

Social Audience and Emotional Bonding in Marvel's Transmedia Phenomenon: An Exploration of Peruvian Digital Communities

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This article explores how activities of Marvel's Peruvian social audience expanded and increased the emotional bonding among its participants through the movie *Avengers: Endgame*, which contributed to this transmedia phenomenon's success. The research involved a netnographic study of Peruvian Facebook and YouTube communities, analyzing 40 publications and the 2,000 most relevant comments. The results show that as the movie's premiere drew closer, social audience activities became key to expanding and intensifying emotional bonding toward the story's narrative elements (characters, plots, and conflicts) and the general Marvel transmedia phenomenon.

Keywords: social audience, emotional bonding, participation, transmedia storytelling, Marvel

The concept of social audience emerged in the context of the incorporation of social networks into the consumption of television content (Halpern, Quintas-Froufe, & Fernández-Medina, 2016). It refers to the use of various platforms for enriched consumption of audiovisual content. Hence, the concept serves in the study of transmedia storytelling to understand the scope of participation not only related to interaction but as a factor that increases emotional bonding and enjoyment of audiovisual products.

In this context, the social audience behaves as a touchpoint that responds to participation, encourages community creation, and generates knowledge that expands the narrative and the audience's enjoyment experience through novel forms of interaction. Social audience behavior goes beyond the relationship with audiovisual content and interaction with peers and appeals to the knowledge and emotional bonding that is built into these relationships, adding value to the world of fiction. Furthermore, the active role played by the social audience increases the viewer's level of commitment to the audiovisual product (Arrojo, 2013; Vázquez-Herrero, González-Neira, & Quintas-Froufe, 2019).

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To study the social audience in a transmedia phenomenon, this research addressed the Marvel franchise. Of interest was whether social audience activities increased and expanded the emotional bonding of participants interested in the movie *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). Conducting a netnographic study of Peruvian Facebook and YouTube communities, this study delved into how social audience activities generated a level of interaction that strengthened the emotional bond with the Marvel franchise.

Social Audience in the Context of Transmedia Storytelling

The first academic publications that used the term social audience date from 2013 (Arrojo, 2013; Congosto, Deltell Escolar, Claes, & Osteso, 2013; González-Neira & Quintas-Froufe, 2013) and focused on exploring how audience participation on social networks, through second screens, impacted the monitoring of a television program. The development of a social audience requires two fundamental technological conditions: (1) the widespread use of Internet-connected devices and (2) the widespread use of social networks as spaces for participation.

Segado-Boj, Grandío, and Fernández-Gómez (2015) used the term "social TV" to refer to the phenomenon that integrated traditional TV with the participation of users through second screens. Song, Kim, and Choi (2019) argued that watching television while talking about content on social networks with other viewers has become a popular phenomenon. This new way of watching television allows interaction with other viewers who are physically distant but virtually close. In this new dynamic in the audiovisual environment, the social audience has gradually acquired greater relevance (López Vidales, Gómez Rubio, & Medina de la Viña, 2019). This increased relevance responds both to changes in the forms of consumption and the desire to interact based on users' experience with stories (Quintas-Froufe & González-Neira, 2016, p. 379).

Research on this phenomenon highlighted how audience participation and the formation of digital communities based on interaction are fundamental features to connect with the active audience. However, this finding is not exclusive to television. The concept applies to various audiovisual content of the current media ecosystem. In this sense, Halpern and colleagues (2016) emphasized that the social audience has emerged because of the incorporation of social networks and the fragmentation of the media ecosystem, currently characterized by cultural participation and convergence, phenomena that Jenkins (2006) highlighted as central to transmedia storytelling.

In transmedia storytelling, the audience collaborates in the creation of an expansive story (Jenkins, 2003). Participation fosters a high level of narrative engagement, which encourages the audience to search for more mechanisms to further increase participation. This is possible thanks to technological mechanisms that allow interaction and sharing (Tur-Viñes & Rodríguez Ferrándiz, 2014). The conversations, rereadings, and sharing of content created by social audience members among their communities increase an audiovisual product's life since these activities invite revisiting the original content. In transmedia storytelling, users' contribution is key to expand and generate greater interest in the products (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Encouraging audience participation works as a loyalty strategy by promoting the creation of communities that enjoy sharing their experiences (Quintas-Froufe & González-Neira, 2014). Participation that expands the transmedia narrative involves two levels:

- Participation through interaction: Discussion, dialogue, conversation, commented content dissemination, and levels where communities that reflect and produce new plot lines are gestated (Atarama-Rojas, Guerrero-Pérez, & Gerbolini, 2020).
- Participation through production: The creation of products analogous to the products of the entertainment industry. At this level, products classified as user-generated content are developed. The main manifestations are fan art and fan fiction (Scolari, 2013).

A social audience develops in the dynamics between these two levels of participation in the environment of social networks.

Considering the elements explored, a definition of social audience emerges. This definition serves to combine the contributions of academics who address this topic and to find points of analysis that enrich the debate on this concept, which involves various possibilities to understand audiences in a transmedia environment. Thus, a social audience can be defined as an audience that consumes audiovisual content via any medium or platform and enriches consumption with its active participation in the digital environment, especially on social networks through interaction, and the creation of communities that value original content and generate knowledge about that fictional world. Three practical consequences emerge from the proposed definition for using the concept:

- The social audience is not exclusive to television audiovisual content. This is evident when considering that a social audience's distinctive feature is its active participation and not the origin of its consumption. It is even possible that someone starts as part of a social audience before seeing the audiovisual content and later accesses the content to enrich their participation in the specific community. As Herrero de la Fuente (2018) showed, the social audience can be a strategy to attract more viewers to a traditional audience.
- A social audience is not a different type of audience. The linear, delayed, or traditional audience can behave as a social audience if they carry out participation activities in interactive communities. Crucially, audiovisual content is consumed by an audience, and part of that audience stands out for behaving as a social audience. Thus, traditional audiences can behave as social audiences. As Orihuela (2015) highlighted, "to the extent that the public of the old media become users of the networks, the content of the media is transformed into conversations within virtual communities" (pp. 43-44).
- The social audience not only participates simultaneously or in parallel with the transmission of content. This is consistent with contemporary consumption, where users decide when, where, and how to consume audiovisual content. Thus, the social audience can participate through interaction before the premiere (exploring development possibilities) and after the dissemination of content, reflecting and establishing relationships with other content. The social audience takes part in all stages of audiovisual content: before, during, and after consumption (Castro-Mariño, 2018).

This participation also encourages various synergies among the members of the social audience that expand the transmedia world. By participating in the activities of a social audience, a person acquires more information and an enriched frame to approach the transmedia phenomenon. In this sense, the social audience, thanks to its swarm intelligence dynamics, favors three results that serve as sources of value

generation in a transmedia phenomenon: social relationships through interaction, new lines of interpretation through rereading, and content analogous to the audiovisual industry created by participants. These activities are also promoted in the culture of convergence. As Freeman and Proctor (2018) found, people now engage with content across multiple platforms, following stories, characters, worlds, brands, and diverse information across a varied spectrum of media. The social audience is the functional category that gathers, describes, and explains how these relationships exist among the followers of a fiction and how their practices generate value for a franchise.

Thus, it is essential to recognize this category in contemporary studies, not only of audiences but also of the media and the communication industry in general. Traditional categories remain valid as long as audiences maintain traditional behaviors, but it is necessary to appeal to a concept whose essential feature is people's relational character, which is strengthened due to technological innovations. In this sense, proposals such as those of active audiences, fans, and prosumers—although they describe certain changes in public behavior—do not affect the relational aspect that fosters the gestation of communities in a virtual social space. The concept of the social audience also explains value generation through interaction and collaboration. This is even more evident in the context of multimodal value creation (Samuels, 2018).

Another key aspect is that the social audience also includes followers of fictional works, that is, users who interact on a social network but are not necessarily fans. Considering that an essential feature of a fan is self-recognition as a fan (Lozano, Plaza, & Sánchez, 2020) and being part of a fan community (Hills, 2017), it emerges that followers are interested in participating in a virtual community related to specific content but do not have a fan's emotional attachment and commitment. This way, the social audience is made up of followers who are not fans, fans who are not prosumers, and prosumer fans, the latter also called critical discourse fans or creative discourse fans (Ryan, 2019).

These types of audiences with different levels of connection and creation are related to the concept of social audience. The value of this concept relates to its ability to help explore value creation in different audiences that are linked through interaction in the digital environment, especially on social networks. Social audience dynamics show how prosumer fans and non-prosumer fans influence the new link a follower who is not yet considered a fan may be forming.

Apart from interaction-generated knowledge, the development of an emotional bond has also been evidenced in social audience dynamics, which functions as a catalyst for social relationships that are gestated in the interaction. As Serrano-Puche (2016) showed, "somehow the status of social networks revolves around the emotions and feelings that users express about themselves but at the same time find resonance among their circle of contacts" (p. 23). These emotions are generated by audiovisual content that invigorates the interaction of the social audience. In the socialization of these emotions, the audience expands and strengthens the bonds with content it finds attractive. Indeed, experience management can lead to lasting emotional ties with users (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014).

Hence, Lamerichs (2018) stated, "Media texts generate affects with their audiences. I suggest that meaning is not allocated within the text but is generated by its audiences" (p. 30). The complexity of affects in the field of communication warrants exploring the value of behaviors, discourses, contents, signs, and

mediations in play (Allard, Alloing, Le Béhec, & Pierre, 2017), especially the current mediations that materialize in interactions in the digital environment. This interaction has its own codes and intensities (Serrano-Puche, 2017) because when emotional expressions surface on the Internet, they materialize in the form of signs (emojis, emoticons, likes) or documents (posts, comments, images), which are semiotic indices of current affect (Alloing & Pierre, 2021a).

Affective experience is key in people's relationships with each other and the media because "affect is understood as a fundamental condition that allows us to make sense of aspects of our life and valorize them" (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 34). Hence, the emotional link generated through interaction among the social audience enriches the experience with the franchise, making it part of followers' lives beyond a strictly consumerist experience. Hills (2015b) found that "affective economics mobilizes a concept of emotional engagement between consumers and branded goods in order to position itself as beyond mere 'commodification'" (p. 185).

Crucially, affective experience, although part of a personal interpretation, is essentially a collective phenomenon in which relationships with others are fundamental (Alloing & Pierre, 2021b). This relationship with others based on interest in a work of fiction can lead the social audience to jointly produce knowledge of a narrative universe (Hills, 2015a). In social audience dynamics, some fans "actively work with the gaps in the source text that spark their imagination and give way to oppositional readings" (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 17). The creative work and interactions that occur among prosumer fans, non-prosumer fans, and followers reinforce the emotional bonds of members of the social audience with the virtual community and the work of fiction. This link does not arise directly and solely from the consumption of fiction but also from the relationship with others who share an interest in the work.

The present research emphasized emotional bonding in social audience activities that increased a transmedia phenomenon's value. This reflects that "it is precisely through emotions that most consumed content for users can be opened" (Serrano-Puche, 2017, p. 80). The term engagement did not serve in its stead because it is a multimodal concept, which apart from the emotional component includes motivations, cognitive responses, and observable behaviors of audiences (González-Bernal, 2016). On the other hand, exploring emotions specifically provides insights into the bond a follower can establish with a fiction. This insight can reach the point where the expansion and increase of the emotional connection to a franchise lead to richer enjoyment of that fictional world and revisiting it to continue experiencing the stories a follower has connected with.

Material and Methodology

To explore if the social audience's activities expanded the emotional connection of its participants with Marvel, two preliminary delimitations were necessary. Recognizing the features of transmedia storytelling and appealing to the concept of node (Kim, 2013), the Marvel transmedia phenomenon is best studied from a central touchpoint, that is, focusing on relevance and the narrative entity. Thus, this research addresses *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) for three reasons: The film concludes the Infinity Saga; it was a social and commercial success; and it is a recent phenomenon, facilitating the study of social audience activities.

The second delimitation aims to specify the social audience that is studied. As Jenkins (2012) highlighted, when studying audiences, it is important to pay attention to social and cultural contexts. Although the Marvel franchise clearly has a global audience, this research studies activities of the social audience that developed around Peruvian digital communities. This delimitation does not prevent the results from being extrapolated to the behavior of similar digital communities.

To explore the contribution of the social audience as a key touchpoint that increased and expanded the emotional bonding of its participants with the franchise, it was methodologically necessary to carry out an empirical investigation where audience behavior was observed to recognize the manifestations of an emotional bond with the Marvel franchise. A netnographic study was proposed to explore via direct observation the social audience's behavior on social networks. Netnography has become relevant in exploring the dynamics of participation and interaction that occur in social networks (Casas-Romeo, Gázquez-Abad, Forgas-Coll, & Huertas-García, 2014).

Three steps were followed in the netnographic study to describe audience participation on social networks. The steps allowed structuring the analysis of audience participation in the digital environment and corresponded, with due adjustment to the study object, to those proposed by Casas-Romeo and colleagues (2014): (1) identification and delimitation of audiences (selection of the sample), (2) metric analysis (quantitative approach) for the selection of the analysis units, and (3) identification of attributes (qualitative approach). Each step is described below.

The identification and delimitation of audiences followed three criteria: (1) The study considered only Facebook and YouTube. (2) Accounts that produced content linked to *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) were searched using keywords related to the protagonists of the films as well as "Marvel," "Avengers," and "Endgame." Searches were done using the platforms' search engines and with hashtags (#). (3) Searches were filtered by authorship, and only accounts with at least one Peruvian administrator qualified.

Facebook and YouTube were selected because they are the two most used social networks in the world (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020). Peru's most visited websites during 2019 were Google.com, Facebook.com, and YouTube.com. The temporal delimitation of the study is from April 27, 2018, coinciding with the world premiere of *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, 2018), to October 27, 2019, six months after the premiere of *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019), yielding an 18-month mapping period.

After mapping and detecting the pages and channels that created or shared Marvel content, the following filters were established: (1) Some activity on the page had to be registered before and after the premiere of *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, 2018); and (2) the page must have published content related to *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), excluding multi-fandom pages dedicated to other franchises. Qualifying accounts were ranked based on the number of followers to determine the final selection of the five accounts with the largest community for each social network. Table 1 shows the sample of accounts to explore the dynamics of the social audience.

Table 1. Selected Facebook and YouTube Accounts.

Social Network	Account Name
Facebook	Fandom Comix (n.d.-a)
	Marvel Dark Avengers Perú (n.d.)
	Marvel Perú (n.d.)
	Marvel Assemble Perú (n.d.)
	Fans por siempre de Marvel (n.d.)
YouTube	Entretenews (n.d.)
	Fandom Comix (n.d.-b)
	Zapping You (n.d.)
	YouGambit (n.d.)
	Amazing Comic X (n.d.)

The metric analysis (quantitative approach) for the selection of the analysis units used the Fanpage Karma software, and direct observation enabled data collection on the scope of the accounts. To define the most relevant publications on the selected accounts, metric, relevance, and viability criteria were followed.

The 20 publications with the highest number of comments on each social network were selected, and the conversations generated in the comments were analyzed. The 50 most relevant comments in each publication were analyzed according to the social network algorithm, following the sample saturation criterion. Importantly, the aim of this research was not to quantify the phenomenon but to describe the interactions in the conversations. For the qualitative analysis of the conversations generated on the social networks, four observation categories were applied that corresponded to the variable of emotional attachment to the Marvel transmedia phenomenon. Table 2 shows the comments analysis sheet based on González-Bernal (2016) and Song and colleagues (2019).

Table 2. Qualitative Comment Analysis Sheet.

Analysis Categories	Category Descriptions
The manifestation of an emotion linked to expectations to consume new content	It is explored if any emotion expressed in the comments suggests the person wants to see new Marvel content.
The manifestation of an emotion toward the content (characters, plots, conflicts)	It is explored if any emotion related to the various narrative elements of Marvel is appreciated in the messages.
The manifestation of an emotional bond toward the Marvel universe	It is explored if users reveal in their comments a link to the Marvel phenomenon, understood as the entire Marvel universe, not individual aspects.
The search for dissemination or the dissemination of emotions	It is explored if users are interested in finding out if other community members are feeling similar emotions.

The analysis was applied to 2,000 comments selected for the study, and the behaviors in the digital community were manually recorded. Similarly, some comments illustrating the results were recorded.

Results: Emotional Connection With the Marvel Universe

Results are structured according to the analysis categories of the emotions, and quotes from comments are presented to illustrate social audience activities.

The Manifestation of an Emotion Linked to Expectations to Consume New Content

On Facebook, one prime aspect that confirmed this link was users expressing excitement at seeing still unpublished content. An emotion that was found repeatedly was the expectation to watch *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). Some users expressed this emotion with comments such as "I can no longer hold out 🤞" (Jkarlos GI, personal communication, April 11, 2019) or "Tiziana Oscoco I can't wait any longer!!!!!!!" (Giancarlo Garavito, personal communication, March 14, 2019). Crucially, emotions also manifested with the use of multimedia resources such as gifs, memes, and images. The emotions expressed in the comments showed a strong link to the content that was going to be released, and sometimes this link was expressed as sadness about the death of a hero. Comments appeared such as "Maii Alonzo Nuñez 😞😞😞😞😞 I still don't see her and I want to cry" (Janeeth Balderrama, personal communication, May 29, 2018), or even users expressing sadness and pain they expected to experience when watching the movie: "Fabrizio Garcia Gutiérrez I will buy my box of tissues, I already saw myself in tears 😭" (García Gutierrez, personal communication, April 23, 2019).

On YouTube, followers expressed the desire to watch the movie. Comments like "I want to see it now!!" (Giancarlo Skywalker, personal communication, October 30, 2018) or "I'm already killing myself to see *Avengers: Endgame*" (Aldair Acosta, personal communication, January 4, 2019) were common. It was evident how the content of the publication and the related comments stimulated interest: "Now more interested in watching the film." (Xavier Rueda, personal communication, March 11, 2019). Followers expressed intense emotions linked to their desire to watch the movie. Some users even classified this wait as a pain—"It is torture to wait for the second part of *Infinity War*" (Valeria Garza, personal communication, May 31, 2018)—or associated the meaning of their life with events in the movie: "I want to watch this movie and at the same time I don't, I feel that if a character dies my life will no longer have meaning" (Anette holland 7u7, personal communication, May 31, 2018).

In relation to this wait, some users affirmed rising interest as content appeared. This phenomenon reached a point where fans sought spoilers because of the inclination to consume everything related to the movie: "If I want to see *Avengers: Endgame* and I see a spoiler, it will make me want more to go watch it and to know more about the movie" (Hernán, personal communication, April 15, 2019). A desire related to experiencing the movie for as long as possible was also palpable: "With everything I heard, I hope the movie lasts 4 hours 😊" (Violeta Curioso de Hurtado, personal communication, March 11, 2019). Imagining the events that could occur in *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) was a catalyst for different emotions. A key such moment was the realization of scenes loaded with great meaning for everything that was built over 12 years. Along these lines were found comments such as, "it will be epic if the Captain says AVENGERS ASSAMBLE uffffff I get goosebumps!!! It will be as epic as Thor's arrival in *Wakanda*!!" (Tio gamboa, personal communication, January 4, 2019). Users expressed various emotions with different levels of

intensity in anticipation of the premiere. This confirms that a strong emotional bond was expressed and reinforced among the social audience.

Manifestation of an Emotion Toward the Content (Characters, Plots, Conflicts)

Followers' emotions were not only related to the desire to watch the movie, but they also referred to an emotional bond with various aspects of Marvel content. In relation to a preview that featured Captain Marvel with arrogant behavior, Facebook users expressed disgust, captured in comments like "How badly I like Captain Marvel" (Rosario Caceres, personal communication, April 8, 2019). The preview also elicited reactions in relation to Captain America's foul language, who is normally a politically correct hero in the MCU. Some comments evidenced the emotion of surprise: "My Cap . . . Talking obscenely? 🤔 It can't be" (Moreno Zamora, personal communication, April 8, 2020). Motivated by different aspects of a publication, followers clearly felt challenged and expressed emotions on the social networks.

Some Facebook users expressed their nostalgia and sadness for the characters who died: "This is the saaad thing in life 😭😭😭😭😭" (Sime Coronel, personal communication, May 29, 2018) or "OMG !!!!! Stark is alive . . . does that mean my Cap dies???(😭😭😭)" (Cruz Jaime, personal communication, March 14, 2020). Other emotions signaled disapproval of content because it apparently did not correspond to the affection and consideration users developed for a character. In this sense, comments like "How do they say that the Black Widow is secondary if she is an original Avenger" (Cedeño Guerrero, personal communication, April 29, 2019) emerged.

Emotion was even explicitly recognized: "Wouuu is a very good description and it excites me, the only thing that can be expected is that it be like this" (Alejandro Gomar, personal communication, October 11, 2018). However, comments on Facebook that expressed emotion were more frequently found through what the content aroused in them, for instance, "OMG I cried because of this preview 😭😭😭" (Rivas Bravo, personal communication, December 7, 2018) or "I just read it and felt a sensation of crying terribly 😭" (Santos Falen, personal communication, April 23, 2019). Followers expressed excitement or detailed their actions or the sensations they were experiencing at that moment (crying or wanting to cry). This emotional connection with Marvel content also manifested in the recognition of practices, such as repeatedly watching a movie, that are typical of someone who has generated strong affection. Responding to publications that asked followers how many times they had seen *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, 2018), some commenters said they watched the movie up to 155 times. So, the relationships these followers established with the content and the emotional bonds they developed and shared with other followers were apparent.

On YouTube, users expressed a strong connection to various characters. For example, comments such as "Psychologically, I'm not ready to say goodbye to Iron Man 😭" (Brandol Bernal, personal communication, August 25, 2018) or "Iron Man is my favorite character 😭😭😭😭😭" (Balan Balanzario, personal communication, August 25, 2018) were found. In these comments, emojis helped manifest the emotional charge that accompanied the text and were frequently used. These examples show that users developed emotions for the characters and assigned them a special value in their lives.

These emotions were also observed in comments that explicitly expressed what some scenes triggered in users. There were manifestations of sadness linked to scenes in which some characters die, coupled with empathizing with the pain of others due to the difficult situations the movie created. But some scenes elicited positive emotions, for example, when users experienced key moments of the story and saw their favorite characters fulfill their mission: "Thank you for the information. Iron Man wearing a gauntlet. My skin crawled" (Omar Cahui2, personal communication, April 11, 2019) or "When Thor arrives in Wakanda I screamed at the movies, I said yes (my heart, please)" (Alexis Ramírez, personal communication, May 4, 2018). In these cases, followers expressed how the powerful emotions they felt caused by the intense experience while watching the movie generated a physical reaction. It was also found that users openly admitted to having cried when faced with an intense positive emotion: "I cried and cried more when Captain America was standing and with that sad music he sees all the fallen Avengers reappear! Black Panther comes out first 😭😭😭 the best movie!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" (QTV MX, personal communication, April 15, 2019). As this moment of the Avengers' reunion to face Thanos is a gripping scene, the intensity of the emotions led the user to admit having cried.

Manifestation of an Emotional Bond Toward the Marvel Universe

Another constant in the comments was the expression of sadness about the absence of certain characters from other touchpoints of the MCU. For example, in relation to the responses of the scriptwriters to fan questions, several users demanded the inclusion of characters called The Defenders. Users clearly developed not only an affection for characters or specific frames but also a link to the Marvel Worlds and wanted to see how they materialized in the movie. This showed a desire to unite the different heroes into a single experience and an enthusiasm for the global experience of the Marvel phenomenon through more crossovers and meet-ups of characters in Marvel's transmedia world.

This link was also observed in Facebook comments that indicated affection or mentioned this fictional world. Comments like "I love you Stan Lee♥" (Mauro Alvarez, personal communication, April 11, 2019) or "Amalia Valdez Talavera now that you have become a Marvel Lover We have to watch it!!!! 😊" (San VD, personal communication, March 14, 2019) were common. The examples showed not only an emotional link with *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) or any of its narrative elements but also with Marvel's global universe attributed to Stan Lee. In line with this sentiment, when the studio presented a special collection of the MCU movies, users reacted with comments that expressed their bond with Marvel and a deep desire to get that collection.

In the study of YouTube comments, a strong emotional bond toward Marvel could be detected. This bond was appreciated in drastic expressions that showed its importance for followers who related to characters that accompanied them for 12 years. Comments like "The saddest death is mine, because something died inside me when I saw the Avengers die" (Juan Pi, personal communication, April 29, 2018) captured this bond. In videos that suggested the movie would close a cycle, some comments expressed affection that links fans not just with a movie but with the characters they feel represent something in their lives. Thus, although Spider-Man properly enters the MCU only in 2017, users commented on Spider-Man in general, not the specific one, the former representing the value of doing the right thing with substantial power: "The Spider-Man was my childhood. Rest in peace" (MrSporty YT, personal communication, May 4,

2018). This general link pertains to all the characters: "I do not want anyone to die" (Scarlet Witch, personal communication, August 30, 2018).

General recognition and gratitude were also observed regarding Marvel's contribution to the characters and stories. In this sense, comments like "Marvel you are a damn machine making great movies with perfect continuity" (Edgar Aguilar, personal communication, April 26, 2019) were found, recognizing the innovative practices of Marvel's transmedia world. For example, some comments highlighted how the various media are feedback loops: "A comic based on a film based on a comic, I love this world <3" (Slade Wilson, personal communication, December 5, 2018). Emotional bonding toward a transmedia world was confirmed through comments that not only showed admiration for the Marvel phenomenon but also expressed gratitude toward this world of fiction.

The Search for Dissemination or the Dissemination of Emotions

For the search for dissemination or sharing of emotions, Facebook provides tools such as labels, reactions, and answers, which were commonly used in the comments analyzed. Representing a community of content followers, expressions of emotion used to be validated by other followers. A highlight in this observation was regular tagging, revealing that this social network is a means to express a bond that is part of everyday life. Comments such as "Lesly Aracelly Bautista pencil it in, there are no excuses like 'I must sustain a thesis' nor 'if I do not go to work, they will shoot me,' that day is separated" (Orlando Perez, personal communication, December 7, 2018). Tagging in publications was common, even without adding text, as an invitation to share what was watched.

Separately, some comments also expressed an emotion but expected validation from the community. For example, "It is normal to feel chills while you see the trailer TT <3" (Tania Laurente, personal communication, March 14, 2019). In this comment, the user appreciated on the one hand the manifestation of a very intense emotion that generated even psychosomatic reactions, and, on the other, it was framed in a tone that asked for community confirmation. Replying to this comment, other users wrote: "You are not the only one who feels that! 🤩" (Redkoborodiy Loayza, personal communication, March 14, 2019), and it "is the most normal thing in the world" (Lobo Dávila, personal communication, March 14, 2019). This confirmed that Facebook's mechanisms encouraged emotions based on content consumption.

On YouTube, which does not offer tags in the comments section, the mechanisms of asking the community about a feeling and requesting Likes on a comment if the same emotion was recognized were common. Users engaged in emotion-sharing activities. For example, comments were found with questions around a theory or proposal: "I really liked the theory, who else did so joins the crew" (Apocalipsis zombie, personal communication, October 30, 2018). With the same goal, the confirmation of an emotion was requested through a like: "Like if you want to see all this on Avengers 4 and if you are excited" (Ricardo Castañeda, personal communication, May 31, 2018) or "Like if the death that hurt you most was that of Spider-Man" (El Show de Mau, personal communication, April 29, 2018). Both comments elicited community responses, showing shared excitement in the comments.

In addition to requests for actions that demonstrated an emotion, some examples referred to the experiences lived through the movies: "Who else applauded when Thor appears in the Wakanda scene" (Mercedes Martinez, personal communication, April 28, 2018). Likewise, with affirmations such as "Imagine the captain says: Avengers assemble. I swear I will cry" (Fiamma Marasco, personal communication, January 4, 2019), users encouraged peers to respond. Overall, comments expressed an emotion that users knew was shared and corresponded to a set of experiences the social audience members recognized as their own. In this sense, the importance of the expression of emotions and their confirmation by the community can be recognized in this study as encouraging participatory dynamics. Other comments related to the search for shared emotions as part of the wait for unpublished Marvel content: "I already want to see the trailer, like if you do too" (Aka deadpool, personal communication, December 5, 2018) and "Like if you want that it's March and April to see Captain Marvel and Avengers 4" (Rodriguez Amador, personal communication, December 8, 2018).

Discussion

After the qualitative analysis of the comments, it was confirmed that samples of the participants' emotional links with Marvel's transmedia universe expanded to varying degrees. The bonds, however, still suggested a fundamental experience in continuing to consume Marvel content and share that experience. The expressions of these emotions were guided by the type of shared content and social networks' interaction mechanisms. On Facebook, tags were frequently used to promote the dissemination of emotions, coupled with resources such as images, gifs, and memes. And on YouTube, confirmation questions were more common to encourage the community to express a shared emotion with a like or a comment.

This research found evidence of the relationship between the local culture and the universal audiovisual experience. The conversations that emerged in the comment sections of Facebook and YouTube contained elements of Peruvian culture that helped to better understand and enjoy the interaction among users but maintained the inherent universal character of both Marvel movies discussed in this study. In other words, someone acquainted with the Marvel franchise could access the entire conversation, but participants who understand Peruvian cultural codes could enjoy it even more. The component of local cultural codes was more frequently evident in the use of resources such as gifs and memes, whose meaning is generally built through cultural context.

Also, some YouTube comments showed users' profound knowledge of the Marvel universe, manifested in constant references to comics and other Marvel products. Additionally, publications facilitated more committed participation with the deepening of the MCU's narrative possibilities. On Facebook, more focused knowledge was exposed through the movies' narrative and progression dynamics. This corresponded to the type of content that was shared on each social network. On Facebook, content snippets and leaks predominated, while on YouTube, users focused on theories of specific characters' development.

The study illuminates an underexplored area of Transmedia Storytelling studies. Although consensus exists on the audience being key to expanding the narrative, this consensus is related to the increase in knowledge and the creation of touchpoints (Jenkins et al., 2013; Scolari, Bertetti, & Freeman, 2014; Scolari & Establés, 2017). But in the present research, the focus was on ways in which the social

audience's activities expanded emotional links to the franchise. Users valued these bonds and perceived them as helping to maximize the enjoyment of the content. To validate this finding, a qualitative analysis was carried out, observing every comment in its context and recognizing not only its content but also framing dynamics. This led to the conclusion that such social interactions expanded audience members' emotional links with the transmedia phenomenon.

The expansion related to a wider scope of these emotions on social networks. The manifestation of emotions is usually accompanied by validation, dissemination, and confirmation activities by the social audience. Hence, the expression of an emotion usually generates the expression of a similar emotion by another member of the community. Kaplan (2021) found that community links to a third party can encourage outsiders to join the conversation. Increasing emotional bonding was appreciated in interactions that highlighted how content consumed through social networks moved emotional fibers and encouraged the repetition or consumption of various touchpoints of any transmedia phenomenon. The practice expressed shared emotional support through various activities, such as reacting, commenting, and sharing, generating a spiral of collective creation and activity reinforcement (Reißmann, Stock, Kaiser, Isenberg, & Nieland, 2017).

The value of emotional bonding for the success of audiovisual projects has been widely studied (Jenkins et al., 2013), but the current media ecosystem allows these emotions to be mediated and intensified through the digital environment and social networks. As stated by Allard and colleagues (2017), the field of emotions and affects is underexplored with respect to the influence of digital devices. But the concept of the social audience makes it possible to highlight not only the creation of emotional links but also the value of interaction, participation, and content creation in the digital environments of social networks to create and increase the emotional links of the audience with a franchise. Thus, audiovisual content is enriched by and enriches its scope through interaction dynamics in the digital environment.

The concept of social audience remains important to understand consumption dynamics in the current media ecosystem, particularly to recognize audience contributions, participation, and interaction in a transmedia phenomenon's value generation. The social audience becomes a key touchpoint because it connects content with the profiles of followers who have different levels of emotional attachment to a franchise. Members with deeper links tended to express and socialize their emotions in ways that led others to experience those same emotions. Conversations that challenged positive emotions were not found in the Facebook and YouTube environments, even though there was room for criticism about interpretations or perspectives. This shows that the emotional bonds with Marvel are mainly positive, even when ideas differed.

Also, it was possible to recognize different levels of participation and interaction among the social audience, but all these levels were enriched by the members. Some followers only visualized and consumed publications, while others used a social network's interaction mechanisms, especially reactions. More active followers shared ideas, emotions, or sensations through comments, and the most engaged audience members created content similar to prosumers and shared it via Facebook or YouTube. The social audience concept allowed for highlighting the dynamics among these profiles and showing how interactions generated value. The social audience was key to intensifying emotional bonds with the Marvel franchise.

Content creators were also the members that not only shared but encouraged interaction. This research did not aim to study the Marvel franchise or brand but to qualitatively explore the behavior of its Peruvian social audience on Facebook and YouTube, where a desire for continuing the franchise became clear through spontaneous searches that resembled pull behavior into the transmedia universe.

Finally, research limitations involved the focus on only two social networks although the Marvel phenomenon and its social audience are global and found on multiple platforms. Also, Marvel's transmedia storytelling contemplates various narrative pillars, including comics, series, and video games. In this article, only cinematography was explored as a touchpoint, but further research could explore the behavior of the social audience by emphasizing other Marvel transmedia content. Similarly, based on the results presented here, other studies can analyze more deeply the social audience's relationships on other digital platforms to recognize the dynamics of value creation and the possible synergistic relationships among platforms that arise from the social audience's activities.

Conclusion

The activities of Marvel's social audience expanded and increased the emotional bonds of its members with the movie *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). They also intensified the global nature of the transmedia phenomenon, where other touchpoints came into play. After interaction among the participants of the digital community, the social audience experienced enriched enjoyment and sought new content or revisited already consumed content to reread it with a fresh perspective developed through social interaction. Hence, the concept of social audience is key to explaining the success of the Marvel transmedia phenomenon and shows the relevance of qualitative research and to analyze emotions that help consolidate experiences a digital environment enriches along several touchpoints.

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