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Tweet Along: Analyzing the Relationship Between Social Media and Television Ratings

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TWEET ALONG: ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND
TELEVISION RATINGS

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

TWEET ALONG: ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND
TELEVISION RATINGS

By
Christian Holt

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science
in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:
Dr. William H. Freivogel, Chair

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TITLE: TWEET ALONG: ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND TELEVISION RATINGS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. William H. Freivogel

Television ratings affect everything from advertising rates to the time a show is scheduled, and ultimately, its success. In recent years, rating methods have been updated not only to include live viewings, but also viewers who record and stream shows on the Internet. This is the result of living in a digital age. The pressure put on those who create television shows to get high ratings is even more intense, and viewers now expect a level of interaction from actors, writers and television staff on social media. This study examines the importance of the relationship between social media presence and television ratings. The author studied a popular cable television show and assessed its success based on social media presence. The hypothesis was that on days when there was more interaction with fans on the social media platform Twitter, the Nielsen Television Ratings would be the highest. The results show this to be true.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of social networking is usually mentioned in connection with news and other traditional media, but social media also plays a significant role in television audience engagement measured by television ratings. Within the past decade and a half, television content and audience viewing habits have changed drastically. While some television networks have struggled to keep up with evolving technology resulting in dwindling audience numbers, some have embraced new forms of marketing such as social media — and especially Twitter -- to promote shows by engaging and interacting with audience members.

Watching shows no longer means sitting in front of a television set in the living room at a certain time each week. With the inventions of DVR, TiVo, Netflix, Hulu and many more, viewers have the option to watch their favorite shows anytime. Netflix and Hulu have changed the television industry in an enormous way as both companies have begun to produce shows of their own. Netflix has had exceptional success with original shows such as *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Similarly, premium networks including CBS, HBO and Showtime have introduced apps and subscription services that allow more consumers than ever to enjoy their content. CBS recently began to produce a Web-only show, while HBO and Showtime allow streaming of popular programs to begin as soon as the show airs on network.

Another way companies such as Netflix and Hulu, have changed television viewership is a phenomenon called “binge watching.” This involves a person watching multiple episodes — sometimes even an entire season or series — in a few sittings. No longer does a person even have to own a television, subscribe to cable or another service to watch shows. Netflix releases original shows an entire season at a time so subscribers can choose to “binge watch” at their

convenience. Hulu follows the traditional television model of releasing one episode a week and the same time on the same day every week. Having proven themselves worthy contenders in the original television business, Hulu and Netflix will continue to evolve until they are fully respected as television “networks.”

Other media also have recently begun to shape the television business model. Social media such as Twitter have completely changed the way television is viewed. Thanks to the invention of Twitter and other “second screen” media, television viewership has changed from a passive pastime to an active one. Viewers no longer just sit back and enjoy a television show. In fact, according to Nielsen, “86% of tablet owners and 84% of smartphone owners in the United States said they used their second screen of choice while simultaneously watching TV at least once during a 30-day period.” (Hare) Having turned television watching into such a user-generated pastime, social networks such as Twitter have changed the game for television ratings.

In October 2013, Nielsen launched a new rating — a Twitter TV Rating. According to USA Today, “The Twitter TV Ratings will measure the number of people tweeting about TV programs as well as how many Twitter users are viewing those messages.” (USA Today) Because of these new statistics, people who run television shows and networks have started to take social media seriously. Many shows have hired special social media experts to coach producers, writers and even the stars of the shows on proper social media marketing. In fact, many shows are becoming even more successful because of their handle on social media. Television shows such as ABC Family’s *Pretty Little Liars* is among the top five rated television shows when it comes to social media.

In August 2013, *Pretty Little Liars* took the crown for the most tweeted about television show ever. Its season finale, titled “World War A” was the most popular episode of a television

show to ever grace Twitter using the hashtag #WorldWarA.



Figure 1 - Source: Nielsen

This project will use a case study approach to examine *Pretty Little Liars* to understand the use of Twitter to promote the show and engage with audiences. This show was chosen based on ratings as well as activity on Twitter. The underlying goal of the study is to examine show success and its link with social media presence and activity.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

This research was conducted using tweets from the account @PLLTVseries and comparing them against Nielsen Television Ratings. Using the website “If This Then That,” tweets were collected from the account for a year and stored on a spreadsheet. The data then was sorted to see how much of the content was original and how much was direct interaction with fans of the show. Interaction in this case included retweets of fans talking about the show. Also sorted out were retweets from accounts associated with the show’s stars, producers, directors and the show’s creator. When applicable, the tweets then were aligned with the corresponding ratings.

CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION

The research questions for this project are as follows:

RQ1: What can networks and specific television shows do to promote themselves better?

Hypothesis: Television network and show employees should hire full teams of social media content creators, editors and managers. These people should develop diverse content calendars and enlist high-profile cast to engage with fans regularly.

RQ2: What are current television shows doing correctly when it comes to Twitter and other social media?

Hypothesis: Many social media teams use Twitter to reply to fans' questions, and tease spoilers for upcoming episodes.

RQ3: What are the key components in a good social media campaign?

Hypothesis: Key components for a good social media campaign include engaging content, dedicated team members and something – such as a “big” episode – to build to.

One social media outlet, Twitter, has become increasingly popular in the entertainment industry as a means of promotion. As Dean and Biswas pointed out in their *Journal of Advertising* article, there have been three major focus areas of scholarly social media study. “The vast bulk of scholarly work has centered upon three major areas of analysis: the political economic implications of television-Internet convergence (and especially the role of corporate interests in this process); the legal and regulatory issues surrounding the process of media integration, particularly as it regards violent or sexual material; and lastly, the technological dimensions of this convergence and the possibilities for an increasingly sophisticated interface between the relevant hardware.” (Dean & Biswas, p. 239) Through these three areas of study,

scholars have found that the importance of social media as it concerns marketing, advertising and promotion is expanding.

Because of the increasing interest in social media, studies of its effects are prominent. “Twitter has become the campaign-management tool of choice, one that studios and other marketers can harness faster and to a great extent as more case studies crop up on a weekly basis.” (Hampp, 2009, p. 2) Companies of all kinds — including, but not limited to, television studios — are using Twitter to promote their brand.

Understanding how social media affects television ratings, requires a knowledge of the jargon. On Twitter, for example:

“A *singleton* is classified as an undirected message, where no specific recipient is suggested. Second, directed messages can be facilitated by using the @ character. Such @ *messages* indicate that they are intended or supposedly relevant for a specified user. Third, *Retweets* refer to the practice of redistributing a tweet previously sent by another user. Moreover, the presence of *hashtags* indicates thematic content in the tweet. By using the # sign in conjunction with thematic abbreviations ... Twitter users can link their messages together to enable coherent, threaded thematic lists (Farhi, 2009, p. 29).” (Larsson, 2013)

Second, the changes in the dynamic of television over the past decade are important to understanding the impact of social media. Watching a television program no longer necessarily means sitting in front of the set at a specific time on a specific day of the week. Television now can be recorded, rewound, and watched on most mobile devices — from computers to telephones.

Many networks have completely modernized their take on television consumption. Not only have they changed when viewers watch television, they also have changed how shows are

viewed. One of the many results of online watching is the new phenomenon referred to as binge watching. Binge watching is defined as when viewers watch multiple episodes of a television show in one sitting; viewers will sometimes watch an entire season or series in one day. Because of binge watching, traditional week-to-week ratings are not as important.

However, despite the growing popularity in online watching, recording and other types of delayed television viewing, most networks still rely heavily on live viewing. Nielsen reports prove live television has not become obsolete. Looking at the relationship between Twitter and live television ratings proves that engagement with a live audience is as important as ever.

“By analyzing minute-to-minute trends in Nielsen’s live TV ratings and tweets for 221 broadcast primetime program episodes using Nielsen’s SocialGuide, the study found that live TV ratings had a meaningful impact in related tweets among 40 percent of the episodes sampled. The results also showed that the volume of tweets caused significant changes in live TV ratings among 29 percent of the episodes.” (Nielsen, 2013).

For this reason, it is important to study exactly how engagement on Twitter affects live television ratings.

There are several different ways for programs to use Twitter as a marketing tool. Some networks and shows use Twitter in the third person, never actually giving the show a “face” only a “voice.” Others encourage actors, directors, writers and producers to actively use their personal accounts to promote their projects as well as allow fans to look behind the scenes and into their personal lives. Most companies also use Twitter hashtags and trending topics to track how many people are talking about their show at a given time. Larsson quoted a source saying that hashtags are important for people looking to find common interests with others. “(Gaffney (2010, p. 2)

has suggested that hashtags allows researchers to “identify exact communication transmissions [...] of interest.” (Larsson, 2013)

Nielsen has honed in on tracking Twitter activities. Nielsen has created an entirely new system based on tracking ratings through Twitter. Nielsen claims that these new tracking standards are revolutionary in the ratings world. They say these new tools will help television shows know more than ever about their audiences and help advertisers know which shows to put money into. Advertisers today often factor social media into the TV buying and planning process by evaluating affinities between programs and brands and considering the impact of TV campaigns on earned media.” (Nielsen, 2016)

With this ground-breaking way to track information, people in the entertainment industry are able to hone in on their fans with advertising in a way never possible before. “Not only can networks and media planners use Twitter x TV data to distinguish the programs that have the most potential to deliver engaged viewing audiences, but the benefits also cross over to brands and marketers as prior Nielsen research has shown that ads perform better on memorability in TV shows with high audience engagement.” (Midha, 2015)

It is, however, important to note that not all television shows are social media-friendly. In his *Advertising Age* article “Wait, who’s actually making money off Social TV?” Dumenco said: “Some shows are more inherently social than others, and the same is true with advertisers. For instance, credit-and-charge-card marketers are big on campaigns that emphasize friends, families and community.” (Dumenco, 2012) Television shows such as *Pretty Little Liars* are made for social media. The producers work hashtags into each episode. *Pretty Little Liars* holds the record for the most Tweeted about television show to date. According to a Wall Street

Journal article from Jurgensen, the show's midseason finale in August 2013, had 1.9 million Tweets that "flooded Twitter."

The same Wall Street Journal article quotes I. Marlene King, producer of *Pretty Little Liars* as saying that Twitter is the best focus group possible. Even if they are not using Twitter to pump up advertising revenue, television producers can use the medium to have discussions with fans and find out what is and is not working in their shows. If monitored correctly, other producers could take a cue from King and use the information given to them by their fans to make wildly popular television shows. (Jurgensen, 2013)

In the article, "Glee fandom and Twitter: something new, or more of the same old thing?" Wood quotes Neff as saying, "Fans of a particular brand, celebrity, or even television show rapidly exceed the marketing potential of other Internet sites (Neff, 2010)." (Wood & Baughman, 2012) Smart producers like King use information provided by their fans to increase the rate of success for their television programs. Wood also uses other sources to further explain the importance of monitoring social media activity to gauge the popularity of television shows. "As a testimony to the convergence between television and the massive global network that is the Internet, television programmers have been cashing in on the 'enhanced television' phenomena, with the intentions of building viewer loyalty, widening audiences, and increasing retention (Fahey, 2000; Griffin, 1996)." (Wood)

Television network executives might ask, "Why do people care about the opinions of others?" People always have cared about the opinions of others. Chang, Chen, and Tan cited, "One of the most pervasive determinants of an individual's behavior is through the influence of others [20]." They go on to discuss two types of social influence, informal and normative.

“While *informal influence* refers to consumers appropriating requisite information from endorsers in order to form perceived values of products in consideration, *normative influence* refers to consumers’ assumed need to align their attitude with that of valued endorsers to reach a decision regarding products. ... Informal influence may be accomplished through the internationalization subprocess, where endorsers who are perceived as credible or knowledgeable will most readily lead to internalization [22].”
(Chang, Chen, & Tan 2012)

In their own way, Twitter and other social media have changed the paradigm of mass marketing. In his article “How Twitter users defied Twitter’s creators—and saved them and the platform in the process,” Dumenco quoted Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey explaining how Twitter is self-reliant, ““Bird chirps sound meaningless to us, but meaning is applied by other birds. The same is true of Twitter: a lot of messages can be seen as completely useless and meaningless, but it’s entirely dependent on the recipient.”” (Dumenco, 2010)

As long as live TV and Twitter exist, they will continue to rely on each other. It’s important to take social media seriously as a marketing tool and not rule out the power it holds in engaging consumers.

RQ1: What can networks and specific television shows do to promote themselves better?

Hypothesis: Television network and show employees should hire full teams of social media content creators, editors and managers. These people should develop diverse content calendars and enlist high-profile cast to engage with fans regularly.

The *Pretty Little Liars* social media team uses television events such as season premiers and finales to draw in their biggest audiences. During the times when the show is not airing live, they produce far less content than when there are new episodes. For this research it is important

to note that, as a cable program, *Pretty Little Liars* seasons are broken up into two parts – A and B – and often air several months apart.

In August 2016, the season 7A finale aired with a viewership of 1.1 million; this was 57 percent more than the week before. That day, Aug. 30, there were 574 tweets from the show’s official account. Only 71 of those tweets were original content, the other 503 were retweets. Below, is a table that shows how much content was produced for two live episodes of *Pretty Little Liars* and three days in which an episode did not air. Notice the difference in volume and engagement from the community managers.

Table 1 - Sources: Research from @PLLTVSeries on Twitter and Nielsen TV Ratings.

Date	Total Tweets	Original Content	Retweets	Retweets From Cast	Ratings	Notes
8/23/16	133	64	79	21	500K	
8/30/16	574	71	503	74	1.1M	7A Finale
1/18/17	23	18	5	0	NA	Off Season
2/18/17	12	12	0	2	NA	Off Season
3/18/17	24	19	5	2	NA	Off Season
4/18/17	366	78	288	88	1.33M	7B Premier

It also is important to notice that, on days when episodes aired live, the volume of original content is not what went up drastically. Instead, it was the engagement by retweeting fans and cast members. Engaging fans by simply retweeting and replying to them is incredibly beneficial for a show. It allows fans to feel as though their thoughts are being considered in the making of a television show, these fans create a personal stake in the outcome. Seventy-four of the retweets that day were of accounts linked to the high-profile cast and crew of the show. By having the celebrities engage with fans the bond to the show becomes even stronger.

RQ2: What are current television shows doing correctly when it comes to Twitter and other social media?

Hypothesis: Many social media teams use Twitter to reply to fans' questions, and tease spoilers for upcoming episodes.

Social media managers/community managers who work for television shows know the importance of engagement. They understand that the more personally invested fans feel in a show, the more likely they are to watch.

In the approximately 7.5 months between the 7A finale and the 7B premiere of *Pretty Little Liars*, the content team produced a special series of tweets and Instagram posts. Counting down the days to the next new episode, they created a recap of every episode. This allowed fans to interact with social media managers, cast, crew and each other while building up excitement for the new episodes. See example below:



Figure 2 - Source: @PLLTVSeries on Twitter

The content also allowed fans to re-live the entire series one day at a time. This is important because the show will end in June 2017. Using this tactic, the social team created a sense of nostalgia amongst the loyal fan base.

RQ3: What are the key components in a good social media campaign?

Hypothesis: Key components for a good social media campaign include engaging content, dedicated team members and something – such as a “big” episode – to build to.

The first step to a good social media campaign is a well-thought-out plan. Content should be mapped out, and timing and platform must be planned. While planning, there are a few things to remember. As mentioned previously, engagement is key to a good social media campaign and the social media team must create fun, lively content that will draw in followers. Once their attention has been grabbed, the team must create a dialogue with followers. Finally, hashtags are an important aspect of a campaign. They allow anyone following along to quickly see what others are saying.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

As society becomes more reliant on devices and second screens to consume media, it becomes more important for shows to be engaging on social media as well as the television screen. Gone are the days of networks deciding what will be the most popular television shows. Audiences now have control over what they watch and when, and how they engage with the people making the content. Without a strong social media presence by the show and its cast and crew, audiences are more likely than ever to lose interest. If a network wants a show to succeed, it must invest money in a strong social media presence.

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