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A New Precedent for Superhero Movies:

Analyzing Deadpool's Social Media Marketing Strategy

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Intro

Deadpool is a film created by Fox Home Entertainment that had the honor of holding the title of the fastest selling superhero Digital HD movie and also held the #1 spot for DVD and Blu-Ray sales for three weeks in a row (Fox Home Entertainment 2017). Not to mention that it is also the highest grossing R-rated film of all time (Poggi 2016). This is markedly impressive, considering that it surpassed Fox's opening weekend estimate of \$70 million by \$60 million with a low budget of \$58 billion.

To reach this level of success, it has utilized social media in a whole new way to achieve a heightened brand awareness of a previously relatively unknown character. The awareness exceeds that of its predecessors by reaching multiple platforms utilizing transmedia storytelling as well as challenging people to do more with their social media. It connected a larger variety of audiences this way that normally would not engage with this genre of film (Scott 2017). In fact, the main character is portrayed as heavily inclusive and speaks to different people by utilizing the human connection by encouraging people to take action beyond simply seeing the movie, and thus, was more effective.

So, my assertion is that the film was successful due to its social media marketing campaign. The social media marketing campaign was extensive, meaning that it reached a large audience, it was also inclusive in its attempts to secure audiences that are not normally targeted for superhero films, and the goals of the campaign encouraged people to take action beyond seeing the movie (interactivity), adding personal attachment and feelings to the project that would have been lost if the audience had just been directed to "go see the movie".

Literature Review

What about *Deadpool*'s social media marketing strategy catapulted it to industry success? To find that answer, we must examine what mechanisms make it different from the rest. To do so, the literature included examines popular culture from the lens of academia, including the importance of transmedia storytelling.

In his blog, Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California, gives readers a crash course in what transmedia storytelling is and how it is portrayed in popular media, including in the popular film *The Matrix*. He demonstrates the economic imperative for the entertainment industry to utilize transmedia storytelling with one of his key examples being that of comic book universes. The creation of these universes creates endless transmedia opportunity and experiences that are enriched for the consumer by getting valuable insight into beloved characters. The blog is a highly accessible medium with the condensed information included and updated from his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*.

Suzanne Scott, an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Texas at Austin who specializes in fan and digital culture, academically illustrates fandoms as catering to a predominantly male audience through different examples of media, including through a member of the Marvel Universe: Agent Coulson. She asserts that, the narrative model that she compares to the "Marvel Model" "valorizes and validates historically male-dominated fan practices, and in turn imagines male fans as the primary audience for its content" (p 1051). This shows that the traditional transmedia storytelling model employed by Marvel would have done the same thing, but *Deadpool*'s ability to reach multiple audiences was a push away from this traditionally male model.

The literature supports the idea that Deadpool's social media campaign fits the framework for transmedia storytelling, which was a key in its success with a more modern, interactivity-driven media audience. Deadpool was advertised over a variety of platforms, including Snapchat (Figure 1.) and during the Clio awards (Fox Home Entertainment 2017, 20th Century Fox 2016). In addition, they were given a role beyond simply seeing the movie—like preventative self-care in the cancer ads, for instance— and that made all the difference.

In addition, opening up to this wider audience using transmedia storytelling has created a more inclusive culture culminated by Deadpool as a character, whereas most superhero movies are only trying to appeal to male audiences. This is partly because Deadpool is pansexual and (sometimes) effeminate, different from the norm of what society deems as acceptably masculine. The marketing for the film sought to attract more female audiences, not only by expanding their marketing platforms so widely, but also by including marketing campaigns for breast cancer and by (though humorously) creating female-friendly ads for the film. These works are definitely connected with that of Jenkins (2012). For example, she says that "...the Marvel Model and the contemporary understanding of transmedia franchising have become so conceptually intertwined, it is important to note that the two-sidedness endemic to Marvel Studio's self-branding (independent/blockbuster; old/new storytelling and business models) also extends to transmedia franchising logics." (p. 1050).

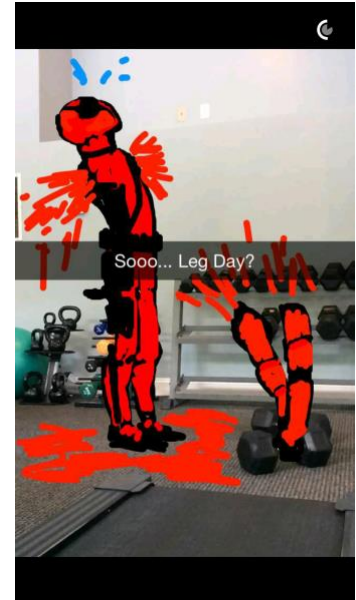


Figure 1. Deadpool's marketing team pushed boundaries with their social media by using native ads created in Snapchat and presented it as a normal Snap Story. This prompted a lot of organic, fan-made interactivity & free publicity. Source: 21st Century Fox

Analysis

Deadpool has reached 200 million impressions on social media and boasted extensive media coverage, making it Fox's best performing Digital HD title to date (Fox Home Entertainment 2017). Its success is due to the pervasive marketing campaign put forth by Fox. With its R-rating, Fox was forced to pursue different avenues for advertising efforts, and the Marvel film's small budget was quite limiting. The team focused on *Deadpool*'s personality as the center of the campaign, which was easy to do realistically since *Deadpool* has the special ability to break the fourth wall and communicate directly with viewers. This gave them unprecedented versatility (Poggi 2016).

Some other industry leaders criticized the marketing campaign for going overboard, claiming that it was too in-your-face too often. The argument for Fox was that, while some people were seeing the ads over and over, that time may have been someone's first time seeing it. The use of native advertising was also invaluable; people enjoy organic content more than traditional ads (BusinessWire 2016). However, the success of the film supports the statement made by Marc Weinstock, president-domestic marketing at 20th Century Fox, "This is a template for the future (Poggi 2016).

Deadpool was everywhere. On Facebook Livestream, Ryan Reynolds and film creators answered fan questions in real time, *Deadpool* starred in his own Honest trailer, reportedly picking up 13.5 million views to become one of Screen Junkie's most watched trailer of all time, took over the iTunes



Figure 2. *Deadpool's Game of Thrones* ad. Source: 21st Century Fox

pages of several films, and kept with trends such as the release of *Game of Thrones*'s next season with a Deadpool-themed hashtag: #deadpooliscoming (Figure 2.) (Fox Home Entertainment 2017). Deadpool's unprecedented presence is due to the success of Marvel's transmedia storytelling as well as its delivery as content—detaching itself from the traditional paid media approach of its predecessors, through the extensions created and dispersed by Fox (Jenkins 2012). Suzanne Scott claims that Marvel's advertising is based on this understanding of transmedia franchising, but *Deadpool* takes it a step further than other Marvel films, saturating the market and making it stand out (p. 1050).

In addition, Suzanne Scott's assertion that fandoms cater to a predominantly male audience is what this paper finds to be a failing in other superhero films. Deadpool's campaign had female-friendly ads, such as the breast cancer awareness PSA. It closely mirrors the testicular cancer PSA initially released, but it shows an effort to connect to a non-male audience. Additionally, there was no shame from Fox when they doled out posters, billboards, and tweets indicating that Deadpool was a romantic comedy, a notoriously female-heavy genre (Ferrerias 2016). Finally, who can forget Deadpool's shameless self-promotion during *The Bachelor* (Bruculieri 2016)? The latter was the most sure-fire way to reach the female demographic, and it was effective. Female audience members were going to see the film, but women who had previously

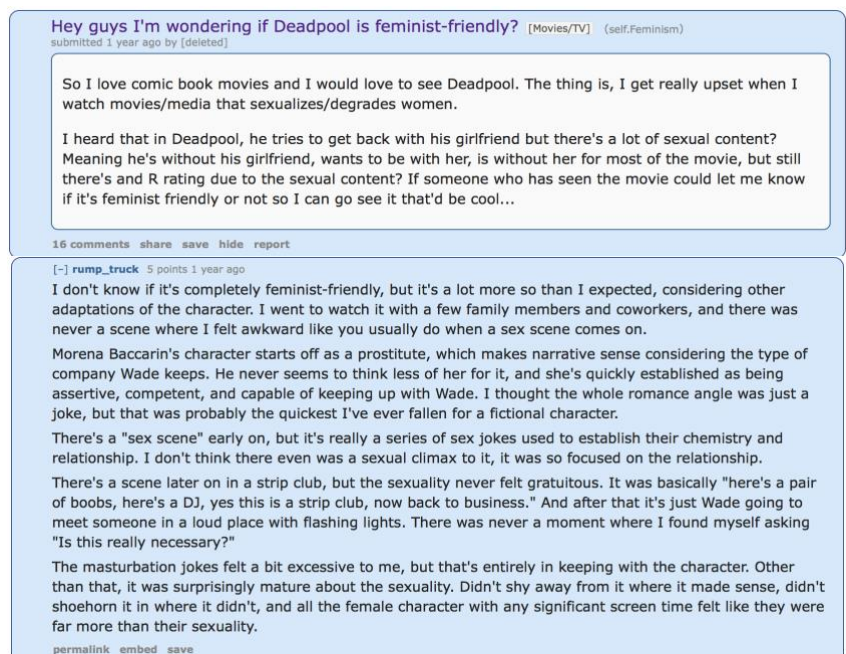


Figure 3. Female Redditors discussing *Deadpool* from a feminist perspective. Source: Reddit 2016

fallen prey to the male-oriented marketing strategies pointed out by Scott (2017) were wondering about the film and took to the Internet, asking others if *Deadpool* was good for women.

According to a Reddit thread (Figure 3.), the responding users were not threatened by the sexual content, found *Deadpool*'s character to compliment his female love interest, and overall seemed to find the film enjoyable. (Reddit 2016).

In comparison, marketing for the X-Men films was not as successful, with fewer impressions and less public engagement. In addition, women do not find the film to be empowering to women, criticizing its portrayal of women in power, the needless slaughtering of women, and the lack of woman-based action in the film (Kingston 2016). However, audiences are finding that the marketing for *X-Men: Apocalypse* is actually more entertaining than the movie itself, which earned a low score on Rotten Tomatoes (49%) (GEEK GIRL DIVA 2016). This may be due, in part, to more off-beat storytelling techniques being incorporated after the successes found in *Deadpool*. The lesser success being found, however, may be blamed on the lack of interactivity as well as a failure to captivate audiences on social media the way that *Deadpool* did. It also did not attempt to stray from the male-oriented model, so nontraditional audiences did not feel as connected to the film (Scott 2017). This shows a relationship between these facets of *Deadpool*'s marketing campaign and its success. Furthermore, all of the marketing for X-Men pointed consumers to simply go see the movie. While there are hints of the transmedia storytelling necessary for success, modern technology and thought dictates that this be taken further to different social media platforms.

Discussion

Given that current generations are very media-oriented, future generations will only increase their social media presence. It is happening now; teenagers are creating carefully curated Instagram accounts, Facebook personas, and so on with the intent to show their best selves. This form of personal branding allows them to display what they want to the world, and they have figured out how to do it more responsibly than previous generations (BBC 2016, Meehan 2016). They want to be called to do more with their media, seeing it as a hub for change (Meehan 2016). This expertise at the hands of the consumer requires companies to also be social media experts, able to craft their messages to adapt to any platform. As demonstrated, social media and interactivity makes a large difference in the end results for film marketing. Given recent trends, it seems as if media is moving towards virtual reality and augmented reality instruments, which also explains the increasing popularity of the social media platform Snapchat.

Snapchat's increasing popularity threatens Facebook as the top social media site and the popularity of the others with its wide reach and effectiveness, which has also been demonstrated with the success of *Deadpool*. Furthermore, Snapachat pioneered its own study, in partnership with MediaScience to survey 320 consumers aged 16 to 56 with the purpose of comparing the effectiveness of Snapchat's video ads to those on TV, Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube.

The study tested emotional responses, eye-tracking, and exit surveys.

Snapchat says its ads garnered twice the visual attention of Facebook and 1.5 times more than Instagram. They were also 1.3 times more effective than YouTube. When compared to those platforms and TV, Snapchat claims that its ads generated greater emotional response and twice as much intent to purchase (Parker 2017).

As per Jenkins (2012), establishing a narrative is important in transmedia storytelling. Bringing this forward to VR and AR platforms will be challenging, but the groundwork is already being established, and it is showing that this is definitely the future of film marketing. Increasingly, film marketing is being tested and utilized on these platforms. For example, an experimental partnership between OF3D, a world-class multiplatform digital animation studio, and VRADX turned out to be much more. “Our partnership with VRADX was supposed to be a marketing experiment. It turned out to be a revelation on how VR and AR advertising networks can be the venue where filmmakers and artists, in general, can fully share their art to the general public. VR and AR is the future of Hollywood,” Sun Ming said, SVP of OF3D (BusinessWire 2016).

Furthermore, this study was a good application of native advertising. VRADX’s VR & AR advertising platform enables end-to-end user experience without suspending action in the VR environment. According to the article (BusinessWire 2016), “Users responded to the ads with deeper involvement. In fact, every user interacted with at least three of L.O.R.D.-themed ads proving that ads that are native to a user’s experience get more engagement...” So, with this information, it is not unreasonable to also favor native advertising to the other methods of advertising for future generations. Native advertising is less intrusive than others—for example, your movie is not paused—and people can see the ad like they would other content. The more organic method may appeal to the next generations, as they are looking for efficiency and less show-y forms of communication in a world where they will be more familiar with the behind-the-scenes work that creating their artificial worlds require (BBC 2016).

Conclusions

With the odds stacked against it due to *Deadpool*'s (previously) B-list status as well as its low budget, it was a huge surprise to see it marketed so persistently. According to Fox Home Entertainment (2017), "Subtlety isn't *Deadpool*'s game so we thrust the spandex-wearing superhero's goods directly into the faces of fans. AND THEY LOVED IT." Now, *Deadpool* is being hailed as creating a new marketing standard as it pertains to its use of social media. There is no doubt that this is effective use of transmedia storytelling over many platforms is what brought it box office success. According to Marc Weinstock, in addition to cementing this as the future of film marketing, "This reaffirmed my faith in social media. There's a lot of debate as to whether or not social media can really open a movie...and this proves it can." (Poggi 2016).

With future technologies in VR and AR being tested, it is clear that film marketing will have many more hurdles to overcome in the future. Keeping up with the constantly evolving media landscape will be imperative to reach future audiences, as they've made it clear that they want their social media to take them beyond simply seeing a movie or buying a product (Meehan 2016, BBC 2016). Social media means real world application to them, and so marketers must learn to communicate impact and further implications to them to make interactions with their product more meaningful.

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