

Marvel media convergence: Cult following and buddy banter¹

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Abstract

The social media driven paradigm shift and convergence of mass media has transformed celebrity culture, and affected the way fans are entertained and audiences interact with celebrities and fan communities. The series *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* marked Marvel Studio's first foray into the medium of television. In a convergent media environment in which content saturation is a potential barrier to audience attention and commercial success, the leveraging of celebrity friendship is an effective means of promotion. The series was launched at the 2013 Comic Con in San Diego, during which the cast participated in interviews that were distributed online. This article explores the success of celebrity friendships as a marketing device through an analysis of audience comments in response to one online interview. It examines how displays of friendship generate online discussion, audience hype and reward loyalty, and the significance of perceived authenticity on the reception of bonds portrayed. It proposes the term 'buddy banter' as a means to illustrate the presentation of close celebrity friendships in a multi-gender, group environment. Analysis revealed banter to be a useful means of attracting audience attention, while audience interpretation of celebrity dynamics favoured the reading of close cross-gender friendships as heterosexual couples.

Keywords

Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D

online discussions

fandom

bromance

buddy banter

transmedia storytelling

Introduction

Promotion of television dramas in an age of convergent media is often complicated by the diversified and fragmented nature of the media environment (Bottomley 2015). In particular audiences can be difficult to locate and retain in a setting in which content is readily accessed on increasing varieties of platforms, and in which the definition of 'entertainment' content itself diversifies (Kim 2012). The expanding entertainment behemoth that is Marvel Studios expresses various productive, receptive and interactive practices that are a direct consequence of a convergent media environment. While an exhaustive examination of these practices is beyond the scope of this article, the promotion of a recent addition to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) offers useful insights into the intersection between media audiences, producers and celebrities. The conceptual framework informing this article engages with three perspectives.

First, the impact of convergent media on audience reception practices is considered an underpinning feature of contemporary approaches to content distribution. Increasingly, media products are distributed using both diverse and direct methods of dissemination. Second, the diversified audience stimulates discussion on the impact of convergent

media on the promotional practices of media producers seeking to capture the inattentive and ‘promiscuous’ (Jones 2003: 419) gaze of audiences scavenging ‘among dispersed media content’ (Jenkins 2006a: 3). Finally, the function of the celebrity figure as both promotional device and identificatory subject is examined through the lens of group dynamics and the application of what we term ‘buddy banter’.

A practical exploration of these concepts is conducted through the case study of a group interview with the cast of *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013–), filmed in the lead up to the premiere of the television series. The interview was distributed online during the 2013 Comic Con and has been selected to explore audience reaction to buddy banter and its significance as both an entertainment source and promotional tool.

Convergence a doubled-edged sword

In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins highlighted the multifaceted, contextual and altogether slippery nature of a notion which has since come to underpin the operation of contemporary media practice. Writing in 2006, he views convergence as a ‘word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural and social changes’ (2006a: 3) in which old and new media forms intersect. Ciastellardi and Patti echo this sentiment in their introduction to *International Journal of McLuhan Studies: Understanding Media today, McLuhan in the Era of Convergence Culture*, in which they highlight the potential for shifts in the media economy ‘where the power of the producers and the power of the consumers interact in emergent, unpredictable ways’ (2011: 16). The debate around

the reality of a participatory culture – whether the utopian ideal is achievable or simply technological determinism – circulated at the time of *Convergence Culture*'s publication and persists today (Andrejevic 2009; Hay and Couldry 2011). Indeed, Jenkins himself warned 'it is wrong to assume that we are somehow being liberated through improved media technologies' (2006b: 135), highlighting instead the complicated interaction between audience, industry and text that emerge because of media convergence. At the intersection of 'new tools and technologies', 'subcultures promot[ing] Do-It-Yourself [...] media production' and 'horizontally integrated media conglomerates' (Jenkins 2006b: 135–36) is a new set of interactions that offer modes of spectatorship, content production and dissemination previously unseen in the broadcast era. Convergence represents not only a 'coming together' of technological platforms and media distribution, but also of concepts, of practices and of behaviour.

The complexity of interactions between industry, text and audience affects television production, distribution and consumption in two opposing but equally significant ways. On the one hand, production values for television drama series continue to increase as the convergence between television and film industries draws high profile actors and directors from big to small screens. Diversified distribution methods afforded by second-screen, video on demand and streaming services prolong the longevity of content beyond the date of initial broadcast (Graves 2014: 229). Additionally, television series employ the immediacy of social media to establish an online presence in the lead up to, during and after broadcast (Proulx and Shepatin 2012). Knowledge and awareness of series are enhanced through strategies such as promotional tweets, social media posts, and actors live tweeting during episodes.

These paratextual elements, if carried forward by fans, are redistributed among fan networks thereby further embedding the series in popular consciousness.

On the other hand, diversified distribution methods and a persistent online presence (and the regularity of uploaded content required to maintain such a presence) can also result in a content saturated media environment. Here television productions vie for audience attention from high profile film franchise adopting similar online promotion strategies, a culture of ‘DIY media production’ (Jenkins 2006a: 135) facilitates increased user-generated content (Burgess and Green 2009: 125), and the definition of ‘entertainment’ content is broadened (Kim 2012: 62). In this setting, promotion becomes an exercise of locating and attracting audiences that are increasingly fragmented and distracted (Jones 2003).

Audiences in the age of media convergence

Audience engagement with media content that traverses distribution and technological platforms encourages amalgamation ‘within the brains of individual[s]’ (Jenkins 2006a: 3), and intersects with discourses focused on participation. Within these discourses of participation, audiences are considered as more than consumers. The active nature of contemporary audiences is explored through the lens of Jenkins’s notion of participatory culture (2006b), while the productive and discursive nature of fan practices and fan works have been examined for their therapeutic (Larsen and Zubernis 2012), discursive (Hellekson and Busse 2006) and creative (Jenkins 2006a) potential. At the same time, the ability to create and distribute ‘amateur’ works and rework existing material enables fans to construct (Soukup 2006) and perpetuate specific celebrity images (Raphael and Lam 2015). This affords the audience some

degree of control over the representation of celebrities, while simultaneously diversifying the nature of content constituting ‘entertainment’.

Audience attention becomes divided not only between professionally produced and amateur content, but also between platforms of media distribution. In a context in which offline content produced for the traditional mediums of film, television and radio broadcast naturally bleed online – and in which online content gains traction with greater speed than offline counterparts – campaigns targeted at both platforms often prove to be the most successful (Feinstein 2015). The video chosen for analysis in this article is evidence not only of diversified content distribution, but also a reflection of perceived audience practice. It is an instance of producers seeking audiences where they imagine them to be. The interview, a promotional tool and ancillary production associated with a primary media text, was made specifically for distribution online. It was published during Comic Con 2013, presumably with the intent to capitalize on the momentum of the event. However, its placement on YouTube, which has rapidly become an archive of popular culture, suggests an open engagement with audiences not limited by the strictures of time governing traditional broadcast mediums. In effect, audiences are encouraged to consume the content at first release, but also have the opportunity to discover the material at any time.

While it may not be common practice among all media producers, this is indicative nonetheless of contemporary media distribution practices that seek to maximize exposure to audiences over both spatial and temporal boundaries. However, the multiple platforms on which media are displayed renders its environment as one

saturated with content directed towards ever fragmenting audiences with shorter attention spans (Livingstone 2003).

Celebrity and media convergence

In order to herald the arrival of a new television series, one means to attain a greater degree of audience attention could be to leverage celebrity interest within promotional campaigns. Celebrity is a pervasive concept that has influenced conceptualization of personhood, societal values and discourse. Celebrity culture predominately circulates around the constructed celebrity persona on whom symbolic (Dyer 1986), dramatized (Dyer 1979) and idealized (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2012) notions of self and society are writ large. It is also the dominant lens through which all public figures, from politicians to local heroes, are framed. In a reflection of Daniel Boorstin's assertion that a celebrity is one 'whose main characteristic is his [*sic*] well-knownness' (1962: 60), contemporary celebrity culture proliferates with celebrity figures whose public visibility is both due to, and generates, professional and amateur media content.

While the ubiquity of celebrity and the ever-present nature of celebrity figures might contribute to media clutter, audience interest in the personal interactions of celebrities could also be leveraged for the purposes of promotion. Indeed initial film promotion in the 1920s focused on the creation of 'picture personalities' (de Cordova 1990), amalgamated public figures that sought to mould actors in the shape of their on-screen persona rather than their 'real' identities. When public interest in the private lives of actors clearly outstripped interest in the narratives and characters of films, strategies were employed to merge 'on-screen and off-screen identities' (Turner 2004: 13) to

better align the celebrity with their on-screen counterparts (Gamson 1994). A precedent was thus set for capitalizing on public interest in the celebrity figure to promote affiliated works.

The development of Web 2.0 technologies has facilitated increased interaction between celebrities and fans (Marwick and boyd 2011), while simultaneously raising questions of authenticity in a context P. David Marshall terms ‘presentational media’ (2010). Contemporary media reporting in popular press, reflected in celebrity social media accounts, focuses not only on the identity and activity of celebrity figures, but on interaction *between* celebrity figures. Specifically the dynamics (and accompanying questions of authenticity) of celebrity friendships are offered as talking points, which generate increased audience interest and potential for word-of-mouth proliferation.

Bromance and buddy banter

A dynamic often adopted to capture public imagination is described by the conflated term ‘bromance’ (brother/romance), which emerged from skater culture in the 1990s (DeAngelis 2014). The term characterizes an ‘emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually’ (DeAngelis 2014: 1), with initial scholarship focused on thematic engagement with fictionalized accounts of male intimacy. As a genre, typified by films such as *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007), and the *Hangover* series (Phillips, 2009–2013), the bromance is a rendering of contemporary concerns of masculinity and the male role that traces antecedents to early American literature via the buddy films of the 1970s (DeAngelis 2014).

As a term, it has entered the public lexicon as shorthand for camaraderie and is used in media reporting of celebrity friendships. Producers of mainstream media franchises have leveraged the appeal of witnessing such bonds through the presentation of group interviews in traditional broadcast mediums, in cult fan arenas such as Comic Con, and through the uploading of raw interview footage online. This form of interaction is an extension of the entertainment gained from the film or series, as well as an effective means of promotion. In a convergent media environment, the bromance tag can function as a marker to gain audience interest and elevate the popular culture status of series affiliated with the celebrities in question.

While the term bromance is widely utilized in popular culture, it has gender limitations. By definition, it disavows other modes of close but non-sexual interaction between genders or females. Indeed, the presence of women in bromance films is often a narrative complication that at once prevents a ‘natural’ conclusion to the intimacy of the male relationship, while assuming a double-role as (occasionally un)attainable object (Boyle and Berridge 2014). Theirs is a complex role; an obstacle to male homosocial intimacy but a necessary one, required as a ‘safety net’ to reaffirm heteronormativity and thus, preserve the innocuousness of said intimacy.

Female representation in film and television has been examined from multiple perspectives including cinematic techniques and the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), the complexities of the voice in cinema (Doane 1986), the aforementioned marker of heteronormativity (Boyle and Berridge 2014), as objectified goal, reward or hindrance in narrative construction (Mulvey 1975; DeAngelis 2014), and as a reflection of

masculine reaction to feminist social movements in the 1970s (Willner 2012). This article limits discussion of female representation to narrative constructs comparable to the bromance genre, typified by contemporary offerings such as, *Bridesmaids* (Feig, 2011), *The Heat* (Feig, 2013), and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). Although ranging widely in genres a unifying factor in these narratives is an exploration of female homosocial relationships.

It is perhaps indicative of criticisms towards tokenistic female representation in bromance films, and a general lack of three-dimensional female characters, that a similarly widely recognized term for female homosocial bonds does not exist. Popular press references have toyed with ‘womance’ (Schappell 2011), the not altogether politically correct ‘homance’ appears in the *Urban Dictionary* (2015), while a *New York Times* review of *The Heat* managed only an unwieldy ‘cop-buddy movie with women’ (Scott 2013) to describe the female friendship in the film. What then of close but non-sexual relationships that transcend gender boundaries?

DeAngelis articulates a condition in relational discourse that views ‘progression from “just friends” to “lovers” [...] [as] a naturalized “given”’ (2014: 2). This ‘natural’ conclusion to a close relationship presents challenges to representations of close male friendships and is narratively attenuated by the presence of heteronormative expectations, exaggerated humour to acknowledge but disavow the potentiality of a homosexual ‘finale’, and the presence of women as heterosexual objects of desire (DeAngelis 2014). If this is problematic for displays of male homosocial intimacy, it is deadly for representation of close male/female friendships. In this instance, the ‘given’ is not only a ‘natural’ and expected narrative convention, but a socially

acceptable relational conclusion that ends in the harmonious stability of heterosexual union and the perpetuation of family. We thus enter complicated territory when both on- and off-screen expectations of male–female relationships are for heterosexual union.

Similarly, female homosocial relationships are viewed within a wider framework of heteronormativity. Although the female friendship is often presented in on-screen narratives defined by Karen Boyle and Susan Berridge as ‘girlfriend flick[s]’ (2014: 353), it often occurs within group scenarios constructed prior to the commencement of the narrative. This origin before the point of the narrative, often within childhood, is indicative of a view towards female friends as ‘an impediment to the development of hetero-romance’ in which homosocial intimacy is constructed as a phase that will pass as female characters grow ‘into heterosexuality’ (Boyle and Berridge 2014: 355). With the complication of homosocial bonds relegated to the immaturity of childhood attachments, female characters are free to pursue the conventional narrative path towards heterosexual union.

We propose the term ‘buddy banter’ as a general category to describe female, male and cross-gender friendship bonds. The term bromance is not entirely discarded, rather it is accommodated within the group dynamic of buddy banter to describe the intimacy of male cast members. Buddy banter thus describes both *group* and *individual* dynamics. The signification of ‘buddy’ is deliberate as a means to emulate the camaraderie of characters in ‘buddy cop’ film and television narratives typified by relationships in *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991) and *Lethal Weapon* (Donner, 1987). In the word ‘banter’, we evoke the notion of an enjoyment of company accompanying

close friendships, and by extension, the contagious joy of witnessing such interactions. Thus, buddy banter includes audience observation of physical and verbal interactions between celebrities, as well as the actual interactions themselves. Unlike bromance, which is suggestive of singular relationships, the more general buddy banter accommodates a description of group dynamics.

Similarly to bromance, buddy banter is applicable across narrative boundaries and equally describes both fictional and real-world dynamics. It also engages with notions of authenticity. As an enacted display of intimacy, believing the genuineness of the interaction becomes central to audience enjoyment of the banter. Additionally, the ‘slippage’ (Jermyn 2006: 74) between actor and character, particularly in reference to television actor/character dyads constructs ‘conflated identities’ (Lam 2015) that becomes a focal point of audience’s relation to actors and shapes their enjoyment of the promotional material surrounding a media text.

Types of buddy banter

We propose the following buddy banter table (Table 1), as a form of categorizing the various relationships between celebrities. It is important to note that relationships between actors and characters are complicated, thus any examples given in this article are not stagnant. As shown in the table, relationships can vary based on gender and how bonds are formed. It can also differ if those involved are a pair or a group (three or more celebrities). Within the group dynamic, various combinations of buddy banter may coexist: three males and two females, one male and five females, two males and one female and other similar combinations. The table also notes the inclusion of bromances.

	<i>Pre-success</i>		<i>Industry</i>		<i>On-screen</i>		<i>Off-screen</i>		<i>On and Off-screen</i>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Pairs										
Male	MM*	FM	MM	FM	MM	FM	MM	FM	MM	FM
Female	MF	FF	MF	FF	MF	FF	MF	FF	MF	FF
3 or more celebrities										
Male	MM	FM	MM	FM	MM	FM	MM	FM	MM	FM
Female	MF	FF	MF	FF	MF	FF	MF	FF	MF	FF

* All MM also referred to as bromance and can be pairs, trios or groups

Table 1: Buddy banter table.

Pre-success is defined as individuals known to each other before reaching celebrity status. For instance, Leonardo DiCaprio is renowned for maintaining his friendships with actors Tobey Maguire and Kevin Connolly, who he knew before any of them reached fame (Sales 1998). When DiCaprio and Maguire acted together in *The Great Gatsby* (Luhrmann, 2013), their friendship was heavily publicized during the promotion (Coyle 2013).

Industry refers to individuals who bonded through mutual friends or meeting at celebrity events. An example of this is the friendship between A-list Australian actors that show their patriotism by referring to their friendship. Among this collection of actors are Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and Russell Crowe. Although they have collaborated on-screen, media representation of their friendship is based on their ‘Australian’ identity. In fact, their combined image was used to sell Australia’s national identity on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (2011), when she visited the country in 2010.

Off-screen bonds relate to individuals who become friends in real-life through performing together even if they share minimal scenes or their characters are not close. For instance, *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) stars have complicated relationships on-screen, however, off-screen are renowned for their extremely close friendship. In fact, Liam Hemsworth, Josh Hutcherson and Jennifer Lawrence have stated that they plan to stay ‘friends forever’ and that there is nothing they do not know about each other (Yapalater 2015). Their friendship is highly covered in the media and frequently referenced in interviews during film promotions (Yapalater 2015).

On-screen is dependent on the characters having a close bond, although in real-life they may not get along or may be casual friends. Some of the cast in the series *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000) and *The O.C.* (2003–2007) were friends off-screen, however, rumours spread in the media that they did not all get along, making their on-screen group bond far stronger than off-screen (Reilly 2014). Thus, the fan perception of their buddy banter is stronger as an on-screen relationship.

On- and off-screen friendships are identified by those who have both on-screen intimacy and off-screen closeness. *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) cast are a strong example of this. Some of the actors had performed together in previous films, such as Robert Downey Jr and Mark Ruffalo in *Zodiac* (Fincher, 2007) and Scarlett Johansson and Chris Evans in *The Nanny Diaries* (Berman and Pulcini, 2007) and *The Perfect Score* (Robbins, 2004). Yet, their friendships were not heavily publicized until after reuniting in *The Avengers*. All of the main cast members of this franchise frequently mention their closeness (Funny or Die 2015). Having done several movies together, it also enhances the authenticity behind their promoted friendship.

The overlap of various relationships makes the details of buddy banter far more complex. Regardless, the closeness between celebrities can generate media and fan discussions. YouTube in particular, helps to spread footage globally and encourages two-way communication. Hence, buddy banter can result in strong promotion for films and television series. The following case study focuses on the dynamics in the cast of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013–) as an example of buddy banter. In particular fan response to the creation of an *on- and off-screen buddy banter*, and concurrent bromance, is explored.

Case study: Promoting *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*

Introduction

The 2008 release of the film *Iron Man* (Favreau) marked the first offering of the MCU, foreshadowing a concerted effort by Marvel Studios to create a contemporary screen-based narrative world featuring characters from the Marvel Universe. Marvel's first foray into the medium of television is *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013–). The titular agency is first introduced as a shadowy organization in *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008), and represented via the proxies of Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and Agent Coulson (Clark Gregg). Audiences were given their first glimpse of the group in full operation during *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), with Coulson playing a pivotal role in the plot. His demise at the hands of villain Loki provided the impetus for the formation of the Avengers, becoming whom they avenged. The home media release for *The Avengers* again featured the agency in a short film entitled *Item 47*

(D'Esposito, 2012). The narrative followed two S.H.I.E.L.D agents dealing with the aftermath of events in *The Avengers*, and is credited as the inspiration for the series.

The series features a fully restored Coulson leading a team of agents comprised of experienced field agent Melinda May (Ming-Na Wen), Black ops specialist Grant Ward (Brett Dalton), new recruit Skye Johnson (Chloe Bennet), and engineering and life sciences experts Leo Fitz (Iain De Caestecker) and Jemma Simmons (Elizabeth Henstridge). The series was launched at Comic Con 2013 before fans of the MCU. Even so, as a novel product with limited character connections to the film franchise, additional methods may have been required to promote the series. The following analysis of a group interview explores the role of on- and off-screen buddy banter as a means to publicize the series in a convergent media environment.

Method

A YouTube video featuring all members of the cast of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* conducted at the time of the series launch is selected and user responses analysed with thematic analysis. Comments are transcribed and tabulated according to username, time (since posting) and remark. Any conversation between posters is also noted. Inductive category development (Mayring 2000) is adopted to allow categories to emerge from the data. This involved a three-step process. First, all comments are summarized into one/two word statements. These statements were then grouped into subcategories and finally into broader thematic categories. Categorization is conducted independently by both authors and compared for final categorizing.

Summary of video

The TVLine video chosen for the case study was uploaded by @HOLLYWOOD on 20 July 2013. Since then, it has received more than 180,000 views and 1248 likes. The interviewer, Megan Masters, sits on a large lounge chair, while the six main cast members are squashed up on a couch. The close proximity of the actors indicates immediately to audiences that they have already bonded, as mentioned by one user; ‘I kinda like the fact that they are sitting very close to each other. I also like the chemistry between the cast’ (Comment 75). Throughout the interview the actors speak over each other as they laugh and tell stories.

Masters begins the interview by stating; ‘I kind of feel like I’m in the presence of newly inducted Comic-Con royalty’. In response Dalton states; ‘That’s the way to start an interview’ and from that point on the banter begins. Humour is used frequently throughout the interview, with an emphasis on the closeness of the team. For example, Bennet states; ‘the stuff when we’re all in it, and it’s like teamwork! That’s the most exciting’. Within the group context, the actors also highlight individual dynamics between characters. At one point, De Caestecker looks at Dalton, and states; ‘There’s a lot of conflicts and different dynamics’, to which Dalton responds with a smirk ‘I mean not with us’. De Caestecker carries on the banter stating; ‘Not with me and him of course’. Wen and Bennet join in, referring to the sexual tension between them. Bennet refers to the actors’ names, Iain and Brett, rather than the characters that they were originally referring to.

Masters then asks the actors to describe the character of the person to their right. Wen describes De Caestecker’s character as being ‘cute’. De Caestecker sarcastically states; ‘She’s hitting the nail right on the head there’. As Henstridge finishes her

description of Dalton’s character, Wen adds that he has ‘amazing cheekbones’ and Henstridge agrees. Gregg states; ‘He has actually killed several people with those cheekbones’. Wen concurs and adds ‘or with the hair’. The banter continues between the actors and Wen and Dalton flick their hair. The video ends with the cast laughing.

Comments analysis

As of June 2015, 145 comments have been uploaded to the platform, with a total of 139 included in analysis. Comments not in English and Google+ likes are excluded from analysis. Comments are organized into four main categories: ‘buddy banter’, ‘imagined romance’, ‘fandom’ and ‘interview and other’. 76 comments reflect discussion related to ‘fandom’ of actors and/or the series, ‘buddy banter’ received 35 comments, with ‘imagined romance’ and ‘interview and other’ receiving eleven and seventeen comments, respectively. Comments are summarized in Table 2 below.

Categories	Frequency
Fandom	
Character/actor comparison	5
Fan of actors – Ming-Na’s age	9
Fan of actors	39
Reference to series	23
Subtotal	76
Buddy banter	
Banter	7
Behaviour	12

General	16
Subtotal	35
Imagined romance	
Romance between actors to reflect characters	5
Reference to character romance	6
Subtotal	11
Interview and other	
Reference to interviewer/general	4
Other	13
Subtotal	17
Total	139

Table 2: Comment Analysis of TV Line interview 20 July 2013.

Of the two largest categories, comments focused on ‘fandom’ are classified into four subcategories. Five comments related to comparisons between characters and actors, while expression of fandom towards actors in general is the most prevalent (39), with a small section dedicated to discussion of actor Ming-Na Wen’s age (9). A total of 23 comments discuss the series, referencing plot points or expressing opinions about the quality of the series. ‘Buddy banter’ is subcategorized according to reports of fan observation of actor interactions. Seven comments refer to verbal banter, with observation of body language and behavior amounting to twelve, and general observations to sixteen of the total count, respectively.

‘Imagined romance’ engages with the fluidity of identity recognition between actor and characters, with five users expressing a desire for actors to reflect the romantic pairings of their characters, while six reference romance between characters only. Of the remaining comments, four reference the interviewer, with thirteen classified into the ‘other’ category.

Online reaction to buddy banter

The viewer comments suggest that the buddy banter is hugely significant in engaging the audience and creating enthusiasm towards the cast and the series. Examples of ‘buddy banter’ behavioural comments include:

Comment 34

laughed through [*sic*] the video. love these guys their [*sic*] so funny – especially Ming-Na, I just love her jokes and those humorous acts during others speaking...

Comment 35

Is it just me or did Iain keep looking at Elizabeth’s lips? Not saying anything is actually going on, but...

Both comments refer to physical actions of the actors and the dynamic. Others refer to the conversation between the actors such as:

Comment 16

LMBO!! he has killed a few people with those cheekbones and the hair!! Love this cast!! perfect casting [*sic*]

Comment 62

The ending when they all complement Brett's look is hilarious. He's indeed the most beautiful [*sic*] man on the planet so I'm not arguing ;-)

This is evidence of how important banter is to providing entertaining interviews. The following remarks were categorized as general buddy banter appreciation:

Comment 65

love [*sic*] how they genuinely seem to get on well :) is lovely to see

Comment 72

I feel like they are a family. :)

Comment 133

Oh man, I love this cast already. I'm so excited to watch how they work together on the show!

These comments show fan enjoyment of the video overall and the perceived dynamic of the cast. Evidently, buddy banter is a useful technique in crafting the personas of actors and promoting a series or film. Other statements relate directly to the series:

Comment 50

when [*sic*] is the season 2??

Comment 90

I'm getting really excited for this show!

These are the types of responses the studios would be seeking, as the focus is on the show. However, many remarks related specifically to actor fandom such as this conversation between fans about Wen:

Comment 55

Ming-Na always plays these tense, kind of mean, tough characters. Meanwhile in real life she's this happy-go-lucky funny, sweet person...

Comment 56

She's just so nice and fun! It's great to have someone like that in alot [*sic*] of my fandoms. Disney, Stargate, and now Marvel!!

As mentioned, many people also made reference to Wen's age and drew comparisons between her character and persona. At times, fans (and the cast) would conflate actors and characters, using both their real names and character names. This happens regularly in fandom, but more so in this context with so many unknown actors.

Many also made references to romances. This included character romances and wanting a romance between the actors to reflect the character dynamics. For example:

Comment 14

#skyeward Skye keeps looking at Ward and smiling!!!!

Comment 25

Brett and Chloe should date in real life!!

As fans of a new series, it is likely many viewers were unaware that Dalton is married. However, the on-screen romance and off-screen banter seems to be creating the notion of a real-life romance between Dalton and Bennet. This can work in favour of a series or film, as it generates discussion. Ultimately, viewer comments demonstrate a predominantly positive reaction to the video and the series. However, buddy banter is not simply a promotional tool for a series or film, but works as publicity and a branding outlet for individual celebrities.

Impact of buddy banter

The key factors of buddy banter and bonding in this video is the way the cast looks at each other, their physical interaction, their body language, and their banter being well timed. Although this interview took place just after the pilot was released, it is perceived by audiences that they have already created a close bond, as is evident in the fan comments. One user stating; 'I can see all of them becoming best friends over the next few years of the show... (I predict there will be many) :D' (Comment 131). In terms of promoting the television series, this video helps to show fans what the actors are like. Other than Gregg, the cast is new to Marvel fans. This video helps build a playful persona for the actors and the perception of a team, reflecting the essence of the series. Furthermore, the video provides extra entertainment for those

watching it later as archived footage. Those discovering the video after watching some of the series were surprised to find how different the actors are to their characters. To add authenticity to the on-screen team, the off-screen cast seemed to emphasize their closeness through humour and body language.

Some of the key perceptions expressed about the individual actors in the comments is that Wen differs most to her character and Dalton has a lot more charisma than his character. Overall, the comments showed that the audience was entertained by the humorous banter between the actors and this reflected well on the individuals. The celebrity persona is built from public appearances, but is also formed by the way the celebrity wants to portray themselves. Thus, it may not be realistic, but it is perceived as 'authentic' by fans.

Their buddy banter is strong within the group dynamic, however, as suggested by the female cast's discussion of 'sexual tension' in the TVLine interview; there is a particular bromance between Dalton and De Caestecker. This was emphasized in particular on 3 March 2015, when De Caestecker, Dalton and Henstridge appeared on the *Larry King Now* web series. After a series of comments from De Caestecker relating to Dalton's physique and calling him an Adonis, Henstridge states; 'There's the chemistry'. Dalton adds; 'We're best friends in real life'. King eventually reacts to De Caestecker's constant references to Dalton's appearance; 'Let's reveal it [...] You have a thing for Brett'. De Caestecker laughs and responds; 'I do yeah, this is why we're here'. Dalton follows up with; 'We have a bromance'.

Dalton and De Caestecker's bromance has developed since this interview, with the shipped name (romantic pairings denoted by conjoined names) Witz emerging online (IMBrettDalton 2015). While the origin of the name is unclear, the actors have embraced it. Bennet makes a reference to 'Witz' in a 2014 interview (Firth 2014) and Dalton has actively promoted the term through Facebook stating; 'Looks like #Witz is the new #Skyward' (Brett Dalton's Facebook Page 2015). Witz and a variation of the name 'Fawd', are also mentioned by Dalton at Florida Supercorn (2015). In response to a fan question, Dalton states he would kiss Hunter, marry 'Ian' and kill Coulson. The question had referred to characters, yet Dalton mentions the actor's real name, stating he and Ian were 'destined to be together'. The question and cheers from the audience are suggestive of how interested fans are in bromances. However, Dalton's reference to the hashtags of their shipped names is also indicative of his promotional intentions.

Buddy banter: Audience perception and promotion

Buddy banter is not gender restrictive, however, many fans do look for romances in these situations, especially if their characters have sexual tension or are romantically involved on-screen. The TVLine interview presents various iterations of male/male, female/male and group interactions, through which the desire to perform (from the perspective of the actors) and perceive (from the perspective of the audience) suggested 'pairings' is revealed. The nature of such pairings is subtle yet, in its engagement with contemporary observations of heteronormative narratives and gendered cultural norms, significant and illuminating of audiences' desired readings.

At first glance, the positioning of the cast in alternating gender order appears a practical attempt to evenly distribute the gender mix. Banter between cast members is playful and collegial, and any expression of heterosexual desire is clearly framed in jest. Wen's reference to Dalton's 'cheek bones', while suggestive of heteronormative attraction, is quickly offset by similar comments from the rest of the cast and the visual gag of 'hair flicking'. Wen's original comment is thus clearly not a declaration of heterosexual attraction, but a common point of mirth. If explicit references are made, it is to the homosocial bromance between Dalton and De Caestecker, with Bennet's emphasis of the 'sexual tension' between the actors. Thus while the cast as a whole displays elements of banter associated with heterosexual attraction and flirtation, it is indicative a group dynamic in which the topic of conversation focuses on Dalton's appearance as a means to facilitate interaction, rather than on expressions of actual desire.

Nonetheless, audience comments reflected a desire to identify heterosexual romantic pairings, noting first the positioning of the actors as a reflection of suggested romance between the characters and cast, evidenced by the first comment 'Just sit all the couples together' (Comment 1). Additionally, audience observation of actor behaviour tended towards descriptions that reinforced a romantic view, either between actors '[...] Iain sort of gazes at Elizabeth [...]' (Comment 15) or through the filter of character intimacy: '[...] I ship fitzsimmons and skyeward [...]' (Comment 33). This is suggestive of an audience who desire to, and take pleasure in, reading the banter between genders as evidence of romantic pairings, while simultaneously perpetuating character dynamics.

Conceptually, this supports a view of ‘heterocentrism’ (Boyle and Berridge 2014: 355) in which intimacy leads to the ‘naturalized ‘given’’ (DeAngelis 2014: 2) of romantic conclusions, reflected both in societal expectation and narrative convention. Thus, the audience anticipates a narrative trajectory towards ‘hetero-romance’ (Boyle and Berridge 2014: 355), and in the process, reaffirms the dominant cultural expectation of heterosexual coupling. Practically, a reading of the cast as heterosexual pairs is potentially a consequence of the display of heteronormative buddy banter to subconsciously attenuate the homosocial intimacy of Dalton and De Caestecker’s bromance. The heterosexual credentials of both actors are established by constructing them as attractive figures in the eyes of the female cast. The addition of imagined or actual flirtatious interaction between Dalton and Bennet, and De Caestecker and Henstridge solidifies their respective heterosexuality, rendering their declarations of homosocial intimacy within ‘safe’ heteronormal confines. Bennet’s ‘sexual tension’ comment regarding Dalton and De Caestecker is generally reserved for male/female characters. Foregrounding the ‘tension’ at once acknowledges, but humorously and definitively disavows, any potentiality of homosexuality therein reasserting a heterocentric view.

Additionally, replicating character-based romantic subtext in the ‘real’-world scenario of a press interview encourages audiences to ‘ship’ (construct romantic pairings of) characters, thereby generating a more substantial popular culture footprint. While the Marvel universe may be a cultural monolith, the series (at the time of recording) was most certainly not. Establishing the character-actor dyads as ‘slash pairings’ (Busse and Lothian 2009) better facilitates a path to cementing the cult status of the characters, and by extension of the series.

By bringing together casts that are able to create the perception of a bond, Marvel capitalizes on the appeal of celebrity interactions to capture transient audience attention in a convergent media environment. As is evident in the case study, the buddy banter more easily evokes fan responses relating to the chemistry between the celebrities. Comments relate to the cast as a whole, character couples, interaction between actors, and their excitement towards watching the series. Thus, viewers are encouraged to not only become fans of the series, but also the actors, which ensure a stronger sense of audience loyalty. Furthermore, the entertainment value of these videos can help to reach a wider audience and promote the series.

Conclusion

Garnering attention for new products in a media-saturated convergent environment can prove challenging for producers seeking to capture the imagination of inattentive audiences. Despite originating from the entertainment powerhouse that is Marvel Studios, the television series *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* presented audiences with unfamiliar characters in a hitherto little explored section of the MCU.

As such, promotion of the series in the lead-up to its premiere was strategic. It was launched at Comic Con 2013 to a receptive and friendly audience of Marvel fans. Cast participation at interviews held during the convention ensured exposure at the time, while online content distribution increased spatial and temporal audience access. This constructs the interview itself as a marketing device, but also an independent form of entertainment that persists long after its promotional function is served. Concurrently, the conduct of the cast during these interviews is a contributing factor

to audience appeal, regardless of their prior attachment to the Marvel universe. While audience comments most frequently highlighted fandom of individual actors and discussion of the series, this was closely followed by observation and impressions of the interaction between actors. This suggests audiences derive a level of enjoyment from witnessing these interactions – especially when fitting them within the schema of on- and off-screen dynamics – and points to the possibility of celebrity interactions as a promotional device. As these are results of one case study only, further research is required to fully elucidate the impact of cast interactions on audience attraction to television series.

The term ‘buddy banter’ is suggested as a means to illustrate interactions within a mixed-gender group dynamic. Analysis of audience comments reveals buddy banter to be a useful tool to generate interest in the series. However, responses tend to favour the reading of close friendships as heterosexual couples. This suggests the intricacies of gender in the buddy banter of celebrity group interaction, and audience perceptions of intra-gender dynamics, are areas for further investigation. Additionally, the impact of shifting character dynamics on subsequent cast interaction in ongoing promotion for the series, which is currently entering its third season, will be the focus of future research.

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