Participation and Transmediality: Audience Influence on Web Series

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Interactivity with users represents a key feature of transmedia storytelling. This research revolves around the way viewer engagement influences the content of an interactive Web series—namely, Si fueras tú. The series used a strategy based on social networks to encourage viewer participation in the decisions of the protagonist. Research uses a mixed study methodology that includes (1) an analysis of turning points, (2) an analysis of characters, (3) content analysis based on viewers' comments on social media, and (4) in-depth interviews with project managers to illuminate the process of building the transmedia strategy. Findings confirm that audience participation influences the content of the fiction series, albeit in a limited way, with the main aim being to retain the audience as part of the marketing strategy.

Keywords: transmedia storytelling, interactivity, fiction, audience, series, participation, viewer engagement, social media, production, television

Through digital media, the boundaries between fictional worlds and the real one have become increasingly blurred (Cortés-Gómez, Martínez-Borda, & de la Fuente Prieto, 2016, p. 154). Producers increasingly leverage digital tools to enable audience participation by promoting user-generated content. Therefore, the audiovisual industry must adapt to changes in media and adjust its business models and product features (García-Escrivá, 2018).

Evans (2015) argued that basic factors that defined television as a medium have evolved. Particularly, "rapid technological changes have not only increased the variety of screen devices, they have also changed the boundaries of the industry itself as the Internet opened up distribution avenues and alternatives for viewer attention" (p. 111). It is no longer a requirement that the viewer consumes content

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Date submitted: 2019–11–27

during time of broadcast or on a certain device as many television providers also join digital platforms (Vázquez-Herrero, Gonzales-Neira & Quintas-Froufe, 2019). Therefore, each viewer can now watch their favorite content during time and on a screen of choice.

The impact new technologies have on communication has led traditional studies to engage with questions around "identity, interactivity, geolocation, engagement, affectivity, sharing, creativity and fan crowd and other forms of online and real life community building through new communications technologies" (Weedon & Knight, 2015, p. 405). These new factors highlight a profound change in audiovisual consumption habits motivated by the convergence of television and the Internet. This has boosted interactivity and, consequently, the proliferation of transmedia television, which Mittell (2014) describes as "a potentially more productive avenue for serial television to develop, building on its strengths of character and mood over plotting and mythology, as well as tapping into the clear fan interest in imagining non-canonical possibilities" (p. 276). Jenkins (2006) adds that "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (pp. 95–96). Digital platforms have impacted the consumption of TV, providing particular content and promoting interactivity.

According to Guerrero, Diego, and Kimber (2017, pp. 1111–1112), the popularization of viewing online audiovisual content represents a key cause of the decline in traditional television consumption, especially among younger audiences. Preferred devices are the computer and the smartphone. A real audience outflow from television has occurred regarding lower age targets of linear television and low rates of affinity with respective channels, a reality that has forced TV operators to change strategy and bet on transmedia and interactive online content-on-demand platforms, aimed at this audience. In this context, the main Spanish television groups have launched Playz (RTVE), Flooxer (Atresmedia) and Mtmad (Mediaset), in a movement some analysts have interpreted as the *youtubization* of conventional television (Guerrero, 2018, p. 1241).

Miranda and Figuero (2016) studied how these changes accord increasing power to viewers, giving them a role in the expansion of transmedia universes. Viewers have become active participants in fiction (Giglietto & Selva, 2014), demanding to play a role in the production of content (Jenkins, 2006). Fandom has understood creativity and participation as essential attributes of engagement with a fictional phenomenon (Stein, 2015). This type of participation would correspond to what Carpentier, Dahlgren, and Pasquali (2013) call "participation in the media," distinct from "participation through the media." Participation in the media "deals with participation in the production of media output (content-participation related) and in media decision-making (structural participation)" (p. 288).

Social networks "have shown that television messages have ceased to be unilateral and become multidirectional" (Alonso & García, 2017, p. 3). Personal profiles of characters on Facebook and Instagram do not exist purely as a form of promotion, but their messages are part of the narrative and contribute to the diegetic world, what Bertetti (2014, p. 2351) named transmedia characters based on a single course of events (with narrative continuity). Hernández (2019) emphasizes that social networks allow for the use of playful strategies within the narrative to activate the participatory and creative role of the viewer, generating social television, which integrates traditional television with the participation of users through second

screens (Segado-Boj, Grandío, & Fernández-Gómez, 2015). This facilitates interaction among viewers, characters, and producers (Giglietto & Selva, 2014).

The new multitasking viewer readily uses second screens while watching content. Research revealed that the most used second-screen device is the smartphone, and that it is mainly used to comment or display preferences, recommend titles, and participate in voting, contests, or games related to the content watched (Guerrero et al., 2017, p. 1113). These activities create a lot of digital information, which through an automatic computational analysis can offer a guide for content development (Manovich, 2018).

In addition, through such interaction users satisfy the social need to feel connected with others, which has been highlighted by consolidated research streams such as the "uses and gratification theory" (UGT), which also provides a theoretical framework for the present study. Despite dramatic technological changes, the needs people endeavor to meet via interactive audiovisual media are not so different from those discussed first in the 1970s by researchers such as Katz, Gurevitch, and Hass (1973). Rather, interaction affects how such needs are met.

In this context, interactivity is a process that allows the reciprocal exchange of actions and reactions between two entities (Tur-Viñes & Rodríguez, 2014)—in this case, between producers and viewers, for whom it is most interesting to participate in content creation, improving the user experience. Manovich (2018) emphasizes that software mediates interactions, as

> interfaces and tools of social networks and messaging apps are designed with input from UI (user interaction) scientists and designers who test endless possibilities to ensure that every UI element . . . is optimized and engineered to achieve maximum results. (p. 477)

By using interactive tools, viewers show more enthusiasm to watch, create, contribute, and share content in which they want to participate (Lacalle & Castro, 2018). It is necessary to produce many types of content that not only tell new stories spun off from the original but also boost user-generated content. Therefore, "not all transmediality is narrative, although it can potentially be" (Rodríguez, Ortiz, & Sáez, 2014, p. 74). Transmedia resources are an option "for audiences that are interested in new levels of reading, depth and contact with history" (Costa, 2013, p. 564). Users will have greater access to the various levels of content consumption depending on curiosity they feel toward such content (Araujo, 2017).

Audience participation represents multiple benefits for transmedia content (Atarama-Rojas & Requena, 2018). First, fiction makers receive direct feedback from the audience that allows them to respond in real time to viewers' concerns. But transmedia strategies also extend the temporal duration of content (for a series' episodes as well as season duration), because viewers can continue to consume or contribute to content from other sources, even after the broadcast period ends. Finally, transmedia storytelling functions as loyalty strategy by creating fan communities that enjoy sharing the experience with other fans (Quintas-Froufe & Gonzales-Neira, 2014, p. 84). This confirms that transmediality is an important concept for understanding the shifts that digital technologies have wrought on the relation between media industries and their audiences (Freeman & Rampazzo Gambarato, 2019).

According to te Walvaart, Dhoest, and van den Bulck (2019, pp. 1143–1145), this participation can occur in three stages: behind the screen (during the production process), on-screen (during the broadcast), and beyond the screen (on other platforms such as social networks). Our research seeks to uncover audience influence in the three phases of a transmedia Web series produced by public operator Radio Televisión Española (RTVE). Specifically, the international award-winning series *Si fueras tú* serves as case study because of its use of social networks and digital tools to incorporate viewers in the decisions of the protagonist and bring the transmedial world into reality. The series "is a dialogic encounter between two worlds, the fiction of the narrative of television that establishes the character and the reality of the people who follow it" (Cortés-Gómez et al., 2016, p. 161).

In this context, the question arises: What influence does viewer participation via social networks have on the content of *Si fueras tú*? The hypothesis is: In the series, through votes and comments, viewers influence the decisions of the protagonist, modify turning points, and contribute to the main character's construction. Research unfolds under a mixed methodology that contemplates a qualitative way, including turning point analysis as the plot proceeds, character building analysis based on voting options presented, and in-depth interviews with developers of the transmedia strategy. A quantitative methodology of viewer comments' content analysis, based on the show's official Facebook and Instagram accounts, supports the research.

Material

Si fueras tú *(2017)*

Apart from studying the series' episodes, this study also includes its official social media accounts. This choice rests on the transmedia strategy using social networks to engage viewers in the decisions of the protagonist and bring the characters closer to viewers through real dialogue, using, for example, the Facebook Live tool.

Si fueras tú tells the life of Alba, a 17-year-old girl who moves with her uncle to the village of Sotocruz in search of a new beginning. When she arrives, she realizes everyone's looking at her intriguingly. She is exactly like Cris, who mysteriously disappeared six months before her arrival. Alba embarks to find out what happened to Cris and herself. On that trajectory she gets closer to the people from Sotocruz related to Cris: friends, family, teachers and classmates to seek those responsible for Cris's disappearance. It emerges that Alba is Cris, who was murdered but had an opportunity to redeem her past.

The series addressed a teenage audience, which is close to digital media and prioritizes user experience in television consumption (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Considering audience characteristics, the series released on Playz, RTVE's multiplatform online channel for multimedia content. It recorded 7.7 million views during an eight-week broadcast period on the Playz platform and YouTube (Raventos & Schaaff, 2017).

Official Social Media of Si fueras tú: Facebook and Instagram

Facebook served as the main platform for sharing content related to the series. Followers received notifications about the broadcast of a new episode and got access to hitherto unpublished behind-the-scenes

footage. The broadcaster also posted interviews with the actors on Facebook. But most important were the moments that facilitated audience participation via the Facebook Live tool: voting on the protagonist's decisions and on dialogues. Thanks to the live broadcasts, it got thousands of viewers to watch an episode when it went online and participate in the broadcast.

Another prominent social network in the transmedia strategy was Instagram, which served as the second polling platform. In addition, the protagonist shared exclusive content via her Instagram account. Because both Facebook and Instagram are social networks naturally used by viewers to make friends, the actress, in her leading role, could also "enter the universe of true life" (Jost, 2014, p. 50).

For this study, viewer participation during the seven dates of Facebook and Instagram postings serves as study sample. First, live videos on Facebook are considered in which the protagonist entered direct dialogue with the audience. Second, Facebook and Instagram posts that required votes on the protagonist's path were analyzed. This resulted in 14 types of publications (two types of content per episode), but only 13 types of posts have been accessible because the broadcaster deleted the first publication. Thus, the 50 most relevant comments were manually chosen (based on the interaction generated) from the 13 types of selected posts, adding up to 650 comments.

Comment content analysis, in line with Quintas-Froufe and Gonzales-Neira (2014), helped supported the research because comments contribute "multiple positive elements for the television executives," as through them "those aspects that work or deserve to be corrected in their broadcasts [can be noticed] live and economically" (p. 84). Posts from both Facebook and Instagram comments were relevant for voting.

Executives of the Transmedia Strategy

To gain an internal perspective of the series' transmedia strategy, in-depth interviews were conducted with the designers and managers of the transmedia strategy, Agustín Alonso, Alberto Fernández, and Pablo Lara.

Agustín Alonso has worked at RTVE for more than 10 years. He is deputy director of Transmedia and Playz, where he manages transmedia fiction projects and creates and oversees transmedia strategies and content development as well as distribution via cross-platform channel Playz.

Alberto Fernández has worked as a digital and radio media editor. He has been part of the RTVE team since 2008, where he integrated the audiovisual innovation team into his new commitment to transmedia content. He currently is digital content director, participating in the transmedia production of the Playz platform series.

Pablo Lara has been a transmedia producer and screenwriter for *El Ministerio del Tiempo* and *Si fueras tú* (Raventos & Schaaff, 2017) by Playz. He currently holds the position of transmedia creative at Globomedia, a communication group that specializes in the creation and development of audiovisual experiences.

Methodology

Four methodologies allowed us to analyze viewers' influence on the content and help to confirm or reject the hypothesis raised when crossing the data. Watching the series formed part of the development of the first two methodologies and allowed us to understand the process a participating viewer would follow.

The first methodology is qualitative and uses turning-point analysis as a methodological tool in the development of the plot. The series included votes where viewers got to decide on the protagonist's action. Turning points became relevant if they implied a link to the votes, and the relationship between turning points and voting options was evaluated. Finally, the function of each turning point in the story is analyzed.

The second methodology is qualitative and uses as a methodological tool character construction analysis based on the voting options presented to viewers. This methodology focused on a character being built through the decisions it takes in pressure situations (McKee, 2017). At the end of each episode, viewers had to choose between two options to determine the action of the protagonist, which allowed them to contribute to character construction. This methodological tool visualizes how one option or the other affected the character. Options are studied to gather if they were crucial or if it was possible for the character to perform both options at various points in the story.

The third methodology is quantitative and uses content analysis as a methodological tool. Viewers' comments on the show's official social media accounts were key. Analysis focused on the 650 comments that were most relevant and implied most interaction. Variables used for this step are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables of Content Analysis.

Variable	Categories
Actions of spectators outside of voting	They ask questions about the plot.
	They create theories about the relationship between Alba and Cris.
	They're asking for Alba and Rafa to have an affair.
	They suggest Alba not trust anyone.
	They're referring to Alba in the second person.
	They suggest a third acting option.
	They indicate that characters aren't trustworthy.
Relationship of user feedback to the plot of the following episode	Relationship exists
	No relationship exists

The first variable allowed us to identify whether viewers interact with the series, based on the actions that appear in their comments. Categories were created using an inductive method and looking for actions that we considered interactive in all the analyzed comments shared. Then, a percentage of interactivity based on the responses obtained emerged, considering interactivity in comments that responded yes to at least one of the seven categories analyzed. In addition, the research included evaluation of the actions that were most performed and how their realization indicated high interactivity. A second variable, considering the comment–plot relationship for subsequent episodes, shows whether viewers' contributions affected the following episodes.

The fourth methodology is qualitative, using in-depth interviews. With sources, it is possible to know expectations of audience participation before, during, and after the broadcast; and, above all, to know firsthand if the strategy included viewer influence on plot or characters. To that end, four variables fed into a specially designed structured in-depth interview (see Table 2).

Table 2. Variables and Categories Developed for In-depth Interviews.

Variables	Categories
Transmedia storytelling and its use in serial fiction	What can transmedia storytelling contribute to serial fiction?
	Why is audience participation important?
	Is content created or changed based on audience response?
	Do you think a transmedia strategy can bridge the gap between reality and fiction?
The transmedia strategy used in *Si fueras tú*	How long was the series' transmedia strategy worked on before release?
	Was the transmedia strategy developed on a par with the script?
	How does one write a transmedia script without knowing the audience's response?
	Was turning the series into a movie part of the strategy from the start?
Serial fiction–viewer interactivity	Had any turning points of the script to be rethought because of audience response? Did the audience ever surprise you with its response?
	Do you think Alba's character changed through audience responses?
	How did you prevent conversations on Facebook Live from deviating from the main topic? Did they have a script?
	Do you feel the audience felt Alba was a real person?
The future of transmedia storytelling	Would you have done anything differently regarding the strategy of *Si fueras tú*?
	After the television broadcast, did interactivity continue on social media?
	If someone were to watch the series today, could they have the same experience?
	Is it possible to prevent interaction from developing only during the broadcast?

After the analysis using the four methodological tools, we crossed the results. This way, we identify how user interactivity, participating in votes, and commenting on social networks influences turning points and the construction of the main character.

Results and Reflections

Turning-Point Analysis in Frame Development

The first methodological tool, turning-point analysis in the plot's development, served to find the number of turning points in each episode, their nature, and whether they corresponded to the decisions the audience took for the protagonist. Given the episodes' short duration, they contained only one turning point, except the last, which contained two.

Schilf, Ziem, and Ruth (2012, p. 174) define a turning point, or twist, as any event that redirects the course of the story. They argue it could emerge at any time in the script and functions as a catalyst to pose new challenges to the protagonist. For this analysis, turning points were events or revelations that changed the course of the story or caused the protagonist to change behavior or reevaluate her view on those around

her. In transmedia stories, turning points can function as junction points and thus invite the audience to move from one screen to another, creating a planned flow of audience and content (Ytreberg, 2009, p. 472).

McKee (2017) lists five types of turning points: inciting incident, progressive complications, crisis, climax, and resolution. The inciting incident is the initial cause of what happens, followed by progressive complications that generate more conflicts by forcing the characters to face increasingly antagonistic forces. Crisis is the protagonist's ultimate decision and will force a choice between danger and opportunity. This is the point of greatest tension in the story. Climax refers to the final change that brims with meaning for the character, while, finally, the resolution presents the effects produced by the climax.

Table 3 presents the data found when applying the methodology to the eight episodes. We considered episode number, duration, turning point, location, voting options, relation to turning point, and turning point type.

Table 3. Results Obtained From Turning Point Analysis.

Episode	Duration	Turning point	Occurrence (minute: second)	Voting options	Relationship to the turning point	Turning point type
1	23:18	Alba learns of Cris's disappearance and that she is just like her.	15:00	Go to Cris's house or go talk to Blasco?	Reaction to the turning point	Inciting incident
2	09:35	Alba discovers that the phone that supposedly has clues is Hugo's.	07:35	Work with Hugo and Rocío or Rafa and Nerea?	Reaction to the turning point	Progressive complication
3	08:40	Alba finds Cris's bracelet.	06:50	Give it to Blasco or the Civil Guard?	Reaction to the turning point	Progressive complication
4	09:41	Cris's brother and mother meet Alba and mistake her for Cris.	03:11	Open the door to Dani or not?	Reaction to the turning point	Progressive complication
5	11:38	Dani accuses Rafa of being his sister's killer.	05:25	Kiss Rafa or not?	Reaction to the turning point	Progressive complication
6	10:45	Alba learns that Cris made life impossible for Hugo and Rocío.	05:00	Take the drug or not?	Both contribute to character creation	Progressive complication
7	08:40	Nerea humiliates Rocío.	06:30	Stay at the party or go after Hugo and Rocío?	Reaction to the turning point	Crisis
8	11:38	Alba is Cris. Hugo and Rocío murdered Cris.	03:25 04:40	No votes offered		Climax Resolution

Votes at the end of each episode did not correspond to turning points, but they related to them, because in almost all cases they comprised the protagonist's reaction before events or after they occurred at the turning point. In Episode 6, both the turning point and the decision taken through the votes contributed to the transformational arc of the protagonist. In all cases, the decisions form the protagonist's character and, when taken by viewers, verify that such decisions influenced character creation.

Character Building Analysis Based on Voting Options

The second research variable related to analyzing how every voting option contributed to character building. It analyzed the different paths the protagonist could take and if they affected the character's construction. Additionally, it was considered if these changes were strong enough to affect the turning points.

Table 4 sets out the data found about voting options. It includes the singularity of voting options and whether they represented changes to the turning points.

Table 4. Voting Options and Their Effects on the Construction of the Main Character.

Episode	Option 1	Option 2
1	**Entering the house** Alba wants to investigate what happened on her own. She'd rather not trust anyone at the moment. She's not afraid to take risks. She wants to know the truth at all costs.	**Meeting with Blasco** Alba doesn't see Blasco's behavior as suspicious. She's naïve and can't see that bad intentions exist.
2	**Doing the job with Hugo and Rocío** Alba recognizes Hugo and Rocío as kind people who wouldn't hurt her. She believes she can trust them and that they can provide information about what happened.	**Doing the job with Rafa and Nerea** Alba wants to get to know Rafa because she knows of his closeness to Cris. She thinks he knows more about what happened and could provide information.
3	**Deliver the bracelet to Blasco** Alba believes the Head of Studies has information he has not revealed. She thinks that when confronted with evidence like the bracelet, he might give more clues. She wants to continue investigating without involving the police.	**Deliver the bracelet to the civil guard** Alba wants to do the right thing. Collaborate with the police in the case of Cris' disappearance and try to get the investigation to end as soon as possible to get back to normal.
4	**Opening the door to Dani** Alba feels sorry for Cris's family. She wants to help them any way possible. She understands their suffering and trusts them. She wants to know more about the missing person.	**Not opening the door to Dani** Alba doesn't trust Cris's family. She believes their suffering is fake and that they have something to do with her disappearance. She's afraid they might do something to her.

5	**Kissing Rafa**	**Not kissing Rafa**
	Alba has been attracted to Rafa from the start; trusted him despite Dani's accusations. She feels a connection between them. She doesn't care that Rafa has a relationship with Nerea.	Alba is unsure about trusting Rafa after hearing Dani's accusations. She's attracted to Rafa. She understands that it is not the right thing to do because he has a relationship with Nerea.
6	**Taking the drug offered by Rafa**	**Not taking the drug offered by Rafa**
	Alba cares about what Rafa thinks of her. She wants to look good by taking the drug. She wants to have a good time and forget about the bad things that happened to her.	Alba has clear principles and knows that taking the drug is not right and can pose a risk. She doesn't care that Rafa could think badly of her.
7	**Follow Hugo and Rocío**	**Staying at the party**
	Alba believes that what Nerea has done was wrong. She feels bad about inviting them to the party. She wants to make them feel better and they're still friends.	Alba wants to continue having a good time that night with Rafa and Nerea. She considers that what Nerea did is not so serious and Rocío will overcome it. She wants to remember that night as something good.
8	No votes offered because it was the final episode	

The vote on the first episode clearly shows two distinct voting options in which the protagonist's way of thinking is diverse. It confirms that viewers form the Alba character in making this decision.

But the second vote does not predate such distinct options nor does it represent a change in character construction. This is proven in the episode because although viewers had Alba go with Rafa and Nerea, in the middle of the episode she changed the group and went with Hugo and Rocío.

The third vote presented two exclusionary options that reflected a different character of Alba. Likewise, the fourth vote allowed the viewer to decide the level of empathy Alba feels toward Cris's family and forms this character. At that time, Alba could have left the door closed, but could still have spoken to Dani later on.

Because the actor was a youth idol, the fifth vote was the most celebrated by the audience, which could have biased the results. The character of the protagonist was formed because the vote revealed what she thinks and whether she trusts Rafa.

Through the sixth vote, viewers could have greater control over the formation of Alba's character, as these are opposite choices. They had to choose between taking the drug offered by the boy who attracts her or staying true to her principles.

Voting options in the seventh episode presented different ways of acting and thinking of the protagonist. However, they did not represent a story twist, as Hugo and Rocío were fleeing to *La papelera*, and the party was about to be moved to that place.

Results show that the options allow the viewer to change the main character, but most do not represent a plot twist. The audience's influence on the construction of the main character is not strong enough to affect the plot's turning points.

Content Analysis of Viewers' Comments on Social Media

For the analysis of this variable, 650 public comments on Facebook and Instagram were analyzed under two kinds of posts: votes and live videos.

The first variable consisted in identifying whether viewers performed interactive actions in their comments. This illuminated the most repeated actions and the repercussions they had on the interactivity of viewers in the series and on its characters. Results are shown in Table 5 and show a percentage of interactivity, taking into account how interactive comments responded positively to at least one of the seven categories of analysis.

Table 5. Analysis of Viewer Actions in Comments on Facebook and Instagram Posts.

Categories	Yes		No		
	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Total
Ask questions about the plot.	12%	78	88%	572	100%
Create theories about the relationship between Alba and Cris	13%	84	87%	566	100%
Want Alba and Rafa have an affair	18%	118	82%	532	100%
Suggest the protagonist not trust anyone	8%	55	92%	595	100%
Refer to Alba in the second person	51%	331	49%	319	100%
Suggest a third acting option	15%	96	85%	554	100%
Say they don't trust a specific character	41%	264	59%	386	100%

The most relevant result was that more than half of viewers addressed the protagonist in the second person in their comments, as if she were real. This percentage rises to 79% when considering only comments on live videos, where interactivity was more direct.

Given the feedback in both voting posts and Facebook Live videos, *Si fueras tú* had a high percentage of interactivity on its official social network accounts—88% of viewers took one or more interactive actions in their comments.

As result, this transmedia series fulfilled its objective of audience interactivity. It greatly used the Facebook Live tool and voting to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality and make the audience feel it had control over the plot.

The second variable of analysis enabled finding out about the level of influence the audience's comments had on the construction of the plot of subsequent episodes. The topics mentioned in the comments were compared with the topics present in the following episodes to assess whether they

influenced the drafting of scripts. Table 6 presents the numerical data resulting from analysis of both types of publications.

Table 6. General Analysis of the Relationship of Viewers' Comments to the Plot of the Following Episodes in Facebook and Instagram Posts.

Category	Percentage	Count
Relationship exists	77%	499
No relationship exists	23%	151
Total	100%	650

Results indicate a strong relationship between viewers' comments and the plot, as 77% of comments related to subsequent episodes. Viewers made predictions, gave advice to the protagonist, and created their own theories.

Analysis of In-depth Interviews With the Transmedia Strategy Creators

In-depth interviews helped to give an internal perspective of the strategy posed by the series' transmedia producers. In general, the interviewees agreed on the importance of transmedia storytelling to engage the viewer with the fictional story. They emphasized participation as an effective way to create online communities and turn viewing into a community experience. An overview of the strategy development process plus what producers would change in the future to enrich the experience emerged.

For respondents, the greatest contribution of transmedia fiction is real-time adaptation of the content to an active audience in response to changes coming from the audience. "It's the perfect contribution to reaching a different, younger audience. Generations are changing, and with them consumption habits in any area" (P. Lara, personal communication, February 20, 2019). And, "if no community exists to participate, interact with the content, and even create content from the original serial content—transmedia doesn't make sense" (A. Fernández, personal communication, February 27, 2019).

A. Fernández (personal communication, February 27, 2019) believes that creators must still do a lot to make content malleable to audience response, but it will be possible to create live fiction formats, whereas A. Alonso sees a challenge arising to get "more user influence on the narrative" (personal communication, March 18, 2019).

For P. Lara (personal communication, February 20, 2019), transmedia storytelling "breaks the natural barrier between fiction and reality." A. Alonso added that using these tools allows fiction to be more immersive and closer to reality. Conceiving the format of the series as transmedia and interactive affected the entire nature of the project. Writers adapted the script in tune with the transmedia strategy to entrench it in Spanish culture. A. Fernández (personal communication, February 27, 2019) also said the integration of transmedia elements into the script was a big challenge.

To write an interactive transmedia script and consider audience responses, it was necessary to develop several parallel stories. "We had a nonlinear narrative tree created in which we included the most

important ramifications of the series" (P. Lara, personal communication, February 20, 2019). Each voting option included a fully developed parallel line within the narrative tree. "They were all options, already written in advance" (A. Alonso, personal communication, March 18, 2019).

Regarding interactivity between the viewer and fiction, the interviewees said they never had to rethink the turning points because they already had the options mapped. "Looking to the future, it would be more interesting if the influence was really greater because it would take a lot of advantage of what people are talking about" (A. Alonso, personal communication, March 18, 2019).

Although the writers created the main character, the audience's response influenced its episode-by-episode construction. "It was a series that was alive, and the characters and actors received constant inputs" (P. Lara, personal communication, February 20, 2019). Alonso said the creators did not reach the limit of possible influence. Being part of a living project, lead actress María Pedraza played the protagonist not only on the television screen but became the character during the transmissions on Facebook Live.

As a result, the audience perceived Alba's character as being real. This is verifiable as most called her by her fictional name (79% of the live commentary analyzed). "It was amazing, and I think we really crossed the line between fiction and reality" (P. Lara, personal communication, February 20, 2019). "I think a big part of the show's success was that one felt Alba was a real character one could communicate with" (A. Alonso, personal communication, March 18, 2019).

For the interviewees, the development of the transmedia strategy was a learning process; everyone would now do some things differently. A. Fernández (personal communication, February 27, 2019) and A. Alonso (personal communication, March 18, 2019) believe they should have focused on interactivity on Instagram from the beginning, as it is the predominant social network among the members of the target audience and could have made better use of its narrative possibilities.

The interviewees acknowledge that viewers who watched the series after the broadcast period did not access the same experience. "The series was alive and keeps the game going during the weeks of broadcasting and filming" (P. Lara, personal communication, February 20, 2019). "The transmedia experience was unique during the broadcast in autumn 2017" (A. Fernández, personal communication, February 27, 2019). "The enriching and original thing of such a transmedia narrative is that it obliges viewers to follow it live as it happens" (A. Alonso, personal communication, March 18, 2019). In these cases, then, fiction becomes an event with a certain date and time. "This kind of community experience cannot be repeated and that is part of the value of the proposal" (A. Alonso, personal communication, March 18, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusions

Si fueras tú (Raventos & Schaaff, 2017) allowed an expansion of the initial story due to the publication of additional content through various social networks. Transmedia tools in this series allowed viewers to influence content, modifying the construction of the character, but not the plot twists.

Results of the variables' analysis show that a high level of user interactivity with the series occurred. Viewers could experiment, meet, and interact with the possible world created by the show's makers. Interacting directly with the protagonist allowed to create "emotional and personal links [with viewers] identifying the discourse of the transmedia narrative with their own" (Rodríguez & Molpeceres, 2014, p. 328). The audience believed in the content they themselves helped create and shared, helping to spread the project. As indicated by Hills (2002), this feeling of belonging to a community and sharing an identity leads fans to go beyond just consuming content. A. Alonso (personal communication, March 18, 2019), responsible for the series' transmedia design, said the objective was to turn the visualization of fiction into a community and shared experience. Simons (2014, p. 2221) found that another aim of this strategy is to create emotional commitments and communities loyal to the brand. This case study confirmed this objective.

Molpeceres and Rodríguez (2014) asked to what extent it is desirable to allow the receiver to modify the entertainment product, because too much influence could truncate the meaning of the story. The makers of the analyzed series found the solution by providing limited voting options that allowed the audience to gain some control over the decisions of the protagonist and her construction as a character but not change the meaning of the story. "The fact that television networks give their audiences the opportunity to take an active part in and interact with the programs does not obscure the fact that the actual decision-making power remains on the side of the producers" (Bergillos, 2015, p. 109). The freedom to choose is limited and guided by the creators of the series. "This sense of direct involvement generates a greater degree of loyalty that favors the circulation of ideas and the dissemination of proposals through different platforms" (Fernández, 2014, p. 57).

Zimmerman (2015) found it was possible to blur the line between fiction and reality by creating the diegetic world not in parallel to the reality of viewers but constantly intertwine both. This is exactly how the diegetic world of the series functioned, and its dissemination used codes similar to those many viewers use daily. These "are inserted as objects into the real world, as if they crossed that threshold and were corporatized as part of our experience and our daily practices" (Rodríguez et al., 2014, p. 81). Viewers regularly use screens to communicate with others in real life, so by communicating with the protagonist through Facebook Live, "we no longer know if it is a character or a real person" (Jost, 2014, p. 49). The lead actress enriched this parallel reality through improvisation, because during direct dialogues with her fans she did not use a script, but reacted naturally to comments.

As Lacalle and Castro (2018) confirm, the Internet has made it possible to prolong the experience of the viewer by integrating programs into their daily lives. Viewers no longer sit in front of a screen and enjoy their favorite fiction, but fiction becomes immersive and is part of their lives in many respects. Most viewers were addressing the protagonist as if she were a real person, thanks to her responses through a personal profile on Instagram; she communicated with fans, asked them for advice on Facebook Live, and even chatted with them through WhatsApp. Other actors in the cast even received messages to their personal social media accounts, with audiences addressing them as their characters in the series (A. Alonso, personal communication, March 18, 2019).

The proliferation of interactive content in various media shows that the ways of storytelling have changed to align with the needs of the viewer, giving rise to transmedia storytelling. Surfing the Internet involves constant participation; however, the number of viewers' comments show that, in the case of *Si*

fueras tú, a vocal participation ensued in which "the voice of the users is reflected in content they generate and publish to the site" (Guerrero-Pico, 2014, pp. 246–247). According to Rodríguez et al. (2014), interesting feedback follows when the production of a series includes contributions from fans. When viewers feel they belong to a fan phenomenon, a more positive appreciation and enjoyment of audiovisual content arises, compared with passive consumption (Grandío, 2015).

These findings prove that including viewers in the development of the plot delivers them a more complete audiovisual experience and emotional involvement, as the possibility exists for "offering experiences where recipients-users have the opportunity to participate in the stories as co-creators" (Rodríguez & Paíno, 2015, p. 303). However, this influential participation has limits that must be respected to maintain the story. In the case analyzed, producers created a nonlinear narrative tree with all voting options, so no matter what the audience chose, the makers already had the outcome of all possible frames mapped.

It would be interesting to apply these interactive tools to the development of a story where fans had real control and influence, being able to deeply change the plot. A. Alonso, P. Lara, and A. Fernández think these forms could work, and will experiment with several.

The present research shows that viewers of a transmedia series can influence the decisions of the protagonist, contributing to the construction of the character and modifying turning points. Analysis showed that viewers influenced the construction of the main character, but in a rather limited way. No choice the audience could make would have drastically changed the turning points.

This research confirms that applying the tools of transmedia storytelling to the series *Si fueras tú* elevated the participation and interactivity of viewers, leading to a more positive appreciation of the show, generating emotional links with the virtual characters and communities around the content. Transmedia storytelling proved an effective tool to ensure users' participation through the development of communities linked to the series. Hence, the results also confirm the findings of previous studies, such as that of te Walvaart, Dhoest, and van den Bulck (2019, p. 1151), who point out that the main objective of producers by allowing the audience to participate in the design of transmedia strategies is none other than to enhance their marketing campaign to reach and retain new audiences.

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