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***SONIC THE HEDGEHOG: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON EVOLVING PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON ARTISTIC LICENSE***

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**Abstract:** Audiences have always been perceived as passive receptacles to content, especially films, music, and television. However, there has been a noticeable shift in audience behavior that has contributed to a change in this perception. Consumers are now using social media as an intermediary platform to voice their reactions. Producers of art, like brands, are now taking market demands into serious consideration and turning cinema and TV content into a commodity. This study aims to look at the evolution in audience behavior towards media content and the effects these changes have on artistic license by mainly considering the example of *Sonic the Hedgehog* among others. This exploratory research will study this phenomenon and how it can be harmful to artistic license by conducting a discourse analysis of the public's reactions to the initial character design of *Sonic the Hedgehog*.

**Keywords:** Sonic the Hedgehog, Intermediary Platforms, Social Media, Audience Passivity, Audience Behaviour, Commodification, Participatory Culture

There was a time in the history of mass media, not too long ago, when the word 'audience' conjured to mind J. R. Eyerman's iconic photograph on the cover of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), which captured a group of spectators gazing at the screen through anaglyph glasses. This passive and homogenized audience spends an enormous amount of time *receiving* content and messages from various media channels such as cinema and television, without really questioning the validity of the information provided or challenging the ideas presented. While 'feedback' has always been and continues to be the cornerstone of communication between producers and consumers, the relationship between these two entities has been unilateral, to say the least.

Over the decades, however, there has been a significant shift in audience behavior, as observed by media theorists such as Stuart Hall, Henry Jenkins, and Jay Blumler. Audience participation has emerged and manifested itself in numerous forms, with the effect that spectators have increasingly grown more active in the way

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they decode and create personalized meanings from the proffered content. The rise of new technologies in the sectors of communication, computing, and content, along with the popularization of the Internet, has played a crucial role not only in enabling fresh forms of content to surface, but also in the evolution of audiences' response and engagement with a particular media production. Today, consumers are not simply *receiving*; they are demanding content that is in tandem with their vision and fulfils their expectations, exerting an unprecedented degree of power and control over the content of films, television shows, and even advertisements. How, one might wonder, are they making their voices heard loud enough for producers to take notice? The answer is quite a no-brainer: social media.

Functioning as an intermediary platform, social media allows consumers from all over the world to express their opinions, and when it comes to popular culture, the world collectively has enough to say to render the creation of alternate dimensions of content more fine-tuned to individual tastes than the original versions, a reality. Through the uninhibited use of public forums like Twitter, Face book, Reddit, and YouTube, consumers can now come together as a unified entity, or as factions of unified entities, to consolidate information, share their thoughts, and

ensure that their views and criticisms are well-recorded.

In order to explore this evolving phenomenon of participatory culture in the context of today's audience and reflect on its possible impact on the artistic license of creators, this paper will focus on the rather recent contention following the trailer launch of the cinematic rendition of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, in which online audiences expressed disapproval and even outrage over the "flaws" in Sonic's character design. The criticism was aimed at the stark differences between the original character design, as seen in the video game, and the reanimated one used in the film, labeled by many as "grotesque". After days of derisive Tweeting and relentless hash-tagging on the aforementioned forums, the producers, to the world's surprise, succumbed to the pressure and promised to release a new trailer with the re-reanimated design, this time more in sync with the audience's vision of the character.

This instance in particular, though not isolated by any means, therefore becomes a prime example of participatory culture. Keeping in mind the growing pervasiveness of this phenomenon due to steady developments in technological convergence, this paper seeks to perform a discourse analysis by exploring the question of whether such a culture poses a threat to artistic integrity and creative license, as the continuous pacification of audience demand

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guarantees commercial success for producers, thus endangering the integration of fresh perspectives in the mainstream sphere and resulting in further commodification of art.

In 2006, Henry Jenkins coined the term ‘participatory culture’ to explain the maturation of audiences from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ consumers. According to him, media ecology has been hybridized due to the recent advancements in the technological arena coupled with the proliferation of the Internet. The ascent of intermediary platforms such as social media allows audiences to voice their opinions, concerns, and demands. Apart from this, audiences are also at the core of user-generated content that dominates new media, thus making them active consumers, or ‘prosumers’.

From Jenkins’ ideas on participatory culture and Alvin Toffler’s coinage of ‘prosumers’ stems Dr. Axel Bruns’ theory of ‘produsage’. He explains that *producers* engage in activities that are distinct from traditional forms of content production. They build on existing material in the pursuit for better content. The rise of *producers* marks the blurring of the lines between producers and consumers, and this evolution in audience behavior has been made possible through the emergence of new technologies, which grants access to information, facilitates the exchange of

knowledge, and assists in the process of content production.

This remarkable shift in audience behavior from passivity and mere spectatorship to an active involvement in the creative process of media production has been observed not merely in the field of academia but also by the popular press. In the same year that Jenkins invented the term ‘participatory culture’, *Time* magazine named ‘You’ as its Person of the Year, recognizing the power of the people to effect social and political change in the world through media.

‘Produsage’, a portmanteau of the words *production* and *usage*, can be seen in force when one looks at the collaborative user-generated content that constitutes the majority of YouTube, Wikipedia, Vimeo, Twitter, and Reddit. In the ongoing progression of such prod usage, there are certain instances of audiences bringing about a change in the production process of media content by exercising their capacity as *producers* that demand our attention. Foremost is the case of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, a long-running sitcom produced by Fox Entertainment Group. In May 2018, the company decided to cancel the show months prior to the release of its sixth season, sending its sizeable fan base into a frenzy of sorts. It only took an entire day of Tweeting and relentlessly reaching out to various streaming authorities on the part of the audience, not to mention a change.org

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petition signed by approximately 50,000 people, for the NBC network to pick up the Golden Globe Award-winning show and give it a new lease of life.

Another notable example in popular culture wherein one finds produsage in effect is the way audiences have pushed Unicode for improved representation in Emojis. On almost a daily basis, a number of Tweets from consumers keep software developers on their toes with consistent demands of racial and cultural diversity as well as the inclusion of minorities. *Producers* have been observed drafting entire proposals in order to get their point across to Unicode. In this manner, they have managed to mould existing material in a bid for better, more progressive content, and it is courtesy of this phenomenon that users around the world are able to access emojis that include diverse races and LGBTQA+ representations.

But perhaps few cases of participatory culture in action provide as fecund a ground for analysis on the subject as that of *Sonic the Hedgehog*. When Paramount first released the trailer for the film in April 2019, fans were outraged at Sonic's character design. The new look did not match up to its original cartoonish image. The human teeth, overtly pointed nose, and freakishly long legs were only a few among the plethora of flaws that were criticized heavily. Simply put, the redesign was a disastrous imitation of the original,

and in the virtual equivalent of a cosmic day, Sonic became the raw material for countless memes, Tweets, and YouTube reaction videos.

Of course, Hollywood production giant Paramount immediately took note of the audience's unanimous disapproval of their product, and not long after, conveyed recognition of their opinions via the director, Jeff Fowler, Tweeting the following: "Thank you for the support. And the criticism. The message is loud and clear; you aren't happy with the design and you want changes. It's going to happen. Everyone at Paramount and Sega are fully committed to making this character the best he can be," accompanied with the hashtags, "sonicmovie" and "gottafixfast". They released an edited version of the trailer in November, and this time, the design was considerably more in line with the vision expected by the audience.

In this way, the audience, through active participation on intermediary platforms, have transformed into sources of input considered valuable and practical by the producers themselves, thus rendering the transition from consumers to *producers* complete. The reaction to the first look of the film and Paramount's urgent counter-response can be understood in what Costello and Moore (p. 140) call the potential for online communities to produce "unified centers of resistance" to influence

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the “global industries of cultural production”.

This case therefore becomes a clear example of the power wielded by previously-deemed-passive audiences to incite changes in existing content, a power given to them by social media and its infinite possibilities. However, *producers* engaging almost directly with the treatment of material which does not, at this point in the process, belong to them, with the basic purpose of expressing their sincerest opinions and the underlying hope of satiating their personal demand, when met with producers conceding to these demands for the overt purpose of pleasing their viewers and the underlying vision of multiplying their personal profits, begs the question of how the integrity of creative license is hindered along the way.

Because producers are able to collaborate directly with *producers*, who are ultimately useful to them as consumers, and churn out commodities under the guise of media content that they *know* will sell far and wide, creators are decreasingly incentivized to express untried ideas and explore different perspectives and instead encouraged to pursue time-tested formulae. This is the same logic behind the legacy of monolithic narratives evident in most genre films, the commercial effectiveness of which has resulted in a cinematic culture of remakes, sequels, prequels, trilogies, and every possible variation of the same

fundamental plotline, leaving the same audience wanting for originality.

This culture has engendered innumerable instances of artistic censorship at the hands of the capitalist machine that is the production company, and is posing a threat for artists across media, whose liberties are compromised and labor is commodified to be exchanged for consumer satisfaction, AKA, money. Thus, the *producers'* power of influence over producers and the market favors repetition and routine over creativity. When producers who are in it for the money have a clear idea of what the market wants, there is little need for them to produce anything else, since profits are already guaranteed. For example, E.L James milked profits from the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (and subsequently, film) series while it was selling like hotcakes by releasing the same story but from the perspective of the titular character, Mr. Christian Grey.

While examples such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Emoji Diversity* are on the positive side of the coin in the discussion of ‘*produsage*’, it would be wrong not to acknowledge the looming shadow of its potential to strip away artistic license for the preservation of economic prosperity. By tracking the ongoing evolution of this phenomenon and analyzing its effects, one might come to the conclusion that: *a.)* Audiences are no longer passive, powerless spectators. *b.)* Producers of art, like brands,

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are now taking market demand into serious consideration and turning cinema into a commodity. c.) Art, like any tangible product, is being created for the purpose of increasing profits rather than as an unrestrained means of self-expression. The scope of this study is, therefore, as infinite as the media that has catalyzed it, and should not be dismissed without a watchful eye on the big picture.

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