

Television Sharknados and Twitter Storms: Cult Film Fan Practices in the Age of Social Media Branding

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Syfy channel's broadcast of the television movie *Sharknado* and the large number of tweets that were sent about it. *Sharknado*'s audience engaged in cult film viewing practices that can be understood using paracinema theory. Paracinema engagement with cult films has traditionally taken place in midnight screenings in independent movie theatres and private homes. Syfy's audience was able to engage in paracinematic activity that included making jokes about *Sharknado*'s low quality of production and interacting with others who were doing the same through the affordances of Twitter. In an age where branding has become increasingly important, Syfy clearly benefited from all the fan activity around its programming. Critical branding theory argues that the value generated by a business's brand comes from the labour of consumers. Brand management is mostly about encouraging and managing consumer labour. The online shift of fan practices has created new opportunities for brand managers to subsume the activities of consumers. Cult film audience practices often have an emphasis on creatively and collectively engaging in rituals and activities around a text. These are the precise qualities that brands require from their consumers. *Sharknado* was produced and marketed by Syfy to invoke the cult film subculture as part of Syfy's branding strategy. This strategy can be understood using the theory of biopolitical marketing. Biopolitical marketing creates brands by encouraging and managing consumer activity on social media. Instead of simply promoting itself, a brand becomes an online platform through which consumers can engage. An active consumer base raises a brand's profile and puts forward the image of happy, loyal customers. An equally important advantage of biopolitical marketing is that it can mask the marketing aspect of branding. Consumers who are cynical towards marketers may be less defensive towards a group of fellow consumers enjoying a product online. Developing a consumer community around a business where every consumer interaction enhances the brand and there is no semblance of marketer involvement is the end goal of biopolitical marketing. The subculture around cult films not only has brand-friendly practices, but is also positioned as being rebellious, a quality that can be particularly valuable in trying to mask the presence of marketing.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“No way is SHARKNADO as entertaining as the Tweets about it. Congrats, @SyfyTV. You’ve created a new way to watch movies.” Patton Oswalt. @pattonoswalt. 11 July 2013.

On 11 July 2013, the film *Sharknado*, the latest offering produced by the Syfy channel’s original films department, aired across the United States. By the time the broadcast of the low-budget disaster-monster mash-up film ended, it had been tweeted about 318,232 times, making it the most popular television programme on Twitter that evening. Outside of the Twitter-friendly broadcasting of sports, reality TV and award shows, these were impressive numbers surpassing the number of tweets about the infamous “Red Wedding” episode of *Game of Thrones* from the month before (Hayden). At its height on Twitter, there were over 5,000 tweets being sent per minute using the *Sharknado* hashtag (Rogers). Celebrities were involved in the tweeting about *Sharknado* and the official Twitter accounts of a variety of organisations saw the trending hashtag as an opportunity to promote themselves. Media organisations rushed to compile lists of the best and funniest *Sharknado* tweets. The film instantly entered the popular culture vocabulary while the Syfy channel received substantial publicity.

Media commentators were quick to offer up opinions about the meaning of the *Sharknado* Twitter frenzy. Mostly the commentary was about the bizarre and seemingly terrible content of the film. At a time when American television viewers had an almost endless choice in terms of programming, why would they turn to a film about poorly CGI-ed sharks being flung through the air? Others, who were interested in and understood the appeal of a “so-bad-it’s-good” film and the history of cult cinema, had questions about what the Twitter buzz around *Sharknado* meant. If the experiences of group watching and enjoying a bad movie, which usually happened in a live setting, can now take place online, what does this say about the value of the cult cinema experience? (Ricchiuto). What was being talked about less in the public discourse was the changes in both the television industry and audience practices that the tweeting of *Sharknado* signalled.

Sharknado came at a time when television networks were working on how to integrate the audience's Twitter use into their programming for marketing and branding purposes. This was being driven by major changes for the television industry as it entered the post-network era (Lotz 15). Audiences had been divided up between the growing numbers of cable and online options. Time-shifting technologies and streaming let audiences "select what, when, and where to view from abundant options" (Lotz 15). This resulted in broadcast times becoming largely irrelevant and, in turn, advertising harder to get in front of an audience. Social media such as Twitter have been seen by many in the industry as a way a channel can brand itself to keep existing as well as bring in new viewers, and to get their audience to watch shows at an appointed time. This thesis will use the *Sharknado* broadcast as a case study to examine this new media configuration.

The Syfy Channel

The Syfy channel, originally Sci-Fi Channel, is a US cable channel that was launched in the early 1990s with a focus on programming around science fiction, fantasy and horror. It quickly found a market share in the increasingly crowded cable channel industry. Its success was in part due to its ability to find and cater to a relatively small but dedicated audience that was largely composed of a valuable demographic. After changing hands several times, the channel was bought by Universal, which merged to become NBC Universal, with Syfy being run by NBC Universal Cable in 2004. The channel has struggled to expand beyond its core audience. Under pressure from its corporate owner it has gone through multiple advertising campaigns and rebrandings in an attempt to be more accessible to a wider audience. Its 2009 rebranding, which gave it its current name, also prefigured its move towards marketing itself through social media. Syfy began trying to connect to a wider audience through engagement over Twitter.

Syfy had already been successful at building an online presence before *Sharknado*. The channel had a website that hosted web shows, a popular web science fiction magazine, had developed online game tie-ins to their shows and was active on social media. Since 2009, the channel has accounted for most of its shows and encourages its casts to use Twitter. Senior executive Craig Engler set up Syfy's official Twitter account @Syfy, and managed it from 2009 to 2014. While the account never had a particularly large

following, Engler was able to make it influential (Mims). He approached Twitter both as a fan and a creator of science fiction. He had started in the media industry by creating his own science fiction webzine in the 1990s. Engler was able to engage with fans on their own terms, while using his status as someone who has power at the channel to make his interactions appear more meaningful. He leveraged these attributes to encourage audience members to tweet about Syfy and their shows. All this work gave Syfy's core audience an accessible way to engage with the channel.

This thesis will examine Syfy's development and implementation of branding strategies, and how this approach encouraged and facilitated audience practices through social media. Syfy both promoted the *Sharknado* broadcast on Twitter and encouraged people to tweet about it. The television industry, and businesses in general, are looking to social media for new marketing and branding opportunities. Social media has created a new space that presents both opportunities and challenges for businesses hoping to use it to market themselves and build or reinforce a brand identity. Online brand management has become increasingly important for companies, despite concerns about the lack of control a business has over its brand once it is on social media (Arvidsson 238). Social media branding is valuable to media producers because it can potentially tap into free labour from consumers. Having customers posting and talking about products online is not just good publicity, but also adds to the brand by putting on display the loyalty of consumers. Managing that free consumer labour has become essential for modern brands (Arvidsson 243). In trying to come to terms with these shifts, theorists have categorised these brand strategies as "biopolitical marketing" (Zwick and Bradshaw 3). Biopolitical marketing strategies look for methods to use consumers' everyday online action to generate a brand (Zwick and Bradshaw 9). Biopolitical marketing will be used as a framework to demonstrate how Syfy's branding strategies for *Sharknado* succeeded so well.

***Sharknado* and Exploitation and Cult Cinema**

The plot of *Sharknado* revolves around a massive storm hitting Los Angeles, flooding the city and driving large numbers of sharks in the waterlogged streets. Former world champion surfer and bar-owner Fin sets out with his friends, Baz, Nova, and George, to rescue his estranged wife April, their teenage daughter Claudia, and trainee pilot son

Matt. As they traverse the shark-ridden city, they regularly stop to help people who are in danger. In the climax of the film, three giant tornados full of sharks form and converge on the city. The main characters scavenge improvised explosives to throw in to these “sharknados”. Nova is eaten in the process, but after Fin drives an explosive laden Humvee into the last sharknado, he jumps into the mouth of a flying shark while wielding a chainsaw. He cuts his way out and then proceeds to drag an unharmed Nova out of the same shark. The film ends with Fin, covered in shark blood, and April reuniting with a kiss.

Syfy’s branding and social media strategies all came together around the *Sharknado* broadcast. The channel successfully encouraged a relatively large number of people to tweet about the film. It may seem strange that a film with the qualities of *Sharknado* would not only exist in the first place, but would go on to generate a large amount of positive publicity. Understanding *Sharknado*’s place within the tradition of exploitation cinema is important for context. The production of *Sharknado* should not be seen as an anomaly, but instead it is part of a long history: a history of which the Syfy channel was entirely conscious when making and marketing the films. Exploitation cinema has a long history with two important phases. The first was the classical era from 1919 to 1959. This was a period in which mainstream Hollywood endeavoured to sell itself as a producer of high moral content (Schaefer 14). In 1922, the major studios created the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to establish and enforce a set of rules around the appropriate moral content of their films (Vaughn 41). The MPAA heavily restricted the production of films that included many topics, but particularly those related to sex and drugs. While Hollywood was adhering to the MPAA so that it could construct itself an image of respectability, there rose a group of independent ‘exploiteer’ film producers known as the Forty Thieves (Vaughn 41). They made films on the very topics that had been forbidden by the MPAA, with sensational names like *Smashing the Vice Trust* (1937), *Is Your Daughter Safe?* (1927) and *Tell Your Children*, also known as *Reefer Madness* (1936) (Schaefer 2). As Schaefer writes:

The essence of exploitation was any subject that was forbidden: miscegenation, abortion, unwed motherhood, venereal disease.... All those subjects were fair game for the exploiteer-as long as it was in bad taste! (Schaefer 3).

These films were made on very low budgets and were only shown in independent and disreputable cinemas. Exploitation films were often confused with both pornography and B-movies, despite important differences between them (Schaefer 2). Pornography, with its explicit sex scenes, was outright illegal in America until the late 1960s. While exploitation films often pushed the legal limits, their simulated sex and creative ways of showing nudity (using the censorship exemptions granted to documentary and educational film) meant that most were shown legally. B-movies, on the other hand, were mostly made by small independents known as the Poverty Row studios, but they were closely tied to the big studios. They presented the less expensive B-movies as the second film of a double-feature, paired with a big studio A-feature. Therefore, a B-movie still had to be approved by the MPAA. These distinctions led to the pervasive impression of exploitation film as being rebellious and sitting outside the establishment, while still being relatively accessible to any audience wanting to see it.

The 1950s saw a series of important shifts in the American film industry that resulted in a new era in exploitation cinema. The antitrust Paramount Decision meant the United States Supreme Court declared that Hollywood studios had to give up ownership of their theatre chains. With their monopoly around distribution dismantled, the major studios moved away from the B-movie system and instead started to make fewer films for higher budgets. Movie theatres were suddenly desperate for new films to show. A new group of independent studios and producers came up to fill this need (Mathijs and Sexton 149). As the industry was changing, there was also a shift in the audience with the rise of “youth culture” and teenagers with disposable incomes (Schaefer 226). These changes signalled the end of the classical exploitation era. With the new exploiters hoping to cash in on teenage filmgoers, there rose up new subgenres of exploitation films such as “juvenile delinquent”, “rock’n’roll”, “clean” and most infamously the “weirdies” films (Mathijs and Sexton 148). Weirdie, as described by Thomas Patrick Doherty, “was inexact nomenclature for an offbeat science fiction, fantasy, monster, zombie, or shock film, usually of marginal financing, fantastic content, and ridiculous title” (Doherty 119). Many of the most iconic films to come out of the weirdie genre included such monster films as *Attack of the 50 Ft Woman* (1958), *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957) and *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958). The weirdies were a perfect fit for

exploitation film. Exploitation producers believed they could overcome their small budgets and lack of big name stars with the use of hyperbole (Mathijs and Sexton 27). The bizarre narratives and themes of the weirdies were well suited to the sensational posters and trailers that were starting to be aimed at teenage filmgoers in the second half of the 1950s. This strategy paid off for the new independent studios. American International Pictures and filmmakers like Russ Meyer, Roger Corman and William Castle pumped out cheap sensational films that would come to make them icons, and these films would shape much of the public idea of what it meant to be an exploitation film in the modern era. This popular image of exploitation cinema and the history around it is what the Syfy channel is evoking with the content of *Sharknado*.

The Syfy channel original film production unit has purposefully invoked the legacy of the exploitation films, particularly the weirdies, through their sensational narratives about high concept monsters (Selznick 200). Titles such as *Sharktopus* (2010), *Piranhaconda* (2010) and *Mega Python vs Gatoroid* (2011) have become a standard part of Syfy's line-up. Syfy produces these films with independent studios that work very much in the exploitation film mode. However, the biggest connection to the exploitation tradition is how Syfy has marketed its films through a style of showmanship that reflects the chutzpah of 1950s exploitation films. Syfy movie executives have indicated that they start with a sensational catchy name and concept before even considering a script (Suddath). This is identical to the strategy developed by the exploitation studios of the 1950s (Mathijs and Sexton 149). In the 1950s, teenage film audiences said trailers were the main reason they watched films. This tendency coincided with the rise of ideas involving the effects of the persuasive psychology of advertising. These factors influenced exploitation producers trying to entice teenagers into the theatres through cheap but sensational advertisements (Mathijs and Sexton 149). A contemporary equivalent can be seen in Syfy's online viral marketing. Producers of Syfy movies are equally concerned about what shots will be needed for the trailer as they are about the movie itself. Borrowing a term from the climax of pornography, they said that each movie needs to have a particularly sensational "money shot" moment that can be put into the trailer in the hope that it will go viral (Farrell). The realm of exploitation advertising has moved from the entertainment section of local newspapers and low-rent cinema foyers into the world of social media.

Sharknado can seem like an inexplicable film when viewing it. Its extremely bizarre plot, bad acting and incredibly low quality CGI make it confusing on the textual level. However, putting *Sharknado* into the context of exploitation cinema explains its place within the cinema landscape. As well as marketing purposes, the hyperbole of exploitation films is used as low cost substitute for the elements of filmmaking often considered important for quality (Mathijs and Sexton 27). The limited budget and time restrictions mean that scripts are a low priority, while both acting and directing are rushed and post-production effects are of the absolute lowest quality. However, keeping the film fast paced by moving characters quickly from one bizarre, absurd or over the top situation to another is a straightforward way to paper over the narrative cracks and lack of filmmaking craft. One of the most striking features of *Sharknado* is how it maintains a distracting level of momentum by having characters engaging in actions that they have no real motivation for. In *Sharknado*, the characters, for no discernible reason, follow Fin as he goes to look for his family. The final act of the film begins when the characters suddenly take it upon themselves to fly a helicopter toward the sharknados and throw homemade explosives into them. This is motivated less by the narrative and more by the film needing a third act climax. Also events have no lasting effect on characters: once they have happened, the forward momentum, and lack of plotting, means there are no lasting consequences. This is most clearly illustrated in the opening scene of the film, which is set aboard a shark-finning boat. It involves none of the characters from the rest of the film. Instead it is set on a boat where the captain is negotiating with a businessman, which results in a shootout that ends with them both being eaten by sharks. This scene is completely disconnected from the rest of the film. Random obstacles, like saving a busload of children, come up with no connection to what plot there actually is. The logic of the physical environment in which the action takes place cannot be allowed to slow down or limit the sensationalism. The most extreme and also consistent example of this in *Sharknado* is the characters will often be in or near water no deeper than twenty centimetres, yet massive sharks supposedly swim freely in that water. Moreover, people are regularly in dangerous situations that they seem to be able to easily get out of, but for dramatic effect it is claimed that they are trapped. Certainly many of these narrative phenomena stem from the low budget; they have also stemmed from the standard practices for creating an entertaining exploitation film.

Exploitation films make up a large part of the films that are included within the paracinema subculture around cult cinema (Mathijs and Sexton 145). Cult films are movies that have developed a small but active audience following. The cult audience is active through engaging with the film and each other through developing rituals and practices. Exploitation film with its combination of low quality filmmaking and sensationalism makes it well suited to the way cult film fans engage with their chosen texts. The term paracinema was developed by Jeffrey Sconce to describe how the audiences that are part of the subculture around cult films engage with those texts. Sconce and theorists who have built on his work have noted that active audiences give cult films an air of authenticity, which makes them a more desirable commodity. The audience can also use cultural knowledge accumulated by being part of the subculture to elevate their social status. Using paracinema and cult film studies as frameworks, this thesis will examine *Sharknado*'s audience engagement.

Research Question

This thesis answers the question: How were paracinematic audience practices transferred to Twitter during the *Sharknado* broadcast and how does this affect the value of Syfy's products and brand? *Sharknado* is a rich case study with unique qualities. As Twitter and television increasingly overlap, these popular platforms are changing in new and complex ways. This question focuses the research and analysis on two significant elements of *Sharknado*. First, it explores how a live group audience practice that has existed for decades is now taking place in an online space. Second, it examines branding as a key aspect of the industrial context that has motivated television channels to encourage online audience participation. This research adds to the relatively new but growing body of work around how television and Twitter are becoming interconnected, which adds to the understanding of how the media industry is changing in the digital age.

Methodology

The tweets sent about *Sharknado* during and around the 11 July 2013 broadcast are central to this thesis's research. These tweets were all archived by Twitter. Researchers have pointed out that the Twitter search engine has made the platform difficult to study

(Wohn and Na). The Twitter search engine is focused on finding more recent tweets. The archives of Twitter were not easily searchable to the public until Topsy.com provided access in September of 2013. Topsy.com was a free service created by Topsy Labs, a social search and analytics company that was a certified Twitter partner. The tweets that this thesis examined were compiled using Topsy.com. By using Topsy.com to go back to 11 July 2013, one can see all the tweets using the hashtag #Sharknado throughout the day in order of popularity. Once a tweet is found using Topsy.com, it can then be accessed on the Twitter website. The platform also shows all the replies that a tweet has received.

Topsy.com allows searches through the archives of specific accounts. This allows for the history of tweets, replies and modified tweets of the @Syfy account to be easily viewed. Searching the @Syfy account's activity up to 11 July 2013 shows everything the channel sent about *Sharknado* in the lead up to and during the film's broadcast. The Topsy.com search shows when @Syfy first started promoting *Sharknado* and the accounts they directly engaged with in the lead up to and during the broadcast.

Several issues presented difficulties in collecting the tweets. Topsy.com, like the Twitter search engine, cannot be considered absolutely reliable. There are potentially important tweets that have been missed. However, when cross-checked with media articles that compiled the most popular tweets this seems unlikely. Also, its owner, Apple, shut down Topsy.com in December of 2015. This was after all the tweets were compiled, but meant there was no option to recheck. Finally, the use of retweets by @Syfy was an important part of its online marketing strategies. However, it was difficult to see what tweets the @Syfy accounts had retweeted in 2013. The Twitter search engine provides different options to search accounts, but retweets were never retrieved. When manually scrolling back through the @Syfy account to look at retweets, it became evident that the account only went back nine months. This thesis will therefore be limited to using the public discussion about how @Syfy used retweets.

This thesis uses two bodies of evidence to examine the events around the *Sharknado*. The first is an analysis of Syfy's branding and marketing strategies on Twitter. Data analysed to do this included marketing materials, trade articles and media interviews with Syfy senior executives. This discussion about marketing is then combined with how Syfy

applied it through its use of Twitter. The @Syfy account is examined to demonstrate how the channel applied these strategies to promote *Sharknado*. This included analysing the content and interaction of the tweets sent by Syfy's official Twitter account leading up to and during the broadcast.

The second aspect is an analysis of how the audience engaged with the film on Twitter. This involves examining the tweets sent in the lead up to and during the broadcast of *Sharknado*. Twitter's official blog puts the number of tweets about *Sharknado* during its broadcast at 318,232. For this research, tweets were selected on the basis of two criteria. The first was popularity, indicated by numbers of retweets, favourites and replies. The second was that the tweets must display some form of creative engagement with the broadcast of *Sharknado*. While evaluating fan engagement can be difficult, the research focused on paracinema actives around *Sharknado* and how fans used humour and discussion to engage in a performance as part of their enjoyment of film. This excluded the large number of tweets that simply said things like, "I am watching Sharknado!" or, "What is Sharknado?". This also ruled out popular tweets by media organisations that were compiling the most popular live tweets and then tweeting the links of these compilations. The choice of popularity as criterion was informed by research on cult film audience viewing practices. Each popular tweet and the replies they received were analysed. Then the next most popular tweets and its replies were analysed and so on, until no new patterns were uncovered. The replies to each of the popular tweets were chosen in a similar way. Ten replies were examined, with the tweets that did not meet the criteria of relevance discarded, and then continued to the next ten replies until no new patterns were uncovered. This resulted in the top five tweets and the replies to those tweets being analysed within this thesis.

This thesis's analysis of tweets sent about *Sharknado* is informed by the work of Will Brooker and Richard McCulloch. They both examined live audiences that group watched cult and paracinema films. Brooker described the actions and rituals of group watching films as a kind of live viewing game for the audience (Brooker 59). The game of group watching cult films has unspoken rules; these rules vary depending on the text being viewed as well as the makeup of the audience. However, the rules mostly involve timing, relevant cultural context and displays of wider cultural knowledge (Brooker 60;

McCulloch 208). McCulloch examines how, by successfully playing by these rules, audiences can gain cultural capital by entertaining and winning approval from fellow paracinema viewers (McCulloch 209). This thesis analyses the *Sharknado* tweets sent in the lead up to and during the broadcast and examines how the game of watching paracinema is played via Twitter. Twitter's format and the practice of retweeting allows this research to analyse the most popular tweets that appealed to *Sharknado*'s live tweeting audiences and the types of conversational threads that they generated. The same analyses can be applied to the tweets sent by @Syfy and how they used the game for their own ends. Examining the quotes, jokes and references that were tweeted and how these were responded to will provide an overview of the rules and rituals that developed as part of *Sharknado*'s paracinema Twitter experience.

Chapter summary

Chapter Two is a literature review. It brings together a range of theories relevant to understanding the events around *Sharknado*. The first are paracinema and cult cinema theories. These works are focused on audience practices around films that have developed cult fandoms. Paracinema provides a useful framework to understand *Sharknado*'s audience and their engagement with the film. *Sharknado* was made to evoke previous films that already had cult fandoms, so insight can be gained about its audience by looking at paracinema theory's examination of the audiences of the original films. Second is the work that has already studied the connection of television and Twitter. This field of work has examined both television networks' motivations for incorporating Twitter and how the platform shapes and affords audience practices. Finally, critical branding and biopolitical marketing theory are discussed. These frameworks offer an understanding of how businesses are creating valuable brands through their consumers' labour. This section will bring together these frameworks, define their key terms, definitions and terminology, and outline how they have informed this thesis.

Chapter Three uses critical branding and biopolitical marketing theory to examine Syfy's position in the television industry and its marketing strategies in general. Critical branding explains how the labour of Syfy channel's audience and the management of that labour have become central to its brand value. This thesis uses biopolitical marketing

theory to examine Syfy's social media strategies around the marketing of *Sharknado* and its specific techniques in managing the film audience's Twitter activity. The role of Craig Engler, the Syfy executive who ran the channel's official Twitter account, will provide much of the focus. Engler's tactics to engage Syfy's audience via Twitter will be examined using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. His ability to have Twitter interactions around *Sharknado* while using the cultural knowledge of fandoms offers a rich example of how Syfy's branding strategy used fan practice to mask its marketing intentions.

Chapter Four analyses the five most popular *Sharknado* tweets and the replies they received. This chapter will be informed by work that examines cult films and paracinema theory. Paracinematic examination of how cult film fans are able to use their fandom to accumulate cultural capital influences the way that the Twitter accounts that sent these popular tweets may be understood. Their popular tweets about *Sharknado* increased their cultural capital which, in turn, added value to their accounts. The contents of the top five tweets and the replies they garnered are then analysed. These tweets will be viewed through paracinema frameworks to examine audience interactions. How cult film audiences made jokes and played games will provide a guide as to how Twitter users engaged with *Sharknado*. The role that accumulating cultural capital played through these interactions will be shown as the central reason for *Sharknado*'s success.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

“I’m not so sure about the science in this movie you guys. #SharkNado.” Wil Wheaton.
@wilw. 11 July 2013.

This chapter sets out the theoretical frameworks that this thesis employed in order to examine the tweeting around *Sharknado*. There are three key aspects to understanding the events round the *Sharknado* broadcast. First are the strategies that Syfy developed to increase the value of its audience so as to sell them to advertisers. Second is the audience’s motivation to tweet about *Sharknado*. Third are the affordances that Twitter has allowed for both the television industry and television audiences. Literature from a range of disciplines will be utilised in order to demonstrate how Syfy’s social media marketing of the *Sharknado* broadcast encouraged the audience to engage in cult film viewing practices over Twitter as part of the channel’s branding strategy.

The motivations and actions of the channel will be examined using critical branding and biopolitical marketing theory. Critical branding theory is used to understand the economic drive to engage with consumers on social media. The work of Adam Arvidsson examines how businesses attempt to manage the labour of active consumers to create valuable brand identities. Detlev Zwick and Alan Bradshaw’s work on biopolitical marketing builds on critical marketing theory and examines the specific marketing tactics used by companies to develop a brand when they engage with consumers through social media. These theories look at business practices that are high-risk, have large potential value and are difficult to implement. As such, Syfy’s success with them makes *Sharknado* an important case study.

Paracinema explains how cult film audiences engage with their preferred texts and what they achieve in doing so. This requires examining Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, which has been highly influential in cult film studies. Jeffrey Sconce and Mark Jancovich used Bourdieu’s work to develop paracinema theory to examine how and why cult film audiences engage with their chosen texts. Also employed is the work of Will Brooker and Richard McCulloch, who each analysed the group watching experiences of cult audiences. Their work gives an understanding of the specific practices and ritual that

develop around cult film viewing. To add to the understanding of cult film audience practices, the work analysing the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988–1999) and its influence in popularising practices around group watching cult films will be discussed. This body of work will provide a framework to understand motivations and practices of the *Sharknado* audience, but also it will establish the importance of the shift from live group experience to live tweeting.

A range of studies looking at the way the television industry incorporates Twitter, and how audiences develop their own practices using it, give context to the space that the *Sharknado* broadcast took place in. Studies examining how networks integrate Twitter and other social media into their programming, and their motivations for doing so, provide insight into the *Sharknado* broadcast. The literature shows the types of practices that Twitter has afforded the audiences, such as using second screens to engage with social media and watching television.

The frameworks used by this thesis will examine each of these aspects of the *Sharknado* broadcast. They will also lay the groundwork to bring them together for a comprehensive understanding of the event. The literature is used to demonstrate how Syfy's business interests and its audience's engagement influenced each other through the medium of Twitter, while cult film viewing practices harmonised with the channel's branding strategies.

Critical Approaches to Branding

The first key aspect to this thesis is branding theory. Syfy's marketing of *Sharknado* was closely tied to its brand identity, and the film's success was a boost for its brand. Modern brand management has become concentrated on how to generate and utilise consumer activities. Many of the consumer activities brand managers are looking for are the qualities that are seen in fandoms: creativity, activity in public spheres and engagement in rituals around a product. Fan communities have often added value to a product and enhanced its brand. Now the Internet and social media have given fandoms a new platform on which to engage, while allowing brand managers to have a greater level of access to their activities. Fandoms can seem like a lucrative asset, but there are risks associated with having so little control over the output of those fans. Nevertheless,

branding and fan activities are becoming increasingly linked together as they overlap on social media.

Brand identity has become increasingly important for businesses. Arvidsson, for instance, has demonstrated that the majority of the value of many companies now depends on it (Arvidsson 238). As branding has become a larger part of a business's value, brand professionals and their work have become more prominent. Ideas on how to build and maintain brands, which create emotional connections, forms of self-expression, lifestyles, attitudes and foster loyalty, are now commonplace within the industry. However, branding, along with marketing in general, has been increasingly viewed by consumers as a form of manipulation (Arvidsson 237). Arvidsson has developed a critical framework to examine branding and the role of consumer labour in the construction of brands. First, he establishes how consumption can be a form of labour. Consumers are active in how they engage with the product they are buying and using. People can create meaning and identity around products they consume. This in turn can generate a form of community through a sense of shared identity crystallised around a product (Arvidsson 242). Arvidsson summarises this process as follows:

Consumers use goods, and the 'general intellect' available to them in the form of a commonly accessible media culture, to produce a common framework in which goods can have a use-value (Arvidsson 242).

This intellectual use-value is what brands are hoping to tap into. Brand management has become concerned with finding ways to shape this free consumer labour and subsume it under capital (Arvidsson 243). However, managing consumers that are under no actual obligation to a business can be both difficult and risky. The end aim, then, is to create a brand identity that is so interwoven and ubiquitous with the consumer's life that every action and interaction in which they engage promotes the brand (Arvidsson 249).

Much of brand management, despite some reservations, has moved onto social media platforms (Nitins and Burgess 293). The development of social media and Twitter was seen as a major crisis for brand management. The traditional lines of communicating with consumers were being broken down (Nitins and Burgess 293). However, industry professionals within the field of brand management quickly began looking for ways to

exploit the new platform. There are now a seemingly endless number of articles, websites and blogposts telling businesses why and how they should be using Twitter for marketing and branding (Zwick and Bradshaw 4). This includes Twitter's own *Twitter for Businesses* website as well as a growing number of professional social media consultant companies. The benefits for businesses can vary, but most businesses aim to create a distinctive online presence with which customers want to be associated and engage, for a low cost.

Critical understanding of online branding has been informed by theories of free labour. From the early years of the Internet there was a glamorisation of online labour, which resulted in people willingly doing free volunteer work, often for profitable businesses (Terranova 33). Many saw this as the way the Internet could transcend the class contradictions and alienation of labour under capitalism. However, the online labour carried out by unpaid individuals on behalf of corporate profits actually reinforces the status quo. Instead of creating a post-capitalist digital economy, Tiziana Terranova argues that:

The fruit of collective cultural labor has been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily channeled and controversially structured within capitalist business practices (Terranova 39).

While people were engaging in free labour for pleasure, businesses were benefiting. Instead of paying wages, online businesses gave volunteers the “opportunity” to work on web design, multimedia production and digital services. Moreover, free labour was collected by creating open online spaces, like “chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters”, in which users generate value for the owners (Terranova 38). Terranova argues that “the Internet is about the extraction of value out of continuous, updateable work, and it is extremely labor intensive” (Terranova 48). The Internet is creating new and, in some cases, more effective ways for businesses to generate profits out of the labour process.

Building on the idea of free labour to examine closely what motivates it, Kuehn and Corrigan developed the concept of “hope labour”. People who are willingly engaged in unpaid work online often cite personal satisfaction and public recognition as motivations (Kuehn and Corrigan 3). However, many unpaid workers harbour some level of hope that

their online labouring could become paid work (Kuehn and Corrigan 4). This belief is shaped by neoliberal ideology that portrays the internet as a meritocratic level playing field where anyone can put their skills on display and the best will rise to the top with paying jobs (Kuehn and Corrigan 6). Businesses are profiting from this hope labour. Blogging, reviews, video and other user-generated content sites have people creating free content in the hope they will be discovered. Hope labour can also produce the type of online content that brand managers are looking for. Consumers that engage online with brands by whom they have hopes of being employed would be more open to brand management techniques.

Many of the marketing practices that are being used by brand managers on social media are categorised as biopolitical marketing. Zwick and Bradshaw developed biopolitical marketing theory to examine the strategies that businesses adopt on social media to encourage and control free consumer labour. Among social media marketing professionals, there is a trend towards trying to build brand communities (Zwick and Bradshaw 6). These Web 2.0 marketers see that potential value is being generating by people's everyday online interactions. They have bought into the idea that social media holds the possibility of "radically creative and innovative anarcho-revolutionary transformation" of consumer labour that can be used to generate a brand (Zwick and Bradshaw 7). While these activities can seem diametrically opposed to market logic, they in fact hold the substantial potential that marketers can turn into economic value. Drawing on Foucault's idea of biopolitics, which examines the way in which the nation-state uses technologies that affect the health and longevity of the human body to teach the population to obey and reinforce state power through their everyday actions, Zwick and Bradshaw examine how this applies to social media marketing. When marketers are trying to impose their commercial activity on social media users and capitalise on their everyday activities, this becomes biopolitical marketing. The result will be online groups of consumers created around businesses, and any active engagement by members within these groups will add value to a company's brand.

Paracinema and cult films

The second key aspect to this thesis is the theory of paracinema. The study of cult films and their audiences has been heavily informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. His concept of cultural capital is fundamental to understanding cult film subcultures. Cultural capital includes forms of knowledge, education and skills related to the dominant and legitimate culture. Bourdieu considered how these could be accumulated and embodied within a person; he writes, “The accumulation of cultural capital in the form of culture, cultivation, presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation – implies a labour of inclination and assimilation, cost time” (Bourdieu 83). This embodied cultural capital can be acquired over time by working to:

improve one’s self or passively inherited from family and social connects over time through socialization of culture and traditions. This embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into habitus, cannot be transmitted by gifts or bequest, purchase or exchange (Bourdieu 83).

Cultural capital must be acquired over time depending on the period, the society, and the social class. Cultural capital has the potential to be used to gain other forms of capital: social capital (e.g., interpersonal connections and social networks) and economic capital (e.g., financial resources and material wealth). The better understanding a person has of the cultural fields that society has deemed important, the more advantages that person has (Mathijs and Sexton 61).

The value of cultural capital varies depends on where the field it relates to sits within society. Dominant institutions within society are able to determine what cultural fields are of most importance, designating such value using terms such as “high” and “low” cultures. Accumulating cultural capital in what has been designated as legitimate high culture can return high rewards. Accumulating cultural capital within a “lowbrow”, niche, or subcultural field that is not seen by dominant institutions as part of the legitimate and dominant fields of culture has less value and therefore will return much smaller advantages. However, this lowbrow capital, while not widely valued, can play an important role for those who identify with these subcultural fields. Building on Bourdieu, John Fiske describes low fan culture as “a form of popular culture that echoes many of

the institutions of official culture, although in popular form and under popular control” (33). While the amount of control that fans have over the culture with which they engage has been hotly debated, the idea that low culture has a cultural capital value is important. Even if a subculture is designated by dominant institutions as having a low value, the cultural capital that is accumulated within it still has value among those who belong to that subculture. Theorists who have examined subcultures have used Bourdieu to understand how cultural capital operates within these niches. This subcultural capital is largely embodied in the guise of performance, haircuts, dance, clothes, and use of correct language/slang at the appropriate time and setting, and doing it all effortlessly as if it was second nature (Thornton 203). Furthermore, if a sub-culture then rises into more conventional acceptance the sub-cultural capital associated with it can then rise in value (Mathijs and Sexton 62). People who were part of subcultures and embodied its capital can be thrown up as trendsetters, turning their knowledge into other forms of capital (Mathijs and Sexton 62).

The application of Bourdieu’s work to the cult film subculture led to the development of paracinema theory. In the early development of Film Studies as an academic discipline, a narrow focus that excluded many texts pervaded. Films that fell outside of the theories of aesthetic appreciation and auteurism were neglected (Lupo 224). As Janet Staiger concludes, “Some films are moved to the centre of attention; others, to the margins” (8). Films that are deemed to be of value by dominant institutions and ideologies become part of the “canon” (Staiger 18). Understanding and appreciating these films would impart the cultural capital of the official ruling institutions. New areas of film and audience studies looked beyond the canon to previously largely ignored genres such as B-grade, exploitation and “bad” films that were enjoyed by cult audiences. These changes became apparent in the mid-1990s with the development of theories looking at lowbrow, trash and bad cinema. Paracinema theory and cult film studies set out to provide a theoretical framework to explain and give relevance to these low forms of movies and the subcultural capital that their audiences accumulated.

Paracinema is a concept that offers explanatory power to how audiences engage with the subculture of trash cinema. The starting point for understanding paracinema theory is an examination of the types of films that are talked about by the magazines and zines of the

trash cinema fandom. This results in many films falling within the category of paracinema, which may be defined like so:

As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as ‘badfilm’, splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography (Sconce 101).

There is nothing within the content of the films grouped together by paracinema that links them together as a coherent genre. Paracinema, instead of being a traditional genre, is “a particular reading protocol” where the audience’s attitudes towards these films motivate an ironic reading strategy (Sconce 101). It is audience practice that binds these films together (Bonnstetter 96). Paracinematic audiences have actively reinterpreted the intentions of these films. “Paracinema is a form of textual production of fans salvaging the forgotten and forgettable forms of filmmaking and re-creating them into new, meaningful experiences” (Bonnstetter 95). A scary scene becomes funny while benign action become surreal and romance becomes creepy

The concept of paracinema was developed in the 1990s as the subculture of cult films was gaining a presence within the mainstream. The term was developed by Jeffrey Sconce who noted an influx of graduate students interested in trash films entering academia, while the art establishments, avant-garde and academy cinema and mass culture was beginning to embrace these films (Sconce 102). As a subculture it had its own set of norms and practices, which, if understood and performed correctly, would allow someone to accumulate the subcultural capital of paracinema. Some of these practices were by this point gaining a wider popularity, which was why paracinema experienced the increase in visibility noted by Sconce. This meant some paracinema fans were able to carve out institutional and economic power with the cultural capital that they had gained through the subculture (Sconce 102). However, Sconce points to how paracinema’s non-conformity is a radicalised movement against dominant cultural values. To describe those who engaged in this type of subculture, paracinema theorists have used Bourdieu’s term “new style autodidact”. The new style autodidact is someone who invests in culture unendorsed by “legitimate” tastemakers because they already have accumulated abundant

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mainstream cultural capital or because they feel unsanctioned culture is more authentic and valuable (Sconce 106). Sconce sees the paracinematic fandoms as rebelling against the mainstream, overturning the conventional academia and becoming a new set of “cinematic tastemakers” (Sconce 101). This paracinematic culture with its use of irony defamiliarises the text and lets audiences see through a film’s artifice and creates an anti-illusionist aesthetic (Sconce 118). Members of the cult-film audience that generated paracinema experience become a new group of tastemakers with unique cultural capital that has the potential for a cinematic understanding that truly rebels against ruling class dominant values.

Other theorists who have studied cult cinema have also used Bourdieu to put forward important criticisms of paracinema. The main criticism is that the popularity of cult films has been less of a rebellion and more a reinforcing of bourgeois cinema ideals (Mathijs and Sexton 94). The fandom that celebrates these obscure trash films often sees popular mass culture as inauthentic and those who enjoy it as conformists who fail to understand good taste. However, in their celebration of trash films and bad taste cult films, fans reinforce the conventional ideals by using the same formats and formal language (Jancovich 156). Bourdieu showed that the bourgeois interpretation of art prioritised form over content in fundamentally the same way that paracinema does (Mathijs and Sexton 94). Fan publications commonly valorised “terrible” filmmakers using identical terminologies and vocabularies that legitimate publications use to describe directors who are part of the canon. What is more, not only does this terminology parallel mainstream cinema discourse, but a vocal cult fan base disseminating these ideas adds commercial value to these films. Cult film practices promote the idea that trash movies are uncommonly exceptional films. Therefore, rather than a site of rebellion, cult-film fandom is a process that ensures that these films, as consumer commodities, have the attributes of rarity and exclusivity. The fandom helps create the idea that paracinematic texts are dangerous and that those in authority do not want you to see them because of their anti-social or rebellious qualities (Jancovich 160). This is seen as an effective marketing strategy, with distribution companies having purposely attempted to generate moral panics around film they are selling (Jancovich 161). Paracinema experience reproduces marketing strategies of mainstream commercialism.

There has been relatively little empirical audience research on the make-up of paracinematic audiences and how they engage with the films. Most of the scholarly work that does exist has attended to the traits and rituals associated with paracinematic experience. The earliest, pre-Bourdieu attempt to examine the paracinematic audiences was Bruce A. Austin's *Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from 1983. Austin began by defining cult films in terms of their audience. He argued that cult films have nothing to do with the filmmaker's intent or the contents of the text, but rather how the audience identifies with them (Austin 393). In terms of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, this process is defined by how the audience interacts with both the film and fellow fans. Bringing props to the screenings, often to throw at the screen, was popular, while dressing up as the film's characters remains common to this day (Austin 399). In interviews, most audience members stated their reason for repeat attending was to be part of the social experience (Austin 401). People queued up early specifically to interact with other audience members. Austin concluded that the group rituals that fans have created around the film give it its level of popularity; this, in turn, draws in both new and repeat audiences.

In Will Brooker's 2002 book on *Star Wars* fandom, *Using the Force*, he wrote a chapter on group-watching the films. Brooker watched *The Empire Strikes Back* in the home of a group of friends he met online through his research. While the *Star Wars* films blockbuster status meant they are not generally considered cult films, the audience of the films certainly exemplifies cult fandom (Mathijs and Sexton 184). Brooker observed, recorded and then examined how the audience engaged with the film while interacting with each other. Throughout the screening there was constant talking from the audience and Brooker drew a comparison to *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* and its attempts to create a paracinematic experience with comedians talking over a film (Brooker 35). Much of the discussion involved intertextual references. Brooker identifies three subtypes of these references (Brooker 51). There are intratextual references that relate solely to the diegesis of the text being watched. Intratextual references take the text on its own terms like questioning a character's actions as opposed to questioning why the filmmaker chose to construct the film that way. Intertextual references, meanwhile, relate to texts outside of the one being watched, such as texts that are closely related such as sequels or pieces of

pop culture that are far removed. Finally, extratextual references relate to objects or events that are not even part of popular culture and are instead entirely based on personal experiences. Along with the intertextual references there is a lot of quoting the film throughout the group watch. The quoting is used by the audience as a way of putting on a display of their cultural knowledge (Brooker 57). There is a game aspect to this display. Saying the quote at the right time with the correct cadence gains “points” in the form of praise from fellow viewers, while getting a quote wrong can result in jeers and mocking (Brooker 58). However, despite the competitive element, the group experience dominates over the competition (Brooker 59). Members of the audience often split the quote between them, working together to make the experience more enjoyable and communal. Jokes can also turn into group skits, with audience members building on a joke, adding joke upon joke to improve it and letting each individual show off their humour skills.

In 2011, Richard McCulloch took Brooker’s work on live group watching of films and applied it to the so-bad-it’s-good film *The Room* (2003). *The Room* has become one of the most popular paracinematic texts of all time and since its release has developed a large fan base and a well-defined set of audience viewing rituals. McCulloch saw that the audiences of *The Room* had developed their own set of collective actions to engage with the film. During the film screenings, the audience engaged in the yelling of jokes, quoting lines, adding their own dialogue, singing a different soundtrack and throwing objects towards the screen at certain times. As this text is viewed for its enjoyable badness, a quality that is not commonly sought after among wider audiences, these audience activities help set the tone that let people know how to experience it. The audience activities operated like a laugh track, letting people know, particularly newcomers, that it was appropriate (and encouraged) to laugh (McCulloch 205). This is an example of Sconce’s idea that paracinema is an audience-generated aesthetic. McCulloch notes that, within these audience interactions, there are power structures (McCulloch 208). McCulloch linked Brooker’s observation that the audience members, by displaying their cultural knowledge, in this case about *The Room* and its rituals, were accumulating cultural capital. They know the appropriate time to yell out a line or throw something at the screen and are rewarded with laughter (McCulloch 209). Those who lack or

misunderstand these rituals are excluded, often with the embarrassment of silence following an inappropriate joke.

Riffing is a form of joking that has become a central activity to the paracinema experience. Riffing on bad films was widely popularised by the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, which ran from 1988 to 1999. Riffs in their most basic form are simply joking comments made by an audience member (McWilliams and Richardson 112). The practice is similar to heckling a stand-up comic, with the audience yelling out how bad a performance is, except a heckler is trying to disrupt a performance whereas riffing intends to enhance or augment a text (McWilliams and Richardson 112). *Mystery Science Theater 3000*'s format of comedians talking over and riffing on an old bad film has become an especially well-known representation of paracinema and has equally become the common idea of how to enjoy trash cinema. Riffs are the major aspect of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, with the bulk of the show being the cast making them while a film is played. The riffs are focused on the contents of the text being made fun of, such as jokes about poor quality storytelling, bad acting or obviously fake special effects. Beth Bonnstetter has examined the contents of *MST3K* riffing and focused on how the jokes were dominated by intertextual references. These references operate as a form of parody intended to mock a text and exhibit how bad it is. Intertextual references link two texts together and work if one text incorporates a caricature of the other (Bonnstetter 99). Comparing an inept attempt at storytelling in a bad film to a well-known film that is part of the canon creates amusement through juxtaposition. Kris Markman and John Overbolt also point out that intertextual riffs set up a barrier between those who are the right sort of fan and those who are not (71). Riffs referring to a text that are external to the one being watched let the joke teller and receiver display the cultural knowledge and capital, while those who do not get it are left on the outside.

A central aspect of paracinema is the use of humour in the audience practice that generates the experience. The central academic theoretical category for studying humour is incongruity (Morreall 12). Incongruity theory understands humour as coming from when events or narratives do not match up in a way that is expected (Critchley 3).

Incongruity theory relies on the fact the humans understand the world largely through learned patterns. Our past experiences prepare us for future experiences. We understand

the effect of weather from our previous experience of it. Most of the time, people's experiences match up to these patterns. When things do not match up – snow on a hot day, cats that like to swim, a story of Abraham Lincoln fighting vampires – our normal expectations are violated. This incongruity has been long been a source of humour (Morreall 12). Incongruity theory offers insights into paracinema and how humour is central to it. An important reason why fans enjoy cult films is that they do not match up to what is expected in mainstream cinema. Their failure to conform to familiar conventions creates incongruity which in turn generates the exact material audiences can use to create humour. Another key aspect of incongruity theory is that there needs to be an element of play around the unexpected (Morreall 15). Many of rituals of paracinema, particularly riffing, provide a clear example of this. The way an audience can create a skit or small performance around an unexpectedly weird or incompetent part of a film is standard practice in a paracinematic experience. Concurrently, the audience's vocal articulation of their feelings about these incongruities creates another level of incongruity in terms of appropriate ways of engaging with a film.

Building on the idea of the active audience, cult film theorists have examined how "liveness" is part of the social dimension of watching films included within paracinema (Mathijs and Mendik 4). A key element of understanding how these texts are consumed comes from acknowledging the importance of paracinema as an event that feels live. Many paracinema events are actually live: midnight screenings, movie marathons or festival sleepovers. There is a live theatrical aspect that makes being there and being part of the event a sign of dedication and a point of honour. It sets the paracinema audience apart from a mainstream viewer who can see a Hollywood film at a variety of regular and convenient times and in more subdued surroundings.

The paracinematic audience practice of group-watching cult films has gained popularity to the point that many of its rituals have become known to general audiences. Paracinema's use of humour, its live social aspect and the edgy rebellious aura around it, have made it a desirable experience to be part of. Paracinema can give its audience the chance to accumulate cultural capital through an understanding of how to play the games that develop around the live viewings. All of the key aspects of paracinema encourage its audience to engage in active, creative action focused around a movie.

Twitter and Television

The ways television is being consumed has been changed by the development of social media, particularly Twitter. With more than sixty per cent of viewers using social media at the same time as watching television, the industry has been profoundly affected (Lochrie and Coulton 1; Harrington 240). Social media and the way viewers use it through a second screen has become more important for the television industry as television audiences have become more fragmented (Harrington 241). Television audiences' viewing habits have changed though the affordance of time shifting technologies, meaning that broadcast networks are facing new challenges (Lotz 15). Entire networks and individual shows alike have embraced their viewers' use of second screens as a way to get audiences back to watching broadcast shows, and commercial breaks, at an appointed time (Harrington 241). Television audiences have responded positively and have embraced Twitter as a way to enhance their viewing experience (Lochrie and Coulton 1).

Much of the research into audiences' use of second screens has examined how it is changing the industry. Although the changes to the industry have been profound, this research is also grounded in acknowledging that these shifts have not been absolute. As Stephen Harrington writes, "history shows that new technologies rarely result in the displacement of long-standing audience practices, but are typically blended into existing routines and activities instead" (238). In trying to integrate audience practices into the new media landscape television production is increasingly being geared towards second screen use. In making their show more social-media friendly, the networks are looking for content by which the audience will want to engage with others, in real time, online:

So what second-screen productions imply is mediated (close) relations between users, hosts, coaches and contestants who no longer need to be situated in the same space, due to the affordances embedded in social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter to make and spread updates, postings and comments and to group them thematically by use of, e.g. hashtags (Sandvik and Laursen 147)

The television industry deploys its power as the broadcaster and producer to exercise some control over the audience through its social media usage. Networks endorse official hashtags, which let viewers engage with each other, and offer the opportunity to interact

with the stars and creators of the shows on social media. This enables the networks to screen the programme at a time that they judge to be optimal for watching a show while using a second screen. By creating social-media friendly shows, they are more likely to be watched at the time of their broadcast and its commercial breaks sat though, with the further potential for advertisements to be tweeted about (Lochrie and Coulton 4; Pittman and Tefertiller).

Across the research on second screens and television, a consistent finding is that audiences are drawn to television's social aspect (Sandvik and Laursen 156; Pittman and Tefertiller; Schirra, Sun and Bentley 9). Television has always had a social aspect, with people watching it together in their lounges at home or having "water cooler moments" and talking about television with their work colleagues. Social media has simply expanded the social aspect into a wider digital space. The terms "virtual lounge room" and "digital water cooler" have been adapted as ways to talk about the new space that social media has created for audiences (Harrington, Highfield and Bruns 405). A constant theme across this body of work is the idea that live tweeting creates a sense of togetherness and community (Schirra, Sun and Bentley 10). Twitter lets a small and dispersed audience communicate in a virtual lounge room, despite geographical separation (Harrington 240). This connection is an important motivation for why audiences tweet about television (Schirra, Sun and Bentley 11).

A number of recent studies have specifically looked at audiences tweeting about television. Of all forms of social media, Twitter has become the most popular and important for its effects on the television industry and audience (Harrington, Highfield and Bruns 407). In response to this, the television rating company Nielsen partnered with Twitter to launch Twitter TV Ratings in October 2013. In a press releases explaining the important of the services Nielsen claims:

Initial analysis of Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings reveals that the Twitter TV audience for an episode is, on average, 50 times larger than the authors who are generating Tweets. For example, if 2,000 people are tweeting about a program, 100,000 people are seeing those Tweets. (Nielson).

The press release goes on to say that these numbers vary across programmes and, as the amount of tweets and tweeters increase, the multiplier, which started at fifty, goes down due to overlap, the more people who tweet the less new people there are to see it. Getting viewers to tweet about a show will get its name out to a wider audience than traditional marketing can.

Studies about the live tweeting of television strongly focus on how the blending of old and new forms of media and viewing practices are being shaped. The key aspect has been the expansion of the social nature of television viewing. The recreation of a “pseudo group viewing” experience of television is the central theme in these studies (Wohn and Na). This has been shaped by the traditional television viewing experience of group watching and the affordances of the Twitter platform. Twitter lets people express themselves and share their thoughts publicly about a programme. Hashtags, links, re-tweets, and “@” messages are tools that the audience can use to easily connect with each other. The utility that Twitter provides its users is what makes it well suited to creating the sense of community and togetherness that makes live tweeting pleasurable to the audience (Wohn and Na; Schirra, Sun and Bentley 11).

Twitter has allowed audiences to engage actively with each other around the programme they are watching. Television networks have encouraged this as a way to bring back appointment viewing of programming and have audience engagement add value to their shows at no extra production cost. These aspects that networks are seeking mirror the attributes of active audiences, liveness and creative engagement that are inherent to paracinema.

Conclusion

The areas of literature that examine modern branding strategies, cult film audiences and the relationship between television and social media inform this thesis’s research into how Syfy’s branding incorporated viewer participation through Twitter to increase the value of *Sharknado*. This thesis employs critical branding theory and biopolitical marketing theory to understand the strategies that Syfy employs to encourage audience tweeting and then profit from. The theory of paracinema is used to demonstrate how and why audience practices on *Twitter* associated with cult film were happening during the

Sharknado broadcast. The literature looking at how Twitter is being combined with television by both the industry and the viewers provides the context of the media landscape in terms of technological affordances that allowed the tweeting of *Sharknado* to take place. This thesis uses these frameworks to explore how both Syfy and its audience were able to take a viewing practice that had formerly existed in late-night cinema screenings and private living rooms to one of the most public and popular social media platforms. Syfy and its audience each have their own motivations and goals around the tweeting, and these frameworks will show how they overlap and intersect. The following chapter will specifically examine Syfy's branding efforts, particularly on Twitter, and how these led to the marketing tactics used to promote *Sharknado*.

Chapter Three: Sharknado and Twitter Branding

“Commercials giving me a chance to reflect on secondary, even tertiary levels of #Sharknado.” Shawn Ryan. @ShawnRyanTV. 11 July 2013.

Introduction

In the highly fragmented post-network era, television market branding has become essential for television channels. The Syfy channel's 2009 rebranding around the slogan of “Imagine Greater” built on its past work which appealed to its niche audience of science fiction fans while trying to expand viewership. This branding has been something of a balancing act for the channel, as much of its core audience has resisted any moves away from science fiction programming. However, this dedicated and vocal customer base is an asset to Syfy. Online consumer communities, where customers gather and engage with each other around a product, have become the focus of marketing and branding professionals. Loyal customers and their word of mouth have always been seen as the best form of advertising. Expanding on word of mouth, businesses are encouraging consumers to engage with each other online, then manage those activities to enhance their brands. To achieve these aims many brand managers use biopolitical marketing tactics. Syfy has used biopolitical marketing to motivate audiences to engage online through the channel's effective use of Twitter. The *Sharknado* broadcast was able to build on and add a new element to this usage of Twitter that enhanced Syfy's biopolitical marketing: paracinema. Paracinema is an audience practice based around watching cult films that encourages active participants. Paracinematic audience activities are the types of online interactions from consumers that brand managers are hoping to generate on Twitter. The form that the *Sharknado* Twitter paracinematic experience took will be examined in this chapter. It will look at the role that Syfy's marketing had in utilising paracinema for branding purposes through biopolitical marketing.

Syfy and Branding on Twitter

Since its launch in the early 1990s, Syfy marketing has been based around a core and relatively small audience. Over its first two decades the channel has managed to find a niche audience (Selznick 180). Over the same time it has been acquired by a variety of

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larger media conglomerates and is currently part of the NBCUniversal Cable network. This has led Syfy to try to find ways to deal with two audience-related pressures. First of all, Syfy is under economic pressure from NBCUniversal to expand its viewership (Selznick 181). This has seen Syfy go beyond what is considered science fiction by broadcasting professional wrestling and reality television. This decision clashed with the second pressure imposed by the network: managing its core viewers' expectations. These expansions outside of Syfy's traditional genre resulted in a backlash from its often vocal fans. Audience members took to Syfy's online forums to voice their opinion that these choices were betraying the principle of the network and were an insult to fans (Selznick 184). In trying to cater to its core audience while increase viewership, the channel has had major successes with high-end miniseries, such as the Steven Spielberg-produced *Taken* (2002). However, these are too expensive to imitate constantly (Selznick 196).

Syfy's current branding is focused on "imagination". In 2009, the channel undertook a major rebranding, developed by the branding and design firm Proud Creative, which introduced the slogan "Imagine Greater":

"The brief asked for an ownable and distinguishable brand identity; retaining the positive associations from the genre of science fiction, whilst appealing to a broader audience and embracing the benefits of imagination" (Proud Creative).

This builds on Syfy's previous marketing campaigns that pre-dated the 2009 rebranding. Syfy's advertising has always focused on the dual ideas of science fiction being fantastical yet accessible to everybody ("Syfy"). Past slogans were "I Am Sci Fi" and "what if". Syfy has used ad spots that focus on a diverse range of people: sometimes they speak about their enjoyment of the genre, or appear in a short narrative about a science fiction situation. "Imagine Greater" is just the latest brand identity used by Syfy in the hope of expanding its audience base while maintaining fidelity to the genre its core viewers are invested in.

Syfy is an example of how the core consumer base of the business plays a key role in a branding strategy. Syfy's branding is clearly on display in how it sells this audience to advertisers. Syfy sees their fans, or at least markets them to advertisers, as "Igniters": Internet and digital savvy early adopters of technologies (Selznick 196). In a paid

advertisement in *Adweek* from April 22 2013, Syfy claims: “Igniters are more likely to try new foods, have family/friends ask for and trust their soft drink advice, be first among their friends to shop at new stores, and be ‘super influential’ video game consumers” (Thielman, “Syfy Bringing ‘Igniters’ Campaign to the Museum of Natural History”). The assertion is that Syfy’s audience is especially likely to share and talk about what they like, making them more valuable to advertisers. The Igniters concept is very similar to Bravo channel’s “Affluencers” and Oxygen channel’s “Generation O” branding of their audiences. All three channels are owned by NBCUniversal and each, in a specific way, is pushing the idea to advertisers that, independent of quantity, their audiences have value in terms of quality. This matches up with how Syfy brands itself to its audience. The idea of embracing the benefits of imagination and the use of social media and multiplayer online games encourages and puts on display the channel’s audiences’ use of technologies and collaborative interactions (“Syfy Igniting Imagination”). Syfy portrays itself not just as a place to watch science fiction, but somewhere audiences can engage in imaginative ways with the channel and fellow fans using technology.

Syfy was an early adopter of Twitter within the television industry. They have used it with the hopes of turning the problem of having a small, but dedicated, audience base into an asset by mobilising that core into “brand ambassadors” (“‘Defiance’ Renewed For”). Arvidsson wrote in 2005 that branding consultants were already beginning to move their focus from employed brand managers to how consumer practices could be central to brand marketing (Selznick 182). Building brands which people will invest in and be loyal to has always involved generating some level of free word of mouth advertising, but social media has the potential to increase that to a vast extent. The *Adweek* advert claims that Syfy has 7.8 million Facebook fans and 5.5 million Twitter followers. This claim is based on “internal figures” and seems to be constructed by combining multiple accounts, as no single Syfy social media account has this many followers. Alongside numbers and ratings, the wider industry buzz and cultural impact a television network can generate play a role in advertisers’ decisions (Arvidsson 239). Syfy does not just want social media followers; they want their audience to be engaging in a conversation online (Stamell). Television shows that go viral on Twitter gain positive coverage in the mainstream

media, which is exactly the sort of buzz that network brand managers hope will draw attention to their channels.

Syfy's approach has been pioneering in how television networks can use Twitter. They have created Twitter marketing strategies that have been used to create their brand image. Even before the Syfy Twitter main official account was created, the channel was experimenting with the platform. In 2008, the Syfy marketing department started a Twitter account for an artificial intelligent character from the show *Eureka* (2006–2012) called `_S_A_R_A_H_`. In addition, Syfy's popular "reality" show *Ghost Hunters* (2004–) has had success at generating buzz and engaging with fans as the entire cast were active on Twitter (Selznick 184). Craig Engler, an executive at Syfy, joined Twitter with a personal account and started engaging with the audience as the channel's popular show *Battlestar Galactica* was ending. Engler went on to establish and operate the Syfy official Twitter account. The Syfy account was set up in 2009 to help the rebranding from Sci Fi to Syfy, and under Engler it became one of the most influential accounts on Twitter (Stamell). While this has become standard for most television channels, it was innovative in the early years of Twitter. This tied into Syfy's brand image as technologically cutting edge and an early adopter.

One of the key affordances that Syfy's twitter account has is promotion, sending out tweets about what shows are being broadcast and encouraging other accounts to promote Syfy. Engler explains his strategy in using the Syfy Twitter account:

I try to let the viewers talk about what's on the network whenever possible. If there's a *Caprica* marathon coming up, rather than me just saying that, I'll try to find a viewer who tweeted about it and retweet their note to my followers. They love the fact that 27,000 people see their note (Stamell).

He does not need to write original tweets, he just retweets other accounts' tweets. A key aspect of this strategy is the public promise of retweets. Engler lets people know that if they tweet positively about the Syfy channel, he will retweet them and expose them to Syfy's large number of followers. This reward-based encouragement to tweet suitable things about Syfy gives the channel a wider Twitter promotional coverage beyond just followers.

Engler has used the Syfy account for more general audience engagement, dealing with complaints, informal research, audience feedback and marketing (Stamell). Other Syfy-related Twitter accounts, such as *Ghost Hunters*, have been used to encourage fan discussions about Syfy shows. These activities point to how useful Twitter can be for a business, not just as a tool for engaging with customers, but as a way to subsume those interactions in the service of branding. Twitter has allowed Syfy to establish an audience community where members may interact with each other, but are equally aware that both onscreen talent and people with real power at the channel are involved. Syfy hopes that this will carry a greater sense of meaning for a fans and encourage them to engage more. About dealing with complaints, Engler said in 2010:

It was around the time *Battlestar Galactica* was ending, and I was checking out Twitter to see the live reaction to the final episode. A lot of misinformation was going around about whether it was canceled (no), or if the creators chose to end it (yes), and so I stepped in to clear things up.

[...]

From time to time people will say nasty things, mostly because they are frustrated with something that doesn't make sense to them. I try to write back and find out what's bothering them. 99 out of 100 times they turn out to be nice people who just never thought anyone would see (or reply!) to their notes (Stamell).

This is an example of how Twitter can be used to manage complaints and negative press. Engler was able to deal with issues rapidly in a way a traditional complaints department never could. Tweeting about an issue a viewer has with Syfy is a direct line to a channel executive. There is even a chance the viewer will get a response. This costs Syfy very little in resources and time, while they are under no obligation to do anything other than respond. While a critical analysis points to how audience labour is being exploited by Syfy, the facts the tweets are reaching executives and the potentially influencing programming may increase viewers' willingness to volunteer their opinions online.

Twitter provides valuable audience feedback and can be used as a form of free audience research. Syfy is able to use Twitter as a large focus group, adapting programming-based audience tweets. Engler takes feedback from Twitter and uses it to keep fellow executives at Syfy informed on audience sentiments (Stamell). Engler says, "I use it for research,

getting information out there, sharing fun stuff I come across, meeting new people [...] It's like the Swiss Army knife of the Internet" (Stamell). The interactions of Syfy's audience community generate a valuable feedback database. In an industry that has been willing to pay for as much information about consumers as possible, a platform like Twitter, where audiences publicly record their opinions about shows, is of immense value to television channels. Engler makes it clear that the decision makers at the channel are reading the tweets made by audience members.

The marketing strategies of audience engagement on Twitter encourage audience members to tweet about Syfy and provide the channel with free labour. The most important free labour the core fan base of Syfy provides is in the form of building a consumer community. Syfy has an active consumer community whose actions in many ways match up with the ideas of biopolitical marketing. Fans engage with Syfy in online forums, discuss Syfy shows, use Syfy hashtags and have developed fandom around Syfy texts (Stamell). Encouraging these actions from the audience requires that they are part of an enjoyable and rewarding practice. As Terranova points out when discussing online free labour: "[free labour] was not compensated by great financial rewards (it was therefore 'free,' unpaid), but it was also willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange (it was therefore 'free,' pleasurable, not imposed)" (Stamell; Selznick 196). Syfy has been able to create this pleasurable communication and exchange, in part, through its marketing strategy around its use of Twitter.

Engler himself is a key part of this strategy. When he began Syfy's Twitter account, he was already experienced with online media and Twitter, so he was able to operate it much more like a regular authentic user than a corporate mouthpiece (Stamell). While being run by Engler, @Syfy was considered to be one of the most influential accounts on Twitter (Stamell). Engler brings with him a level of science fiction credibility. He is an enthusiastic fan of the genre and a recipient of a prestigious Hugo Award for co-editing an e-anthology of science fiction stories. He had also written two Syfy original movies himself: *Zombie Apocalypse* (2011) and *Rage of the Yeti* (2011). Engler's ability to talk about science fiction like a fan while being competent in using social media has given him the capacity to market himself as a supreme geek (Mims). Engler has a level of cultural knowledge about the fandoms connected to the channel. This gives him high

cultural capital that is used within Syfy's marketing strategy to encourage the audience to use Twitter to engage with the channel for the enjoyment of interacting with him.

Engler's ability to present himself as an audience member while implementing Syfy's marketing strategy is an asset to Syfy's branding. Marketers have become mistrusted and consumers are often cynical towards their actions. Finding ways to promote products that do not appear to be marketing is the image many brands now seek (Thielman, "Syfy Guy Craig"). Engler has "geek" cultural capital and this carries a lot of importance among the Syfy's fan base (Zwick and Bradshaw 13). This credibility lets him engage with fans in the way that marketers hope consumers will engage with each other. Engler's cultural capital masks his marketing and consumer management by making him appear like just another geek. Syfy needs to be seen as genuinely interested and invested in science fiction so as to keep its core fan base on board and help develop the customer community – and not just as a profit making business (Thielman, "Syfy Guy Craig"; Selznick 186). Engler's cultural capital has allowed Syfy's Twitter marketing to seem less like marketing and, in turn, has helped the channel's branding appear more authentic. Accordingly, in the dialectical relationship between branding and marketing, this brand has made Syfy's Twitter marketing strategy more effective.

Branding and Paracinema

New branding strategies based on social media fit very well with paracinema. The key aspects of paracinema are that it is shaped by an active audience that engages in live activities around a text. Audience practices generate paracinema (Selznick 179; Zwick and Bradshaw 7). Paracinema involves groups of consumers working collectively to create and improve their enjoyment of a text. Companies today desire fans to come together and engage in rituals around a product. Engagement with the text and other fans generates activities that promote what is being consumed. However, the producers of a film encouraging audiences to engage in paracinematic activities may not be seen as marketing.

At first blush, paracinema does not seem an obvious choice for marketing purposes with its rebellious qualities. Enjoying a bad film is seen as a counter-hegemonic activity to mainstream corporate Hollywood (Mathijs and Mendik 4; Sconce 101). Wide mainstream

appeal and commercialism are aspects of cinema that much of the cult films subculture has actively avoided. The discourse around paracinematic fan-produced writing is predicated on cult films being a radical alternative to the dominant film canon and criticism (Jancovich 160). However, the paracinema fandom's image of producing a more authentic or rebellious experience than mainstream films is a quality that adds real value to the films that become part of the subculture (Sconce 117).

Paracinema also adds new qualities and value to films through the live experience. There is an added level of fun with being part of an active audience, which is similar to being at a live music performance (Jancovich 160). This added value is a strong commercial advantage, particularly when considering that paracinematic texts are often cheaply made. Paracinema lets producers create low budget texts that audiences themselves will imbue with the values of being enjoyable and authentic.

Paracinema, with its focus on low-budget science fiction and monster movies, is a natural marketing and brand match for Syfy. The genres that most commonly fall within paracinema – science fiction, horror, disaster and monster movies – also fit in with the channel's brand (Austin 401). Syfy has been able to market *Sharknado*, along with films like *Sharktopus* and *Piranhaconda*, as a nostalgic throwback to B-grade horror movies. They are the type of films that could have appeared on Syfy show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. *MST3K* was famous for its production of a paracinema experience, by evoking its legacy of riffing bad films, which popularised the practice of viewers making fun of these films (Bonnstetter 98). It also helps to mask Syfy's marketing strategy, as tweeting and riffing about a bad movie appear to be just the standard and traditional practices of paracinema, combined with newer audience practices around live tweeting broadcasts, moved online. The free advertising and added value to Syfy's brand was hidden from most people, including those wanting to engage in the subversive aspect of paracinema, who were focused on the enjoyment of collectively riffing on a so-bad-it's-good movie.

Sharknado, Twitter and Marketing

Syfy's marketing strategies all came together for *Sharknado*. The early part of *Sharknado*'s marketing did not substantially differ from any other of Syfy's original

movies. All the tweeting to promote *Sharknado* and the response to it in terms of likes, retweets and interaction were normal for a Syfy movie. However, Syfy's strategy had been creating the potential for a large scale paracinematic experience on Twitter to take place and *Sharknado* is where their work paid off. Before the broadcast, the Syfy Twitter account was promoting the film by publishing *Sharknado* related tweets. The earliest of these tweets appeared on 20 June:

ST1. @Syfy

A supersized storm sucks sharks from the ocean & hurls them onto land in SHARKNADO. This epic Syfy movie premieres Thurs, July 11, at 9pm.

This was retweeted 436 times. Then, the same day, Syfy tweeted a picture of the *Sharknado* poster, which was retweeted 123 times. At this point, these numbers were not unusual as they were on par with promotional tweets for past Syfy original movies. Syfy continued to try to give a sense of buzz being built up around the film by posting about *Sharknado*'s media coverage:

ST2. @Syfy

My Sharknado tweet made it onto @gawker. I'm honored. I think.

This tweet let Syfy's followers know that the media was talking about the *Sharknado* film and that this Twitter account is a subject of topical news. At this point there may also have been retweets by @Syfy from people tweeting about *Sharknado*, but due to the nature of Topsy.com and Twitter such retweets are difficult to find. Furthermore, on the same day there was the first paracinematic conversation about *Sharknado* on Twitter. @BadAstronomer, a popular science themed account run by Phil Plait, an astronomer who has appeared in several documentaries, tweeted at Syfy:

ST3. Bad Astronomer @BadAstronomer

"Blizzaardvark" may be why Twitter was invented. // @SyFy

This is the first example of someone on Twitter using what would become the most popular type of riffing on the film the formula of mashing up name of an animal with a natural disaster. Syfy replied to this tweet, ironically advising that mashing up names is not so simple:

ST3R1. @Syfy

@BadAstronomer Oh you poor amateurs...“Sharktopus” and “Sharknado” don’t just grow on trees you know. You really think this is that EASY???

Then Plait replied ironically with mock earnestness:

ST3R2. Bad Astronomer @BadAstronomer
@Syfy Yes. Yes, I do.

To which Syfy replied in a style commonly seen in portrayals of intransigent children:

ST3R3. @Syfy
@BadAstronomer Well, um....it’s....not. So there!

This early interaction mirrored the effect of riffing and building one joke upon another that is common in *MST3K*; it also served to anticipate the tone of Twitter interactions about *Sharknado*. It was good publicity too, as the @BadAstronomer account had many more followers (444,000 on 22/02/16) than Syfy. Replying, as opposed to just retweeting, and beginning a conversation with @BadAstronomer, already suggests a strategy of prioritising popular accounts with a higher level of engagement.

A similar interaction took place on 2 July with this sarcastic tweet:

ST4. Troll Cat 2@p2TrollCat
One word: #Sharknado. Don’t worry, I’m sure the science behind it is sound. After all, it’s on @Syfy.

Syfy replied by ironically suggesting that 2@p2TrollCat’s comment is entirely accurate. Finishing the tweet with a comical hashtag which makes fun of Syfy’s mathematical nous:

ST4R1 @Syfy
@2p2TrollCat Sharknado has been vetted by top scientists and is 112% guaranteed to be scientifically accurate. #theprecedingisanestimate

@2p2TrollCat is a reasonably popular comical account with over 11,700 followers (22/02/16). Syfy has prioritised a greater level of engagement with an account with a higher number of followers. This gave Engler the opportunity to riff and display his cultural capital to a potentially larger audience. This conversation would be seen as a

regular Twitter interaction, despite Engler using it to promote a television show and brand Syfy as a place people can make jokes about bad movies.

On the day of the broadcast, Syfy's tweeting increased markedly. In an interview the next day, Engler described his activities on Twitter leading up to the broadcast:

"Hours before the movie even aired we were retweeting the fans talking about how much they were looking forward to watching it... and also tweeting out *Sharknado* 'warnings'".

[...]

"We know going in that people already love to tweet about these movies, so our goal is to foster the conversation and amplify it. For instance, we'll retweet fun posts from our viewers on the @Syfy feed, which the fans LOVE. It gives them their 15 minutes of fame on Twitter and shows them that we're listening and playing along." (Selznick 182).

In the lead up to the *Sharknado* broadcast, it would have been obvious to Syfy's Twitter followers that tweeting about the film would mean a good chance of being retweeted by the Syfy account, which would give them a boost in terms of visibility.

Along with retweets, there was at least one modified retweet with Syfy adding their own comment to someone else's tweet.

ST5. @Syfy
The ones with good taste! RT @dougblackjr Can anyone tell me which restaurants are showing *Sharknado* tonight?

Replies only get seen by people who follow both accounts, but retweets get seen by all of Syfy's followers. Engler's modified retweet gives the original author more publicity, but also acts as a reply that plays along with the jokingly absurd and incongruous idea of a restaurant showing *Sharknado* to its customers. @dougblackjr is not a particularly popular account with 1,130 followers (22/02/16). This, along with Engler's statements, suggests that Syfy was willing to retweet anyone talking about *Sharknado* in the immediate lead up to the broadcast. This tweet may have also been prioritised to promote the absurd quality of its humour and help set the tone of the tweets.

Right up to the day of the broadcast, it was not clear that anything out of the ordinary was taking place. Syfy's tweeting was its standard promotion for their films and all their shows received some level of Twitter buzz from fans. However, as it got closer to *Sharknado*'s debut, tweeting began to escalate. Engler described the lead up:

“Then about 20 minutes before the movie aired we could see there was an, ahem, feeding frenzy going on around it so we started jumping into as many conversations as we could” (Rogers).

Once the broadcast began ordinary fans became less of a priority. With such a large number of tweets coming in, Engler used the Syfy account to focus on the participating account with the most cultural and social capital: celebrities. Engler boasts about the celebrities involved in the *Sharknado* hashtag and his engagement with them.

“When notable people on Twitter post about our movies — like Damon Lindelof, Patton Oswalt (@pattonoswalt), Mia Farrow (@MiaFarrow) and many others did last night — we'll retweet them so our fans can see what they're saying, and we'll also tweet along with them. At one point I was tweeting with Damon, Elizabeth Banks (@ElizabethBanks) and Olivia Wilde (@OliviaWilde) about Damon's idea for a sequel and the roles Elizabeth and Olivia wanted to play in it!” (Rogers).

The conversations between these writers and actors let their followers know about *Sharknado* and also gave the *Sharknado* hashtag a higher level of prestige. By retweeting and engaging in the conversation, the Syfy account maximised the visibility of celebrities and made sure its account was as closely associated with them as possible. So, not surprisingly, Syfy's most popular tweet from during the broadcast was its most celebrity-orientated.

ST6. @Syfy
@oliviawilde @MiaFarrow We have roles for both of you in the
#Sharknado sequel @DamonLindelof is writing for us.

As well as retweeting and replying, Engler used the Syfy account to engage with celebrities' tweets in the form of paracinematic interactions. Simply engaging with celebrities on Twitter would not have set Engler apart from a “regular” paid corporate marketing manager. The early tweets from Syfy were clearly promoting a product, but these tweets appear less as marketing and more as part of a game. In Brooker's

observations of group watching *Star Wars*, he notes that even newcomers to the group could be almost instantly accepted into the fold (59). This was achieved by them displaying the right cultural knowledge and playing the game of quotes, jokes and intertextual references correctly. The game is capable of breaking down barriers and people's defences. Engler was able to display his cultural capital and, in turn, the cultural capital of the Syfy channel by demonstrating his ability to play the paracinematic game. This cultural capital then played a role in helping Engler and Syfy to market themselves, while acting in a way not associated with marketing. Engler seems to have had some success at overcoming people's cynicism towards marketers. The collective nature of *Sharknado* viewing created a comradely atmosphere, so people put aside concerns of being manipulated by marketers, making paracinema a uniquely powerful marketing tool. That is also reflected by the fact that Engler and Syfy had no direct power within or control over the *Sharknado* hashtag once it started trending, which is common to all social media campaigns that go viral. Engler just rode the wave of popularity.

The most prominent account during the broadcast was actor and Internet personality Wil Wheaton's, @WilW. One of Wheaton's most popular tweets during the broadcast was:

ST7. Wil Wheaton @WilW
I'm not so sure about the science in this movie you guys. #SharkNado

Engler used the Syfy's account to reply to Wheaton's statement about his concerns of scientific inaccuracies in the film by denying any inaccuracies.

ST7R1. @Syfy
@wilw The science was checked out by, um, top minds. Really.

Engler built on Wheaton's riff about how seriously people should take the scientific accuracy of the film. Engler used the Syfy channel's Twitter account to engage with the high profile tweet, showing his cultural capital through riffing. He masked his marketing practices by engaging in paracinematic activities like any other audience member might. However, it is telling that he replied to a tweet from one of the most prominent celebrities tweeting during the broadcast.

Engler had another opportunity to show off his paracinematic skills when the actress Elizabeth Banks, displaying her own level of paracinematic knowledge, tweeted about being in a possible sequel.

ST8. Elizabeth Banks @ElizabethBanks
@oliviawilde seems @DamonLindeloF has us “embracing” in
#SharknadoTwo but he promised it’d be classy and my harpoon arm
wouldn’t hurt you.

Engler’s reply focused on the idea of a harpoon arm, as having limbs replaced with weapons is a common trope in paracinematic texts. He mentioned the need to reuse props, and that even a big star like Banks will not be exempted from the budgetary restraints of the Syfy movie.

ST8R1. @Syfy
@ElizabethBanks @oliviawilde @DamonLindeloF Just remember we
need that prop harpoon arm back for future movies. So you break it,
you buy it!

An A-list celebrity tweeting about being in a *Sharknado* sequel involves a level of incongruity, which Engler mangers to emphasise with the “So you break it, you buy it” line. This also self-referentially mocks the cheapness of *Sharknado*. Plenty of other people were doing this, but Engler is the only one using the Twitter account of the channel broadcasting it to do so. The power dynamic was clear in these tweets, as they reminded the audience that Engler has power over production. They show an executive enjoying the film in the same way as everybody else, which suggests that Syfy, from the corporate heads to the fans, was one big community that enjoyed the same things.

Conclusion

Syfy, like most businesses, has become more focused on increasing its value though branding. Branding professionals have come to see free consumer labour as key to understanding how brands generate value. Brand managers today put a lot of work into persuading consumers to become unpaid brand ambassadors in their everyday life. Establishing a brand as a platform where people can engage in pleasurable and rewarding activities and interactions has become a central marketing strategy. Syfy was an early adopter of social media and was able to create major branding success with *Sharknado*.

Syfy was well set up to create a paracinematic experience. The channel's genre focus, its branding as the place to "imagine" and its strong emphasis on Twitter invited the audience practice of enjoying a bad movie. Paracinema's commercial applications have traditionally been limited to midnight screenings at small theatres and VHS rentals. Syfy managed to harness the creative labour of the active audiences of paracinema and put it to work for the cause of branding the channel. Broadcasting a film that evoked the genre, tradition and aesthetics of paracinema was just the first step. Syfy's marketing on Twitter let viewers know not just that *Sharknado* existed, but that there was a place to engage in the joking, riffing and intertextual referencing of paracinema. Moreover, if people did engage on Twitter in the way Syfy wanted, their account might reward viewers by retweeting them to their tens of thousands of followers. Syfy created the platform and the *Sharknado* hashtag for consumers to engage with each other and the channel's product. To most people who took part in the *Sharknado* hashtag, it was a fun experience that for some may have mirrored real-life cinema experiences and for others would have seemed similar to what they had seen on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

The enjoyment of the *Sharknado* hashtag came in spite of Syfy's using it for the purposes of marketing to enhance their brand. Syfy was able to overcome any potential mistrust of marketers thought the use of Engler and his cultural capital. Engler had been laying the marketing groundwork for weeks before the broadcast, but his familiarity with the genre and audience practices around cult films meant he understood how to mask this activity as paracinematic ritual. He was able to encourage and reward audience activity, just as biopolitical marketing aims to do, in the way that paracinematic participants engaged with each other. While audience members understand that Syfy is a commercial profit-making business, Engler's display of fluency with paracinematic behaviour masked the marketing and managing work, at least enough to allow Syfy to create an event that seemed organic.

Syfy's brand of embracing the benefits of imagination fits well with paracinematic experience. The audience activities that it generated were the types that the channel could use to show that it was an appropriate platform for such creative and enjoyable activities. The next chapter will look at these audience practices and how Syfy's use of its cultural capital affected the motivation of those who engaged with the *Sharknado* broadcast.

Chapter Four: Tweeting *Sharknado*

“I saw the best minds of my generation live tweet *Sharknado*.” Alison Forns.

@alisonforns. 11 July 2013.

The previous chapter examined how Syfy’s drive to create an active consumer community to use in branding itself led to a marketing strategy that invoked a paracinematic experience. It argued that Syfy was able to use the cultural capital of executive Craig Engler on Twitter to mask its marketing of *Sharknado*. This, in turn, encouraged audience engagement, which could be managed to enhance their brand. The masking gave their brand of Imagine Greater a feeling of authenticity. This chapter will look at the role that the audience that participated in the paracinematic experience played in making the *Sharknado* hashtag so popular. It will consider how Syfy used its cultural capital to encourage people to tweet about *Sharknado*, and in turn created a space for the audience to display and increase their own personal cultural capital. Social media users are looking for online spaces where they can show off their cultural capital to an audience. For many this is motivated simply by enjoyment, but as social media platforms have developed into a place where money can be made and employment opportunities advanced, some users hope to turn their cultural capital into financial capital. Much of the enjoyment of paracinematic group watching involves the audience putting on displays of their cultural capital for each other’s entertainment. As well as enjoying the experience, moving paracinema to Twitter makes it an opportunity for Twitter users who want to raise their profile.

This chapter will examine the five *Sharknado* tweets that had the most retweets and likes and the reply threads that resulted from them. These tweets were collected using Topsy.com. While Twitter allows for a wide variety of activities by many different types of account holders with a range of motivations, the *Sharknado* hashtag was dominated by certain types of accounts that serve specific purposes. Two of the most popular tweets were written by comedians, two by parody accounts and one by the official account of an organisation. Most of the replies to the popular tweets came from regular users who tweeted for their own entertainment and personal social media use. The top five tweets are from accounts that each have a specific purpose. The top tweets, the replies to those

tweets and their content will be analysed. This chapter will use paracinema theory to give context to these tweets. It will examine the way jokes and riffs are made and built on in much the same way as a live group watch. Furthermore, paracinema provides a framework through which to study the way humour and intertextual references are used within individual tweets. The chapter will look at the accounts with the top *Sharknado* tweets to examine their purpose and how the users were motivated by their position in society, particularly their occupations. This will be put into a framework that includes the effects of how online self-promotional free labour has developed alongside the rise of social media. Together these aspects of the *Sharknado* tweeting will demonstrate why users were driven to tweet about the film and how the paracinematic experience that was generated resulted in such an obscure television film having such a presence on Twitter.

Paracinema on Twitter

Studies of Twitter have often made the point that Twitter is a “noisy” forum (Weller 245). The near total open access to Twitter, as well as any user’s ability to be part of a trending hashtag, means that the conversation is highly unstructured. However, while there are examples of this noise in the threads of the top five tweets, a large number of these tweets are both focused on the topic of the *Sharknado* movie and have a certain amount of uniformity in their content and in the way they engage with the film. This consistency can be explained by the nature of the paracinematic experience that developed around the *Sharknado* hashtag. Paracinema is an experience that is built around the watching of a film that falls outside of the mainstream in which the audience applies their own “reading protocol” (Sconce 101). This is a practice that involves an active audience adding their own meaning to a film. In a live setting, this often involves watching a “bad” movie and making jokes and riffs about the film. This activity was popularised in the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988–1999), in which three comedians riff about the film, which they referred to as a B-movie, while it is being played. Their practice of riffing, making jokes about a text in a way that enhances the viewers’ experience of it, has become a popular activity among cult films fans. The most well-known examples are the boisterous live showings of films like *Troll 2* (1990) and *The Room* (2003) where it is standard for the audience to yell out mocking jokes. With its low budget, hyperbolic title and generic associations with exploitation cinema, which itself is closely associated with

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paracinema, *Sharknado* managed to evoke an idea of cult film experience. When Syfy marketed that idea on Twitter, they were connecting a live group experience to a platform that afforded a live experience though tweeting. Syfy's marketing and strong presence on Twitter gave people a platform and encouragement to engage in the paracinema practice on the *Sharknado* hashtag, and a range of audience members took up that invitation.

By looking at the replies to the top five tweets, one can see how the paracinema experience unfolded on Twitter. The tone of the replies is set by the original tweets that started each thread. In the live paracinema experience, riffs and jokes are often built on: somebody calls out a joke and others add to it, like a skit (Brooker 59). Successfully making a joke and showing an understanding of the joke and quickly adding something funny to it are ways that paracinematic audience members display their cultural knowledge and accumulate cultural capital. The content of the first tweet must be good enough, and informed by the right amount of cultural knowledge which makes people want to like and respond to it. The cultural capital of the top five tweets meant the people wanted to continue that riff. These replies, to show they understood the riff, often made jokes directly building on or in the same vein as the original tweet. The top tweets set a pattern in the structure or focus that the replying tweets followed. The three dominant aspects of these threads are: (1) irony, sarcastically praising or taking seriously the content and concept of *Sharknado*; (2) closely connected to irony, intertextual references often in the form of parody, constructing meaning of a text by alluding to another text; and (3) praise, complimenting the original tweet. The praising replies acknowledged the quality of the riff, while the ironic and intertextual replies were often in the form of additional riffing that built on the original tweets. Each of these aspects is a type of performance and reflects the audience practice that takes place when a group watches a paracinematic text. The directing of this comedic content towards a low budget exploitation film fits within the paracinematic group watching experience. The more effective a tweet was at engaging with the film, in terms of paracinema, the more retweets and replies it gained, giving the hashtag and Syfy's product increased visibility.

Breakdown of the top five tweets

Two of the tweets came from parody accounts, The-Tweet-Of-God and The Batman; two came from verified accounts of professional comedic entertainers, Rob Delaney and B J Novak; and one came from the official account of an organisation, Red Cross Oklahoma. Comedians, entertainers and parody accounts, categories that have a certain amount of overlap, were responsible for not just most of the top five tweets, but most popular tweets about *Sharknado*. The actor and internet celebrity Wil Wheaton, who started tweeting about *Sharknado* even before the broadcast began, had the most *Sharknado* retweets from any account (Rogers). Other entertainers who were also tweeting throughout the broadcast and had several popular tweets were the comedian and actor Patton Oswald, writer Damon Lindelof, the actress and director Elizabeth Banks and actress and model Olivia Wilde. Similar parody accounts were very active and gained a large numbers of retweets with Death Star PR, Jerk Superman and Pourmecoffee having tweets in the top ten *Sharknado* tweets. Often when a hashtag becomes popular and starts trending, organisations, businesses, government organisations and NGOs will attempt to gain free publicity by joining in. The *Sharknado* hashtag saw a variety of examples of this, but the Red Cross was the organisation that was by far the most visible. Regular users, the personal accounts of people who do not have any level of celebrity, did not produce any of the top tweets at all. However, they dominated the conversation threads of the popular tweets.

Comedians and entertainers on Twitter

For actors and comedians, Twitter has become an essential part of their career. In an interview about actors and social media, long-time casting director Mike Fenton said: “If it came down to two professional actors, one of whom had great visibility in social media and one who was barely recognizable, we’d go with the one who could get the numbers” (Hod). Producers now simply expect the free social media advertising that an actor with a popular Twitter, Instagram or Facebook page can provide. Similarly, comedians are finding they need a presence on social media. Some in the comedy world celebrate Twitter as a way to test material, connect with fans and bypass the restrictions of the traditional industry gatekeepers (Krefting and Baruc 137). As in many other industries,

there is a certain amount of libertarian extolling of social media for the control, freedom and opportunity it can give a comedian in terms of their career. For comedians the model of this success is in large part based on the accomplishments of Rob Delaney, who, after years of failing to break through as a comic, had a sudden meteoric rise when he turned to Twitter in 2009 (Tyson). Others point out that it is now obligatory for a comedian to use social media. Comedy director Paul Feig has said that “If you are a comedian, you cannot be a luddite anymore” (Krefting and Baruc 137). Feig’s argument is if a comedian is not using social media they are falling behind the inevitable march of progress, in a similar fashion to how workers who smashed machines in hopes of protecting their jobs during the industrial revolution were perceived. Delaney himself elaborates on the motivation to use social media when he was asked how closely he watches his follower count:

Pretty closely. Not to be too technical or even mercenary about it, but the more followers I have, the more easily I can sell tickets on the road, and that’s the thing I most want to do professionally, regularly perform stand-up comedy for large groups of people (Ryan).

For actors and comedians social media can serve a wide range of uses, but self-promotion is now an expected and required part to advance their careers (Krefting and Baruc 133).

Building a social media presence, however, requires labour. Amongst the praise for Twitter there has been little attention to the amount unpaid labour it takes to create and maintain a successful social media account. As a 2010 study on Twitter influence concludes, “influence is not gained spontaneously or accidentally, but through concerted effort” (Cha et al. 17). For a comedian, effort means all the labour of creative and comedic writing. To create and maintain a Twitter account that is not just popular but also engages followers, entails skill and effort on two levels. First, a user must shape an appealing overall persona, through posts that form a consistent tone and theme (Krefting and Baruc 134); and second, the content of individual tweets needs to have value to the account’s followers (Cha et al. 17). For comedians, this usually means funny, fresh, topical jokes. The buzz phrase used is “Content is king”, but this king requires comedians to be almost constantly working, looking for new material, shaping it into jokes and tweeting it out (Krefting and Baruc 137). This activity can be viewed in terms of Bourdieu’s idea of forms of capital. Comedians are trying to build up and put on display their cultural capital. Twitter followers, retweets and likes can be seen as a tangible, if not

exact, measurements of cultural capital, resources gained from relationships, group affiliation, and networks of influence and support. The network of Twitter followers that users amass can act as a form of social capital. When a follower retweets a joke that is then seen by their followers, some of whom choose to retweet, the chances of that material going viral are increased. There are several high-profile stories of comedians who have their jokes retweeted and then find their way to television producers who consequently hire them. Delaney echoes these ideas when he talks about his success on Twitter: “It’s gotten me jobs, it helps me sell tickets on the road, it’s improved my writing and it’s introduced me to great people in real life” (Tyson). Comedians are being driven to use their labour, while being funny, to show they have cultural capital in the hope of creating social capital and more followers, which can then be turned into economic capital.

Some entertainers have managed to turn their cultural and social capital on Twitter into economic capital. There are a large number of news and magazine articles about social media’s financial success. This is through either being paid to promote products or gaining lucrative employment due to skills displayed online. However, this is a small minority of not just the social media population, but even of entertainers (Krefting and Baruc 132). Yet this promise has played a role in convincing many amateur and professional comedians and entertainers to engage in free/hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan). They believe that by performing unpaid labour and giving away material for free on social media, they are increasing their chances of being discovered and making themselves more employable. Because of it being unpaid, their labour generates value for profit-making institutions. While the social media platforms that they use gain content, their current employers can also benefit from free advertising if they mention a movie, show or comedy club in which they are performing. Similarly, when the content of a tweet is about a product, such as food or a television show, free advertising is also generated. Even entertainers who are considered to be successful are still expected by the industry to tweet for free. While some big name celebrities are paid to tweet about sponsored products, this practice is less common and is carried out for lower sums of money on Twitter than on other social media platforms like Instagram or Vine (Shontell; Golby; Brown). Hollywood is reluctant to pay entertainers to tweet. Oliver Luckett, social

media expert and CEO of the media company theAudience, complained in an interview that studios are not paying actors to use social media to promote their work. This is a self-serving, but telling, complaint that was reinforced by the 2014 Sony Pictures email hack. When movie star and comedian Kevin Hart asked to be paid for promoting his film *The Wedding Ringer* to his more than 14 million Twitter followers, Sony executives refused and one called him a “whore” (Donnelly). Such comments suggest that there is an expectation from Hollywood among even its top stars that social media is a normal and essential part of the industry that requires no compensation from employers.

To maintain a Twitter presence means that comedians and entertainers are in need of material to tweet about. *Sharknado* was an opportunity for tweeting jokes on a trending and therefore high-profile hashtag. Twitter reported that Wil Wheaton had his combined *Sharknado* tweets retweeted over 10,335 times and gained 3,400 new followers that night, twice as many as normal (Rogers). It was this potential for success that motivated comedians to tweet about *Sharknado*. The two most retweeted tweets from comedians were posted by B.J. Novak and Rob Delaney. As of 20 February 2016, Delaney has 1.23 million followers (he had around 694,000 in 2012) and Novak has 870,000 (347,000 in 2012). They both use their accounts to promote projects they are involved with. Along with jokes, they tweet about the commercial ventures in which they are involved. These promotional tweets are posted along with original jokes and content from these accounts. This is comparable to a television channel that broadcasts adverts between entertainment programming. Most people follow these accounts for the jokes while the operators slip in marketing tweets between the entertaining ones. These two comedians are examples of how entertainers put out free material that serves to further their promotional activities.

B. J. Novak

The second most popular tweet, with 2,681 retweets and 1.657 likes, was posted by B. J. Novak, an American actor, stand-up comedian, screenwriter and author. Novak is most well-known for his acting role in the NBC television comedy *The Office*, a show he was a writer and executive producer for from 2005–2013. He has also has supporting roles in the films *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013). In 2013, he signed a

book deal for two novels. In 2015, he helped develop *The List App* for the Apple Operating System.

T2. B.J. Novak @bjnovak

I'm afraid that now when we have a real sharknado everyone's going to treat it like a joke

The premise of this tweet is taking the absurd plot of *Sharknado* as a serious real world possibility. Disaster preparation is an important real world issue which has become even more acute in the United States in the wake of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 58). Contemplating the real world consequences of an actual sharknado heightens the absurdity of the premise. Most paracinematic texts strive to adhere to mainstream film conventions, which include having a premise in which an audience can become invested. A story that is ridiculous or so poorly told that it takes the audience out of engaging with the film can be one of the main reasons that attracts audiences to participate in paracinematic activities around a text. Engaging in activities that creatively point out the film's failure to achieve this is a large part of the paracinematic experience (Bonnstetter 98). Novak's tweet does this by jokingly riffing on the plot and making its faults more obvious. It also helps to create the audience-generated paracinematic aesthetic that Sconce defined (102). By riffing on the film's faults using irony, as opposed to simply pointing them out, this falls in line with other tweets, including promotional content from Syfy, and reinforces how the audience should engage with *Sharknado*.

In live group viewing sessions, when a member of the audience makes a riff that is successful within the paracinematic game that everyone else is playing, they are rewarded with laughter (Brooker 59; McCulloch 208). This is recognition of someone's cultural capital within paracinema. The substitute for laughter on Twitter comprises likes, retweets, and replies that are complimentary.

T2R1. Jim Cantore @JimCantore
@thebriansims @bjnovak Hillar !!!

T2R9. Ivette @IvetteCaridad
@marcosmanzanoo @IrisMariaSiri dying!

T2R11. Beth Martinez. Hero. @dangervillage
@bjnovak buwahahaha

T2R14. Hana Gilliom @HanaGilliom
@KaylieLewallen hahahah you watched?! Because I did!

T2R1, T2R9, T2R11 and T2R14 are examples of these compliments acknowledging the quality of Novak's joke. Receiving these is an indication that the paracinematic audience approves of a riff that has been made on Twitter. Tweeting a reply, instead of just liking or retweeting, also lets the replier show that they get the joke.

The name *Sharknado* inspired people to come up with their riff on the animal-plus-disaster type film name.

T2R2. Darren Zarter @El_Zarto
@bjnovak no one will laugh when the #Koalacaust takes us all by storm.

T2R17. Todd Salazar @TSalazar__31
@TellyZuniga @bjnovak might as well have bluegillnado #stupid

T2R18. Todd Salazar @TSalazar__31
@TellyZuniga @bjnovak Wait how bout Bullnado...that way when Bulls start coming down it will be BULLSHIT!! #stupid
#illbehereallday

T2R2, T2R17 and T2R18 are examples of this common type of riffing right across the *Sharknado* hashtag that will be discussed further.

There are also intertextual references.

T2R3. Meredith Modzelewski @meredithmo
@bjnovak the boy who cried "sharknado"

T2R3 used the well-known fable 'the boy who cried wolf', but by changing wolf to sharknado it builds on the idea of the original tweet that the film might leave people unprepared. Intertextual references are a key part of paracinema. They use a reference from one text to parody another. This example uses one of the most common fables about how to act responsibly and inserts *Sharknado* into its story in a way so bizarre that it contains no such commonly applicable moral.

T2R20 is a reference to an incident involving *Sharknado* star Tara Reid.

T2R20. BrianLustig @brianlustig
@bjnovak Sharknado is so unrealistic. Tara Reid's dress falls off walking down red carpet but stays on during multiple Sharknado attacks?

In 2004, while Reid was at a red carpet event the top of her dress slipped down. This caused a sensation in the world of Hollywood celebrity. This is an intertextual reference between celebrity gossip involving actress Reid and the events affecting her character in the film. This reference involves knowledge of celebrity culture. By comparing *Sharknado* to a celebrity incident, it is ironically suggesting that this very absurd film is not realistic.

T2R10 is a reference to the popular idea of what Disney's marketing is, by suggesting a more sentimental kid friendly version of *Sharknado*.

T2R10. Disney Ech°o° @DisneyEcho
Disney's working on Sharknado Buddies

The irony is that *Sharknado* could be turned into something very safe and mainstream, like a Disney film. These intertextual references are common within paracinema, not just for their use of irony, but also their disparaging use of mainstream culture (Jancovich 154). This hostility towards the popular while displaying an understanding of riffing and bad movies marks out this user as having a type of rarefied cultural capital.

T2R22 refers to a previous Syfy channel movie, *Sharktopus*.

T2R22. richard l @rlucero9
@bjnovak that and Sharktopus ::shudders::

This is an intertextual reference to another very similar film. This is less a parody and more a simple comparison between two similar films. It also makes people aware that this user is familiar with Syfy's past body of work. Such displays of cultural knowledge are common at paracinematic events (McCulloch 209). There is cultural capital in having been part of a subculture before it was popular. This tweet lets people know this user has been watching Syfy original movies before *Sharknado*.

The dominant riffing that took place on this thread was building on Novak's idea of an actual sharknado happening in real life. Building on a riff by adding something new but directly related to the original joke is something that also takes place in live group film watching (Brooker 59). This type of building on riffs is very common throughout the *Sharknado* hashtag. The reply function of Twitter is particularly well set up to facilitate this interaction. There were two riffing styles used by people replying to Novak, agreeing that people would be unprepared or talking about how they themselves would be prepared.

T2R4. Red Cross Oklahoma @RedCrossOK
@bjnovak not down here. :)

T2R4 is interesting because it came from an official Red Cross Twitter account. The Red Cross was a prominent tweeter throughout *Sharknado*'s trending on Twitter, as will be discussed later, using the discussion about *Sharknado* to promote themselves and disaster readiness. Here they ironically suggest they will be prepared for the sharknado.

Much of the riffing about being well prepared for a *Sharknado* is tied closely to the depiction of Fin, the lead character in the film, as the rugged action hero individual, along with his use of chainsaws.

T2R6. Cakeus @trippyhipppy_
@IvetteCaridad @IrisMariaSiri LMFAO we'll be the only ones prepared

T2R7. @marcosmanzanoo
@IrisMariaSiri we need to buy those Craftsmen chainsaws!

T2R8. Ivette @IvetteCaridad
@IvetteCaridad @IrisMariaSiri they're definitely a necessity if we're gonna be ripping each other out of massive, flying great whites!

T2R20. Matt Thomson @daddymention
@bjnovak You kidding? I'm at the store buying my survival chainsaw right now.

T2R5. Todd Henry @toddhenny
@bjnovak Remember: if you see a sharknado, don't try to outrun it; just succumb. (Unless you have a chainsaw.)

Chainsaws are objects commonly portrayed as weapons in low-budget horrors that often are associated with paracinema. This is not explicit intertextual referencing, but is informed by the author's wider understanding of film genres. To be part of a paracinematic experience, the audience requires a certain level of cultural capital to recognise what the reference is an allusion to (Bonnstetter 99). This excluded those who lack this capital, giving the experience an element of exclusivity, while letting those with this knowledge put it on display.

There are tweets that riff by agreeing with the original tweet and building on the joke by talking about the film in a sombre tone that is completely lacking in the film itself.

T2R12. Jake Ludington @jakeludington
We're all afraid! RT @bjnovak: I'm afraid that now when we have a real sharknado everyone's going to treat it like a joke

T2R13. javachik @javachik
Such a salient point. Take heed. RT @bjnovak: I'm afraid that now when we have a real sharknado everyone's going to treat it like a joke

T2R15. J Scarp @theblackcloud19
@iamslange it's true, let's not forget that this movie had a strong message to say about sharks and natural disasters.

T2R19. Melissa Hilfers @melissahilfers
@bjnovak on that day screenwriter thunder levin will laugh bitterly.
"Oh my prophetic soul"

This is closer to the praise tweets, with people simply reinforcing Novak's original tweet and showing that they get the joke. However, T2R19 shows that they know the name of the *Sharknado* screenwriter, Thunder Levin, a name that many people found amusing.

Novak's tweet had the qualities of ironically riffing on a text associated with paracinema. There were many types of replies that fell within the audience practice of paracinema. However, the largest type of reply was built on the image or short narrative that Novak had created about *Sharknado*. The idea of taking the concept of a sharknado seriously and applying it to real life is both funny and easy to expand on. These tweets became popular because people liked and retweeted and enjoyed the joke, but also because people could easily add their own riffs to it. Getting to make riffs yourself and building on others' jokes is part of the pleasure of paracinematic group watching (Brooker 57). Novak's

paracinematic skill is not just in making a funny joke, but also giving people easy access to the enjoyment of building their own riff. Novak displayed his cultural capital through effective use of humour and adherence to the collective nature of cult film watching by giving his fellow paracinematic audience members a platform to engage with. In turn, he was rewarded with having his tweet become popular.

Rob Delaney

The second comedian is Rob Delaney, who sent the fifth most popular tweet (retweets 886, likes 891). Rob Delaney is a comedian who is seen as a pioneer in generating Twitter content. He started his account in 2009 and was the first ever winner of the ‘Funniest Person on Twitter Award’ at The Comedy Awards run by Comedy Central. His success on Twitter has led to a book deal and a television acting career.

His tweet cites the acclaimed filmmaker Wes Anderson and his well-known detailed visual style, arguably the polar opposite of *Sharknado*. This is an intertextual reference common in paracinema. The use of intertextual references in this case is a parodic form of joking. Simon Dentith defines parody in part as “one of the many forms of intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced” (6). Intertextual references, in the form of parody and irony, are an important part of paracinematic experience as they can be used simply to point out flaws or to be a reflexive way to deconstruct the texts (Bonnstetter 99). The paracinematic use of intertextuality is clear, as it is being used ironically to parody the style of *Sharknado*. Delaney is displaying his cultural capital with an effective use of humour and is showing his understanding of cinematic style with his reference to Anderson. Delaney also taps into paracinema’s hostility towards mainstream Hollywood by making fun of a popular and critically acclaimed director.

T5. Rob Delaney @robdelaney

I usually hate Wes Anderson, but Sharknado’s actually pretty good.

There are praising tweets fulfilling the role of laughter.

T5R8. Peter Wentz @pjwentz

Glorious. RT: @robdelaney: I usually hate Wes Anderson, but Sharknado’s actually pretty good.

T5R10. Owen Beecher @obeech1989
@robdelaney thank you.

T5R16. MCU @MusicChoiceU
“@robdelaney: I usually hate Wes Anderson, but Sharknado’s actually pretty good.” #LOLZ

T5R12. ARNOLD™ @____arnold
“@robdelaney: I usually hate Wes Anderson, but Sharknado’s actually pretty good.” best #SharkNado tweet.

T5R8, T5R10 and T5R16 praise Delaney’s tweet, indicating Delaney’s tweet was found a worthwhile contribution to the paracinematic experience.

Many of the replies are riffs that build on Delaney’s original tweet. In line with what happens in live group watches of paracinematic texts, there is an accentuation of the ridiculousness of the idea that Wes Anderson directed *Sharknado*.

T5R1: Dana Brunetti @DanaBrunetti
@robdelaney That’s the documentary he did on land sharks, right?

In T5R1 there is a suggestion that *Sharknado* is a documentary made by Anderson. The irony here is that documentary is considered a highbrow genre that shows a high level of realism, as opposed to *Sharknado*. With this riff, the user gets to display cultural capital in the form of understanding film genre.

There is an interaction that involves T5R5 replying to T5R4 who has replied to Delaney. The replies are playing on the fact that people often confuse Wes Anderson with fellow director Paul Thomas Anderson (PTA).

T5R4. Stephanie @Low_Level_Rebel
@robdelaney You are confusing him with Paul Thomas Anderson.
Don’t worry, I do that all the time.

T5R5. rickydigital @rickydigital
@Low_Level_Rebel @robdelaney PTA ‘there will be sharks’

T5R4 mentions Paul Thomas Anderson then T5R5 replaces the word blood from the title of the PTA film *There Will Be Blood* with the word sharks. This is an example of an

intertextual reference, but also the collective experience of riffing back and forth often involved in paracinema (Mathijs and Sexton 19). Cultural capital is being used here, as the humour of the jokes involves knowledge about critically acclaimed directors and their films.

T5R14 and T5R20 used other intertextual references as part of riffing, such as suggesting other famous directors who could have been involved with *Sharknado*. They continue the riff suggesting other famous directors that could make *Sharknado*.

T5R14. Michael Dean @mikedeancomic
@robdelaney I thought it was Michael Mann...
#BecauseHisMoviesSuck

T5R20: #Astrodog @Memeth_Astrodog
@robdelaney Too bad Von Trier pass on this one...

This lets these users illustrate their cultural capital around film knowledge. Also, we see elements of paracinema's counter-hegemonic positioning, with the mocking of critically acclaimed filmmakers.

T5R17 and T5R19 are also intertextual tweets that demonstrate the user's knowledge of Wes Anderson's filmmaking style and the actors with whom he regularly collaborates.

T5R17: Umar 'Danger' Ditta @UmarDitta
@robdelaney Bill Murray's death was so touching
#sharkrippedhisdickoff

T5R19: James Kust @JamesKust
@robdelaney Have you ever seen sharks so quirky?

T5R21: Paul Dillon @jamespauldillon
@robdelaney I'm just glad to see Luke Wilson getting work on the
SyFy channel.

Once again, intertextual references are employed to attack the popular filmmaker by parodying his stylistic choices.

Delaney's tweet used the paracinema audience practice of irony and intertextual references to riff on *Sharknado*. His tweet also contains some of the counter-hegemonic deconstruction that Sconce explored (118). Like Novak, Delaney established a riffing

pattern and many of those who riffed on his thread followed it. Replies about other acclaimed filmmakers that could have made *Sharknado* and comments about Anderson's filmmaking style let people put on a display a certain highbrow level of cultural knowledge. However, while this tweet does give people a pattern to follow, it did not gain the popularity of the other top tweets that did this. Anyone with a limited knowledge of "quality" cinema was excluded from participating. The riffing pattern on this tweet was not as accessible as others among the top five, which limited the accumulation of Delaney's cultural capital through the paracinema experience.

Parody Twitter Accounts

Parody accounts have developed as a popular phenomenon on Twitter. There are many different types of these accounts, based on real-life public figures (Elizabeth Windsor), fictional characters (Lord Voldemort), fictional organisations (Death Star PR) and non-human entities (Hostile Goose) (Highfield 8). The accounts are operated by a mix of individuals or groups operating with varying levels of anonymity. Successful parody accounts involve the creators' engagement in roleplaying that, much like entertainers accounts, requires work to shape an entertaining persona (Highfield 4). Many of the most successful parody accounts are tied to popular culture and fandom, in the account's persona and the content of their tweets. Popular culture personas will tweet about real-life events, like Death Star PR commenting on the birth of the royal baby, while a persona based on a non-popular cultural subject will tweet about popular culture, such as Elizabeth Windsor comparing the television show *X-Factor* to the civil war in Syria. Celebrity and cultural news are popular on social media, so unsurprisingly the most popular tweets from parody accounts are about topical popular events (Highfield 12). Once it started trending, *Sharknado* became the perfect subject matter for parody twitter content.

The two parody accounts that sent the tweets with the highest amounts of retweets were The-Tweet-Of-God and The Batman. As of 7 January 2016, The-Tweet-Of-God had 2.22 million followers and The Batman had 458,000. The-Tweet-Of-God is run by David Javerbaum, a comedy writer. He has worked on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and since 2010 has been a comedy producer for the media company Fusion. It is not publicly

known who is behind The Batman. Many parody accounts tweet about sponsored products (Golby). However, neither The-Tweet-Of-God nor The Batman accounts seem to do this. The-Tweet-Of-God has promoted the book *The Last Testament: A Memoir by God* and the play *An Act of God* that Javerbaum wrote based on the Twitter account. Given the author's level of anonymity and the somewhat cynical persona of The Batman, there seems to be no obvious paid promotion on the account. However, the account does tweet about comic book films, but not always in a positive manner. Tellingly, The Batman has become largely inactive, and on 13 February 2016 Javerbaum has declared that he is discontinuing The-Tweet-Of-God. He stated that, "It's been taking up too much of my time and energy and mental agility" (Maloney). These are not the first popular Twitter accounts that have been come inactive, which suggests that tweeting as a fake persona takes high effort for low reward. Engaging in that level of free or mostly free labour can be hard to sustain.

The-Tweet-of-God

The most popular tweet about *Sharknado*, 5,520 retweets and 2,211 favourites, came from the parody account '@TheTweetOfGod' run by David Javerbaum. The account is operated as if it were a humorous version of God's personal Twitter.

The tweet is mocking the *Sharknado* title by proposing similarly absurd portmanteaux that combine animals with natural disasters as potential sequels.

T1. God @TheTweetOfGod
"SHARKNADO SEQUELS Wolcano Bearnami Hippoquake
Piranhurricane Tarantulavalanche Lizard Blizzard"

The only element of the joke that comes from the diegesis of *Sharknado* is its name, while the rest of the tweet relies on the understanding of Hollywood's trend of making sequels. By creating titles with the animal-plus-disaster formula, the tweet points out how ridiculous the title of *Sharknado* is. Riffing on sensational elements of texts by contrasting them with intertextual references is a common practice within the paracinema and group watching experience (Bonnstetter 99; Brooker 51).

A number of the replies were just direct compliments.

T1R2. Mathias Eichler @einmaleins
@TheTweetOfGod @parislemon lizard Blizzard is my favorite.

T1R14. Bryan Harley @BryanHarley
@tvsmatthackney @TheTweetOfGod @brodiemash Wolcano,
Bearnami and Hippoquake are winners.

This is the Twitter substitute for laughter that indicates audience approval of this paracinematic riff and rewarding the cultural capital put on display.

There are replies that involve intertextual references to specific texts. T1R13 cites *Mansquito* (aka, *Mosquitoman*), a 2005 Syfy Pictures original film about people mutating after being bitten by radioactive mosquitos. T1R18 compares The-Tweet-Of-God suggested sequels with another pop culture text that uses portmanteaus, parodying the use of such names. T1R20 is playing on The-Tweet-Of-God name. “Frog storm” is a reference to one of the ten biblical plagues that God visited upon Egypt.

T1R13. Pat Christman @PCphoto
@TheTweetOfGod @nelses1 my favorite is still Mansquito.

T1R18. Van Hooten @VH151KIN211
@TheTweetOfGod are those new pokemons ?

T1R20. Alex Kobayashi @agkobayashi
@TheTweetOfGod I assumed #sharknado was an remake of your Frog Storm.

These are riffs that let the users who make them put on display their cultural knowledge, of past Syfy movies, anime, or the Bible.

T1R5 also has elements of intertextual references.

T1R5. Bill Rinehart @BillGRinehart
@TheTweetOfGod Not funny. My aunt and uncle were killed in a hippoquake.

This tweet uses the common trope wherein someone claims that the ridiculous subject that is being discussed is the cause of a relative’s death, giving a silly concept an unexpected level of seriousness. This also exhibits a level of cultural capital by showing an understanding of how a trope works by using it as an incongruity.

T1R9 uses a meteorological pun to refer to the science of weather forecasting.

T1R9. Perspectivator @perspectivator
@TheTweetOfGod @kvonhagen You'll know the bad weather is on
the way when there's a drop in the bearometric pressure.

This is a less common intertextual reference outside of pop culture. However, bringing a scientific reference to the pop culture riffs adds another level of incongruity.

The following tweets all build on the original riff by creating and adding their own sequel titles.

T1R4. JessGreenwood @JessGreenwood
@TheTweetOfGod you missed the Barricudicane. I cannot take credit.

T1R7. Troy Beast @TroyBeast
@TheTweetOfGod @MartinPribble Don't forget "Raccoon Typhoon"
#sharknado

T1R10. jon housman @jonhousman
@TheTweetOfGod @ovonhauske @DailyReHash What, no Zombie
Sharks?!

T1R11. Scott Dierdorf @sdierdorf
Squirrel Niño #SharknadoSequels cc @TheTweetOfGod

T1R19. Miss Rosi @LeftCoastGirl
@TheTweetOfGod @ZJiff30 no Alpacalypse? I'm disappointed.

This is the most common original reply in this thread. T1R4, T1R7, T1R10, T1R11 and T1R19 are the most basic versions of this, merely generating new names.

T1R1 adds another level to the process of listing the animal-plus-disaster sequel names with the title "Farmageddon", a location where there are lots of animals, a farm, plus a disaster (Armageddon).

T1R1. Danny Woodburn @DannyWoodburn
@TheTweetOfGod this some kind of Farmageddon?

By adding the word farm, while most other people are saying the name of particular animals, the tweeter provides a riff that then adds a level of incongruity by playing

against expectations. Moreover, the tweet is alluding to the event itself by suggesting that, considering all the animals that were mentioned in previous tweets, it is like a farm.

T1R8 expanded the joke not just by adding a new title, but also by writing, “Rhinosteroid will cause mass extinction!”

T1R8. Simon Brewer @SimonStormRider
@TheTweetOfGod don’t forget the Rhinosteroid will cause mass
extinction! #SharkNado

This reads like a movie tagline, adding another level of creativity and displaying of cultural capital around intertextual pop culture knowledge as well as animal conservation concerns.

T1R15, T1R16 and T1R17 are part of a sub-conversation that takes place on this thread. This kind of back and forth skit is certainly an element of paracinema (Bonnstetter 99; Brooker 59).

T1R15. Roque Rodriguez @brodiemash
@BryanHarley @tvsmatthackney Baboon Typhoon

T1R16. Bryan Harley @BryanHarley
@brodiemash @tvsmatthackney that’s not a portmanteau!

T1R17. Roque Rodriguez @brodiemash
@BryanHarley @tvsmatthackney Baphoon!

T1R15 puts forward the name “Baboon Typhoon”. T1R16 then point out this, unlike most of the other tweets in this thread, is not a portmanteau. T1R17 responds with the reworked title “Baphoon”. This build-up pays off because “Baphoon” would be an unrecognisable portmanteau out of context. In addition, T1R16 brings attention to the portmanteau structure of the joke. This exchange displays the users’ knowledge of the humour on which this thread is based and deconstructs the title of *Sharknado*. Using Twitter gave people, like the owners of the @brodiemash and @BryanHarley accounts, the opportunity to riff on *Sharknado* together. This allowed them to engage in practices like working together to build on a riff, a common aspect of paracinema.

The-Tweet-of-God’s tweet was a riff on *Sharknado* that subsequently allowed other Twitter users to build on it. The contents of the tweet, a series of fake film titles that

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combined animals and natural disasters, established an easy-to-follow pattern of how to create a title for *Sharknado* sequels. While there was a variety of replies, a large number of participants stuck to this pattern to create similar replies with their own title, while others looked for humour by changing the pattern or adding something new. Similar patterns are seen in the other discussed tweets, but this is the most distinct example. The-Tweet-of-God's tweet was successful because it had the cultural capital to be humorous and to an easy to follow riffing pattern. This success at the paracinema game is why the The-Tweet-of-God tweet became the most popular.

The Batman

The other parody account and fourth most popular tweet, with 969 retweets and 395 likes, comes from the unverified account The Batman (Formerly God_Damn_Batman). Around the time of the *Sharknado* broadcast, the account had about 464,168 followers (Intern). The Batman posts jokes as if they were from the fictional superhero character of Batman. The tweets from this account are often trying to evoke the dramatic line readings by Christian Bale in the Christopher Nolan directed Batman films. Many of the jokes from the account in general are intertextual references, incorporating texts that relate Batman to current events or other pieces of popular culture. Many of those who reply to the tweets from this account are fans of Batman and the texts in which the character appears. This means a large number of replies to this account talk solely about Batman and ignore other content in its tweets.

The intertextual aspect of this account are on full display here when comparing *Sharknado* to the, at the time, most recent Batman film.

T4. The Batman @TheBatman

Hate to say it, but Sharknado might have fewer plotholes than Dark Knight Rises.

The tweet sarcastically suggests that *Sharknado* is more coherent than a Hollywood blockbuster. The tweet relates to some of the criticisms levelled at the Batman film *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), which declared that it was convoluted and full of plot holes. This reference parodies the quality of *Sharknado*'s script. Paracinema's rebellious aspect

is at play, as the intertextual reference parodies a comic book film at a time that the genre is dominating the box office.

T4R3 is a tweet that plays along with criticism of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

T4R3. B. Paraskevas @bparas87
“@TheBatman: Hate to say it, but Sharknado might have fewer
plot holes than Dark Knight Rises.” The animation is better too
#SharkNado

It builds on the riff by mirthfully suggesting that another aspect of *Sharknado* is superior to *The Dark Knight Rises*.

T4R2 and T4R7 also build on the riff.

T4R2. Dial C for Christian @christianguisa
@TheBatman @hard_pop and better action sequences than Man of
Steel...

T4R7. Jeff Rothman @amazingjr87
“@TheBatman: Hate to say it, but Sharknado might have fewer
plot holes than Dark Knight Rises.” More plot holes than MAN OF
STEEL though

They agree with each other, and add another intertextual reference by bringing up another contemporary superhero film, *Man of Steel* (2013). There is mocking of the massive action sequences of the film.

T4R4 integrates the word shark into the name of *The Dark Knight Rises* creating an intertextual pun.

T4R4. mary. marebear. @piemaryy
@TheBatman At first I thought this said “Shark Night Rises”.

Its paracinematic aspects are mostly about intertextuality as this reply is an almost entirely separate riff. The intertextual combination of Batman and *Sharknado* is the only similarity it has with the original tweet. There is a lot less building on other tweets to create the joke.

T4R1 and T4R8 are tweets that contain no intertextual references and instead simply focus on mocking the quality of *Sharknado*. There is also very little in the way of building on other tweets to create these riffs.

T4R8. John Lee @geniodocrime
@TheBatman is there a plot on sharknado?

T4R1. B. Paraskevas @bparas87
@TheBatman I'm assuming that the film is ten minutes long and involves a bunch of sharks being pulped on impact & a huge, smelly cleanup?No?

T4R8 refers to the ironic use of the term “plot” in the original tweet, while T4R1 lays out an ironically realistic plot that a movie called *Sharknado* might have. There is no mention of any aspect of Batman. These tweets are solely focused on making jokes about how bad *Sharknado* is. This is still part of the paracinematic experience with their use of irony, but there is less embracing of the aesthetic here.

The nature of the account and the content of the original tweet have both had a major effect on the replies generated. There were a number of intertextual references; they all focus on superheroes, predominantly Batman. Many of these riffs had a much greater focus on the superhero aspect and were less interested in *Sharknado*. There were also riffs that did not necessarily build on the original or other tweets. There was less of a pattern that could be imitated in the original tweet, so the building of riffs was not so developed. Without the established pattern, this meant that it was more open to diverse replies; but it would also take more creative effort, with less collective help, to create a good riff. The paracinematic experience on Twitter may require even more collective cooperation than the live group version does. The Batman tweet's success came from its cultural capital in creating humour and intertextuality. However, with fewer elements in the original tweet on which to build and riff collectively, its success has been capped.

Organisations on Twitter

As well as individuals, a wide range of organisations use Twitter. It is common for an organisation to have one or more official Twitter accounts for promotion, coordination and interaction with members and customers. As discussed in the previous chapter, there

have been mixed reports on marketing through Twitter. While many see it as a low-cost opportunity to reach out to consumers, there are also worries about this new and not yet fully understood medium. There have been suggestions that it is simply ineffective (Soboleva, Burton and Khan 5). Another major concern is that negativity about a brand spreads faster and wider than anything positive (Soboleva, Burton and Khan 4). When businesses or organisations do something embarrassing or offensive on Twitter it can quickly backfire, often publicly (Bhasin). Appropriate and acceptable ways to market online still remain something of a mystery to marketing and public relations experts (Soboleva, Burton and Khan 4). Trent Spaulding, looking at early social media, found that online communities and groups form informal sets of rules out of their practices unique to their own needs (Spaulding 40). While this has not yet been widely explored in relation to Twitter, marketers are becoming aware that online groups form their own rules (Sanderson et al. 5). This clearly applies to paracinema with its own sets of rituals and often anti-establishment feeling. If those are not understood and respected, trying to market within those groups can backfire.

The organisation account that experienced the highest amount of retweets in this study was Red Cross Oklahoma (@RedCrossOk). As of 7 January 2016, it had 18,500 followers. The Red Cross is a humanitarian organisation that responds to disaster situations. The Red Cross sees Twitter as a hugely important tool in its work (Briones et al. 368). Using Twitter to communicate, coordinate and gather information during a crisis has become an important strategy for the Red Cross. Having a Twitter presence during the calm periods is part of that strategy; it can help the Red Cross gain donations and volunteers, while letting people know that their Twitter accounts are a place to check in times of trouble. However, the Red Cross has not always had a smooth time on Twitter. In 2011 there was the infamous #GettingSlizzard tweet, when the Red Cross Twitter manager accidentally sent a text about getting drunk to the Red Cross account instead of his own personal account. It appears that the Red Cross saw *Sharknado* as an opportunity to make light of message tweets that might overshadow #GettingSlizzard. Many state-based Red Cross branches also used their accounts to be part of the trending hashtag. Drawing on humour to pretend that a sharknado is a realistic possibility, they used the sharknado hashtag for public relations purposes and to promote disaster preparedness.

The American Red Cross actively called for people to “Practice preparedness in a hypothetical situation by tweeting #sharknado #redcross tonight” (American Red Cross Twitter). The American Red Cross then compiled some of these tweets together on their blog. This meant that the Red Cross was much more explicit about promoting the *Sharknado* hashtag than Syfy was.

Red Cross Oklahoma

The third most popular *Sharknado* tweet came from the organisation in question, the official Red Cross Oklahoma Twitter account (retweets 1,320, likes 435). Many tweets and replies to tweets were sent out by the Red Cross Twitter accounts from various states. Oklahoma’s account may have been the most popular because of the state’s notoriety for its real-life tornados, a fact this tweet plays on.

T3. Red Cross Oklahoma @RedCrossOK

We’re ready to respond if there is a #Sharknado. If it were to happen, it would be in Oklahoma. Why? Because we’re tough like that.

The tweet, while promotional, is playing the paracinematic game. It uses an intertextual reference, Oklahoma’s history of tornados, to parody the seriousness of the film’s premise.

As a continuation of the initial purpose of the tweet the American Red Cross of Southern Missouri (SOMO) tweeted their support (T3R1), telling Oklahoma they would help if a sharknado hit. T3R2, meanwhile, is Oklahoma’s reply in kind, saying they will help Southern Missouri when needed. Then T3R3 is a regular Twitter user who praises the interaction.

T3R1. SOMO Red Cross @SOMORedCross

@redcrossokc you can have the #sharknado but we will come back you up if you need support. Because we #GotYourBackJack

T3R2. Red Cross Oklahoma @RedCrossOK

@SOMORedCross and we got your back anytime you need!

T3R3. Raul @hummingbird604

Folks: @redcrossokc @SOMORedCross both have won The Internet tonight. And they defeated the #sharkNado ;)

This exchange is about marketing the Red Cross, but it is done in a way that displays that they have the cultural capital to understand the paracinematic experience. These tweets are approved of by the paracinema audience.

There are a lot of tweets simply praising the Red Cross Oklahoma tweet.

T3R7. Billie Jean VK @BillieJeanVK
@redcrossokc You're awesome.

T3R10. Hayes Brown @HayesBrown
Amazing. MT @redcrossokc: We're ready to respond if there is a
#Sharknado. Why? Because we're tough like that.

T3R11. Patricia Zengerle @ReutersZengerle
Wins! MT @redcrossokc: We're ready to respond if there is a
#Sharknado. If it happened, it wld be in Oklahoma. Because we're
tough like that

T3R12. Laurie London @LaurieBLondon
@redcrossokc OMGosh, that's hilarious the Red Cross tweeted about
#Sharknado

This indicates a level of success at the paracinematic game. Furthermore, the general surprise that this joke about *Sharknado* came from a respected NGO creates a level of incongruity that people find amusing.

Like all the top tweet threads, there are also replies that use intertextual references. Some are references to the history of Oklahoma. T3R13 and T3R16 are references to "Sooners", the nickname given to the early settler colonists of the area that became Oklahoma. It is also the name of an Oklahoma college American football team. T3R14 is a reference to the Dust Bowl, the drought that affected Oklahoma in the 1930s and produced some of the most iconic imagery of the Great Depression.

T3R13. Rebecca Rose @RebeccaBurtRose
@redcrossokc Sharks are not match for Sooners #truefact

T3R14. S.P. Miskowski @SPMiskowski
@redcrossokc Just watched the Ken Burns doc about the Dust Bowl.
You're not lyin'.

T3R16. Karin Hildebrand @Karimala1

@redcrossokc @goldietaylor ROCK ON, OKLAHOMA!!!! Boomer
Sooner!!!

These tweets are ironically playing on the idea of a real *Sharknado* by saying that the people of Oklahoma can deal with it. They display a level of cultural capital in terms of understanding of how to play the paracinematic game, but there is a different kind of cultural capital also being showing here: pride in Oklahoma.

While there are popular culture intertextual references they are not as common as in the other top tweets. Popular documentarian Ken Burns was mentioned in the Dust Bowl Tweet T3R14. There is also a tweet alluding to *The Wizard of Oz* and the famous line “we’re not in Kansas anymore”, spoken after the main character Dorothy has been transported by a tornado.

T3R15. James D. Johansson @JDJohansson
This ain’t KS sharks! RT @redcrossokc: We’re ready to respond if
there is a #Sharknado...Because we’re tough like that.

There were several general ironic jokes about what would happen if sharknados were real. They have a strong technical aspect to them with references to the effect of fracking and the technique of shark fishing.

T3R20. James Ayers @Ayers111
@redcrossokc Just read the article a Scientific Journal that fracking
causes Sharknados. #Sharknado

T3R21. Mike Estwick @wxMikeD
@redcrossokc so #Sharknado chasing would be easy... Just lay some
chum and watch them come... No dryline needed...

The technical description within the tweets is ironic as they refer to such a technically inaccurate film.

The Red Cross Oklahoma’s tweet is part of a wider promotional campaign for a humanitarian organisation, which has shaped its content. The replies that dominated this thread were praise and compliment tweets. This could be motivated by the humanitarian work Red Cross does, as much as the joke made in the tweet itself. However, as other Red Cross accounts as well as other organisations were using the *Sharknado* hashtag, the fact that this tweet was so popular indicates that it played the paracinematic game well.

This is reinforced by the fact that other Red Cross accounts joined in on this riff thread. The original tweet did not set a pattern for riffs to build on, but many of the replies did stick to the topics of preparedness and Oklahoma. The Red Cross Oklahoma's cultural capital in playing the paracinematic game was rewarded with positive attention and publicity.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the *Sharknado* audience engaged in a paracinematic experience through Twitter. The previous chapter showed how Syfy's marketing strategy encouraged people to engage with *Sharknado* and how its branding objectives were the motivating factor. A large part of Syfy's success was due to executive Craig Engler's use of his personal cultural capital to make tweeting about *Sharknado* seem like a more authentic experience. The strategy worked and people joined the hashtag for the enjoyment of an online paracinematic experience. However, beyond Syfy's marketing there are broader economic pressures for people in the entertainment industry to tweet about funny and topical subjects. There are now economic motivations for people to demonstrate and increase their cultural capital. *Sharknado* was a meeting point of these motivations and, as such, exemplified its success on Twitter.

Praising tweets are seen throughout the *Sharknado* hashtag. Tweets that praise on these threads are acknowledging the quality of the original tweeted joke. They are a public acknowledgement of a successfully made riff. In the live setting of group watching, people are unlikely to yell out full compliments in praise of a joke; instead, laughter plays this very important role. The jokes and actions of paracinema are part of a game, a game that is shaped collectively by the audience and learnt through practice. When someone does something well, laughter is the way of telling participants that they have played the paracinema game successfully (McCulloch 207; Brooker 57). McCulloch describes the importance of laughter in live group viewings as "an indicator of fan cultural capital" (207). Acknowledgment tweets are a Twitter equivalent of laughter. These direct compliments, along with retweets and favourites, are, like the laughter in a live group viewing, a form of cultural capital that users, particularly professional entertainers, often

aim to accumulate on Twitter. All the accounts that the most popular tweets came from have a relatively high number of followers and a certain online presence.

In terms of Twitter users adding and riffing on the original tweets, intertextual references are the most popular form. This popularity is largely shaped by the fact that all of the tweets, with the exception of Novak's, contain an intertextual reference. The intertextual reference in Red Cross Oklahoma's tweet is not as explicit as the other three. However, there are intertextual references made by users in all five threads. The most common use of intertextual references in the *Sharknado* tweets is the creating of fictional names of sequels or alternative films. This plays on the other films of the Syfy channel with similar titles, as well as the tendency of both mainstream Hollywood and exploitation filmmakers to produce sequels or imitations of popular films. This humour strategy uses the animal-plus-disaster formula to create a new film name and to point out how ridiculous the title and concept of *Sharknado* is. The other popular examples of intertextual references were comparing *Sharknado* to already existing films. This happened most on The Batman and Delaney tweets. This is due to the cinematic intertextual references in each of their tweets and, in the case of The Batman, their Twitter persona. The Batman tweet generated intertextual references to superhero films like *Man of Steel* and *Iron Man 3*, while Delaney's sees replies about filmmakers like Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, Lars von Trier and Michael Mann. This type of intertextual referencing is a major part of the paracinema group watching experience (Bonnstetter 99; Brooker 57). It lets participants put on display both their wit and cultural knowledge. Those replying to The Batman show off their knowledge about the details and tropes of comic book superheroes, while those on Delaney's thread get to display a familiarity with more highbrow filmmakers and their cinematic styles.

The tweets and their jokes are presented mostly in the form of riffs that are common in paracinema and were popularised by the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Making a good riff, something funny that related to *Sharknado* that the other members of the audience enjoyed, showed that the author had the cultural capital to understand the experience. These tweet riffs would be rewarded with likes, be retweeted and receive positive feedback. However, the most popular *Sharknado* tweets, particularly those by Novak and The-Tweet-of-God, added something beyond funny. They held to a pattern

that was easy to follow for other users to add their own riffs. Paracinema is a collective activity and creating a riff that capitalises on this will return greater rewards. Humour and intertextual references can gain popularity, but without collective riffing this popularity may be limited.

The previous chapter explored how Syfy encouraged its audience to tweet about *Sharknado* by evoking paracinematic practices. This chapter has focused on what happened once they took up Syfy's offer. The *Sharknado* hashtag was dominated, in terms of popularity, by accounts engaging in self-promotion. These accounts took the opportunity to accumulate cultural capital by playing the paracinematic group watching game. Unlike paracinematic audiences who engage with cult films simply for fun or as an activity oppositional to the dominant culture, these accounts directly enhanced their position in society. This promotional activity also benefited Syfy, as it generated a high numbers of followers, increasing the film's visibility, many of whom were comedians whose skills increased the humour on the hashtag.

Conclusion

“Somewhere in Hollywood there is a senior executive yelling at a junior executive for not coming up with #Sharknado first.” Greg Berlanti. @GBerlanti. 11 July 2013.

Syfy’s marketing was able to make the low budget, incoherently plotted, and poorly acted *Sharknado* into a film that was enjoyable to tweet about. In doing so, the channel enhanced their brand of “Imagine Greater” and managed to connect to a wider audience while staying within the designated cultural field strongly preferred by their core viewership. This was achieved through evoking the audience practice of paracinema around the watching of cult films for the purposes of biopolitical marketing. Syfy was able to combine and capitalise on the tradition of group watching a cult film and the growing popularity of live tweeting television. Syfy’s promotion of *Sharknado* on Twitter was so successful at encouraging people to engage in the paracinematic activities associated with cult film watching that both individual people and organisations took part, in the hope of being able to promote themselves.

Syfy’s branding strategies were developed in the face of the challenges of the economic landscape of the post-network era. While catering to a niche audience has become a common economic model for cable channels, channels like Syfy still face pressures from their corporate owners to increase ratings and revenue. The problem with these external pressures was that Syfy’s core viewership was outspokenly opposed to any move away from the genres associated with science fiction. However, this dedicated audience was also an asset in branding the channel. Through Twitter, Syfy encouraged its established audience to be brand ambassadors and be the ones to bring in new viewers. The channel did this largely by making its Twitter presence enjoyable and rewarding for the audience to interact with. These audience interactions increased the visibility of Syfy and created the image of a channel with loyal consumers who publicly enjoy its products. Syfy’s branding strategy is not just about keeping its core audience happy, but also about utilising its audience’s labour to promote the channel’s brand.

Syfy was an early adopter of using Twitter for marketing. The channel’s use of Twitter has stood out as an example of effective social media marketing. The official Syfy

account operated by Craig Engler has been able to mobilise the audience for the channel. Most importantly, the account was used to promote the channel and its programming. Engler's running of the Syfy account demonstrates how brand marketing has become largely about motivating current consumers to be the ones who sell the product to new consumers. Engler encouraged people to send positive tweets by retweeting them from the Syfy account. Just as important, the high level of engagement raised the profile of the channel across Twitter.

Syfy's Twitter tactics were closely connected to its branding strategy. Much of Syfy's branding has been done through engagement with its viewers over Twitter. This has created value for Syfy in two ways. The high level of online engagement has helped Syfy to brand its audience as "igniters". Igniters are people who are most likely to buy the newest, most cutting edge products and then talk about them on social media. These are the consumers whom many advertisers want to target. The *Sharknado* broadcast reinforced this idea, with Syfy's audience being highly visible on Twitter in a way that became a noteworthy story in the mainstream media. The tweeting around *Sharknado* helped to brand Syfy's audience as creative and technology savvy people who are very willing to talk about the products they enjoy.

Syfy's branding has been clearly shaped by its economic needs. In its brief to the design company that created its current brand, the channel specifically asked to retain science fiction elements while appealing to a wider audience. The resulting "Imagine Greater" slogan, while referring to the imagination of the science fiction genre, is also a call for audiences to use their creativity when tweeting about Syfy. The channel brands their audience as creative and innovative users of technology and Syfy is the place they can come to. Twitter encourages their viewers to connect with each other and form an online community.

As explained in Chapter Three, biopolitical marketing theory is the most useful way of understanding Syfy's branding strategy and *Sharknado*'s place within it. In developing biopolitical marketing as a critical framework for examining modern marketing, Zwick and Bradshaw build on critical branding to show how consumer communities have become the holy grail of branding. These are groups of active customers who engage with

each other around a product. This engagement goes beyond consumers being brand ambassadors and tweeting positive comments about a product. What brand managers are hoping to create is a group that initiates activities that are organic, creative, everyday actions that people might do anyway. These activities can involve people tweeting positive things about a product, but this is only a small part of what biopolitical brand managers are trying to capture. Tweeting a question, telling an anecdote or making a joke about a product with fellow consumers is what brand managers want to encourage. These activities are valuable for branding because they are not explicitly promotional, but instead are an everyday life action that just happens to feature the product. Brand managers look to subsume those activities in branding specifically because they will promote a product without coming across simply as marketing *qua* marketing. Zwick and Bradshaw claim these communities are elusive. The live tweeting around *Sharknado* created a consumer community, if for only a short time, that produced a mass of tweets. *Sharknado* became a platform for people to engage in marketing disguised as a pleasurable activity.

The question posed by this thesis was: How were paracinematic audience practices transferred to Twitter during the *Sharknado* broadcast and how does this affect the value of Syfy's products and brand?

This thesis has argued that Syfy's biopolitical marketing of *Sharknado* was successful in adding value to the channel's brand because Twitter affords the possibility for paracinematic audience practices to take place online; these audience practices generated engagement that was well suited to the aims of Syfy's marketing strategies. Syfy was able to use a biopolitical marketing strategy to build a consumer community that was made up of a highly active audience. Twitter allows for television audiences to connect in real time through hashtags and lets them interact through replies, retweets and likes. The audience practice of paracinema around the watching of cult films is what motivated the active audience. The humour, the liveness and sense of rebellion that makes paracinema an enjoyable experience is what attracted people to tweet about *Sharknado*. Tweeting riffs, replying to build on riffs and retweeting the best riffs about *Sharknado* was precisely the kind of activity a biopolitical brand strategy invites from a consumer community. The compatibility of these three aspects, biopolitical marketing, Twitter and paracinematic audience practices, is what made *Sharknado* a branding success.

The goal of biopolitical marketing is to turn a brand into a platform that a consumer community can actively engage around. Syfy succeeded in creating an active group around the *Sharknado* broadcast through its use of the paracinematic activity of cult film fandom. Paracinematic activity helped Syfy create a consumer community in two ways. First, a key aspect of paracinema is that the audience is highly active and engages in ritual practices around these films. By evoking the aura of cult films through *Sharknado* and its exploitation style of production and marketing, Syfy was able to tap into this. The riffing and making jokes at the expense of *Sharknado* over Twitter that resulted, generated the exact type of consumer activity that brand managers are looking for from consumers. The *Sharknado* hashtag was full of creative tweets that encouraged replies and retweeting the film to improve the viewing or pre-viewing experience of it. The tweets that this thesis examined were successful in large part because of their creativity.

Syfy was able to take a subcultural audience practice that has existed for decades in opposition to commercialism and mainstream Hollywood and turn it into a marketing tool for a corporate cable channel. Paracinema theorists had already pointed to the commercial potential of having cult audiences engaging in activities around a film. Paracinema activity can give a film an aura of authenticity and rarity. While these were attributes that the paracinematic experience around *Sharknado* gave the film, Syfy, using biopolitical strategies, was able to generate much more. The channel was able to turn their audience's creative energy of riffing and collectively joking about a bad movie into actions that promoted and added value to Syfy's brand.

Syfy's biopolitical marketing was able to subsume the paracinema audience practices into brand value because the people tweeting about *Sharknado* could be formed into a consumer community over Twitter. Paracinema audience practices developed out of the subculture around cult films. This subculture has been gaining in status with the recent growth and popularity of several so-bad-it's-good films and the communal audience practices that have developed around them. *Sharknado* was not just a movie that emulated a cult film, but also created the opportunity for a community of people to engage with it and interact with each other in a way that had a growing level of desirability. This forming of a community is a regular occurrence around cult films, but this typically happens in private living rooms or at midnight screenings in small theatres. With

Sharknado this took place on Twitter, in full view of the public, using a hashtag promoted by Syfy, with the channel's official account playing a central role. The actions of the community of people who engaged with *Sharknado*, independent of their motivations, became free labour that increased the value of Syfy's brand.

Paracinema was not just effective at generating the amount of activity needed to form a consumer community, but it also brought another important aspect to this biopolitical marketing strategy: the ability to hide marketing. Modern brand managers seek to use consumers to do the marketing as this can overcome people's cynicism about advertisements and branding. A consumer community can also overcome this, as the participants are not necessarily directly promoting a product at all. The *Sharknado* community had these aspects, plus paracinema's image of rebellion. The paracinema subculture that has developed around cult films has positioned itself as both rebellious and authentic. By enjoying and appreciating films that do not conform to the mainstream, paracinematic activity has gained a status as a counter-hegemonic movement that works against bourgeois culture. Syfy was able to take advantage of the very qualities that made paracinema an act of rebellion and turn them into a branding asset. Paracinema's traditional hostility towards mainstream commercial cinema meant that it generated the community that usually sends mocking and sarcastic tweets about Hollywood and common cinematic tropes. This made the tweeting around *Sharknado* look even less like marketing and gave the consumer community around *Sharknado* the appearance of a fun, rebellious and organic event, and a valuable image for a brand. The consumer community that developed around *Sharknado* had the image of a rebellion against the commercial practices of the cultural industries, which masked the fact that its own existence was creating value for one of the players in those industries.

To understand how Syfy used biopolitical marketing to create this consumer community around *Sharknado*, this thesis examined the use of the channel's official Twitter account. Engler used the Syfy Twitter account to promote the film and engaged with the followers on it. This engagement around *Sharknado* from the earliest promotional tweets onwards took on the distinctive quality of paracinematic activity with both Engler and his followers making riffs on the film and building on each other's riffs. Engler was signalling right up to its broadcast that *Sharknado* was a film that people could watch to

engage in cult film practices such as riffing. *Sharknado* gave anyone who had access to the Syfy channel and Twitter the opportunity to experience the fun of bad movies in a way that is accessible to a wider audience, while remaining faithful to the core audience's dedication to the science fiction related genres.

The way Engler operated Syfy's Twitter account in the lead up to and during the *Sharknado* broadcast can be understood using the work on cult film group watching by Brooker and McCulloch. The paracinematic experience of group watching a cult film operates like a game where audience members display their cultural knowledge and skills to gain cultural capital. In the tweets that Engler sent to market *Sharknado*, he was displaying his cultural knowledge and skills by riffing on the film. This informed people about the film, demonstrating that it could be riffed on and mocked over Twitter and that he and the Syfy channel understood the game of group watching a cult film. Engler's skill at riffing allowed him to accumulate cultural capital among those who saw his tweets. This capital allowed him to appear more like a mere fan of cult films. Although all of his tweets were doubtless promotional in some way, his ability to engage as a knowledgeable fan masked the marketing aspect of many of his tweets. This attribute is what brand managers look for to overcome audiences' cynicism toward marketing. Engler helped Syfy's brand by marketing *Sharknado* in a way did not appear to be marketing, making the brand appear more "authentic".

Syfy was able to turn the paracinema experience around *Sharknado* into a commercially valuable activity, despite its traditional hostility to such motivations. Syfy's biopolitical marketing managed to downplay the commercial elements and move the focus to aspects that have made engaging in paracinematic activities around group watching cult films a pleasurable experience for audiences over the decades. Also, while many of the riffs had the mocking qualities associated with paracinema's rebellious aspects, this did not hurt Syfy's brand, as *Sharknado* was produced to be joked about. Criticism of the nature of bourgeois culture just produced more tweets and made the experience more authentic. Any critique of Syfy and marketing strategy would have been lost in all the jokes, criticisms and sarcasm. Even to suggest Syfy's marketing and use of audience labour was being exploitive only reinforced the image of *Sharknado* as a genuine exploitation film. Both Syfy's and Engler's deployment of their cultural knowledge to produce and promote

Sharknado and paracinema's rebellious authenticity tweeting about the film became a desirable activity that could be engaged in to accumulate cultural capital.

The majority of people using the *Sharknado* hashtag were regular Twitter users who did not rely on their accounts to market themselves for financial reasons. While many may have been engaging in some level of hope labour, hoping for future employment by showing off their creative and comedic skills, most were tweeting about *Sharknado* for no economic benefit. Like the audience of a live group watching a cult film, the *Sharknado* audience was playing the group watching game discussed by Brooker and McCulloch, but in this case on Twitter. The group experience lets everyone be part of an audience where they can hear other people's jokes and they can riff together. The best riffs were rewarded by way of likes and retweets which, on Twitter, represent the accumulation of cultural capital. Syfy provided this experience in large part through its biopolitical marketing that masked the commercial aspects of *Sharknado* and focused on the elements that had made paracinema an enjoyable activity.

A big part of the visibility that *Sharknado* gained on Twitter came from celebrities joining the Twitter hashtag. The success of Syfy's biopolitical marketing turned *Sharknado* into an audience platform in which other Twitter users wanted to use the film for their own promotion. Entertainers, comedians, parody accounts and organisations all interacted around the *Sharknado* hashtag. *Sharknado* was an opportunity for them to accumulate cultural capital by displaying their cultural knowledge and skills through riffing on a bad movie. This increased their social capital that could potentially give them more followers, which in turn could increase their economic capital and make them more employable. Twitter has become a personal marketing tool, particularly for people in the entertainment industry.

The top tweets came from accounts that already had a relatively large number of followers. However, what set the tweets from these accounts apart from the ones sent from other similar accounts was they were well set up to have riffs built on them. On the *Sharknado* hashtag, understanding the important elements of paracinema and the group watching game meant that a tweet that contained the appropriate cultural knowledge or skill could become popular. The top tweets added something extra by inviting riffs by

using a pattern the people could easily reply to. The-Tweet-Of-God is the clearest example. The fake sequels names that combined animals with disasters made it very easy for other Twitter users to reply with their own mashup. The authors of the top tweet used their cultural knowledge and skill to set up a riff that would be easy to build on by any Twitter user, which resulted in more people engaging with that tweet. In much the same way that Syfy set up *Sharknado* to be a platform for its audience to engage with, the top authors set up their tweets to be platforms for Twitter users to engage with.

Syfy's branding success with *Sharknado* can be explained by the fact that they played the game that paracinematic audiences have been playing for decades in living rooms and at midnight screenings. *Sharknado* can be seen as an example of the channel making a giant riff, to which they brought all their knowledge and skill to produce it and market it. They did such a good job that a large number of people wanted to join in and build on the riff. This included celebrities, actors, comedians and organisations that all wanted to make their own riffs in the hope that people would want to join in. Those who were able to include regular viewers in their riffs were the most successful. While the majority of people who joined in did so just for the pleasure of riffing on a bad movie – making fun of dominant cultural ideas and collectively being part of a rare live event – everybody who riffed well increased their cultural capital. For ordinary viewers that meant a few likes on Twitter. For celebrities, it meant increasing followers and visibility, which makes them more employable. All the while, Syfy gained free promotional labour and a boost to its brand.

As both fandoms and brands have moved online through social media, there will be increasing interaction between the two. This contact will be shaped by the economic logic of branding and the agency of fans. Brands want both the free labour of their consumers and the authenticity of fans promoting and engaging publicly with their products online. Fans, meanwhile, are looking for more rewarding ways to engage with their chosen object. Syfy's broadcast of *Sharknado* provides an example of a brand successfully tapping into a fandom. *Sharknado* demonstrated how Syfy used its understanding of a fandom and the cultural knowledge of its employees to imbue *Sharknado* with cult-film cultural capital. This drew in people via Twitter to engage in paracinema audience practices that allowed them to accumulate cultural capital. A range of celebrities and

organisations participated as a way to promote themselves with the most successful tweets, demonstrating an understanding of paracinema audience practices. Regular audiences joined in and engaged with *Sharknado* through Twitter to accumulate cultural capital as well. However, while the accumulation of cultural capital around *Sharknado* added value to Syfy's brand and made celebrities more employable, the majority of the audience members who tweeted were riffing about the film for the same reason cult film fans have yelled jokes at bad movies for decades: personal enjoyment. In the past, this enjoyment motivated the financial exchange of the audience paying to see a midnight screening or rent a VHS. In the age of *Sharknado*, Syfy certainly hopes audiences will pay for a subscription, but also they want to subsume every fan interaction, no matter how earnest, rebellious or benign, into its value-generating brand. *Sharknado* provides an insight into how for fandoms Twitter is not a neutral space, but instead is a platform that can be shaped and used by brand managers who aim to turn every fan interaction into free labour for branding proposes.

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Paraskevas, B. (bparas87). ““@TheBatman: Hate to say it, but Sharknado might have fewer plotheles than Dark Knight Rises.” The animation is better two #SharkNado”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:32 UTC. Tweet

Plait, Phil (BadAstronomer). ““Blizzaardvark” may be why Twitter was invented. // @SyFy”. 20 Jun 2013, 18:52 UTC. Tweet

Plait, Phil (BadAstronomer). “@Syfy Yes. Yes, I do.”. 20 Jun 2013, 19:03 UTC. Tweet

Raul (hummingbird604). “Folks: @redcrossokc @SOMORedCross both have won The Internet tonight. And they defeated the #sharkNado ;)”. 12 Jul 2013, 03:38 UTC. Tweet

Red Cross Oklahoma (RedCrossOK). “@bjnovak not down here. :)”. 12 Jul 2013, 06:17 UTC. Tweet

Red Cross Oklahoma (RedCrossOK). “@SOMORedCross and we got your back anytime you need!”. 12 Jul 2013, 02:17 UTC. Tweet

Red Cross Oklahoma (RedCrossOK). “We’re ready to respond if there is a #Sharknado. If it were to happen, it would be in Oklahoma. Why? Because we’re tough like that.”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:35 UTC. Tweet

rickydigital (rickydigital). “@Low_Level_Rebel @robdelaney PTA ‘ there will be sharks’“. 12 Jul 2013, 05:22 UTC. Tweet

Rinehart, Bill (BillGRinehart). “@TheTweetOfGod Not funny. My aunt and uncle were killed in a hippoquake.”. 12 Jul 2013, 03:28 UTC. Tweet

Rodriguez, Roque (brodiemash). “@BryanHarley @tvsmatthackney Baboon Typhoon”. 12 Jul 2013, 22:06 UTC. Tweet

Rodriguez, Roque (brodiemash). “@BryanHarley @tvsmatthackney Baphoon!”. 13 Jul 2013, 02:29 UTC. Tweet

Rose, Rebecca (auntbeckyrose). “@redcrossokc Sharks are not match for Sooners #truefact”. 12 Jul 2013, 04:25 UTC. Tweet

Ryan, Shawn (ShawnRyanTV). “Commercials giving me a chance to reflect on secondary, even tertiary levels of #Sharknado.”. 12 Jul 2013, 05:47 UTC. Tweet

Salazar, Todd (TSalazar__31). “@TellyZuniga @bjnovak might as well have bluegillnado #stupid”. 12 Jul 2013, 17:53 UTC. Tweet

Salazar, Todd (TSalazar__31). “@TellyZuniga @bjnovak Wait how bout Bullnado...that way when Bulls start coming down it will be BULLSHIT!! #stupid #illbehereallday”. 12 Jul 2013, 18:00 UTC. Tweet

Scarp, J (theblackcloud19). “@iamslange it’s true, let’s not forget that this movie had a strong message to say about sharks and natural disasters.”. 13 Jul 2013, 14:16 UTC. Tweet

SnappyDaze (SnappyDaze). “@redcrossokc bahahahahaha!!!”. 12 Jul 2013, 14:09 UTC. Tweet

something about mary (piemaryy). “@TheBatman At first I thought this said “Shark Night Rises”.”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:33 UTC. Tweet

SOMO Red Cross (SOMORedCross). “@redcrossokc you can have the #sharknado but we will come back you up if you need support. Because we #GotYourBackJack”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:41 UTC. Tweet

Stephanie (Low_Level_Rebel). “@robdelaney You are confusing him with Paul Thomas Anderson. Don’t worry, I do that all the time.”. 12 Jul 2013, 03:11 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “. @2p2TrollCat Sharknado has been vetted by top scientists and is 112% guaranteed to be scientifically accurate. #theprecedingisanestimate”. 02 Jul 2013, 21:32 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “@BadAstronomer Oh you poor amateurs...”Sharktopus” and “Sharknado” don’t just grow on trees you know. You really think this is that EASY???”. 20 Jun 2013, 18:54 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “@BadAstronomer Well, um....it’s....not. So there!”. 20 Jun 2013, 19:05 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “@ElizabethBanks @oliviawilde @DamonLindelof Just remember we need that prop harpoon arm back for future movies. So you break it, you buy it!”. 12 Jul 2013, 03:53 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “. @oliviawilde @MiaFarrow We have roles for both of you in the #Sharknado sequel @DamonLindelof is writing for us.”. 12 Jul 2013, 03:08 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “@wilw The science was checked out by, um, top minds. Really.”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:45 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “A supersized storm sucks sharks from the ocean & hurls them onto land in SHARKNADO. This epic Syfy movie premieres Thurs, July 11, at 9pm.”. 20 Jun 2013, 14:43 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “My Sharknado tweet made it onto @gawker. I’m honored. I think.”. 20 Jun 2013, 15:10 UTC. Tweet

Syfy (Syfy). “The ones with good taste! RT @dougblackjr Can anyone tell me which restaurants are showing Sharknado tonight?”. 11 Jul 2013, 15:25 UTC. Tweet

Tenzin (tenzinster). “Lol MT @redcrossokc: Ready to respond if there is a #Sharknado. If it were to happen, it’d be in Oklahoma. Why? Bcuz we’re tough like that”. 12 Jul 2013, 02:30 UTC. Tweet

Whalan, Mark (MWhalan). “@redcrossokc #SharkNado WINNER!”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:38 UTC. Tweet

Wheaton, Wil (wilw). “I’m not so sure about the science in this movie you guys. #SharkNado”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:43 UTC. Tweet

White, Jenna (JennaWhite22). “@bjnovak that and Sharktopus ::shudders::”. 12 Jul 2013, 09:46 UTC. Tweet

Woodburn, Danny (DannyWoodburn). “@TheTweetOfGod this some kind of Farmageddon?”. 12 Jul 2013, 04:33 UTC. Tweet

Young, Jake (ItsJakeYoung). “@sarah_lusk I personally like the turantulavalanche for name quality but I’d most fear a bearnami I think”. 12 Jul 2013, 17:08 UTC. Tweet

Zarter, Darren (El_Zarto). “@bjnovak no one will laugh when the #Koalacaust takes us all by storm.”. 12 Jul 2013, 05:22 UTC. Tweet

Zengerle, Patricia (ReutersZengerle). “Wins! MT @redcrossokc: We’re ready to respond if there is a #Sharknado. If it happened, it wld be in Oklahoma. Because we’re tough like that”. 12 Jul 2013, 01:58 UTC. Tweet