limited membership to Harvard students, eventually expanding to other Ivy League universities, colleges more broadly, and lastly, high schools. The strategy metered demand and also granted the platform an air of exclusivity. Starting in 2006, anyone over 13 could join. Initially, Facebook supported text and photos; the company added video functionality in 2007.³⁹⁸ However, video remained a secondary focus for Facebook in the early years, and many users continued to embed YouTube videos in their Facebook feed. Facebook launched its first ad product—essentially banner ads with the ability to target users by the university—in 2004.³⁹⁹ By 2005, companies including Hollywood studios could start a group page and pay Facebook to promote it. In 2006, Microsoft signed a three-year deal to be the exclusive provider of banner ads and sponsored links for Facebook. Google had just signed a similar agreement with MySpace; rather remarkably in retrospect, industry consultant Phil Leigh told *The New York Times* that Facebook was the “consolation prize.” At the time, MySpace had ten times as many users, another reminder of early instability amongst social media platforms.⁴⁰⁰ While it outsourced established ad formats to Microsoft, Facebook experimented with new, data-focused advertising products. Most notoriously, 2007’s Beacon feature tracked users’ activity on partner

³⁹⁸ Pete Cashmore, “Facebook Video Launches: YouTube Beware!,” Mashable, May 24, 2007, <https://mashable.com/2007/05/24/facebook-video-launches/>.

³⁹⁹ Seth Fiegerman, “This Is What Facebook’s First Ads Looked Like,” Mashable, August 15, 2013, <https://mashable.com/2013/08/15/facebook-first-ad/>.

⁴⁰⁰ Katharine Q. Seelye, “Microsoft to Provide and Sell Ads on Facebook, the Web Site,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 2006, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/23/technology/23soft.html>.

websites, even if the user logged out of Facebook.⁴⁰¹ Facebook eventually canceled Beacon after an outcry. However, as José van Dijck points out, the company continued to develop similar, only slightly less intrusive ad products.⁴⁰²

Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams launched Twitter in July of 2006, the same year Facebook became fully available to the public. Evan Williams had also been one of the founders of Blogger.com, and Twitter arguably remains as much a microblogging service as a social network. Indeed, Williams contends that the company came to discover it was “really more of an information network than it is a social network.”⁴⁰³ Unlike YouTube and Facebook, which launched ad products early in their lifespans, Twitter did not offer advertising until 2010, when it introduced Promoted Tweets.⁴⁰⁴ Beyond the ad platform, Twitter is relevant to marketers, perhaps especially in Hollywood, because it is a powerful and flexible publishing tool. Popular Tweets can be embedded on other web pages, multiplying their effect far beyond Twitter’s official user base. Marketing departments run Twitter accounts. Even more so, celebrities can have tens of millions of Twitter followers, an audience that studio marketing departments very much covet when crafting their promotional strategies.

If YouTube’s unauthorized video sharing seemed to be a clear threat to the Hollywood business model, the danger from Facebook and Twitter was rather more amorphous. Certainly,

⁴⁰¹ Juan Carlos Perez, “Facebook’s Beacon More Intrusive Than Previously Thought,” PCWorld, November 30, 2007, <https://www.peworld.com/article/140182/article.html>.

⁴⁰² Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 48.

⁴⁰³ Issie Lapowsky, “Ev Williams on Twitter’s Early Years,” Inc.com, October 4, 2013, <https://www.inc.com/issie-lapowsky/ev-williams-twitter-early-years.html>.

⁴⁰⁴ Brian Anthony Hernandez, “Explore Twitter’s Evolution: 2006 to Present,” Mashable, May 5, 2011, <https://mashable.com/2011/05/05/history-of-twitter/>.

studio executives recognized that the upstarts were attracting the attention of young, tech-savvy consumers—an audience Hollywood coveted. But particularly since neither platform emphasized video content or live broadcasting at first, the studios were unsure how to respond. Many remained more worried about bootleg copies of SNL skits or *Star Wars*. However, from all of the social media platforms, the threat towards Hollywood was much more fundamental: a complete reordering of media logic.

Media scholars José van Dijck and Thomas Poell offer “mass media logic” in comparison with the “mass media logic” David Altheide and Robert Snow articulated in 1979. Features of social media logic include programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. Even as they explore a new logic, van Dijck and Poell recognize that many core concepts articulated by mass media scholars remain highly relevant to social media.⁴⁰⁵ Two particularly stand out. First, television’s programmed “flow,” described by Raymond Williams, attempts to seem “natural” but serves the broadcasters’ commercial interests. Second, mass media typically present themselves as neutral platforms while, in reality, they operate as filters through which some people get more exposure than others. That certainly applies to social networks like Facebook that claim to be neutral arbiters of information while retaining tremendous control over which content is most visible to users.

Datafication, probably the most important feature of social media logic, illustrates how social media greatly expands a mass media practice. The Hollywood studios have almost always collected data and user input—via Nielsen ratings, test screenings, customer surveys, and box office returns—but in social media, user input is nearly instantaneous, and the quantity of data is

⁴⁰⁵ José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” 4.

vastly greater. Both Hollywood studios and social media firms such as Facebook seek to manage what Sut Jhally and Bill Livant have termed “the activity of watching.” That is to say, “the central problem for the media is not simply to get people to watch but to get them to watch extra.”⁴⁰⁶ The tech firms leverage this data to keep users glued to a particular social media app or site. As Mark Andrejevic observes, the business models of tech-media firms are structured around “forms of productive data gathering enabled by private ownership of and control over” interactive, digital enclosures.⁴⁰⁷ Andrejevic’s use of the term “enclosure” brings to mind a prison (perhaps Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon) but, he explains, the facilitation of media production within these digital enclosures “extends the monitoring gaze beyond such institutional walls to encompass spaces of leisure, consumption, domesticity, and perhaps all of these together.”⁴⁰⁸

Moreover, social media platforms simultaneously measure and influence data, an essential distinction from mass media data practices. Under the old mass media logic, studios certainly struggled with imperfect data; indeed, web firms have long promoted their superior ability to measure audiences. Even today, the studios all self-report their weekly box office numbers, and only a tiny handful of companies, such as Rentrak and comScore (themselves recently merged), offer any competing data. Likewise, the Nielsen Company still bases its television ratings—which determine advertisers’ rates for television spots, a \$70 billion market in the U.S. alone—on dated technology and a sample of just 20,000 households. Even so, these

⁴⁰⁶ Sut Jhally and Bill Livant, “Watching as Working: The Valorization of Audience Consciousness,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 1986): 126.

⁴⁰⁷ Mark Andrejevic, “Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure,” *The Communication Review*, 10 (2007): 299.

⁴⁰⁸ Andrejevic, “Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure,” 302.

processes are far more transparent than is data collection under social media logic. As van Dijck and Poell explain, social media has the “ability to measure popularity at the same time and by the same means as it tries to influence or manipulate these rankings.”⁴⁰⁹ Extending the point, Wendy Chun argues that the tech firms can mine data to create a future that will be beneficial to them, organizing past data towards its subsequent application.⁴¹⁰ For these reasons, datafication probably represents social media logic’s most fundamental threat to Hollywood. The fox is guarding the henhouse, and the studios are increasingly at the fox’s mercy.

Social Media Users: Participants or Unpaid Laborers?

Scholar Tiziana Terranova recognized the monetary value of “free” user labor early in Web 1.0. In her 2004 monograph *Network Culture*, Terranova further explains that the rise of free labor is not restricted to the digital economy or internet companies; instead, she sees free labor as a significant source of value across advanced capitalist societies.⁴¹¹ Her argument correctly anticipates later trends across the capitalist system, including the fact that many companies, Hollywood studios included, have become reliant on “product evangelists” and other unpaid laborers.

However, the rise of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter initially led to a more optimistic spin on user labor, focusing less on corporate monetization and more on the participatory possibilities of social media. When *Time* magazine proclaimed that “You” were 2006’s “Person of the Year,” the issue anticipated that YouTube, Facebook, and other user-generated “Web 2.0”

⁴⁰⁹ José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” 7.

⁴¹⁰ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 9.

⁴¹¹ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London ; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2004), 82–86.

sites would democratize the production of media.⁴¹² Perhaps mindful of the sprawling Hollywood conglomerates and their grip on mainstream media, some scholars initially welcomed social media's intervention. Primarily written before the social media era but released in the consequential year of 2006, Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* is often cited as an exemplar of the utopian view of user participation in digital networks. For example, a 2011 special issue of *Cultural Studies*, "Rethinking Convergence/Culture," mainly focused on critiques of Jenkins's work.

In truth, Jenkins was never quite the unabashed techno-optimist some critics describe. He always recognized that "convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process."⁴¹³ Nevertheless, Jenkins did welcome the participatory potential of social media, for instance, arguing in 2007 that "YouTube has emerged as the meeting point between a range of different grassroots communities involved in the production and circulation of media content," and that the platform "may embody a particular opportunity for translating participatory culture into civic engagement."⁴¹⁴

For James Hay and Nick Couldry, Jenkins overemphasizes the virtues of interactivity without fully considering the power structures in which users exist.⁴¹⁵ Similarly, Nico Carpentier focuses on what he sees as Jenkins' "conflation of interaction and participation." While users

⁴¹² *Time*, December 25, 2006, cover.

⁴¹³ Henry Jenkins, "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (2004): 37.

⁴¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, "Nine Propositions Towards a Cultural Theory of YouTube," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* blog, May 28, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/05/9_propositions_towards_a_cultu.html.

⁴¹⁵ James Hay and Nick Couldry, "Rethinking Convergence/Culture," *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4–5 (September 1, 2011): 473–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600527>.

have more opportunities for interaction, media and technology conglomerates restrict genuine participation. And they certainly restrict users from sharing in any significant slice of the profits.⁴¹⁶ Finally, Catherine Driscoll, Melissa Gregg, Laurie Ouellette, and Julie Wilson argue that Jenkins overlooks the gendered logic of convergence, which digitally replicates the “free” labor built into the social expectations of women.⁴¹⁷ As I will discuss in the next chapter, the gendered nature of digital labor becomes particularly important since the first studio social media campaigns often targeted young women.

Mark Andrejevic, whom Jenkins says is his “most persistent, perceptive, and persuasive critic,” returns to questions about surveillance.⁴¹⁸ Andrejevic argues, “If convergence marks the mainstreaming of participatory fan culture, it has the potential to cut both ways: the increasing influence of participatory consumers on the production process and the facilitation of monitoring-based regimes of control.”⁴¹⁹ Recognizing the critiques, Jenkins says that he is increasingly talking about “a *more* participatory culture” to acknowledge that “participatory culture is something we have struggled toward over the past 100 plus years.” Still, Jenkins continues to strike a balance: “Web 2.0 companies have sought to capture and commodify the public’s participatory energies, even as they offer tools that may be used in support of

⁴¹⁶ Nico Carpentier, “Contextualising Author-Audience Convergences,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4–5 (September 1, 2011): 529, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600537>.

⁴¹⁷ Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg, “Convergence Culture and the Legacy of Feminist Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4–5 (September 1, 2011): 566–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600549>; Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson, “Women’s Work,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4–5 (September 1, 2011): 548–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600546>.

⁴¹⁸ Henry Jenkins, “Rethinking ‘Rethinking Convergence/Culture,’” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 278, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.801579>.

⁴¹⁹ Mark Andrejevic, “The Work That Affective Economics Does,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4–5 (September 1, 2011): 612, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600551>.

democratizing and diversifying our culture.”⁴²⁰ Supporting the latter claim, Jenkins points to social movements such as “Occupy Wall Street” that he says have successfully leveraged YouTube to spread their message.⁴²¹

The Hollywood studios, marketing departments especially, have a paradoxical relationship to participatory culture and labor on social media. On the one hand, truly democratized cultural production would fundamentally endanger Hollywood’s business model, which of course, increasingly relies on intellectual property and control over valuable transmedia franchises. On the other hand, studios want their properties to be part of the online conversation. Studios aim for the most profitable balance, and an effective social media marketing strategy helps their aim.

Similarly, studios welcome unpaid user labor—up to a point. Gordon Paddison convinced *Lord of the Rings* fans to share production photos and news. Artisan Entertainment encouraged *Blair Witch* fan sites. Of course, the strategies were “successful” not because they generated online traffic but because people bought tickets to the movies. But what if online content became so popular that fans, satiated by their web surfing, didn’t need to watch the actual film? What if digital conversations failed to translate into box office, benefiting the tech platforms but leaving the studio out in the cold? That fear drove many studio marketing executives’ cautious approach to social media. And in the first years of social media, when any Hollywood marketer became too excited about the online buzz for a particular film, a colleague would often respond with a simple retort: “*Snakes on a Plane.*”

⁴²⁰ Henry Jenkins and Nico Carpentier, “Theorizing Participatory Intensities: A Conversation about Participation and Politics,” *Convergence* 19, no. 3 (August 1, 2013): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856513482090>.

⁴²¹ Jenkins and Carpentier, 275.

Snakes on a Plane: Meme or Marketing?

Snakes on a Plane, a boldly self-explanatory thriller released by New Line Cinema in August of 2006, unexpectedly became one of the year's most discussed films. At first, the anticipation grew almost exclusively online via blogs and nascent social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace. Intrigued by the title and the persona of the film's star, Samuel L. Jackson, fans created websites, satirical posters, T-shirts, poems, fiction, videos, and songs. New Line's marketing team had not expected the buzz but, given their experience managing online fandom with *Lord of the Rings*, did their best to cultivate it. New Line even ordered reshoots to better match online expectations, adding more violence and even new dialogue directly inspired by fan-made content. Rather remarkably, digital fan paratexts directly influenced the text. There was just one problem: many internet users had so much fun talking about the film online that they didn't bother to show up at the theater. As a result, the film grossed a modest \$15.2 million in its opening weekend. "The tepid opening dashed the hopes of Hollywood...that vigorous marketing on the Internet would be a powerful new way to propel fans into the theater at a time when movies are working hard to hold their own against other forms of entertainment," *The New York Times* reported.⁴²² Thus, New Line's film was at once apotheosis and a cautionary tale of the early social media marquee.

The film dated back to a 1992 screenplay from first-time writer David Dalessandro. New Line picked up the script in turnaround from Paramount Pictures in March 2003 when, still less than two years after 9/11, terror-on-plane movies remained problematic.⁴²³ Somewhat to New

⁴²² Sharon Waxman, "After Hype Online, 'Snakes on a Plane' Is Letdown at Box Office," *New York Times* (Online), August 21, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/21/movies/21box.html>.

⁴²³ Borys Kit, "Fan Frenzy for 'Snakes' Is on a Different Plane," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 31, 2006, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/film/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002234847.

Line's surprise, Samuel L. Jackson signed on to play FBI agent Neville Flynn, savior of the titular plane overrun by the titular poisonous snakes. Although the reductive title would end up fueling online interest, skeptical New Line executives briefly changed the name to the generic "Pacific Air Flight 121." Russell Schwartz, New Line's domestic marketing president, explained: "Honestly, I think we were worried about the same things other people were worried about: Could you take a movie called 'Snakes on a Plane' seriously?' It took us some time to catch up with it."⁴²⁴ Jackson told *USA Today* that he asked the studio to change it back. "The title was what got my attention. I got on the set one day and heard they changed it, and I said, 'What are you doing here? It's not *Gone with the Wind*.'"⁴²⁵ During a 2005 press tour for another movie, Jackson told reporters about his preferred title. That's when internet buzz began, and New Line promptly changed the title back to *Snakes on a Plane*.⁴²⁶ Still, the studio's expectations remained muted for the film, which had a modest production budget of \$32 million. It planned a release in the late summer doldrums, on August 18, 2006.

In some corners of the internet, though, fans kept buzzing about the comic title. For a while, "Snakes on a Plane," sometimes abbreviated as "SoaP," became internet-speak, meaning something like "c'est la vie."⁴²⁷ Befitting the transitional moment, the online activity was a mix of Web 1.0—"snakesonablog.com" stands out—and social media. YouTube (still a few months away from its acquisition by Google) and other early social video sites certainly played a

⁴²⁴ Jeff Jensen, "Kicking Asp," EW.com, July 28, 2006, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1219727_4,00.html.

⁴²⁵ Susan Wloszczyna, "'Snakes on a Plane' Ssssssays It All - USATODAY.Com," April 18, 2006, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2006-04-17-snakes_x.htm.

⁴²⁶ Jensen, "Kicking Asp."

⁴²⁷ Kit, "Fan Frenzy for 'Snakes' Is on a Different Plane."

significant role. Fans uploaded parody videos such as "Raccoons on a Space Shuttle."⁴²⁸ While the title itself seemed to generate the most discussion, considerable fan activity also focused on Samuel L. Jackson's star persona. Mock posters, often shared on MySpace and Facebook, played with Jackson's foul-mouthed "bad-ass" image, particularly from *Pulp Fiction* (1994)—even though in *Snakes*, Jackson plays a reasonably subdued, by-the-numbers FBI agent. One fan poster (see Figure 12) trumpets star "Samuel L Motha Fuckin' Jackson" and jokes that the movie is based upon a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Most influentially, Chris Rohan and Nathaniel Perry, colleagues at an audiobook production firm, created a mock audio trailer for the film—or, more precisely, the film as they imagined it. "It's a genius title," Rohan said at the time. "It's so stupid it's great. It invites satire, but it's something you just love. It's something I can't explain. You either get it or you don't."⁴²⁹ In their mock trailer, "Samuel Jackson" (actually an impression by Perry) yells: "I have had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane!" Online fans loved it, and it became the most famous line in the movie. Except it wasn't actually in the movie.

In March 2006, six months after principal photography had finished, New Line and production company Mutual Film gathered most of the cast and crew for five days of reshoots. The goal was to make the film more like the one online fans had dreamed up. New scenes were written to up the film's rating from PG-13 to R.⁴³⁰ The additions stand out in the finished film. In

⁴²⁸ chopperdave78, *Raccoons on a Space Shuttle*, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8h77_Am_Js&ab_channel=chopperdave78. See also Sam Schechner, "Plane Has Snakes, Needs Viewers; Thriller's Debut Will Test Online-Fan Marketing," *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, August 18, 2006.

⁴²⁹ Kit, "Fan Frenzy for 'Snakes' Is on a Different Plane."

⁴³⁰ Kit.

one sequence, a young couple (played by Taylor Kitsch and Samantha McLeod)—in brief roles utterly inconsequential to the plot before or after—head into the airplane’s lavatory. They quickly light up a joint and undress, as if to fit an R-rating into one confined, easy-to-film space. (The snakes, of course, immediately express their displeasure at the drug use and nudity.) Most notably, Sam Jackson recorded a new scene with the fan-written line: “Enough is enough! I have had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane!”⁴³¹

Up until this point, about five months before the release, New Line’s marketing department mostly stood back and watched the online buzz. “When the crowd speaks in unison and is pushing you uphill, that’s a wonderful thing,” Gordon Paddison explains. “So, the normally caustic community became our friend.”⁴³² Paddison’s objective? “Don’t screw it up... don’t overplay your hand.” Still, Paddison and his colleagues developed some strategies for “extending” the momentum without, they hoped, stepping on fan enthusiasm. Noticing the many song parodies, New Line teamed up with the (short-lived) social networking site TagWorld.com, inviting fans to submit *Snakes*-themed songs, with the winning entry appearing in the movie.⁴³³

About a month before the release, Paddison took a page from his *Lord of the Rings* viral playbook by launching “The #1 Fan King Cobra Sweepstakes” on the official website. To earn sweepstakes entries, fans had to post links on social media, forums, blogs, and websites. After New Line partnered with the personalized marketing startup VariTalk (also short-lived), fans could visit the official film website to send a semi-customized message in Samuel L. Jackson’s

⁴³¹ Jensen, “Kicking Asp.”

⁴³² Paddison, interview. Unless otherwise noted, all Paddison quotes about *Snakes on a Plane* come from this interview.

⁴³³ Kit, “Fan Frenzy for ‘Snakes’ Is on a Different Plane.”

voice to telephone numbers of their choosing. Participants would input a few details about their intended target. "Forget about your regular job working in the media.... Stop wasting all your free time puffing on those cigarettes" and "hop on the subway" to go see the movie, Jackson told one New York-based reporter (and smoker).⁴³⁴ Fans requested 1.5 million calls within the campaign's first week. As the release date neared, New Line also added offline marketing and publicity, from planes flying over L.A. streaming banners for the film to more conventional billboards and TV spots. In addition, Jackson made the rounds of late-night talk shows.⁴³⁵ New Line spent over \$20 million on prints and advertising, not a massive tally for a studio film but still nearly double the film's production cost.⁴³⁶

Google search data demonstrates that through luck or strategy, New Line maintained a high level of online interest in *Snakes on a Plane*. Figure 13 illustrates 2006 U.S. searches for the film compared to Sony's higher budget *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, a Will Ferrell-starring action comedy released on August 4, two weeks before *Snakes*. Starting in March, *Snakes* generated about ten times more search volume than did *Talladega*. Indeed, the Will Ferrell film generated low search interest until just a few weeks before its release. As studios hope, interest in both films peaked right before the release dates, but *Snakes*' apex was three times higher. Press coverage helped New Line's cause. The August 4 cover of *Entertainment Weekly* asked: "Could this hokey horror film change the movie business?"⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Alexandra Leo, "If Samuel L. Jackson Called, Would You See His Movie?," ABC News, August 15, 2006, <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/story?id=2313405&page=1>.

⁴³⁵ Robert W. Welkos, "That Buzz on 'Snakes' Could Just Slither Away; New Line Cinema Hopes the Thriller's Internet Chatter Pays off at the Box Office.: [HOME EDITION]," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2006, sec. Calendar; Part E; Calendar Desk.

⁴³⁶ Waxman, "After Hype Online, 'Snakes on a Plane' Is Letdown at Box Office."

⁴³⁷ Jensen, "Kicking Asp."

Studio tracking suggested that by the release date, 87% of potential moviegoers had heard about *Snakes*.⁴³⁸

As the release date neared, the big question in Hollywood was: Will it live up to the hype? The same survey that showed 87% awareness indicated a much lower percentage of “want to see” sentiment. “It's driving everybody crazy,” New Line’s Schwartz told the *Los Angeles Times* a few days before the release. “It may not do well. But I suspect this is a rather difficult movie to track.” Adam Fogelson, Universal’s marketing chief, argued: “I certainly don't think Internet buzz has been a reliable predictor of box office. You want a community of like-minded people around the country or the world, and the Internet is a great place to do that. But a lot of online discussion does not necessarily translate into box office.” Fogelson pointed to his studio’s *Serenity* and *Land of the Dead* (both 2005) as two films that had generated digital buzz but box office disappointment. Gerry Rich, president of worldwide marketing at Paramount Pictures, added that “it's difficult to quantify” whether online buzz “represents the masses... or a segment of the population that may or may not be indicative of the general public.”⁴³⁹

Indeed, the *Snakes* bit off only \$15.25 million in their opening weekend, behind tracking and certainly not commensurate with the online buzz.⁴⁴⁰ The second weekend dropped 50%, and the film eventually grossed \$34 million domestically and \$62 million worldwide before home video. In the opening frame, *Snakes* barely beat out *Talladega Nights*, by then in its third weekend. In fact, despite consistently trailing *Snakes* in online buzz, *Talladega* performed much

⁴³⁸ Welkos, “That Buzz on ‘Snakes’ Could Just Slither Away; New Line Cinema Hopes the Thriller’s Internet Chatter Pays off at the Box Office.”

⁴³⁹ Schechner, “Plane Has Snakes, Needs Viewers.”

⁴⁴⁰ Waxman, “After Hype Online, ‘Snakes on a Plane’ Is Letdown at Box Office.”

better at the box office: a \$47 million opening and a total gross of \$148 million domestic, \$163 million global. So, *Snakes* generated three to ten times as much online search interest (depending on the week) but less than a fourth of the box office return. The Monday-morning quarterbacking began. *Variety* reported that the oft-repeated line at the watercooler was: "Internet buzz doesn't translate into ticket sales."⁴⁴¹ "We're a little disappointed," said David Tuckerman, president for theatrical distribution for New Line. "There were a lot of inflated expectations on this picture, with the Internet buzz. But it basically performed like a normal horror movie." Longtime box office prognosticator Paul Dergarabedian speculated: "If you're a heavy blogger, or Internet user, maybe you're not a heavy moviegoer. You may spend a lot of time on the Internet, on MySpace, talking about movies, and that was the most fun part of it. The movie was almost an afterthought."⁴⁴² Many in the industry drew the unfavorable comparison to *The Blair Witch Project's* viral success seven years earlier. *Variety* interviewed Paul Pflug, who had been Artisan's PR chief for *Witch*. "There was a sense of discovery, just as the Internet was bubbling up," he said, a quality that seemed to elude *Snakes*.⁴⁴³

Of course, social media was very much "bubbling up" in 2006, yet New Line had not managed to translate the energy into a hit. Gordon Paddison argues that the film was profitable, particularly including home media sales, and did quite well given what it was: a modestly budgeted thriller with no franchise connections. "There became an inflation in the press and in terms of expectations. I mean, the film was made for \$34 million dollars and suddenly

⁴⁴¹ Mohr, "'Witch's' Spell Haunts."

⁴⁴² Waxman, "After Hype Online, 'Snakes on a Plane' Is Letdown at Box Office."

⁴⁴³ Mohr, "'Witch's' Spell Haunts."

everybody's treating it suddenly like *Star Wars*," he says. The film tripled the opening weekend of Sam Jackson's previous two films, Paddison points out. Still, the narrative had set in. In early 2007, New Line founder and co-chairman Robert Shaye told *The New York Times* that *Snakes on a Plane* had been a "dud" that disappointed him.⁴⁴⁴ He said he'd be more selective about greenlighting films in the future. Most of all, the results seemed to reinforce studio executives' existing skepticism of digital media and preference for traditional advertising approaches. Even if the narrative was convenient and oversimplified, it certainly was (and is) true that online buzz does not guarantee box office success any more than does an expensive television ad campaign. With *Snakes on a Plane*, Paddison recalls, "you may not have needed to go see the film because you already laughed at it." He adds: "It became a meme before memes were memes." As it turned out, a meme does not a movie make.

Conclusion

By 2007, at a crucial moment of transition to social media logic, the Hollywood studios were still looking for ways to replicate the viral online success of *The Blair Witch Project*. Many weren't even trying. With only two to three percent of ad buys directed towards digital, most marketing departments stuck with their traditional, television-heavy strategies. *Snakes on a Plane* drew many comparisons to the earlier film, but it was a different animal. Although the *Blair Witch* producers enjoyed plenty of luck and good timing, their promotional efforts—the website and early cable TV promotion, particularly—successfully seeded the online buzz. In contrast, the internet response to *Snakes on a Plane* had been much more accidental and largely

⁴⁴⁴ Sharon Waxman, "For New Line, an Identity Crisis," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2007, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/19/business/media/19new.html>.

divorced from the film's actual story. Starting their efforts relatively late, the New Line marketing team successfully maintained online interest but never achieved transmedia storytelling as Henry Jenkins defines it. Perhaps transmedia storytelling would not have been possible or successful for the B-movie style of *Snakes*, but in any case, no one tried.

So, within studio marketing departments, the impact of *Blair Witch* was surprisingly fleeting. Instead, the *Lord of the Rings* marketing campaign proved to be more influential, with many studios adopting Gordon Paddison's strategy of selectively releasing production news, photos, and clips to fan websites. The more significant impact of *Rings* certainly reflects the ever-rising importance of Hollywood franchises, as explained by Derek Johnson. And as Kristin Thompson points out, New Line's Tolkien trilogy provided a particularly useful model of a carefully planned, cross-media franchise. Certainly, the *Lord of the Rings* franchise included elements of robust transmedia storytelling. The web marketing campaign, however, did not. Instead, Paddison focused on managing the existing fandom, who were already plenty engaged by production details. As I will discuss in upcoming chapters, later social media campaigns would successfully integrate both strategies: transmedia storytelling (albeit with studio constraints) *and* careful management of existing online fandoms.

This chapter has presented several explanations for Hollywood marketers' hesitation to embrace social and digital media. The dot-com bust and failed mergers such as AOL Time Warner made top brass gun-shy, which filtered down to marketing departments. Indeed, the innovative *Blair Witch* and *Lord of the Rings* campaigns launched before the dot-com bust in a brief window when studios felt more open to digital experimentation. Widespread concern about online copyright infringement, which began in music but spread to video as internet speeds improved, likewise tempered corporate enthusiasm for cooperating with the tech platforms. For a

while, Google sales reps couldn't even get a meeting with Viacom marketers while the two companies engaged in legal battles over copyrights on YouTube.

Moreover, the trackability of online media—a huge boon to web retailers such as Amazon—less clearly benefited Hollywood since many purchases were still offline. Senior studio executives, accustomed to primetime television spots and massive billboards in Times Square or the Sunset Strip, disliked the unpredictability of online ad auctions. Some also questioned whether digital strategies often focused on existing fandoms helped expand a movie's audience. They felt—not without justification—that the tech companies would benefit more from word-of-mouth campaigns than they would. Finally, in a risk-averse business, marketers hesitated to abandon longstanding techniques; as Universal's Adam Fogelson said in 2006, “traditional methods continue to work remarkably well.”⁴⁴⁵ As long as old methods worked well—or at least, senior executives thought they did—digital media would remain on the fringe of marketing plans. Eventually, that would change. Under Fogelson's leadership, Universal would later become the first big studio to invest heavily in digital media.

While studio marketers and their bosses stepped cautiously into the digital age, tectonic shifts were underway 350 miles north in Silicon Valley. The dot-com bust washed away Hollywood's early web investments and many early internet companies; others, like Amazon, survived and retrenched. After nearly going bankrupt in the 1990s, Apple took a massive bite out of connected entertainment, first with the iPod (introduced 2001) and then the iPhone (June 2007). Google quickly grew into the world's dominant search engine and expanded its reach into advertising, email, news, and mobile software. Netflix, previously focused only on DVDs by

⁴⁴⁵ Galloway, “Several Million & Change- Movies and the Media.”

mail, introduced streaming in 2007. Of most note to the studio marketing departments, social media platforms emerged with a period of instability gradually giving way to the dominance of YouTube and Facebook. YouTube initially attracted the most consternation from Hollywood considering copyright concerns and the “long-tail” fear that millions of user videos might supplant the franchises and stars of Disney or Universal.

Both of those concerns proved to be fairly short-lived, a win for the studios. Not short-lived: the shift from mass media logic to social media logic. As Poell and van Dijck explain, the latter introduced speed, invisibility, and—perhaps above all—vast troves of user data. Not only do the social media platforms measure user activity, but they also have considerable control over that activity, thanks to their hidden algorithms. The new data regime cuts across society and industries, of course. But within entertainment, the studios once controlled some of this data via surveys, test screenings, Nielsen ratings, and even box office returns. Today much of this information, alongside new layers of data never before imagined, sits in Silicon Valley, not Hollywood. This fact colors every social media marketing campaign I will discuss in the following chapters. “Web 1.0” marketing campaigns were different. Any data Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, or Artisan Entertainment could glean from *blairwitch.com* was their data, not linked to millions of user-profiles via a hidden Facebook algorithm. Sony even successfully sold advertising on its “Dawson’s Desktop” transmedia website; if similar content appeared on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, a significant chunk of the ad revenue would go to the tech platform, not the studio.

Even as it presented a long-term structural threat, social media introduced new opportunities for studio marketing departments to promote their films. Social media logic blurs the line between content and advertising, granting marketers increased power to reshape a film

through paratexts. Then there is digital user labor, first explored by Tiziana Terranova in the Web 1.0 era. Gordon Paddison convinced Lord of the Rings fans to disseminate his marketing materials without compensation in that era. Because social media enables rapid sharing and connections between weak ties, a social media marketer can *potentially* leverage even more free promotional labor. There are risks, of course. Fan creations may prove more entertaining than the film itself, as seemed to happen with *Snakes on a Plane*. Even worse, from the marketer's perspective, negative word-of-mouth could spread and dissuade moviegoers who would otherwise have bought tickets.

Social media marketing strategy, which I have described as the social media marquee, is fundamentally about balancing risk and reward. The marketer hopes to harness user participation and labor without losing control of their brand. With *Paranormal Activity*, widely released in 2009, Paramount would come closest to directly replicating *Blair Witch's* word-of-mouth strategy for a low-budget horror film. However, two small but ambitious studios would truly demonstrate the power of social media marketing. Mainly on the strength of social media marketing, Summit Entertainment and Lionsgate Entertainment would transform a pair of female-driven, young adult novels into two of the most successful franchises in Hollywood history.

Figures



Figure 8. The Blair Witch website, first launched in 1998, presented the film's fictional story as fact. Source: Lionsgate Entertainment, www.blairwitch.com



Figure 9. The three *Blair Witch* actors, pictured here, used their real names, a fact marketers exploited to suggest the disappearance was real. Source: Lionsgate Entertainment, www.blairwitch.com.



Figure 10. *Blair Witch* marketers highlighted a twig figure logo inspired by a prominent prop in the film. Source: Lionsgate Entertainment, www.blairwitch.com.

MISSING



On October 21, 1994, Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard and Michael Williams hiked into Maryland's Black Hills Forest to shoot a documentary film on a local legend, "The Blair Witch." They were never heard from again.

One year later, their footage was found, documenting the students' five-day journey through the Black Hills Forest, and capturing the terrifying events that led up to their disappearance.

EVIDENCE EXISTS...

LOG ON TO www.blairwitch.com TO SEE AND HEAR

- Audio and video footage of the students' terrifying journey through the Black Hills
- Interviews with authorities in the case
- The journal kept by missing student/filmmaker Heather Donahue

Figure 11. In a viral marketing stunt, Artisan Entertainment distributed posters advertising the "missing" filmmakers (actually actors). Source: Daily Mirror (UK).

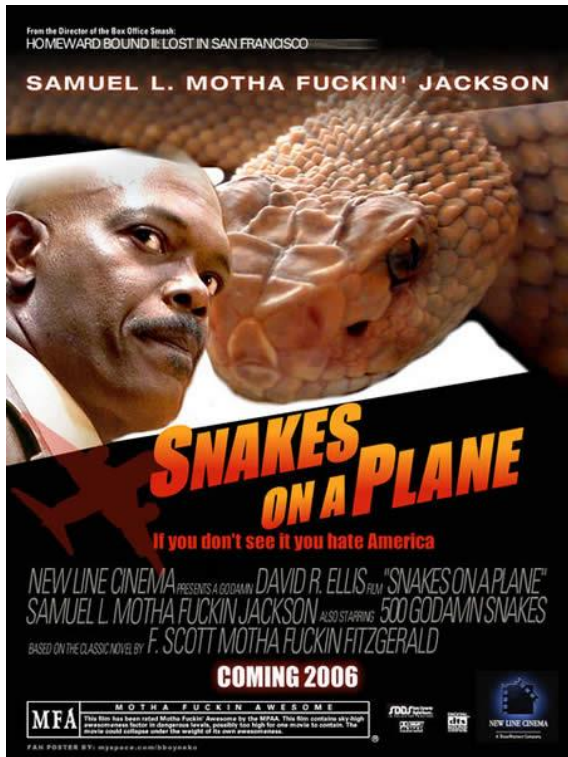


Figure 12. A fan-made poster for New Line’s *Snakes on a Plane*. Source: The Local (Germany), user forums, posted Aug 22, 2006.

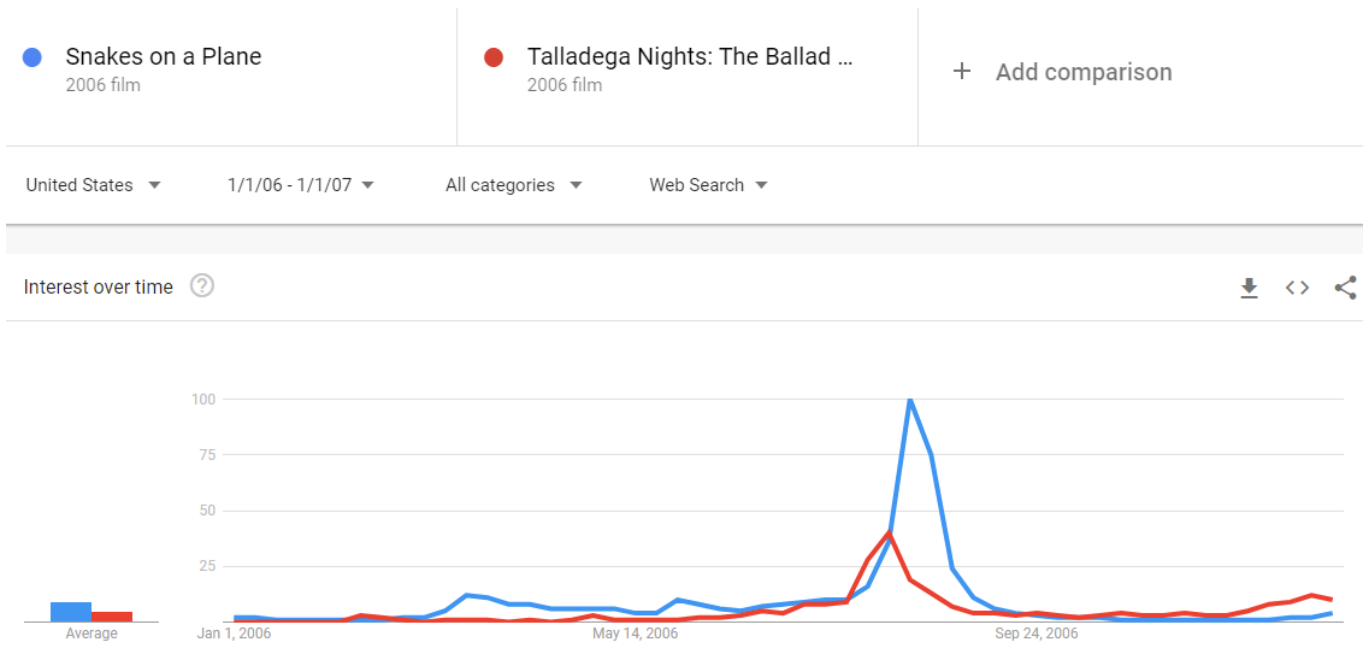


Figure 13. *Snakes on a Plane* generated much more online buzz but less than one-fourth the domestic box office return of *Talladega Nights*, released two weeks earlier. Source: Google Trends, web search data.

Chapter 3. Summit, Lionsgate, and the Dawn of Social Media Marketing

Introduction

In 2005, the same year three PayPal employees created YouTube, and a year before Twitter launched, first-time American author Stephenie Meyer published *Twilight*, a young-adult novel about a budding romance between a teenage girl and a vampire. Three years later came Suzanne Collins's novel *The Hunger Games*, also following a female teenage heroine but in a starkly dystopian, sci-fi setting. Although neither book was a known quantity, pre-publication buzz attracted attention from Hollywood studios and agents. Several major studios flirted with acquiring the film rights, but they had reservations. *Twilight*'s romance-heavy plot might attract teenage girls but drive away everyone else, executives feared. *The Hunger Games* earned even better early reviews, but its plot was edgy: kids killing kids in a futuristic spin on Roman gladiator fights. Eventually, the Big Six studios passed on the projects, and the film rights landed with two smaller, upstart studios. Once focused on sales and distribution, Summit Entertainment was reinventing itself as an independent studio when it optioned *Twilight*. Summit also competed for *The Hunger Games*, but those rights went to Lionsgate, another small studio best known for low-budget horror.

From these modest beginnings emerged two blockbuster film franchises. The five films in the *Twilight* saga, released between 2008 and 2012, grossed over \$3.3 billion worldwide. The four *Hunger Games* films, released between 2012 and 2015, netted \$2.97 billion. They rank as the 18th and 21st most successful franchises in global box office history, on par with much higher budget franchises such as *Mission Impossible* (\$3.57 billion) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (\$4.52 billion). Even more striking: amongst the top 25 film franchises, *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* are

the only ones NOT distributed by a major studio. And they are the only top franchises with a female lead actor.⁴⁴⁶ Indeed, the films' success surprised competing executives at the major studios, especially given Summit's and Lionsgate's lower marketing budgets. So how did the small studios punch above their weight? One big reason was their early and savvy use of social media marketing, deploying digital-first strategies to simultaneously cultivate the books' devoted fan bases and expand the films' appeal. Initially unable to afford the big television buys of a Disney or Universal—and mindful of their teenage target audience—Summit and Lionsgate turned to Facebook, YouTube, discussion forums, and websites supporting the social strategy. In 2012, Lionsgate acquired Summit, becoming arguably the most successful “mini-major” studio in decades, driven mainly by profits from these two teen franchises.

Meanwhile, the Big Six studios largely held on to traditional marketing approaches. In 2009, Nielsen estimated that of the \$26.5 million in media the studios spent on the opening weekend of a 2,000- to 5,000-screen release, 80 percent went to network, cable, and spot TV ad buys.⁴⁴⁷ While the majors experimented with social media and digital storytelling, they typically did so for inexpensive genre films. For example, Amy Powell, a young marketing executive at Paramount, oversaw successful digital campaigns for a pair of low-budget horror films. To promote the found-footage monster pic *Cloverfield* (2008), the studio partially replicated the *Blair Witch* formula, releasing a mysterious teaser trailer without a title attached. Online

⁴⁴⁶ Data from “Franchise Index,” Box Office Mojo, retrieved April 23, 2019, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/>. For further comparison, the *Star Wars* franchise has grossed around \$10 billion. The two animated *Frozen* films, released after *Twilight* and *Hunger Games*, also rank in the top 25 and give top billing to female voice actors.

⁴⁴⁷ Larry Gerbrandt, “How Much Does Movie Marketing Matter?,” *Reuters*, June 11, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-industry-idUSTRE65A13Q20100611>.

speculation successfully built word-of-mouth.⁴⁴⁸ Paramount developed a particularly clever digital stunt for *Paranormal Activity*, a micro-budget haunted house thriller it bought at a film festival and widely distributed in 2009. Before releasing the film, marketers asked potential viewers to “demand” a local screening by voting online. The feature, developed by a social media startup, seemingly put distribution in the hands of web-savvy fans.⁴⁴⁹ Once Paramount received a million requests, which it quickly did, it released the film nationwide—and eventually grossed just under \$200 million.

Yet it took two upstart studios to demonstrate that social media could be much more than an occasional gimmick for horror fans. As they built new franchises with digital-first marketing strategies, Summit and Lionsgate introduced many of the practices I have described as the social media marquee. For *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, marketing intervened early and often in the film production process, a significant focus even as the authors negotiated their deals with the studios. Even more notably, studio executives deployed social media logic to blur the line between content and advertising. Co-marketing, product placement deals, and soundtracks amplified the mini-majors’ limited marketing budgets and, as the franchises wore on, increasingly influenced filmmaking choices.

Meanwhile, the social media campaigns expanded the text beyond the films themselves, reframing the screenplay to support the lucrative co-marketing deals or target specific demographics. To this end, the campaigns often emphasized minor aspects of the movie, small

⁴⁴⁸ Mike Reyes, “10 Years Later: How Cloverfield Completely Changed The Way Movies Could Be Marketed,” CINEMABLEND, January 18, 2018, <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2285341/10-years-later-how-cloverfield-completely-changed-the-way-movies-could-be-marketed>.

⁴⁴⁹ Owen Gleiberman, “‘Paranormal Activity’: A Marketing Campaign so Ingenious It’s Scary | EW.Com,” October 7, 2009, <https://ew.com/article/2009/10/07/paranormal-activity-marketing-campaign/>.

scenes rendered large on the promotional surround. Thanks to the interactivity of social media, Summit and Lionsgate invited fans inside the film world, letting them role-play. Yet that play was intentionally limited, within bounds set by the companies. And it usually came with a price: handing personal data to the studios and—by extension—the social media platforms. While the big studios remained tentative about social media and continued to spend the bulk of their marketing budgets on television, the mini-majors dove headfirst into social media.

Twilight: Vampires and Volvos

The production circumstances around the first *Twilight* movie—a fledgling studio operating on a shoestring budget and executives concerned the book’s narrow appeal to teen girls would not translate to box office success—informed Summit Entertainment’s early embrace of social media. Paramount Pictures’ MTV Films originally optioned Stephenie Meyer’s supernatural romance novel in April 2004, but the project remained in development limbo for several years.⁴⁵⁰ Top of Paramount executives’ concerns: neither males nor anyone over 25 would be interested in a romance between a shy high schooler and a quiet vampire, failing the “four-quadrant” test. A “four-quadrant” film appeals to all four major demographic quadrants of the moviegoing audience: male and female, over- and under-25s. Films usually aim to reach at least two such quadrants, and most franchise films are four-quadrant movies.⁴⁵¹ So in an attempt to broaden the appeal, Paramount developed a script that bore little resemblance to the book, reinventing the shy Bella Swan as a track star and depicting a fanged vampire far from author

⁴⁵⁰ “‘Twilight’ Hits Hollywood,” EW.com, accessed October 22, 2020, <https://ew.com/article/2008/07/16/twilight-hits-hollywood/>.

⁴⁵¹ Former MTV Films executive, in-person conversation with the author, December 10, 2018.

Meyer's vision. "They could have put that movie out, called it something else, and no one would have known it was *Twilight*," Meyer recalls.⁴⁵²

Led by Robert G. Friedman, a former vice chairman and president of marketing at Paramount, and Patrick Wachsberger, a longtime global sales agent, Summit Entertainment initially focused on film sales and distribution. By the early aughts, its most significant success had been the international distribution of the *American Pie* franchise, and it was just reinventing itself as a full-service studio when executives heard about the *Twilight* script languishing at Paramount. Erik Feig, Summit's production chief, specifically noticed the book's intense online following even though it was still not a massive sales success.⁴⁵³ Indeed, Meyer had been an early, savvy social media user, connecting with readers on MySpace and participating in online discussion groups.⁴⁵⁴

Feig approached Meyer to make a deal. Mindful of the experience at Paramount, Meyer resisted. So, Feig and Summit drew up a contract, guaranteeing the writer that the film would be faithful to her vision, including a direct promise that "no vampire character will be depicted with canine or incisor teeth longer or more pronounced than may be found in human beings."⁴⁵⁵ Says Meyer: "When Summit came into the picture, they were so open to letting us make rules for them, like "Okay, Bella cannot be a track star. Bella cannot have a gun or night vision goggles.

⁴⁵² "'Twilight' Hits Hollywood."

⁴⁵³ Brooks Barnes, "For Studio, Vampire Movie Is a Cinderella Story (Published 2008)," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2008, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/20/business/worldbusiness/20iht-20summit.17982824.html>.

⁴⁵⁴ Heather Green, "Harry Potter with Fangs--and a Social Network.," *Business Week*, August 11, 2008.

⁴⁵⁵ "'Twilight' Hits Hollywood."

And, no jet skis. Are you okay with that?”⁴⁵⁶ The author accepted Summit’s offer. The contractual restrictions, and Meyer’s interest in maintaining fidelity to her novels, are not merely trivia. With limits to what they could change within the *Twilight* films themselves, Summit executives had extra reason to look to the social media marquee to reframe the franchise to fit their needs.

By the middle of 2007, Summit hired director Catherine Hardwicke, then best known for the edgy coming-of-age film *Thirteen* (2003), and screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg. Rosenberg’s resume included the teen dance movie *Step Up* (2006) and primetime soap *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007). Yet if the initial creative hires suggested Summit embraced *Twilight*’s teenage girl target market, executives remained concerned about the film’s narrow demographic appeal. Hollywood marketing executives had long accepted an adage that while they could convince women to attend an action film with their significant others, men would never go see a “chick flick.” The *Twilight* budget reflected the concern. “It was a modest budget because everybody thought, hey, a movie for women is only going to make like what *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* made – \$29 million,” Hardwicke recalls.⁴⁵⁷ Then, just a few weeks before production began, Hardwicke received an urgent memo from the studio. “They came to me and said, ‘You’ve got to find a way to cut \$4 million out of the budget in the next four days, or we’re pulling the plug,’” she

⁴⁵⁶ “MediaBlvd Magazine, The Source for Celebrity Interviews and Entertainment News - Twilight’s Author and Director Talk About Bringing The Film To Life,” October 21, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20081021085543/http://www.mediablvd.com/magazine/the_news/celebrity/twilight's_author_and_director_talk_about_bringing_the_film_to_life_200809171287.html.

⁴⁵⁷ Nate Nickolai, “‘Twilight’ Director Catherine Hardwicke on How the Film Paved the Way for Female-Led Franchises,” *Variety* (blog), October 7, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/twilight-catherine-hardwicke-ny-comic-con-1202971712/>.

remembers.⁴⁵⁸ So, Hardwicke and her team raced through the script, deleting action sequences and effects, to chop what they could from their already relatively slim budget. Hardwicke hoped that once the executives saw what she had to slash to meet their demand—the big stunts requisite in most franchises—they would reverse their cuts. “They did not,” she notes. “They said, ‘Great, glad you cut it.’ And then we made the movie.”

Twilight, released in the United States and Canada on November 21, 2008, is indeed judicious in its special effects. But, as Meyer hoped, the film hews quite closely to her novel, introducing viewers to 17-year-old Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) as she moves to the small, forested town of Forks, Washington, to live with her divorced father, and meets Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) a 108-year-old vampire who conveniently looks much younger. In the end, Summit spent about \$37 million on the first *Twilight* film—including marketing and repurchasing the rights for the book from Paramount.⁴⁵⁹ By contrast, the James Bond entry *Quantum of Solace*, released the same year, cost north of \$200 million *before* marketing expenses.⁴⁶⁰ Nevertheless, *Twilight* made more money than Bond at the domestic box office and nearly reached 007’s total globally. For its opening weekend in the United States and Canada, *Twilight* grossed \$69.6 million, on its way to a \$392 million global haul. Right after seeing the opening day receipts, Summit acquired the film rights to Meyer’s following two books in the series.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁸ Yohana Desta, “10 Years after *Twilight*, Catherine Hardwicke Knows She Deserved More,” *Vanity Fair*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/10/catherine-hardwicke-twilight-ten-years-later>.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ “‘Quantum of Solace’ Stirs up Big Box Office,” *EW.com*, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://ew.com/article/2008/11/17/quantum-solace-stirs-big-box-office/>.

⁴⁶¹ “Summit Greenlights *Twilight* Sequel,” *Film*, November 22, 2008, <https://www.slashfilm.com/summit-greenlights-twilight-sequel/>.

With its small budget and acute awareness of *Twilight*'s online fan base—that was, after all, what initially attracted production chief Erik Feig—Summit turned to a digital-first strategy. Summit encouraged fans to interact with the film world while leveraging social media to retain some control over the conversation, especially as the franchise progressed and budgets increased. Rising budgets also led to a new emphasis on co-marketing arrangements and product placement, which began in earnest with the second film, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009), and influenced both marketing practices and the sequels themselves. Summit and its agency partners also deployed social media to address the concern that had plagued Paramount executives: the books' narrow appeal to teenage girls. Even as the films stuck reasonably close to the page, YouTube trailers targeted men while other online channels cultivated family-oriented “Twilight Moms.”

Managed Interactivity: “Twi-hards” Online

Erik Feig's confidence that Summit could benefit from *Twilight*'s online fan base came in part from the studio's marketing executives, veterans of the industry's initial attempts at digital marketing.⁴⁶² Nancy Kirkpatrick, Summit's president of worldwide marketing, had overseen successful digital campaigns for three *Batman* sequels while at Warner Bros. and the Tina Fey comedy *Mean Girls* (2004) for Paramount. Still, Kirkpatrick recalls that *Twilight* presented unique marketing challenges.⁴⁶³ “We really felt like we were doing something that hadn't been done before -- building a franchise at an independent studio built on the backs of females,” she

⁴⁶² Former Summit publicity manager, in-person conversation with the author, October 15, 2019.

⁴⁶³ Nancy Kirkpatrick and the 'Twilight'-Fueled Transformation of Summit | Hollywood Reporter,” accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/women-entertainment-nancy-kirkpatrick-summit-397443>.

says. According to Kirkpatrick, since females are so engrossed in pop culture, she relied heavily on social media to build the Twilight brand and make the fans feel invested.⁴⁶⁴ Another key Summit marketing executive was Jack Pan, a 10-year veteran of Disney, who helped create that studio's internet marketing team.⁴⁶⁵ Colleagues viewed Pan as a social media expert with particular skill at reaching female fans online. In addition, Kirkpatrick and Pan brought in advertising agency The Cimarron Group to help manage digital strategy, with Lara Hoefs serving as transmedia producer for the franchise.⁴⁶⁶ Like Kirkpatrick, Hoefs recalls modest expectations. "It was not going to be a blockbuster movie," she says. "It did not have a blockbuster budget, which is encouraging because it means that [with] any property you have an opportunity to hit the zeitgeist of the cultural landscape and your audience."⁴⁶⁷

The Summit team began laying digital groundwork well before the first film's release, creating chat rooms and fan pages.⁴⁶⁸ For instance, the studio created an official "Fans of the *Twilight Saga*" Facebook page where fans regularly posted graphics, quotes, and comments—all under Summit's gaze since the marketing team owned the page.⁴⁶⁹ In addition, according to Hoefs, the marketing team created official Myspace and Twitter accounts, held

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ "Summit Marketing Exec Jack Pan Moves To Robert Simonds' Studio," *Deadline* (blog), September 30, 2014, <https://deadline.com/2014/09/jack-pan-robert-simonds-marketing-hire-843653/>.

⁴⁶⁶ "'Using Transmedia' for Twilight and Now Fifty Shades of Grey – Twilight Girl," accessed October 22, 2020, <http://twilightgirlportland.com/using-transmedia-for-twilight-and-now-fifty-shades-of-grey/>. Additional detail from Summit publicity manager, in-person conversation with the author, October 15, 2019.

⁴⁶⁷ "'Using Transmedia' for Twilight and Now Fifty Shades of Grey – Twilight Girl."

⁴⁶⁸ "'Twilight Saga' -- the Making of a Bargain Blockbuster," *TheWrap* (blog), June 30, 2010, <https://www.thewrap.com/twilight-saga-making-bargain-blockbuster-18921/>.

⁴⁶⁹ www.facebook.com/OfficialTwiFans; no longer active. See Anne H. Petersen, "The Politics of Twilight Web Traffic," *Celebrity Gossip Academic Style* RSS. N.p., Nov 13, 2009.

online contests, introduced a “Twilight time capsule” – where fans could upload their photos – and even published graphic novels.⁴⁷⁰ By the time the second film arrived in 2009, the studio’s *Twilight* Facebook pages had nearly 4 million fans.⁴⁷¹ With a limited budget for paid advertising, especially for the first two films, Summit carefully cultivated publicity via both traditional and digital media. For example, it built audience anticipation by releasing advance footage and interviews as part of a weekly series on MTV dubbed “Twilight Tuesdays.”

Meanwhile, the public relations team fed selected news to bloggers and fan sites, even inviting some to the first film set. With the help of outside digital agencies, Summit created a “virtual world” for *Twilight* on the then-popular interactive network Habbo and an iPhone app offering message boards and news updates.⁴⁷² Even when Summit did spend on traditional media, it focused its efforts on driving fans back to digital content.⁴⁷³ The studio premiered the trailer for *New Moon* on the *MTV Movie Awards* but encouraged fans to re-watch and see additional content on two digital partner sites, Myspace and MTV.com. Within just 24 hours of the trailer’s television premiere, fans watched it again 4.2 million times on Myspace and another 1.6 million on MTV’s website.⁴⁷⁴

In many ways, Summit’s digital strategy mirrored the one Gordon Paddison had introduced for the pre-social media *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: stay relatively hands-off on

⁴⁷⁰ “‘Using Transmedia’ for Twilight and Now Fifty Shades of Grey – Twilight Girl.”

⁴⁷¹ Stuart Turner, “Why Brands Are Staking a Claim on Twilight Saga,” *Marketing Week* (blog), September 29, 2009, <https://www.marketingweek.com/why-brands-are-staking-a-claim-on-twilight-saga/>.

⁴⁷² Turner.

⁴⁷³ Summit publicity manager, in-person conversation with the author, October 15, 2019.

⁴⁷⁴ Anne H. Petersen, “The Politics of Twilight Web Traffic.”

trademark enforcement but maintain some control over fan activity by sending them production photos and news. The *Twilight* team gave fans a fair bit of latitude to interact with the property. There's no sex at all in devout Mormon Meyer's novels, but sex scenes abounded on message boards, and fan fiction, some of which had titles like "Edward and Bella do steamy office affair," or "Edward and Bella try out S&M."⁴⁷⁵ Most famously, E.L. James's erotica bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), adapted into a 2015 movie, began as a work of *Twilight* fan fiction entitled "Master of the Universe." It earned a massive following well before James's book deal.⁴⁷⁶

Unlike *Lord of the Rings* in the early 2000s, however, newly emergent social media platforms gave Summit more ways to control online conversation. Simply by creating studio-controlled platforms on social media sites—and doing so well in advance of the first movie—Summit enjoyed increased visibility into fans' activities and control over the posts. Features such as the "Twilight time capsule" encouraged interactivity and allowed the studio to collect fan data. In this way, the *Twilight* team innovated a carefully managed interactivity that would influence future social media marketing efforts.

Especially as later entries in the franchise increased in cost and risk, Summit, Meyer, and publisher Little, Brown, and Company all fought harder to retain control over online conversations and data. In April 2011, Meyer published an "Official Illustrated Guide" to the *Twilight* series, prescribing rules, biographies, and images far beyond the scope of the books or

⁴⁷⁵ "Older Women Crave 'New Moon' Vampires - CNN.Com," accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Movies/11/16/older.twilight.fans/index.html>.

⁴⁷⁶ Jason Boog, "The Lost History of Fifty Shades of Grey," accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.adweek.com/galleycat/fifty-shades-of-grey-wayback-machine/50128>.

movies.⁴⁷⁷ For the final two films in 2011 and 2012, Summit—by then owned by Lionsgate—inked a deal with Yahoo. In exchange for creating a Yahoo account and turning over data to the tech firm and Summit, fans could interact with online content focused on the film’s characters, watch live-streaming events, see interviews with the filmmaker, and participate in Q&A sessions.⁴⁷⁸ For the final film, a five-day “fan camp” in Los Angeles, outside the theater where the movie premiered, saw 2,000 people—but many more registered on social media for a chance to attend.⁴⁷⁹ Thanks to a marketing campaign centered on social media, Summit offered *Twilight* fans increased opportunities to interact with their favorite property. In the bargain, of course, Summit got valuable user data and some semblance of control over how fans discuss the movies.

Social Media Logic on the Big Screen

Movie studios highly value co-branding promotions when other companies pay fees or marketing costs in exchange for the use of a movie’s intellectual property. Summit executives certainly thought about co-branding as they built their digital-first strategy for the initial *Twilight* film. Initially, however, brands shared the skepticism that had caused *Twilight* to remain in limbo back at Paramount.⁴⁸⁰ Would the modestly budgeted young adult romance be a worthwhile investment? At that time, most co-branding dollars flowed towards male-oriented, big-budget

⁴⁷⁷ Stephenie Meyer, *The Twilight Saga: The Official Illustrated Guide* (Little, Brown, 2011).

⁴⁷⁸ “Yahoo Banks on Twilight Content to Boost New Promotion - Blogs & Content Archives - BizReport,” accessed November 24, 2020, <http://www.bizreport.com/2011/11/yahoo-banks-on-twilight-content-to-boost-new-promotion.html>.

⁴⁷⁹ Erica Orden, “Final ‘Twilight’ Film Set for Big Weekend,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2012, sec. Business, <https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324595904578123270552060476.html>.

⁴⁸⁰ Former account executive at The Cimarron Group, in-person conversation with the author, October 29, 2019. See also “Movie Series Twilight: Marketing Industries Paying Attention Now - The Economic Times,” accessed October 22, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/movie-series-twilight-marketing-industries-paying-attention-now/articleshow/6227334.cms?from=mdr>.

action films; as filming on *Twilight* began, *Iron Man* (2008) had just attracted \$100 million in marketing spending from a dozen partners.⁴⁸¹ By contrast, the first *Twilight* saw minimal interest from brands. However, when the film grossed \$392.5 million globally on a \$37 million budget, potential co-marketing partners noticed. In approaching brands for the second entry, *New Moon*, Summit executives emphasized their fan-centric social media strategy, not only as an explanation for their outsize success but as a reason other companies would want to associate with the movie and its dedicated fandom.⁴⁸²

The pitch worked. Volvo provides a good example. Edward, that dreamy vampire, drives a silver Volvo in Meyer's book, a choice the author says derives not from an early product placement deal but consultation with car fans in her family.⁴⁸³ Edward drives a Volvo in the first movie, too, but the company had not paid for the privilege. In fact, after the first film's release, Volvo marketing execs were caught off-guard by the brand's sudden rise in popularity amongst tweens (and their parents).⁴⁸⁴ Volvo and Summit did sign a co-branding deal for *New Moon*, for which the car company launched a website that offered fans the chance to attend the premiere, meet the cast, and win the car. Volvo reported that nearly 300,000 people entered their "What Drives Edward" promotion, which means Volvo collected email addresses and other valuable

⁴⁸¹ Julia Boorstin, "Twilight Eclipse: Marketing Through Movies," June 28, 2010, <https://www.cnn.com/id/37982371>.

⁴⁸² Former account executive at The Cimarron Group, in-person conversation with the author, October 29, 2019.

⁴⁸³ "The Cullen Cars," *Stephenie Meyer* (blog), accessed December 13, 2020, <https://stepheniemeyer.com/the-books/twilight/twilight-cullen-cars/>.

⁴⁸⁴ "Twilight Fans Root For Team Volvo," *Wired*, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/2010/06/twilight-fans-root-for-team-volvo/>.

data.⁴⁸⁵ The deal also led to clear product placement, a longstanding practice in Hollywood but certainly one that reflects social media logic's blurring of text and paratext. In the first film, the camera rarely lingers on Edward's Volvo. The first time we see Edward in *New Moon*, cinematographer Javier Aguirresarobe captures Robert Pattinson in slow motion, deep focus—the character's Volvo, logo and all, clearly visible throughout the long take.

For the third film, *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (2010), Volvo accelerated its cross-promotional efforts, especially on the digital front. In advance of the film's release, Volvo and agency Euro 4D launched the "Lost in Forks" online contest, in which fans navigate a Volvo XC60 through the town of Forks, Washington, following a series of clues that lead to Edward's home. The contest had a standalone website, but Volvo heavily promoted it on Facebook and Twitter.⁴⁸⁶ "Above all, of course, we are really pleased that the image of the Volvo brand has changed among many of the young people who in a few years' time will be our potential customers," explained Volvo marketing manager Oliver Engling.⁴⁸⁷ Volvo even backed the partnership with traditional television ad buys. One spot, developed by the creative agency Arnold Worldwide, links the safety aspect of a Volvo with the twists of the franchise's plot. "There's more to life than a Volvo. There's what you can expect: Being kissed, desired, loved, missed," reads a voiceover accompanied by scenes from the movie. "Then there's everything you can't expect. So be ready for it. That's why you drive one."⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ "Lost in Forks? Volvo's Online Promotions Offer TWILIGHT SAGA Fans a Chance to Win Edward's Volvo XC60 or Premiere Tickets," accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.media.volvocars.com/us/en-us/media/pressreleases/33619/>.

⁴⁸⁶ "Lost in Forks?"

⁴⁸⁷ "Twilight Fans Root For Team Volvo."

⁴⁸⁸ "Volvo Ties In With New 'Twilight' Movie," accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/volvo-ties-new-twilight-movie-107499/>.

Volvo's increasing involvement in the *Twilight* franchise highlights a significant effect of social media marketing: amplifying and redirecting existing promotional practices. Volvo's marketing staff had not initially viewed *Twilight* and its young audience as beneficial to their brand, but the property's rabid fan base and Summit's successful social media strategy convinced them. Moreover, the digital components of the co-branding effort, such as the "Lost in Forks" contest, allow for more fan interactivity and more data collection for the advertisers.

Following the first film's shoestring (by Hollywood standards) total budget of \$37 million, Summit spent more as the series progressed. *Eclipse* cost \$68 million to produce, and the studio spent another \$50 million marketing the film, a significant ramp-up but still modest next to big studio franchises.⁴⁸⁹ Summit's success in attracting co-branding partners such as Volvo dramatically increased the reach of their marketing efforts. While the studio directly spent \$50 million, marketing partners, including Hot Topic, Nordstrom, Volvo, and Burger King, spent an estimated \$80 million to \$90 million on promotions related to *Eclipse*. Burger King alone spent \$10 million to \$15 million on its campaign, including T.V. commercials plus games on Facebook and in its restaurants.⁴⁹⁰ In theory, the arrangements benefit both the marketing partners and the studio, whose property gets additional media exposure. Burger King executives say that their most lucrative promotions yield a double-digit percentage increase in foot traffic and sales.⁴⁹¹ The mall retailer Hot Topic credited *Twilight* merchandise with turning around its sales slump amidst the 2009 recession.⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁹ "'Twilight Saga' -- the Making of a Bargain Blockbuster."

⁴⁹⁰ Boorstin, "Twilight Eclipse."

⁴⁹¹ Boorstin.

⁴⁹² "Twilight Emerges As Retail's Great Savior," *The Cut*, accessed December 14, 2020, https://www.thecut.com/2009/03/retails_great_savior_twilight.html.

Beginning with the second film, the *Twilight* saga attracted a long list of co-branding partners, from mega-advertisers like Burger King to smaller specialty and online retailers. Bella and Edward branched out to live events, toys, cosmetics, clothing, and gaming. The cosmetics brand Lip Venom launched a Twilight-themed beauty line; Mattel targeted young girls with its Barbie Twilight figures. A publisher even released a reprint of Emily Bronte's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* with a cover nearly identical to those in the *Twilight* series and the words "Bella and Edward's Favourite Book" highlighted on the outside.⁴⁹³ On the Coolspotters message boards, where users identify products and brands they catch in movies and T.V., *Twilight* fans spotted at least 65 individual products in *Eclipse* and its marketing, from Rainier beer to Diesel jeans to Asics shoes to Coca-Cola.⁴⁹⁴

Many of the co-branded campaigns offered fans opportunities to interact with the film world. For example, Nordstrom offered an exclusive fashion line inspired by *Eclipse*. Created by Awake Inc., the collection allowed fans to create head-to-toe looks inspired by two of the films' most visible female characters, Alice (Ashley Greene) and Bella (Kristen Stewart).⁴⁹⁵ In another example of paratext possibly influencing text, some of the most significant narrative differences between the book and movie relate to Alice, who—despite receiving her own outfits in the Nordstrom collection—is very much a supporting character. A key plot point requires Bella to have an alibi for a while. In the book, Alice forcefully holds Bella hostage after receiving a bribe.

⁴⁹³ Boorstin, "Twilight Eclipse."

⁴⁹⁴ Brandchannel, "Twilight Eclipse Products Draw Blood," *Brandchannel*: (blog), June 30, 2010, <https://www.brandchannel.com/2010/06/30/twilight-eclipse-products-draw-blood/>.

⁴⁹⁵ Larry Carroll, "Exclusive: 'Twilight' Fashion Week Highlights 'Eclipse' Merch," MTV News, accessed December 13, 2020, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1638756/exclusive-twilight-fashion-week-highlights-eclipse-merch/>.

In the movie, Alice instead invites Bella for a sleepover, a far friendlier, fashion-focused affair. Since Meyer's contract generally required fidelity to the books, the promotional surround may well have influenced this relatively rare divergence.

Edward proposes marriage to Bella at the end of *Eclipse*, a development ripe for merchandising with additional partners. In an interesting example of the blurred line between text and paratext, author Stephenie Meyer contributed to fashion designs for several bridal merchandise partners. First, in partnership with Summit, The Infinite Jewelry Company created the "Bella Engagement Ring," a line of replica engagement rings in different price ranges. Executives said Infinite worked directly with Meyer to design both the ring and a coordinating bracelet.⁴⁹⁶ Next, Summit's publicity and marketing teams worked together to create suspense around Bella's wedding dress, planned to appear in the fourth film, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (2011).⁴⁹⁷ To whet fan appetites, the studio deployed social media to reveal snippets of the dress. It placed a nugget of information on Twitter that Carolina Herrera had designed the gown, a piece of news that quickly made its way to fashion and wedding blogs, along with news that Meyer had personally selected Herrera for the task. Summit also posted, to several social media channels, a still of the actress Kristen Stewart as Bella Swan on her big day. The intentionally obscure close-up photo showed about a square inch of her wedding veil.

Similarly, the first trailer for *Breaking Dawn*, posted on YouTube and Facebook, deployed extreme close-ups to show bits of the dress fabric but keep the mystery intact.⁴⁹⁸ Eric

⁴⁹⁶ Brandchannel, "Twilight Eclipse Products Draw Blood."

⁴⁹⁷ Former Summit publicity manager, in-person conversation with the author, October 15, 2019.

⁴⁹⁸ *THE TWILIGHT SAGA: BREAKING DAWN Part 1 - Trailer*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQNLfo-SOR4&ab_channel=TheTwilightSaga.

Kops, Summit's senior vice president for publicity, confirmed the strategy: "We are saving the reveal of the dress as a surprise for the fans when they see the film. Therefore, we aren't planning to release any images showing the dress until after the film in theatres."⁴⁹⁹ After the movie's release, the dressmaker Alfred Angelo sold a replica of Bella's wedding dress under the brand Twilight Bridal.⁵⁰⁰

Another critical piece of co-branded merchandise: The *Twilight* soundtrack, released by Atlantic Records. The soundtrack had not been a significant part of the promotional strategy for the first film, but the album sold 2.6 million copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan, the most for any film soundtrack since the musical *Chicago* in 2002, over six years earlier. The second soundtrack sold 1.2 million copies.⁵⁰¹ "It harkens back to '80s soundtracks," observed Keith Caulfield, senior chart manager and analyst at Billboard, around the release of the third film." Certain film music is really important, like *Top Gun* or *Footloose*, where we can't really think of scenes without music. The *Twilight* films are like that."⁵⁰² Caulfield's comment brings to mind Justin Wyatt's analysis of "high concept" 1980s films in which music and particular songs were central to studio marketing strategies.⁵⁰³ Often, Wyatt notes, high concept films incorporated songs into critical scenes within the movie. Summit did not take this approach for the first *Twilight*, which featured few songs and focused on instrumental score. However, the unexpected

⁴⁹⁹ Monica Corcoran Harel, "What Will Bella Wear? (Published 2011)," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2011, sec. Fashion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/fashion/weddings/twihards-ask-what-will-bellas-wedding-dress-look-like-field.html>.

⁵⁰⁰ Carroll, "Exclusive."

⁵⁰¹ "'Twilight Saga' -- the Making of a Bargain Blockbuster."

⁵⁰² "'Twilight Saga' -- the Making of a Bargain Blockbuster."

⁵⁰³ Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 133.

success of the soundtrack led to a new musical direction for the remaining films in the series. Pop and rock songs from the soundtracks receive extended play during crucial scenes, much like *Top Gun* or *Footloose*. Thus, the *Twilight* soundtracks developed similarly to the co-branding deals with Volvo and Burger King. On the heels of outsized box office performance for the debut film, the *Twilight* franchise embraced a branding and merchandising strategy more common to big-budget, male-driven films.

Twilight drew upon social media logic to extend existing Hollywood practices in new directions. Brands that had initially eschewed the franchise embraced it once they saw an opportunity to engage with a loyal, young, female fan base driven by online activity. The \$80 million to \$90 million brands spent on promotions related to *Eclipse* far exceeded Summit's own marketing budget and nearly caught the record-setting total of *Iron Man* a few years earlier. Many of the co-promotions relied upon the interactivity and data collection of social media. *Twilight* set a new industry template: female-led, female-driven films could net significant box office returns *if* a studio developed an aggressive co-branding and merchandising strategy.

Demographic Targeting

Having established a digital-first marketing strategy for the *Twilight* franchise, Summit benefited from one of the primary promotional advantages of social media: precise demographic targeting. Movie studios had long tailored promotions to various target audiences. For example, a television spot on the women-targeted Lifetime cable channel might emphasize a film's romantic angle, while one for ESPN, with more male viewers, might focus on action sequences. Before social media, however, such an approach had clear limits. Most advertising—trailers, posters, print, television—would be seen by a wide demographic. Leaning too heavily on the romance angle, for instance, might alienate viewers more drawn to action.

On the other hand, ad products from Facebook, Google, and Twitter make it easy to customize ads for chosen demographics and interests. If a studio targets a particular ad to women 18-35, for example, or to fans of romance novels, there's relatively little chance that a 50-year-old man with no interest in romance novels would see the ad. Summit executives bought demographic and interest-based ads on YouTube, Google, Facebook, and Twitter to promote the Twilight saga.⁵⁰⁴ However, because of their relatively small marketing budgets, the teams also wanted to maximize the impact of their organic, unpaid presence on social media. So, starting with the second film, they developed broad demographic strategies for each social media platform. Facebook attracts more women and is particularly well suited to hardcore fans, so Summit's Facebook posts focused primarily on the films' romantic storyline. YouTube attracts more men, so Summit's YouTube posts, as with their theatrical trailers, focused more heavily on action sequences for the later films in the franchise.⁵⁰⁵

Repeat business from young women had been crucial to the first film's box office power. To sustain teenage girls' intense interest, executives leaned into the book's romantic triangle, asking fans to choose between "Team Edward," after the vampire heartthrob, and "Team Jacob," after the werewolf/muscular teen Jacob Black (Taylor Lautner). Summit's marketers did not invent Team Edward/Team Jacob; the shorthand had developed on fan sites and homemade t-shirts during the books' initial run.⁵⁰⁶ However, Summit actively promoted the dichotomy,

⁵⁰⁴ Former account executive at The Cimarron Group, in-person conversation with the author, October 29, 2019.

⁵⁰⁵ For current demographic info about social media platforms, see "Social Media Demographics to Inform Your Brand's Strategy in 2020," Sprout Social, August 4, 2020, <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/new-social-media-demographics/>.

⁵⁰⁶ "MediaBlvd Magazine, The Source for Celebrity Interviews and Entertainment News - Twilight's Author and Director Talk About Bringing The Film To Life."

starting with the second film, *New Moon*. For example, after a few fans in the United Kingdom created a “Team Edward” Facebook page, Summit’s U.K. office fed the owners production photos and news and promoted the fan page.⁵⁰⁷ The Team Edward page ultimately amassed over 3 million followers and 3 million “likes.” It frequently reposted promotions from the official Summit Facebook account, usually with some “Team Edward” spin appended, as in Figure 14. Here, Team Edward reposted a Summit promotion for *Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, adding, “OK so the picture has Jacob in it but still - I.T.’S ONLY 4 DAYS TO GO!!!”

Summit’s focus on the love triangle is notable since there was little narrative suspense about whom Bella would choose; the triangle didn’t develop until *New Moon* (book and movie two) and was moot by the end of *Eclipse* (book and movie three). Instead, the marketers used promotional paratexts to extend the love triangle narrative beyond the original text, a tactic especially well-suited to immersive, sharable social media. Co-marketing partners amplified the tactic. For *New Moon* and *Eclipse*, Burger King (with the creative agency Crispin Porter & Bogusky) released a series of television and online video ads on the Team Edward vs. Team Jacob theme. A *New Moon* spot even hints at demographics, beginning by depicting groups of teen girls arguing for their favorite pairing, followed by older women in a bingo parlor and two male construction workers having the same argument.⁵⁰⁸ For *Eclipse*, Burger King introduced a Team Edward vs. Team Jacob scratch-off game. It promoted the game with more television and online ads depicting teenaged fans of the two characters walking into a restaurant, urging

⁵⁰⁷ Former Summit publicity manager, in-person conversation with the author, October 15, 2019

⁵⁰⁸ TeaFinny, *New BK Commercial for New Moon!!*, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=mrQ3hr1GYvw&ab_channel=TeamDusk.

uninformed customers (such as a befuddled older man, in Figure 15) to play the game. “Jacob’s abs are so hard,” a Jacob fan informs a customer, “you can scratch that game piece on them.”⁵⁰⁹

The studio’s efforts to cultivate Team Edward vs. Jacob conversation online seem to have been successful, undoubtedly aided by fan conversations and press coverage. Google searches for the terms “Team Edward” and “Team Jacob” (Figure 16) saw only a slight uptick at the first film’s release before Summit aggressively promoted the idea. Summit’s marketing of the terms began in earnest for *New Moon*, and indeed the corresponding Google searches rose nearly tenfold around that title’s release on November 20, 2009. *Eclipse*’s release on June 24, 2010, saw a fivefold increase. Thus, Summit was able to drive the online discussion to sustain teen girls’ interest in their favored pairing even beyond the narrative bounds of the film text.

Even if the first film had proven that a predominantly female audience could drive strong box office, Summit executives remained hopeful that they could broaden the sequels’ appeal to men. For the first film, upwards of 80% of ticket buyers were female, and half were under 21.⁵¹⁰ So while Summit sought to retain loyal female fans with the Team Edward vs. Jacob emphasis, they took a starkly different approach for the theatrical trailers heavily promoted on YouTube. The final trailer for the first film focuses squarely on the romantic plotline, with the vast majority of shots including only Bella and Edward alongside dialogue such as, “I’d rather die than live without you.” The trailer ends with Edward and Bella embracing as he says, “you are my life now.”⁵¹¹ By contrast, the final trailer for *New Moon* emphasizes action, with

⁵⁰⁹ Stuart Elliott, “Edward or Jacob, Have It Your Way at Burger King,” *Media Decoder Blog* (blog), June 18, 2010, <https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/18/edward-or-jacob-have-it-your-way-at-burger-king/>.

⁵¹⁰ Nancy Cordes, “‘Twilight’ Attracts Unexpected Audience,” CBS News, November 22, 2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/twilight-attracts-unexpected-audience/>.

⁵¹¹ *Twilight - Final Trailer*, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxjNDE2fMjI&ab_channel=TheTwilightSaga.

dramatic, operatic music and quick cuts. “You’re an adrenaline junkie now,” a friend says to Bella in the trailer. Other scenes include a motorcycle chase, cliff diving, and an ocean rescue; the trailer ends with a fight scene.⁵¹² As a film, *New Moon* consists of a bit more action than its predecessor, but it primarily focuses on romantic entanglements. Long sequences feature Bella dreaming about the absent Edward. The trailer certainly overemphasizes the action elements.

A similar dichotomy applied to Summit’s marketing strategy for the final entry in the franchise, *Breaking Dawn – Part 2* (2012). That film was the most action-heavy, with a long final battle sequence. However, in the days before the release Summit’s official Facebook page emphasized family and romance. There, fans engaged most with a photo of Edward and Bella’s daughter Renesmee (Mackenzie Foy, Figure 17). It received 468,708 Likes, 9398 Comments, and 50,606 Shares for an engagement rate of 1.48% (of those who saw the post, the percent that interacted with it in some way).⁵¹³ Indeed, all of the top official Facebook posts emphasized family or the (by then moot) love triangle. By contrast, the final theatrical trailer posted on YouTube underscores action and battle sequences, ending with a shot reminiscent of two armies charging at each other (Figure 18). Cultivating the romantic angle on interactive social media channels freed Summit to sell action elements on the less interactive, more male-friendly YouTube.

Did the strategy work? While young women remained by far the franchise’s most important audience, Summit modestly broadened the appeal of later entries. *Breaking Dawn –*

⁵¹² *THE TWILIGHT SAGA: NEW MOON - Trailer*, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q58iQSHhZGg&ab_channel=TheTwilightSaga.

⁵¹³ “Twilight Dominates the Box Office and Social Media!,” Socialbakers.com, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.socialbakers.com/blog/1076-twilight-dominates-the-box-office-and-social-media>.

Part 2 grossed \$830 million worldwide against a production budget of \$136 million, making it the sixth-highest-grossing film of 2012 and the highest-grossing film of *The Twilight Saga* series.⁵¹⁴ When the film ticketing site Fandango surveyed ticket buyers, 96 percent of respondents identified as female for the first *Twilight*'s November 2008 debut; that number dropped to 92 percent by the third entry, *Eclipse*.⁵¹⁵ Meanwhile, *Eclipse*'s "date-night appeal" went up compared with the previous films. Only 11 percent of *Twilight* viewers said they would attend with a date, a number that rose to 28 percent for *Eclipse*, based on a survey of 1,000 fans. "Word of mouth is spreading that it's OK for guys to see this movie," said Fandango's Harry Medved.⁵¹⁶

Social media also enabled Summit to target narrower demographic groups it might have missed altogether with a more traditional marketing approach. By the time the first *Twilight* began filming, Erik Fieg, Jack Pan, and other executives had noticed an unexpected fan cohort: older "Twilight moms" who were just as enamored with the franchise as were teens and tweens. As part of Summit's strategy to cultivate online fan activity, producers invited a group of bloggers from the "Twilight MOMS" website to spend several days on set so they could post about their experiences and help promote the film to mothers.⁵¹⁷ Actor Justin Chon recalls an on-set encounter. "We just finished a scene and I was walking back to my trailer. I noticed this group of middle-aged women hanging around. One of them kind of loudly whispers, "Hey, come

⁵¹⁴ "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 2," Box Office Mojo, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r13276178945/>.

⁵¹⁵ Sarah Ball, "Is 'Twilight' Looking to 'Eclipse' the Ladies?," Newsweek, June 29, 2010, <https://www.newsweek.com/twilight-looking-eclipse-ladies-73567>.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Claude Brodesser-akner, "Moms Get Starring Role in Marketing 'Twilight' Movie," October 30, 2008, <https://adage.com/article/madisonvine-news/moms-starring-role-marketing-twilight-movie/132142>.

here.” I walk over and she hands me a business card. I flip it over and it reads, “Twilight MOMS.” She wanted me to call her.”⁵¹⁸

Some older fans said they related to the films’ core themes. “Everybody remembers their high school love, their first crush, the emotion of it all. I think even at our age we can relate to that,” 40-something Meg Symington explained.⁵¹⁹ Others picked up on minor textual elements, small details much emphasized on message boards and fan social media discussion. “Bella is a responsible caretaker—she cooks, she cleans, she takes care of her family. Those are maternal traits that a lot of moms can relate to,” said Kirsten Starkweather, media director of TwilightMOMS.com, which had 34,000 registered members by the second film’s release.⁵²⁰ Of course, movies have long invited different interpretative communities, some of whom may even have oppositional or negotiated readings of a film text. Social media and online message boards amplify the effect, enabling studio marketers to target and curate specific communities. Digital promotion can encourage a particular interpretation and even retrain fans to see a film in the studio’s preferred light.

Gender and the *Twilight* Effect

Rival studios certainly noticed *Twilight*’s unexpected success and Summit’s ability to grow the franchise’s box office across five films in five years. A small studio had posted big studio results, despite limited production and marketing budgets. “It represents a fundamental

⁵¹⁸ Ryan McKee, “Confessions of a (Male) Twi-Hard: Twilight MOMS Rule My World,” MTV News, accessed December 14, 2020, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2800256/confessions-of-a-male-twi-hard-twilight-moms/>.

⁵¹⁹ Cordes, “‘Twilight’ Attracts Unexpected Audience.”

⁵²⁰ “Why Middle-Aged Moms Are Swooning Over The ‘Twilight’ Series -- New York Magazine - Nymag,” New York Magazine, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://nymag.com/movies/features/62027/>.

paradigm shift — one that producers all over Hollywood are scrambling to understand and leverage,” said Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Entertainment, who has consulted on franchises such as *Pirates of the Caribbean*. “They’re going to make their budget back in 24 hours.”⁵²¹ *Twilight*’s box office also challenged industry orthodoxy that women alone could not sustain a big-budget film even though women had always been the most avid filmgoers. “I think that changed the landscape,” *Twilight* director Catherine Hardwicke said. “People could see that women want to see movies about women.”⁵²² Added Vinny Bruzzese, president of research firm OTX: “It costs more to blow up a helicopter than have two people kiss, but both drive different audiences to the theater. It shows that young females can open a movie.”⁵²³ The success of *Twilight* likely paved the way for future female-led franchises, including *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent* (Lionsgate, 2014-2015), *Frozen* (Disney, 2013-2019), and *Wonder Woman* (Warner Bros, 2017-2020).

At the same time, *Twilight* underscores Hollywood’s continued ambivalence about gender representation and the female audience. Even though females drove the first film’s unexpected success, Summit still focused on attracting males to the subsequent entries. Catherine Hardwicke did not return to direct any of the sequels; producers hired (white) men to helm films two through five. Scholars Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, and Melissa A. Click argue that the series’ reception—it generally received negative critical reviews and plenty of online snark—reflects sexist attitudes towards the cultural content women or girls favor.

⁵²¹ “‘Twilight Saga’ -- the Making of a Bargain Blockbuster.”

⁵²² Nickolai and Nickolai, “‘Twilight’ Director Catherine Hardwicke on How the Film Paved the Way for Female-Led Franchises.”

⁵²³ “‘Twilight Saga’ -- the Making of a Bargain Blockbuster.”

Mainstream press accounts often described the fans of the series with gendered, demeaning terms such as “fever,” “hysteria,” or “obsession.”⁵²⁴

Moreover, the films and Meyer’s novels express a relatively conservative view of gender. Media scholar Carrie Anne Platt argues that Bella and Edward’s relationship reinforces traditional gender roles, with the man as protector and savior. Perhaps most striking is conservative sexual politics; Bella quite literally and violently dies when she consummates her relationship with Edward and gives birth to their child.⁵²⁵ To Danielle McGeough, that moment seems to grant Bella a “divine status,” but only once she leaves behind her disordered, uncontrolled teenage body.⁵²⁶ Indeed, the conservative teachings of her Mormon faith may have influenced author Stephenie Meyer, Margaret M. Toscano suggests.⁵²⁷ In some ways, *Twilight* even narratively resembles the “woman’s film” of the 1940s (a period when Hollywood more directly catered to women, with so many men at war).

For instance, in her study of the woman’s film, Mary Ann Doane identifies a sub-genre influenced by the gothic novel which “link women with paranoia through a conflation of legalized sexuality (marriage) and violence...”⁵²⁸ Notably, Doane also observes that “the female

⁵²⁴ Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, eds., *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, Mediated Youth, v. 14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 6.

⁵²⁵ Carrie Anne Platt, “Cullen Family Values: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Twilight Series,” in *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, ed. Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Mediated Youth, v. 14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 71.

⁵²⁶ Danielle McGeough, “Twilight and Transformations of Flesh: Reading the Body in Contemporary Youth Culture,” in *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, ed. Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Mediated Youth, v. 14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 86.

⁵²⁷ Margaret M. Toscano, “Mormon Morality and Immortality in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series,” in *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, ed. Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Mediated Youth, v. 14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 21.

⁵²⁸ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 36.

subject of the consumer look in the cinematic arena becomes, through a series of mediations, the industry's own merchandizing asset," a description that aptly applies to *Twilight's* co-branding and product placement.⁵²⁹ Just as 1940s studio press books suggested tie-ins with local makeup and fashion stores, Summit pitched the power of the young, female consumer to dressmaker Alfred Angelo, Nordstrom, Volvo, and Burger King.

The *Twilight* marketing campaign also highlighted the unique gender dynamics of social media compared to the earlier internet era. Women were, and continue to be, the most avid users of social media. In May 2010, just before the third *Twilight* film, 52 percent of women reported using at least one social media platform compared to 44 percent of men.⁵³⁰ Facebook skewed even more towards women. Marketers saw these statistics, one reason why *Twilight* was among the first films to embrace a robust social strategy. By contrast, the earliest internet marketing campaigns back in the 1990s generally targeted tech-savvy men; recall that the first film websites promoted *Star Trek*, *Stargate*, and *Mortal Kombat*. Among other scholars, Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson contend that Henry Jenkins's conception of media convergence largely ignores gender and, in particular, the ways social media exploit the "free" labor built into societal expectations of women.⁵³¹ Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg add that "the fan fiction communities so regularly discussed by Jenkins almost exclusively consist of women," a salient point since fan fiction was a central feature of *Twilight's* online fandom.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ Doane, 36.

⁵³⁰ "Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States."

⁵³¹ Ouellette and Wilson, "Women's Work."

⁵³² Driscoll and Gregg, "Convergence Culture and the Legacy of Feminist Cultural Studies," 570.

Twilight created an industry template, demonstrating how studios could market a female-led franchise. Summit's marketing and publicity teams carefully cultivated online fan communities, feeding them production news and inviting bloggers to visit film sets. The studio established informal—and sometimes formal—relationships with fan sites and Facebook pages, promoting them while retaining more control over the messaging. Buoyed by the digital-first, low-budget success of the first *Twilight*, Summit aggressively pursued co-branding and product placement deals for the sequels. Ultimately partners paid many of the marketing dollars spent on the franchise. In addition, the studio leveraged social media's interactivity and demographic targeting to customize messaging and broaden the franchise's appeal. For example, Summit encouraged some fans to focus on the franchise love triangle, asking them to pick Team Edward or Team Jacob even after the films narratively settled the matter. Meanwhile, the studio emphasized action elements when speaking to more mainstream, more male audiences.

In many ways, the *Twilight* books perfectly matched Summit's digital strategy. The vampire in high school plotline easily lent itself to product integration and co-branding. Stephenie Meyer actively managed her online presence and eagerly participated in co-branding such as Bella's wedding dress design. Moreover, modest expectations and budgets gave executives the freedom to engage with online fan communities. As the social media era progressed, other film marketers would follow Summit's playbook. How would it work for *The Hunger Games*, a young adult book series with more challenging themes and a more progressive view of gender roles?

The Hunger Games: Marketing “Kids Killing Kids”

Summit Entertainment’s success with *Twilight* soon attracted the attention of another emergent youth-oriented studio, Lionsgate. On and off merger talks began in 2008.⁵³³ Finally, in January 2012, Lionsgate officially acquired Summit for \$412.5 million.⁵³⁴ Just two months later, on March 12, 2012, Lionsgate released its adaptation of Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*. Founded by Canadian banker Frank Giustra in 1997, Lionsgate Films had developed a reputation for lower budget, edgy fare such as the gory *Saw* horror film franchise (2004-2010). The small studio beat out Warner Bros. and other formidable suitors for *The Hunger Games* in March 2009, when it entered into a co-production agreement with another upstart studio, Nina Jacobson’s Color Force (which had acquired the rights a few weeks earlier).⁵³⁵ At the time, Collins’s 2008 novel was only a mild hit, having sold fewer than 500,000 copies. By the time film production began in 2011, the novel had sold 10 million copies. Seeing the possibilities and encouraged by *Twilight*’s success, the heavily indebted Lionsgate slashed other films’ budgets and sold assets to raise *The Hunger Games*’ production budget to \$80 million, a massive number for the small studio but still modest by blockbuster standards.⁵³⁶ The gamble paid off. Until 2012, Lionsgate’s

⁵³³ Sharon Waxman, “Lionsgate May Buy Summit,” *TheWrap* (blog), February 1, 2009, <https://www.thewrap.com/lionsgate-may-buy-summit-1209/>.

⁵³⁴ “It’s Official: Lionsgate Has Acquired Summit Entertainment for \$412.5 Million - ComingSoon.Net,” accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/85972-its-official-lionsgate-has-acquired-summit-entertainment-for-412-5-million>.

⁵³⁵ “Lionsgate Picks up ‘Hunger Games,’” *Reuters*, March 18, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hunger-idUSTRE52HOLK20090318>.

⁵³⁶ Chris Lee, “Lions Gate Has a Hit with ‘Hunger Games.’ Can It Turn a Profit?,” *Newsweek*, April 2, 2012, <https://www.newsweek.com/lions-gate-has-hit-hunger-games-can-it-turn-profit-63989>.

highest-grossing film had been the Michael Moore documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). *The Hunger Games* broke Moore's record in just its first weekend.⁵³⁷

As a small studio with relatively little cash on hand, Lionsgate had to stretch its marketing dollars, and social media was far cheaper than traditional advertising approaches such as T.V., print, or even digital display ads. *Saw* and similar films also gave the Lionsgate team experience in targeting young audiences on a small budget. Indeed, as we will see, the studio's marketing team—and marketing strategy—was a big part of its pitch to Suzanne Collins.

To be sure, Collins's novel handed Lionsgate a marketing challenge well beyond that presented by the *Twilight* books. *The Hunger Games* (2008), as well as Collins's follow-ups *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010), depict the futuristic, dystopian country of Panem, which consists of a wealthy, dominant "Capitol" and twelve "Districts" in varying states of poverty. Every year, the authoritarian Capitol government chooses children from the districts, "tributes," to participate in a compulsory annual televised death match called The Hunger Games. Forced into the Games, the trilogy's impoverished heroine, Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence in the films), eventually leads a rebellion against the wealthy Capitol. *The Hunger Games* films are a fascinating marketing example precisely *because* of the source novels, which depict a young woman as a military leader and critique real-world issues such as inequality and media violence.

The pages that follow will examine Lionsgate's marketing strategy for *The Hunger Games* (2012) and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013), considering how the studio developed the campaigns and how fans have responded. At the heart of that strategy is a social

⁵³⁷ "'Hunger Games' to Pass Michael Moore's 'Fahrenheit 9/11' as Lionsgate's Top-Grossing Movie," *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hunger-games-michael-moore-fahrenheit-911-lionsgate-303803>.

media campaign that invites fans *inside* the fictional world of the films, letting them role-play and interact. The more time fans spend inside the story world, I will argue, the less time they have to consider connections (or lack thereof) between the film and society—and the more a studio can control the conversation. Tracing the ad campaign across both the original and its first sequel will also highlight one of the critical features of social media marketing: blurring the distinction between advertising and other content. Thanks to a meticulously planned digital strategy centered upon a satirical fashion magazine called “Capitol Couture,” Lionsgate was able to use a film about kids killing kids to sell makeup, clothes, and even sandwiches.

Ideology and Gender in *The Hunger Games*

In marked contrast with Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* novels include progressive gender roles and explicit political critiques. While romance, marriage, and childbirth form much of Bella Swan’s character arc, Katniss Everdeen is a skilled warrior who ultimately leads a political rebellion. Katniss’s romance with fellow tribute Peeta Mellark is a significant part of the story but secondary to the battles and the heroine’s eventual face-off with Panem President Coriolanus Snow. The second novel, *Catching Fire*, even includes explicit commentary on traditional gender depictions in media. To curry favor with viewers of the televised Hunger Games, Katniss pretends that she is pregnant and that she and Peeta have married. The feigned romance and pregnancy make the pair a media sensation in the Capitol, ultimately helping Katniss advance her political rebellion.

The novels also contend with another hot-button Hollywood issue: on-screen violence. The Hunger Games—a spectacle of kids killing kids—is *the* television event of the year in fictional Panem, replete with pageantry, high production values, and sponsorship. Indeed,

Suzanne Collins originally conceived the novels to critique media violence, as she recalled in 2008 (well before the films were released).

One night, I was lying in bed, and I was channel surfing between reality T.V. programs and actual war coverage. On one channel, there's a group of young people competing for I don't even know; and on the next, there's a group of young people fighting in an actual war. I was really tired, and the lines between these stories started to blur in a very unsettling way. That's the moment when Katniss's story came to me.... I worry that we're all getting a little desensitized to the images on our televisions.⁵³⁸

Reviews of the first novel often recognized the media connection. *The Los Angeles Times*, for example, began its review, "Suzanne Collins imagines a future in which reality television has run amok."⁵³⁹

Suzanne Collins's worry that "we're all getting a little desensitized to the images on our televisions" speaks to the persistent concern in politics, popular discourse, and scholarship that violence in media leads to real-world violence amongst youth. Such concerns, which also extend to sexual behavior and other (perceived) moral failings, date back nearly to the advent of cinema but remain prominent today. Former film critic and current conservative radio host Michael Medved's widely read 1992 text *Hollywood vs. America* is one contemporary, right-wing articulation of this thesis.⁵⁴⁰ Some social scientists such as Craig A. Anderson have offered statistics claiming a causal relationship between exposure to media violence and real-world behavior.⁵⁴¹ Most researchers disagree. A 2015 policy statement from the media psychology

⁵³⁸ Rick Margolis, "A Killer Story: An Interview with Suzanne Collins, Author of 'The Hunger Games,'" *School Library Journal*, September 1, 2008, <http://www.slj.com/2008/09/opinion/under-cover/a-killer-story-an-interview-with-suzanne-collins-author-of-the-hunger-games/#>.

⁵³⁹ Sonja Bolle, "BOOK REVIEW: A turn to the serious," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2008. Retrieved from ProQuest.

⁵⁴⁰ Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

⁵⁴¹ Craig D. Anderson, et al., "The Influence of Media Violence on Youth," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4 (2003): 81-110.

division of the American Psychological Association found no support for a causal connection between watching or playing violent media and actually committing violent activities. “The data on bananas causing suicide is about as conclusive,” summarized psychology researcher Chris Ferguson. “Literally. The numbers work out about the same.”⁵⁴²

Nevertheless, concerns about media have often drawn widespread popular attention, especially following violent acts by youth. In particular, conservative politicians usually prefer to blame Hollywood rather than the gun industry. Following the 1999 school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, and evidence that the shooters were fans of violent films and video games, the Federal Trade Commission launched an investigation into the entertainment industry. In addition, the U.S. Senate held a series of hearings on connections between media and violent acts.⁵⁴³ The 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech, which occurred less than a year before Lionsgate acquired the rights to *The Hunger Games*, again revived widespread concerns about media’s culpability.

The inequality between the few in the Capitol and the many in the other districts, particularly the excessive materialism of the elites, may be an equally problematic theme for a big-budget Hollywood film. First of all, rising inequality is no fiction. “There is no dispute that income inequality has been on the rise in the United States for the past four decades,” write economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman. “The share of total income earned by the top 1 percent of families was less than 10 percent in the late 1970s but now exceeds 20 percent as of

⁵⁴² Kevin Draper, “Video Games Aren’t Why Shootings Happen. Politicians Still Blame Them.,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2019, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/sports/trump-violent-video-games-studies.html>.

⁵⁴³ “Senate Holds Hearing on Violence in Media,” ABC News, September 13, 2000. Accessed June 7, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=122924>.

the end of 2012.” Recent decades, they note, also saw “the share of total household wealth owned by the top 0.1 percent increasing to 22 percent in 2012 from 7 percent in the late 1970s.”⁵⁴⁴ Suzanne Collins confirms she’s heard of many readers responding to the “99 percent kind of thing.” Moreover, the novel hardly suggests a restrained response to inequality; Collins views her trilogy as “first and foremost a war story” about rebellion against the corrupt elites.⁵⁴⁵

Nor is social inequality a comfortable subject for Hollywood filmmakers. After all, studio executives and big-name directors (even those with liberal politics) are the lucky “one percent” at the top of today’s income ladder. This irony is not lost on the director of three of *The Hunger Games* films, Francis Lawrence, as he told *Wired* magazine in 2013.

I’m not focusing so much on the idea of the haves and have-nots that it starts to be uncomfortable to be working in a business where people are making serious money. Usually [these] are movies that 15 people go see and it plays at the Nuart [art house theatre] in L.A. or something. I’m just excited to be a part of something that people are going to see in droves that actually has ideas in it.⁵⁴⁶

It is worth parsing this comment. Successful Hollywood films do indeed make “serious money.” That is, Lionsgate executives and shareholders, Suzanne Collins, and Lawrence himself all benefit greatly from the very inequality *The Hunger Games* ostensibly critiques. As Lawrence suggests, while arthouse, adult dramas may take on class issues, major media franchises rarely linger on the subject, at least not explicitly. Thus, it is worth considering how *The Hunger Games* relates to longstanding scholarship on the ideologies behind popular film.

⁵⁴⁴ Blog post, London School of Economics, October 29, 2014. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2014/10/29/>.

⁵⁴⁵ Lev Grossman, “Come for the Love Story, Stay for the War: A Conversation with Suzanne Collins and Francis Lawrence,” *TIME.com*, November 22, 2013.

⁵⁴⁶ Devon Maloney, “Marketing Tactics for *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* Would Make Panem’s Capitol Proud,” *Wired*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.wired.com/2013/11/catching-fire-marketing/>.

In their pioneering 1930s critiques of media's power, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and others at the Frankfurt School argued that media owners, or the "culture industry," employed their cultural products to further their interests. That *The Hunger Games* films appear to critique inequality is perfectly consistent with Horkheimer and Adorno's ideas. "The culture industry," they write, "perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory...."⁵⁴⁷ While media scholars have debated, and sometimes rejected, Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis, Mark Duffett notes that their "broader argument about the industrial production of culture remains relevant: in various ways media producers do wield considerable power and constantly encourage us to collude with their agenda."⁵⁴⁸

Douglas Kellner goes further. "Against approaches that displace concepts of ideology and domination by emphasis on audience pleasure and the construction of meaning," Kellner argues, "the Frankfurt School is valuable for inaugurating systematic and sustained critiques of ideology and domination within the culture industry, indicating that it is not innocent and a 'creative industry,' as certain contemporary idiom would have it."⁵⁴⁹ Kellner advocates inserting political economy into media studies, resulting in "empirical analysis of the actual system of media industry production, investigating the constraints and structuring influence of the dominant

⁵⁴⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 38.

⁵⁴⁸ Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 57.

⁵⁴⁹ Douglas Kellner, "Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 97.

capitalist economic system and a commercialized cultural system dominated by powerful corporations.” Such analysis, he says, “can help elucidate features and effects that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay.”⁵⁵⁰

Kellner’s emphasis on the “constraints and structuring influence” of the media industry highlights an important point. Even if Suzanne Collins, Francis Lawrence, or anyone else *wanted* to offer a full-throated critique of wealth inequality or excessive materialism, the realities of making a big-budget film would render that difficult. As we have seen, co-marketing deals and merchandising have become highly lucrative for major Hollywood releases, and in some cases, these “ancillary” profits can exceed the return from ticket sales.⁵⁵¹ A studio, therefore, would be hesitant to greenlight a big-budget film that potential corporate partners would shy away from. Hence Francis Lawrence’s observation that reducing the focus on “the haves and have-nots” was the only way he could make a blockbuster film, rather than an art-house one, that contains “ideas.” As Thomas Schatz explains, “authorship at this level is exercised by the studio itself through its production, marketing, and home entertainment executives, with the director relegated to the role of narrative craftsman and creative coordinator, whose innovation and vision are welcome only if they enhance a pre-narrativized story and overall market strategy.”⁵⁵²

⁵⁵⁰ Kellner, 101-102.

⁵⁵¹ For example, *Jurassic Park* (1993) grossed \$900 million at the box office but over \$1 billion in licensing fees and merchandise sales. See A.M. Busch, “*Jurassic* is Box Office King, Licensing Prince,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 31, 1994.

⁵⁵² Thomas Schatz, “Film Industries Studies and Hollywood History,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 51.

From Novel to Screenplay

Despite the weighty themes, or perhaps because of them, Collins's novels resonated with teen and adult readers alike. Released in September of 2008, the first novel soon entered *The New York Times* bestseller list and remained there for over three years.⁵⁵³ In 2012, Amazon.com announced that *The Hunger Games* books had become their biggest-selling series of all time, surpassing *Harry Potter*.⁵⁵⁴ Before the blockbuster sales, though, Hollywood producers heard the early buzz around the novel; Lionsgate acquired the film rights to the trilogy in early 2009 before the second two books were released.⁵⁵⁵ The story behind the evolution from a novel to four blockbuster films tells us much about how the entertainment industry interacts with a potentially profitable text that challenges its interests.

The Hunger Games began its journey to film before Suzanne Collins even completed the first novel in her trilogy. Collins's literary agent, Jason Dravis, recalls "30 or 40" film producers expressing interest before the publication. As she considered the offers, Collins was already balancing the challenging themes of her novels with the commercial considerations of a Hollywood film (and her payday). Consider the contradictory ways Dravis recounts the negotiations. On the one hand, he says they chose Lionsgate mainly because the studio promised to protect Collins's "vision" and let her be part of the screenwriting team. On the other hand, he

⁵⁵³ "Scholastic Announces Updated U.S. Figures for Suzanne Collins's Bestselling The Hunger Games Trilogy," Scholastic press release, July 19, 2012, <http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/press-release/scholastic-announces-updated-us-figures-suzanne-collinss-bestselling-hunger-games-tril>.

⁵⁵⁴ Julie Bosman, "Amazon Crowns 'Hunger Games' as Its Top Seller, Surpassing Harry Potter Series," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2012. http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/amazon-crowns-hunger-games-as-its-top-seller-surpassing-harry-potter-series/?_r=0.

⁵⁵⁵ Ronald Grover and Peter Lauria, "How Lions Gate won 'Hunger Games,'" Reuters, March 23, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/lionsgate-hungergames-idUSL1E8QL2G320120323>.

explains that they brought in producer Nina Jacobson, a former Walt Disney studio president, because Jacobson “had worked on big franchises before. This novel had the potential to get very dark very quickly and she understood how to keep it from doing that.”⁵⁵⁶

Industrial structures helped Collins thread the needle between her ideas and commercial viability. Nina Jacobson recalls that Warner Brothers, New Regency, and Spyglass Entertainment were the primary bidders for the film rights.⁵⁵⁷ On the simplest level, the competitive bidding process helped Collins negotiate more authorial control. More notable is that, according to Jacobson, only one major studio, Warner, bid for the rights—and even so, Warner was not willing to match bids from the smaller competitors. Perhaps the major studios were scared off by the challenging material; in any case, the industrial landscape helped Lionsgate win. In some respects, Lionsgate faced less risk than the big studios in marketing *The Hunger Games*. Since they were best known for those edgier films such as the *Saw* horror series, Lionsgate had less of a brand to protect.

The balancing act between ideas and salability continued once work began on the first film. Suzanne Collins wrote the screenplay with Billy Ray and Gary Ross (also the director of the first entry), and indeed the script does remain relatively faithful to the novel. But, of course, the book itself, despite its themes, was a squarely commercial product. In his 2008 book review in *The New York Times*, John Green notes that “Collins sometimes fails to exploit the rich allegorical potential here in favor of crisp plotting, but it’s hard to fault a novel for being too

⁵⁵⁶ Ronald Grover and Peter Lauria, “How Lions Gate won 'Hunger Games.’”

⁵⁵⁷ Grover and Lauria.

engrossing.”⁵⁵⁸ Still, the most notable changes between the book and film released in the U.S. on March 23, 2012, obscure some edgier plot points.

While the book describes many of The Hunger Games' deaths in specific detail, most deaths in the film occur off-screen. Such a change seems logical enough for brevity and to secure a PG-13 rating, but it nonetheless makes the brutality of the Games—one of the novel's fundamental tenets—much less salient. What is more, the books are narrated in the first person by Katniss Everdeen. The film switches to a third-person perspective, and as a result, spends much more time developing the “villains”: President Coriolanus Snow (Donald Sutherland) and the “Gamesmaker” behind the deadly battle arena (Wes Bentley). In the novel, these evil forces are generally unseen and ethereal. Though again sensible enough for clarity and to showcase more performances, this change may dull the societal critique. On the page, the entire Capitol, cruel and largely unseen, seems to be against Katniss. That is more unsettling than pinning the blame on one or two corrupt government officials. Finally, the film places greater emphasis on romance, considerably expanding the part of Gale Hawthorne (Liam Hemsworth) as he competes with Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson) for Katniss's affection. Thus, the film overemphasizes the romance typical of young adult films, somewhat ironically given that the novels specifically critique that tendency in popular media.

It is worth underscoring that Collins inked her film contract before writing the second two novels (including the one, *Mockingjay*, that tells how the rebellion ends). In this way, the considerations of commercial film—to the extent they are distinct from the considerations for commercial books—had already intervened in creating the original text. Here we come to a

⁵⁵⁸ John Green, “Scary New World,” *The New York Times Book Review*, November 7, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/books/review/Green-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

limitation of Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the culture industry and Kellner's conception of political economy. As Amanda D. Lotz notes, "the strongly Marxist influenced version of political economy common in North America has rarely considered the operation of media industries to be affected by individual managers."⁵⁵⁹ The media industries, the Hollywood studios, and even a single studio such as Lionsgate are not monoliths. Many individual decisions helped to create *The Hunger Games* films—and so did many individual authors.

To understand this process, I suggest a broad conception of the word "author," to include the novelist, her literary agent, producers, screenwriters, directors, marketing executives, and even fans. According to John Hartley, "The very history of the word itself shows that an 'author' never was a simple individual, but *one who channels system-level or institutional authority into text.*"⁵⁶⁰ The institution—in this case, Lionsgate and the Hollywood studio system as a whole—grants many different people authority over the text. That authority may be small or large, and it is almost certainly temporary. Expanding on Hartley, Jonathan Gray offers a "model of textuality that poses creation as always in process, and authors as always present...*when* is the author" is at least as important as *who* is the author.⁵⁶¹

As I hope *The Hunger Games* case study will illustrate, most of the authors fully recognize the limits of their influence and the constraints of the film industry, understanding that

⁵⁵⁹ Amanda D. Lotz, "Building Theories of Creative Industry Managers," in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, ed. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 28.

⁵⁶⁰ John Hartley, "Authorship and the Narrative of Self," in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 25.

⁵⁶¹ Jonathan Gray, "When is the Author?" in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 89.

they have what Amanda Lotz and Timothy Havens term “circumscribed agency.”⁵⁶² As Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Caldwell point out, the “paradox of the media worker is that the promise of autonomy, creativity, fame, or wealth still oversupplies the labor market, allowing media industries to control the *mise-en-scène* (setting and action) of production narratives.”⁵⁶³ Notably, the labor surplus applies to both “below-the-line” labor—for example, costume designers, visual effects artists, and production designers—and “above-the-line” workers such as Francis Lawrence and Suzanne Collins. If a particular director, screenwriter, or costume designer does not act in the studio's interests, the studio can usually find someone else who will.

How Social Media Managed a “Perception Problem”

Despite some softening via screenwriting choices, the themes of inequality and exploitative violence remain central to *The Hunger Games*. Lionsgate’s chief marketing officer, Tim Palen, knew he had a marketing challenge. “This book is on junior high reading lists, but kids killing kids, even though it’s handled delicately in the film, is a potential perception problem in marketing,” he said.⁵⁶⁴ According to agent Jason Dravis, marketing was a crucial part of Collins’s conversations with Lionsgate from the very beginning. Dravis recalls, “When Tim Palen...told us he had mapped out exactly how they would market it, [Collins] felt it would be in good hands.”⁵⁶⁵ The strategy Palen shared with Collins emphasized social media. So here is a

⁵⁶² Amanda D. Lotz, “Building Theories of Creative Industry Managers,” 31.

⁵⁶³ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., “Introduction by the Editors,” in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

⁵⁶⁴ Brooks Barnes, “How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2012, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/business/media/how-hunger-games-built-up-must-see-fever.html>.

⁵⁶⁵ Ronald Grover and Peter Lauria, “How Lions Gate won 'Hunger Games.’”

central element of the social media marquee: marketing considerations enter the filmmaking process early and often.

How did Palen and his marketing colleagues address the challenging material? While the film script dialed down the novel's violence, the promotional campaign diverted attention from violence altogether. Palen decided never to show the games in the advertising campaign. “[W]e made a rule that we would never say ‘23 kids get killed,’” he said. “We say ‘only one wins.’” The team also barred the phrase “Let the games begin.”⁵⁶⁶ Indeed, the first trailer focuses entirely on the lead-up to the games, ending just as the games start.⁵⁶⁷ Marketing executive Terry Press, then a consultant for Lionsgate, suggested that the trailer emphasize the scene where Katniss volunteers for the games in place of her sister. Press felt that moment would emphasize family loyalty and avoid turning females off to the film's violence.⁵⁶⁸

Palen's marketing team also built on many of the digital strategies innovated by Summit's Nancy Kirkpatrick for *Twilight*. Lionsgate marketers engaged early with existing fans of *The Hunger Games* books. They developed highly interactive digital campaigns—far more elaborate than anything attempted for *Twilight*—to invite fans inside the film world. They presented different versions of *The Hunger Games* story to different online demographics. Lionsgate deployed these strategies to control the online conversation as much as possible. While marketers always seek to manage the conversation about their product, the task was essential given the

⁵⁶⁶ Brooks Barnes, “How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever.”

⁵⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4S9a5V9ODuY>.

⁵⁶⁸ “291B: Feature Film Marketing,” UCLA graduate course lecture, January 2014.

"perception problem" of a movie about kids killing kids—not to mention the ironies of an expensive, sponsored media product that critiques expensive, sponsored media products.

As with *Twilight*, the marketing team recognized that its first task was managing and exploiting an engaged fan base already eager for any word about the coming screen adaptation of their favorite book. "Our first mission was to start connecting with the fans of the book by utilizing Facebook and Twitter," says Danielle DePalma, Lionsgate's senior vice president for digital marketing.⁵⁶⁹ Early on, DePalma hired the digital branding agency Ignition Creative to help manage the social media efforts.⁵⁷⁰ The team decided that the first big reveal of the campaign—the film's cast—would happen online. Facebook was already the hub of fan discussion, so Lionsgate used its official Facebook pages to reveal cast details. Lionsgate also offered Facebook fans chances to visit the set of the movie. The goal was to establish Facebook, particularly Lionsgate's own Facebook pages, as an important gathering place for fans. "It was really all our way of developing that direct connection and that direct dialogue with them," DePalma notes.⁵⁷¹

Ignition staffers recommended giving fans an early sense of ownership in the property to make them marketing evangelists.⁵⁷² "One of the things we did around that was to start Fan Fridays on Facebook, as a way to highlight all the great works they were doing," says DePalma. "That allowed us to really start forming an emotional connection with fans, and it got them

⁵⁶⁹ Ari Karpel, "Inside 'The Hunger Games' Social Media Machine," *Fast Company*, April 9, 2012, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1680467/inside-the-hunger-games-social-media-machine>.

⁵⁷⁰ Former Lionsgate marketing staffer, in-person interview with the author, May 21, 2017.

⁵⁷¹ Karpel, "Inside 'The Hunger Games' Social Media Machine."

⁵⁷² Former Lionsgate marketing staffer, May 21, 2017.

following us and then spreading the word for us. It was exciting because we knew that we could work with them and get them onboard to really help push the campaign."⁵⁷³ One of the key social media marketing tactics, as DePalma acknowledges here, is directing fan labor towards the studio's business goals. The studio launched a similar effort on YouTube. Lionsgate also assigned a marketing staffer, social manager Jessica Frank, to communicate with Twitter and Facebook fans daily.

Many of Lionsgate's most visible and expensive digital initiatives encouraged fans to stay *within* the films' fictional world of Panem. Lionsgate hired RED Interactive Agency to develop the promotional website www.thecapitol.pn, pretending it was the "official" website of the government of Panem.⁵⁷⁴ (The marketers even went so far as to register the website in the Pitcairn Islands so it could use that territory's ".pn" Internet domain.) The website includes sections such as "Capitol T.V.," featuring interviews with characters, and "Capitol Concerns," a feedback form where "citizens" can submit suggestions to the government. The "Capitol Concerns" section begins by explaining that it's a "revolutionary initiative designed to improve communication between the Capitol and our esteemed District citizens." A website visitor can then enter feedback under categories like "Goods & Labor" and "Ethics & Moral Policy." Next, the user must log in to Facebook or Twitter to submit their feedback. Under the site terms, Lionsgate could then broadly share the "feedback" posts on social media. Perhaps even more notable is what is *not* in the [thecapitol.pn](http://www.thecapitol.pn) website: any mention of the films, release dates, or actors. Only by clicking "legal" in the bottom corner of the website does one see Lionsgate's

⁵⁷³ Karpel, "Inside 'The Hunger Games' Social Media Machine."

⁵⁷⁴ The version of www.thecapitol.pn discussed here was accessed in June 2015. The website is no longer active and the URL redirects to a generic description of the franchise on Lionsgate.com.

logo. The “Capitol” website—launched in 2011, nearly a year before the first film's release—eventually promoted all four films in the series. Lionsgate advertised it via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, online ads, and a launch video on MTV.com.⁵⁷⁵

Lionsgate's promotional Capitol website went through various iterations. The initial version “registered” visitors as citizens of Panem—a step that also required visitors to log into Facebook or Twitter, allowing Lionsgate to collect user data.⁵⁷⁶ The website then randomly assigned an occupation, district, and “Panem Citizen Number.” Next, fans could download a “District Identification Pass” for display on their Facebook, Twitter, or Google+ profiles (or phone). Nearly 1 million people did so by two months before the first film's release.⁵⁷⁷ The Identification Passes included a QR code that led back to the Capitol website, enabling viral marketing. The truly dedicated could even order a physical I.D. via Facebook.

After registering, Lionsgate invited users to join their assigned district's Facebook page. Each district’s Facebook page had a “mayor,” “recruiter,” and “journalist.” RED Interactive and Lionsgate staffers appointed Facebook users to be mayors and recruiters, drawing from lists of people who had participated in earlier Facebook events. They chose users with significant numbers of followers. The mayors acted as “leaders” for the districts, responsible for celebrating the citizens and relaying communication from the Capitol (Lionsgate marketing staff). The recruiters promoted the district pages on various social media channels. For the journalists,

⁵⁷⁵ Brooks Barnes, “How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever.”

⁵⁷⁶ This version of the website was no longer viewable at the time of research. A contemporaneous case study by an advertising agency described many of the details. See “The Hunger Games: Using Social Media Marketing to Bring Fiction to Life,” *Ignite Social Media Agency* (blog), March 19, 2012, <https://www.ignitesocialmedia.com>. Additional details about the backend process from former Lionsgate marketing staffer, in-person interview with the author, April 19, 2017.

⁵⁷⁷ Brooks Barnes, “How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever.”

marketing staffers appointed established bloggers; citizens (other Facebook users) could send them "tips," which would sometimes appear on their blogs. In addition, any user who registered for a district Facebook page received fan perks such as early looks at film clips or access to a beta test of a *Hunger Games* video game.

Lionsgate's elaborate interactive storytelling exemplified the "free" fan labor interrogated by Tiziana Terranova and expanded upon by Mark Andrejevic, Abigail De Kosnik, and other media theorists.⁵⁷⁸ The appointed Facebook "mayors" and "recruiters" promoted messages on behalf of Lionsgate marketing staff—without pay, beyond the promise of additional social media followers. For all of the participants, the immersive experience enhanced their excitement for the film. De Kosnik points out that "customization and personalization make mass-media productions more engaging to them and others in their taste culture or demographic and increases those fans' commitment to the mass-media texts that were initially found at least somewhat lacking...."⁵⁷⁹ For instance, Lionsgate's digital campaign engaged fans of Collins's book whose interest might otherwise have waned. It also directed fans' online focus into a studio-controlled environment where Lionsgate marketers could call the shots. Without such an effort, fans might have been posting content less compatible with Lionsgate's promotional goals, perhaps even focusing on the controversial topics Tim Palen hoped to avoid.

While fan labor is free to Lionsgate (beyond the cost of creating the initial content), fans certainly pay the price: their time and data. The Capitol site helped Lionsgate—and the social media platforms—collect user data by providing incentives to register. Indeed, social media data

⁵⁷⁸ Terranova, "Free Labor."

⁵⁷⁹ Abigail De Kosnik, "Interrogating 'Free' Fan Labor | Spreadable Media," *Spreadable Media* (blog), accessed July 15, 2021, <http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/kosnik/index.html>.

helped the Lionsgate team refine its positioning for *The Hunger Games* franchise. "We never went to the love triangle place," says DePalma. "We knew from fan feedback early on that we wanted to avoid that. We could have done a lot with that online, but I think that's definitely much more teen- and young-girl focused. And I think that this film really appeals to all four quads."⁵⁸⁰ Summit had always been concerned that *Twilight* would lack four-quadrant appeal (men under 25, men over 25, women under 25; women over 25), and although marketing techniques helped broaden that franchise, ticket buyers remained overwhelmingly female. By contrast, Lionsgate saw four-quadrant potential in the action-heavy *Hunger Games*. In fact, on the first film's opening weekend, the demographic breakdown was 61% female, and 56% of attendees were over 25.⁵⁸¹ As Summit had done, Lionsgate customized its messages for various online demographics. For example, publicity execs encouraged the video gaming site IGN to write articles imagining a "strategy" for winning the fictional Hunger Games.⁵⁸²

As a smaller company, Lionsgate only had a marketing budget of about \$45 million for the first film and a marketing staff of 21 people. By contrast, bigger studios routinely spend \$100 million promoting major releases and have worldwide marketing and publicity staffs of over 100 people.⁵⁸³ So while social media is a logical strategy for reaching young consumers, Lionsgate's specific institutional constraints may have forced it to be especially focused and diligent about its digital presence. Lionsgate did not abandon traditional strategies like posters, press releases, and

⁵⁸⁰ Karpel, "Inside 'The Hunger Games' Social Media Machine."

⁵⁸¹ Aljean Harmetz and Aljean Harmetz, "Why 'Hunger Games' Boasts Such Wide Appeal," *IndieWire* (blog), April 2, 2012, <https://www.indiewire.com/2012/04/why-hunger-games-boasts-such-wide-appeal-182068/>.

⁵⁸² Former Lionsgate marketing staffer, May 21, 2017.

⁵⁸³ Brooks Barnes, "How 'Hunger Games' Built Up Must-See Fever."

T.V. spots; it just spent less on them. As Summit had done for *Twilight*, Lionsgate took a digital-first approach; even offline advertising connected to the online presence. Palen, DePalma, and their teams sought to turn basic marketing milestones, such as the release of a poster or trailer, into digital events. They created unique posters and even trailers for the film's main characters and used hashtags to encourage sharing on Twitter. "They created a ton of social buzz and got everyone really excited," says DePalma. "And within the first 24 hours of the release of the trailer, it had 8 million views."⁵⁸⁴ DePalma and social manager Jessica Frank developed specific hashtags for various phases of their digital campaign. For example, #HungerGames100 marked 100 days until the movie's release. #WhatsMyDistrict launched a viral campaign for fans to ally with a chosen district team and then watch an MTV sneak peek. #HeadtotheSquare introduced the Facebook page where fans could run for mayor of a district.

Also reminiscent of the *Twilight* effort, Lionsgate stretched its marketing dollars by aggressively pursuing co-branding partners. Other companies co-sponsored several of the studio's social media initiatives. One program mirrored Paramount's earlier campaign for *Paranormal Activity*. The "Hunger Games Advanced Screening Program," presented by Nook (Barnes & Noble's reading tablets), encouraged users to tweet unique hashtags; the cities with the most activity would receive an early screening of *Hunger Games*.⁵⁸⁵ Yahoo! sponsored a giveaway to the red carpet premiere; social media users who shared contest links received more

⁵⁸⁴ Karpel, "Inside 'The Hunger Games' Social Media Machine."

⁵⁸⁵ "Tweet to See an Early Screening of 'The Hunger Games' In Your Hometown," *MovieViral | the Home of Movies, TV Series, Sci-Fi, and Superheroes* (blog), accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.movieviral.com/2012/02/29/tweet-to-see-an-early-screening-of-the-hunger-games-in-your-hometown/>.

entries.⁵⁸⁶ In an initiative intended to blunt critiques that the studio was ignoring serious subjects, Lionsgate also partnered with Feeding America and the World Food Program to solicit donations via social media—while simultaneously spreading awareness of the film.⁵⁸⁷

"Capitol Couture"

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most unique, tenet of Lionsgate's co-branding efforts was a visual blog site entitled "Capitol Couture" (capitolcouture.pn, no longer available). Again heavily promoted via social media, particularly Tumblr, this website celebrates the fashions of the wealthy Capitol—including the costumes the Hunger Games participants are forced to wear—with lush photography (see Figure 19). "Tumblr is such a visual site and really has a footprint in fashion as it is, so we thought it was the perfect place to launch our 'Capitol Couture' blog," says DePalma, the Lionsgate digital marketing V.P. Lionsgate launched the Capitol Couture site in January 2012, a few months before the first film's release, and then re-launched and promoted it again in Spring 2013 in advance of the second film, *Catching Fire*. Comparing the two iterations yields insight into the evolution of Lionsgate's marketing strategy.

The initial version focuses primarily on glamour photos of characters from the film, with clothes created by the first film's costume designer, Judianna Makovsky. See, for example, Figure 20, featuring actress Elizabeth Banks dressed as Effie Trinket. However, the *Catching Fire* version of Capitol Couture includes many more photographs of real celebrities and the work

⁵⁸⁶ "Yahoo! Movies Giveaway: 'The Hunger Games' Premiere Tickets Official Rules," accessed June 16, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/bp/yahoo-movies-giveaway-hunger-games-premiere-tickets-official-174210554.html>.

⁵⁸⁷ Feeding America, "The World Food Programme and Feeding America Partner With The Hunger Games," <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-world-food-programme-and-feeding-america-partner-with-the-hunger-games-140189763.html>.

of multiple fashion designers; users could now click links to purchase many of the clothes (see Figure 21). For the second film, Cover Girl even partnered with Lionsgate to offer a series of makeup "inspired" by each of the films' 12 districts (see Figure 22). In fact, the producers hired a brand-new costume designer for *Catching Fire*, Trish Summerville, who was then best known for her work on *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011)—and notably, an associated clothing line she designed for the global clothing chain H&M.⁵⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, in September of 2013, the fashion website Net-a-Porter launched a 16-piece luxury clothing collection entitled "Capitol Couture by Trish Summerville." Somerville's simultaneous involvement in the film, promotional paratexts, and merchandise highlights how media industries can incentivize even below-the-line workers to participate in marketing and brand extensions.

Tim Palen and his marketing team intentionally incorporated commerce into this fictional world by the second film, clearly cooperating with yet another "author" in Summerville. Palen told *Variety* that the Capitol perspective helped the campaign avoid overt product placement or sponsorships, which tend to turn off fans and instead let them pretend they were living within the story world. "There's a little punk-rock, anti-establishment in the true core fans, the purists (of the franchise). There was always a strong sense we should keep (the campaign) authentic and not overtly gross," he said. Palen argued that the tonal shift on Capitol Couture reflected the reality of *Catching Fire*. "This is the book and the movie of color. This is the moment where we can actually have some fun and explore some opportunities that we might not get to have later," he

⁵⁸⁸ Cheryl Wischover, "Costume Designer Trish Summerville on Making 'The Hunger Games: Catching Fire' Into a 'High Fashion U.N.,'" *ELLE*, November 15, 2013.

explained.⁵⁸⁹ The “color” likely refers to the elaborate costumes Katniss and Peeta wear on their “victory tour,” at their sham wedding (broadcast on TV), and when the Capitol forces them to compete again in a showy special edition of *The Hunger Games*. So, the “opportunity” seems to be selling clothes and makeup. Since co-marketing agreements have become such an essential part of promotional strategies for major Hollywood films, Lionsgate found a way to include them even in light of potentially controversial material.

In addition to Tumblr, Lionsgate relied on other social media channels and online publicity to advertise *Capitol Couture*. The team created a series of “Capitol Portraits,” dramatic images that revealed the look of the sequel's 11 major characters. Lionsgate was able to turn the release of each portrait into an event, offering exclusives to a variety of online partners, including MTV, IGN, Yahoo Movies, Empire, MSN, and The Huffington Post. The studio also promoted the portraits via the fake magazine's Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook feeds. Lionsgate PR staff asked the outlets to refer to the images not as publicity photos but as “Capitol Portraits,” and they did. Marketers first teased the shots by posting empty chairs on Instagram; that move generated considerable buzz on its own and helped four different *Hunger Games* characters trend on Twitter in the week their portraits were released.⁵⁹⁰

Consider how the *Capitol Couture* campaign alters the franchise's gender representation. In the books and movies, Katniss spends most of her time in battle, first in the *Hunger Games* arena and later leading a political rebellion. However, *Capitol Couture* overemphasizes the

⁵⁸⁹ Marc Graser, “Lionsgate’s Tim Palen Crafts Stylish Universe for ‘Hunger Games: Catching Fire,’” *Variety* (blog), October 29, 2013, <https://variety.com/2013/biz/news/lionsgates-tim-palen-crafts-stylish-universe-for-hunger-games-catching-fire-1200772931/>.

⁵⁹⁰ Graser.

relatively few scenes when the character conforms to traditional gender roles, appearing in elaborate dresses at galas and her staged wedding. Katniss challenges gender stereotypes on the big screen; the promotional surround restrains her. Figure 23 shows Katniss's Capitol Portrait. Here, Jennifer Lawrence appears not in battle uniform but an extravagant wedding gown, her face heavily made up. Social media underscores a brief scene—and the co-branded makeup and fashion line available for purchase.

Capitol Couture is—it must be emphasized—intended to be tongue-in-cheek. Suzanne Collins highlighted this point in praising the marketing efforts of the second film.

I'm thrilled with the work Tim Palen and his marketing team have done on the film. It's appropriately disturbing and thought provoking how the campaign promotes 'Catching Fire' while simultaneously promoting the Capitol's punitive forms of entertainment. The stunning image of Katniss in her wedding dress that we use to sell tickets is just the kind of thing the Capitol would use to rev up its audience for the Quarter Quell (the name of the games in "Catching Fire"). That dualistic approach is very much in keeping with the books.⁵⁹¹

Based on the evidence presented thus far, there may be a few flaws in Collins's analysis. As noted, Palen and his team worked hard to make the campaigns *less* "disturbing." What's more, the ironic tone of Lionsgate's digital marketing becomes diluted in advertising for the many cross-promoted products associated, in particular, with the second film. As a Lionsgate marketing executive explained, "the first time around, everyone was so nervous about some blogger saying we were being hypocritical by selling stuff. When that didn't happen, or at least not in any big way, we felt freer for *Catching*."⁵⁹² A good example is an online banner ad from the Subway restaurant chain that invites consumers to "win your own victory tour" by collecting

⁵⁹¹ Graser.

⁵⁹² Former Lionsgate marketing staffer, in-person interview with the author, May 21, 2017.

codes from soda cups (see Figure 24).⁵⁹³ That the film's victory tour happens after all one's opponents die goes unmentioned and unexamined. But the most critical question is whether fans themselves find the marketing campaigns to be "disturbing" and "thought-provoking," as Collins suggests. To consider the point, let us turn from the industrial story to the audience one. How did fans of *The Hunger Games* interpret the marketing efforts, and what does that tell us about reception scholarship in the convergence era?

Fans Respond

From a business standpoint, Lionsgate's promotional strategies seem to have worked exceptionally well. As noted, and despite Tim Palen's fears, there was no widespread outcry about the film's themes or marketing techniques. In 2012, the Harry Potter Alliance, a fan group dedicated to charitable and political causes, tried to counterbalance Lionsgate's marketing with a campaign titled "Hunger is NOT a game," but it gained little traction. Lionsgate threatened to sue for copyright infringement, pointing to the hunger charities the studio was already supporting, but even beforehand, the protest campaign did not generate much buzz.⁵⁹⁴ Starting in 2013, the Harry Potter Alliance launched a new drive (<http://oddsinourfavor.org>) that specifically protests Lionsgate's use of *The Hunger Games* to market makeup and sandwiches, though it did not seem to distract most fans. While it's difficult to trace an exact line from promotional strategy to box office results, the first *Hunger Games* film in 2012 grossed \$408 million in the United States and Canada and nearly \$700 million worldwide; *Catching Fire* did even better. More relevant to our

⁵⁹³ Image republished in Devon Maloney, "Marketing Tactics for *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* Would Make Panem's Capitol Proud."

⁵⁹⁴ Alyssa Rosenberg, "As 'The Hunger Games' Opens Big, Lionsgate Tries to Shut Down Anti-Hunger Advocates," thinkprogress.org, March 23, 2012, <http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2012/03/23/450357/exclusive-as-the-hunger-games-opens-big-lionsgate-tries-to-shut-down-anti-hunger-advocates/>.

discussion, Lionsgate's social media campaigns posted impressive results. By the beginning of 2015, with three of the four *Hunger Games* films released, the official Hunger Games movie Facebook pages had been "liked" about 23 million times. That's a substantial figure given that the most-liked Facebook page globally (that of the singer Shakira) in 2015 stood at 85 million likes. Lionsgate's Twitter accounts promoting the films add another 1.5 million followers.⁵⁹⁵

When considering this data, it's important to note that not all of Lionsgate's social media posts take place within the fictional story world of the films. Many of the studio's Facebook updates and Tweets simply highlight a new trailer or an interview with one of the films' stars—the more straightforward sort of material used to promote most films. That said, the film-world posts merit particular investigation because of their importance to Lionsgate's overall marketing strategy and because such posts seem likely to attract the most dedicated fans. A casual fan, after all, might share the official trailer or a reminder of the release date. Engaging with the film-world posts, on the other hand, requires more detailed knowledge of the story as well as a willingness to role-play. Arguably, dedicated fans are also the most likely to be influenced by social messages within *The Hunger Games*; at the very least, they spend the most time thinking about the films. And, of course, hardcore fans are the subject of considerable scholarship.

As media scholar Mark Duffett explains, "Paratexts 'hype' the products to which they refer, sometimes changing their meaning quite radically."⁵⁹⁶ To begin to understand the ways *Hunger Games* fans interact with Lionsgate's promotional paratexts, I analyzed all 265 Facebook comments directly responding to Lionsgate's fictional "Capitol" or "Capitol Couture" posts in

⁵⁹⁵ Facebook and Twitter data displayed on the respective promotional pages; retrieved March 15, 2015.

⁵⁹⁶ Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom*, 81.

the four weeks before the release of the second film, *Catching Fire*, on November 22, 2013. Of the 265 comments, 226 of them, or 85%, *remained in the film's fictional world*. In one example, Lionsgate posted a fake ad reminding “citizens” to “obey peacekeeper demands.” One fan responded, “Never! Revolution!!!” Another mock ad reminded Panem citizens to “respect district boundaries” (see Figure 25).⁵⁹⁷ In their responses, some fans, in role-play, align with the oppressive Capitol (Figure 26).⁵⁹⁸ Said one Facebook commenter, “Why would anyone want to go to those uncivilized districts? We get everything we need here, especially from Districts: 1,2 and 3!” Added another, “The capitol is the law, and every citizens must to respect capitol authority [*sic*].” Other fans align themselves with the rebellion; “bring down the capitol AND reunite it to the districts,” exclaimed one. Of the 265 comments analyzed, only four referenced real-world political events—and not a single one critiqued the marketing campaign. (The remaining 35 comments either discussed plans to see the film or were entirely unrelated.)

Note that these fans are taking on a (highly prescribed) authorial role of their own, meeting Gray’s definition as “those who have authority within an interpretive community.” Indeed, Gray does not “see authors as needing an entire reading populace to honor or heed their authority, but they are those who in some way, and to some community of readers or potential readers at a given (even if fleeting) moment in time, can change texts and create meanings for others as well as themselves.”⁵⁹⁹ *Hunger Games* fans’ interactions likewise illustrate what Derek Johnson calls the “audience function, where discursively imagined audiences, and the cultural

⁵⁹⁷ Lionsgate Productions, “Respect District Boundaries,” Facebook, October 23, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/TheHungerGamesMovie/>.

⁵⁹⁸ Various user responses to Lionsgate Productions, “Respect District Boundaries,” Facebook, October 25-29, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/TheHungerGamesMovie/>.

⁵⁹⁹ Gray, “When is the Author?,” 101.

hierarchies in which they are situated, grant meaning and value to the creative practice and identities of authors.”⁶⁰⁰

To be sure, these 265 Facebook commenters are not a representative sample of all *Hunger Games* fans, but they do give us a snapshot of how dedicated fans were interacting with paratexts in the weeks before they (presumably) saw *Catching Fire* in theaters. The promotional campaign appears to keep fans happily immersed in the fictional world, ready to see their heroine Katniss rebel against the government (which she does in *Catching Fire*) but not particularly prepared to draw connections to the real world.

For another data point, consider Google search volume for the keywords “capitol couture” (the name of Lionsgate’s fake fashion magazine) and the related, but general, search “Hunger Games fashion.”⁶⁰¹ Naturally, searches for “capitol couture” spiked when Lionsgate launched and then re-promoted its magazine. Searches for “Hunger Games fashion” peaked several months later, right before the release of a *Hunger Games* film (see Figure 27). The data suggests that Lionsgate successfully led the conversation towards fashion—away from more controversial topics and into the arms of sponsors like Cover Girl.

Does any of this matter? Henry Jenkins argues: “Fandom is born out of a balance between fascination and frustration; if media content didn’t fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it, but if it didn’t frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it.”⁶⁰² Fandom can rework a text in profoundly significant ways. For Jenkins,

⁶⁰⁰ Derek Johnson, “Participation is Magic,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 154.

⁶⁰¹ Google Trends, <https://www.google.com/trends/>, retrieved March 15, 2015.

⁶⁰² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 258.

fandom even “provides a space in which fans may articulate their specific concerns about sexuality, gender, racism, colonialism, militarism, and forced conformity.”⁶⁰³ So fandom can be powerful. But what happens when the media producer seizes more control over fan activity? Lionsgate gives fans a space to engage with the text, but the studio—not the fans—sets the rules. Might such control limit fans’ opportunities to “articulate their specific concerns”? Jenkins says studios often want fans to “look but not touch” their media properties. Lionsgate lets *Hunger Games* fans touch, but in very delineated ways.⁶⁰⁴

Perhaps by design, Lionsgate’s social media campaigns offer many of the very things scholars say fans value most. Jenkins argues that fans create “a particular Art World”—they like to make things.⁶⁰⁵ Lionsgate enables this. The “Capitol Couture” site, for example, has a “Citizen Activity” section that showcases fans’ fashion designs for the film characters. Meanwhile, the *Hunger Games* Facebook pages often hold contests for “best fan creations”—or, on Halloween, film-themed costumes. Janet Staiger describes “the extension of fan partialities into everyday living.”⁶⁰⁶ Staiger points to physical collections and pilgrimages to filming locations. However, consider how readily social media allows fans to blur *The Hunger Games* world with their own everyday lives. To the mock posts from the Capitol, for instance, fans often respond with a “selfie” of themselves—usually in their bedroom or living room—performing the three-finger

⁶⁰³ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (London: Routledge, 1992), 283.

⁶⁰⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 142.

⁶⁰⁵ Henry Jenkins, “Strangers No More, We Sing’: Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community,” in *Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 211.

⁶⁰⁶ Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 105.

salute used by rebels in the films. Elsewhere, Lionsgate asks fans to post photos of their tickets to the movies.

Matt Hills suggests that fan activity often boils down to a desire to actually *enter* the text.⁶⁰⁷ Of course, by creating interactive websites within the film world, Lionsgate allows fans to do just that. In a related notion, Kurt Lancaster argues that fans are really “textual *performers*” rather than the “textual *poachers*” Jenkins describes in his influential 1992 text about fandom.⁶⁰⁸ When Facebook users write as if they live *in* a fictional Panem, they do seem more like performers than poachers. For instance, when Lionsgate (in imaginary Capitol voice) asked fans what they do to “polish” the Capitol, many fans responded based on the “district” to which they had been previously assigned—*randomly*, by the studio, in an earlier interactive feature on the website. One fan wrote, “During the day, I suppose I work in a mechanics shop [one of the jobs available in District 6], but at night I may or may not spend my time plotting the overthrow of President Snow and his lackeys....” In other Facebook responses, fans self-categorize themselves as supporters of the Capitol or members of the rebellion, a behavior consistent with John Fiske’s observation that fan groups sometimes recreate social hierarchies from which they are excluded in the real world.⁶⁰⁹

It is hard to fault Lionsgate for giving fans what they seem to want, and indeed most of *The Hunger Games* Facebook fans apparently enjoy the chance to role-play as citizens of Panem. The critical question is whether ceding fan space back to the control of the media producer

⁶⁰⁷ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 144-151.

⁶⁰⁸ Quoted in Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom*, 82. Since 1992’s *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins himself has increasingly discussed the mediated nature of fan/industry interactions.

⁶⁰⁹ See Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, 96.

restricts fans from “articulating their specific concerns,” as Jenkins puts it, and creating oppositional readings of the text. My analysis of the Facebook comments suggests that this may indeed be occurring. Recall Suzanne Collins’s claim about the marketing efforts: “It’s appropriately disturbing and thought-provoking how the campaign promotes ‘Catching Fire’ while simultaneously promoting the Capitol’s punitive forms of entertainment.” When fans take Lionsgate up on its offer to play around in the fictional world of Panem, they are not thinking *about* the advertising. They are immersed *in* the advertising.

This *Hunger Games* case study, focusing on the digital media marketing campaign supporting and complementing the films, helps us reflect on the role of modern convergence media. Even as he popularized the term, Henry Jenkins recognized that convergence is a two-sided coin.

Convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users.⁶¹⁰

When consumers and companies come together, media scholar Mark Deuze notes that the companies “are better protected and more powerful in negotiating” the terms of the agreement.⁶¹¹ We see this power differential at work in *The Hunger Games* social media campaigns. Fans can speak, but Lionsgate gets to start the conversation.

⁶¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (2004): 37.

⁶¹¹ Mark Deuze, “Convergence Culture and Media Work,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 153.

Conclusion

Between 2008 and 2013, as the big six studios dipped their toes in the waters of social media, upstart studios Summit and Lionsgate dove in. The digital-first marketing campaigns for the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* franchises demonstrated the possibilities of the social media marquee. Marketing intervened early and often in the film production process, even as part of the studios' negotiations with novelists Stephenie Meyer and Suzanne Collins. Studios began cultivating an online presence and relationships with fan sites long before the films hit theaters. Co-marketing, product placement deals, and soundtracks amplified the mini-majors' limited marketing budgets and even influenced filmmaking choices. Social media campaigns expanded the text beyond the films themselves, reframing the screenplay to support the lucrative co-branding deals or target specific demographics. Harnessing the interactivity of social media, the campaigns invited fans inside the film world, letting them role-play. The studios hoped immersed fans would tow the company line—or even help spread the word as unpaid marketers. Invites, contests, and prizes enticed fans but always came with a clear price: handing personal data to Summit, Lionsgate, and—by extension—the social media platforms.

Summit Entertainment, led by marketing chief Nancy Kirkpatrick, set the template with the five *Twilight* films released between 2008 and 2012. For the first *Hunger Games* film in 2012 and *Hunger Games: Catching Fire* in 2013, Lionsgate and Tim Palen developed increasingly immersive social media experiences, seeking to control the online conversation about the films. The tactic was crucial given the films' violent and politically sensitive material, which Palen feared would create a “perception problem in marketing.” The “Capitol Couture” digital magazine, celebrating the fashion choices of the films' ostensible fascist villains, proved to be a particularly clever device for making the franchise palatable to co-marketing partners. Moreover,

Capitol Couture undercut the franchise's otherwise progressive gender representation by overemphasizing the few scenes in which Jennifer Lawrence's Katniss conforms to traditionally feminine looks.

Lionsgate's 2012 acquisition of Summit cemented the impact of the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* franchises. For several years after the merger, Nancy Kirkpatrick retained marketing oversight of Summit-branded titles. She led marketing for *Divergent* (2014) and its sequel, *Insurgent* (2014), another young adult dystopia derived from a novel series, and applied a similar social media strategy. Kirkpatrick departed Lionsgate in 2014, and Palen took over the whole marketing operation, a title he still held as of 2020.⁶¹² Lionsgate retains a focus on more modestly budgeted fare but has branched out beyond young adults and the horror genre. *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* remain the distributor's biggest box office smashes, though it has also seen success with the *John Wick* action franchise, *Now You See Me* (2013), and the Oscar nominees *La La Land* (2016) and *Knives Out* (2019).

As Hollywood moves increasingly towards franchises, online marketing efforts never really cease. In 2014, two years after the last franchise entry, Lionsgate and Stephenie Meyer announced plans to select five aspiring female directors to make short films based on *Twilight* characters. The shorts, financed by Lionsgate, were chosen in a Facebook contest and screened exclusively on Facebook in 2015.⁶¹³ A *Hunger Games* theme park may not have piqued Disney's

⁶¹² "Lionsgate-Summit Shake-up: Marketing Chief Nancy Kirkpatrick to Exit | Hollywood Reporter," accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/lionsgate-summit-shake-up-marketing-697312>.

⁶¹³ Brooks Barnes, "'Twilight' to Be Revived in Short Films on Facebook (Published 2014)," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2014, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/01/business/media/twilight-will-be-revived-via-short-films-on-facebook.html>.

interest, but one opened in China in 2019.⁶¹⁴ In 2020, Lionsgate began work on a *Hunger Games* prequel based upon Suzanne Collins's *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*.⁶¹⁵

Whatever the future for *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, the films had a significant impact on the Hollywood film industry—and its social media marketing practices. The franchises' box office success certainly grabbed Hollywood's attention, particularly since it challenged the industry's long-held belief that women-led films could never enter the male-dominated ranks of big-budget franchises. The top studios that had passed on the projects paid close attention to Summit's and Lionsgate's cost-efficient, successful digital marketing initiatives. Soon, Universal, Disney, and other majors invested more heavily in social media, applying many of the techniques pioneered by their smaller brethren.

⁶¹⁴ Jim Dobson, "Inside 'The Hunger Games' World At China's New Adult Theme Park," *Forbes*, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimdobson/2019/07/24/inside-the-hunger-games-world-at-chinas-new-adult-theme-park/>.

⁶¹⁵ "'Hunger Games' Prequel Movie in the Works at Lionsgate | Hollywood Reporter," accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/hunger-games-prequel-movie-works-at-lionsgate-1291105>.

Figures



Figure 14. "Team Edward" fan site reposting Summit's official message. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/TeamEdward/>



Figure 15. A Burger King online and T.V. ad promoting its Team Edward vs. Team Jacob game (2010). Source: <https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/18/edward-or-jacob-have-it-your-way-at-burger-king/>

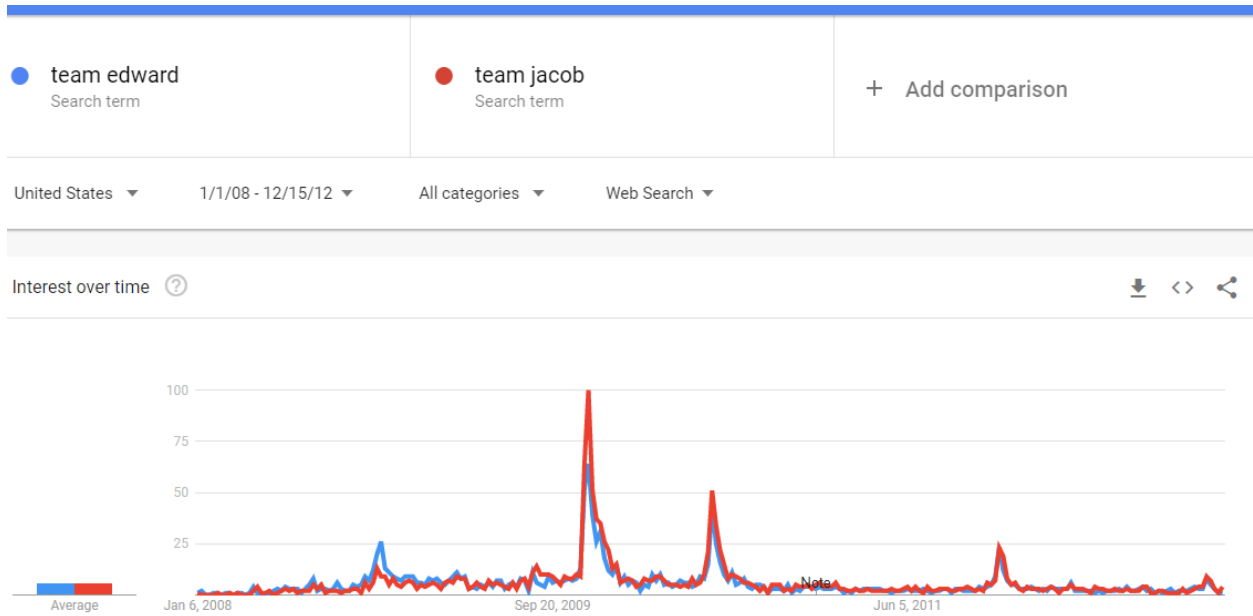


Figure 16. Google search volume for queries "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob." Source: Google Trends.



Figure 17. For the final *Twilight* film, the most popular Facebook post. Source: socialbakers.com

Twilight Breaking Dawn Part 2 Official Trailer



Figure 18. For the same film, the theatrical/YouTube trailer emphasizes action. Source: Fresh Movie Trailers.



Figure 19. An image from Lionsgate's promotional website "Capitol Couture" (2012). Source: Tor.com



Figure 20. Another image from Capitol Couture with Elizabeth Banks as Effie Trinket. (2012). Source: Kidzworld.

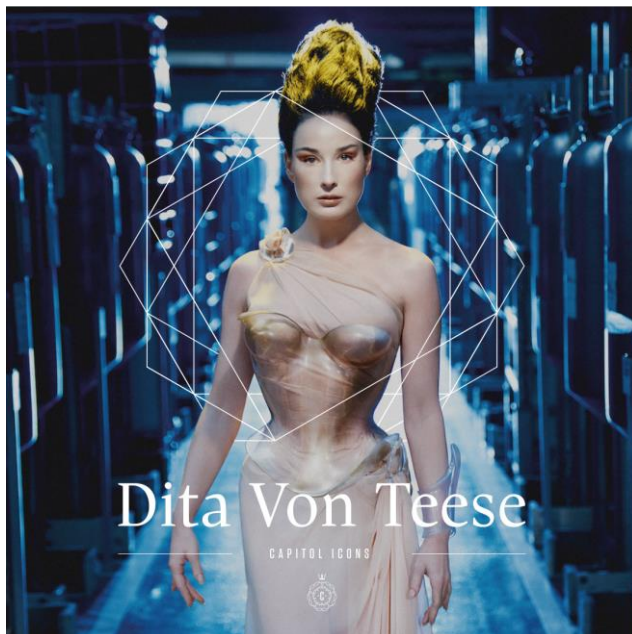


Figure 21. An updated Capitol Couture, promoting the second film, features model Dita Von Teese (2013). Source: Tumblr.



Figure 22. A 2013 co-branding deal with Cover Girl makeup. Source: Celebuzz.com.

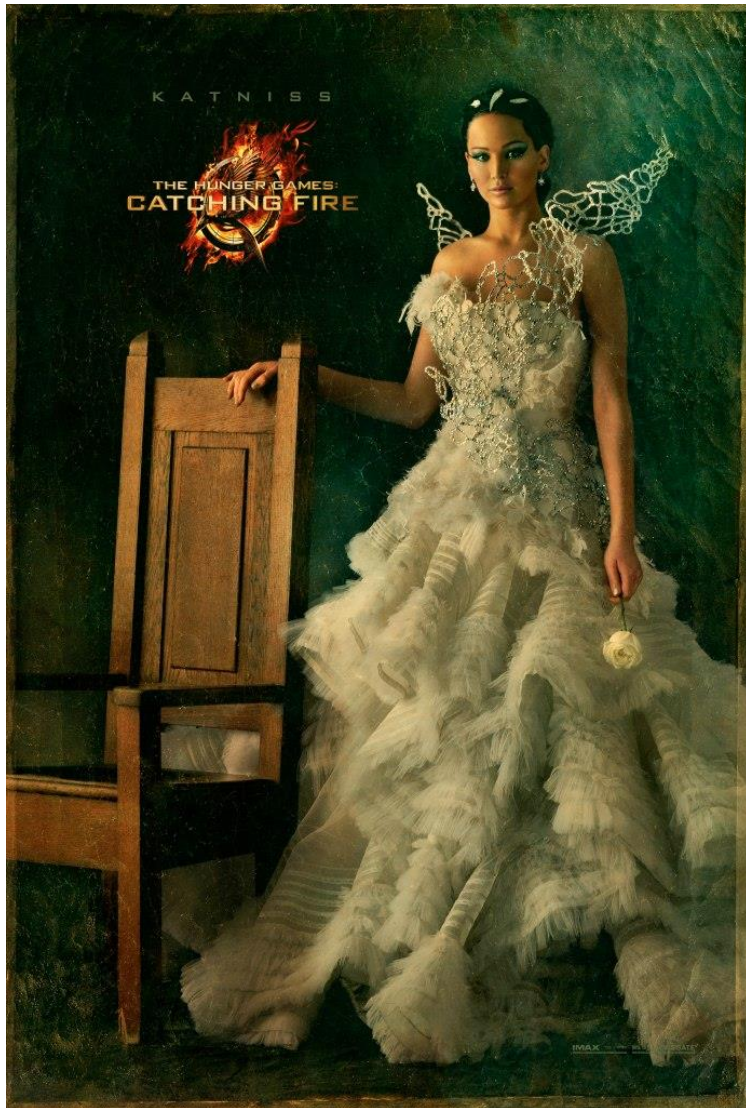


Figure 23. Katniss's "Capitol Portrait," released on the Capitol Couture blog in advance of the second film, underscores a moment when the character conforms to traditional gender roles. Source: Time.com.

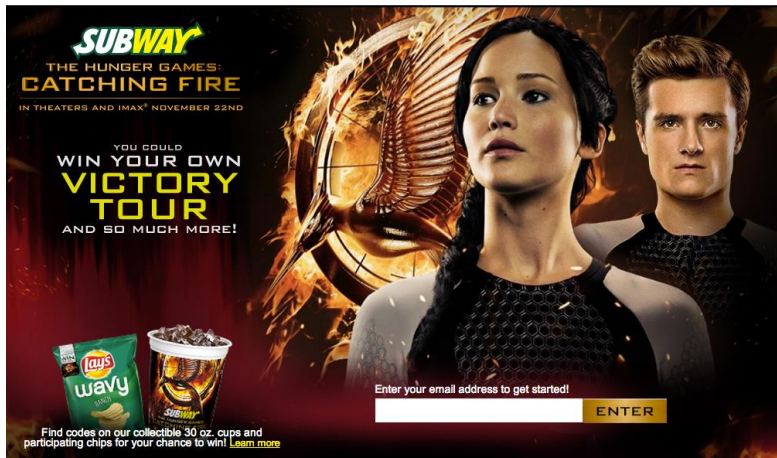


Figure 24. For *Catching Fire*, a co-promotion with Subway restaurants (2013). Source: Wired.com.

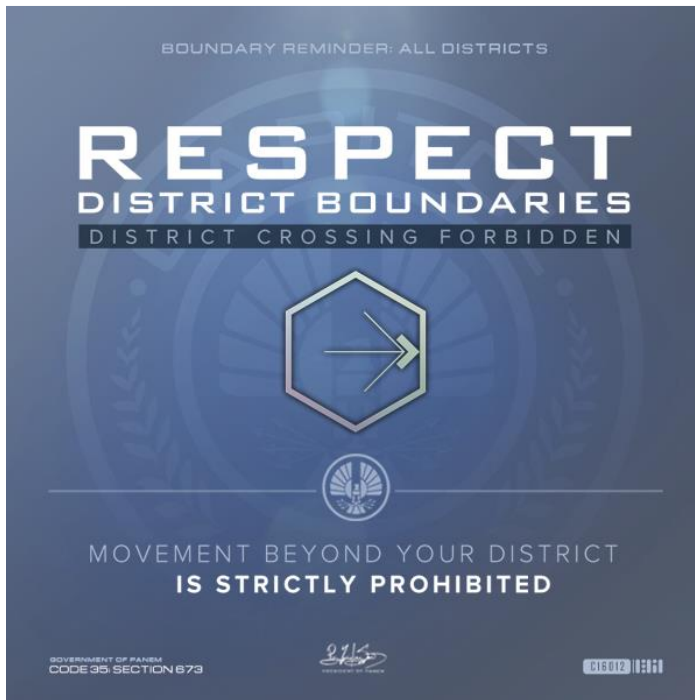


Figure 25. Lionsgate's Facebook post in the voice of the fictional "Capitol" government (2013). Source: Lionsgate/Facebook.

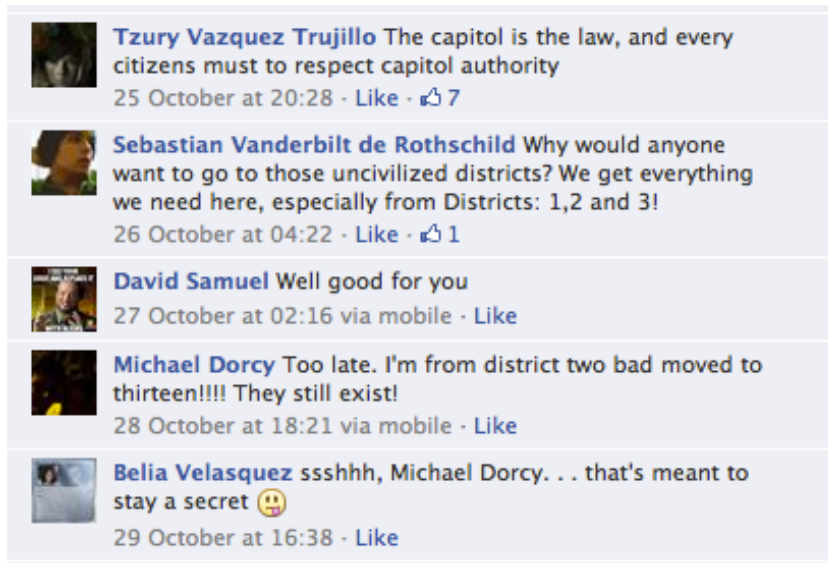


Figure 26. Facebook fans respond to Lionsgate's post. Source: Facebook.

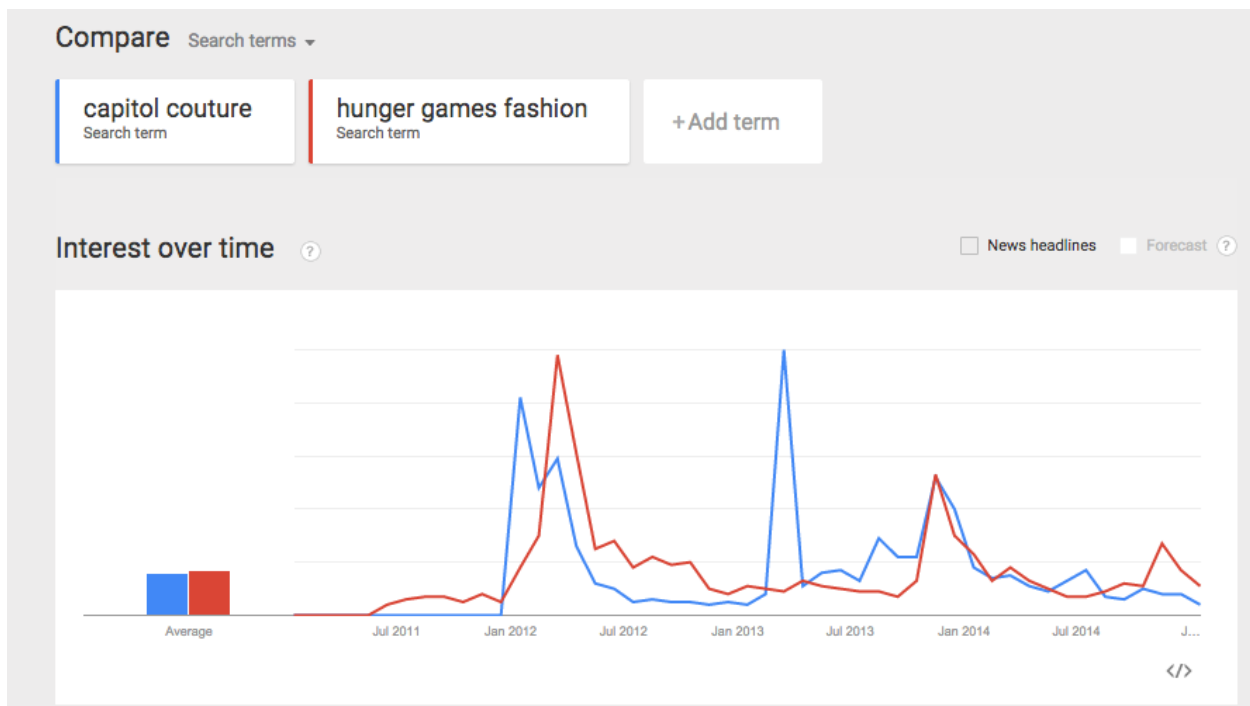


Figure 27. Google searches for "Capitol Couture" and "Hunger Games Fashion." Source: Google Trends.

Chapter 4. *Jurassic World*: Social Media in Conglomerate Hollywood

Introduction

The unexpected success of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* grabbed Hollywood's attention. The major studios had passed on both properties, but Summit and Lionsgate built them into major franchises—in no small part thanks to social media marketing. At Disney, Universal, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Sony Pictures, and 20th Century Fox, marketing executives wondered if they should start taking social media more seriously. Yes, they all had digital marketing departments. Every movie had an online strategy. However, they still spent the vast majority of their promotional budgets on television. And while they experimented with digital, transmedia storytelling, it was usually for one-off promotions or lower budget genre films.

Big Hollywood remained behind the curve. By 2015, 65 percent of U.S. adults used at least one social media site—way up from 26 percent at the end of 2008, when Summit released the first *Twilight* movie. Social media was no longer a youth phenomenon, even if many big studios still focused their digital marketing efforts on young-skewing genres like horror. Indeed, a majority of 51- to 64-year-olds used social media platforms in 2015.⁶¹⁶ All platforms increasingly focused on their smartphone apps, and many newer products offered no robust desktop computer version. With nearly twice as many monthly users as their closest competitors, Facebook and YouTube still enjoyed a dominant position in social media. However, the photo-sharing app Instagram (acquired by Facebook in 2012) grew quickly in the mid-2010s. So did

⁶¹⁶ “Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States.”

messaging app Snapchat, launched in 2011, which aggressively pursued partnerships with Hollywood studios.

By the mid-2010s, some big studios finally followed Summit's and Lionsgate's social, digital approach to franchise filmmaking. Universal led the way, devoting 20 percent of its entire marketing spend to digital efforts by 2015. The tech-forward strategy worked. By August 2015, the distributor had scored nine hits out of its last ten releases, a rare accomplishment in modern Hollywood.⁶¹⁷ The capstone: *Jurassic World*, released on June 12 and eventually grossing \$1.67 billion globally and \$652 million in the U.S. and Canada. At the time, it was the third-highest return in box office history, trailing only *Avatar* (2009) and *Titanic* (1997).⁶¹⁸ The box office returns far exceeded industry expectations. Although the original 1993 *Jurassic Park* remained a cultural touchstone for many filmgoers, the dinosaur franchise had been dormant since the middling returns of 2001's *Jurassic Park III*. Competitors and analysts credited Universal's digital-heavy marketing for some of the success. "There was a social media aspect to it that kind of created a network effect," Doug Creutz, a media analyst for the Cowen Group, said in August 2015. "Everyone was talking about it so everyone had to see it. The marketing was very effective."⁶¹⁹

More significantly, *Jurassic World* exemplified studio marketing departments' increasing power in the social media era. Social data from early marketing campaigns led to changes in the film itself. The movie's relentless product placement, striking even by Hollywood franchise

⁶¹⁷ James B. Stewart, "Universal Conquers the Box Office, Without a Superhero," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2015, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/business/universal-avoids-superheroes-but-still-conquers-box-office.html>.

⁶¹⁸ Data from Box Office Mojo by IMBbPro. As of 2021, *Jurassic World* ranks 7th in both the global and domestic rankings. Adjusted for inflation, *Jurassic World* ranks #30 in history; the 1993 *Jurassic Park* is #18.

⁶¹⁹ Stewart, "Universal Conquers the Box Office, Without a Superhero."

standards, epitomized social media logic and the ever-blurrier distinction between entertainment content and advertising. Notably, product placement directly benefited Universal's marketing department since the dollars spent by co-branding partners were dollars saved on the promotional budget. Marketers also influenced fan *and* creative labor, strategically deploying social media to shape the narratives surrounding the film.

Much as Summit and Lionsgate had done, Universal focused its ongoing social media marketing on dedicated franchise fans. But, then, at crucial moments—most especially the release of the first trailer on November 25, 2014, and the week before the film's release on June 12, 2015—the studio aimed for a broader audience. The film's digital and social media presence, organized around an elaborate website promoting the imaginary "Jurassic World" theme park, thus served dual purposes: keeping dedicated fans engaged and happy while encouraging casual fans to buy movie tickets. Reminiscent of *Hunger Games*' "Capitol Couture," Universal created a digital, self-referential campaign that invited devoted fans "inside" the film world, but in highly prescribed ways targeting specific business interests: co-branding, merchandise, and the company's lucrative theme parks.

Universal's goal? Adam Rubins, chief executive of a digital ad agency that works with the studios, put it this way: "There's a sweet spot the industry is working towards in terms of using official assets and endorsing fan-created content so that they're almost promoting the product on behalf of the studio."⁶²⁰ To achieve these aims, marketers embraced a narrow form of transmedia storytelling. They greatly expanded a relatively brief narrative moment, the peaceful minutes at the new "Jurassic World" theme park before (of course) everything goes awry.

⁶²⁰ Seb Joseph, "Movie Marketing Moves into the Digital Age," *Marketing Week* (blog), February 3, 2014, <https://www.marketingweek.com/movie-marketing-moves-into-the-digital-age/>. At the time, Rubins led Way to Blue, <https://www.waytoblue.com/>.

If “free” fan labor helped Universal marketers achieve their goals, so, too, did the social media labor of *Jurassic World*’s creative personnel. Star Chris Pratt, unexpectedly popular after the breakout success of Marvel’s *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), regularly used his Instagram account to pitch co-branded Lego merchandise (doubly convenient since Pratt also voiced the lead character in 2014’s *The Lego Movie*). The actor’s franchise contract with Universal included a requirement to promote *Jurassic World* on social media and participate in co-branded promotional appearances, both typical provisions in the social media era.⁶²¹

However, the strictures of the connected tech platforms—requiring constant self-promotion and presentation of *all* users—encourage creative laborers to support marketing goals even when they are not contractually obligated. Director and co-screenwriter Colin Trevorrow did not have specific social media obligations in his contract, but he promoted the movie and himself because it was in his interest to do so.⁶²² Indeed, the marketing and publicity teams found a unique social media role for the director. Although little known with just one previous credit, Trevorrow was the production’s most ubiquitous early spokesperson, targeting hard-core fans with frequent posts to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. With executives’ blessing, Trevorrow positioned himself as a franchise protector devoted to Steven Spielberg’s original film. Although marketers did not highlight Trevorrow in their mainstream promotions, they felt the 36-year-old

⁶²¹ Formal Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, July 8, 2020; Mark A. Johnson, “A New Negotiation: Social Media and Talent Agreements,” <https://foxrothschild.gjassets.com/content/uploads/2017/03/A-New-Negotiation-Social-Media-and-Talent-Agreements-by-Mark-Johnson-and-April-Perroni.pdf>.

⁶²² Formal Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, July 8, 2020; Universal publicity executive, interview with the author, September 5, 2019. Trevorrow’s contract very likely included social media riders regarding conduct (e.g., he could be fired for offensive posts) but my interviewees say that, to their knowledge, it did not obligate him to post on the movie’s behalf. The Directors Guild of America (DGA) standard contract with the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) does not directly address promotional obligations beyond specifying proper compensation should they occur. See <https://www.dga.org/Contracts/Agreements.aspx>.

forged an “authentic” connection with *Jurassic Park*’s most ardent fans: 30-somethings, particularly men, who remembered the 1993 original as a milestone of their youths. The marketing department leveraged Trevorrow and social media’s precise targeting to reach a niche but essential audience.

Key Concepts: Authenticity and Industrial Self-Reference

Two ideas explored in recent scholarship can help us understand the significance of Universal’s marketing campaign. First, the *Jurassic* franchise is a brand with real emotional meaning for many fans. As media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser explains: “In the contemporary U.S. building a brand is about building an affective, authentic *relationship* with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations.”⁶²³ Through social media, Universal sought to manage the brand’s relationship with highly invested fans and, in particular, their memories of the first *Jurassic Park*. The challenge: make marketing feel like an “authentic” exchange between the studio and the audience. While consumers’ affective investment in brands is not unique to social media, communication scholar Alice E. Marwick argues that “authenticity” and “being yourself” have become marketing strategies embedded in Web 2.0 technologies, working to “encourage instrumental emotional labor.”⁶²⁴ The emotional labor benefits the tech platforms, of course. But it can also reward Hollywood marketers—if they can corral fan labor in their preferred directions. Universal tried to do just that.

⁶²³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 8.

⁶²⁴ Marwick, *Status Update*, 17.

The task was not easy. Banet-Weiser situates “brand cultures in terms of their ambivalence, where both economic imperatives and ‘authenticity’ are expressed and experienced simultaneously.”⁶²⁵ Indeed, the *Jurassic World* social media campaign often reflected ambivalence between commodification and artistry and nostalgia and progress. Perhaps most striking: Colin Trevorrow’s social media and fan press appearances, where he struggled to rhetorically balance his claims to artistic authority with the obvious business imperatives of a big studio film. Cannily if somewhat accidentally, Universal marketers pushed one of their tougher tasks onto Trevorrow; the director not only vouched for the studio’s authenticity, but he also had to take the heat when his claims—or even the studio’s marketing—missed the mark.

In the social media era, loyal fans *will* speak up if a marketing campaign or new film feels inauthentic to their franchise memories. But if they are happy, they can perform valuable promotional labor. Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, and Avi Shankar suggest “consumer tribes” to describe customers highly invested in a product or brand. They “know-the-corporation and emerge as guardians of brand authenticity; if brands are symbolic resources for the construction of personal identities, consumer tribes will want to be more than mere customers and become actual stakeholders and even partners in the co-creation of brand equity.”⁶²⁶ However, “authenticity” is an elusive concept for the marketer. Marwick notes that scholars and business executives alike struggle to define the term even as they recognize its importance.⁶²⁷

A second theme running throughout the *Jurassic World* marketing campaign—and indeed the film itself—is industrial self-reference to both the filmmaking business and

⁶²⁵ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 5.

⁶²⁶ Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, and Avi Shankar, eds., *Consumer Tribes* (London: Routledge, 2011), 22.

⁶²⁷ Marwick, *Status Update*, 121.

Universal's theme parks. The concepts are interrelated since Universal marketers often deployed self-reflexivity in an attempt to seem more "authentic." Like earlier franchise entries, *Jurassic World* ostensibly critiques corporate greed, over-reliance on technology, and commodification. Ironic for a CGI-heavy Hollywood sequel with seemingly endless product placement? Yes, Universal's social media seemed to admit. But we see the irony and can joke about it; so, maybe ignore it?

"What does it mean to critically analyze and theorize an industry that critically analyzes and theorizes itself?" asks John Caldwell.⁶²⁸ He proposes the term "para-industry" to describe the "ubiquitous industrial, cultural and corporate fields that surround, buffer and complicate any access to what we traditionally regard as our primary objects of media research," such as the feature film. "Para-industry" encompasses not only promotional paratexts but meta-texts, trade representations, and industry interactions. Caldwell argues that para-industry operates in four modes: "para-political-economy," "para-aesthetics," "para-cultural studies," and "para-industrial standpoint theory."⁶²⁹

The last of these modes describes online videos created by below-the-line media employees or "worker-generated snark." Although not my primary focus here, I would note that many of Universal's "behind-the-scenes" YouTube featurettes highlight below-the-line workers, for example, prop masters, sharing their work and enthusiastically endorsing paid promotional partners like Mercedes or Hasbro. The featured below-the-line workers get to advertise their craft and personal contributions to the film, but in exchange, they must endorse paid sponsors—likely

⁶²⁸ Caldwell, "Para-Industry, Shadow Academy," 720.

⁶²⁹ Caldwell, 722–23.

without additional compensation beyond their base paycheck. Perhaps an attempt to counter “worker-generated snark,” the YouTube videos offer a clear example of industrial negotiation and marketing executives asserting control over creative labor. Meanwhile, I find Caldwell’s first three modes to be particularly useful in unpacking the self-referencing layers of *Jurassic World*. The modes express themselves both in the film and its promotional surround; as Caldwell puts it, “industrial activities cannot be easily divorced from the texts and meta-texts they produce.”⁶³⁰

Para-political-economy refers to the industry’s self-reflection on its economic structures. Caldwell’s case study is *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013), a sitcom from Universal Television that frequently commented upon Universal/NBC’s real-world conglomerate owners, first General Electric and later the cable giant Comcast. In *30 Rock*, Caldwell says, “the para-political economics of the shadowing academy seems to *welcome* viewers, but as toothless critics, thus potentially inoculating the NBC/Universal conglomerate from the very political criticism the show itself employs.”⁶³¹ I see a similar tactic and function in Universal’s *Jurassic World*, albeit adapted for a global blockbuster film rather than a niche television half-hour. Unlike *30 Rock*, *Jurassic World* never explicitly name-checks Universal or its parent company. However, most of the action occurs in a theme park with direct stylistic references to Universal’s parks.

Moreover, the film text comments upon several common critiques of Hollywood filmmaking: a focus on spectacle, the audience’s short attention span, and even marketing pitfalls. The self-reflexivity begins in the film text itself but amps up on digital marketing and social media, with frequent tongue-in-cheek references to co-branding, merchandising, and

⁶³⁰ Caldwell, 722–23.

⁶³¹ Caldwell, 729.

theme parks. As it did with *30 Rock*, Universal rewards viewers who “get” the insider references while also providing satirical cover for its actual business activities. Social media adds another layer. For viewers who neither notice nor care about the irony of the killer dinosaur being named “Verizon Wireless presents the *Indominus rex*,” the film itself does not linger on the point. Instead, the paratextual surround offers additional self-references for more dedicated and perhaps more skeptical viewers, reminding them that Universal is in on the joke.

In other words, marketers combine aggressive product placement and co-branding with a knowing wink to the audience, hoping to inoculate themselves from charges of over-exploitation. The tactic worked for *The Hunger Games* and again for *Jurassic World*. In some respects, self-scrutinizing marketing meets Fredric Jameson’s definition of postmodern “pastiche” or “blank parody” without any political bite.⁶³² Yet, the *Jurassic World* case study and social media marketing in general also highlight the limitations of placing all industrial self-reference under the broad banner of postmodernism, a point Caldwell underscores. Are the paratexts I discuss truly empty, a signifier divorced from the signified? After all, social media marketing is a real-time conversation engaging with real issues raised by audiences and industry professionals. Yes, the conversation includes plenty of spin, conflict, and obfuscation. However, calling this intertextual exchange a simulacrum seems to ignore the complex negotiations between disparate audiences and industry stakeholders.⁶³³

To illustrate his second mode, para-aesthetics, Caldwell analyzes the series finale and surrounding paratexts of the television drama *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010). The paratextual material,

⁶³² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 17.

⁶³³ “Simulacrum” from Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

including a special broadcast right before the finale, emphasized showrunner Carleton Cuse and his stated goal to “make a show that we would really appreciate as viewers. That tried to be intelligent.”⁶³⁴ *Jurassic World's* paratextual material, particularly in advance of the release when dedicated fans would be most attuned, similarly situates Colin Trevorrow. The director and co-screenwriter granted scores of interviews to niche fan websites and posted photos and updates to his social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. He amassed a relatively modest number of followers (about 80,000 on Twitter), but fan and film websites picked up many of his posts. In these posts and appearances, Trevorrow often discussed his narrative and stylistic technique. Most of all, he positioned himself as a *Jurassic* fan first and foremost. In 2013, two years ahead of the release, he tweeted to fans: “Keep telling me what you [want to] see. We're all directing JP4.”⁶³⁵

Trevorrow's claim hints at Caldwell's third mode, para-cultural studies, in which industry repurposes the “bottom-up” content generated by fan communities. His example is *Life in a Day*, a 2010 digital collaboration between YouTube and Hollywood producer Ridley Scott. The project solicited user videos, suggesting that “old media” was now open to “outsiders,” even though Google and Scott fully controlled the final cut.⁶³⁶ Social media marketing often operates in this para-cultural mode, since for many marketers, the ideal outcome is content that “seems” organic and crowdsourced but is highly prescribed and aligned with business objectives. Social media often enables genuine collaboration between producers and fans, but producers seek to

⁶³⁴ Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” 213.

⁶³⁵ Colin Trevorrow, “There Is No Friction...,” Tweet, @colintrevorrow (blog), May 9, 2013, <https://twitter.com/colintrevorrow/status/332525971448147968>.

⁶³⁶ Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” 723.

retain as much control as possible. The *Jurassic World* marketing and PR staff engaged in paracultural studies by soliciting fan creations and deciding which they would circulate. Or, they would encourage social media sharing within tight parameters, such as prominent share buttons on the “Jurassic World” website or offering two choices for discussion on a Facebook post. In the most striking example, when one fan-created website proved popular, Universal simply hired the creators and, with fanfare, invited them to the world premiere. Many of Universal’s social media channels operated in several of Caldwell’s modes simultaneously; I will further explore the modes throughout this case study.

When Banet-Weiser advocates that we consider “brand cultures as culture,” she means a culture that includes “competing power relations and individual production and practice.”⁶³⁷ Caldwell posits that “media texts,” including the digital texts I discuss here, are best understood “as dynamic sites of intrinsically collective, negotiated interactions by industry, not just audiences.”⁶³⁸ Both recognize that marketing, and digital marketing, in particular, represent a negotiation between producers and fans. Thus, the scholars build on debates about convergence culture, from Henry Jenkins’s initial recognition that “convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process” to subsequent scholars’ emphasis on power structures that favor corporate interests.⁶³⁹ Simultaneously, as Caldwell points out, social media paratexts reflect an ongoing conversation *between* key industry stakeholders, including marketers, creative labor, and producers. In discussing the *Jurassic World* digital marketing

⁶³⁷ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 13.

⁶³⁸ Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” 720–21.

⁶³⁹ Henry Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 2004): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877904040603>; Hay and Couldry, “Rethinking Convergence/Culture.”

campaign, this chapter traces this complex, overlapping negotiation between industrial collaborators and the audience. Social media, I argue, granted Universal's marketing department greater power and leverage in the negotiation.

Marketing-Centric Filmmaking

Universal's box office successes in 2015 spanned genres and included *Furious 7*, the animated *Minions*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, (the Twilight-inspired) *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and *Straight Outta Compton*. However, one commonality was the studio's focus on marketing and its aggressive investment in digital marketing. In 2009, Universal became the first Hollywood major to appoint a marketing executive, Adam Fogelson, to lead the studio. Fogelson emphasized marketing throughout the production process. Soon, that led to a greater emphasis on digital and social media. By 2015, Universal was devoting about 20% of its marketing spend to digital efforts, about twice what the other big studios were allocating.⁶⁴⁰ Moreover, Universal was spending *less* on television advertising. In the first half of 2015, Warner Bros. spent \$222 million on TV ad buys versus Universal's \$149 million. Despite the bigger spend in traditional media, Warner only earned a third of Universal's box office receipts during the same period (\$1.35 billion versus \$3.6 billion).⁶⁴¹

As it turned towards digital, Universal was the first studio, mini or major, to buy ads on Snapchat. For younger-skewing films like the social media-themed horror film *Unfriended*

⁶⁴⁰ Nicole LaPorte, "Pitch Perfect: How Universal's Digital Marketing Helped It Have The Best Year Ever," Fast Company, September 11, 2015, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3050984/pitch-perfect-how-universals-digital-marketing-helped-it-have-the-best-year-ever>.

⁶⁴¹ Pamela McClintock, "Summer 2015's Tipping Point: 'Tracking Can't Tell You Everything,'" *The Hollywood Reporter (Archive: 1930-2015)* 421, no. 30 (September 11, 2015): 34–35.

(2014), the distributor devoted 60% of the marketing budget to digital and saw a \$62 million return on a \$1 million production budget.⁶⁴² Increasingly, Universal was deploying the digital-first marketing strategy pioneered by Summit and Lionsgate. In 2015, Michael Moses, Universal's copresident of worldwide marketing, said: "Probably even three years ago, digital was seen as an after-market kind of thing. Like, we'll do the campaign, and then digital will push everything out after it's launched. So, we had to completely invert that thinking and say, like with *Pitch Perfect 2*, digital's coming first. They're gonna lead."⁶⁴³

Universal Marketers Go Social

Just as Summit's and Lionsgate's limited marketing budgets led them to embrace online marketing, several industrial factors encouraged Universal to turn to digital ahead of other majors such as Disney or Warner Bros. The oldest operating film studio in the U.S., Universal Pictures has been part of NBCUniversal Media since 2004, when General Electric's NBC television merged with Vivendi Universal's film and television subsidiary. Cable television giant Comcast acquired a controlling stake in 2011 and whole ownership in 2013, while *Jurassic World* was in early pre-production. Even after rival Disney aggressively acquired expensive intellectual property, buying Pixar in 2006, Marvel Studios in 2009, and *Star Wars* owner Lucasfilm in 2012, Comcast was hesitant to approve such hefty bets. Former Comcast executive Jeff Shell, installed as head of Universal in 2013, explained: "We're in the business of making money for shareholders. We're focused on the bottom line. We're proud of the small movies that generate significant profitability. And sometimes small movies become big movies."⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴² LaPorte, "Pitch Perfect."

⁶⁴³ LaPorte.

⁶⁴⁴ Stewart, "Universal Conquers the Box Office, Without a Superhero."

Moreover, with Disney owning Marvel Studios and Warner Bros. owning DC Comics Films, Universal lacked access to the superhero franchises that had been driving outside box office returns. In fact, with Sony and 20th Century Fox still holding licenses to some Marvel properties into the 2010s, Universal and Paramount were the only majors not benefiting from the superhero film cycle. With fewer “pre-sold” properties, Universal innovated with newer, and still generally less expensive, digital and social media marketing strategies.

The company’s corporate structure also encouraged a marketing-centric approach. In 2009, Universal elevated Adam Fogelson, previously president for marketing and distribution, to studio co-chairman alongside former production president Donna Langley. Fogelson was the first marketing executive to lead a major studio. And, as NBCUniversal chief executive Jeff Zucker said at the time, Fogleson’s “mandate is to get back to making commercial pictures with a degree of fiscal responsibility.”⁶⁴⁵ Fogelson, a longtime studio marketer comfortable with traditional practices, did not immediately rush into social media but did ensure his former marketing colleagues joined greenlight meetings, inserting marketing early in Universal’s production process. One of Fogelson’s core filmmaking beliefs, he has said, is that 75 percent of a film’s success comes from its marketing and marketability.⁶⁴⁶ The new focus on marketing, combined with Zucker’s “fiscal responsibility” mandate, led the studio to gradually expand its digital efforts, particularly as its marketers enviously watched the success of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*.

⁶⁴⁵ Michael Cieply and Brooks Barnes, “Universal’s Movie Unit Ousts Its Two Chairmen,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2009, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/06/business/media/06universal.html>.

⁶⁴⁶ Tad Friend, “A New Hope for Hollywood?,” *The New Yorker*, January 3, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/the-mogul-of-the-middle>.

Interestingly, Comcast ousted Fogelson in 2013, at the same time Jeff Shell moved over to head the film business, leaving Langley as sole studio chairman.⁶⁴⁷ Still, Fogelson had already greenlit almost all of Universal’s 2015 releases; colleagues say he watched his former employer’s banner year with a “chip-on-the-shoulder.”⁶⁴⁸ Then, in 2014, Fogelson signed on as chairman of STX Entertainment, an upstart studio focused on mid-budget releases, and placed social media data and digital marketing at the center of its strategy.⁶⁴⁹ Once skeptical about social media as a marketing approach—indeed, I quoted his skepticism in the previous chapter—Fogelson was a convert.

Meanwhile, Universal continued to expand its focus on digital marketing. Heading the digital marketing department was Doug Neil, who joined Universal in 2006 after six years at AOL.⁶⁵⁰ In 2013, the studio promoted Neil to executive vice president while retaining his sole focus on digital and social media, underscoring the increasing importance of the function. He led a team of 13 marketers, most explicitly focused on social media integration with Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+ and Instagram.⁶⁵¹ Michael Moses and Josh Goldstine, Universal’s copresidents of worldwide marketing, tasked Neil with educating the entire marketing team on the importance of social media. “It’s required education. We just had a

⁶⁴⁷ Justin Kroll and Rachel Abrams, “Universal’s Adam Fogelson Out as Jeff Shell Moves to Studio Side,” *Variety* (blog), September 9, 2013, <https://variety.com/2013/film/news/jeff-shell-adam-fogelson-universal-studios-1200605148/>.

⁶⁴⁸ Friend, “A New Hope for Hollywood?”

⁶⁴⁹ Matt Kapko, “How a Small Film Studio Uses Facebook Data to Compete with Hollywood’s Heavyweights,” CIO, February 9, 2017, <https://www.cio.com/article/3167889/how-a-small-film-studio-uses-facebook-data-to-compete-with-hollywood-s-heavyweights.html>.

⁶⁵⁰ “Doug Neil | LinkedIn,” accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dougneil2020/>.

⁶⁵¹ “Universal Ups Doug Neil To EVP Digital Marketing – Deadline,” *Deadline*, August 12, 2013, <https://deadline.com/2013/08/universal-ups-doug-neil-to-evp-digital-marketing-562587/>.

meeting three weeks ago where Doug led all the creatives and all the staff through, ‘Here’s what a Snapchat Story is. Here’s the ad unit and it goes like this, instead of like this,’” explained Moses in 2015. Strikingly, Moses attributed the studio’s large-scale digital presence to its “transmedia” approach to marketing, deploying the once-academic term popularized by Henry Jenkins. For Moses, the word meant no “fiefdoms” or walls between traditional and digital media; they were one and the same.⁶⁵²

Social media marketing permeated many of Universal’s 2015 successes. For *Pitch Perfect 2*, a sequel about an acapella singing group, social media drove most of Universal’s efforts to reach the young, female target audience. Donna Langley explained that the studio recognized the original had a long afterlife on digital media and home video. Despite a modest \$29 million production budget, “we gave it an early summer date and treated it like a big summer film,” Langley said.⁶⁵³ During production, Doug Neil’s team launched a Snapchat channel to actively support the effort, asking the young cast to post images and videos. “We were fortunate to have Hailee Steinfeld and a couple other girls who understood Snapchat,” explained Moses a few months after the release. “We went from zero to 250,000 followers in no time. We’re up to over 350,000 now.” Other social media strategies for *Pitch Perfect 2* included sponsoring an Iggy Azalea music video on Vevo, GIFs on Tumblr, paid ads on Snapchat Stories, and participating in a new Facebook feature, Instant Articles, which inserted full-length news stories into users’ feeds. The Universal team even paid the cast of the ABC Family television mystery *Pretty Little Liars*, which had a collective 1.4 million Snapchat followers, to take Snaps at the premiere. In addition, the studio live-streamed the premiere event, where they had set up

⁶⁵² LaPorte, “Pitch Perfect.”

⁶⁵³ Stewart, “Universal Conquers the Box Office, Without a Superhero.”

multiple camera-ready “InstaStops.”⁶⁵⁴ In a powerful example of social media marketing influencing film production, the marketers even asked the filmmakers to cast an actual acappella group popular on YouTube, Pentatonix, in the film.

To Universal’s marketing chiefs, *Pitch Perfect 2* seemed like a natural fit with social media marketing. However, they were much less sure about a social media strategy for *Jurassic World*, which mainly targeted males, including 30- and 40-somethings nostalgic for the original 1993 film. Moreover, as an expensive reboot of the studio’s most prominent franchise, the stakes were high. So, in something of a generational compromise, Doug Neil and his digital team pitched a social media strategy centered around an elaborate destination website, an idea many studios had already abandoned. The site would be promoted and enhanced with social media, but it would also be a place fans would want to revisit. In marked contrast with fan-created pages, marketers hoped the corporate webpage would help them manage fan behavior. After the fact, Michael Moses admitted he had been uncertain about the approach. “They turned me into a believer from a deep skeptic,” he said.⁶⁵⁵

A Marketing Department’s Agenda

Like the other majors, Universal controls marketing for films it distributes even if it did not produce them. So, the company often has more control over marketing decisions than it does over day-to-day production decisions. Thus, a marketing-centric approach grants Universal more significant influence over film texts. Moreover, careful analysis of marketing campaigns often reveals the distributor’s unique business agenda, which is often broader than ticket sales alone. In

⁶⁵⁴ LaPorte, “Pitch Perfect.”

⁶⁵⁵ LaPorte.

the case of *Jurassic World*, Universal co-owns the franchise with Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment. Amblin staff made most day-to-day production decisions, with additional input from producing partners Legendary Entertainment and The Kennedy/Marshall Company. Director Colin Trevorrow was on Amblin's payroll, not Universal's, limiting the distributor's direct leverage. "I'm not sure if I can recall a single studio note that I got on this whole movie," director Colin Trevorrow claimed. "And part of it was because Steven [Spielberg] has final cut. And I answer directly to him."⁶⁵⁶

What was Universal's unique agenda? To emphasize theme parks, co-branding, and merchandising, all of which benefited the company's bottom line *more than box office returns*. Here is why. While Universal certainly profited from box office sales, it had to share the pie with Amblin, Spielberg, producing partners, and (as always) theaters. In fact, since Legendary contributed around 25% of the estimated \$150 million production budget for *Jurassic World*, that company collected a significant share of the grosses after Universal split the revenue with theater owners.⁶⁵⁷ Moreover, Spielberg enjoys a particularly lucrative deal for the *Jurassic* franchise. Starting with the first *Jurassic Park*, Universal agreed to give Spielberg approximately 20 percent of its gross receipts until it broke even. Once the film was in the black, he received a rare 50/50 split of the profits—including returns from merchandising and licensing. *Forbes* estimated that Spielberg made over \$250 million just from the first film, the most one person has ever made from a movie.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁶ Peter Sciretta, "Colin Trevorrow Jurassic World Interview: Easter Eggs, Spielberg, SNL," /Film, June 12, 2015, <https://www.slashfilm.com/colin-trevorrow-jurassic-world-interview-2/>.

⁶⁵⁷ Meg James and Ryan Faughnder, "Studio Poised for a Record Profit; Universal Is Outpacing Rivals with \$3 Billion in Box-Office Receipts after String of Hit Films," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2015, sec. Business; Part C; Business Desk.

⁶⁵⁸ Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg*, 424.

On the other hand, Universal retained a much bigger share of profits from *Jurassic* tie-ins at its theme park division. Plus, theme parks return dividends year after year. Worth noting: Spielberg does have some stake in Universal's theme park business. He receives two percent of ticket sales and a portion of gross revenue from concession sales at the Universal Orlando and Universal Studios Japan theme parks. The deal dates back to the 1980s when the studio desperately wanted to prevent Amblin from decamping to Warner Bros.⁶⁵⁹ Still, Spielberg's cut of theme park revenue is modest next to the 20 to 50 percent he gets on direct movie revenue.

In addition, the parks business was and is critical to NBCUniversal, actually driving more earnings than the film studio itself. With locations in Orlando, Hollywood, Japan, Singapore, and planned for China and Russia, Universal is the 2nd largest theme park operator in the United States (after Disney) and 4th largest globally.⁶⁶⁰ Even in 2015, an extraordinarily successful year for Universal Filmed Entertainment, the theme parks still generated more cash, 1.46 billion vs. 1.23 billion.⁶⁶¹ In 2019, the theme parks unit generated \$2.45 billion compared to just \$833 million for the film studio.⁶⁶² Universal Parks and Resorts also earns more than the flagship NBC Broadcast Television unit and has often been the company's fastest-growing segment in recent years.

⁶⁵⁹ Ben Fritz and Claudia Eller, "Universal Orlando revises deal with Spielberg so it can focus on debt restructuring," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2009.

⁶⁶⁰ "Global Attractions Attendance Report" (Themed Entertainment Association, 2019), <https://aecom.com/wp-content/uploads/documents/reports/AECOM-Theme-Index-2019.pdf>.

⁶⁶¹ "Comcast Reports 4th Quarter and Year End 2015 Results | Comcast Corporation," February 3, 2016, <https://www.cmcsa.com/news-releases/news-release-details/comcast-reports-4th-quarter-and-year-end-2015-results>.

⁶⁶² "Comcast Reports 4th Quarter and Full Year 2019 Results | Comcast Corporation," Comcast Corporation, January 23, 2020, <https://www.cmcsa.com/news-releases/news-release-details/comcast-reports-4th-quarter-and-full-year-2019-results>. Comparisons refer to adjusted EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization). Cable networks still generate the most cash for NBC Universal, but growth has slowed.

Jurassic World co-branding deals also more directly benefited Universal—and the marketing department in particular—since the dollars spent by promotional partners were dollars saved on the marketing budget. Finally, merchandising such as *Jurassic* t-shirts also rewarded Universal more than box office, mainly because theaters did not get a cut. Indeed, I will argue that Universal’s digital marketing campaign emphasized integration with theme parks, co-brand partners, and merchandise, reflecting the distributor’s unique goals and providing a useful example of how media texts can reflect the impact of industrial negotiation. In short, marketing offers the distributor more latitude to pursue its agenda.

Furthermore, even when producing partners and a distributor agree on goals, there may be disagreement on tactics. For instance, while some Universal marketers pushed to rehire the original 1993 stars, Trevorrow resisted with Amblin’s backing. So, Universal emphasized nostalgia in its marketing. The marketing department also wanted to reveal more information about the forthcoming film, while Trevorrow hoped to keep most details under wraps. This tactical debate also played out via promotion; Universal turned to immersive digital storytelling, partly because Trevorrow and Amblin objected to more traditional tactics like releasing extended film clips or numerous production photos.

As I argue that marketing *departments* enjoyed increased leverage in the social media era, it is worth underscoring that individual *marketers* only temporarily benefit from that power. Employment in a studio marketing or publicity department remained and remains unstable. Comcast forced out Adam Fogelson after he greenlit *Jurassic World* but before he could see its success firsthand. Josh Goldstine, President of Worldwide Marketing for Universal at the time of

Jurassic World, left the studio in 2018, only to land the same job at Warner Bros. in 2021.⁶⁶³

Doug Neil, the digital chief, departed Universal in 2020.⁶⁶⁴ Many marketing executives stay in place for far shorter periods. Ultimately, the actual beneficiaries of marketing-centric filmmaking are the corporation and its shareholders. Marketing executives and staffers enjoy the additional creative control—but they can also lose their jobs as soon as a CEO or board of directors decides they are no longer making decisions in the corporate interest.

From Novel to Franchise: Ideological Tensions

As we will see, Universal deployed social media not only to advance its agenda but to manage textual tensions and ironies inherent in *Jurassic World*—very much mirroring Lionsgate’s strategy for *The Hunger Games*. And also, like *Hunger Games*, the franchise began with a bestselling novel: Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park*, published in 1990. In many ways, the story seems tailor-made for the blockbuster film franchise it would soon become, offering plenty of action, an exotic setting, up-to-the-minute technology, easy merchandising opportunities, and—of course—dinosaurs. At the same time, however, Crichton’s book rails against the exploitation of science for profit and entertainment, not to mention the dangerous, capitalist greed underpinning its fictional dinosaur theme park. And yet Universal, which won a competitive battle for the pre-publication film rights, hoped to turn Crichton’s novel into an expensive, technology-heavy piece of entertainment, sell hundreds of thousands of dollars in

⁶⁶³ Anthony D’Alessandro, “Warner Bros. Names Josh Goldstine President of Worldwide Marketing,” *Deadline* (blog), January 7, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/01/warner-bros-josh-goldstine-president-of-worldwide-marketing-1234666720/>.

⁶⁶⁴ Jill Goldsmith, “Former Universal EVP Doug Neil Named Marketing, Brand Chief At NFT Platform Chronicle,” *Deadline* (blog), July 1, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/07/universal-studios-doug-neil-chief-marketing-office-chronicle-nft-jurassic-world-1234783723/>.

branded merchandise, and introduce Jurassic Park rides at its California and Florida theme parks.

David Koepp, the screenwriter for the first film (1993), saw the irony:

Here I was writing about these greedy people who are creating a fabulous theme park just so they can exploit all these dinosaurs and make silly little films and sell stupid plastic plates and things. And I'm writing it for a company that's eventually going to put this in their theme parks and make these silly little films and sell stupid plastic plates. I was really chasing my tail for a while trying to figure out who was virtuous in this whole scenario—and eventually gave up.⁶⁶⁵

Koepp says he gave up, but in fact, his script cleverly obscures the irony and defuses the novel's harshest critiques of technology and business. Note that Koepp dropped the adjective "greedy" when describing Universal; at the very least, his bosses would want viewers to follow suit. To that end, Koepp and Spielberg introduced specific narrative and stylistic strategies, which would be mirrored and even amplified by later entries in the franchise. Social media and other paratexts will further underscore these strategies, but the process begins in the film texts themselves.

In translating *Jurassic Park* from page to screen, perhaps the most notable shift involves park founder John Hammond (Richard Attenborough), who morphs from a ruthless mercenary into a passionate and kind visionary. As a result, the fictional Jurassic Park's very *raison d'être* shifts from greed to joy. Spielberg has even said he closely relates to Hammond. Like *The Hunger Games*' transition from book to movie, *Jurassic Park* producers faced the challenge of maintaining what readers liked about a popular novel while blunting some of the more problematic social critiques. *Jurassic Park* actually began life as a movie idea. "I wrote a screenplay about cloning a pterodactyl from fossil DNA in 1983," Crichton recalls, "but the story wasn't convincing. I worked on it for several years since, trying to make it more credible. Finally, I decided on a theme park setting, and wrote a novel from the point of view of a young

⁶⁶⁵ Don Shay and Jody Duncan, *The Making of Jurassic Park* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 56.

boy who was present when the dinosaurs escaped.” Crichton received negative feedback on several drafts—until he switched from a child’s to an adult’s perspective. “And then everybody liked it,” he recalls.⁶⁶⁶ Crichton’s anecdote suggests that some of his more challenging, adult themes resonated with readers. His was not *only* a novel about bringing dinosaurs to life.

The novel’s John Hammond is ruthless, obsessed with profit, uninterested in the dinosaurs, and callous to his grandchildren. Crichton says he originally conceived of Hammond as the “dark side of Walt Disney.”⁶⁶⁷ As depicted by Attenborough, the film’s Hammond wants only to create a spectacular experience for his grandchildren and the other visitors. Unconcerned with the bottom line, Hammond frequently notes that he “spared no expense” in making his theme park. He insists upon attending the birth of every dinosaur. The film’s Hammond may be naïve, but he is not evil.

In the book, we first hear about Hammond from an EPA investigator who details the agency’s intense concern about his shadowy activities. After hearing the details, Alan Grant jokes, “You like the part where John Hammond is the evil arch-villain?”⁶⁶⁸ On-screen, by contrast, we meet Hammond when he shows up at the dig-site of Grant (Sam Neil) and paleobotanist Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern). Wearing all white—as he does throughout the film—and bathed in a bright beam of light from a window, a smiling Hammond offers Grant and Ellie celebratory glasses of champagne. He explains to them, “I’ve spent the last five years setting up a kind of biological preserve. Really spectacular. Spared no expense. Make the one I’ve got down

⁶⁶⁶ Michael Crichton, “Note from Michael Crichton,” MichaelCrichton.com, <http://www.michaelcrichton.net/books-jurassicpark-mcnotes.html>.

⁶⁶⁷ Michael Crichton (interview), *Beyond: Jurassic Park*, DVD (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2001).

⁶⁶⁸ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, 42.

in Kenya look like a petting zoo. And there's no doubt our attractions will drive kids out of their minds.... And not just kids, everyone.”

In a pivotal scene much later in the film, after the action shifts to Isla Nublar and the dinosaurs have escaped their containment systems, Hammond sits in the empty park restaurant, slowly eating ice cream, and tells Ellie why he created Jurassic Park.

Do you know the first attraction I ever built when I first came here from Scotland? It was a flea circus. Petticoat Lane. It was quite spectacular. Spared no expense. There was a miniature merry-go-round and a wee trapeze and a car-carousel—and a seesaw. They all moved, motorized, of course, but people would say they could see the fleas. "Oh, I can see the fleas, mummy. Can't you see the fleas?" Clown fleas and high-wire fleas and fleas on parade. But this place—I wanted to show them something they could see and touch. Not just devoid of merit.

This is the longest monologue in the entire film, and it takes place in one of the few breaks in action during the closing hour. As the scene begins, the camera pans across shelves of never-to-be-sold Jurassic Park merchandise before landing upon the solitary Hammond. We hear a slow, wistful piano version of the film’s main theme (composed by John Williams). At this moment, we share Hammond’s sense of loss at what he hoped his park could be. It’s worth noting that this is the only time Jurassic Park merchandise appears on-screen—intact, and just as we’re feeling sympathetic to Hammond and his endeavor. The scene ends when Ellie successfully convinces Hammond that he must give up his dream: “But it’s still the flea circus, John. It’s all an illusion...”

By contrast, pure greed fuels the novel’s Hammond. Explaining the park to the lawyer Donald Gennaro, Hammond starts with his noble-sounding pitch: “*Living* attractions...so astonishing they would capture the imagination of the entire world.” But then he immediately adds: “And we can never forget the ultimate object of the project in Costa Rica—to make

money.... Lots and lots of money.”⁶⁶⁹ Later in the novel, Hammond explains why he chose to build a theme park instead of investing in medicine or other kinds of genetic research: so he could make unfettered profits. “Nobody needs entertainment. That's not a matter for government intervention. If I charge 5,000 dollars a day for my park, who is going to stop me?”⁶⁷⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly, Hammond meets different ends on the page versus screen. In the book, though he never leaves the safety of the park visitor center while his grandchildren are in danger, he does so later to contemplate ways to reopen the park. As he does, a pack of small dinosaurs eats him. The film adds a cane and a limp to explain why Hammond stays in the visitor center and then gives him the film's final line. Grant tells Hammond he has decided not to endorse the park. “So have I,” Hammond replies. Hammond, along with his grandchildren and the scientists, then escapes the island on a helicopter.

The film transfers most of Hammond’s negative attributes—the greed, the lack of actual interest in dinosaurs—to Donald Gennaro (Martin Ferrero), a lawyer who represents Hammond's concerned investors. In the book, Gennaro is generally a voice of reason, rightly expressing concern about the park from the beginning and later pleading with Hammond to focus on the safety of his grandchildren instead of plans for revising the park. In the film, he’s one-dimensionally shallow. It’s Gennaro who says of the theme park, “We can charge anything we want—\$1,000 a day, \$10,000 a day—and people will pay it. And then there’s the merchandise....” Hammond corrects him: “Donald, this park was not built to cater only for the super-rich. Everyone in the world has the right to enjoy these animals.” When the visitors (and the audience) catch the first spectacular glimpse of the dinosaurs, Gennaro can only say, “We’re

⁶⁶⁹ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, 62.

⁶⁷⁰ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, 200.

going to make a fortune with this place.” Described in the novel as a “stocky, muscular man,” the Gennaro of the film appears weak and desperately out of place in the jungle.⁶⁷¹ The novel’s Gennaro survives, not incidentally, and even fends off a raptor with his bare hands. After abandoning the kids in a jeep, a *T-rex* eats the film’s Gennaro (while sitting on a toilet).

According to biographer Joseph McBride, Steven Spielberg closely relates to Hammond’s obsession with showmanship and pure entertainment. Spielberg also relates to Hammond’s “dark side,” but he does not mean greed or immorality—he means an all-encompassing work ethic.⁶⁷² The visionary and passionate Hammond of the film reflects Spielberg’s conception and differs significantly from Crichton’s original. Hammond was the first part Spielberg cast, choosing a fellow director who had not acted in 15 years. “My first choice, without even thinking very much, was Richard Attenborough,” Spielberg remembers.⁶⁷³ (Attenborough won the 1982 Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture for *Gandhi*, defeating Spielberg and *E.T.*)

Why do these book-to-film changes matter? First, consider how significantly they shift the underlying message. In the novel, everything about Jurassic Park is corrupt and evil. Hammond starts the enterprise for the wrong reasons—to make money and avoid government intervention. In the film, Hammond starts Jurassic Park for a noble cause: to bring joy to people. Yes, he would presumably still make a lot of money if the park was a success, but the film never mentions that fact. Instead, all of the greed falls to the one-dimensional, entirely unsympathetic,

⁶⁷¹ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, 63.

⁶⁷² Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg*, 422.

⁶⁷³ Don Shay and Jody Duncan, *The Making of Jurassic Park*, 60.

and quickly dispensed Gennaro. If the novel's narrative might have raised questions about Universal Studios' motivations for creating *Jurassic Park*, the film (and merchandise and theme park), the screenplay cleverly sidesteps those questions.

Another way the film mediates the dangers of Jurassic Park and its technology is simply by emphasizing the visual pleasure of seeing (mostly computer-generated) dinosaurs brought to life. The first time we see dinosaurs, the film carefully choreographs our reactions. For example, two jeeps stop in an open field just after entering the gates of Jurassic Park. First, we notice Grant reacting to something off-screen. Then Grant directs Ellie to look, too. Finally, the two jump out of the jeep and only then do we get the payoff: the two scientists and a massive *Brachiosaurus*, together in one shot. As Frederick Wasser notes, "This hyper-manipulation...made sure that the audience would respond to the spectacle of the movie as something truly pioneering, which the digital imagery actual was."⁶⁷⁴ To further emphasize the point, the film introduces a rule absent from the book: characters that value the dinosaurs survive, those indifferent to them die. The victims—Gennaro, the thieving programmer Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight), and the chief engineer Ray Arnold (Samuel L. Jackson)—all commit the ultimate sin: not thinking dinosaurs are cool. The plotting Nedry, for example, meets a similar death in book and film after a poisonous *Dilophosaurus* spits on him. The screenplay, however, adds an exchange immediately before his end in which Nedry insults the *Dilophosaurus*. "Fetch the stick, stupid," he says. "No wonder you're extinct...I'm going to run you over when I come back down the hill."

⁶⁷⁴ Frederick Wasser, *Steven Spielberg's America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 151.

Jurassic Park grossed \$357 million in the United States and an astonishing \$627 million globally. It became the second highest-grossing film of all time in the domestic box office, trailing only Spielberg's own *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, and the best-ever performer worldwide.⁶⁷⁵ A year after the original release, *Jurassic Park* had made over \$1 billion in merchandising revenue, exceeding even the massive box office tally.⁶⁷⁶ Two sequels followed: *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), directed by Spielberg, and *Jurassic Park III* (2001), directed by Joe Johnston. The sequels received middling reviews, and the third entry grossed \$368.8 million globally, certainly respectable but barely half of the original's total. Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment and Universal held on-and-off discussions about a fourth *Jurassic* sequel starting in 2001, and various screenwriters produced treatments and scripts. Concerned that the muted response to *Jurassic Park III* suggested dwindling interest in the franchise, Amblin and Spielberg were slow to commit to a fourth film.

In 2012, Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver penned the first iteration of what would become *Jurassic World*, incorporating three specific ideas from Spielberg: a fully functioning dinosaur theme park, a human who has a relationship with trained raptors (actually suggested by an earlier draft from John Sayles), and—perhaps least surprising—an escaped, human-eating dinosaur.⁶⁷⁷ In 2013, Spielberg and producer Frank Marshall hired Colin Trevorrow to direct the film. Trevorrow and his writing partner, Derek Connolly, significantly rewrote Jaffa and Silver's draft. At Spielberg's urging, a planned 2014 release was delayed to 2015 to allow Trevorrow to refine

⁶⁷⁵ Source: Box Office Mojo, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=jurassicpark.htm>.

⁶⁷⁶ A.M. Busch, "Jurassic is Box Office King, Licensing Prince," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 31, 1994.

⁶⁷⁷ Mike Sampson, "The Three Things Steven Spielberg Said Had to Be in 'Jurassic World,'" *Screen Crush*, June 9, 2015, <https://screencrush.com/colin-trevorrow-jurassic-world-interview/>.

the script and construct a more detailed set.⁶⁷⁸ Ultimately released in the U.S. on June 12, 2015, *Jurassic World* is set 22 years after the events of *Jurassic Park* and takes place on the same fictional island 120 miles off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, Isla Nublar. A thriving theme park of cloned dinosaurs, dubbed “Jurassic World,” has successfully operated on the island for years, bringing John Hammond's dream to reality. The tragic outcome of the first attempt is alluded to but largely ignored by the park’s current corporate owners. (Also ignored: the events of the 1997 and 2001 sequels.)

Jurassic World contains many of the same ironies David Koepp noted when he was writing *Jurassic Park*. If anything, the new film heightens the irony since the finished theme park looks quite a bit like Universal Studios’ real theme parks, and merchandise and product placement is even more prevalent than it was in 1993. And yet, the film ostensibly critiques corporate greed and commodification. Co-writer and director Trevorrow explicitly explains his critique and connection to Hollywood filmmaking, arguing that the *Indominus rex*, the synthetic dinosaur at the heart of the film's story, symbolizes consumer and corporate excess.

The *Indominus* was meant to embody our worst tendencies. We’re surrounded by wonder, and yet we want more. And we want it bigger, faster, louder, better. And in the world of the movie, the animal is designed based on a series of corporate focus groups. Like in the same way a lot of movies are. They sit a bunch of people down, and they ask them, “What can we do to make the dinosaurs more entertaining for you? What would make you tell a friend to come to *Jurassic World*?” And their answer is, of course, “We want to see something bigger, faster, louder, more vicious; we want a killer.” And they get what they ask for.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁸ Nick De Semlyen, “Access All Areas: Jurassic World,” Empire Online, March 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160308235147/http://www.empireonline.com/jurassic-world/>.

⁶⁷⁹ Joe McGovern, “Meet ’Jurassic World’s Indominus Rex: ‘An Abomination and a Killer—and on Party Plates,’” EW.com, May 25, 2015, <https://ew.com/article/2015/05/25/meet-new/>.

“There’s something in the film about our greed and our desire for profit,” Trevorrow adds in another interview. “The *Indominus rex*, to me, is very much that desire, that need to be satisfied. The customers want something bigger and badder and louder.”⁶⁸⁰ Ironically, the details of *Indominus rex* were leaked in advance through merchandise, much to Trevorrow’s chagrin. Trevorrow explains that he and co-writer Connolly “didn’t set out to make a meta-commentary. I think that it organically turned into that because we were in a situation where you have this giant corporation that needed a sequel to this movie, and they had a start date that was set, and it was happening whether it was a good idea or not. And we felt, well, that’s why you would make a dinosaur theme park!”⁶⁸¹ Co-star Bryce Dallas Howard sees similar themes in her character, Claire Dearing, a park operations manager so obsessed with work that she neglects the safety of her two nephews who come to visit. “The quest for profit has compromised her own humanity,” Howard says.⁶⁸² In an example of Caldwell’s para-political economy, the film comments upon the very spectacle and excess often raised by Hollywood’s critics.

Yet, *Jurassic World* undercuts its own critique, using many of the same strategies deployed in *Jurassic Park*. The literal and symbolic successor to John Hammond is new park owner Simon Masrani (Irrfan Khan). Much like Hammond, Khan—though fabulously wealthy—claims to care more about family entertainment than money. When Claire Dearing starts quoting profit margins, he cuts her off to ask if the animals are happy and visitors are enjoying

⁶⁸⁰ “How the Jurassic Park Dinosaurs Came to Life,” News.com.au, June 10, 2015, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/design/how-the-dinosaurs-in-jurassic-world-came-to-life/news-story/391d003ff3005d31d39cbf5cd6f9012a#.s0rk7>.

⁶⁸¹ Ethan de Seife, “At the Drive-In With Jurassic World Director Colin Trevorrow,” Seven Days, July 15, 2015, <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/at-the-drive-in-with-jurassic-world-director-colin-trevorrow/Content?oid=2737958>.

⁶⁸² “How the Jurassic Park Dinosaurs Came to Life.”

themselves. He continues: "Don't forget why we built this place, Claire. Jurassic World exists to remind us how very small we are. How new. You can't put a price on that." Masrani even directly quotes Hammond's catchphrase: "Spared no expense." *Jurassic World* composer Michael Giacchino uses John Williams's original *Jurassic Park* theme only twice, and one of those times is to underscore Masrani's speech about the noble purpose of the park. The other is when we see our first view of the fully built park. Franchise fans would certainly understand the significance of Williams's recognizable theme; it hit the top ten in digital downloads the day before the new film premiered.⁶⁸³

Much as the first *Jurassic Park* contrasts Hammond with the money-grubbing lawyer Donald Gennaro, *Jurassic World* contrasts Masrani with Vic Hoskins (Vincent D'Onofrio), head of the park's security operations, who hatches a rather ludicrous plan to use trained dinosaurs as military weapons. "Imagine if we'd have had these at Tora Bora!" he exclaims, seemingly an allusion to the December 2001 military operation in which U.S. troops barely missed capturing Osama bin Laden. Perhaps even more damning within the franchise's logic, Hoskins is indifferent to the dinosaurs. "We own them," he says. "Extinct animals have no rights." Hoskins, not surprisingly, receives the film's grizzliest death by dino, following the rules established in the first film. Trevorrow says his film critiques "our greed and our desire for profit," but the critique is obscured by assigning noble goals to the park owner and introducing an exaggerated villain in contrast. While franchise sequels often seek to narratively repackage their predecessors, it is significant which elements the new movie maintains and which it drops. The park owner could have easily been the unequivocal villain; in fact, that would have been narratively

⁶⁸³ Devon Maloney, "John Williams Didn't Score 'Jurassic World,' but His Theme Just Cracked the Top 10," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-john-williams-jurassic-theme-chart-top-10-20150612-story.html>.

simpler—but Trevorrow and the other screenwriters instead followed the first movie’s John Hammond model with the noble if overambitious Simon Masrani.

Also, like the original film, *Jurassic World* underscores the visual pleasure of the dinosaurs, again using the “hyper-manipulation” Frederick Wasser observed. Certainly, the filmmakers recognize that the computer-generated dinosaurs are not the novelty they were in 1993. Indeed, several characters echo Trevorrow’s actual observation that consumers want “bigger, faster, louder, better.” When we first meet park manager Claire, she describes jaded park visitors in nearly the same language Trevorrow describes moviegoers. She says to a group of visiting executives: “No one is impressed by a dinosaur anymore.” They want “bigger, louder, more teeth,” she continues. Claire’s teenaged nephew (Nick Robinson) is so jaded by the live exhibits that he stares at his phone instead. The park developed the synthetic *Indominus rex* precisely because parkgoers were no longer impressed with “real” creatures. “You didn’t ask for reality; you asked for more teeth,” exclaims park scientist Henry Wu (B.D. Wong). This winking acknowledgment and the not-so-subtle connection to Hollywood filmmaking are strategies for anticipating the audience’s “seen that before” reaction.

The *Jurassic Park* franchise—and the Michael Crichton novel that inspired it—is not as ideologically challenging as *The Hunger Games*, with its kid gladiators and specific critique of media violence. Indeed, big studios passed on *Hunger Games* while *Jurassic* was a hot commodity. The potential merchandising tie-ins certainly seem more apparent. Nevertheless, the ideological tensions and ironies are real, as the screenwriters specifically acknowledged. That’s especially true since the franchise ended up in a conglomerate with a significant theme park business. And much as with *The Hunger Games*, the filmmakers developed a multi-pronged strategy for addressing the ideological tensions. The work starts in the script and the films

themselves. *Jurassic World* self-reflexively acknowledges the ironies but quickly emphasizes spectacle and the very pleasures it ostensibly critiques, a tactic very much in line with Horkheimer and Adorno's notions of an industry that "perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises." As the theorists explain, "the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu."⁶⁸⁴

The film's self-reflection on blockbuster filmmaking, theme parks, and merchandising is also a powerful example of Caldwell's para-political economy—ultimately toothless, as even Trevorrow admitted:

In the end, we didn't want to make it too meta.... That's what the fun of it was for us. Can we go in making something look like it's going to be some kind of meta commentary, but to me, if I'm saying anything it's that, "Look, by the time you get to the end of the movie, you have given in." You hopefully have submitted to the joy and to the fun that is inherent in this franchise. That would be the biggest success, if by the end you're like, "Whatever, man, I'm eight years old. I'm on board."⁶⁸⁵

The promotional surround, more than the film itself, makes it "look like it's going to be some kind of meta-commentary." The truly biting satire is in Universal's social and digital media marketing. Applying Stuart Hall's model, the dominant-hegemonic position is, as Trevorrow puts it, "Whatever, man, I'm eight years old. I'm on board." Much of the audience, including actual 8-year-olds, can probably accept this framing and ignore the film's few satirical asides. Yet the digital and social media marketing anticipates an oppositional position, one offended by

⁶⁸⁴ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1999), 38.

⁶⁸⁵ Rodrigo Perez, "Interview: Colin Trevorrow Talks 'Jurassic World,' Sequels, Spielberg's Support, Nostalgia, Ruining Your Childhood & More," *IndieWire* (blog), June 11, 2015, <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/06/interview-colin-trevorrow-talks-jurassic-world-sequels-spielbergs-support-nostalgia-ruining-your-childhood-more-263085/>.

the hypocritical critiques and blatant product placement. The digital paratexts encourage a negotiated position, recognizing the ironies but forgiving them since Universal gets the joke.

Social Media Data Influences Production

Particularly for established franchises, studios increasingly began social media marketing early, often years before a film's release. Universal created its *Jurassic World* Facebook page in January 2011—four and a half years before the film premiere—and the corresponding Twitter handle in March 2012.⁶⁸⁶ (Both were titled “Jurassic Park” until the studio announced the new movie's title in September 2013, which was still nearly two years before the planned release.⁶⁸⁷) In March 2013, Amblin and Universal hired Colin Trevorrow to direct the movie and rewrite the script with Derek Connolly.⁶⁸⁸ By that time, Doug Neil's social media team already had several years of Facebook and Twitter data. They knew which posts had been most popular and the demographic and behavioral characteristics of the franchise's most dedicated fans. Indeed, the digital insights contributed to producers' decision to push back the planned release date—and informed what they did with the extra time. Principal photography did not begin until April 10, 2014.⁶⁸⁹

Although studios had conducted market research before the digital era, social media data arrived much earlier and with far more granular detail. At a conference in early 2017, Josh

⁶⁸⁶ “Page transparency,” www.facebook.com/JurassicWorld/; [www.twitter.com/JurassicWorld](https://twitter.com/JurassicWorld).

⁶⁸⁷ Justin Kroll, “Universal Dates ‘Jurassic Park 4’; Renames It ‘Jurassic World,’” *Variety* (blog), September 11, 2013, <https://variety.com/2013/film/news/jurassic-park-4-jurassic-world-1200606985/>.

⁶⁸⁸ “Jurassic Park 4 to Be Directed by Colin Trevorrow,” *BBC News*, March 15, 2013, sec. Entertainment & Arts, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-21798898>.

⁶⁸⁹ Matt Goldberg, “JURASSIC WORLD Shooting in 35mm and 65mm; Starts Filming in April in Hawaii,” *Collider*, February 6, 2014, <https://collider.com/jurassic-world-filming-65mm-hawaii/>.

Goldstine, then Universal's president of marketing, praised social media's real-time insights into the consumer response: "We also, for the first time, have feedback. Now, we're actually in a world where we're having engagement; we're having a dialogue... We are targeting, and having segmentation, and being able to get a signal and respond to it, and evolve a campaign in a way that we really never have before."⁶⁹⁰ Goldstine drew a sharp contrast with past practices such as test screenings and the legacy market research firms. "It's really a tremendous transformation in terms of a business that, very much, has always looked backwards to what worked yesterday as a guide to what works today and for tomorrow. And that's really not the case," he said.

When studios started widely using tracking data in the 1980s, one company provided it, National Research Group, which relied on telephone polling and sometimes door-to-door surveys and post-screening evaluation cards. Then, most film marketing campaigns followed a similar strategy: Trailers played in movie theaters, while TV commercials, print ads, and billboards arrived a couple of weeks before release. In the older tracking model, consumer surveys would attempt to answer a fundamental question about upcoming movies: Have marketing materials made a film a must-see? In response to that data, usually offered roughly a month before release, studios might edit the creative in an ad, for example, or produce more male-focused TV spots. By contrast, in the social media era, trailers premiere on YouTube—giving studios specific performance data—while Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts begin years in advance.

So, what insights did the Universal marketing team glean from early social media? Nostalgia for the first *Jurassic Park* ruled. Posts referencing Spielberg's 1993 original attracted more interest than new production news, dinosaur facts, or tidbits about special effects. For

⁶⁹⁰ Josh Goldstine, "C Space Storytellers" (CES 2017, Las Vegas, NV, January 5, 2017), <https://ces-c-space-storytellers.brand.live/c/google>.

instance, while Trevorrow posted regularly about the upcoming movie, his most popular Tweets directly referenced Spielberg's 1993 original. One of his most liked and retweeted posts (see Figure 28) included no information about the new film. Simply captioned "Autumn," it was a photo of fall leaves scattered on top of an iconic prop from *Jurassic Park*, a sign Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight) knocks over while trying to flee the island with stolen dino eggs.⁶⁹¹ Similarly, *Jurassic World* co-star Bryce Dallas Howard, with 280,000 followers, tweeted many times about the franchise. Outside of links to the trailers, her most favorited and retweeted *Jurassic* post as of 2021 is a photo of Jeff Goldblum and Sam Neil posing together.⁶⁹²

On Universal's official *Jurassic World* Facebook page, one of the most popular early posts—from March of 2014—promoted an online game reenacting a computer hacking scene from *Jurassic Park*. "Hold onto your butts," the post read in a quote of a Samuel L. Jackson line from the first film. "Now's your chance to hack the Jurassic Park computer system!"⁶⁹³ Online fans expressed much less interest in the two sequels, *The Lost World* and *Jurassic Park III*. Demographic data provided by Facebook and Twitter's advertiser dashboards also helped executives identify their most important demographic: older millennials and younger Gen-Xers, especially men, who had grown up loving the original *Jurassic Park*—and now would likely bring their kids to see the reboot.⁶⁹⁴

On one level, the findings seemed logical to marketing staffers. After all, fans' love for the first film was one reason Universal and Amblin kept returning to the *Jurassic* well, even if

⁶⁹¹ Twitter likes/retweet data source: Social Bearing.

⁶⁹² <https://socialbearing.com/search/user/BryceDHoward>.

⁶⁹³ <https://www.facebook.com/JurassicWorld/posts/10102187279780615>.

⁶⁹⁴ Formal Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, June 17, 2020.

previous sequels had not quite recaptured the magic. Moreover, the franchise had always overperformed with men. And, of course, fans attuned to a franchise reboot years before it hits theaters are those with a deep investment in existing media. Still, the depth of the nostalgia—like the robust responses to highly specific iconography from the first film—surprised many executives in Universal City. Clearly, they found digital fans who had, as Banet-Weiser puts it, “an affective, authentic *relationship* with” a brand: *Jurassic Park*.⁶⁹⁵ Early on, marketers realized that their messaging—and hopefully the new film itself—would have to engage and not alienate the nostalgia.

Interestingly, social media data also pushed Universal to begin its *traditional* market research earlier than usual. The studio’s marketing team began global market research in late 2013 to early 2014, still before principal photography began and while Trevorrow and Connolly were revising the script. “We were doing brand testing in our top markets to understand what the value of *Jurassic Park* was in those countries. That gave us a good understanding of people’s relationships with the first three movies,” explains Simon Hewlett, the London-based executive vice president of Universal Pictures International. At first, studio marketing researchers focused on existing fans of the franchise. “It gave us an idea of where the original fans were and the new fans who had only seen it on DVD. At that point, we were concept testing but didn’t have the full story [of the new movie],” Hewlett adds.⁶⁹⁶ The traditional surveying largely matched the initial social media insights. “The brand value of the original had not diminished in the key markets,”

⁶⁹⁵ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 8.

⁶⁹⁶ Jeremy Kay, “Marketing the ‘Jurassic’ Beast,” *Screen Daily*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/marketing-the-jurassic-beast/5089649.article>.

Hewlett summarizes. “It was still seen as a treasure and a significant point in people’s cinema-going history; a lightbulb moment like *Star Wars* to a certain generation.”

The finding was gratifying and somewhat surprising to Hewlett and other executives, given that the studio had let the franchise lie relatively fallow. A trilogy of novels released in 2001 and 2002 were the most recent entries in the storytelling canon. Even the offshoot theme park attractions, premiering in Hollywood in 1996 and Orlando in 1999, had become long-in-the-tooth. Would childhood memories be enough to compete with other, fresher franchises? “We wanted to make sure *Jurassic World* was always going to be seen as one of the three big movies this year with *Avengers 2* and *Star Wars*,” says Hewlett, mentioning two Disney-owned franchises with more recent releases.⁶⁹⁷ To achieve that lofty goal, executives increasingly pushed for the film itself—not just the marketing—to tap into the reservoir of fan feeling for Spielberg’s original title.

To that end, Colin Trevorrow met regularly with Universal’s marketing and research teams.⁶⁹⁸ He was resistant to one suggestion popular with fans and some studio executives: add roles for the original 1993 stars, Sam Neil, Jeff Goldblum, and Laura Dern. Trevorrow said he couldn’t imagine “the idea that, like, Sam Neill would come to the park on this particular day. It’s *Die Hard 2*. You know, it’s, like, why is the same thing happening to the same guy three times?” Trevorrow felt the presence of the older actors might blunt, rather than enhance, the nostalgic joy. “...[I]t’s the difference between going back to your old elementary school and walking the halls and going back to your elementary school and seeing your teacher who is 20

⁶⁹⁷ Kay.

⁶⁹⁸ Peter Sciretta, “Jurassic World Interview: Colin Trevorrow Reveals All On Set,” /Film, April 30, 2015, <https://www.slashfilm.com/colin-trevorrow-jurassic-world-interview/>.

years older. And I think the more sentimental feeling for me is when I'm alone, walking the halls, and having memories, and it's echoing. That was what I wanted to bring back."⁶⁹⁹

(Goldblum does have a cameo in 2018's *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, and all three actors will appear in 2022's *Jurassic World: Dominion*.)

Nonetheless, Trevorrow, Spielberg, and other producers considered social media findings and market research when they delayed the release to emphasize the working theme park and build more physical sets. Trevorrow explains that “luckily, Steven is one of the few people in this industry who can call the studio and say, you know what? We're going to take a little more time and get this right. And it was the day I think giving me the movie wasn't the gift; giving me the extra year was the gift. So, we spent three months over the summer honing what we had and dialing it in and really just making it something that could be called ‘Jurassic Park’ without being embarrassed for itself, be ashamed to look in the mirror.”⁷⁰⁰ The studio pushed the release from 2014 to 2015. The change upset Universal's release calendar and some early co-marketing deals, but many executives agreed that the working theme park was the key to tapping into nostalgia.⁷⁰¹

Jurassic World's setting on Isla Nublar, the same location as the original, aided visual callbacks—and Trevorrow and production designer Rick Carter (who had also designed the original) added more after seeing the market research. One of the physical sets built following Spielberg's request for a later release was a detailed re-creation of the original *Jurassic Park* visitor center.⁷⁰² Claire's nephews stumble upon the visitor center, now dilapidated, in an

⁶⁹⁹ Sciretta.

⁷⁰⁰ Sciretta.

⁷⁰¹ Formal Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, July 8, 2020.

⁷⁰² Sciretta, “Jurassic World Interview.”

extended sequence that adds little to the story but much to the sense of nostalgia. In an Easter egg for devoted fans, the two boys even find and start up Jeep Wrangler #29, the same one John Hammond rode in to introduce his park. “We wanted to connect *Jurassic World* to *Jurassic Park* as it was Hammond’s idea to build a park, and this was the park that came to life,” explains Hewlett, referring to the character of John Hammond played by Richard Attenborough in the 1993 original.⁷⁰³ Technically, Hammond disavows the idea at the end of *Jurassic Park*, a moment ignored by his fictional successors and Universal’s real filmmakers.

Trevorrow had learned how much fans enjoyed references to particular Jurassic Park iconography even from his own social media data. The insight unmistakably influenced Trevorrow’s film, which includes far more direct visual references to the first movie than did either of the previous sequels. When we first enter the dinosaur park in *Jurassic World*, Trevorrow shoots the gates from the same distance and low angle Spielberg used in 1993. A flock of wispy dinosaurs stampedes through the same spot (actually Kualoa Ranch on the island of Oahu in Hawaii) as they did in the original. A goat on a chain, about to be eaten, signals our first glimpse of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, just as it did in *Jurassic Park*. Owen (Chris Pratt) and Claire get out of their jeep to check out an ailing *Brontosaurus*, a close-up of an animatronic dinosaur shot from the same distance and angle as a similar moment in the original, when Alan and Ellie nurse an ill *Triceratops*. That *Brontosaurus* is actually the only animatronic (rather than CGI) creature in *Jurassic World*; Trevorrow says he insisted upon it as a tribute to the old movie.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰³ Kay, “Marketing the ‘Jurassic’ Beast.” Attenborough died in 2014.

⁷⁰⁴ De Semlyen, “Access All Areas.”

Social Media Logic of Product Placement

Another powerful example of marketing-focused filmmaking: paid product placement. Of course, the practice is not new. Franchise executive producer Steven Spielberg has long been adept at clever product integration; recall the friendly alien's love for Reese's Pieces in Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Even so, *Jurassic World* takes the practice to new heights (or depths). Film critics, certainly accustomed to product placement, took note. "There are so many plugs for Mercedes that you may wonder if the targeted viewers are studio executives," Manohla Dargis wrote in *The New York Times*.⁷⁰⁵ The brand consulting firm Concave Brand Tracking estimated that Mercedes-Benz received almost 2 ½ minutes of screen time with its logo visible a remarkable 85% of the time.⁷⁰⁶ Samsung electronics—phones, TVs, computer monitors, tablets, smartwatches, and even a Samsung-sponsored pavilion in the fictional theme park—are on screen for a full five minutes; the logo is visible for 10 percent of that time (30 seconds).

Exemplifying the marketing-centric filmmaking approach Adam Fogelson and Donna Langley embraced, Universal emphasized co-branding and product placement more than did rival studios. Concave estimated that *Jurassic World's* product placement advertising was worth over \$100 million.⁷⁰⁷ Moreover, in 2015, the four films with the most extensive product integration were all Universal releases: *Furious 7*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, *Jurassic World*, and *Fifty*

⁷⁰⁵ Manohla Dargis, "Review: In 'Jurassic World,' the Franchise Feeds the Beast," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2015, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/12/movies/review-in-jurassic-world-the-franchise-feeds-the-beast.html>.

⁷⁰⁶ "Brands in JURASSIC WORLD (2015)," *Concave* (blog), June 14, 2015, <https://concavebt.com/brands-jurassic-world-2015/>.

⁷⁰⁷ "most brand-filled movies in 2018 - product placement," *Concave* (blog), May 6, 2019, <https://concavebt.com/brand-filled-movies-2018-product-placement/>.

Shades of Grey.⁷⁰⁸ According to estimates, *Furious 7* received the most product placement dollars. Universal marketers told me that the studio's previous success in attracting auto companies to the *Fast & Furious* franchise partially inspired the car-centric placements in *Jurassic*.⁷⁰⁹ Note that the data I cite here are third-party estimates; Universal, Amblin, Samsung, and Mercedes (along with many other brands) all acknowledge that they signed co-branding partnerships. However, the companies keep the specific financial arrangements under wraps; indeed, even many marketing staffers and on-set workers do not know the details.

In the typical co-branding arrangement for a big-budget Hollywood film, an advertiser like Samsung or Mercedes will agree to spend a certain amount of its own money promoting the movie in exchange for on-screen product placement. For example, here is how Mercedes described the *Jurassic World* partnership in a press release:

This summer, when the long-awaited next installment of the groundbreaking *Jurassic Park* series, *Jurassic World*, arrives in theaters, an entire fleet of Mercedes-Benz vehicles will share the spotlight. Alongside the iconic G-Class, Unimog, Sprinter models and the all-new GLE Coupé will play a leading role in the epic action-adventure. Mercedes-Benz will accompany the release of the film with a comprehensive co-promotional package that includes a television commercial, print and online advertising, dedicated microsites and social-media activities.⁷¹⁰

Samsung said its “cross-platform partnership” would include “a presence at the *Jurassic World* premiere and post-party” as well as an exclusive film clip playing on Samsung TVs on display at electronics stores worldwide.⁷¹¹ Universal's marketers particularly benefited from the co-brand

⁷⁰⁸ “Brands in JURASSIC WORLD (2015).”

⁷⁰⁹ Universal marketing associate, videoconference interview with the author, April 9, 2021.

⁷¹⁰ “Mercedes-Benz Launches Campaign to Support Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment's Jurassic World.”

⁷¹¹ “Samsung Electronics And Universal Pictures Announce Global Marketing Partnership With Amblin Entertainment's Jurassic World,” June 10, 2015, <https://news.samsung.com/global/samsung-electronics-and-universal-pictures-announce-global-marketing-partnership-with-amblin-entertainments-jurassic-world>.

arrangements; the money other companies spent promoting *Jurassic World* was money the studio saved, plus the partners offered unique placements like Samsung's in-store displays. In other cases, brands may barter services, such as an airline providing air travel to film crews in exchange for an on-screen plug, or pay directly for the product placement. More akin to traditional advertising spots, the latter practice originated on television but has more recently infiltrated big-budget Hollywood films.⁷¹²

So, is *Jurassic World* a movie, an advertisement, or both? The blurry line between advertising and other content is a defining feature of social media logic, as José van Dijck and Thomas Poell point out.⁷¹³ John Caldwell calls it the “collapse of traditional distinctions between entertainment content and marketing.”⁷¹⁴ Perhaps most striking about the brands in *Jurassic World* is how closely they are integrated into the film, both narratively and stylistically. The “Samsung Innovation Center” is the most prominent building on the Jurassic World theme park's central “Main Street.” The film's climatic dinosaur battle takes place nearby in front of Starbucks. Other tenants on the main shopping street include charm jeweler Pandora, Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's, and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurant. All are paid placements, and the latter three have actual locations at Universal's CityWalk shopping malls in Hollywood and Orlando. Walking down the fictional street, kids ignore their parents while immersed in Beats by Dre headphones. Meanwhile, Chris Pratt's Owen Grady drinks Coke and races alongside dinosaurs on a Triumph Scrambler, a new model made by the U.K.'s biggest motorcycle maker.

⁷¹² Stacy Jones, “How To #29: How Much Does Product Placement Cost,” *Hollywood Branded*, February 10, 2020, <https://blog.hollywoodbranded.com/how-much-does-product-placement-cost>.

⁷¹³ José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” *Media and Communication* Vol 1, No 1 (2013), doi <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v1i1.70>.

⁷¹⁴ John T. Caldwell, “Post-Network Reflexivity: Viral Marketing and Labor Management,” in *Wired TV: Laboring over an Interactive Future*, ed. Denise Mann (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

Jurassic World upped the product placement and co-branding in a franchise already noted for the practice; Mercedes vehicles initially appeared in 1997's *The Lost World*, and the first film included plugs for Ford Explorers, Jeep Wranglers, Nikon cameras, and Jolt Cola. Still, the product integration was far less noticeable in *Jurassic Park*. Perhaps the most memorable integration—the can of Barbasol shaving cream Dennis Nedry uses to smuggle dinosaur eggs—was unpaid and accidental. The film's art director, John Bell, said he grabbed it off a prop shelf with little thought. In retrospect, the shaving-cream maker views the unpaid placement as one of its biggest advertising victories: John Price, a marketing vice president for parent company Perio, called it "one of the most recognized brand integrations of all time."⁷¹⁵ For *Jurassic World*, the Barbasol brand launched a "fully integrated marketing program" with Twitter posts, online sweepstakes, limited-edition "collector" cans with dinosaurs on the side, and a national TV ad blitz.

Back in 1993, McDonald's partnered with Universal to offer a "Jurassic Park extra value meal" in its restaurants, but the chain's Golden Arches did not appear in the film.⁷¹⁶ In 2015, Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurants likewise paid Universal for the right to menu items such as the "Mesozoic Margarita" and the "Indominus Rex Burger" and to run an "Escape to Margaritaville Jurassic World Sweepstakes" offering a trip to the film premiere. However, unlike McDonald's, Margaritaville appears prominently in the film (Figure 29, clearly framed in the background as characters flee menacing pterodactyls). Even Jimmy Buffett himself, a friend of producer Frank Marshall, makes a very brief cameo in the film, heroically saving two margaritas

⁷¹⁵ Drew Harwell, "In the 'Jurassic World,' It's All about Brand," *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2015.

⁷¹⁶ Advertisement, DDB Needham Worldwide, Chicago, for McDonald's Corporation. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CDAGQPc2bk>.

from attacking dinos. The restaurant chain promoted the appearance on social media and digital platforms: “Look for Jimmy and Margaritaville on Main Street in Isla Nublar when the movie comes out tomorrow!”⁷¹⁷ In one of the most self-reflexive moments in the film, we see a co-branding deal as it is signed. Early on in *Jurassic World*, Claire Dearing gives Verizon Wireless executives a tour of the theme park. They have just inked a contract to name the park’s star dinosaur exhibit “Verizon Wireless Presents the *Indominus rex*.”

Co-branding deals, spearheaded by the marketing department, unmistakably influenced film production. Colin Trevorrow said he was intimately familiar with the co-branding deals and discussed them directly with corporate executives. For example, asked about Verizon sponsoring a dinosaur that kills scores of characters, Trevorrow confirmed that the company’s real executives approved all of the details. “The product placement and partnerships in this movie is a fascinating sub-topic. Everybody who participated was fully aware that the oldest creatures to ever walk the Earth are going to destroy them,” he said. “They were all OK with that.”⁷¹⁸

Another powerful example of advertising influencing production: the shopping “Main Street,” so central to many of the product placements, was the most extensive set the crew built after Universal and Amblin approved the delay in the release date.⁷¹⁹ (Ironically, the shopping street filming location was the abandoned parking lot of the shuttered Six Flags New Orleans amusement park.)

⁷¹⁷ “Jimmy Performs At Jurassic World Premiere Party & Watch The Jurassic World Movie Trailer!,” Margaritaville Official Website, June 11, 2015, <https://www.margaritaville.com//599>.

⁷¹⁸ Sampson, “The Three Things Steven Spielberg Said Had to Be in ‘Jurassic World.’”

⁷¹⁹ Sciretta, “Jurassic World Interview.”

Viewers notice and sometimes object to product placement in films. On the website Brand Spotting, viewers can post product placements (whether paid or not) they see; it also tracks Twitter mentions of brands in particular films. *Jurassic World* received by far the most comments in 2015. “Jurassic World or Mercedes Benz World?” tweeted one viewer. “I finally met someone else who also noticed all the #Subliminal #Pepsi Product Placement found in @JurassicWorld,” posted another (although, in fact, Coke and not Pepsi was a co-brand partner). Some Twitter users rejected the film due to the obvious co-branding: “Trying to take Jurassic world seriously but the product placement is disgusting UGH this is why I don’t watch movies.”⁷²⁰

What is more, studio marketers recall other films that received significant blowback for overt placements. “Google, the corporate entity, is so lovingly portrayed that the film itself resembles nothing so much as a massive product tie-in,” *Christian Science Monitor*’s Peter Rainer wrote in his review of the financially unsuccessful Vince Vaughn comedy *The Internship* (2013).⁷²¹ Likewise, when *Transformers* (2007) changed the robot character Bumblebee from a VW Bug to a Chevrolet Camaro—to accommodate a co-branding deal with GM—enough fans objected that producers reverted to original form for later sequel *Bumblebee* (2018, distributed by Paramount).

Thus, *Jurassic World* marketing and creative personnel certainly considered the potential pitfalls of their product placement-heavy approach. Nonetheless, several factors encouraged their

⁷²⁰ “Product Placements in Jurassic World (2015),” Brand Spotters, accessed May 2, 2021, <http://brandspotters.com/movie.aspx?id=4422>.

⁷²¹ Peter Rainer, “‘The Internship’ Doesn’t Make Good on Its Promising Storyline,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 2013, <https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2013/0607/The-Internship-doesn-t-make-good-on-its-promising-storyline>. Filmmakers said that Google did not pay for the placement but permitted filming on its campus and provided input on the script.

aggressive pursuit of branding deals. By 2015, a decade after Facebook and YouTube arrived, younger consumers, in particular, had developed increasing tolerance for product integration. After all, influential beauty vloggers and gamers plug paid placements from their bedrooms in the social media era. In addition, social media logic quickly bled into traditional media. For example, media scholar Jennifer Gillan illustrates that Disney successfully revised an old practice—“dramatized advertisements and sponsor entwinements pioneered by Ozzie Nelson and other 1950s television producers”—for young audiences watching Disney Channel and ABC Family in the 2000s.⁷²² Moreover, Doug Neil’s digital marketing team at Universal admired Lionsgate’s successful and relatively uncontroversial co-branding deals for *The Hunger Games* despite the edgy subject matter.⁷²³

So, Universal signed extensive co-marketing deals with Mercedes, Samsung, and others. However, studio personnel remained cognizant of the risks. In particular, they anticipated potential objections from the franchise’s most dedicated fan cohort: older millennials and Gen-Xers, particularly men, who grew up with *Jurassic Park*. Recall that the studio’s initial social media data highlighted the demographic’s nostalgia and emotional investment in the property. First, such fans would likely be most sensitive to perceived violations of franchise norms. Second, since the group mostly came of age before the web and social media, marketers felt they might be less forgiving of blatant product integration—particularly considering that *Jurassic Park*’s product placements were far less prominent. Yes, *Jurassic Park* itself was a squarely commercial product. However, as Banet-Weiser points out, products and brands have become so

⁷²² Jennifer Gillan, *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 6.

⁷²³ Former Universal marketing executive, interview with the author, November 9, 2019.

central to modern life that many fans deeply value the memories and emotions they associate with corporate properties. “Brand strategies and logics are not only the backdrop but also become the tools for ‘living’ in culture,” she says.⁷²⁴

Moreover, Banet-Weiser explains, “brands are the cultural spaces in which individuals feel safe, secure, relevant, and authentic.”⁷²⁵ Universal marketers and creative personnel such as Trevorrow thought about making dedicated franchise fans feel relevant—and how to maintain that elusive “authenticity” to the original movie and book. One solution was to engage in the ultimately toothless “para-political economy” Caldwell identifies in *30 Rock*. The most evident example in the film comes from one supporting character, the sardonic control room employee Lowery Cruthers (Jake Johnson). After Claire tells Cruthers about Verizon Wireless sponsoring the Indominus rex, he jokes that the park should have gone even further and named a dinosaur “Pepsi-saurus.” The brief aside is the film’s most direct attempt to satirize product placement while still reaping the corporate cash. As with *30 Rock*’s references to GE and NBC, the fictional satire is a barely exaggerated version of the truth. Verizon was a sponsor of the fake theme park and the actual movie. Pepsi was not a sponsor, but, pointedly, its rival Coke was.

Textually, Cruthers seems to be a clear stand-in for the die-hard franchise fans also targeted by Universal’s early social media—and perhaps even a stand-in for Trevorrow and writing partner Derek Connolly. Actor Jake Johnson, likely best known for the sitcom *New Girl* (Fox, 2011–2018), co-starred in Trevorrow’s first film, *Safety Not Guaranteed*. Like Trevorrow and Connolly, Johnson matches the demographic profile of the most dedicated fans: a white man in his 30s who would have been a boy or young teenager in 1993 when *Jurassic Park* hit

⁷²⁴ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 9.

⁷²⁵ Banet-Weiser, 9.

theaters. (Johnson turned 37 in 2015.) Underscoring the point, Cruthers evens wears an original “Jurassic Park” t-shirt—forbidden by corporate policy, the uptight Claire reminds him—and has a desk littered with dinosaur toys and empty Coke cups. Claire scolds him for his messy workspace, too. More so than Chris Pratt’s rugged dinosaur wrangler, Cruthers seems like a grown-up version of the young and somewhat nerdy dinosaur enthusiast from *Jurassic Park*, Hammond’s grandson Tim (Joseph Mazzello). Therefore, it is significant that Cruthers expresses the most skepticism and self-reflexivity about co-branding. The choice is a wink to the invested, longtime fans.

Theme Parks: Corporate Synergy and Retail Fantasies

Still, many of the brand placements go unaddressed in the film. As I will discuss shortly, Universal expands the para-political economy in its social and digital media paratexts—offering additional satirical cover for invested fans. However, one crucial factor helped all of the co-brandings seem, as Trevorrow put it, “real” and authentic to the story: the setting of a finished and (initially) thriving theme park.⁷²⁶ Indeed, theme parks do include widespread co-branding. Disneyland’s opening day attractions in 1955 included the “Monsanto Hall of Chemistry.” Visitors cannot miss the Coca-Cola logo at Universal’s theme parks in Hollywood and Orlando; plugs for the parks’ “official soft drink” are everywhere.⁷²⁷ So, the theme park setting achieves two simultaneous goals for Universal and its conglomerate parent. First, the movie plugs Universal’s own parks, which all have *Jurassic*-themed attractions, in an example of the synergistic cross-promotion common in modern Hollywood conglomerates. Second, the setting

⁷²⁶ Seife, “At the Drive-In With Jurassic World Director Colin Trevorrow.”

⁷²⁷ Hugo Martin, “Theme Parks Welcome More Sponsors, but Going Overboard Can Turn Guests Off,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-theme-park-sponsors-20160521-snap-story.html>.

makes *other* brand sponsorships seem natural, benefiting the marketing department and the production's bottom line. Spielberg, always savvy about co-branding opportunities, may well have considered these benefits when he dictated the new film's setting of an active theme park.⁷²⁸

The *Jurassic* franchise has long been closely intertwined with Universal Parks and Resorts. Steven Spielberg struck his revenue-sharing deal with Universal Orlando in 1987, while that theme park was still under construction. (Carl Laemmle opened the first Universal studio tour in Universal City in 1915, and the modern incarnation of the Universal Studios Hollywood theme park opened in 1964 under the leadership of Lew Wasserman and MCA.) So, by the time Spielberg first read Crichton's *Jurassic Park* manuscript in 1989, he and MCA/Universal had a shared interest in ensuring the property's real-world viability as a theme park attraction. Universal Studios Florida opened, with many technical glitches, in June of 1990, one month after Universal and Spielberg bought the *Jurassic Park* film rights.⁷²⁹ Many of the park's early attractions centered on Spielberg's films, including rides based on *Jaws* and *E.T.*

On September 15, 1993, less than four months after *Jurassic Park* hit theaters, Universal announced that it would be building a second theme park in Florida, Islands of Adventure. That park would include an entire Jurassic Park land.⁷³⁰ Before its release in theaters, *Jurassic Park* had strongly influenced the overall design for Islands of Adventure. In the planning stages, the park had been tentatively called "Cartoon World."⁷³¹ In 1991, during pre-production of *Jurassic*,

⁷²⁸ Sampson, "The Three Things Steven Spielberg Said Had to Be in 'Jurassic World.'"

⁷²⁹ Mike Oliver and Susan G. Strother, "Universal: Stardust And Static," *Orlando Sentinel*, June 8, 1990.

⁷³⁰ "Universal to Expand Park in Florida," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1993.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/16/business/company-news-universal-to-expand-park-in-florida.html>.

⁷³¹ Mike Schneider, "Theme Parks Set in Motion Around Conference Tables," *Lakeland Ledger*, July 5, 1998: B1.

theme park executives decided to devote much of the park to the dinosaurs. They developed the “islands” concept to loosely tie *Jurassic Park* with other planned elements (such as a Dr. Seuss land).⁷³² Islands of Adventure opened on May 28, 1999; *Jurassic Park*-related attractions included the Jurassic Park River Adventure water ride, the Pteranodon Flyers roller coaster, and Camp Jurassic children’s play area. Another *Jurassic* attraction, Jurassic Park: The Ride, opened at Universal Studios Hollywood on June 21, 1996. Universal’s theme parks in Japan, Singapore, and Dubai later introduced similar rides. Notably, according to Spielberg, “I had the idea to do a ride even before we shot the movie. Universal trusted us and they said OK. And 18 months before the film was in release, the ride was already on the drawing board.” Spielberg says he even used Jurassic Park: The Ride’s blueprints as props in the movie.⁷³³

Thus, the theme park business was integral to the franchise long before *Jurassic World*. Still, the fourth film was the first to feature an operating theme park with unmistakable stylistic parallels to Universal’s properties. The setting introduced opportunity *and* risk. While ripe for cross-promotion, it also heightened the irony David Koepp noted for the first film; he was writing about “greedy people who are creating a fabulous theme park just so they can exploit all these dinosaurs and make silly little films and sell stupid plastic plates and things... for a company that’s eventually going to put this in their theme parks and make these silly little films and sell stupid plastic plates.”

Notably, *Jurassic Park* production designer Rick Carter shied away from depicting an operating park. “The park is not as finished as it is in the book,” Carter explained. “I really did

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Dennis Michael, “Jurassic Park: The Ride' opens with a big splash,” CNN.com, June 22, 1996. <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9606/22/jurassic.park/>.

not want to have the park be a lot of commercialized edifices that feel shallow and overly bright and overly energetic. Even though that is something the park would probably evolve into if it were finished. I thought as a film it would feel shallow. This is, after all, not Disneyland.”⁷³⁴ However, Rick Carter was also a production designer for *Jurassic World*. The new sequel embodied the “shallow” and “energetic” theme park setting Carter avoided in 1993. *Jurassic World* employs satirical details from Crichton’s novel that the original adaption eschewed, including theme park “lands” with cutesy titles like “Triceratops Territory.”⁷³⁵ So, Carter and Spielberg felt an active theme park setting would be “shallow” in 1993 but embraced the idea in 2015, highlighting viewers’ increasing tolerance of product integration.

Just as they collaborated with Mercedes and Verizon executives, Colin Trevorrow and other *Jurassic World* creative personnel consulted with Universal Parks executives before film production began. One goal was to make the fictional theme park feel authentic and familiar. Trevorrow recalls that producer “Pat Crowley and I went to Universal Studios here in LA and the one in Florida. We went to Disneyland and Disney World, as well. We went behind the scenes and got to see how some of the rides work. It was especially helpful as we got to see how the control room worked.”⁷³⁶ Set designers and prop masters also toured the Universal theme parks. In fact, property master Guillaume DeLouche argues that getting the theme park “right” was the film production’s most daunting task. “The biggest challenge for us was to sell the idea that we are in a real theme park,” he says.

⁷³⁴ Don Shay and Jody Duncan, *The Making of Jurassic Park*, 45.

⁷³⁵ Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, 86.

⁷³⁶ Sampson, “The Three Things Steven Spielberg Said Had to Be in ‘Jurassic World.’”

In *Jurassic World* itself, connections to Universal's theme parks are clear but subtle. During his park tour, DeLouche noticed that name tags listed employees' favorite films. So, in *Jurassic World*, on-screen park "employees" wear name tags listing their favorite dinosaur.⁷³⁷ Other aspects of the production design likewise closely mirror Universal's real parks. The movie's shopping street is named Main Street in a nod to Disneyland but more closely resembles the modern aesthetic of Universal's CityWalk shopping centers in Hollywood and Orlando. Two of the most prominent product placements in the film, Starbucks and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurants, have actual locations at both CityWalk malls. *Jurassic World* even includes glass-enclosed escalators climbing a hillside and an on-site Hilton hotel, both distinctive features of the real Universal Studios Hollywood.

Only one line seems to be a direct commentary on a typical theme park gripe when the villain Vic Hoskins argues for his war dino plan: "War is a struggle. Struggle breeds greatness. And without that, we end up with a place like this that charges \$7 a soda." This passing moment, along with Lowery Cruthers's joke about naming a dinosaur "Pepsi-saurus," are the few times the film approaches the kind of explicit satirical para-political economy Caldwell describes in *30 Rock*. *Jurassic World's* para-political economy, though clearly part of its narrative, is easier to miss.

Even as they welcomed the cooperation, a few Universal Parks executives expressed concerns about closely conflating the real-world parks with the death and destruction in the film. For example, one early production sketch included a fictional raft ride closely resembling "Jurassic Park: The Ride," but with real dinosaurs. Some executives objected, and the production

⁷³⁷ Interviewed in *Jurassic World* YouTube, *Jurassic World: Props and Animals / Featurette / Jurassic World*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a39EzErXCCs&ab_channel=JurassicWorldJurassicWorldVerified.

team ultimately dropped the idea.⁷³⁸ Interestingly, as some viewers noticed, one of the marquee features of the fictional Jurassic World, a massive aquatic stadium holding the whale-like *Mosasaurus*, closely resembles Shamu Stadium at SeaWorld, a rival theme park. However, unlike the features resembling Universal parks, the *Mosasaurus* does cause on-screen deaths.

Above all, the on-screen theme park foregrounds commerce and brands. It is remarkable how much of Jurassic World takes place in the Main Street shopping area, arguably the least exciting and most familiar-feeling location in the movie. It not only looks like Universal's CityWalk malls, it resembles the typical shopping street in upscale neighborhoods or tourist spots. (In fact, Disneyland's famous Main Street, themed to early 20th century Americana, has far less co-branding than the street in *Jurassic World*.) While *Jurassic Park* focused on jungle settings, *Jurassic World* keeps returning to the mall.

Media scholar Derek Johnson observes that theme parks—and indeed media properties themselves—are increasingly oriented around shopping. Johnson analyzes the wildly popular Harry Potter attractions at Universal's theme parks. Far beyond the old “exit through the gift shop” ploy, Universal's “Wizarding World of Harry Potter” emphasizes merchandise even more than rides. Fans line up to buy “Butterbeer” and expensive “magic” wands that enable them to interact with digital features embedded in the land. “The tourist experience of visiting the Wizarding World of Harry Potter... depends on retail as a point of entry and means of support for immersive media fantasy,” Johnson explains.⁷³⁹

Moreover, he argues that the *Harry Potter* books and movies incorporate retail directly into the narrative, making shopping a natural way for fans to immerse themselves in the fantasy

⁷³⁸ Former Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, July 8, 2020.

⁷³⁹ Johnson, “Retail Wizardry: Constructing Media Fantasies from the Point of Sale,” 257.

world. “J.K Rowling created a fictional world that could be so directly translated into a tourist fantasy of narrativized shopping, the franchise offers an extreme case of entrepreneurial brand management that foregrounds retail as a means of engaged participation in popular media,” Johnson says.⁷⁴⁰ For instance, Rowling organizes several pivotal sequences around Harry’s shopping trips in “Diagon Alley,” a commercial district for wizards. Not surprisingly, Universal’s expanded Harry Potter land in Orlando recreates Diagon Alley, shops very much included.

Jurassic World’s emphasis on theme park shopping, I would argue, similarly—if less artfully—foregrounds retail as a way to participate in the film world. A fan may not be able to visit the Margaritaville restaurant on Isla Nubar, but why not the one at Universal Orlando? The Lego dinosaurs sold at the real theme parks are shown on screen at the imaginary theme park, making the toy even more of a portal into the fantasy universe. Indeed, Universal executives closely analyzed the success of their Harry Potter-themed lands. (Universal did not theatrically distribute the *Harry Potter* franchise but purchased the theme park license from Warner Bros.) The elaborate “Jurassic Park” land at Universal’s Islands of Adventure had never been a runaway hit, but that same park’s attendance and profits skyrocketed once *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter* debuted in 2010.

As Johnson suggests, the Wizarding World placed retail as the center of the immersive experience. By contrast, the Jurassic Park land, opened in 1999, mirrored the first movie’s lush foliage and underdeveloped feel. Of course, there were several shops, but they were departures from the story-world immersion rather than part of it. Unlike the first movie, *Jurassic World*

⁷⁴⁰ Johnson, 257.

narratively and stylistically integrates film, theme park, and merchandising by greatly emphasizing retail and the fictional park's shopping street. And, it invites co-brand partners like Starbucks and Samsung to be part of that integration—something J.K Rowling expressly prohibited for Wizarding World (there is Butterbeer for sale, but no Coke, within the gates of the Harry Potter lands).⁷⁴¹

Indeed, following the success of *Jurassic World*, Universal Parks soon introduced new attractions, restaurants, and shops inspired by the fully functioning theme park from the beginning of the film. In Hollywood, “Jurassic Park: The Ride” was re-themed to “Jurassic World: The Ride.” On-ride and queue video features multiple film characters, with prominent appearances by Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard, as their franchise contracts require. Nearby, park visitors can sip tropical cocktails at “Isla Nu-bar,” have lunch at “Jurassic Café,” or watch their kids in a dinosaur-themed play area, all inspired by the peaceful few opening minutes of the 2015 film.⁷⁴² In 2021, Universal Orlando debuted the “Jurassic World VelociCoaster,” a roller coaster themed as a trip through the fictional park’s raptor paddock. Pratt, Howard, and B.D. Wong (as Dr. Henry Wu) all appear in the VelociCoaster ride video. Like the Hollywood attractions, the Orlando ride is set just before the events of the 2015 film, even though it debuted six years later. It largely ignores the 2018 sequel, *Fallen Kingdom*, which depicts the destruction of the fictional park. Universal ride producer Shelby Honea attempted to explain the disconnect: “It was really important to us that while it exists shortly before the events of the first film, this franchise is going. We’re so excited for the next films. So we made sure that this attraction feels

⁷⁴¹ Drew Taylor, “This Is Why Disney Spent Half a Billion Dollars on an Avatar Theme Park,” *Vulture*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/07/disney-world-pandora-avatar-theme-park.html>.

⁷⁴² See <https://www.universalstudioshollywood.com/things-to-do/rides-and-attractions/jurassic-world-hub/>.

a little timeless. We do have a few little nods to the upcoming film, but really the entire franchise is represented here.”⁷⁴³

It is not difficult to surmise why Universal Parks wants to linger at the beginning of *Jurassic World* rather than move on with the filmic storyline. That narrative moment foregrounds retail and co-branding, theme park profit centers. Even better, all the clothing shops, Starbucks, and brands feel more “authentic” to the story world since they mirror the ones fans saw on screen. In a defense reminiscent of Suzanne Collins’s for *The Hunger Games* “Capitol Couture” campaign, Trevorrow describes the product placement as integral to his storytelling.

This film is not a corporate product, even when it comes down to the product placement in the movie. That was my choice. I wanted that because that's what is real. If you built a Jurassic World [park] today, it would be owned and operated by major corporations at every turn. They'd be trying to take your money every single second, and I felt that was the way to present a reality that we all know. And I think that one of the reasons people are connecting with the movie so much is that it doesn't shy away from addressing how that corporate thirst for profit can lead us to make terrible mistakes.⁷⁴⁴

As it turns out, a film *about* a theme park “trying to take your money every single second” fits in quite nicely with a real theme park that is, well, trying to take your money every single second. That’s authenticity in a transmedia, conglomerate world and a reflection of Universal’s marketing-first filmmaking.

⁷⁴³ Landon McReynolds, “Universal’s Jurassic World: Velocicoaster Is a Gripping, Immersive Adventure. Here’s Your Thrill-Ride Guide,” Click Orlando / WKMG-TV, June 9, 2021, <https://www.clickorlando.com/theme-parks/2021/06/09/universals-jurassic-world-velocicoaster-is-a-gripping-immersive-adventure-heres-your-thrill-ride-guide/>.

⁷⁴⁴ Seife, “At the Drive-In With Jurassic World Director Colin Trevorrow.”

How Fans and Creative Laborers Became Marketers

So, the marketing department's agenda infiltrated *Jurassic World's* production practices and the resulting film text. Aware of potential ironies and their precarious positions, *Jurassic Park* screenwriter David Koepp and *Jurassic World* screenwriters Derek Connolly and Colin Trevorrow created narratives that slyly resolve ideological tensions. Because social media marketing began well before filming or a finished script, digital user data informed production decisions. Moreover, through textual and stylistic choices, *Jurassic World* foregrounds distributor Universal's particular business interests: theme parks, co-branding, and merchandising.

I will now turn to a closer analysis of Universal's social media marketing. Since the studio's marketing copresidents Michael Moses and Josh Goldstine, along with digital chief Doug Neil, enjoyed direct control over most marketing decisions, the promotional paratexts reflected their interests to an even greater extent than the film. Just as we saw with *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, social media overemphasized the narrative and stylistic elements most compatible with the marketing agenda. In particular, the studio's digital campaign focused on the thriving, functional theme park.

Almost by definition, social media marketing has another goal: getting consumers to spread a brand's message for free. That's the "sweet spot" film industry consultant Adam Rubins describes when fans are "almost promoting the product on behalf of the studio."⁷⁴⁵ Indeed, Universal's strategy encouraged fans to spread the studio's preferred message. Crucially, it also deployed social media targeting to distinguish between dedicated franchise fans and the broader

⁷⁴⁵ Joseph, "Movie Marketing Moves into the Digital Age."

audience. To that end, Colin Trevorrow's social media presence helped the studio reassure older *Jurassic Park* fans that the new film would be "authentic" to their memories. The marketers also leveraged both above- and below-the-line creative labor to advance their co-branding deals.

I argue that social media enabled Universal marketers to assert their power, but this is not to say they got everything they wanted. As John Caldwell points out, media paratexts (and texts) reflect "negotiated interactions" between industry collaborators as well as audiences.⁷⁴⁶ Sarah Banet-Weiser recognizes the complexity of these negotiations. She argues that "anti-consumerist" scholarship can overlook the genuine meaning fans find in brands such as *Jurassic Park*. On the other hand, scholars like Henry Jenkins, Clay Shirky, and Yochai Benkler sometimes overstate consumers' power in digital interactions. Banet-Weiser summarizes: "Power is often exercised in contradictory ways, and brand cultures, like other cultures, are ambivalent, often holding possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony simultaneously."⁷⁴⁷ Indeed, ambivalence marked the social media surrounding *Jurassic World*. Fans critiqued some product placements but defended others. Longtime viewers lamented the lack of returning actors but actively engaged with the studio's nostalgic Facebook posts. Trevorrow vouched for Universal's authenticity while also periodically blaming the marketing department for misrepresenting his movie.

Fans, Anti-Fans, and Everyone Else

Gordon Paddison told me that when he founded the first studio digital marketing department in 1994, he described his online audience as "malcontents." Paddison understood that fans turning to the early web were searching for something they could not find in mainstream

⁷⁴⁶ Caldwell, "Para-Industry, Shadow Academy," 720–21.

⁷⁴⁷ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 12.

film or television. Many simply wanted deeper engagement with their favorite media properties. Others wished to voice their objections to Hollywood films, particularly sequels or adaptations of favorite books, and find like-minded fans. Media theorist Mark Andrejevic argues that online viewer activity provides “value-enhancing labor” for film and television producers in two distinct ways: “by allowing fans to take on part of the work of making a show interesting for themselves and by providing instant (if not necessarily statistically representative) feedback to producers.”⁷⁴⁸ We have already seen how “instant feedback”—social media data—informed production decisions for *Jurassic World*. Just as Andrejevic suggests, Universal also hoped its social media would encourage fans to perform the work needed to make the movie more interesting for themselves. Thus, even though today’s social and digital media reaches a far broader audience, in many respects, it *still* caters to “malcontents.” After all, as media scholar Abigail De Kosnik reminds us, fans engage with media they “initially found at least somewhat lacking, frustrating, or unsatisfactory (and therefore ripe for fans’ tailoring or supplementing).”⁷⁴⁹

Paddison’s early digital efforts targeted hard-core fans. At the time, most consumers were not online at all. Those who found their way to web bulletin boards and fan sites were especially dedicated and tech-savvy. In the 2010s, however, the vast majority of consumers in developed markets were online. Thus, Universal marketers knew their *Jurassic World* social media would need to serve committed fans and the broader audience simultaneously. Dedicated fans still spent the most time engaging with *Jurassic* content; that much had not changed since the 1990s. While

⁷⁴⁸ Mark Andrejevic, “Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans,” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476407307241>.

⁷⁴⁹ De Kosnik, “Interrogating ‘Free’ Fan Labor | Spreadable Media.”

this group would probably buy tickets no matter what, they weren't a big enough cohort to make the expensive movie profitable. Universal knew that catering solely to existing fans would be a losing strategy, at least over time. At the same time, Universal had to reach casual fans who might only briefly interact with the online content, for example, when searching for advance tickets, flipping through their Facebook feed, or watching a two-minute trailer on YouTube.

Within media scholarship, audience studies have frequently focused on fans, meaning the interpretative community of loyal, dedicated, and emotionally committed viewers.⁷⁵⁰ Marketers also often think about these loyal viewers. Banet-Weiser, among other scholars, discusses fans' deep emotional attachment to brands and media. Similar ideas have entered industry discourse. For instance, Kevin Roberts, former CEO of the global advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, published an influential book, *Lovemarks* (2004), which explained how advertisers could make consumers "fall in Love" with a brand.⁷⁵¹ Studio marketing departments understand the importance of loyal fans—and recognize that the spreadability of social media can potentially expand the impact of formerly niche interpretative communities. At Universal, Doug Neil and his digital team certainly hoped that the *Jurassic Park* fandom would spread enthusiasm on social media. Even more, they feared a disappointed fan base that could build negative word of mouth, even well in advance of the release date. Complaints can ricochet through Twitter or Facebook. In addition, popular film blogs and even mainstream newspaper and TV outlets regularly pick up negative fan tweets. For example, prominent news outlets covered the reaction

⁷⁵⁰ Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005).

⁷⁵¹ Kevin Roberts, *Lovemarks: The Future beyond Brands*, 2nd ed., Expanded ed (New York, NY: PowerHouse Books, 2005), 210.

when fans and a few industry figures complained about sexist character types in a *Jurassic World* clip the studio released in April 2015.⁷⁵² Many publications then revisited the claims after the film's release. "‘Jurassic World’ battles sexism claims, in heels," said a *Los Angeles Times* headline.⁷⁵³ While the controversy (which I will revisit later) did not derail the movie's success, marketing executives live in fear of headlines that might.

However, focusing solely on loyal, emotionally committed fans ignores most people who will ultimately buy tickets for a Hollywood movie. Jonathan Gray argues that scholars would do well to analyze anti-fans ("those who strongly dislike a given text or genre") and non-fans (people who do view a text, "but not with any intense involvement.")⁷⁵⁴ From a marketer's perspective, anti-fans actually have much in common with fans, since both groups have an emotional attachment, whether positive or negative, to a product. Especially in the media industries, many anti-fans still consume the content they claim to dislike. As Gray observes, "although pleasure and displeasure, or fandom or antifandom, could be positioned on opposite ends of a spectrum, they perhaps more accurately exist on a Mobius strip, with many fan and antifan behaviors and performances resembling, if not replicating each other."⁷⁵⁵ Indeed, as this case study has revealed, Universal marketers especially worried about *Jurassic Park* fans becoming *Jurassic World* anti-fans.

⁷⁵² Ben Child, "Joss Whedon Criticises Jurassic World Clip for '70s-Era' Sexism," *the Guardian*, April 13, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/13/joss-whedon-criticises-jurassic-world-sexism>.

⁷⁵³ Meredith Woerner, "Analysis: 'Jurassic World' Battles Sexism Claims, in Heels," *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/herocomplex/la-et-hc-jurassic-world-sexism-20150620-story.html>.

⁷⁵⁴ Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877903006001004>; Gray, 74.

⁷⁵⁵ Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike," *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (March 1, 2005): 845, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204273171>.

The big studios also need what Gray terms “non-fans,” those with a more ambivalent or fleeting relationship to a movie. Even in an increasingly splintered media era, big-budget Hollywood movies remain a mass media phenomenon. Given their high production costs, they must. *Jurassic World’s* eventual success did not rely solely on dedicated fans or anti-fans. It relied on viewers who just felt like going to the movies and decided they’d check out the new *Jurassic* flick. Theatergoing groups of friends and family who decided it was the only movie all could agree upon. Or, viewers who bought tickets just because everyone was talking about it. Rather than “non-fans,” I will refer to these groups as the broad or general audience.⁷⁵⁶ That’s the language studio marketers usually use.

Universal marketers knew they would need to reach both loyal franchise fans and the general audience to turn a profit on an expensive movie. So, they tried to anticipate not only *who* would engage with their content but *when*. Figure 30 tracks U.S. YouTube searches related to *Jurassic World* from October 2014 to the end of 2015. Note two big spikes in user interest: the release of the first trailer on November 25, 2014, and the week before the film’s release on June 12, 2015. Searches increase more modestly in early February 2015, when Universal ran a trailer during the Super Bowl and mid-April when the studio posted the second trailer to YouTube and released the first extended film clip. Figure 31 illustrates U.S. Google web search trends for the same period. Given that Google dominates the search market and indexes social media, this is a rough proxy for overall online interest in the movie. Here, we see by far the most search interest right before the wide release, with a smaller bump at the first trailer and modest increases for the Super Bowl ad and second trailer.

⁷⁵⁶ Although Gray’s use of “anti-fan” has been widely cited by subsequent scholars, “non-fan” has been less so. The term is perhaps a bit confusing; the linguistic distinction between “anti” and “non” is rather subtle. Nevertheless, Gray’s definitions are useful for understanding studio marketing practices.

What does the data suggest? Most people who bought *Jurassic World* tickets didn't spend much online time thinking about it. They might have watched the first trailer and then searched again in June to read reviews or social media comments or buy tickets online. At these crucial moments, Universal's digital and social media targeted a broader audience. The rest of the time, the online presence targeted only dedicated fans. Of course, the two audiences interacted; if fans posted many negative comments about the movie in March, for example, casual fans might see those comments (or media coverage of them) in June. That's a big reason why studios don't simply write off hard-core fans, even if they are a small minority of the overall audience. Doug Neil and his digital marketing team understood these dynamics, at least broadly. Thus, their social media campaign was carefully staged to (they hoped) reach the right people at the right time.

The data also underscores the enduring importance of the movie trailer format, first introduced in the 1910s.⁷⁵⁷ In fact, the format became increasingly high stakes for the studios, and more outside "trailer houses" jostled to create the promotions. While in-theater trailers remained important, many more people watched them on YouTube or Facebook. With other videos just a click or swipe away, the trailers had to be captivating. Moreover, negative reactions spread quickly. So, in the 2010s, the major studios often hired multiple trailer houses at once, considering as many as 100 different versions before selecting two or three.⁷⁵⁸ Universal's marketers followed this process for *Jurassic World*. The global team even tested various trailers

⁷⁵⁷ Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," 8.

⁷⁵⁸ Matthew Kitchen, "Meet the People Who Grind Out the Best Movie Trailers in the World," *The Ringer*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2018/7/23/17601024/movie-trailer-editors-marvel-pixar-how-made>.

in major markets. Particularly for the first trailer, the PR department built up anticipation and teased the release to the press and on Comcast's TV channels. "Your first trailer is the biggest trailer... they're like mini-movie campaigns," explained Universal EVP Simon Hewlett. "We left nothing to chance and then we got a real sense of what people wanted."⁷⁵⁹ The first trailer's release in November 2014 was thus Universal's first big marketing push to the broad audience, not just the fans closely attuned to production news.

The studio released a short teaser trailer on November 23, followed by the first full trailer on November 25; both premiered online. Executives originally intended to premiere the full trailer on an NBC Thanksgiving football broadcast, but at the last minute, they decided an online debut would lead to more audience engagement and word-of-mouth, another striking reminder of the gradual shift to social media.⁷⁶⁰ Following the social media data that highlighted digital viewer's nostalgia for *Jurassic Park*, the short online teaser trailer leans heavily on the 1993 film. It includes just four shots from *Jurassic World*, and the first two are direct visual callbacks to *Jurassic Park*: a low-angle shot of the park gates and an extreme long shot of a flock of wispy dinosaurs stampeding through the recognizable jungle valley on Oahu. The only sound is a slow piano rendition of John Williams's *Jurassic Park* theme. The teaser ends with links to subscribe to Universal's YouTube channel and Facebook page.⁷⁶¹

The full first trailer seeks to balance nostalgia with an appeal to a new, younger audience. Upbeat in tone, it focuses on the most youthful characters (Claire's nephews played by Ty

⁷⁵⁹ Kay, "Marketing the 'Jurassic' Beast."

⁷⁶⁰ Adam Chitwood, "Watch the Jurassic World Teaser Trailer; Full Trailer Debuts on Thanksgiving," Collider, November 23, 2014, <https://collider.com/jurassic-world-teaser-trailer/>.

⁷⁶¹ Universal Pictures, *Jurassic World - Official Trailer (HD) - Teaser*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFinNxS5KN4&ab_channel=UniversalPicturesUniversalPicturesVerified.

Simpkins and Nick Robinson) and their initial experience of the visual spectacle of the completed theme park. Yet, it also delivers nostalgic imagery, including the shots of the park gates and iconic Oahu valley. We also see another visual reference to the 1993 film, a close-up of a bloody “Jurassic Park” hardhat, and hear the slow piano version of Williams’s theme.⁷⁶² The trailer amassed over 100 million views, but the social media response also highlighted the studio’s continuing challenge with nostalgic fans. Consider the user comment that received the most replies on YouTube in 2014: “I was hoping for a couple returning actors as I loved them (it doesn't look like there are). But honestly after seeing this trailer I'm pretty excited!! I love Jurassic Park and I think this will be a great new movie, definitely going to see it.”⁷⁶³ Of course, the user’s conclusion—that he will go see the movie—is music to a marketing executive’s ears, but his lament about the lack of returning actors is one the Universal team would keep firmly in mind on social media.

In April 2015, two months before the release, Universal started aiming for a broader audience. As a result, the second trailer, released on April 20, 2015, moved away from nostalgia.⁷⁶⁴ Gone are the visual and soundtrack nods to the first movie. Instead, the trailer emphasizes Chris Pratt, the best-known actor in the film, and action sequences, with a pounding soundtrack that starkly contrasts the inspirational, wistful score of the first trailer. The tone and emphasis of the second trailer is also an apparent attempt to target male action film fans.

⁷⁶² Universal Pictures, *Jurassic World - Official Trailer (HD)*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFinNxS5KN4&ab_channel=UniversalPicturesUniversalPicturesVerified.

⁷⁶³ Comment from “Jordan Sweeto,” Universal Pictures.

⁷⁶⁴ Universal Pictures, *Jurassic World - Official Global Trailer (HD)*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJJrkyHas78&ab_channel=UniversalPictures.

The franchise was already popular with men, but Universal positioned *Jurassic World* as a high-octane actioner reminiscent of its globally successful *Fast and Furious* franchise. Flashy cars and motorcycles already feature prominently in the film, and the trailer particularly highlights them. Similarly, the film emphasizes masculinity, mainly white masculinity. Chris Pratt's Owen Grady is by far the most heroic character in the film, explicitly contrasted with Vincent D'Onofrio's greedy and warmongering Vic Hoskins. Men of color appear only in supporting roles. Omar Sy plays Owen's devoted assistant, Barry. The dynamic recalls Neal King's analysis of 1980s and 1990s cop action films, in which white heroes often "join with the victims of white male leadership, those abused by white men in groups lawful and criminal, and so build a better, somewhat less dirty hero."⁷⁶⁵ Meanwhile, at the beginning of the film, Claire Dearing's great sin—besides indifference to dinosaurs—seems to be that she works hard and isn't interested in mothering her nephews. Owen appears shocked and disappointed when she can't remember their ages.⁷⁶⁶

And yet, the promotional surround leans into masculinity and dated gender roles even *more* so than the film. Claire has more screen time than Owen, and in many respects, she is the clearer protagonist, undergoing significant character development as she learns to protect her nephews and look beyond the corporate bottom line. Indeed, Trevorrow argues for that interpretation: "The real protagonist of the movie is Claire, and we embrace her femininity in the

⁷⁶⁵ Neal King, *Heroes in Hard Times: Cop Action Movies in the U.S* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 102.

⁷⁶⁶ Claire embraces a mothering role by the end of the film. Sam Neill's Alan Grant undergoes a similar transformation in *Jurassic Park*. In that respect, the earlier film offers a more progressive view of gender roles.

story's progression."⁷⁶⁷ Universal's promotions, however, place much more emphasis on Pratt. While not surprising since he had become the more recognizable star, the result is a gendered reframing. Perhaps most striking is the first extended clip the studio released, premiering on MTV in April and widely circulated online.⁷⁶⁸ In it, Owen recalls his onetime date with Claire, when she brought an itinerary and refused to drink tequila because she was on a diet; she responds defensively and requests that they focus on the (dinosaur) "asset." On social media, fans debated the clip. One common reaction was that it felt sexist and dated.

A dripping-with-sarcasm YouTube comment read: "Hahaha he made sexual innuendos. Hahaha he is so down to earth and relaxed compared to her. Hahaha there is sexual tension between these two. Wow. What great, original, non cookie-cutter writing."⁷⁶⁹ *Avengers* director Joss Whedon received press coverage for his similar response on Twitter: "70's-era sexist... She's a stiff, he's a life-force – really? Still?"⁷⁷⁰ Trevorrow responded: "I don't totally disagree with him. I wonder why [Universal] chose a clip like that, that shows an isolated situation within a movie that has an internal logic. That starts with characters that are almost archetypes, stereotypes that are deconstructed as the story progresses."⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁷ Ben Child, "Jurassic World Director Backs Joss Whedon's Criticism of 'Sexist' Clip," *the Guardian*, June 5, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/05/jurassic-world-director-backs-joss-whedons-criticism-of-sexist-clip>.

⁷⁶⁸ JurassicCollectables, *JURASSIC WORLD | Extended Movie Clip 1 | MTV Movie Awards | 2015 HD*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-dmzgqY9Q&ab_channel=JurassicCollectables.

⁷⁶⁹ Movieclips Trailers, *Jurassic World Official Movie Clip #1 - Alive (2015) - Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard Movie HD*, accessed August 9, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfZwU24LWIA&ab_channel=MovieclipsTrailers.

⁷⁷⁰ Child, "Joss Whedon Criticises Jurassic World Clip for '70s-Era' Sexism." The tweet came before widespread allegations that Whedon was abusive on set, particularly to women.

⁷⁷¹ Child, "Jurassic World Director Backs Joss Whedon's Criticism of 'Sexist' Clip."

The gendered marketing, even more striking in later stages of the campaign when the studio was trying to *broaden* its audience, illustrates that *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* had not changed the big studios' bias for male-dominated content. Males comprised 62 percent of *Jurassic World's* U.S. opening night audience, arguably confirming the marketing department's bet that men dominated the dedicated fan base.⁷⁷² However, by the end of the record-breaking opening weekend, the gender split was more even, 52 percent male.⁷⁷³

Overall, the sequence of trailers and clips reflects a common progression for a franchise film marketing campaign, from cultivating existing fans to reaching a broader, newer audience. The first online teaser, like most of the early social media, emphasized nostalgia for *Jurassic Park*. The first trailer, originally planned for network television, struck a balance. The second, global trailer, released shortly before the wide release, catered to a casual audience more drawn to action spectacle than memories of 1993.

Fan Labor at a Virtual Theme Park

Beyond the digital trailers on YouTube and Facebook, the rest of Universal's social media strategy also sought to balance dedicated fans with the broader audience. More precisely, the studio marketers tried to put both groups to work for them. The centerpiece of Universal's digital strategy was www.jurassicworld.com, an elaborate website promoting the fictional "Jurassic World" theme park and presenting it as a real destination replete with brand-name shops and a Hilton hotel. Created by the interactive group at the Hollywood ad agency Trailer

⁷⁷² Brian Truitt, "'Jurassic World' Has Strong Opening Night," USA TODAY, June 12, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2015/06/12/jurassic-world-friday-box-office/71137422/>.

⁷⁷³ Frank Pallota, "'Jurassic World' Rampages to Global Box Office Record," June 15, 2015, <https://money.cnn.com/2015/06/14/media/jurassic-world-opening-box-office/index.html>.

Park, the website's user interface clearly and cleverly mirrored the sites promoting Universal's actual Orlando and Hollywood theme parks. The interactive site attracted more than 3 million unique visitors.⁷⁷⁴ Universal launched the website on November 17, 2014, six days before releasing the teaser trailer. Likewise, Universal's social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram often pretended to be "official" announcements from the fictional dinosaur park rather than actual announcements from a Hollywood studio.

The destination website was a rather old-school approach for 2015, and Universal marketing co-president Michael Moses had been skeptical it would work.⁷⁷⁵ However, Doug Neil and Trailer Park staffers argued that the site would effectively reach both dedicated *and* casual fans.⁷⁷⁶ My narrative and stylistic analysis of the website and the supporting social media illustrates how their strategy worked. For everyone, the theme park paratext overemphasized *part* of the film text—the scenes depicting a family-friendly dinosaur destination—while mostly ignoring the death and destruction equally prevalent in the film. This reframing, enabled by social media, fit much more easily with Universal's actual theme parks and its myriad cobranding deals. It also allowed marketers to depict the story world without extensive production stills or clips, something Trevorrow had vocally resisted.⁷⁷⁷

For the casual fans, those who might come across the website while searching for the trailer or looking at reviews right before the release, the faux theme park site has one clear purpose: sell movie tickets. Almost every page on the site eventually leads to a list of movie

⁷⁷⁴ LaPorte, "Pitch Perfect."

⁷⁷⁵ LaPorte.

⁷⁷⁶ Trailer Park account executive, videoconference interview with the author, October 19, 2020.

⁷⁷⁷ Sciretta, "Jurassic World Interview."

theaters selling advance tickets to the film. This explains Doug Neil's preference for an old-fashioned destination website over relying solely on social media platforms. It gave the studio much more control over the user interface. It also gave the marketers direct user data rather than relying on Facebook or Twitter's tools. Consider that if a fan only interacts with Universal's Facebook page, Facebook controls the analytics and generally gets to decide how much to share with the studio. However, the studio receives unfiltered data if Universal redirects that same fan to a website it controls. Even more crucially, the website allowed Universal's team to track conversions to its primary goal: movie ticket sales. They could even track the effectiveness of various referral sources. If a user clicked on one of the studio's tweets, did they ultimately buy a movie ticket? What about if they clicked on a friend's Facebook post? Thus, jurassicworld.com granted Universal robust customer data while still leveraging popular social media platforms.

Once on the website, nearly every page featured prominent links encouraging sharing via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google+. The web designers at Trailer Park hoped visitors would see an image they liked and share it with their network. Of course, viral word-of-mouth would attract new visitors to the site without the need for paid digital advertising. The "share" buttons enable frictionless, lightweight fan labor. Even ambivalent fans briefly browsing the site—perhaps after following a link from a friend's Facebook post—might share an image they like. Another design decision catering to the broad audience: Just as all paths on Amazon.com lead to the checkout page, all paths on JurassicWorld.com lead to ticket sales. For instance, a prominent banner on the homepage explains how to reach the theme park. As shown in Figure 32, the "Travel" page reads: "Fly to Costa Rica with our partner American Airlines, then take the Isla Nublar ferry to Jurassic World." What happens when visitors click to "purchase tickets" for the ferry? They see a listing of movie theaters selling advance tickets to the film (Figure 33). If a

casual fan spends just a few minutes on the website, Universal wants them to buy tickets while briefly engaged with the property.

As the Google data illustrated, searches for the film increased at least tenfold in the week before the wide release. Trailer Park and Universal anticipated the surge. So, a few weeks before the film's June 12, 2015 release, Universal's digital team launched an even more interactive and elaborate site (see Figure 34). The new iteration offered a "real-time" look at Isla Nublar and the fictional theme park. A fan visiting on June 8 would have seen "park hours" (8 AM-10 PM) and the park at "83% capacity." Under "What's Happening," scrolling items mention a *Tyrannosaurus rex* feeding at 10 AM and a character meet-and-greet with "Mr. DNA" at 10:12 AM. And just like Universal's real theme park websites, "wait times" scroll by for the island's attractions: the "petting zoo" has an 18-minute line and the "gyrosphere" 29 minutes. A somewhat mysterious countdown clock lists the time remaining to the film's release and encourages fans to "visit Jurassicworldmovie.com." (That separate site dropped the faux theme park story and listed basic information about the film, a much more typical studio web page) Also, just like Universal's real theme parks, the revamped website sells co-branded merchandise genuinely available for purchase, including "classic Jurassic looks." If a fan returned to the website on June 12—the film's opening day—they would see a tongue-in-cheek error message (Figure 35) noting "some dino-sized technical issues." The park capacity was now 0%. As in the earlier iteration, every site pathway eventually led to a ticket purchase portal.

As detailed as it is about the imagined theme park, the *Jurassic World* website includes few detailed references to characters or specific plot points from the new film. That was intentional. In part, the choice reflected the nostalgic playbook, which emphasized characters from the 1993 film. However, it also granted more flexibility to the digital marketing team and

the agency it hired, Trailer Park. Since Doug Neil hired Trailer Park to design the site while production was still underway, the agency had relatively little footage at its disposal. Trevorrow consulted on the site and even wrote some copy. However, Neil wanted not to rely on Trevorrow or the actors' participation.⁷⁷⁸ That approach reflects a broader industry trend: marketers taking more direct creative control of transmedia storytelling, bypassing the high-paid writers and directors responsible for the primary text. Denise Mann notes that “since 2008, more and more studios and networks have created digital marketing divisions and have employed low-cost labor to generate content-promotional hybrids in house.”⁷⁷⁹

Some of Universal's social media, especially in that vital period right before and after the release, ditched the faux park veneer and cut to the chase. Once the film was in theaters, the studio tweeted the short teaser trailer and a link to ticket purchase (see Figure 36). Here again, marketers encourage frictionless casual fan labor, hoping for retweets and favorites of the short video and ticket link. On the other hand, the theme park site and supporting social media served a different purpose for dedicated, attuned fans. For them, Universal's strategy closely followed the one Lionsgate had pioneered for *The Hunger Games*. Media scholar Matt Hills argues that fans desire to *enter* the text, and Universal's fictional Jurassic World—just like Lionsgate's fictional Panem—grants that wish.⁷⁸⁰ Moreover, as Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar point out, a fan's pleasurable immersion into digital entertainment worlds leads to greater complacency

⁷⁷⁸ Trailer Park account executive, videoconference interview with the author, October 19, 2020. Trevorrow says he wrote comments for the fake hotels on the *Jurassic World* website. See De Semlyen, “Access All Areas.”

⁷⁷⁹ Denise Mann, “The Labor Behind the Lost ARG: WGA's Tentative Foothold in the Digital Age,” in *Wired TV: Laboring over an Interactive Future*, ed. Denise Mann (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 122.

⁷⁸⁰ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 144-151.

about who pays for it.⁷⁸¹ Thus, the detailed and interactive site helped obscure the many product placement and co-branding deals.

To create a sense of realism and immersion, the website replicated many features one would expect from the Walt Disney World or Universal Orlando sites—but with real dinosaurs headlining the attractions. For example, the current temperature on Isla Nublar displays in the top left corner of the homepage. Visitors can even peruse a map of Jurassic World to decide which attraction to visit next (see Figure 37). Another section features detailed profiles of the park’s dinosaurs (Figure 38). As with the stylistic and narrative choices in the film itself, the active theme park setting enabled yet more plugs for co-branding partners. For example, the “Stay” section promotes the imaginary “Hilton Isla Nublar Resort,” conveniently located “within a T. rex’s roar of everything in the park.” Film footage displays the Hilton logo. The hotel chain was, of course, one of Universal’s co-branding partners and has long operated the Hilton Universal City, adjacent to the entrance of Universal Studios Hollywood. The Hilton logo appears briefly in the film, but it enjoys more prominent placement on the website, another example of digital space expanding product placement.

One of the most extensive website sections, often promoted on social media, listed many “packages” available to Isla Nublar guests. Here, the content clearly caters to committed, nostalgic *Jurassic Park* fans. For example, the “John Hammond Package” targets “dinophiles” and promises an “exclusive tour behind the scenes of the Hammond Creation Lab” (see Figure 39). The package even offers a meeting with “resident paleontologist” Brian Switek; although not “resident” on the fake island, Switek is a real paleontologist and writer the studio hired to

⁷⁸¹ Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar, *Consumer Tribes*, 14.

consult on dinosaur facts.⁷⁸² The “Hammond package” page even offers a scientific-sounding explanation for why Jurassic World’s dinosaurs do not have feathers, as most paleontologists now believe dinosaurs did. Ever since the first trailer, that inaccuracy had created minor controversy among hardcore fans and amateur paleontologists.⁷⁸³ Using the website and related social media posts, Universal hoped to assuage those fans’ concerns without addressing the issue in the film. The choice illustrates social media’s power to address niche concerns among a small but potentially vocal group of customers. The studio’s most liked and shared posts often referenced the 1993 characters, particularly Hammond, in more nods to nostalgia. For instance, a popular June 4 Facebook post (Figure 40), titled “John Hammond’s Vision,” included two Hammond quotes from *Jurassic Park*.

For attuned fans—possible “malcontents”—the digital theme park added a veneer of industrial self-reflexivity to help justify all of the product placement in the film and the paratexts. The site and social media gave the sense that Universal is in on the joke and well aware of the irony. That matters, especially since older *Jurassic Park* fans would not only be attentive but also perhaps less comfortable with social media’s tolerance for product integration. Most of the studio’s social media posts, especially those well before the release date, mirrored the website by speaking in the “voice” of the fictional theme park. The posts were often self-reflexive with a hint of satire, an example of Caldwell’s ultimately toothless para-political economy. “Attention:

⁷⁸² Brian Switek, “Yes, Jurassic Park’s Bad Dinosaur Science Still Matters,” Gizmodo, June 11, 2015, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/yes-jurassic-parks-bad-dinosaur-science-still-matters-1710655652>. Switek changed their name to Riley Black in 2019.

⁷⁸³ The first *Jurassic Park* also depicted dinosaurs without feathers, a point of minor contention at the time. *Jurassic Park 3* attempted to rectify the inaccuracy by depicting feathers, which pleased paleontologists but displeased some franchise fans. *Jurassic World* reverted to the look of the first film. See Susana Polo, “Jurassic World Explains Its Featherless Dinos While Poking Fun at Blockbusters,” *Polygon* (blog), June 10, 2015, <https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/10/8760275/jurassic-world-dinosaurs-feathers>.

This paddock has a 99.8% safety rating,” declared a winking “Jurassic World” Facebook post, sarcastically adding “#SafetyFirst” and “with numbers like these, it’s no wonder that we’re the safest theme park in the world” (see Figure 41). Joking about theme park safety is a bit risky for a theme park company, perhaps why this level of satire appears in social media but not in the film itself. Note how Universal’s social media marketers even cleverly played with Facebook’s industry categorizations, describing “Jurassic World” as a “Travel/Leisure” business rather than a “Movie.”

Another series of Facebook posts promoted the various “travel packages” described on the website. For example, asked a March 20 post: “Would you rather spark your prehistoric passion on an amorous adventure or take a walk on the wild side with T. Rex feedings and whitewater rafting?” (Figure 42). Given the timing—two-and-a-half months before the release and in between major promotional pushes—the post aimed at the engaged fans. Reminiscent of Lionsgate’s earlier strategy, Universal invited fans to perform inside the text but in highly constrained ways (pick from A or B).

In fact, Universal’s social media strategy constrained fans even more than Lionsgate’s. Lionsgate ran weekly “Fan Fridays” on Facebook to highlight audience creations such as character drawings or homemade costumes.⁷⁸⁴ For *Twilight*, Summit published a handbook for fan fiction writers. By contrast, most of Universal’s social media redirected fans to the studio-controlled website. (Universal occasionally highlighted or solicited *Jurassic* fan creations on social media, but it was a minor focus relative to the Lionsgate or Summit approaches.) In part, the distinction reflects the continued hesitancy of a major conglomerate to cede too much control

⁷⁸⁴ Karpel, “Inside ‘The Hunger Games’ Social Media Machine.”

to potentially unruly fans. It also reflects marketers' gendered assumptions about social media labor. As Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson point out, social media's free labor often exploits societal expectations of women.⁷⁸⁵ Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg add that connected social media often draws upon "women's expertise in intimacy."⁷⁸⁶ Indeed, Lionsgate and Summit focused on crafting, costumes, and fan fiction, labor-intensive activities generally more popular with women. On the other hand, Universal focused on frictionless, less intensive forms of social media labor for its male-dominated target audience.

Overall, the *Jurassic World* interactive website and social media encourage fan labor from casual *and* dedicated audiences. For the broad audience, the studio highlights frictionless sharing and ticket purchases. For franchise fans, Universal offers carefully delineated interactivity within the film world. Media scholar Michael Serazio might classify the strategy as "guerrilla marketing," his term for the increasingly covert and interactive flows of commercial persuasion in the social media age. According to Serazio, guerrilla marketing aims to get subjects to act, but "without the sense of being acted upon," creating "governance that tries not to seem like governance."⁷⁸⁷ Certainly, the audience can rebel when they feel manipulated, as we saw in the fan complaints about *Jurassic World* seeming more like "Mercedes World."

Yet while Serazio advocates for "real discovery external to commercial culture," Banet-Weiser contends commercial that interactions within "brand cultures" can be "affective and authentic."⁷⁸⁸ Indeed, the social media responses to the *Jurassic* franchise highlight the deep

⁷⁸⁵ Ouellette and Wilson, "Women's Work."

⁷⁸⁶ Driscoll and Gregg, "Convergence Culture and the Legacy of Feminist Cultural Studies," 575.

⁷⁸⁷ Michael Serazio, *Your Ad Here: The Cool Sell of Guerrilla Marketing*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 155; Serazio, 29.

⁷⁸⁸ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 14.

emotional connection fans can have to a media property. Moreover, as audience posts about *Jurassic World* and *The Hunger Games* illustrate, fans are happy to play along even when they understand they are participating in an advertising campaign. Advancing their idea of “consumer tribes,” Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar argue that consumers make tacit compromises, collectively determining to what extent they are to be manipulated by and to what extent they choose to manipulate brand meanings.⁷⁸⁹ In this view, which I find helpful for understanding studio marketing practices, the *Jurassic World* social media reflects an ongoing negotiation between fans and marketers. Digital audiences participate in the studio’s agenda as long as they feel they are getting something in return.

Who’s Behind “Authentic” Fan Projects?

Recognizing that fans can bristle at, as Serazio puts it, “the sense of being acted upon,” studio marketers love to highlight their openness to fan participation—even as they quietly limit and constrain it. The efforts correspond to Caldwell’s “para-cultural studies” mode of media industry reflexivity, in which “user-generated content can add economic and cultural value to A-list producer/directors, by converting distant and anonymous labor into leverageable cultural capital.”⁷⁹⁰ A compelling example is Universal’s approach to a fan-created website that imagined a backstory for park owner Simon Masrani (Irrfan Khan) and his multinational Masrani Corporation. On the surface, Universal welcomed and promoted the fan participation. Yet on closer investigation, the studio retained tight control as it converted the fan activity into cultural capital.

⁷⁸⁹ Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar, *Consumer Tribes*, 8.

⁷⁹⁰ Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” 729.

In early script drafts, the Masrani character was named “Patel,” a fact some fan blogs reported. After reading that news, Jack Ewins, an aspiring writer and movie theater employee in London, posted some drawings of Patel to his social media accounts. A fellow *Jurassic* fan, Australian web developer Timothy Glover, saw the posts and contacted Ewins via social media. The two collaborated to develop a website for the fictional “Patel Corporation” (see Figure 43). Other franchise fans even mistook the Patel website for an official website associated with the upcoming film.

Universal’s digital marketing team saw the site and contacted Ewins in April 2014. “I was working at the Empire Cinema at Leicester Square [in London] and felt my phone vibrate, and I had an email from Universal,” Ewins recalls. “I was thinking, ‘Am I going to get sued?’”⁷⁹¹ Universal might have sued in the not-too-distant past, just as Paramount famously threatened suit against *Star Trek* fans. Instead, Universal hired Ewins and Glover to design an “official” version of the fake corporate website and write the backstory (see Figure 44). Doug Neil said to BBC News: “Having fans like Jack and Timothy get involved helped to make sure that what we created maintained an authentic voice and respect for the fans.”⁷⁹² Neil’s use of “authentic” is notable. Certainly, studios want their marketing efforts—and the film itself—to *feel* authentic to audience expectations and memories.

As Banet-Weiser explains, “we want to believe—indeed, I argue that we *need* to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something

⁷⁹¹ “Jurassic World Fans Asked to Make Simon Masrani Website,” *BBC News*, June 23, 2015, sec. Suffolk, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-33226770>.

⁷⁹² “Jurassic World Fans Asked to Make Simon Masrani Website.”

outside of mere consumer culture....”⁷⁹³ Yet, that human impulse runs up against brands’ increasing infiltration in every aspect of our lives. In the always-connected social media, smartphone era, consumer products are everywhere, structuring our routines and interactions. Thus, Banet-Weiser contends that “both economic imperatives and ‘authenticity’ are expressed and experienced simultaneously” within brand cultures.”⁷⁹⁴ So, “authenticity” becomes part of the negotiation between marketers and fans.

In the case of the Masrani website, Universal seems to have been more interested in promoting its authenticity rather than actively circulating the fan creations. Trevorrow spoke about it in a few of his early fan magazine interviews. “We have a website that details all that backstory” about Masrani, Trevorrow told the British film magazine and website *Empire* in late 2014. “It will get more interesting as we get closer to June,” he teased.⁷⁹⁵ However, in my review of hundreds of the studio’s social media posts, I found only one or two mentions of the Masrani website. By contrast, the studio actively and consistently promoted its Jurassic World theme park site. Nevertheless, the studio invited Ewins and Glover to the film’s world premiere, generating press coverage, particularly in the U.K. and Australia. “Big studios don’t tend to call people straight off the street. It was a dream come true,” Ewin told BBC News.⁷⁹⁶

Unlike the fake theme park website, so carefully designed to speak to dedicated fans *and* the general audience, the Masrani website targeted those deeply interested in the franchise. It

⁷⁹³ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 5.

⁷⁹⁴ Banet-Weiser, 5.

⁷⁹⁵ Nick De Semlyen, “Empire’s Jurassic World Trailer Tour,” *Empire*, 11 2014, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/jurassic-world-teaser-trailer-tour/>.

⁷⁹⁶ “Jurassic World Fans Asked to Make Simon Masrani Website.”

included story information absent from the film, such as details of the company's purchase of InGen and the park's origins. Although Ewins and Glover supposedly still had creative control of the site, Universal's digital marketing team produced YouTube videos featuring Vincent D'Onofrio and B.D. Wong (though not the film's stars) speaking in character about the fictional company.⁷⁹⁷ The videos, presented as faux corporate publicity replete with employee interviews, corny inspirational music, and lab footage, appeared on the Masrani website and Universal's YouTube channels. Released in May 2015, about a month before *Jurassic World* premiered, the video featuring Wong ties the new story back to *Jurassic Park* with far more detail than the actual film. Titled "InGen Technologies: Tomorrow, Today," the 3-minute video explains changes in technology since 1993 and highlights the "Hammond XB-20" gene decoder, another reference to Richard Attenborough's character from the first film.⁷⁹⁸

Narratively, the Masrani website and the YouTube videos resemble *The Blair Witch Project* website from 1998 and 1999 (as discussed in Chapter 2). Like that famous early effort, the Masrani site invents an industrial backstory to explain the film's events. In that regard, it also mirrors the elaborate transmedia content for the TV drama *Lost*.⁷⁹⁹ The similarities remind us that transmedia digital storytelling can be just as derivative as a big-budget film. In any case, Doug Neil and his digital marketing team turned a fan-created website into one piece of the

⁷⁹⁷ Adam Chitwood, "Jurassic World Viral Video Reveals Vincent D'Onofrio," Collider, February 10, 2015, <https://collider.com/jurassic-world-viral-video-vincent-donofrio/>; Ethan Anderton, "Jurassic World InGen Viral Video Looks at Dino Breeding," /Film, May 16, 2015, <https://www.slashfilm.com/jurassic-world-ingen-viral-video-shows-how-dinosaur-breeding-has-evolved/>.

⁷⁹⁸ Jurassic World, *InGen Technologies: Tomorrow, Today (HD)*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYVUnaoyfkk&t=10s&ab_channel=JurassicWorld.

⁷⁹⁹ *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) producers created a notably extensive alternate reality game (ARG) about the "Dharma Initiative" responsible for events in the show. See Mann, "The Labor Behind the Lost ARG: WGA's Tentative Foothold in the Digital Age," 118-36.

studio's carefully controlled digital strategy. More importantly, the studio got to brag about its fan-focused "authenticity."

Another example of marketers quietly manipulating "authentic" fan activity comes from perhaps the most iconic image in *Jurassic World*, and certainly the most shared meme on social media: Chris Pratt's Owen Grady, arms outstretched, attempting to calm three menacing raptors (Figure 45). Many social media users reenacted the moment; in Figure 46, an English farmer dressed up like Pratt to confront three not-so-menacing chickens. A few weeks after the film's release, Trevorrow said he had not anticipated the response to that moment: "And when something takes on a life of its own, that is an iconic image. It can't be debated. Yet we didn't shoot that saying, 'Oh, my God, this thing is gonna be the thing!' It was just part of the film, and the audience generates their own idea of what speaks to them the most."⁸⁰⁰ In fact, Universal's marketing team had a hand in the wide circulation of Chris Pratt's dinosaur-wrangling skills. The global trailer, released on YouTube on April 20, begins with that scene.⁸⁰¹ Social media enabled users to take screengrabs and then circulate the image or their versions. Indeed, the photo went viral *before* the film was released; its iconic status stemmed not from filmic text but social media paratext.

Universal marketers say they did not directly orchestrate the meme, although digital advertisers and agencies certainly do plant preferred messages, often by reaching out to social media influencers in a practice typically called "content seeding."⁸⁰² In any case, Universal

⁸⁰⁰ Seife, "At the Drive-In With Jurassic World Director Colin Trevorrow."

⁸⁰¹ Universal Pictures, *Jurassic World - Official Global Trailer (HD)*.

⁸⁰² "What Is Content Seeding? | Content Marketing Glossary | Textbroker," *Textbroker.Com* (blog), accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.textbroker.com/content-seeding>.

marketers certainly pushed for the global trailer over Trevorrow's objections; the director publicly critiqued it for showing too much of the film.⁸⁰³ However, Doug Neil and other Universal marketers felt it was essential to show the new dinosaurs and, even more so, to emphasize Pratt.⁸⁰⁴ The studio's social media data had already illustrated that Pratt was the most viral digital spokesperson for the upcoming film.⁸⁰⁵ So, the Universal marketing team deployed the promotional surround to emphasize their unexpectedly popular leading man. By design or by accident, the meme powered the marketing strategy to social media success—reaching viewers who never watched the trailer.

The meme illustrates how studio marketers benefit from the constant data surveillance enabled by social media platforms. As scholar Mark Andrejevic observes, the business model of tech-media firms is structured around “forms of productive data gathering enabled by private ownership of and control over” digital enclosures.⁸⁰⁶ Andrejevic contextualizes various practices that surveillance enclosures take to provide scientific management of behaviors captured within its monitoring gaze. Tech-media firms have complicated our understanding of behavior surveillance precisely because their power and ability to monitor is not legally constructed. Their models are distinct from the moral and legal questions that surrounded the debates of Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon.⁸⁰⁷ Rather, Silicon Valley-based surveillance tactics

⁸⁰³ Andrew Pulver, “Jurassic World Director Criticises Trailer for Revealing Too Much of Film,” *the Guardian*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jul/07/jurassic-world-director-colin-trevorrow-criticises-trailer-showing-too-much>.

⁸⁰⁴ Former Universal marketing executive, interview with the author, April 5, 2019.

⁸⁰⁵ Trailer Park account executive, videoconference interview with the author, October 19, 2020.

⁸⁰⁶ Mark Andrejevic, “Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure,” *The Communication Review*, 10 (2007): 299.

⁸⁰⁷ In an excerpt from *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault summarizes the architecture of Bentham's panopticon, an enclosure that situates a watch tower in the middle of a prison structure to create the

are less about disciplining user behavior within the eyes of the law and more about disciplining users to engage with their platforms in ways that their proprietary algorithms can measure, collect, and monetize. As tech-media firms rely on their ability to sell audience access to advertisers, it is in their interest to collect a whole array of data to ensure that users are matched with advertising content most appropriate to their perceived interests, as well as to use this collected data to encourage other companies to advertise on their platforms.

In this case, the tech firms' surveillance rewarded Universal in two ways. First, the platforms program their algorithms to respond quickly to emergent data trends. Within two days, user-created *Jurassic World* memes appeared in millions of consumers' Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube feeds. In most cases, algorithms deliver the content even if a user has not explicitly expressed interest in the movie. Such a rapid feedback loop would not have been possible before social media. Second, by 2015, marketers better understood how to seed, monitor, and respond to fan activity. As a result, Universal's digital team monitored Pratt's popularity and adjusted its strategy accordingly. Even earlier in the social media era, marketing departments had been slow to respond to digital trends. (As discussed in Chapter 2, the online buzz for 2006's *Snakes on a Plane* simmered for months before New Line figured out ways to exploit it.)

Colin Trevorrow's Fanboy Labor

Online fan labor helped Universal promote its film, thanks in part to a carefully designed digital strategy. An equally intricate plan helped the marketing team leverage *creative* labor from the actors, below-the-line professionals, and director/co-screenwriter Colin Trevorrow. Not long after Spielberg and Amblin hired Trevorrow in March 2013, Universal's PR staff decided that

impression among the captive that their behavior is always visible. Foucault's analysis underscores how control societies exploit this perception that all deviant behavior is visible to those in power.

Trevorrow, then 37, would be a valuable conduit to dedicated franchise fans who grew up with *Jurassic Park*.⁸⁰⁸ Executives felt that their target demographic would respond to Trevorrow's story as a *Jurassic* fanboy turned director.⁸⁰⁹ And Trevorrow was eager to promote the movie and his own authorial role. So the publicity team arranged for frequent interviews with film fan websites, including */Film*, *Screen Crush*, *Moviehole*, and the U.K.'s *Empire Online*.

Neil's digital marketing team also encouraged Trevorrow to actively post about the film, even though he was little known to the broader public. Universal's official accounts invited fans to follow Trevorrow on social media. As illustrated in Figure 47, in February 2014, nearly a year and a half before the release date, Universal's official "Jurassic World" Facebook account posted: "Follow Director Colin Trevorrow on Twitter for the latest news on #JurassicWorld!" The post highlighted one of Trevorrow's typical production tweets, in which he wrote: "Honored to be working with cinematographer John Schwartzman on Jurassic World, shooting this April on 35mm and 65mm film." In social media, Trevorrow often commented upon filmmaking technique or his view of the franchise, an example of the para-aesthetic posture described by Caldwell.

Some posts combine para-aesthetics with para-cultural studies, positioning Trevorrow as nothing but a stand-in for legions of *Jurassic Park* fans. In a May 2013 tweet, just two months after he joined the film, Trevorrow responded to press rumors that Universal execs were already regretting their choice. As shown in Figure 48, he wrote: "There is no friction. @UniversalPics is giving us time to make the movie you deserve. Keep telling me what you see. We're all directing

⁸⁰⁸ Former Universal marketing executive, interview with the author, April 5, 2019.

⁸⁰⁹ Former Universal marketing executive, interview with the author, March 3, 2019.

JP4.” Fans responded with their suggestions; “I see dinosaurs eating people. I see adult Tim running the park. I see Alan Grant and Malcolm,” tweeted one fan in response. Agreed another: “yes Tim lex should only see part of the adventure.”⁸¹⁰ (None of those *Jurassic Park* characters ultimately appeared in *Jurassic World*.)

Similarly, Trevorrow told *Empire Online* about the upcoming movie: “I want it to be truly great. This has been an amazing experience, fueled by my love of the movie they made back in 1993.” In the same interview, producer Pat Crowley underscored Trevorrow’s fan devotion: “It was Colin’s insistence to make an animatronic dinosaur. I said, ‘Colin, this is going to cost a lot of money. Why do we want to do this?’ He said, ‘We have to.’ It’s important to him that fans be happy with this film.”⁸¹¹ To the blog */Film*, Trevorrow added: “I felt like I had a responsibility to do it mostly, you know, for Steven [Spielberg]. In thanks for everything he’s done for all of us and how much his movies meant to me and to my childhood, but also if one is asked to do this, it’s almost insulting to everyone else to say no. We would all love this privilege to be able to recreate a film that meant so much to us.”⁸¹² Marketing executives were generally quite pleased by the director’s rapport with franchise fans.⁸¹³

Indeed, Trevorrow helped Universal forge a connection with dedicated, longtime franchise fans—the ones who were following *Jurassic World* tweets and production news months and years before the film’s release. When Trevorrow said, “we’re all directing JP4” or that he’s fueled by “love of the movie they made back in 1993,” he certainly tapped into fans’

⁸¹⁰ Colin Trevorrow, “There Is No Friction...”

⁸¹¹ De Semlyen, “Access All Areas.”

⁸¹² Sciretta, “Jurassic World Interview.”

⁸¹³ Former Universal marketing executive, interview with the author, March 3, 2019.

desire for authenticity. He offered “something outside of mere consumer culture,” as Banet-Weiser puts it, and spoke to “memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations.”⁸¹⁴ Trevorrow labored to reassure fans that he was not in it for the paycheck or the prestige. He was in it to honor Spielberg and his favorite childhood movie.

While Trevorrow took a posture of candor on social media, comparing his various comments reveals contradictions or at least ambivalence. For instance, although he claimed to *Empire* that “[w]e would all love this privilege to be able to recreate a film that meant so much to us,” he admitted to *IndieWire* that *Jurassic Park* had not actually been one of his childhood favorites. “I was 16 at the time and so I wasn’t a child, either, so it certainly wasn’t the same thing for me like ‘Back to the Future,’ ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ or ‘Star Wars,’” he said.⁸¹⁵ However true or not, Trevorrow’s constant emphasis of his Spielberg and *Jurassic* fandom seems like a calculated decision.

Moreover, for all of his talk about Spielberg and pleasing longtime fans, Trevorrow well understood that his film wasn’t really for nostalgic 30-somethings. As he said to a fan blog:

The movies of our particular childhood were so great that it’s almost impossible to recapture that magic, especially as adults. I remember when I had some...bloggers come to the set and one of them asked me, “Is this going to be better than ‘Jurassic Park?’” I said flat out, “No.” I think he was just surprised at that level of honesty. I’m like, “Look, man, you’re not going to see this movie as a 9-year-old and there’s just no way that it can have the same effect on you as it did on you when you were 9, but it can have its own special effect on you when you’re in your 30s and hopefully, you’ll bring a kid with you and it’ll have that effect on them.”⁸¹⁶

⁸¹⁴ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 5; Banet-Weiser, 8.

⁸¹⁵ Perez, “Interview.”

⁸¹⁶ Perez.

Here, Trevorrow concisely describes his film’s marketing pitch: satisfy 1993’s nine-year-olds but excite today’s nine-year-olds—and hope the grown-ups bring their kids.

Also striking: Trevorrow’s posts and interviews frequently de-emphasized studio executives’ influence, contending that “nothing was forced on me” and “you’re seeing the movie right out of our AVID. Just a couple guys in a room.”⁸¹⁷ His claim that a Hollywood sequel with a \$150 million production budget is the work of “a couple guys in a room” strains credulity. However, Trevorrow’s comments certainly helped the movie appear pure and authentic, more about passion than corporate boardrooms and the product placements for Samsung, Mercedes, or Starbucks. An advertising copywriter trying to appease longtime *Jurassic Park* fans couldn’t have written a better script.

While Trevorrow’s comments were probably not scripted as such, studio publicity staffers arrange almost every interview related to a film. They write positioning documents outlining talking points and subjects to avoid. Often the PR or digital marketing teams will approve social media posts before publication. If not, they certainly carefully monitor them. And PR executives constantly evaluate who is (and is not) a good spokesperson for a production. For instance, co-screenwriter Derek Connolly rarely posted on social media or gave interviews, perhaps because, in one of his few interviews, he said that he had never seen any of the *Jurassic Park* films until he got the job.⁸¹⁸ In Trevorrow’s case, executives limited his publicity and marketing role to the crucial but niche dedicated fandom. Official studio channels primarily promoted Trevorrow’s social media early on, when the hard-core fans were tuned in.

⁸¹⁷ Sampson, “The Three Things Steven Spielberg Said Had to Be in ‘Jurassic World.’”

⁸¹⁸ De Semlyen, “Access All Areas.”

Trevorrow's interviews appeared in many fan blogs (and even an independent newspaper in Vermont, where he lives) but not in national newspapers. Unlike directors such as J.J. Abrams (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*), Trevorrow did not appear on television interview programs. Trevorrow's labor thus reflected Universal's overall segmented marketing approach, with one message for dedicated fans and another for everyone else.

In his informal role as fan whisperer, Trevorrow even responded to social media critiques of the studio's marketing. For example, the *Jurassic World* Super Bowl television ad generated thousands of Reddit comments. The most popular posts questioned one particular scene shown in the ad when Velociraptors—the deadliest dinos in all previous movies—seem to cooperate with Chris Pratt as he races through the jungle on a motorcycle. Said one bemused Reddit user, “the raptors with the bike are indeed trained sidekicks.” Added another sarcastically, “I hope they fully commit and by the end of the movie the raptors are using guns.”⁸¹⁹ Trevorrow responded to the objections, telling a fan blog: “Your suspension of disbelief has to be earned. We've been earning it [in the movie], by the time that happens, for an hour and a half.”⁸²⁰ He similarly used social media and fan blogs to defend the charges of sexism in advance clips.⁸²¹ Even though Trevorrow's responses sometimes critiqued the marketing department (“they have shown far more of this movie than I would ever have wanted”), the studio likely benefited from Trevorrow's online labor. After all, in defending his movie, he reassured loyal fans that they would like the film even if they didn't like the mainstream advertising. He saved the marketers

⁸¹⁹ “Jurassic World Official Super Bowl TV Spot (2015) - Chris Pratt Movie HD,” Reddit Post, *R/Movies*, February 1, 2015, www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/2ughjl/jurassic_world_official_super_bowl_tv_spot_2015/. The two cited posts received

⁸²⁰ Pulver, “Jurassic World Director Criticises Trailer for Revealing Too Much of Film.”

⁸²¹ Child, “Jurassic World Director Backs Joss Whedon's Criticism of ‘Sexist’ Clip.”

the trouble of responding themselves. As Denise Mann observes, while “anonymous marketing executives...are forgiven for promotional campaigns gone wrong,” writers and other creatives greatly fear alienating a “committed fan base.”⁸²²

Why might Trevorrow play along? Above all, the explanation returns to Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Caldwell’s point that for media workers, including above-the-line directors and actors, “the promise of autonomy, creativity, fame, or wealth still oversupplies the labor market, allowing media industries to control the *mise-en-scène* (setting and action) of production narratives.”⁸²³ For all of his claims to autonomy and independence, Trevorrow had relatively little industrial power over the Jurassic franchise. Amblin and Universal hired him for one movie; even after *Jurassic World’s* success, Trevorrow said he was in negotiations about his future involvement in the franchise.⁸²⁴ Contrast that with Steven Spielberg’s control over *Jurassic Park* in 1993. Then, Spielberg, an iconic brand name in his own right, negotiated co-ownership of the franchise and a generous profit-sharing deal. When Amblin and Universal signed Trevorrow, the companies were following a contemporaneous trend in big-budget franchise filmmaking: hiring younger, less experienced directors who often have just one or two low-profile credits.⁸²⁵ Other examples include Rian Johnson (*Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 2017), Gareth Edwards (*Godzilla*, 2014), and James Gunn (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, 2014). The lesser-

⁸²² Mann, “The Labor Behind the Lost ARG: WGA’s Tentative Foothold in the Digital Age,” 128.

⁸²³ Introduction by the editors, in *Production Studies*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York, Routledge, 2009), 4.

⁸²⁴ De Semlyen, “Access All Areas.”

⁸²⁵ Todd Cunningham, “Behind ‘Jurassic World’s’ \$150 Million Gamble on a Director With Just One Indie Film Credit,” *TheWrap* (blog), June 11, 2015, <https://www.thewrap.com/behind-jurassic-worlds-150-million-gamble-on-a-director-with-just-one-indie-film-credit/>.

known directors may bring a new artistic vision to the franchise—certainly, that is the PR pitch—but they also return more power to the studio and producers.

For an illustration of the power dynamics, consider Trevorrow’s own career path following *Jurassic World*. Disney’s Lucasfilm hired Trevorrow to direct the concluding entry in its new *Star Wars* trilogy. Trevorrow, with his co-writer Derek Connolly, worked on preproduction and script revisions for two years. However, Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy disliked Trevorrow’s creative direction and fired him in 2017.⁸²⁶ (J.J. Abrams replaced Trevorrow on the film, ultimately titled *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* and released in 2019.) On the other hand, Trevorrow has remained involved with the *Jurassic* franchise and is directing *Jurassic World: Dominion*, currently scheduled for theatrical release on June 10, 2022. So, in contrast with the relative power Spielberg or George Lucas enjoyed in an earlier franchise era, Trevorrow’s role was precarious. Nevertheless, his cooperation with Universal’s marketing agenda helped him secure a continued role in the prominent franchise.

Social media logic also structured Trevorrow’s actions. Alice E. Marwick argues that connected tech platforms emphasize status-seeking techniques already crucial in Silicon Valley itself, including micro-celebrity and self-branding. The activities require constant user labor (while the tech companies collect the data).⁸²⁷ Furthermore, Marwick contends, social media privileges “a certain type of self-presentation that encourages people to strategically apply business logics to the way they see themselves and others.” Most simply, this means that social

⁸²⁶ Adam Chitwood, “Star Wars 9: Why Colin Trevorrow Was Fired,” Collider, May 11, 2018, <https://collider.com/star-wars-9-why-colin-trevorrow-was-fired/>. Kennedy had actually co-founded Amblin with Spielberg but left prior to *Jurassic World*.

⁸²⁷ Marwick, *Status Update*, 17.

media users must constantly promote themselves. The self-branding often includes what Marwick terms the “authenticity myth.” Even as Silicon Valley startup founders pursue massive fortunes, they claim they are true to themselves and pursuing noble societal goals.⁸²⁸

In his social media posts and fan interviews, Trevorrow displays just the status-seeking behavior Marwick describes. He constantly restates his credentials as a *Jurassic Park* fan, film lover, and Spielberg acolyte. He speaks about a franchise sequel as if it is his personal passion project. He defends even the most baldly commercial elements like the extensive product placement as “real” to the story he wanted to tell. And, because social media platforms require constant work—and because of Trevorrow’s unstable position within the franchise—the director reiterated his messages again and again. Working behind the scenes, Universal marketers benefited from social media logic and Trevorrow’s labor. They steered his claims of authenticity to the core fandom most desperate for them.

Creative Laborers as Mercedes Pitchmen

Beyond the relentless product placement in the film itself, co-branding extended to the paratextual surround, including social media and publicity appearances. As a result, *Jurassic World* blurred the line between advertisement and content to an extent not seen before the social media era. Here again, the “instrumental emotional labor” Marwick identifies in connected tech platforms—including micro-celebrity, self-branding, and life-streaming—helped advance the marketing department’s agenda.⁸²⁹ To help them pitch Mercedes, Coke, and other products,

⁸²⁸ Marwick, 246.

⁸²⁹ Marwick, 17.

Universal marketers recruited not only the film's stars but below-the-line workers, including line producer Pat Crowley, prop masters, and costumers.

Social media has undoubtedly transformed Hollywood stardom. Digitally savvy actors with robust social media followings can command higher salaries and choicer roles. Indeed, the studios' social media strategies increasingly rely on stars, many of whom enjoy more significant online followings than official company platforms. As a result, online media has dramatically accelerated the transition to what Joshua Gamson calls a "decentralized star system," shifting power away from studios and towards stars and their talent agencies. Janet Staiger describes stars as "a monopoly on a personality."⁸³⁰ If so, it matters who controls that monopoly. In the classical era, it was the Hollywood studios, thanks to lengthy contracts, lax labor protections, and studio control of publicity vehicles. By the late 20th century, Gamson observes: "The economic push to make people known for themselves rather than for their actions remains at the heart of the now-decentralized star system; as sales aids, celebrities are most useful if they can draw attention regardless of the particular context in which they appear."⁸³¹

Yet as social media transferred some economic power to stars, studios responded by making an actor's social media presence and followers an increasingly important part of the studio casting process. "Movies and shows are commonly casting with social-media quotas to fill... I would imagine that nearly every digital project has some form of quota, [as do] a growing number of traditional projects," Amy Neben, a talent manager at Select Management Group, said

⁸³⁰ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 101.

⁸³¹ Gamson, "The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America," 13.

in 2018.⁸³² Entertainment lawyer Mark A. Johnson confirms that actor contracts increasingly include social media obligations and mandatory publicity appearances. Contractual obligations typically include live social media appearances, a minimum number of posts on personal accounts, and mutually approved posts on the studio's social media channels.⁸³³

For *Jurassic World*, cross-promotional deals infiltrated the film stars' social media accounts. For example, while traveling to promote the film's various international premieres, star Chris Pratt posted a popular series of Instagram photos depicting his Lego toy likeness posed in front of global landmarks (such as the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany; see Figure 49). Cleverly, the gambit promoted *Jurassic World* and a merchandising partner without requiring Pratt to appear in the posts. Universal marketers credit Pratt (or his team) with the specific implementation but confirm that Pratt's contract required a set number of promotional social media posts.⁸³⁴

Beyond satisfying any contractual obligation, Pratt's cross-promotional gambit exemplifies the constant self-branding and life-streaming social media requires. The product integration worked because it was subtle and humorous. Instagram users got to follow along with Pratt's global travels. The posts resembled the kind of funny picture our (non-famous) friends might send us from their vacations. But, of course, the widely shared posts also granted Pratt more social media followers and more leverage in future contract negotiations since he demonstrated both digital popularity and a willingness to participate in studio-driven branding

⁸³² Alissa Schulman, "Studios Are Now Looking for Actors Who Are Insta-Famous," *New York Post* (blog), May 27, 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/05/27/studios-are-now-looking-for-actors-who-are-insta-famous/>.

⁸³³ Johnson, "A New Negotiation: Social Media and Talent Agreements."

⁸³⁴ Formal Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, July 8, 2020.

efforts. In the social media era, personal lives have become increasingly intertwined with business and consumerism, which media scholar Alison Hearn calls a “monetization of being.”⁸³⁵

Although Pratt did not have tremendous leverage on his *Jurassic World* deal since it predated his larger box office profile, top stars who enjoy substantial social media followings can carve out lucrative deals. As one example, Universal reportedly paid Dwayne Johnson \$1 million to promote *Red Notice* on his social media accounts—on top of his \$20 million salary.⁸³⁶ (Ultimately, Universal never even distributed the film, now scheduled to premiere on Netflix in late 2021.) While Pratt probably could not have demanded such compensation in 2013, when he signed on to *Jurassic World*, he might come close now—after the franchise’s success and Pratt’s demonstrated ability to play along with co-branding efforts. Thus, social media strictures incent creative laborers to collude with the marketing agenda, even above and beyond contract requirements.

The *Jurassic World* actors also participated in studio-produced YouTube videos plugging brand partners. In May 2015, the studio released a series of YouTube videos entitled “Chris Pratt’s Jurassic World Journals.” One entry, “Motorcycle,” primarily focused on the Triumph Scrambler. “Hey, people of Triumph, can I have this motorcycle, please?” Pratt asks in the video.⁸³⁷ In early June, Universal released a YouTube featurette, “Mercedes-Benz Behind-the-Scenes of Jurassic World,” promoted heavily on Universal’s and Mercedes’s social media channels. The digital team also released the video to fan websites and channels, hoping the

⁸³⁵ Alison Hearn, “Producing ‘Reality,’” in *A Companion to Reality Television* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), 438, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118599594.ch24>.

⁸³⁶ Schulman, “Studios Are Now Looking for Actors Who Are Insta-Famous.”

⁸³⁷ Universal Pictures, *Chris Pratt’s Jurassic World Journals: Motorcycle (HD)*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_bL6rq5UGA&ab_channel=UniversalPictures.

“behind-the-scenes” angle would obscure the rather naked advertising. The video begins with a dramatic intro from executive producer Frank Marshall: “You’d think the biggest secret we’re keeping is the dinosaurs. Well, it’s not. It’s a car. No one, anywhere else in the world has seen this car—until today.”⁸³⁸ Cut to crew members (literally) unwrapping the Mercedes GLE Coupe in front of the film’s two main stars. “Oh, it’s beautiful,” Bryce Dallas Howard exclaims, before Chris Pratt shouts, “Yeah! Look at that thing.” Howard even offers this review: “Driving the Mercedes was an incredible experience. It was kind of amazing that they let us use these new cars.”

The extensive cross-promotion deal extended to the movie’s Hollywood premiere, with the actors stepping onto the red carpet from a red Mercedes GLE Coupe and then entering the theater past a themed Mercedes G-Class SUV.⁸³⁹ In Universal’s official red carpet photographs, widely circulated on Twitter and other social media, the Mercedes logo is nearly as prominent as the Jurassic World logo (see Figure 50, featuring Howard, Pratt, Trevorrow, co-star Omar Sy, and line producer Pat Crowley). In yet another tie-in, the world premiere even featured Jimmy Buffett performing on stage with Chris Pratt.

Below-the-line workers have visible roles in many of Universal’s brand-focused paratexts. For example, one of the most popular featurettes, “Jurassic World: Props and Animals,” focused primarily on the dinosaur design but began with a discussion of branded props, including Lego toys and Coke. “We had a lot of corporate partners who added authenticity

⁸³⁸ Mercedes-Benz USA, *Mercedes-Benz Behind-the-Scenes of Jurassic World*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv9AVwW4IHg&ab_channel=Mercedes-BenzUSA.

⁸³⁹ Laura Schreffler, “Mercedes-Benz Presents the World Premiere of Jurassic World,” *Haute Living*, June 10, 2015, <https://hauteliving.com/2015/06/jurassic-world/574562/>.

to the whole thing, Coca-Cola being one of them,” Property Master Guillaume DeLouche says in the video alongside a lengthy shot of Jurassic World-branded Coke cups.⁸⁴⁰ Likewise, in the “behind-the-scenes” Mercedes video, Ron Mendell, the production’s vehicle design coordinator, points out the Mercedes Sprinter van, describing it as a “pretty amazing vehicle.” Line producer Pat Crowley also describes various Mercedes cars in the video. Through these appearances, studio marketers offered below-the-line professionals greater visibility and an opportunity to advertise their contributions to the film—if they endorsed paid sponsors along the way. The bargain highlights both the instability of Hollywood employment and the self-branding inherent in social media platforms. As Marwick explains, social media has introduced an altogether new kind of “micro-celebrity,” meaning a “state of being famous to a niche group of people, but...also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention.”⁸⁴¹ The co-branded YouTube videos promised DeLouche, Mendell, and Crowley a hit of Hollywood micro-celebrity, though only if they colluded with the studio’s marketing plan.

While Universal’s social media marketing *expanded* the film’s product placement, it also helped *defend* the practice. In several interviews, Trevorrow claimed the product placements were integral to his storytelling.⁸⁴² As I discussed earlier, the active theme park setting—further emphasized in social media marketing—helped normalize the many on-screen brands. Although Trevorrow doesn’t appear in the co-branded Mercedes YouTube video, the piece makes similar claims about just how naturally Mercedes fits with the filmmakers’ creative vision. In the video, producers assert that product integration enhances their storytelling, mirroring Trevorrow’s

⁸⁴⁰ Jurassic World, *Jurassic World*.

⁸⁴¹ Marwick, *Status Update*, 114.

⁸⁴² Seife, “At the Drive-In With Jurassic World Director Colin Trevorrow.”

argument elsewhere. “It reflects the same things as the characters,’ Frank Marshall explains. “Sexy, smart-- and it really fits in perfectly to the movie.” Crowley continues the thought: “Jurassic World is an upscale theme park, so we wanted one of the most upscale auto manufacturers to be involved in it. It makes sense that all of the cars would be Mercedes cars,” he insists. After a series of shots of various Mercedes vehicles used during the film, Marshall returns to underscore the none-too-subtle point. “It really adds to the storytelling,” he says of the product integration. “We’ve worked in situations that feel real and believable.” However, as some social media commenters pointed out, the featured GLE Coupe, a small luxury SUV with limited off-road ability or cargo capacity, does not seem exceptionally compatible with a remote jungle island.

In addition to producers’ specific defenses, the stylistic context of the YouTube videos matters, too. By placing the product placements in an on-location, behind-the-scenes setting, Universal furthers the argument that brands like Mercedes represent artistic expression more than an economic imperative. Media scholar Jennifer Gillan observes that Disney similarly positions many of its content/promotional hybrids: as making-of features designed to bolster the brand mythology of “a group of craftspeople working together to make the best film their combined talents would allow.”⁸⁴³

If consumer/brand relationships are “tacit compromises,” as Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar argue, then marketers certainly run the risk of pushing too far. Indeed, many viewers found the product integration excessive, both in the film and the surrounding paratexts. The most-liked comment on one of Universal’s “behind-the-scenes” Mercedes videos on YouTube: “Should

⁸⁴³ Gillan, *Television Brandcasting*, 203.

[have] called the movie ‘Mercedes World’.”⁸⁴⁴ After watching the movie, some fans took to social media to similarly complain about the co-branding. “I thought the "Samsung Innovation Center" and the Mercedes Benz cars were just so tacky and intrusive,” posted one franchise fan on Reddit. “It’s so disappointing that an artist and legend, SPIELBERG, with a portfolio of solid gold and a giant in the industry, has to bow down to this stupid ad shit. A real shame.”⁸⁴⁵ Of course, Spielberg’s earlier movies (as a director or, in this case, executive producer) included product placement. But, for this Spielberg fan, *Jurassic World* went overboard and sold out to “stupid ad shit.”

Another Reddit user responded to the complaint: “It takes place in a theme park. Everything is sponsored in a theme park. Didn’t distract me really. Seemed fairly natural.” Notably, this fan (and plenty of similar posts) accepted the justifications creative laborers previously offered online. Recall Trevorrow’s argument that the movie’s product placement was his choice “because that’s what is real. If you built a Jurassic World [park] today, it would be owned and operated by major corporations at every turn. They’d be trying to take your money every single second, and I felt that was the way to present a reality that we all know.”⁸⁴⁶ Or, line producer Pat Crowley’s insistence, on YouTube, that it “makes sense that all of the cars would be Mercedes cars.” Thanks to social media structures, creative workers labored to justify the marketing department’s many co-branding deals. Then, fans labored to share the justifications with others. The marketers benefited without saying anything at all.

⁸⁴⁴ Universal Pictures, *Jurassic World - Mercedes Benz GLE Coupe Sneak Peak*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyxuUh6i7CM&ab_channel=UniversalPictures.

⁸⁴⁵ 1millionbucks, “Jurassic World and Product Placement: What Are Your Thoughts?,” Reddit Post, *R/Movies*, June 30, 2015, www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/3b18hc/jurassic_world_and_product_placement_what_are/.

⁸⁴⁶ Seife, “At the Drive-In With Jurassic World Director Colin Trevorrow.”

Conclusion

If we understand the film text and its promotional paratexts as “intrinsically collective, negotiated interactions” between industry and audiences, social media grants studio marketers extra leverage in the negotiation.⁸⁴⁷ Doug Neil and his digital team began promoting *Jurassic World* before it had a title or completed script. Long before filming began, marketing executives signed lucrative co-branding deals with Mercedes-Benz, Samsung, and others, leaving Colin Trevorrow to reassure fans that he *wanted* the product placement. Thanks to social media’s increasing tolerance for product integration, the executives bet that most viewers wouldn’t mind.

Having placed their stamp on the film text, the marketing department turned to a carefully staged social media campaign. The precise targeting and relatively low cost of digital media fostered “authentic” brand connections to loyal *Jurassic Park* fans even as the overall campaign focused on a younger, global audience less invested in nostalgia. Marketers publicly highlighted fan contributions and Trevorrow’s artistic independence even as they worked behind the scenes to retain as much control as possible. The constant surveillance of the tech platforms encouraged user labor and meant the digital team could respond quickly to unexpected trends like Chris Pratt’s social media popularity. Finally, the dual precarity of social media *and* the Hollywood job market meant that Trevorrow, Pratt, Bryce Dallas-Howard, and even below-the-line laborers all pitched in to support the marketing agenda.

The *Jurassic World* marketing campaign is a particular form of transmedia storytelling. It is, I would argue, “dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of

⁸⁴⁷ Caldwell, “Para-Industry, Shadow Academy,” 720–21.

creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience,” as Henry Jenkins defines the term.⁸⁴⁸ However, the approach differed from earlier examples in television or even from bigger, more layered transmedia franchises like Marvel or *Star Wars*. Most notably, marketers orchestrated the story, sidelining fans and even screenwriters. In addition, the transmedia elements didn’t so much advance the plot as keep it revving in neutral at one moment—the active theme park so advantageous to co-branding and merchandising. Initially, the textual expansion focused more on *mise-en-scène* than narrative or character development, enabling fans to insert themselves in the imaginary theme park.

The successful marketing campaign influenced the subsequent direction of the *Jurassic World* franchise. Executives deployed a very similar approach for the 2018 follow-up *Fallen Kingdom*. In place of the faux theme park website (not so tenable given that the park is blown up in the first minutes of the sequel), marketers introduced the “Dinosaur Protection Group,” an animal rights-like organization.⁸⁴⁹ The “charity” had its own social media profiles, YouTube videos, and newsletter. Fans could even “adopt a dinosaur” (and Universal could adopt their data). Even more notably, Universal theme parks introduced multiple attractions, including one debuting in 2021, set in the same narrow narrative moment first explored by Trailer Park’s 2014 promotional website. In addition, Universal and Amblin’s *Jurassic World Camp Cretaceous*, an animated Netflix series that premiered in 2020, begins at the same point.

Meanwhile, the other Hollywood majors certainly noticed Universal’s 2015 success, particularly since the studio had eschewed Disney’s costly approach of buying the rights to

⁸⁴⁸ Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101.”

⁸⁴⁹ “Dinosaur Protection Group | Jurassic World,” Dinosaur Protection Group, accessed July 10, 2021, <http://www.dinosaurprotectiongroup.com/>.

Marvel superheroes and *Star Wars* droids. Even *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* had not convinced the more skeptical executives that a digital-first marketing campaign could open a summer blockbuster successfully. But when *Jurassic World* scored the biggest opening weekend of all time—a full 13 years after the middling returns of the last franchise entry, *Jurassic Park III*—competing studios looked carefully at Universal’s social media strategy. Soon, digital spend increased at all of the major studios. Even relative holdouts Disney and Warner Brothers invested more in social media, particularly by 2018 when younger executives (Asad Ayaz and Blair Rich) took over the marketing departments. As the big studios adopted social and digital media marketing, social media logic further infiltrated Hollywood filmmaking.

Figures



Figure 28. Many of *Jurassic World* director Colin Trevorrow's most popular tweets reference the original 1993 film. Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight) knocked over this sign in *Jurassic Park*. Source: <https://twitter.com/colintrevorrow>.



Figure 29. One of *Jurassic World's* most prominent sets, a shopping street, featured multiple brand placements, such as Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurant.



Figure 30. YouTube searches (in the U.S.) related to *Jurassic World* from October 2014 to December 2015.

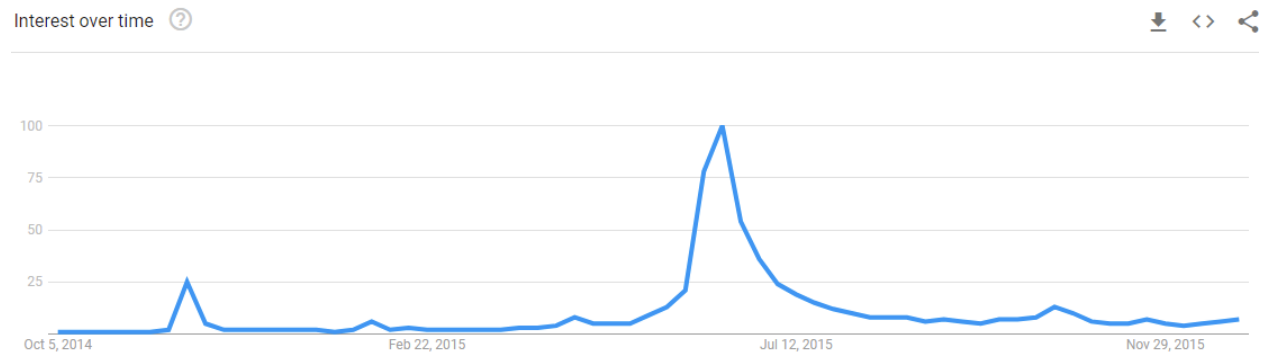


Figure 31. Google web search for *Jurassic World* during the same time period.



GETTING TO ISLA NUBLAR

Travelling to Isla Nublar is truly a pleasure. Fly to Costa Rica with our partner American Airlines, then take the Isla Nublar ferry to Jurassic World. As John Hammond once said, "Your journey to Jurassic World may take a few hours, but your memories will last a lifetime."



ISLA NUBLAR FERRY

You'll ride the Isla Nublar Ferry across the Costa Rican Pacific to Jurassic World. The views can be breathtaking, and humpback whales have been known to greet our ferry. But don't worry—there are no Mosasaurs outside of our lagoon.

[PURCHASE TICKETS](#)



Figure 32. Website visitors could plan their ferry journey to Isla Nublar. Source: jurassicworld.com via Internet Archive.



Figure 33. When site visitors click to link the purchase "ferry tickets," they are redirected to purchase movie tickets. Source: jurassicworld.com via Internet Archive.



Figure 34. An even more interactive website launched a few weeks before the film's release. This screenshot is from June 8, four days before the release, as indicated by the built-in countdown clock. Source: jurassicworld.com via Internet Archive.

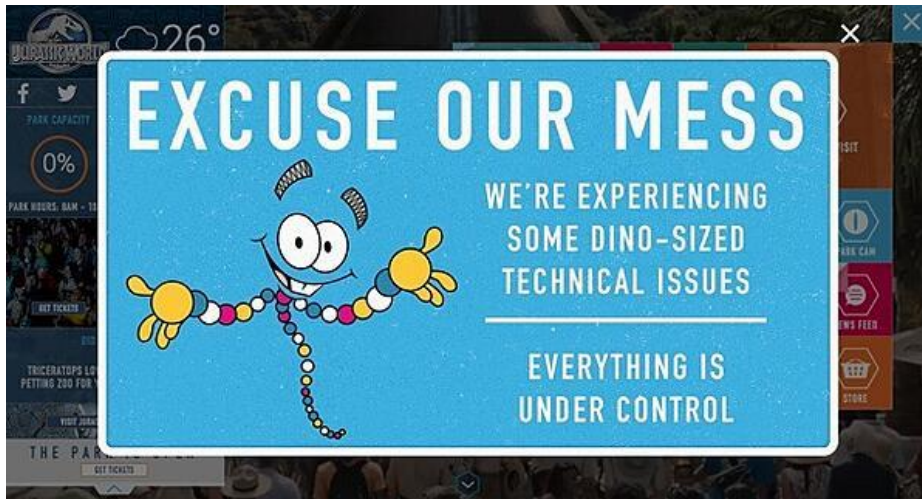


Figure 35. Once the film opened, marketers added a tongue-in-cheek "error message" and another reference to the first film (the animated "Mr. DNA").



Figure 36. Universal's Twitter posts focused on clearer calls-to-action, recognizing that platform's more limited interactivity.



Figure 37. JurassicWorld.com featured an interactive map of the fictional island theme park. Every page included links to post content to various social media platforms. Source: jurassicworld.com via Internet Archive.

TYRANNOSAURUS REX

SHARE
f t g+

ADMISSION INDEX
HIGH

PARK ATTRACTION
T. REX KINGDOM
VIEW

DIET
CARNIVORE

TYRANNOSAURUS REX

- > Name Meaning: "Tyrant lizard"
- > Habitat: Western North America
- > Length: 12m
- > Weight: 9,000 kg
- > Stance: Biped
- > Diet: Flesh and bone
- > Age: Late Cretaceous, 68-66 million years ago

Among the largest carnivores to have ever stalked the planet, Tyrannosaurus was one fearsome dinosaur. Tyrannosaurus fossils have shown toothmarks that could have only been made by their own kind, though we've never seen a T. rex family feud at Jurassic World!

Figure 38. The website also featured detailed information about the “real” dinosaurs found in the park. Source: jurassicworld.com via Internet Archive.



DURATION
3 DAYS

INCLUDES



TIER
\$\$\$

BOOK THIS PACKAGE

SHOP NOW

STUDENTS, DINOPHILES, AND PROTO-PALEONTOLOGISTS, THIS PACKAGE IS FOR YOU

Experience the scope and depth of John Hammond's vision with hands-on interactions and an exclusive tour behind the scenes of the Hammond Creation Lab. We know you love dinosaurs—now's your chance to reach out and touch one.

Figure 39. The "John Hammond" package targeted "dinophiles"—and fans nostalgic for original franchise characters. Source: jurassicworld.com via Internet Archive.



Figure 40. The most popular posts by the fictional theme park often referenced the original 1993 film, as in this quote from John Hammond (Richard Attenborough).



 **Jurassic World**
Travel/Leisure · 535,753 Likes · April 3 · 🌐

 Like Page

With numbers like these, it's no wonder that we're the safest theme park in the world. #JurassicWorld

4,545 Likes · 151 Comments · 275 Shares

 Like  Comment  Share

Figure 41. Universal's social media posts also spoke in the voice of the fictional theme park, as in this example from Facebook, replete with ironic “#SAFETYFIRST” hashtag.



Jurassic World

March 20 · 🌐

Would you rather spark your prehistoric passion on an amorous adventure or take a walk on the wild side with T. Rex feedings and whitewater rafting?
#JurassicWorld



Like · Comment · Share

👍 3,242 people like this.

Most Relevant ▾

↪️ 235 shares

Figure 42. Another series of Universal's Facebook posts encouraged interactivity by asking fans to pick between two theme park "products."

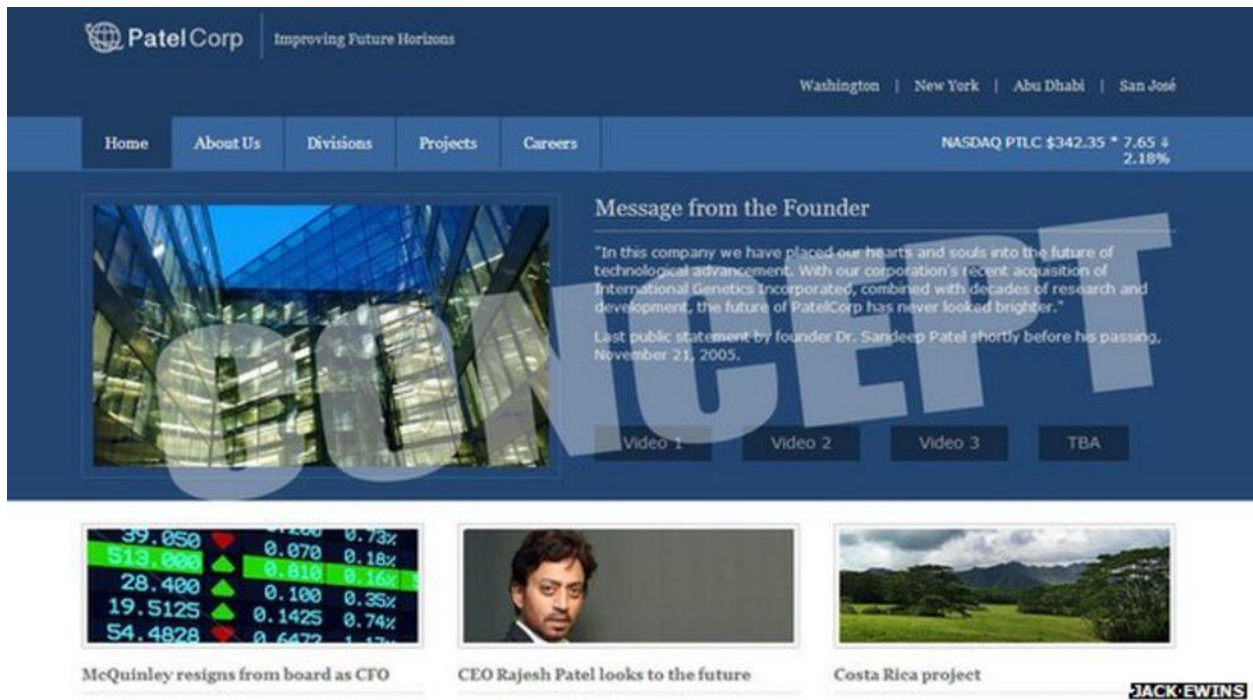


Figure 43. Two *Jurassic World* fans created their own transmedia storytelling inspired by pre-production rumors. Source: BBC News.

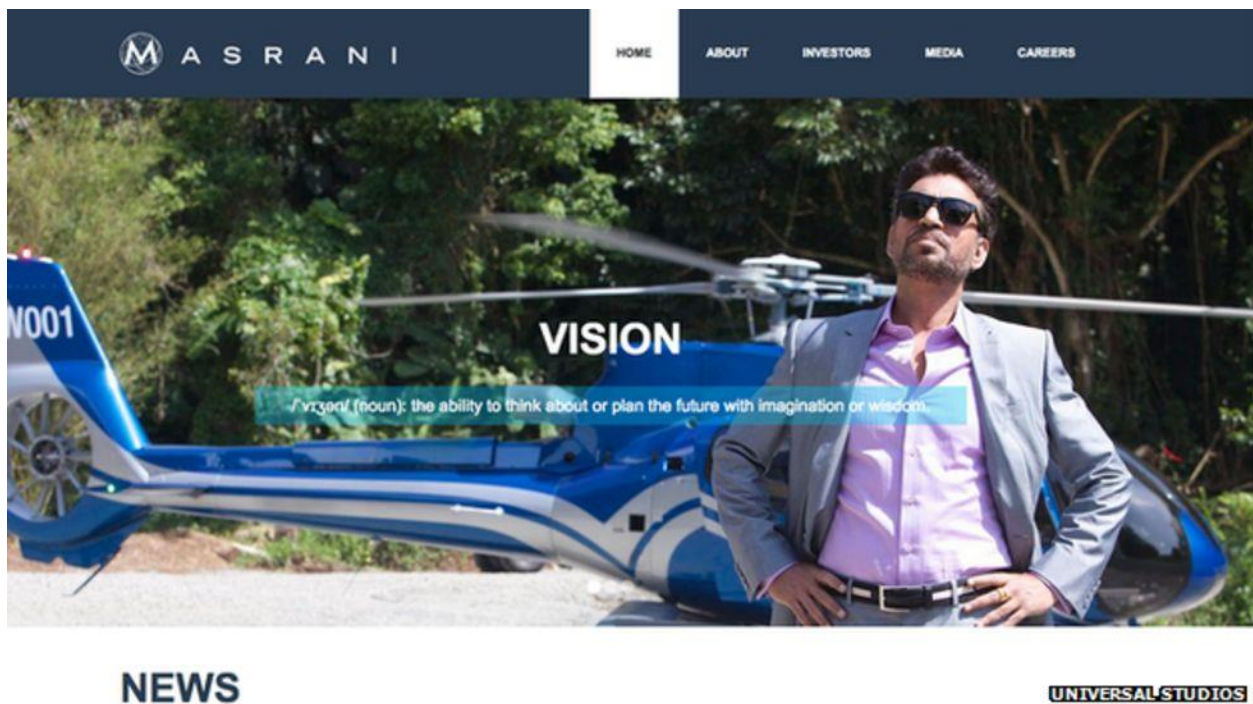


Figure 44. Universal's digital marketing team paid the fans to create an updated version of their website--and invited them to the film's world premiere. Source: BBC News.



Figure 45. This moment from *Jurassic World*, featuring Chris Pratt, was widely shared on social media.



Figure 46. Some social media users, such as this farmer in England, posted their own versions of the scene.



Figure 47. Universal actively promoted director Colin Trevorrow as a production spokesperson.



Colin Trevorrow ✓
@colintrevorrow



There is no friction. @UniversalPics is giving us time to make the movie you deserve. Keep telling me what you see. We're all directing JP4.

9:02 AM · May 9, 2013 · Twitter for iPad

193 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 100 Likes



Figure 48. Trevorrow's tweet suggested industrial transparency and a faux fan collectivism, writing that “we’re all directing JP4.”

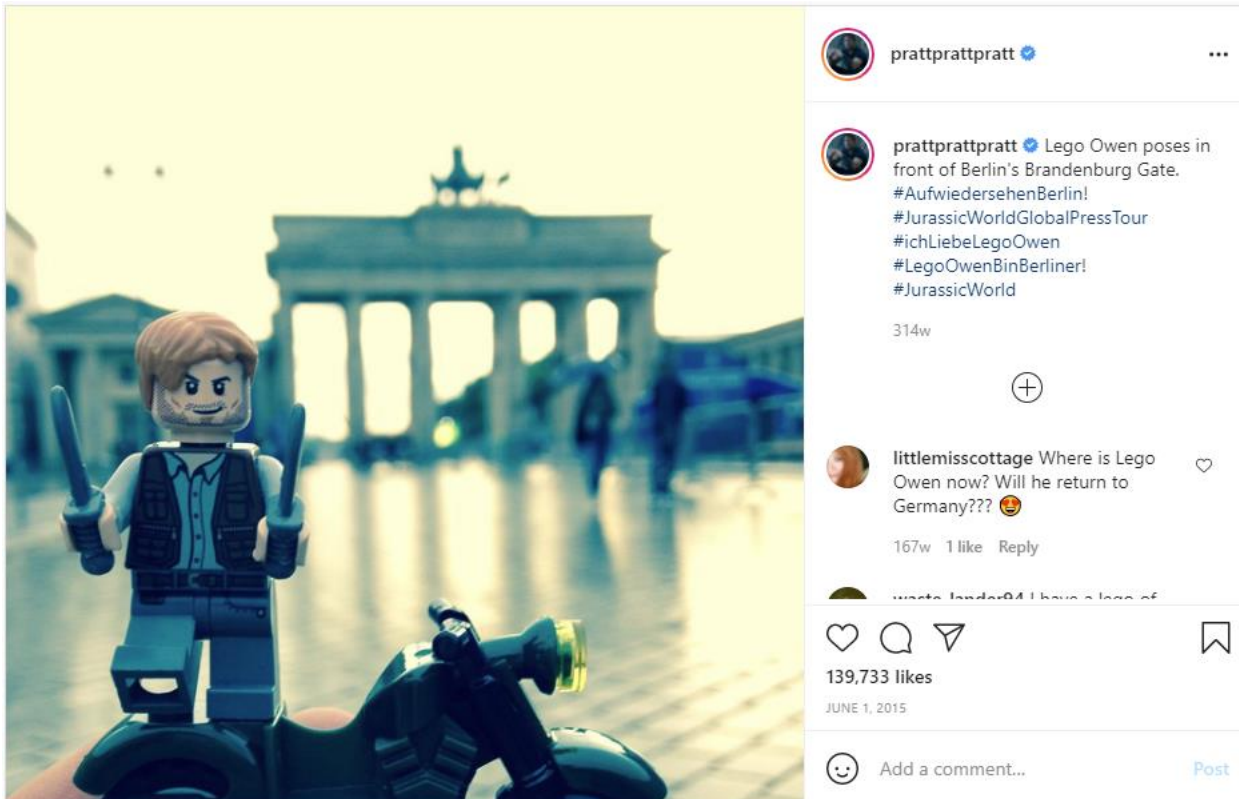


Figure 49. In an example of co-branding extending to social media, Chris Pratt posted to Instagram images of his Lego likeness in front of world landmarks.



Figure 50. The 2015 *Jurassic World* premiere in Hollywood was sponsored by Mercedes-Benz. Source: Universal/Getty Images.

Conclusion. The Contemporary Social Media Marquee

We're really able to find the audience and put materials under its nose. You're not doing as much shouting into a hurricane and hoping someone hears you.

Michael Moses, Chief Marketing Officer, Universal Pictures ⁸⁵⁰

Jurassic World marketers leveraged social media to transform an aging pre-web franchise into a cross-generational hit. Universal thus embraced digital media ahead of the other legacy studios. But it was still rather late to the party. Sixteen years earlier, when only a quarter of Americans had home internet access, Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, and Artisan Entertainment discovered that online audience participation and transmedia storytelling could help the *Blair Witch Project* (1999) go viral. Myrick and Sánchez were marketers as much as directors and screenwriters. At New Line Cinema, marketing executive Gordon Paddison utilized the web to cultivate fan engagement with *The Lord of the Rings* (2001). Both campaigns attracted industry attention and praise. Yet, with studio bosses burned by early internet investments and nervous about digital file sharing, most Hollywood marketers approached Silicon Valley with caution—even as consumers embraced YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Then, the mini-majors Summit and Lionsgate harnessed social media's precision, efficiency, and unpaid user labor to build major studio franchises without major marketing budgets. Finally, the success of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* inspired the Big Six studios to expand their social media efforts.

⁸⁵⁰ Sarah Cavill, "By Effectively Using Data, Movie Studios Are Creating Successful And Shorter Marketing Campaigns," DMS Insights, August 21, 2019, <https://insights.digitalmediasolutions.com/articles/movie-marketing-evolves>.

By 2017, Universal and Sony executives estimated they were spending 30 to 50 percent of their marketing budgets on digital media. Universal’s Josh Goldstine said at an early 2017 conference: "I think we've gone from what used to be, really, pretty small percentages very recently. And we're upwards of 30% on a fairly regular basis. We've actually done some experimentation where we've done movies as high as 75% of digital work."⁸⁵¹ Around the same time, Sony executives reported spending as much as 50 percent of their film marketing budgets on digital media, with a lot of that earmarked for social platforms.⁸⁵² Warner Brothers and market leader Disney initially remained more cautious. (Disney acquired Fox’s film studio in 2019, so the “Big Six” studios became the “Big Five.”) By 2018, the marketing analytics firm Neustar estimated that the Hollywood studios overall were devoting 14 percent of their studio marketing budgets to digital advertising.⁸⁵³ While digital spending was still modest relative to television, it was a notable increase since the number had lingered in the single digits long after YouTube and Facebook became household names. Moreover, the budget data doesn’t capture unpaid posts on social media platforms, so it likely understates marketers’ digital focus.

Although YouTube and Facebook remained by far the leading social media platforms in 2021, the new entrant TikTok was growing quickly. Owned by the Chinese company ByteDance and premiering globally in 2017, TikTok rapidly attracted younger consumers—and soon enough, plenty of celebrities. The new platform’s popularity came after my primary case studies.

⁸⁵¹ Goldstine, “C Space Storytellers.”

⁸⁵² Matt Kapko, "Why Facebook is key to Sony's movie marketing," *CIO*, January 10, 2017, http://www.cio.com/article/3155960/marketing/why-facebook-is-key-to-sonys-movie-marketing.html#tk.drr_mlt.

⁸⁵³ Erica Sweeney, “Digital Represents 14% of Movie Ad Budgets but Drives 46% of Revenue, Study Finds,” *Marketing Dive*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.marketingdive.com/news/digital-represents-14-of-movie-ad-budgets-but-drives-46-of-revenue-study/544253/>.

By 2020, however, the Hollywood studios increasingly included the service in their digital marketing plans. TikTok also threatened Google-owned YouTube’s dominance of online video sharing. In response, YouTube launched a new “Shorts” feature and even set aside \$100 million to pay video creators.⁸⁵⁴ The development highlights a difference between social media and traditional media such as television or print. While market power very much matters—as evidenced by the fact that YouTube and Facebook have maintained their dominance for well over a decade—the digital media ecosystem *is* less stable than the slower moving technologies of yesteryear. Even as they become more comfortable with social media broadly, studio marketers can’t exactly relax; new platforms and technologies emerge with regularity.

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2021, 72 percent of the American public uses some type of social media.⁸⁵⁵ Globally, which includes countries with far-less advanced technology infrastructure, over half of the population uses social media.⁸⁵⁶ In the U.S., the percent of social media users didn’t change between 2019 and 2021, suggesting growth may have peaked. Even more striking, usage amongst the youngest surveyed cohort—18- to 29-year olds—actually went *down* a few points, implying some burnout, at least with the current platforms.⁸⁵⁷ Ironically for the Hollywood studios, social media growth has stalled just as they finally embrace the technology. Still, 84 percent of 18- to 29- year olds used social media in 2021, so connected platforms remain pervasive and an essential part of any marketing strategy.

⁸⁵⁴ Mark Bergen and Lucas Shaw, “YouTube Shorts Is Taking on TikTok and Minting a New Constellation of Concise Video Stars,” *Bloomberg.Com*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-22/youtube-shorts-vs-tiktok-how-google-is-taking-on-bytedance-s-social-media-hit>.

⁸⁵⁵ “Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States.”

⁸⁵⁶ “Global Social Media Stats” (DataReportal, January 2021), <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>.

⁸⁵⁷ “Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States.”

While Hollywood marketers have sought consumer data analytics and targeted advertising since the 1920s and 1930s, social media unlocked the full potential of these strategies. As a result, today's studio marketing departments wield more power and authorial control than ever. Likely not coincidentally, the rise of social media has dovetailed with studios' increasing tendency to place major franchise films in the hands of less experienced, less powerful directors such as Colin Trevorrow. Compared to the New Hollywood era with big-name directors like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, the strategy further strengthens the influence of studio bosses and marketing executives.

To explore the complicated effects of this shift, I end the conclusion by exploring the ways social media frames race and representation on screen. Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms amplified #OscarsSoWhite and similar calls for fairer representation. Connected digital media also enabled marketers to finally realize the market power of diverse audiences long since ready to see themselves reflected on screen. At the same time, online algorithms can reinforce bias and institutional discrimination. As I will illustrate, some recent studio marketing campaigns exploited this tendency and continued appeals to white audiences anxious about increased multiculturalism.

Studies in Social Media Logic

The social media marquee I have described is, in many respects, an amplification of the high-concept filmmaking practices Justin Wyatt observed in 1970s and 1980s Hollywood. More than ever, big studio films aim for "a striking, easily reducible narrative that also offers a high degree of marketability," as Wyatt puts it.⁸⁵⁸ The popularity of music videos on social media has

⁸⁵⁸ Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 16.

led many marketers to closely associate songs or singers with films, an update of another high-concept practice. Studios still abstract a key, recognizable image from a movie, like the *Jurassic World* T-rex, and disseminate it across social, digital, and offline media.⁸⁵⁹ What is more, Hollywood's increasingly global business only reinforces the power of recognizable, pre-sold movies. Market research departments, so crucial to the rise of high-concept films, are today aided—and sometimes supplanted—by the vast data troves of the connected tech platforms. And marketing departments' increased influence on film production, yet another central feature of the high-concept era, has only accelerated with the arrival of social media.

As social and digital media marketing expanded at the Big Five studios, the line between content and advertising became ever blurrier, with marketers increasingly informing greenlight decisions and on-screen creative choices. Notably, in 2019 Sony Pictures elevated Josh Greenstein, president of worldwide marketing and distribution, to the president of the film group, making him the second marketing executive to take charge of a major studio after Adam Fogelson at Universal.⁸⁶⁰ Greenstein proved especially willing to engage with the tech platforms. For instance, he appeared on stage at a high-profile Facebook-hosted event at the Consumer Technology Association's 2017 CES conference in Las Vegas. Sony also regularly experimented with new tools from Snapchat and other social media players. Thus, Greenstein developed a marketing-centric filmmaking process and offered the tech platforms a seat at the table. Meanwhile, Fogelson himself landed at STX Entertainment, where he placed social media marketing at the very heart of the mini-major's production and distribution model.

⁸⁵⁹ Wyatt, 19.

⁸⁶⁰ Derek Ramsay, "Josh Greenstein," *Variety* (blog), accessed July 2, 2021, <https://variety.com/exec/josh-greenstein/>.

Digital intermediaries, outside agencies that promised to make sense of digital data, jostled for studio assignments. As one illustration, the agency Trailer Park expanded from its eponymous format to an array of digital services. The shop soon found itself involved ever earlier in film production cycles. Warner Bros. even reshot *Suicide Squad* (2016) to make the movie look more like Trailer Park's advertising. Another intermediary, PreAct, claimed to track social media sentiment and measure the effectiveness of studios' digital marketing campaigns. Indeed, the datafication of social media logic increasingly pervaded Hollywood practices. Studios cast and even recast movies based upon actors' social media stats and niche demographic appeal.

Sony Hits Silicon Beach

At the LA-area sales offices for YouTube, Google, Facebook, and Snapchat, Sony Pictures gained a reputation as the studio most receptive to sales pitches for new social media products and ad formats.⁸⁶¹ Tech reps frequently made the short trek from their Venice or Santa Monica offices to Sony's lot in Culver City. At the 2017 Facebook-hosted CES event, which I attended as part of my ethnographic research, Greenstein boasted that Sony was the first studio to buy advertising on Facebook's Instagram, one of the first to buy ads on Messenger, and the first to advertise a full-length trailer on Facebook. Sony also partnered extensively with the ascendant Snapchat, using a new 360-degree video ad format to promote the 2016 horror film *Don't Breathe*. "The audience wants freedom. They're consuming content and viewing content at their own leisure, and it's really about making it easy and exciting and interesting for them specifically," Greenstein explained at the event. Contrasting social media with the focus groups

⁸⁶¹ Google/YouTube account executive, videoconference interview with the author, October 5, 2020; former Snapchat sales representative, interview with the author, May 5, 2019.

long familiar to Hollywood studios, the executive argued that the Internet is the "greatest" and "largest focus group in the world." He continued, "It's about listening to the audience. It's about customizing content for the audience. We're able to speak to the audience in ways that we've never been able to do."⁸⁶² When Greenstein talks about "customizing content," he means that *marketers* are customizing the content. That's new. Social media grants a marketing team much more data *and* grants them more creative control.

At the same CES talk, Andrew "Boz" Bosworth, Facebook's vice president of advertising, emphasized his platform's demographic targeting, one of the main features embraced by early studio adopters such as Summit and Lionsgate. "You don't have to talk to the entire audience uniformly," he said. "You can talk to your audience differently, as they'd like to be spoken to. And if you cut a virtual trailer and it's not working with a certain audience, you can play with it. You create more, and you start to form what's going to resonate."⁸⁶³ Bosworth's talk of "creating" and "cutting" a virtual trailer suggests that he, too, sees himself in a creative role, as much film director as an advertising executive.

In a separate interview about six months earlier, Sony's international digital marketing vice-president, Aaron Wahle, expanded on some of the studio's specific initiatives. For example, as well as leveraging new Snapchat formats for *Don't Breathe*, Wahle's team paid social media influencers to promote the movie, a strategy it had also tried for four or five international titles. "Just like we have talent relationships with the actors that are in our movies or the directors that make them, we've got to develop relationships with influencers," Wahle explained. "We don't

⁸⁶² Andrew Bosworth and Josh Greenstein, "C Space Storytellers" (CES 2017, Las Vegas, NV, January 6, 2017), <https://ces-c-space-storytellers.brand.live/c/facebook>.

⁸⁶³ Bosworth and Greenstein.

give influencers money to roll out our content – we give them our opportunities to create content. Just like journalists would be flown to a junket, we pay for them to get there, but yeah, we don't pay for them to roll out this media.”⁸⁶⁴ That Wahle tried out new digital techniques on *Don't Breathe*, a lower budget (\$9.9 million) horror movie, highlights that even Sony still viewed social media as a youth play first and foremost.

Moreover, Wahle's attempt to compare paid social media influencers to the longstanding industry practice of press junkets underscores how social media logic dramatically expands an existing marketing practice. Press junkets have themselves been controversial, with some major news outlets such as *The New York Times* generally prohibiting journalists from participating and even less prestigious outlets requiring writers to disclose when they receive free perks. On the other hand, platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat make no distinction between sponsored or unsponsored videos on a given channel. In the U.S., Federal Trade Commission rules require disclosure of paid placements, but compliance is up to the social media personality, not the tech platforms, and most disclosures are easy to miss.

Just as industrial factors led Universal to embrace social media earlier than many of its big studio peers, political economy influenced Sony. It has a relatively small library and the lowest market share amongst the majors for much of the 2010s. In addition, since 2004, when Universal and NBC merged, Sony has been the only major studio not to own any significant television or cable networks. So, it has been particularly reliant on distribution channels it does not own. Largely by necessity, that has influenced the studio's approach to digital: an aggressive

⁸⁶⁴ Rebecca Stewart, “‘A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words’ - Sony Entertainment's Digital Marketing Lead on Why the Studio Is Turning Away from Twitter | The Drum,” August 23, 2016, www.thedrum.com/news/2016/08/23/picture-worth-thousand-words-sony-entertainment-s-digital-marketing-lead-why-studio.

pursuit of partners, in contrast with the go-it-alone approach epitomized by Disney. The partnership approach is evident in small and large transactions, and in partnerships with social media and streaming platforms. For example, for the 360-degree trailer promoting *Don't Breathe*, Snapchat sales reps approached Sony; there was no formal deal. "We've had a great relationship with Snapchat since the early days," Sony's Wahle said, explaining that the sales team approached his team with the new format and 'thought it would be a great way to do it.'⁸⁶⁵

Tom Rothman, Sony Pictures motion picture group chairman, has referred to his company as an "arms dealer" in the digital streaming race, meaning he is cutting simultaneous deals with multiple players. In April 2021, Sony signed a \$3-billion "first-look" distribution deal with Netflix and a \$1-billion deal with Disney, encompassing not only Disney + but Hulu, FX, ABC, ESPN, Freeform, and National Geographic.⁸⁶⁶ So, in the short term, Rothman's approach looks lucrative. As they aim to build up their subscriber bases and content libraries, Disney+ and other new streaming platforms are willing to spend even if it means losing money.⁸⁶⁷ And although Netflix has greatly ramped up its original productions, it also lost content from Universal, Warner Bros., Paramount, and Disney as each studio started its own direct-to-consumer platform. In that context, the streamers value Sony's production capabilities and recognizable franchises such as *Spiderman*, *Venom*, and *Jumanji*. But, in the long term, as the

⁸⁶⁵ Stewart.

⁸⁶⁶ Matt Donnelly, "Sony Pictures Gained Ground in Streaming Wars With Historic Licensing Deals at Netflix and Disney," *Variety* (blog), May 19, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/sony-pictures-netflix-streaming-lede-1234974439/>.

⁸⁶⁷ Lucy Handley, "Streaming Services like Disney+ Aren't Likely to Make Money 'anytime Soon,' Analyst Says," *CNBC*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/09/streaming-services-arent-likely-to-make-money-anytime-soon.html>.

streamers look to stabilize profitability by relying on in-house content, Sony risks being left out in the cold without its own direct-to-consumer channel.

Sony's initiatives also highlight an important point that I discussed in previous chapters. Even as Hollywood and Silicon Valley compete for consumer attention, collaboration happens in regular meetings between studio marketers and tech sales staff, as in Snapchat's deal with Sony for *Don't Breathe*. In exchange for an ad buy or simply using a new product, the tech firms often promise data or engineering resources, a reminder of the power the platforms enjoy as gatekeepers of user data and technical prowess. Twitter, for example, invites "select advertisers," including studios, to use its Reach & Frequency tool to buy ads targeted by demographic data that otherwise would not be available outside of Twitter.⁸⁶⁸ At a 2016 industry conference, longtime Sony marketing executive Dwight Caines recalled his all-time favorite digital campaign, for *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). "It was a book that was considered to be targeting to older consumers, but we targeted the campaign at college-plus [age group]," Caines explained of the strategy. "It was tech-driven, puzzle-driven. It was not the easiest thing in the world to [create] but Google built it custom for us. The project team was 50 people. It was very exciting."⁸⁶⁹ That Google would allocate a 50-person team to Sony's marketing effort highlights the paradox that has run through this study: Silicon Valley controls immense data and resources but still needs the IP controlled by the Hollywood studios.

At the same 2016 event, Caines, perhaps a bit more candid since he had just departed his post at Sony, admitted that the studios had been slow to adopt digital and social marketing.

⁸⁶⁸ Twitter case study, <https://marketing.twitter.com/na/en/success-stories/bad-moms-creative-campaign-starts-movement-on-twitter>.

⁸⁶⁹ Dwight Caines, "On Stage Interview with Andrew Wallenstein" (Hollywood In Pixels' second annual Silver Pixel Awards, Los Angeles, Calif, United States, October 5, 2016).

“Many of the executives who are very senior are less digital-savvy than you’d think. I liken them to climate-change denialists,” he joked. “Execs accustomed to seeing a campaign in front of them in the form of a billboard or commercials can find it difficult to get behind digital efforts that are invisible to those outside targeted, younger audience segments,” he explained. Many analytics firms—along with younger, digital-minded executives at the studios—likewise argued for a quicker digital turn. For instance, Neustar’s 2018 study claimed that digital media drove 46% of movie box office revenue despite only comprising that 14% of spend.⁸⁷⁰

Meanwhile, according to Neustar, television accounted for 82% of marketing budgets but was responsible for driving just 42% of media-driven box office revenue. The firm argued that Facebook paid advertising was particularly effective, comprising only 4% of movie media budgets but 9% of opening box office revenue and 20% of marketing-driven sales. Studio marketers take such research with a grain of salt; even setting aside potential conflicts of interest (depending on who is paying for the analysis), ad effectiveness research is challenging, particularly since many movie ticket purchases still happen offline. Nevertheless, studios have been seeing more and more data arguing for the strong ROI generated by social media. As Caines put it: “If we’re going to rely upon TV spots to open movies, we’re going to fade away.” By 2016, all of the studios were investing in digital, even if amounts varied greatly. “Now that the budget share exists, the battle is ... how much. [Digital’s] gotta be baked into the campaign,” Caines said.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁷⁰ Sweeney, “Digital Represents 14% of Movie Ad Budgets but Drives 46% of Revenue, Study Finds.”

⁸⁷¹ Caines, “On Stage Interview with Andrew Wallenstein.”

STX Entertainment: Marketers as Film Authors

Even as the big studios made marketing more and more central to production, a new “mini-major” pushed the envelope further. After Comcast forced Adam Fogelson out of his role as chairman of Universal, the veteran marketer ended up as production chief at STX Entertainment, an upstart studio founded in 2014 by film producer Robert Simonds and investor Bill McGlashan.⁸⁷² Fogelson placed marketing at the center of STX’s operations. The small studio focused on mid-budget, star-driven films and matched Big Six *marketing* spend while keeping *production* costs low. “From a marketing and distribution standpoint, we are working 100 percent at the level that the other major studios are. We’re not trying to market and distribute these movies for 20, 30, 40 percent less,” Fogelson explained in 2015. “On the production side, however, we have combined the marketing and production disciplines inside the company. The benefit to filmmakers is they know before they start exactly how we’re going to sell the film, so there are no surprises down the road,” he continued.⁸⁷³ At STX, marketing and production became a single entity, an extreme but illustrative example of marketing’s increasing centrality in Hollywood film production.

At the same time, Fogelson embraced digital and social media—an extension of his initial efforts at Universal. To promote the comedy *Bad Moms* (2016), STX asked users to retweet movie clips in exchange for pre-recorded “Bad Mom Advice” from the cast, another attempt to keep fans immersed within studio-controlled content. The studio also tweeted commentary on

⁸⁷² STX merged with the Indian film and television studio Eros International plc in 2020 and became ErosSTX Global Corporation.

⁸⁷³ Matthew Belloni, “STX Film Chief Adam Fogelson on China Money, Ambitious Slate and Universal’s ‘Bittersweet’ Success,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), August 5, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/stx-film-chief-adam-fogelson-812978/>.

the popular reality series *The Bachelorette* (ABC, 2003-), aligning itself with the fandom of a show it did not own. With the help of Twitter’s sales team and engineers—another example of mid-level collaboration—STX created a “spilling wineglass” emoji. The emoji generated 169 million views on Twitter alone, while STX’s tweets generated 67.7 million views.⁸⁷⁴

When STX took control of the female-driven crime drama *Hustlers* (2019) from struggling Annapurna Pictures, it recast several parts with social media specifically in mind. Most notably, it hired Jennifer Lopez and the singer Cardi B, both highly popular on Instagram and other social media. In addition, the multicultural cast had social media followers in different demographics, quite intentionally so. Cardi B and Lopez were joined by the singer Lizzo, Constance Wu of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), and Lili Reinhart, the latter with a smaller but devoted, young fan base from the television drama *Riverdale* (The CW, 2017-present). All told, the cast had 320 million Instagram followers at the time of release.⁸⁷⁵

To further underscore popular social media personality Cardi B, STX used her song “Money” as an anthem throughout the campaign. And it promoted the hashtag #HustlingIn to encourage social media users to connect the film title to their own activities. In addition, the studio said it analyzed social media data particularly to identify “fence-sitters,” consumers open to buying a movie ticket but unsure. Staffers said the studio was able to reach 15 million such customers on Facebook alone. Finally, STX identified 25 top social media influencers in various categories (such as fashion, fitness, and LGBTQ) and invited them to an early screening to snap

⁸⁷⁴ Twitter case study, <https://marketing.twitter.com/na/en/success-stories/bad-moms-creative-campaign-starts-movement-on-twitter>.

⁸⁷⁵ Anthony D’Alessandro, “STX’s Jennifer Lopez Pic ‘Hustlers’ Part Of Adult Fare’s Recent Revival At The B.O.,” *Deadline* (blog), September 15, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/09/hustlers-jennifer-lopez-stx-box-office-opening-record-1202735075/>.

photos with the cast. The stunt resulted in 18 million new followers for the studio, according to marketing staffers.⁸⁷⁶

Thanks to the digital-heavy effort, STX spent about \$25 million on marketing (below the average \$50 million), while the film generated \$157 million at the box office. STX's approach highlights the continued efficiency and precision of social media relative to other marketing methods. Moreover, *Hustlers* was not merely a youth play. As STX expected, given its casting and social media approach, the movie was especially popular with women. It attracted a wide age range, however. According to box office analytics firm Movio, *Hustlers* attracted the most interest from viewers aged 22 to 29, but 30- to 49-year-olds were not far behind. The movie was more popular with 50-somethings than those under 22.⁸⁷⁷ A social media strategy increasingly reaches almost everyone.

More importantly, STX highlights how early marketing considerations enter the film production process, *especially* when social media is involved. Adam Fogelson's marketing-focused executive team at STX deployed social media data to influence casting and stylistic decisions for *Hustlers*. In the process, marketers' authorial influence rivaled that of director and screenwriter Lorene Scafaria.

Trailer Park: The New Role of an Old Format

With *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Jurassic World*, social media marketing and marketing more broadly intervened early in the production process. As social media marketing expanded across the big Hollywood studios, so did marketers' influence. The shift has even

⁸⁷⁶ D'Alessandro.

⁸⁷⁷ "Who Hustled To See Hustlers?," Movio Blog, September 25, 2019, <https://movio.co/blog/who-hustled-to-see-hustlers/>.

raised the importance of theatrical trailers, that evergreen promotional vehicle with higher visibility in the digital era thanks to YouTube and Facebook. Sony's Wahle confirms that his digital team still relies heavily on the trailer. "I think it really comes down to how they are presented – you need a modern view of what a trailer is," he explains, "so when we cut them for Facebook, we know that most people listen with the sound off, so we put the words on there." Nevertheless, he says, "that's still a trailer; it's just a new form of a trailer. And the long-form, at two minutes and thirty seconds, I still think is a great way to get your movie across, and we lean on our creative departments to make amazing trailers for us that we then run online."⁸⁷⁸

Most studios rely on outside "trailer houses" to create trailers for both theatrical and online use. Particularly for big-budget franchises, studios will call three or four trailer houses, sometimes with firm instructions and sometimes not, and turn the trailer producers, editors, and copywriters loose on early film footage. In some cases, one trailer house gets the green light to produce all of the trailers, but more typically, the work is split between a couple of agencies to get different perspectives and target different demographics. As a result, studio marketers are increasingly considering 30 trailer versions for a single film—and sometimes more than 100 versions.⁸⁷⁹

One of the leading trailer houses, Trailer Park, began in 1994 by developing comedy trailers but has gradually expanded to digital and other aspects of entertainment marketing. With around 500 employees, Trailer Park has divisions across Theatrical, Home Entertainment, Television, Print & Design, Digital, Social, Mobile, Interactive TV, Menus, Content, Digital

⁸⁷⁸ Stewart, "'A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words' - Sony Entertainment's Digital Marketing Lead on Why the Studio Is Turning Away from Twitter | The Drum."

⁸⁷⁹ Kitchen, "Meet the People Who Grind Out the Best Movie Trailers in the World."

Publishing, Video Games, and Brand.⁸⁸⁰ Indeed, the firm developed the *Jurassic World* faux theme park website, an example of its increasing reach early in the production cycle.

“Sometimes we’ll start on a trailer before they’ve even started filming,” says Trailer Park producer Jeff Gritton. “We just break down the script. Then we’ll get dailies—literally everything they’ve shot, hours and hours.” While some studio marketing divisions have a clear idea of what they’d like out of a trailer, others leave the heavy lifting to the trailer houses. “Sometimes it seems like the houses are looked to to provide the basis of a strategy,” says former Trailer Park copywriter Travis Weir. “Sure, that’s a big part of what we were paid for, but sometimes it’s a little surprising. It’s like, ‘Well, you guys are the ones making the fucking thing. Don’t you kind of have an idea?’” Even more notably, studios have rejiggered their shooting schedules to front-load them with “trailer moments.” Trenton Waterson, a former Marvel creative executive, recalls: “For the first two weeks of *Avengers*, we purposefully shot a crazy amount of stuff because they were already thinking about Comic-Con the next year.”⁸⁸¹

Thus, marketing imperatives influence daily production decisions, a contrast with an earlier era when marketers and trailer houses generally got involved closer to a film’s completion. The changes increase marketers’ power two-fold. First, if directors must begin by shooting “trailer moments,” promotional considerations—often derived from social media data—inform the entire production. Second, when trailer houses and social media marketers craft promotions *before* filming—or based upon raw dailies—they have far more opportunity to influence studio executives and on-set laborers alike. Nearly complete films once constrained

⁸⁸⁰ “Trailer Park,” Trailer Park, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://trailerparkgroup.com/>.

⁸⁸¹ Kitchen, “Meet the People Who Grind Out the Best Movie Trailers in the World.”

marketers' creative options. Now that marketing begins before the script's ink is dry, promotional staffers have become film authors.

We saw how early social media data and market research led to changes in *Jurassic World*. Another striking example was *Suicide Squad* (2016), a DC comics entry from Warner Bros. Using early footage, Trailer Park cut the first trailer with an edgy but comic tone that was well-received on YouTube and other social media.⁸⁸² As writer/director David Ayer's actual film came to fruition, Warners executives feared his somber take would not match the trailer and fan expectations. So, while Ayer pursued his original vision, the studio worked on a different cut—with an assist from creatives at Trailer Park. Warner Bros. wanted a movie more like the teaser trailer. In May 2016, just three months before the planned release date, the studio ran test screenings in Northern California, asking audiences to compare Ayer's more somber version with the lighter, trailer-influenced version. Staffers told *The Hollywood Reporter* that audiences preferred Trailer Park's take, with jazzed-up graphics and more characters introduced early in the film. To finish the movie in that vein, the studio approved millions of dollars' worth of additional photography and hired a new (and uncredited) editor.⁸⁸³

As is typical, Warner Bros. publicly maintained that Ayer was entirely on board with the chosen version. Recall that Universal marketers also emphasized Colin Trevorrow's creative independence over *Jurassic World* even as they constrained his control in the background. As longtime industry journalist Kim Masters puts it, "Studios are always careful to stress that the

⁸⁸² Warner Bros. Pictures, *Suicide Squad - Official Trailer 1 [HD]*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmRih_VtVAs&ab_channel=WarnerBros.Pictures.

⁸⁸³ Kim Masters, "'Suicide Squad's' Secret Drama: Rushed Production, Competing Cuts, High Anxiety," *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), August 3, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/suicide-squads-secret-drama-rushed-916693/>.

credited director is on-scene and in charge, which is essential to avoid DGA [Director's Guild of America] issues. And the wise director plays along.”⁸⁸⁴ Marketing teams or other studio executives thus have little incentive to publicize their creative authority—except when talking amongst themselves. “Auteur with a pure creative vision” is a better marketing pitch than “written by focus groups and executive committees.” PR spin aside, marketing highly influenced the *Suicide Squad* audiences ultimately saw in theaters. The movie received middling reviews but grossed over \$700 million globally, a success for Warner Bros. and seeming confirmation of Trailer Park's creative instincts.

Just like the STX example, Trailer Park's rising creative influence highlights the increased centrality of marketing early in the production process. Trailer Park's viral YouTube trailer for *Suicide Squad* led to a movie that (arguably) more closely resembled the ad agency's creative vision than the director's. According to the credits, David Ayer wrote and directed *Suicide Squad*. Lorene Scafaria wrote and directed *Hustlers*. But marketing teams performed multiple rewrites.

PreAct and the Datafication of Hollywood

The massive data collection of social media is its defining feature and is most likely to change Hollywood filmmaking over time. Compared to older tracking and market research methods, social media research begins earlier and requires ever-more advanced computing skills, typically involving upstart digital agencies or the tech platforms themselves. Indeed, consumer data has long influenced commercial film form. Justin Wyatt argues that the 1980s rise of the high concept film dovetails with the rise of market research departments at all the major film

⁸⁸⁴ Masters.

studios.⁸⁸⁵ More recently, the largest research firms, led by the National Research Group, have seen their market share shrink, with many new upstarts offering social media data analysis as an alternative to traditional methods such as surveys and test screenings.⁸⁸⁶

Predictive analytics, granular audience segmentation, and marketing optimization models result in more targeted and generally more digital promotional approaches. “We’re really able to find the audience and put materials under its nose [using digital promotions],” explains Michael Moses, himself elevated to Universal’s global marketing chief in 2018. “You’re not doing as much shouting into a hurricane and hoping someone hears you.”⁸⁸⁷ At the 2017 CES in Las Vegas, Universal’s Josh Goldstine praised social media’s real-time insight into consumer responses: “We also, for the first time, have feedback. Now, we’re actually in a world where we’re having engagement; we’re having a dialogue... We are targeting, and having segmentation, and being able to get a signal and respond to it, and evolve a campaign in a way that we really never have before.”⁸⁸⁸ Goldstine drew a sharp contrast with past practices such as test screenings and the legacy market research firms. “It’s really a tremendous transformation in terms of a business that, very much, has always looked backwards to what worked yesterday as a guide to what works today and for tomorrow. And that’s really not the case,” he said.

When studios started widely using tracking data in the 1980s, one company provided it, National Research Group (NRG), which relied on telephone polling and sometimes door-to-door surveys and post-screening evaluation cards. Then, most film marketing campaigns followed a

⁸⁸⁵ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 155.

⁸⁸⁶ Laura J. Nelson, “Hollywood market research evolves to reflect tech-savvy moviegoers,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2013.

⁸⁸⁷ Cavill, “By Effectively Using Data, Movie Studios Are Creating Successful And Shorter Marketing Campaigns.”

⁸⁸⁸ Goldstine, “C Space Storytellers.”

similar strategy: Trailers played in movie theaters, while TV commercials, print ads, and billboards arrived a couple of weeks before release. In the older tracking model, consumer surveys would attempt to answer a fundamental question about upcoming movies: Have marketing materials made a film a must-see? In response to that data, usually offered roughly a month before release, studios might edit the creative in an ad, for example, or produce more male-focused TV spots. Although NRG and its pre-digital competitors also conducted positioning studies well in advance of film releases, the manual data collection limited the scope compared to today's social media.

Thanks to digital media and the increasing reliance on pre-sold franchises, campaigns have grown longer and more complex. By the time traditional tracking kicks in, studios find most consumers have already made up their minds. The rise of social media created a data boom in almost every major industry, and filmmaking is no exception. New studio-targeted services include Fizziology, which promises algorithms reviewed by human analysts; New York-based ListenFirst Media, founded in 2012 and now a significant supplier of social media “fan engagement” information to various studio divisions; and LA-based Capstone Global Marketing and Research. Capstone sticks with traditional surveying but focuses on alternate entertainment choices and more detailed questions such as what actor makes them less likely to buy a ticket or how the previews make them feel.⁸⁸⁹

One of the most prominent new services is PreAct, a collaboration of United Talent Agency and data firm Rentrak. Like many upstarts, it promises “social listening,” using algorithms to slice and dice chatter on social media. PreAct starts early, closely monitoring

⁸⁸⁹ Laura J. Nelson, “Hollywood market research evolves to reflect tech-savvy moviegoers,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2013.

marketing efforts at least a year before opening weekend. Marketers download charts detailing the response to various promotional initiatives. At any moment, studios using the service can log in to a portal and receive various charts describing how consumers respond to promotional efforts. “Every studio wants actionable information, and that is what we are providing,” said David Herrin, the head of research at United Talent, which developed PreAct at its headquarters here before partnering with Rentrak.⁸⁹⁰ The tool started in 2011 as a way for United Talent to arm its celebrity clients with better data about their films; Boston-based Crimson Hexagon collates the information. PreAct’s algorithm crawls Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, movie blogs, and other sites, indexing content and offering “scores” for upcoming movies. The algorithm considers the size of the online conversation, how much of it is positive or negative, and how much is organic versus the result of studio marketing. Two of the main indexes are “consumer” and “push.” “Consumer” measures the organic conversation while “Push” measures the studio’s promotional effort. “If the consumer number is higher than push, that’s a good sign,” explains Rentrak’s Steve Buck.⁸⁹¹ That would suggest that a film’s buzz is stronger than the studio’s marketing spend behind it. On the other hand, if “Push” is significantly higher than “Consumer,” that means that the studio is aggressively pushing a film, but consumers aren’t responding.

Like many social listening tools, PreAct relies on historical information, generating scores for new films by making comparisons against existing ones. The service also offers

⁸⁹⁰ Brooks Barnes, “Hollywood Tracks Social Media Chatter to Target Hit Films,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2014, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/08/business/media/hollywood-tracks-social-media-chatter-to-target-hit-films.html>.

⁸⁹¹ Anthony D’Alessandro, “How Strong Is Your Film’s Buzz? Rentrak’s PreAct Can Tell You – CinemaCon,” *Deadline* (blog), April 23, 2015, <https://deadline.com/2015/04/pitch-perfect-2-insidious-chapter-3-southpaw-renttrak-uta-preact-film-campaigns-1201414615/>.

subscribers access to scores for any movie headed toward theaters, giving studios insight into competitors' films. Many of the leading social listening tools, including PreAct, charge the biggest studios hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. Nevertheless, within a few months of its 2014 introduction, PreAct signed up studios covering about 40 percent of the North American box office, including 20th Century Fox and Sony Pictures Entertainment. "It's not a perfect tool, but it allows us to be really long-lead, and it provides information in close to real-time, both of which are extremely helpful," said Dwight Caines, then Sony's president for domestic marketing.⁸⁹² For example, Caines said Sony used PreAct data to change its promotional strategy for the Denzel Washington actioner *The Equalizer* (2014), emphasizing an Eminem soundtrack song, "Guts Over Fear," to improve interest among young men.

Warner Bros. and Walt Disney Studios did not initially sign up for PreAct, another example of those companies' slower embrace of social media marketing. However, the more conservative studios were not simply ignoring digital and social media. Instead, they focused on digital and social analytics, making small investments and tests without significant advertising reallocations. Lee Jury, VP of European marketing at Disney, explained in 2014: "The success of a movie is, of course, all in the box office, but the success of the marketing is far more complex. At Disney, we have begun to adopt new models and thinking and to test the mettle of less conventional tactics... Figuring out which triggers might ultimately 'fire blanks' is the key to success."⁸⁹³

⁸⁹² Barnes, "Hollywood Tracks Social Media Chatter to Target Hit Films."

⁸⁹³ Joseph, "Movie Marketing Moves into the Digital Age."

Even if they were unsure how to respond, studio marketers understood that social media was reordering their business and calling into question traditional tracking methods. In 2014 and 2015, one of the biggest studio watercooler topics was the increasing inaccuracy of box office tracking, and many suspected social media was to blame.⁸⁹⁴ During the summer of 2015, for instance, the tracking firms often missed their mark. Tracking predicted *Jurassic World* would earn \$125 million in its opening weekend; it earned \$208 million. Conversely, analysts predicted \$50 million for Fox's *Fantastic Four*, but the actual return was a very disappointing \$25.7 million.⁸⁹⁵ The significant variables, studio executives felt, were word-of-mouth and reviews, mainly expressed by scores on review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes. *Jurassic World* received generally positive reviews, while *Fantastic Four*'s Rotten Tomatoes score was a dismal 9% with critics and 18% with audiences.⁸⁹⁶ Fox executives believed social media further hurt them via a pre-release tweet from director Josh Trank, in which he complained: "A year ago I had a fantastic version of this. And it would've received great reviews. You'll probably never see it. That's reality though." Some analysts estimated the tweet cost Fox \$10 million in lost box office revenue.⁸⁹⁷

Before social media, studio marketers would try to “cheat” an opening weekend — that is, use marketing to cloak a terrible movie. The strategy no longer worked since angry ticket

⁸⁹⁴ Anita Busch, “Movie Tracking In The Toilet: Fix Or Flush?,” *Deadline* (blog), August 24, 2014, <https://deadline.com/2014/08/movie-tracking-in-the-toilet-fix-or-flush-823699/>.

⁸⁹⁵ McClintock, “Summer 2015’s Tipping Point.”

⁸⁹⁶ “*Fantastic Four* (2015),” Rotten Tomatoes, accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/fantastic_four_2015.

⁸⁹⁷ Tom Chatalbash, “*Fantastic Four* 2015 Director Josh Trank Regrets Tweet That Cost Fox \$10 Million,” *ScreenRant*, May 7, 2020, <https://screenrant.com/fantastic-four-2015-josh-trank-regrets-tweet-fox/>.

buyers would immediately complain on Facebook or Snapchat.⁸⁹⁸ Even if a studio holds back a film from advance screenings—a popular strategy when executives expect a film to be poorly received—negative social media can still torpedo the box office within a few hours, says longtime marketer Terry Press.⁸⁹⁹ Speaking about the summer of 2015, Megan Colligan, Paramount’s president of worldwide distribution and marketing, said: “This was a summer completely designed by reviews and word of mouth. I would actually hear people in the grocery store talking about Rotten Tomatoes scores.” Disney distribution chief Dave Hollis agreed: “You don’t have the luxury of bad buzz not being immediately known.”⁹⁰⁰

To be sure, the newest social media analysis tools are not perfect, as Sony’s Caines pointed out. The social media platforms control their data and release it quite selectively. Facebook and Google sell their own “Analytics” products and encourage advertisers to buy those rather than relying on third parties. Facebook, Google, and Twitter offer developer APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) that allow outside firms to cull some data; tools such as PreAct partially rely on such APIs. However, the APIs include significant restrictions. For example, in most cases, Twitter limits outside developers to 900 data requests every 15 minutes.⁹⁰¹ That may sound like a lot until one considers that people send about 6,000 tweets

⁸⁹⁸ Brooks Barnes, “In Hollywood, Cutting the Cord and Other Disruptions,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2018, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/technology/personaltech/hollywood-cutting-cord-tech-disruptions.html>.

⁸⁹⁹ “291B: Feature Film Marketing,” UCLA graduate course lecture, January 2014.

⁹⁰⁰ McClintock, “Summer 2015’s Tipping Point.”

⁹⁰¹ “Rate Limits,” Twitter Developer Platform, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/rate-limits>.

every second.⁹⁰² Like most other platforms, Twitter charges outsiders for “premium” API access to get around some (but not at all) limitations, another reminder of the tech firms’ gatekeeping power over vast data troves. As a result, intermediaries generally base their analysis on small samples of social media data. Just as sampling in political polling of voters has led to errors, social media analysis is not always correct.

Of course, even high-quality data requires interpretation and action—not an easy task in any industry and certainly not in the fickle entertainment business. For example, Facebook and YouTube, with theoretically unfettered access to proprietary data, have introduced their original programming initiatives to decidedly mixed results, with many efforts quietly abandoned after a few years.⁹⁰³ And, if a studio team finds out its marketing is not working well for a particular film, the solution is not always or even usually obvious. The biggest challenges come from unknown or lesser-known properties. So how to cut through the digital noise without an existing fan base? One common approach is to tie into other popular online content, even if it has nothing to do with your movie. Adam Rubins, chief executive of digital ad agency Way to Blue, said in 2014 that the industry is taking “early” steps to be more responsive online by connecting content to current news.⁹⁰⁴ STX Entertainment took this approach for *Bad Moms* when it tweeted about *The Bachelorette*.

⁹⁰² “Twitter by the Numbers (2021): Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts,” Omnicore, June 29, 2021, <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/>.

⁹⁰³ In just one instance, YouTube invested \$300 million in original programming in 2011 and 2012 but ended the program in 2013 after the content was generally unpopular. See Ryan Nakashima, “YouTube launching 100 new channels,” USA Today, Oct 29, 2011. Based upon my own time as a Google employee, I would add that while user data is theoretically accessible to the company, it is not always simple to access for a given project, since only a limited pool of engineers can actually process the raw data and there are many internal demands on their time.

⁹⁰⁴ Joseph, “Movie Marketing Moves into the Digital Age.”

Furthermore, big studio strategies change over time as data improves and marketers learn from experience and their competitors. For pre-sold franchises, the most common approach has been the one I discussed for *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, and *Jurassic World*: beginning digital marketing early, usually near the moment the movie is greenlit. The hope is to build a fan base capable of stretching beyond the theatrical window. In 2015, Universal also took this tack for *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which amassed more than 1.7 million fans on its page a full year from release and *Furious 7*, with 43 million followers a year out.⁹⁰⁵ More recently, studios have experimented with shorter digital marketing windows to try and stand out. “There’s an entire generation that is very skilled at skipping marketing,” notes Universal’s Moses. “They don’t see television advertising. They can easily navigate around [advertising] in the digital space. But what does grab their attention is new content, especially that first trailer. So, you are better off waiting until you can really pack a punch.” For *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), Disney limited most of its marketing spend to five months—even though it spent \$200 million on promotion, a record for the Marvel franchise.⁹⁰⁶ The aim is to stand out from the digital clutter, if only for a short time.

Even as responses evolve, the difference between social listening tools such as PreAct and the older tracking model exemplifies why social media has pushed marketing earlier in the film production process. When most marketing insights arrived about a month before a film’s release, that was enough time to adjust some of the advertising but certainly not enough time to make significant changes to the film. Now that PreAct and other tools provide social data at least a year in advance, marketing data can influence production decisions, as we saw with *Jurassic*

⁹⁰⁵ Joseph.

⁹⁰⁶ Cavill, “By Effectively Using Data, Movie Studios Are Creating Successful And Shorter Marketing Campaigns.”

World and *Suicide Squad*. In addition, the data is much more complex, requiring multiple intermediaries—or the tech platforms themselves—to interpret. That means studios turn to outside firms earlier in the production cycle, further expanding marketing’s reach.

Race, Representation, and Social Media Marketing

Issues of representation and discrimination have epitomized social media’s complicated and sometimes contradictory impact on global culture. Tech platforms and smartphones have shone a welcome light on racism and bias in policing, politics, and entertainment. At the same time, emerging research suggests that social media can reinforce prejudice and misinformation. Hollywood studio marketers navigate the new digital terrain even as they represent a cultural industry long guilty of whitewashing, stereotyping, and outright discrimination. Interrogating representation is among the most important reasons for future scholars to study social media marketing.

While scholars and industry professionals have long pointed out Hollywood’s dismal record on racial, ethnic, and gender representation, the issue finally received sustained (if still insufficient) industry attention after 2015. Studio executives’ increased awareness came during a time when the Big Five increasingly adopted social media marketing. Thus, the social platforms became an instrumental part of studios’ response to questions about diversity. Moreover, their response helps illustrate the concepts I have traced throughout this study. Social media enables marketers to target specific demographic and interest groups with precision and efficiency. The tech platforms’ surveillance algorithms can even identify demographics, interests, or attitudes beyond anything a marketing department could brainstorm. With all of the data in hand, studios

can customize messages for different audiences, altering their advertising pitch depending on who's looking.

Initially, studios leveraged social media's micro-targeting to reach fandoms and, most significantly, the younger audiences who flocked to *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*. Gendered assumptions influenced the marketing strategies, as when Summit Entertainment leveraged the predominantly female fan fiction community to promote *Twilight* or Lionsgate cultivated (and simultaneously constrained) *Hunger Games* fan creations. Yet, the properties also demonstrated the commercial possibilities of female-led franchises. Similar strategies and contradictions mark the studios' more recent social media response to racial diversity and representation.

Social media has made studios more aware of multicultural audiences. Despite its significant downsides, the programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication of social media logic have granted visibility to voices mass media logic easily ignored. The emergent voices include underrepresented industry professionals *and* audiences. After all, a film fan, not an actor or screenwriter, created the viral hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. Beyond social activism, new digital marketing techniques have led advertisers to recognize the *economic* power of diverse audiences. For example, STX Entertainment cast Cardi B, Lizzo, Constance Wu, and Jennifer Lopez in *Hustlers* based upon Instagram data and an apparent effort to woo multicultural audiences. Without social media, STX executives might have never heard of Cardi B or Lizzo—and they certainly wouldn't have known about the vast, diverse audiences the performers attract online.

Simultaneously, recent digital campaigns reflect studios' anxiety about alienating the white audiences to whom they long catered. As we will see, Universal marketed *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) by obscuring the very racial specificity that scaffolds the film. The studio's *Fast*

and Furious franchise grew more diverse, but social media promotions sought to reassure a potentially uneasy white audience. When it remade *Aladdin* in 2019, Disney tried to correct the whitewashed casting and ethnic stereotypes of the 1992 original while still pleasing the fans who loved the older movie. Social media helped marketers walk the fine line.

Studio marketers often couch race and ethnicity in broad terms such as demographics, target markets, and salability, even in internal conversations. However, it is unquestionably part of the discussion. For example, at an April 2021 industry conference, Amazon Studios' chief marketing officer Ukonwa Ojo put it this way:

We're spending a lot of time really understanding our audience. We already know our point of view and what we have to sell, and what we want to get people excited about. But if we know more about them, their *ethnic background*, what they need to escape, what relaxes them, what gives them joy, what makes them angry? The more we learn about them, the more we understand the intersections that will be really motivating [emphasis added].⁹⁰⁷

Here again, social media expands an existing practice. In the pre-digital era, the marketer might have customized a message for the cable channels Black Entertainment Television (BET) or Telemundo or researched the demographics of particular TV shows or print publications. Social media provides much more data and much more granular targeting.

Most social media platforms do not allow advertisers to target by race or ethnicity directly. In August 2020, Facebook removed two targeting categories, "African American Affinity" and "Hispanic Affinity," after criticism. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development accused the platform of enabling discrimination by letting advertisers prohibit housing ads from appearing for users based on traits such as gender and race, a practice

⁹⁰⁷ Ukonwa Ojo, "Panel Discussion" (Variety Entertainment Marketing Summit, Videoconference, April 22, 2021).

barred by law.⁹⁰⁸ Facebook still allows advertisers to reach users interested in “African American Culture,” a similar category that considers Facebook activity, such as the pages followed.

YouTube allows demographic targeting by age, gender, parental status, and household income—but not race or ethnicity.⁹⁰⁹ However, YouTube and Google, like most social media platforms, offer interest-based targeting, allowing advertisers to reach “Rap & Hip Hop Fans” or “Motor Sports Enthusiasts,” for example.⁹¹⁰ Platforms also allow detailed location targeting by zip code or radius. Advertisers may use interest-based or location targeting as stand-ins for racial or ethnic categories; typically, advertisers can *exclude* selected categories. Most digital ad networks also allow language targeting, a feature Hollywood studios have used to reach U.S. Latinos, often bilingual.⁹¹¹

Notably, social media can reinforce people’s biases even when not an advertiser’s direct intent. Each social media post or digital ad is much less expensive than earlier forms such as print or television. So, advertisers test multiple versions to see how people respond. Most of the ad serving systems even automatically optimize to display the most clicked ads. If racial (or gender) bias makes a particular message more popular, that message will receive expanded exposure even if unintended. Emerging quantitative research suggests several ways in which social media platforms not only reinforce but even encourage biases. Most services focus on existing social networks, and people tend to evaluate information more favorably if it comes

⁹⁰⁸ Kurt Wagner, “Facebook Limits Ad Targeting That Some Linked to Race,” *Bloomberg.Com*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-11/facebook-further-limits-advertisers-ability-to-target-by-race>.

⁹⁰⁹ “About Targeting for Video Campaigns - YouTube Help,” Google Help Center, accessed March 6, 2021, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2454017?hl=en>.

⁹¹⁰ See <https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/2497941#zippy=%2Caffinity-audiences>.

⁹¹¹ Pamela McClintock, “Hollywood Studies Latin 101,” *Variety*, April 13, 2009.

from within their social circles. As a result, social media creates “echo chambers” ripe for manipulation, either consciously or unintentionally.

Another group of biases arises directly from the algorithms used to determine what people see online—engineers design personalization technologies to select only the most engaging and relevant content for each user. But in doing so, the platforms reinforce the cognitive and social biases of users.⁹¹² As sociologist Ruha Benjamin puts it, “rather than challenging or overcoming the cycles of inequity, technical fixes too often reinforce and even deepen the status quo.”⁹¹³ In her study of Google’s algorithms, Safiya Umoja Noble describes a “social hegemony” that reifies dominant ideologies, often regardless of the information a user actually seeks.⁹¹⁴

Studio marketers and other content producers may also be expressing their *own* biases, sometimes without realizing it. For example, Justin Lin, director of several films in the *Fast & Furious* franchise, recalls discussions with Universal executives who objected to spoken Spanish, with English subtitles, in a few scenes. “That’s been a challenge,” Lin says. “They don’t like subtitles and stuff. And it’s a fight.... My whole argument coming into this franchise was to say hey, look, you know, I get it. I get that you want to have chases; you want to have races; you want to have fun. But there are a lot of layers we can add in there.”⁹¹⁵ According to Lin, studio

⁹¹² Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia and Filippo Menczer, “Biases Make People Vulnerable to Misinformation Spread by Social Media,” *Scientific American*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/biases-make-people-vulnerable-to-misinformation-spread-by-social-media/>.

⁹¹³ Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 5.

⁹¹⁴ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 36.

⁹¹⁵ Quoted in Mary Beltrán, “Fast and Bilingual: ‘Fast & Furious’ and the Latinization of Racelessness,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 93.

executives said they objected to Spanish because it would distract from “fun” and “chases.” However, the objection may have reflected the executives’ bias—or their assumptions about the racial attitudes of their intended audience.

#OscarsSoWhite and Studio Marketers

Even as social media echo chambers worsen biases, the new technology has highlighted Hollywood’s prolonged failure to accurately reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the U.S, let alone the globe. In January 2015, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences academy awarded all 20 acting nominations to white actors, as it would again the following year, inspiring lawyer and movie fan April Reign to create the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. Reign’s protest, arriving shortly after #BlackLivesMatter, brought intense attention to Hollywood’s treatment of historically marginalized groups. Other social media-driven movements soon followed, from #WhiteWashedOUT for Asian representation to Time’s Up for gender parity. #OscarsSoWhite brought new urgency to what had been a slow—far too slow—embrace of increased diversity in front of and behind the camera. In 2017 and 2018, big studio films including *Black Panther*, *Get Out*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *Coco* demonstrated that multicultural films could win Oscars and significant box office returns. However, in 2019 only one performer of color (Cynthia Erivo) received a nomination, and all of the nominated directors were men, a reminder that the industry’s legacy of underrepresentation would not transform overnight.

Although people of color and women have seen more opportunities in recent years, both groups remain underrepresented on-screen, off-screen, and in the studios’ corporate offices. According to a UCLA report, in 2020, people of color comprised over 40 percent of the U.S. population but just 27.6 percent of film leads, 15.1 percent of film directors, and 13.9 percent of

screenwriters.⁹¹⁶ In addition, studio executive leadership remained dominated by white men. Studio heads were 91 percent white and 82 percent male; senior management teams were 93 percent white and 80 percent male. While the executives overseeing marketing casting, legal and other core studio functions were a bit more diverse in gender, 59 percent male, they were still 86 percent white.⁹¹⁷ At the Big Five Hollywood studios, all global marketing chiefs were men, and four were white men.⁹¹⁸

So, studio marketing and publicity teams—themselves not representative of the United States, let alone the globe—must promote a modestly more diverse film slate while facing scrutiny for their on-screen and behind-the-scenes inclusivity. While social media has created much of the scrutiny, it has also been an essential part of the studios’ response. As the Big Five studios produce fewer but more expensive films, most releases aim to be four-quadrant movies: appealing to everyone. Unfortunately, for the risk-averse studios, that has often meant maintaining the status quo, producing films that cater not only to the male gaze but to what Manthia Diawara and bell hooks have termed the “white gaze.”⁹¹⁹ Film historian Ed Guerrero observes that even as on-screen representation ostensibly improved in recent decades, Hollywood “continued to stock its productions with themes and formulas dealing with black

⁹¹⁶ Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report” (UCLA College, division of social sciences, 2020).

⁹¹⁷ Hunt and Ramón, 8.

⁹¹⁸ As of 2020, the heads of global film marketing, with slightly varying titles, were: Asad Ayaz, Disney; Michael Moses, Universal; Josh Greenstein and Keith Le Goy, Sony; Josh Goldstine, Warner Bros.; and Marc Weinstock, Paramount.

⁹¹⁹ Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” *Screen* 29, no. 4 (October 1, 1988): 66–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/29.4.66>; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

issues and characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience.”⁹²⁰ Often, of course, those reassuring themes and formulas appear on the big screen. Recently, they also appear in social media marketing, reframing a film in ways more palatable to the white audience.

Straight Outta Compton, a \$29 million biopic about the South Los Angeles origins of the rap group N.W.A, was one of Universal’s s most unexpected hits during its record-setting 2015.⁹²¹ The studio’s initial social media marketing, recognizing that the young actors in the film were largely unknown, focused on Ice Cube and Dr. Dre, the two most famous members of N.W.A. Even though neither appears in the movie, Universal produced a short video of the two rappers driving around Compton discussing their roots. The clip premiered at the Grammys in February, with more extended versions simultaneously released on Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms, garnering 44.5 million views.⁹²²

The most considerable marketing success came just before the film’s release, when Universal and its co-branding partner, Beats by Dre, launched a “Straight Outta Somewhere” meme generator that allowed people to insert their hometown (or other phrases) into the film’s black-and-white logo and even customize the background image. Digital agency PMG developed the promotion.⁹²³ The meme trended at No. 1 for two days straight on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Then, Universal cooperated with Snapchat to transform the meme into a customized

⁹²⁰ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Culture and the Moving Image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 162.

⁹²¹ Stewart, “Universal Conquers the Box Office, Without a Superhero.”

⁹²² LaPorte, “Pitch Perfect.”

⁹²³ “Straight Outta Somewhere: Our Work | PMG Digital Agency,” *PMG - Digital Agency* (blog), accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.pmg.com/work/straight-outta-somewhere/>.

geofilter, available the day before the film's release. "There were 9 million uses of that filter, seen by almost 200 million people," Universal's Doug Neil said in 2015. "My 13-year-old daughter was saying, 'All my friends are putting this up! I don't even know what Straight Outta Compton is!' You know you have crossed over at that point." Added Michael Moses: "Our mission on *Straight Outta Compton* was to make it a crossover film. To not just make it an African American film, or a musical biopic, but make it a bigger kind of cultural event. In our gut, we believe that [social media] played a big part in that."⁹²⁴

The campaign enabled "crossing over" by expanding the film's iconography far beyond its narrative context. Many celebrities shared the meme; Bette Midler tweeted "Straight Outta Salem," referencing her 1993 film *Hocus Pocus* (see Figure 51). Fans repurposed the meme to pay tribute to their favorite media, usually entirely unconnected to *Straight Outta Compton*; an Instagram user posted "Straight Outta Starfleet" alongside a picture of *Star Trek* actors William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy (Figure 52). The "Straight Outta" social media campaign, and Universal executives' comments about it, encapsulate the potential power of what I have termed the social media marquee. If a film has narrow appeal—or, at least, marketing executives think it does—the social media surround is one way to broaden the appeal. Social media marketing enables white viewers to reclaim a film not about them, reinforcing Richard Dyer's notion that on-screen whiteness has "a need to always be everything and nothing."⁹²⁵ Via meme, "Straight Outta Compton" can become "Straight Outta Beverly Hills" or "Straight Outta Starfleet,"

⁹²⁴ LaPorte, "Pitch Perfect."

⁹²⁵ Richard Dyer, *White*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2017), 39.

making the release relatable and marketable even as it papers over the racial and historical specificity that undergirds the actual film.

Fast, Furious, and “Multiculti”

Studio executives and Hollywood press often praise Universal’s street racing action franchise *Fast & Furious* for its on-screen diversity and multicultural appeal. Chris Lee writes in *Entertainment Weekly* that “in terms of sheer multicultural visibility, the *Fast & Furious* films stand as a singular splotch of color where the rubber meets the road.”⁹²⁶ Universal president of domestic distribution Nicholas Carpou said in 2015, following the success of *Furious 7*: “Someone that I admire quite a lot recently said this is a franchise that really looks like America, and there are characters that everyone can relate to. I think that’s a big plus.” And longtime Rentrak box office analyst Paul Dergarabedian added: “The importance of diversity of the ensemble cast in the Fast and Furious franchise has been an integral part of the success of the brand. There is literally someone within the cast that is relatable on some level to nearly every moviegoer around the world, and this has paid big dividends at the box office and also in terms of how casting decisions will be made in the future for these types of large-scale action epics.”⁹²⁷

Certainly, the franchise has been particularly successful in drawing diverse audiences to the theater. From a modestly budgeted first entry in 2001, the *Fast & Furious* franchise has spawned nine more films and a television series, short films, live shows, video games, and attractions at Universal Studios theme parks. In the total box office, it is the 7th most successful

⁹²⁶ Chris Lee, “‘Furious 7’ and Diversity: Why Hollywood Needs to Catch up with Reality,” EW.com, April 1, 2015, <https://ew.com/article/2015/04/01/furious-7-and-diversity-why-hollywood-needs-catch-reality/>.

⁹²⁷ Pamela McClintock, “‘Furious 7’ Audience 75 Percent Non-White: Inside the Diversity Stats,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), April 5, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/furious-7-audience-75-percent-786452/>.

film franchise in Hollywood history.⁹²⁸ Universal said that on the *Furious 7* opening weekend in 2015, 75 percent of the audience in North America was non-Caucasian, in line with previous installments. Hispanics, recently the most frequent moviegoers in the U.S., comprised the majority of ticket buyers (37 percent), followed by Caucasians (25 percent), Blacks (24 percent), and Asians (10 percent).⁹²⁹ The series has also performed exceptionally well outside of North America. *Furious 7* grossed \$1.16 billion in international markets, representing 76.7 percent of its total box office. For *The Fate of the Furious* (2017), the global share further increased to 81.7 percent. By comparison, *Jurassic World's* international gross was 60.9 percent of its total, and for the most recent *Star Wars* entry, *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), just 52.2 percent.⁹³⁰

Vin Diesel, the star of the franchise, summarizes the multicultural, multinational pitch this way: “It doesn’t matter what nationality you are. As a member of the audience, you realize you can be a member of that ‘family,’” he says. “That’s the beautiful thing about how the franchise has evolved.”⁹³¹ The films often refer to the racially and ethnically varied characters as a figurative “family.” Marketing and publicity emphasize the idea even further. Late-night comedian Stephen Colbert cut together a video of the press junket for the newest film, *F9* (2021), pointing out that every actor—from Diesel to supporting player Helen Mirren—dutifully responded that “family” was the franchise’s central theme.⁹³²

⁹²⁸ Sarah Whitten, “The 13 Highest-Grossing Film Franchises at the Box Office,” CNBC, January 31, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/31/the-13-highest-grossing-film-franchises-at-the-box-office.html>.

⁹²⁹ McClintock, “‘Furious 7’ Audience 75 Percent Non-White.”

⁹³⁰ Source: Box Office Mojo by IMDb Pro.

⁹³¹ Lee, “‘Furious 7’ and Diversity.”

⁹³² *Just One Question: “F9” Cast Edition*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIBDQ-IGYqU&ab_channel=TheLateShowwithStephenColbert.

However, a closer look at the films and their marketing suggests that Universal has found ways to maintain “characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience,” as Guerrero puts it. For Media scholar Mary Beltrán, the franchise exemplifies “multiculti films,” which “aim to look multicultural but are more ambiguous and typically white centrist on deeper examination.”⁹³³ For example, in the first film, the white undercover FBI agent Brian O’Conner (Paul Walker), ostensibly the outsider in the drag racing culture of South Los Angeles, easily outraces a series of Asian American and African American racers. Unfortunately, this hierarchy goes unnoticed in the narrative. As Beltrán puts it, “white characters are posited as dominant within a subculture in which they are often absent or marginal.”⁹³⁴

The first film also introduces Vin Diesel’s Dom Toretto, a law-skirting but sympathetic street racer. Dom’s ethnic identity has been ambiguous and flexible throughout the series. Diesel describes himself as multiracial. The initial film codes his character as Italian by giving him the last name “Toretto.” When his character returns in the fourth film, *Fast & Furious* (2009), he speaks fluent Spanish and listens to reggaeton music. Yet, in the 2021 *F9*, Dom’s brother is played by the white actor and professional wrestler John Cena. (Cena is of English, French-Canadian, and Italian descent.) Diesel commented: “As the world knows I’m a multicultural movie star. Which means you could have cast anyone to be my brother.”⁹³⁵ Beltrán notes that

⁹³³ Beltrán, “Fast and Bilingual,” 76.

⁹³⁴ Mary C. Beltran, “The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2005.0003>.

⁹³⁵ Caitlin Tyrrell, “F9’s Vin Diesel On Critical Need For Justin Lin To Direct And Casting John Cena In The Pivotal Role Of Jakob - The Illuminerdi,” June 24, 2021, <https://www.theilluminerdi.com/2021/06/24/f9-justin-lin-john-cena-jakob/>.

Dom is a liminal figure, combining traditional notions of American whiteness with cultural flexibility and mastery.⁹³⁶

Thus, the filmic text of the *Fast & Furious* franchise is inclusive but culturally nonspecific, allowing marketing and other paratexts to define the film in different ways for different audiences. Universal's marketing department has specifically pitched the franchise to Latinos in the United States and Latin America. The studio ran Spanish-language ads on Telemundo and Univisión, placed previews on social media platforms and websites targeting Latinos, and purchased outdoor advertising in Spanish and English in US neighborhoods with large Latino populations. Moreover, stars Michelle Rodriguez and Vin Diesel participated in Spanish-language press junkets in Mexico and Miami, which the actors and Universal shared on social media.⁹³⁷ And yet, Universal executives remained concerned about alienating other demographics by including subtitled dialogue in Spanish.⁹³⁸

After original series star Paul Walker was killed in a car accident in 2013, producers hired other white actors for pivotal roles in subsequent films. The British action star Jason Statham played the antagonist in *Furious 7*, the last movie to feature Walker, but his character became Dom's ally in the next installment, *The Fate of the Furious* (2017). And Diesel notes that a producer specifically suggested John Cena play his brother in *F9*.⁹³⁹ Social media enables marketers to emphasize different characters to different demographics. On its "Universal Latino"

⁹³⁶ Beltrán, "Fast and Bilingual," 86.

⁹³⁷ McClintock, "Hollywood Studies Latin 101."

⁹³⁸ Beltrán, "Fast and Bilingual," 93.

⁹³⁹ Tyrrell, "F9's Vin Diesel On Critical Need For Justin Lin To Direct And Casting John Cena In The Pivotal Role Of Jakob - The Illuminerdi."

channel on YouTube, the studio released a trailer with a Spanish-language voiceover by Diesel; the channel targets Latinos in the U.S. “We are ready to make you believe again. Nothing comes back like the movies. We will see you soon,” the actor intones in Spanish (a reference to the fact that *F9* is one of the first big-budget releases following closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic).⁹⁴⁰ Diesel is not a native Spanish speaker, as one YouTube commenter noted: “Parece que está aprendiendo a hablar 🗣️ [it looks like he is learning to speak].” Visually, the trailer emphasizes Diesel’s Dom and Michelle Rodriguez’s Letty, with just a single brief shot of John Cena. By contrast, the primary English-language trailer, released on Universal’s “Fast Saga” YouTube channel and heavily promoted through other social media, emphasizes Cena’s character, explaining his backstory and featuring multiple clips.⁹⁴¹

Cena is best known as a WWE wrestler. WWE’s fan base is about half white, though it’s also popular with Latinos and Blacks, making the casting an ideal fit with *F9*’s target audience.⁹⁴² (Other entries in the franchise feature Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, a former WWE star.) Universal’s social media promotion for *F9* has frequently focused on Cena, even though he is new to the franchise and plays the antagonist. Tweets about or by Cena dominate the list of most favorited or retweeted on the official @FuriousSaga account.⁹⁴³ In one popular series of Tweets orchestrated by Universal, Cena promotes cars featured in the film. In Figure 53, Cena’s

⁹⁴⁰ Universal Latino, *F9- Regreso al Cine (Un Mensaje de Vin Diesel En Español)*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T1JndOh4fE&ab_channel=UniversalLatino.

⁹⁴¹ The Fast Saga, *F9 - Official Trailer [HD]*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSiDu3Ywi8E&ab_channel=TheFastSaga.

⁹⁴² “Tracking Fan Avidity for the Fight Game,” *Sports Business Journal*, April 22, 2013, [https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com:443/Journal/Issues/2013/04/22/In Depth/Fight fan avidity.aspx](https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com:443/Journal/Issues/2013/04/22/In%20Depth/Fight%20fan%20avidity.aspx).

⁹⁴³ Twitter data from Social Bearing for account @FuriousSaga.

May 2021 Tweet about an Aston-Martin includes a video with a few shots of the vehicle and many shots of the film. Meanwhile, on YouTube and other platforms, a recut version of the trailer, released after COVID had delayed the premiere, makes Cena's character seem more sympathetic, including a voiceover in which the character explains his motivations.⁹⁴⁴

Universal marketers acknowledge that demographic targeting and the number of social media followers have been an essential factor in casting and promotional approaches for the *Furious* saga.⁹⁴⁵ The strategy has been especially noticeable in the casting of small cameos in the films. For example, the Puerto Rican singer Ozuna (37.3 million likes on TikTok and 21.6 million followers on Instagram, as of June 2021) makes a brief appearance in *F9*. To emphasize it, Universal arranged for Ozuna and Vin Diesel to appear at the 2021 Latin American Music Awards; the clip was shared on social media by Ozuna, Diesel, Universal, and the awards themselves (see Figure 54). With 98.9 million followers on Instagram and 48.1 million likes on TikTok, rapper Cardi B also has a short cameo in *F9*. She has appeared frequently on Universal's social media channels. To fans of Ozuna or Cardi B, the performers' fleeting roles in the film take on more significance thanks to social media (or at least Universal hopes they will). At the same time, *F9* remains "white centrist," to use Beltrán's phrase, thanks to John Cena and the ethnically ambiguous Vin Diesel.

Disney: Reframing Stereotypes

While Universal executives celebrated their multicultural franchise, Disney's team—two miles northeast, in Burbank—heralded the success of *Black Panther* (2018). The Marvel

⁹⁴⁴ The Fast Saga, *F9 - Official Trailer 2*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEE4RO-_jug&ab_channel=TheFastSaga.

⁹⁴⁵ Former Universal marketing staffer, videoconference interview with the author, June 7, 2019.

superhero film, featuring a predominantly Black cast, a Black director in Ryan Coogler, and an Afrofuturistic aesthetic, grossed \$700 million in North America and \$1.34 billion worldwide. Disney viewed the film as particularly important given that previous entries in the Marvel franchise had received criticism for primarily white casts and creative personnel, including from franchise actors such as Anthony Mackie.⁹⁴⁶ When discussing marketing strategy for the film, Disney executives particularly emphasized outreach to Black audiences. Said Theresa Cross, a vice president of marketing strategy and communications at Disney: “We had seen significant engagement and excitement from multicultural consumers, specifically black women, who were engaged at a higher rate than anyone for this film.”⁹⁴⁷ However, as with *Fast & Furious*, text and paratext also targeted the white audiences important to the Marvel franchise.

The first teaser trailer for the film, broadcast on television but released simultaneously on YouTube with over 42 million views, is structured around a conversation between the only two white characters in the movie, Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman) and Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis).⁹⁴⁸ Ross and Klaue receive far more screen time in the trailer than they do in the film. Notably, this first trailer was released nearly a year in advance, when existing fans of the Marvel universe (who are predominately white) would presumably be most attuned. A viewer who saw that teaser trailer and then followed various Tweets about or by the actor Martin Freeman might pay increased attention to Freeman’s relatively minor role in the film and then share that

⁹⁴⁶ Ellie Bate, “Anthony Mackie Said Marvel’s Lack Of Diversity Behind The Camera ‘Bothered’ Him,” BuzzFeed, June 29, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/eleanorbate/anthony-mackie-captain-america-marvel-diversity>.

⁹⁴⁷ “Disney’s marketing playbook for ‘Black Panther,’” WARC case study, February 25, 2019, https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/disneys_marketing_playbook_for_black_panther/41729.

⁹⁴⁸ Marvel Entertainment, “Black Panther Teaser Trailer,” YouTube video, posted June 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxWvtMOGAhw>.

perspective with others. A possible example: after watching the movie, one Twitter user posted a (satirical?) reading of the film focused on Freeman's character (see Figure 55). "[I] was delighted to finally see a character on a movie screen who looked like me: martin freeman as a scrawny middle-aged white guy whose knowledge is obsolete compared to that of the muscular people barking at him when he tries to speak," wrote the New York-based commenter, an avid tweeter on video games and pop culture with 55,000 followers.⁹⁴⁹ The tweet not only centers on Freeman's character, but it also casts him as something of a victim to the "muscular people barking at him."

Freeman's Everett Ross seems to be a reassuring stand-in for white Marvel fans in the film itself. Ross is a CIA agent who is injured while heroically protecting Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), a diplomat from the Kingdom of Wakanda. Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman) takes Ross back to Wakanda, where advanced technology will heal him. For the rest of the film, Ross aids and cheers on Black Panther. Like viewers, Ross is wowed by and appreciative of Wakanda's technology and beauty; we are encouraged to place ourselves in his shoes.

Moreover, the film places Ross in direct opposition to the other white character, Serkis's villain Ulysses Klaue, a black-market arms dealer threatening the peaceful Wakanda. The framing is also consistent with an observation Mary Beltrán makes about *Fast & Furious*, that "ambiguously white heroes [are] at times positioned in contrast to villainous white characters."⁹⁵⁰ Despite his minor importance to the narrative, white viewers can root for Ross

⁹⁴⁹ Statistics from Twitter, April 10, 2021. Although the Tweet is publicly available, I am not including the user name here to respect his privacy.

⁹⁵⁰ Beltrán, "Fast and Bilingual," 85–86.

because he is “woke” enough to appreciate the beauty of Wakanda’s culture, in contrast with the mercenary Klaue.

Even as Disney released more culturally diverse content, including *Black Panther* and the Mexico-set Pixar film *Coco* (2017), it also leaned heavily on its older intellectual property. The launch of the Disney+ streaming service highlighted a challenge for the company: while it wants to profit from its vast library of childhood favorites, many films would not be released today due to stereotypes and racist content. When Disney+ launched in November 2019, it included a mild warning before films such as *Dumbo* (1941) and *Peter Pan* (1953): “This program is presented as originally created. It may contain outdated cultural depictions.”⁹⁵¹ In October 2020, the company switched to a more robust and extended advisory:

This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together. Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe.

The new statement refers viewers to a website, where Disney explains some—though not all—of the offensive content and says a third-party “advisory council” provides the company with “ongoing guidance and thought leadership on critical issues and shifting perceptions.”⁹⁵²

Arguably, the warning is Disney’s effort to have its cake and eat it, too, since it benefits from the stereotyped movies while also advertising its newfound cultural awareness.

⁹⁵¹ Eli Countryman and Janet W. Lee, “Disney Plus Adds Content Warning to ‘Dumbo,’ ‘Peter Pan,’” *Variety* (blog), October 15, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/disney-plus-dumbo-peter-pan-content-warning-1234806732/>.

⁹⁵² “Stories Matter - The Walt Disney Company,” *Stories Matter - The Walt Disney Company*, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://storiesmatter.thewaltdisneycompany.com/>.

The same tightrope walk has influenced another of Disney's current practices: releasing live-action or computer-generated remakes of its classic animated films. The original animated *Aladdin* (1992), though not even 30 years old, is one of the films to receive the "negative depictions" warning on Disney+. The studio's website does not explain why. However, after the original release, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) complained about "Arabian Nights," the opening song. In partial response, Disney altered some of the lyrics on the home video release, from "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face" to "Where it's flat and immense, and the heat is intense."⁹⁵³ The ADC also pointed out that while the heroes, Aladdin and Princess Jasmine, have anglicized features and Anglo-American accents, background characters and particularly the villains have foreign accents and exaggerated facial features. White actors of European descent also voiced the Arab characters. However, the objections did not prevent the film from achieving critical acclaim and huge box office success.

In 2019, Disney released a live-action remake of *Aladdin*, with Will Smith starring as Genie, the role originated by Robin Williams. The new film includes most of the same music and broadly the same plot, although Princess Jasmine receives a more politically aware, active character arc. Disney emphasized casting actors of Middle Eastern or Indian descent and delayed the start of production because it said it was having trouble finding the right performers to play Aladdin and Jasmine.⁹⁵⁴ Producers eventually cast Mena Massoud, an Egyptian-Canadian actor, as Aladdin and Naomi Scott as Jasmine. Even Scott's casting led to some suggestions of

⁹⁵³ Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman, "Arab Stereotypes and American Educators," American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, March 1995, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070405005650/http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=283>.

⁹⁵⁴ Rebecca Ford and Mia Galuppo, "'Aladdin': Disney Struggles to Find Stars for Its Live-Action Movie," *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), July 11, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/aladdin-movie-disney-struggles-find-stars-1019690/>.

colorism, given her light skin and English heritage (Scott's father is English, and her mother is of Indian Gujarati descent).⁹⁵⁵ In any case, Disney's marketers knew that they needed to attract people who had loved the 1992 film, many of whom by 2019 were parents of young children. In a subtler variant of the Disney+ content warning, the company wanted to profit from the 1992 film—including its Eurocentrism and Arab stereotypes—while avoiding controversy in a more culturally aware era. Social media helped it do so.

Many of Disney's official social media posts leaned heavily on nostalgia, reminiscent of Universal's *Jurassic World* strategy. For example, a May 2019 Tweet (Figure 56), captioned "the magic comes to life," places the 1992 animated characters alongside their live-action 2019 counterparts. Therefore, the tweet perpetuates some of the original stereotyped images, such as Aladdin's and Jasmine's Anglicized features contrasted with the villain Jafar's darker skin and exaggerated, hook-like nose. Another studio tweet includes a film still of Mena Massoud and Will Smith as Aladdin and Genie, but the lighting and shot distance obscures the actors' identity (Figure 57). These posts seem intended to attract fans who would rather revisit the 1992 version than see the updated, more culturally aware take. Likewise, Disney's trailers and posters emphasized scenes from the original feature, rarely emphasizing any new narrative elements. Of course, it is not surprising that Disney would want to remind people of the earlier film; that is a vital benefit of a remake or pre-sold franchise. Nevertheless, social media allows the studio to traffic in the same stereotypes it has supposedly moved past.

It is worth noting that many of the most popular #Aladdin tweets came from Mena Massoud, a relatively unknown actor whom Disney promoted and became popular with a young,

⁹⁵⁵ Erum Salam, "The Fairest of Them All? Two Cheers for Aladdin's Browner Princess Jasmine," the Guardian, May 24, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/24/aladdin-princess-jasmine-brown-colorism-disney>.

multicultural audience online.⁹⁵⁶ However, that point is a reminder of social media’s “choose-your-own-adventure” flexibility, which marketers exploit to mediate between audiences. Parents who grew up with the animated film might retweet or favorite the nostalgic posts, while their kids might retweet or follow Massoud. As we have seen in earlier case studies, digital marketers also consider the varying demographics of each social media platform. Disney’s Facebook posts generally target that platform’s older, female-leaning demographic. In an August 2020 post (which received thousands of comments and likes, despite being several years after the film’s release), Disney’s Aladdin Facebook asked: “Which is your idea of a magical evening?” above photos of various animated Disney princes, including the 1992 Aladdin (see Figure 58). Of course, even social media sometimes exposes generational fault lines. By far the most liked user response: “Flying with Aladdin but the live action Aladdin. Mena Massoud is gorgeous!”

Disney followed a similar strategy—balancing nostalgia with a more culturally aware present—for its 2019 photorealistic, computer-generated remake of 1994’s *The Lion King*. Although set in Africa, the animated original, like *Aladdin*, had white voice actors performing key roles; Matthew Broderick voiced the protagonist, Simba. Producers attempted to rectify the whitewashing in 2019 with a more diverse voice cast, including Donald Glover as Simba and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter as Nala, Simba’s partner. But, again, Disney’s marketing attempted to simultaneously trumpet its newfound cultural diversity and lean into nostalgia for the 1990s hit. Asad Ayaz, Disney’s president of marketing, described the incremental strategy: “We had a very

⁹⁵⁶ Claim based upon most retweets and most favorites; Twitter stats collected by Social Bearing, <https://socialbearing.com/search/general/disneyaladdin>.

carefully planned out ‘pulsed’ campaign. *The Lion King* is a beloved property. At the same time you’re bringing in new audiences around the world who may not have seen the original.”⁹⁵⁷

Released on YouTube in November 2018, the teaser trailer included a long voiceover by James Earl Jones, the sole actor returning from the first film, and many shot-for-shot replications of the animated version—an initial play for nostalgia.⁹⁵⁸ Later in the marketing cycle, as the July 2019 release date neared, the studio deployed the voice cast to target different demographics. One YouTube trailer focused solely on Beyoncé’s voiceover work as Nala, which the studio had intentionally not released earlier, to capitalize on her social media (and press) popularity.⁹⁵⁹ Other social media and press featured joint appearances by Seth Rogen and Billy Eichner, the white actors voicing the comic relief characters Pumbaa and Timon.⁹⁶⁰ That particular casting most closely resembled the original voice actors, Ernie Sabella and Nathan Lane. On the other hand, Disney brought some promotions for the movie to the New Orleans Essence Fest, the most prominent African American culture and music event in the U.S. The studio aimed for social media buzz, offering a brunch for current and aspiring social media influencers and an Instagram-ready photo booth with *Lion King* background. The studio also hosted a chat with and

⁹⁵⁷ Chris Thilk, “Behind Disney’s Massive ‘Lion King’ Marketing Effort,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), July 19, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/behind-disneys-massive-lion-king-marketing-effort-1225625/>.

⁹⁵⁸ Walt Disney Studios, *The Lion King Official Teaser Trailer*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CbLXeGSDxg&ab_channel=WaltDisneyStudios.

⁹⁵⁹ Walt Disney Studios, *The Lion King Sneak Peek | “Come Home,”* 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoGhxfndjpM&ab_channel=WaltDisneyStudios.

⁹⁶⁰ For example, Fandango All Access, *Seth Rogen & Billy Eichner “Hated” Singing with Donald Glover in ‘The Lion King,’* 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vsKII0A5tU&ab_channel=FandangoAllAccess.

performance by JD McCrary and Shahadi Wright Joseph, who voice the young versions of Simba and Nala, respectively. Disney posted the event to Facebook.⁹⁶¹

With *Black Panther*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King*, Disney marketers emphasized cultural inclusion in the filmic text but de-emphasized it in many social media paratexts. In other cases, the studio's marketing and publicity suggested racial diversity not fully present on the big screen. The 88-second teaser for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, released digitally on November 28, 2014, was one of the most anticipated film trailers in years. The upcoming title marked the start of a new franchise trilogy and the first film in over 30 years to feature the original cast, Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill, and Carrie Fisher. It was also the first *Star Wars* film since Disney gained control of the franchise with its 2012 acquisition of Lucasfilm. And the hotly anticipated trailer began with the striking image of a scared, lone stormtrooper in a barren desert, helmet removed.⁹⁶² Perhaps even more memorable was the face under the helmet: the Black, British actor John Boyega. It seemed like a moment of cultural change for (another) franchise long critiqued for its lily-white heroes and racial stereotypes. #BlackStormtrooper became a trending topic on social media, largely celebratory but with pockets of outright racism.⁹⁶³

While Boyega's character, Finn, had a significant if not leading role in *The Force Awakens*, he became less central in *The Last Jedi* (2017) and particularly *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019). "What I say to Disney is do not market a Black character as important and then push

⁹⁶¹ Thilk, "Behind Disney's Massive 'Lion King' Marketing Effort." Facebook video: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=342820803300496&ref=watch_permalink.

⁹⁶² Star Wars, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens Official Teaser*, accessed July 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erLk59H86ww&ab_channel=StarWars.

⁹⁶³ Kriston Capps, "'The Force Awakens' Teaser: Of Course There Are Black Stormtroopers in Star Wars," *The Atlantic*, November 29, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/of-course-there-are-black-stormtroopers-in-star-wars/383259/>.

them aside,” Boyega commented in 2020.⁹⁶⁴ A similar fate befell the character of Rose Tico, introduced in *The Last Jedi* and played by the Vietnamese American actress Kelly Marie Tran. Tran was the first woman of color to play a leading character in a *Star Wars* film. Disney sent Tran on a press tour through several Asian countries.⁹⁶⁵ However, the actress received so much racist and sexist harassment on social media that she deleted her Instagram account.⁹⁶⁶ Rose was on screen for nearly 11 minutes in *The Last Jedi*, sharing a story arc with Boyega’s Finn. In advance of the third film, director J.J. Abrams effusively praised Tran and the character in social media and press appearances. So, fans were surprised when Rose appeared for barely one minute in *Rise of Skywalker*.⁹⁶⁷ Some suggested that Disney or the filmmakers had caved to the online racism, a charge co-screenwriter Chris Terrio denied.⁹⁶⁸ (He said the reason for Rose’s fleeting appearance was editing challenges following the unexpected death of Carrie Fisher.)

Boyega argued that the trilogy did not deliver on Disney’s multicultural marketing promise and ended up preferring the white characters, Daisy Ridley’s Rey and Adam Driver’s Kylo Ren. He explained:

Like, you guys knew what to do with Daisy Ridley, you knew what to do with Adam Driver. You knew what to do with these other people, but when it came to Kelly Marie Tran, when it came to John Boyega, you know fuck all. So what do you want me to say?

⁹⁶⁴ Famurewa, “John Boyega.”

⁹⁶⁵ John Lui, “Kelly Marie Tran Not a Fan before Nabbing Major Star Wars Role,” Text, *The Straits Times*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/star-wars-actress-wants-to-engineer-change>.

⁹⁶⁶ Kelly Marie Tran, “Kelly Marie Tran: I Won’t Be Marginalized by Online Harassment,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 2018, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/movies/kelly-marie-tran.html>.

⁹⁶⁷ Violet Kim, “Kelly Marie Tran Is in Even Less of The Rise of Skywalker Than We Thought,” *Slate Magazine*, December 24, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/12/the-rise-of-skywalker-kelly-marie-tran-rose-tico-time-onscreen.html>.

⁹⁶⁸ Ryan Lattanzio, “‘Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker’ Writer Explains Rose Tico’s Absence | IndieWire,” December 29, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/12/star-wars-rise-of-skywalker-rose-tico-kelly-marie-tran-1202199542/>.

What they want you to say is, ‘I enjoyed being a part of it. It was a great experience...’ Nah, nah, nah. I’ll take that deal when it’s a great experience. They gave all the nuance to Adam Driver, all the nuance to Daisy Ridley. Let’s be honest. Daisy knows this. Adam knows this. Everybody knows. I’m not exposing anything.⁹⁶⁹

Studio executives are loath to discuss editing decisions or script rewrites and even more hesitant to directly address charges of racial discrimination, so it is hard to ascertain the exact reasons for the character changes. What is clear is the disconnect between promotional paratext and text.

Which Came First, the Movie or the Marketing?

Thus, ambivalence marks Disney’s and other studios’ digital response to race and representation. That point does not undercut the real gains made over the past six years. Social media deserves credit for forcing Hollywood to confront its whitewashing. Along the way, some marketing departments even belatedly discovered the economic value of entertainment content that reflects the diversity of the audience. Since marketers have increasing influence over film content, their data-driven insights impact who ends up on the screen. And when a studio reneges on its advertising promise, as when Disney seemingly sidelined Boyega and Tran, social platforms give fans a way to call it out. Still, we must recognize that technology can also reinforce institutional discrimination—and marketers can use it to placate perceived biases in their audiences. That makes it crucial to investigate a movie’s social media marketing alongside the film text itself.

Social media’s ability to mediate screen representation underscores the stakes of this study. In an age when a YouTube trailer or celebrity Instagram post regularly receives more views than a feature film, we cannot understand a movie’s cultural influence without

⁹⁶⁹ Famurewa, “John Boyega.”

interrogating its digital, promotional surround. By tracing the studios' slow embrace of social media marketing, I have aimed to underscore the cultural, industrial, and scholarly significance of the uneasy but increasingly unshakable marriage between Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Social media has shifted the power balance in Hollywood production. A studio marketing department may have as much influence over the viewing experience as a film's director, screenwriter, or cinematographer.

Our hyper-connected world has granted Hollywood marketers new opportunities and new risks. The same is true of media scholars. I would argue that production or industrial studies should take into account marketing departments and their increasingly significant authorial role. Textual analyses, including those focused on race, gender, sexuality, or ideology, might consider the mediating influence of social media marketing. While many audience and fan scholars already explore online communities, I hope my study has highlighted marketers' significant (but certainly not limitless) power to shape fan interpretations. Although it introduces complexities, social media also offers countless new avenues for qualitative and quantitative analysis; I have aimed to model a few.

This study has focused on *theatrical film* marketing practices at a time when the distinction between movies, television, and streaming platforms seems ever fuzzier. Theater closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with four of the Big Five studios introducing new direct-to-consumer streaming platforms: Disney+ (November 2019), WarnerMedia's HBO Max (May 2020), NBCUniversal's Peacock (July 2020), and Paramount+ (March 2021). Warner released its entire 2021 slate simultaneously on HBO Max and in open movie theaters, although

it signed a deal with AMC Theatres to return to a 45-day exclusive theatrical window in 2022.⁹⁷⁰ Likewise, Disney has released several major films day-and-date to streaming and theaters. On its opening weekend in July 2021, the Marvel entry *Black Widow* earned \$158 million globally in theaters—and another \$60 million on Disney+, where subscribers paid an additional \$30 to watch it.⁹⁷¹ And in just the last four months of 2021, streaming leader Netflix planned to release 42 feature films to its platform; notably, 14 of them will also receive a limited theatrical release.⁹⁷²

However, even as Silicon Valley and Hollywood business models converge, the social media marketing practices I have outlined remain as relevant as ever. In a crowded and complex media marketplace, studios desperately need ways to stand out—for theatrical and streaming releases alike. In the introduction, I argued that Hollywood films had become costly advertisements for other products, a point still valid in the streaming era. In most cases, movies remain the “mothership,” to use Henry Jenkins’s term, for transmedia franchises that extend across television, streaming, video games, theme parks, and merchandise.⁹⁷³ The Big Five continue to invest heavily in film marketing not because the theatrical studios are their most profitable business units—they haven’t been for decades—but because a high-profile movie

⁹⁷⁰ Pamela McClintock, “Warner Bros., AMC Strike 45-Day Exclusive Theatrical Window Deal for 2022,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), August 9, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/warner-bros-commits-to-exclusive-theatrical-release-in-2022-in-new-amc-theatre-deal-1234995035/>.

⁹⁷¹ Adam B. Vary and Rebecca Rubin, “Marvel’s ‘Black Widow’ Made \$60 Million on Disney Plus. Is That Good?,” *Variety* (blog), July 12, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/digital/box-office/black-widow-disney-plus-opening-analysis-1235017115/>.

⁹⁷² Scott Mendelson, “Every Netflix Movie Headed To Theaters In 2021 (And Two Shockingly Not),” *Forbes*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2021/08/24/netflix-movies-in-theaters-dicaprio-halle-berry-idris-elba-jennifer-lawrence-benedict-cumberbatch-melissa-mcarthy-winstead-gyllenhaal/>.

⁹⁷³ Jenkins, “The Reign of the ‘Mothership.’”

release is a rare chance to cut through the media clutter. It mostly remains true that the theatrical release “sets the value for the markets that follow,” as media scholar Janet Wasko puts it.⁹⁷⁴

Social media's interactivity, scale, and logic enable marketers to reframe films to be more friendly to their career or corporate interests. The viewer who browses hundreds of Lionsgate's fashion-focused “Capitol Couture” posts before seeing *The Hunger Games* may well miss the political and media critiques of the film (and novel). *Jurassic World* becomes even more of an advertisement for Universal's theme parks and the marketing department's lucrative co-branding deals through social media posts. The digital surround customizes the high concept *Fast & Furious* franchise to simultaneously appeal to a white, middle-aged WWE fan and a young, bilingual TikTok follower of Puerto Rican singer Ozuna. Disney hopes to attract a new, multicultural generation to its *Aladdin* remake while still pleasing older fans who never really noticed (or perhaps even enjoyed) the stereotypes of the 1992 original.

In the social media and streaming era, media convergence partially collapses the distinction between television, theatrical films, and online videos. More significantly, it collapses the difference between marketing and all of the above. Social media logic obscures once-clearer lines between advertising and content. Connected platforms require relentless self-presentation, essentially turning all participants—stars, directors, below-the-line laborers, and average users—into marketers. So, when a YouTube trailer attracts far more viewers than the film it promotes, an Instagram meme frames the way most people remember a movie, or social media marketing begins long before a finished script, the question is not only whether we can tell the difference between a film and its advertising. The question is whether there is any difference at all.

⁹⁷⁴ Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2003), 88.

Figures



bettemidler
@BetteMidler



"Straight Outta Compton" is the story of the "world's most dangerous group," but I think I know a more dangerous one:



1:04 PM · Aug 10, 2015



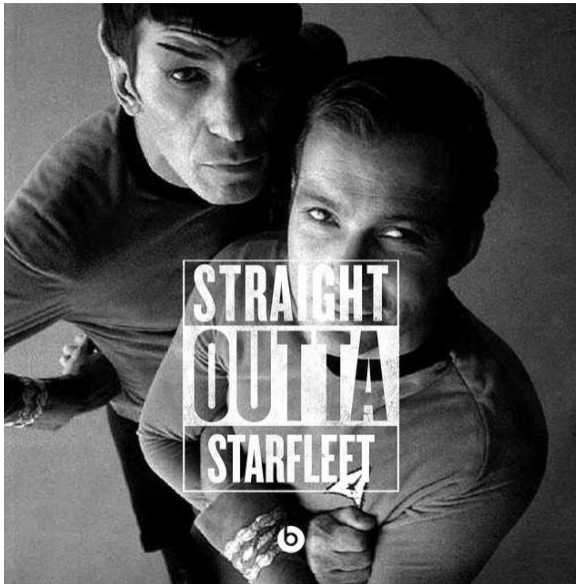
3.9K 144 Share this Tweet

Figure 51. A meme generator for *Straight Outta Compton* encouraged celebrities and fans to repurpose the film's narrative.



yipp'
322 followers

View Profile



[View More on Instagram](#)

Figure 52. Many fans paid tribute to their favorite media, unrelated to the film.



John Cena @JohnCena · May 18



There are so many things I can (and will) say about this car and can say from personal experience. It's sleek, sexy, and FAST!!! May I present the Aston Martin Vanquish S! @TheFastSaga is back June 25!



717

2.2K

13.4K



Figure 53. Universal's official Twitter account emphasized John Cena over other actors with longer associations with the franchise. The studio orchestrated and retweeted this promotional video. Source: Twitter, May 18, 2021.



Figure 54. The Puerto Rican singer Ozuna has a small role in *F9*, but Universal emphasized it through social media and publicity.



Figure 55. A Twitter user focused on one of the few white characters in Disney's *Black Panther* (2018). The studio's teaser trailer had also emphasized the white characters.



Disney's Aladdin @disneyaladdin · May 31, 2019

The magic comes to life.

See Disney's #Aladdin in theaters now, get tickets: [Fandango.com/Aladdin](https://www.fandango.com/Aladdin)



27

1K

2.4K

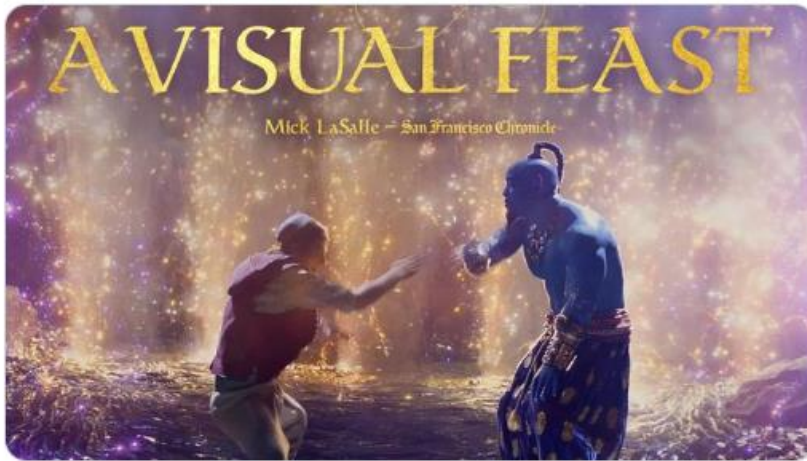
Figure 56. Disney's Twitter post connected its 2019 *Aladdin* to the 1992 animated version, including criticized cultural stereotypes.



Disney's Aladdin @disneyaladdin · May 29, 2019

The magic comes to life. See Disney's #Aladdin now playing in theaters.

Get tickets: [Fandango.com/Aladdin](https://www.fandango.com/Aladdin)



7

122

658

Figure 57. An image Disney shared on multiple social media platforms obscured the identities of the live-action actors.

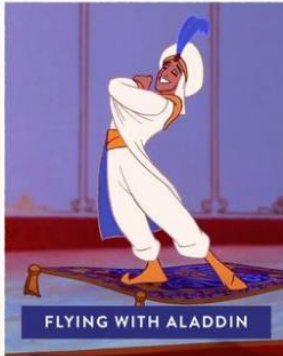
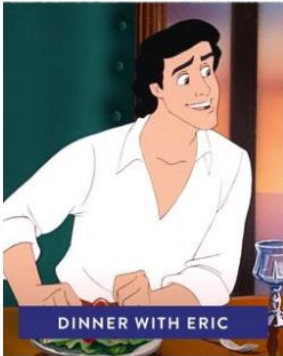


Aladdin

August 16, 2020



Which is your idea of a magical evening? 🌙✨ (Hint: The answer can be all of them! 😊)



3.6K

1.1K Comments 568 Sha

Figure 58. Disney's 2020 Facebook post focuses on nostalgia for the earlier animated version.

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