Melanie E.S. Kohnen, The Experience Economy of TV Promotion at San Diego Comic-Con
Published as “online first” version in International Journal of Cultural Studies, July 2020,
https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920935888

Abstract
This essay analyzes the promotional function of pop-up branded entertainment experiences during San Diego Comic-Con. I argue that these activations are part of the experience economy, in which affect-driven branded experiences in physical spaces and their mediation on social media become central elements of consumption. Through an analysis of several case studies, I reveal how three trends—the media industry’s recognition of fans’ importance, the development of experiential marketing, and the rise of immersive theater—crystallize in the form of the SDCC activation, making it a premiere site for understanding interactions between Hollywood and fandom in the context of life in brand cultures. Overall, I consider the micro- and macro-levels of activations—moving from parsing entertainment companies’ drive to create immersive, interactive experiences and fans’ engagement with them to the larger context of industry-fan relationships—as significant strands in cultural debates around brands and media consumption.

Keywords: San Diego Comic-Con, TV industry, fandom, marketing, immersive theater, experience economy, branding

Introduction
At San Diego Comic-Con 2019, Amazon Studios hired the marketing agency Tool of North America to turn a 60,000 square foot parking lot into an immersive environment to promote new series *Carnival Row*, *The Boys*, and *The Expanse*. Three separate areas—resembling a street in a
fantasy version of Victorian London, an electronics store, and an alien planet--clustered around a central forty-foot tower whose multi-level stages featured brief skits from all three programs [Figure 1].

Figure 1. Amazon Studios’ VIP Fan Party promoting *Carnival Row*.
Source: Photo by the author.

Amazon and Tool of North America also hosted VIP-style parties at night, open to 300 fans who enjoyed free cocktails, gourmet food, and the world premiere of each show. Fans lined up for hours each day to immerse themselves in new televisual worlds and take away swag like travel mugs and T-shirts. Amazon’s promotional playground took two weeks to construct and vanished after Comic-Con concluded. Amazon was in good company—NBC, FX, Epix, and other entertainment corporations built a total of nineteen so-called “activations,” illustrating a shift toward immersive experiences at the core of location-based media promotion.

This essay analyzes the promotional function of pop-up branded entertainment experiences during San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) and their connection to the experience economy. Taking the form of restaurant take-overs, costume exhibits, and mini-theme parks,
these entertainment experiences promote TV shows and films during the four days of SDCC, a yearly convention that attracts 150,000 attendees and is a key venue for Hollywood’s direct engagement with fans. While the panels, autograph sessions, and merchandise inside the convention center are only accessible with an elusive and expensive ticket, “activations” or “offsites,” as industry and fans respectively call these pop-ups, do not charge admission. Fans do not pay any money to participate in offsites, but they pay by spending time waiting in line and surrendering their demographic information, as more and more offsites require signing up with names and email addresses at the entrance. I argue that activations are part of the experience economy, in which affect-driven branded experiences in physical spaces and their mediation on social media become central elements of consumption (Pine and Gilmore 2011, Cahar and Angus 2018). While the entertainment industry has long sold experiences in the form of film and TV, the experience economy of activations takes this strategy a step further through the design of immersive physical sites with a high degree of diegetic verisimilitude. I combine my on-site observations with theories of experiential marketing and immersive theater to expand existing scholarship in media industry and fan studies to analyze why media companies spend large sums of money on ephemeral physical structures, develop scripts, and hire actors, and why fans spend hours in line to participate in an experience that usually lasts less than fifteen minutes.

Over the last ten years, offsites have become more elaborate in scale and scope. The proliferation of offsites goes hand-in-hand with the increasing popularity of SDCC. Founded as comics gathering in 1970, SDCC has become the most important comics and entertainment convention in North America. The non-profit organization Comic-Con International hosts SDCC for four days each July. Tickets and hotel rooms sell out in less than an hour, and an entire blogging culture has developed around strategies for gaining access to SDCC (Kohnen 2019).
While official Comic-Con events take place in the convention center, unofficial offsites have sprawled through the neighboring Gaslamp Quarter; in 2019, nineteen offsites incorporated experiential marketing to promote films or TV (this number does not include parties, meet-ups, or concerts). In other words, Hollywood’s promotional efforts are not restricted to the official convention, but spill over into a ten-block radius around the convention center. SDCC’s growing popularity mirrors the mainstreaming of geek culture in general, a process during which the media industry has paid increasing attention to fans as their most loyal and profitable audiences (Hanna 2019, Jenkins 2008, Scott 2019, Stanfill 2019, Stein 2015). This “discovery” of fans as an important target market is partially a result of fragmented audiences that consume media across a variety of digital platforms. I argue that experiential marketing, with its emphasis on championing consumers’ enthusiasm, has also played a significant role in reshaping the media industry’s attitudes towards fans. In other words, the media industry’s increasing focus on fans and the growth of experiential marketing are mutually constitutive events.

Rather than argue that offsites are examples of how the entertainment industry exploits fans’ attention, my aim is to unpack both sides’ motivations to understand better how industry-fan relations unfold in physical sites like SDCC and how these interactions are embedded in the experience economy. I concur with Sarah Banet-Weiser’s assessment that binaries like empowerment/exploitation or commercial/non-commercial are too reductive to capture life in brand cultures, of which the experience economy is a central part (11, 215). In brand cultures, brands become anchors for social relationships and individual identities; they structure the stories we tell ourselves about the world (4). As Banet-Weiser argues, our current cultural moment is characterized by ambivalence because “economic imperatives and ‘authenticity’ are expressed and experienced simultaneously” (5). Offsites are spaces in which this ambivalence plays out.
Both industry professionals and fans negotiate the overlaps of genuinely felt experience and constraints imposed by the media industry’s pursuit of profit. Ultimately, activations are specific instances of larger cultural dynamics in which “a brand offers symbolic resources and builds social spaces that structure the participatory incorporation of brands into cultural life” (Cahar and Angus, 180). The centrality of brands to the formation of identity and experience deserves careful attention, not dismissal. Recognizing the deep imbrication of brands and culture, I follow Sarah Banet-Weiser in taking seriously the genuinely felt investments that both marketers and fans bring to activations while still recognizing the uneven power dynamics between both groups (14).

Consequently, I introduce theories of experiential marketing and immersive theater to expand existing scholarship about industry-fan relationships. Marketing scholars and professionals believe that embedding consumers in memorable experiences is the key to successful promotion (Batat 2019, Pine and Gilmore 2011, Schmitt 1999). In order to facilitate memorable experiences, marketers often draw on techniques developed in immersive theater, which emphasizes the interactive staging of plays in sprawling physical spaces. Theater companies like Punchdrunk put on choose-your-own-adventure style performances in which spectators find their own path through, for example, a version of Macbeth set in the 1930s (Punchdrunk 2019). Joey Richter of Tin Can Bros, the improv troupe that developed the theatrical portion of the 2019 Brooklyn Nine-Nine offsite, referred to their creation as “immersive theatre slash escape room activation for fans of the 99” (Richter 2019). The proliferation of experiential marketing and immersive theater explains the rise of interactive activations at SDCC and illustrates marketers’ attempts to catch fans’ attention in an environment saturated with promotional messages. All three trends—the media industry’s recognition of fans’ importance,
the development of experiential marketing, and the rise of immersive theater—crystallize in the form of the SDCC offsite, making it into a premiere site for understanding interactions between Hollywood and fandom in the context of life in brand cultures.

My method combines textual analysis, interviews, and on-site research. I analyze trade press reports, marketing agency websites, Instagram, Twitter, and blog posts, and interviews I conducted with marketers. I incorporate “Spectator-Participation-as-Research” approaches, which theater scholar Rose Biggin defines as “a methodology in which writers draw on first-person accounts of their own experience as audience members alongside more theoretical writing” (3). My attendance of SDCC offsites between 2013-19 informs my overall analysis, and specifically my account of the 2019 *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* activation. I am also inspired by Heather Urbanski’s analysis of Disney Parks, in which she uses “personal reflections [that] are processed through an analytical lens” (Urbanski 2018). My analysis weaves together scholarship in experiential marketing, fan studies, immersive theater, and media industry studies.

To conclude this discussion of methods, two notes on terminology. First, I use “industry” and “fans” as short-hands. By “industry,” I mean TV and film companies, their in-house marketing staff, and experiential marketing firms. I use “fan” as general term for SDCC attendees to underline that in the eyes of the industry, all attendees are fans—a perception which speaks to the mainstreaming of fandom. In a divergence from fan studies’ definitions of fans as people who follow a particular entertainment property, the industry’s conflation of attendees and fans emphasizes a general passionate attitude toward interacting with media. Consumption is key to this attitude: the industry considers almost anyone who consumes media as a potential fan. Someone who invests the time and money to attend SDCC counts as a fan from the industry’s standpoint (Gilbert 2018). Second, industry and fans use different terms to describe branded
entertainment experiences, namely “activations” vs. “offsites.” The industry term “activation” reflects the centrality of interactivity and experience in current marketing discourse. The term also suggests that fans are activated in the service of promotion. Aaron Gaeir, founder and CEO of the marketing agency Grandesign remarks that “98 percent of attendees take photos or videos of their experiences and post them to their network. Brands can generate billions of impressions on an activation that brings in 20 or 30,000 visitors. It’s a giant multiplier” (qtd. in Salkowitz 2018). In other words, fans are activated as unpaid brand ambassadors who extend their in-person experience into the realm of social media. In contrast to the industry term “activation,” fans use the term “offsite.” This term suggests that an event takes place “offsite” or away from official SDCC programming. “Offsite” also implies that these events exist as an add-on to the Comic-Con experience. Even as offsites have moved closer to the center of SDCC attendees’ attention due to their increase in numbers and scale, the term “offsite” has stuck.

In the following sections, I first generate an analytical framework based on scholarship in marketing and immersive theater to unpack the entertainment industry and fans’ converging and diverging investments in offsites. I continue with an analysis of my experience at the 2019 offsite for NBC’s sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013--) in connection with the history of SDCC activations. I use this analysis to expand scholarship on transmedia promotion, theme parks, and haptic fandom. The final section considers tensions between industry and fans around the price of surrendering personal information in exchange for swag and entering offsites. I conclude with reflections on how offsites and the experience economy relate to life in brand cultures.

Before I move on, a brief caveat. Experiential promotion is not unique to Comic-Con. Indeed, one of the largest activations to date is HBO’s take-over of a ghost town during SXSW 2018 to promote the drama *Westworld*. The activation took five weeks to construct and featured
60 actors, 440 lines of script, and 4,000 attendees (Jarvey 2018). Activations have become a staple at events like SXSW and New York Comic-Con, and branded pop-ups have appeared across the U.S. and at “Secret Cinema” events in the UK (Pett 2016). I focus on SDCC for two reasons. First, media industry professionals single out SDCC as key site for experience-driven promotion. Seth Bardacke of Grandesign observes that SDCC “is the epicenter of brand activations in the country,” crediting fans as “they’re the ones that create the environment and the sell-outs” (qtd in MacDonald 2019a). Marketing analyst Dan Ortiz even claims “[e]xperiential marketing was practically birthed at SDCC” (Ortiz 2018). Second, I have attended SDCC every year since 2013 and participated in numerous offsites. My rich on-the-ground experience allows me to fill in scholarly theory and trade press reports with details based on first-hand observations of waiting in line and going through offsites.

Activations and the Experience Economy

"The deeper an audience can get into a world of a show, the more they like to talk about it.”
Mike Benson, Head of Amazon Marketing (qtd. in Nieva 2019)

At SDCC, the names of TV shows, movies, networks, and studios are omnipresent, plastered on buildings with giant wrap-around banners and prominently displayed on activations [Figure 2].
The public-facing discourse about activations encourages fans to think of studios and networks as “authors,” which obscures the intermediaries that actually create activations, namely marketing agencies, event producers, and theater companies. The 2019 Amazon activation involved the following people and companies: the marketing agency Tool of North America, event producers Benchmark Productions and We are Webb, fabrication company Populate Creative, and AV creators Supertight, plus a number of freelance 3D motion designers and visual artists (Hawthorne 2019a). In addition, 43 actors populated the activation under the direction of Ross Tipograph, KJ Knies, and Tom Salamon, all of whom work in immersive theater; this list does not include other staff like security, food workers, clean-up and construction crews, stage managers, and costumers (Hawthorne 2019b). The importance of considering activations through the lenses of experiential marketing and immersive theater becomes apparent in this list of people, all of whom work in those fields. For ease of understanding, I refer to activations by the
name of the TV show or film they promote, but my analysis concentrates on intermediaries like marketing agencies and theater producers as activation creators.

Reading trade press coverage of activations, certain terms repeat frequently: experience, immersive, interactive. From the early days of experiential marketing, these terms have shaped the field. M. B. Holbrook and E.C. Hirschman’s 1982 essay “The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun” constitutes a first step toward placing an emotional, experience-based rather than a rational, information-driven appeal at the center of marketing strategies. It is only in the late 1990s, however, that experiential marketing takes off. Bernd Schmitt’s “Experiential Marketing” (1999) and economists B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore’s 1999 book The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage (1999, 2011) sketch out core principles that have endured over time. Schmitt stresses that a memorable, affecting experience persuades consumers to purchase goods: “[e]xperiences provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational values,” he writes (57). Pine and Gilmore argue that in contemporary society, the sale of memorable experiences supersedes the sale of goods and services: “experiences represent the basis of economic activity” (xix, 2011). They observe that “[c]ompanies stage an experience whenever they engage customers, connecting with them in a personal, memorable way” (5). These memorable experiences most successfully take place in physical spaces; Pine and Gilmore single out Build-a-Bear Workshop as an early example of the experience economy (27). Experiential marketers embrace Pine and Gilmore’s insistence on the importance of in-person experience as incentive for consumption. In Experiential Marketing: Consumer Behavior, Customer Experience, and the 7Es, marketing scholar and professional Wided Batat writes that brands “aspire to offer their customers a positive, memorable, emotionally charged, and unforgettable experience” (Batat 2019, 43).
Similarly, Kerry Smith and Dan Hanover state in *Experiential Marketing: Secrets, Strategies, and Success Stories from the World’s Greatest Brands*: “In its simplest form, experiential marketing is nothing more than a highly evolved form of corporate storytelling” (2016, 2). Marketing scholars and professionals identify the following reasons for the shift toward experience-based promotion: the decline of linear advertising’s effectiveness, increased consumer agency, and a dispersed media landscape (Schmitt 1999, Hyman 2018, Batat 2019). Media scholars associate the same trends with the emergence of convergence culture and the shift toward digital distribution of film and TV (Jenkins 2008, Lotz 2014). As these parallel assessments of shifts in advertising and media indicate, the experience economy is a significant part of convergence culture.

Experiential marketing’s emphasis on experience explains why many activations incorporate strategies from immersive theater. Pine and Gilmore’s book underlines that elements of theater, like staging and performance, are central to the experience economy (xviii, 164). In their model of business-as-theater, economic strategy unfolds like a drama, segmented out over time, and the implementation of strategy equals a script, culminating in a performance, i.e. an offering to customers that takes the shape of experiences (166). Batat argues that “storyliving” is the next step in experiential marketing, and her definition echoes the ethos behind activations: “Storyliving refers to the brand’s ability to bring its value and history to life by offering customers immersive and interactive experiences” (229). Entertainment companies have an advantage in using storytelling and storyliving aspects in activations because narrative worlds are baked into the products that they promote.

Immersive theater emerges around the same time as experiential marketing flourishes in the early 2000s. Theater scholar Rose Biggin identifies the following characteristics of
immersive theater: the “ability of an audience to wander with apparent freedom through a spatially immersive environment, usually scenographically rich and multisensory; a non-chronological and/or impressionistic approach to narrative; and interactive elements or characters, often with an emphasis on empowerment, choice, or freedom for the spectator” (Biggin, 2). In other words, immersive theater seems to shift the narrative agency from actors to spectators, who move freely through carefully crafted spaces in which encounters with actors lead to a feeling of being immersed in the world of the play. As Paul Masters underlines, immersive theater spaces “become vessels for sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that imbue abstract, sometimes surreal surroundings with concrete and powerful immediacy” (19). The 2019 Amazon activations embody the principal goals of both experiential marketing and immersive theater: fans moved through elaborate physical environments that echo key diegetic settings of Carnival Row, The Boys, and The Expanse, and they were drawn into short narratives that required their active participation. Moreover, fans could sample food and drinks inspired by the storyworlds, and an open grass area enabled explorations beyond the more structured experiences inside the three activations.

Offsites’ call on attendees via immersive theater techniques reflects another trend in marketing research, namely the idea of consumers as co-creators of brand experiences (Tynan and McKechnie 2009, Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Marketers’ realization that consumers need to become co-creators to increase brand loyalty goes hand-in-hand with the entertainment industry’s courting of fans, a marked shift away from the industry’s previous ignorance or dismissal of fandom (Stanfill 2019, Scott 2019). At offsites, fans become important “co-creators” as marketers rely on them to spread buzz about TV shows, films, and entertainment brands. For
example, at the 2018 *The Good Place* activation, yellow stickers on the sidewalks encouraged fans to “Stop and Share” on social media [Figure 3].

![Stop and Share sticker](image)

Figure 3. The Good Place “Stop and Share” sidewalk sticker.

Source: Photo by the author.

“Co-creators” sounds democratizing, but as Mel Stanfill warns, “the playing field remains tilted in industry’s favor even as the rules have changed” (6). The industry encourages co-creation as long as it happens to their benefit. Marketers perceive the proliferation of digital platforms as increasing consumer agency—“there has been a radical change in the balance of power between companies and their customers,” Batat observes (21)—and consequently seek to harness that agency. Marketing scholars Detlev Zwick, Samuel Bonsu, and Aron Darmody argue that “co-creation principles represent part of a larger reconfiguration of labor and power characteristic of contemporary, knowledge-based capitalism,” a point I extend later in my discussion of how activations generate value for companies (166). Marketers attribute monetary value to social media buzz and count it as advertising savings (Brakus et al 2009, Lee and Kang 2012, Salkowitz 2018). These savings are a result of fans’ unpaid affective labor.
“Welcome to the Nine-Nine”: Inside SDCC Activations

“This [The Boys activation] is what most activations should be: an experience that puts you into the world of the show” (Activation director/writer Tom Salamon 2019)

“It really was like being in the TV show What We Do in the Shadows—fun, fun.” (Fan and blogger Shawn Marshall, 2019b)

These two quotes introduce the industry and fan perspective of two different activations at SDCC 2019: Salamon discusses The Boys, for which he wrote a script that places attendees at a superhero crime scene in an electronics shop. Marshall, a long-time SDCC attendee and co-author of the popular blog Parks & Cons, shares his take on the offsite for FX’s vampire dramedy What We Do in the Shadows, which invited fans to explore the vampires’ lair. Both Salamon and Marshall underline what is key to activations driven by experiential marketing and immersive theater: providing participants with the feeling of stepping into a diegetic world and experiencing it as a complete physical environment.

My visit to the Brooklyn Nine-Nine (B99) offsite echoes Salamon and Marshall’s impressions, but also showed moments of rupture, in which elements of the offsite impeded diegetic immersion. Brooklyn Nine-Nine is a workplace sitcom set at the fictional 99th police precinct in Brooklyn. The program frequently references geeky topics, features characters who identify as fans, and has generated a vocal online fan base; these factors make it an ideal property for promotion during SDCC. Before gaining entrance to the offsite, I waited in line for four hours. In the context of SDCC, this is not unusual. Many panels and offsites require a multi-hour
wait, and fans are willing to invest the time if they perceive the event as worth it. The combination of ephemerality (offsites only exist for four days) and exclusivity (only a small percentage of fans will have a chance to participate) drive interest. During my wait, activation staff checked that everyone had registered with NBC by providing their first and last name, email, and country of residence—information that was encoded into a mandatory RFID wristband. As we prepared to enter the activation, twenty-four people were grouped into teams of eight and asked to come up with a team name and motto—an unexpected task that my group fumbled. Stepping inside, we found ourselves in a version of the ready room that appears in nearly every episode. An actor welcomed us as new recruits of the Nine-Nine. A video that the B99 cast recorded specifically for the activation revealed our mission: solving puzzles modelled on a heist scenario that is a recurring plot element in B99. Moving into the next room, emulating the Nine-Nine’s bull pen, our team leaders showed us around for a few (too) brief minutes. An impressive amount of detail went into the recreation of characters’ desks and the room at large, but there was no time to explore [Figure 4].

![Figure 4. Recreation of the B99 bull pen.](image)

Source: Photo by the author.
Each team received their clues and started rushing around. During this time, the space and the experience felt fully realized, an “immersive world” that has “depth and is expansive, all encompassing” (Lukas, 143). My entire focus was on decoding puzzles based on actors’ cryptic statements and objects hidden around the room—I experienced the immersion that marketing agency Giant Spoon aimed to create, namely, “a chance to play in the world of Peralta and Boyle,” as Experiential Account Director Monica Benson and Director of Strategy Will Simpson describe it (Benson and Simpson 2020). Some puzzles involved intertextual references to other NBC shows (“Chicago Fire season eight” was the solution to one puzzle) while others played into familiarity with character quirks, like Jake Peralta’s love of the film Die Hard. Our efforts ended when another team solved all clues and won the heist. We watched another pre-recorded video, received commemorative pins, and exited the offsite. The entire experience lasted about fifteen minutes.

My participation in the B99 offsite briefly felt like “being in the show”: the physical environment was meticulously constructed and contained many easter eggs for longtime viewers, the heist turned me into an active participant in the experience, and the entire sequence of events was certainly memorable. Other elements were less ideal: the intruding heat and noise from the outside, the lack of time to explore the environment, and the awkwardness of being put on the spot for failing to come up with a creative team name all took away from the experience.

My impressions align with Rose Biggin’s argument that “[i]mmersive experience is not guaranteed by certain performance types or atmospheres and an audience member is not automatically active and empowered as soon as they step into an immersive space” (21, see also Lukas, 136). The commercial imperatives of activations can compound the tension between
immersive environments and immersive experiences. For example, activation staff need to put a certain number of people through the experience per hour to meet client expectations, which does not leave time for leisurely explorations. The feeling of being rushed through the experience cuts down on the degree of immersion. This is not a universal standard at all activations, however. At *What We Do in the Shadows*, fans were able to linger as long as they wanted (Marshall 2019b). The overall takeaway from the B99 offsite was a positive one for many fans. Emily S. Whitten tweeted “it was super fun” and “the Squad room was ON POINT,” and Shelly Gibula shared “this pin made me all sorts of happy. My team won!!!” Not all fan reactions were enthusiastic, however. Fans expressed disappointment for not getting in: “the line kept getting capped” (BuhNahNuh 2019) and “line is too long and it’s too hot” (kth_v1 2019). Statements like these can deter some, but also serve as incitement to line up even earlier in the morning (when it is cool and shady) and to feel a sense of accomplishment if you make it in (and wear the B99 pin with pride). Fans’ social media posts are simultaneously genuine expressions of excitement or frustration and performances tailored to industry expectations of fan enthusiasm.

The *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* offsite shows two things clearly: NBC and Giant Spoon invested considerable amounts of money and creativity into constructing a memorable experience, and fans eagerly embraced the chance to participate. Considering that there were eighteen other experiential activations during SDCC, and that these types of promotion happen with increasing frequency across the United States, marketers’ belief in the experience economy is evident. As Widet Batat argues, “[e]xperience is a concept that is unavoidable in contemporary marketing strategies to the point that almost all products and services are now sold as ‘experience’” (Batat 2019, xxi). Benson and Simpson echo this sentiment when they describe Giant Spoon’s
philosophy: “experiential marketing events should go well beyond promoting a show, service or brand . . . . We aim to create worlds and universes that not only feel real, but in many cases ARE real” (Benson and Simpson 2020). As ideas about experiential marketing began to flourish among marketing scholars and professionals, activations at SDCC became increasingly elaborate, with an emphasis on immersive physical environments rife with diegetic elements.

Toward Transmedia Experience: A History of Activations

The history of activations at SDCC is difficult to trace as there is no central archive that documents their existence. I have constructed a history out of trade press reports, social media posts, and the Unofficial San Diego Comic-Con Blog’s offsite calendar in combination with my own notes and photographs from the past six years. While some activations, like the FX Fear Arena, return to the same spot each year, many are one-and-done phenomena. An early example of experiential activations is Tron Legacy’s Flynn’s Arcade at SDCC 2010, in which attendees moved through key diegetic spaces such as the arcade and the End of the Line Club. In 2013, Ender’s Game built a cadet training room, and the Godzilla Encounter recreated a Tokyo street. Neither Tron nor Ender’s Game succeeded with either critics or the box office: “Despite the popularity of the offsite experience, when released in 2010, TRON: Legacy received a tepid response from critics” (Whitehouse 2013). Despite these films’ moderate success, activations continued to expand at SDCC. In the following years, other activations with varying degrees of diegetic verisimilitude received buzz, such as Fox’s Gotham zip-line between the Hilton Bayfront Hotel and the convention center, which emphasized an adrenaline rush over diegetic immersion. In 2014, the “Game of Thrones: Survive the Realm Experience” offered free permanent tattoos and used virtual reality headsets to let fans explore the ice wall that features
prominently in the show. Activations centered on VR became widespread before giving way to immersive theater-style activations (Rubin 2017). The difficulty of retracing past activations underlines their ephemerality: activations matter most for the duration of SDCC and then disappear from the physical site and cultural memory. The lack of a consistent archive places even more importance on individual fans’ memories and documentation of activations, as these are the only takeaways that persist alongside items of swag.

In 2017, two activations introduce immersive theater to experiential marketing: *Westworld* and *Blade Runner 2049*. Both activations built a physical environment with high diegetic verisimilitude and featured actors that engaged attendees. In the diegesis of HBO’s *Westworld*, the company Delos allows wealthy clients take trips to a fully immersive Western-themed park populated by robots to “live without limits”; at SDCC, actors posing as Delos representatives ushered attendees through the initial experience of entering Westworld, constructed on the third floor of the Kimpton Hotel Palomar. Attendees mingled in a reconstruction of the Mariposa Saloon, a key season one location, and received original Stetson hats, valued at $120 each, after going through a psychological assessment that deemed them a “white hat” or a “black hat” (Wigler 2017; Coulson 2019). As Campfire’s Creative Director Steve Coulson explained, they designed The *Westworld* Experience with an emphasis on exclusivity—only six people at a time every twenty minutes—and on immersion, working closely with former Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* cast member Careena Melia to develop the performance dimension of the activation (Coulson 2019; the creators of the 2017 mixed-reality *Legion* experience also consulted with Punchdrunk, Guido 2017). Fans were so eager to obtain one of the limited daily slots that they camped out in the hotel lobby, a development for which neither the hotel staff nor Campfire were prepared. The resulting tension shows that while the
industry wants fans’ enthusiasm, it wants this enthusiasm to unfold in predictable and manageable ways (Stanfill 2019, 11, 82). Overall, the Westworld activation was a success, as it generated the flattering press coverage that HBO was eager to obtain (Abrams 2017, Bishop 2017, Barnes 2017, Otterson 2017, Woerner and Yamamoto 2017).

The Blade Runner 2049 activation also emphasized immersion, but in a less personalized and exclusive way. Giant Spoon created an iconic street setting featuring fog, neon lights, and food stalls found in both Blade Runner and its sequel. Attendees were free to explore the large space, witness skits like police officers chasing a replicant, or follow an invitation to take the Voight-Kampff test (Whitehouse 2017). Some elements disrupted the diegetic verisimilitude, such as the prop exhibit lining the walls and the bar sponsored by Johnny Walker. This activation required a personalized RFID wristband. A wristband swipe unlocked swag like T-shirts and posters. Much like with Campfire’s Westworld experience, press and fans attributed the activation’s success to its feeling of immersion: “It was the legendary atmosphere of Ridley’s Scott film made real” and “it was the environment and performers that made the experience memorable” (Bishop 2017a). Westworld and BR2049’s difference in approach links back to a difference in objectives: HBO’s primary goal was to creative positive buzz and anticipation via trade press coverage (Coulson 2019), which made high through-put numbers and frustrated fans less important whereas Warner Brothers cared about getting high attendance and social media engagement; as Giant Spoon’s behind-the-scenes video proudly declares, “8,364 in attendance, over 100 million earned media impressions” (Giant Spoon 2017). The side-by-side mention of attendees and social shares shows the continuity between physical and digital spaces, and the importance of that continuity for experiential marketing’s definition of success. The standard set by Westworld and Blade Runner 2049 has shaped subsequent activations in 2018 and 2019 for

Media scholars often use the label “transmedia storytelling” to discuss promotions that emphasize diegetic extensions (Evans 2011, Jenkins 2008, Mittell 2015). In the mid-2000s, transmedia’s core purpose was stimulating viewers’ interest in linear TV texts amid a fragmentation of audiences across then-new video-on-demand and nascent social media platforms (Mittell 2015, 294). While online transmedia extensions continue to exist, their buzzworthiness has decreased at the same time as activations have received increased attention. Discussing the exhibit floor at Star Wars Celebration, Matt Hills argues that “we need to consider transmedia not just as storytelling but also as a kind of experience; not just as a ‘flow’ across platforms and screens, but as potentially and spatially located” (224). Immersive offsites intensify the kind of transmedia experience discussed by Hills. Moreover, I argue that transmedia itself has evolved in response to the influence of experiential marketing and immersive theater. Transmedia’s emphasis is no longer exclusively on storytelling but on creating location-based experiences—the storyliving that Wided Batat identifies as the next step in experiential marketing.

Transmedia immersion is also a key element in theme parks, the conceptual big sibling of activations. Ryan Hawthorne, a principle designer of Amazon’s 2019 offsite, describes the activation as an “all out theme park” (2019). Similarly, Pine and Gilmore credit Disney Parks as the original site of immersive environments that create memorable experiences for guests (4). The most significant overlap between theme parks and activations is a physical environment that is rich in sensory experience. This multi-sensory environment encourages what Rebecca Williams calls “haptic fandom,” that is, allowing fans “to move their fandom from the textual
into the bodily and the spatial” (136). The importance of a multi-sensory experience at activations comes through in fan Kerry Dixon’s description of dining at the futuristic upscale Taco Bell created for the 25th anniversary of the cult sci-fi film Demolition Man: “you were transported into a whole other world – and the free food certainly didn’t hurt” (Dixon 2018).

Haptic fandom is also crucial to the industry perception of activations. Ryan Crosby, vice president of content marketing at Hulu, observes regarding the 2018 Castle Rock activation: “We want to remove the glass from in between the fan and the world . . . . There’s an opportunity to let them touch it, feel it and experience it in different ways” (Qtd in Yamato 2018).

The possibility to touch and feel the storyworld matters both in the moment of going through an activation and in the form of swag fans receive. Swag is a tangible piece of the transient haptic fandom experience. While swag fulfills a promotional function—a T-shirt can turn a fan into a walking billboard—it is also important to recognize its sentimental value. Avi Santo observes that merchandise “can materially encapsulate their acquirer’s memories of a particular event or experience” and thus “evoke a sense of place” (330). Since swag is the physical trace of the experience, it may matter more to fans than some industry professionals realize. Grandesign’s Seth Bardacke downplays the importance of swag: “That swag bag is important . . . . But the longer lasting takeaways, the takeaways that truly can connect fans with the brand and establish that customer loyalty, is the memory of the experience” (qtd in MacDonald 2019a). Fans cherish their memories, but have also voiced disappointment at the decrease in swag at SDCC. For example, in his 2019 video guide to SDCC, Shawn Marshall notes that “the focus has been much more about moving toward experiences over practical things;” other fans echo his sentiment (Ash 2019; Marshall 2019a, MacDonald 2019b). Marketers that recognize the importance of swag may draw more fans to their activations.
Benson and Simpson point out that “[w]e [at Giant Spoon] find a ton of value in creating these event-specific pieces of merchandise, because fans are able to have physical bragging rights that they are super proud of” (Benson and Simpson 2020). Bragging rights are only one aspect of fans’ investment in swag—it is the combination of haptic fandom, memories, and tangible takeaways that makes for the most successful activations. Thus, industry perceptions that scaling back swag because the in-the-moment experience and the subsequent memories are the most important outcomes appear misguided.

The Value of Activations

“Everything is requiring something from you; they’re not just handing stuff out anymore.” -- James Riley, SDCC fan and blogger (Riley 2019)

Activations can cost millions of dollars, which begs the question of what value the industry hopes to receive in return. After all, return on investment is a crucial factor in evaluating success in the media industry. Social media impressions and trade press buzz are part of ROI. Other forms of value include demographic information extracted from fans as price of admission. Experiential marketing discourse emphasizes physical spaces as crucial to creating consumption and brand loyalty, but much of the value emerging from activations resides in the digital realm.

There is a clear exchange between industry and fans: fans trade time and personal information for swag and immersive experiences. Fans are keenly aware of this value transaction, and the proliferation of these transactions over the last few years. Comic-Con blogger James Riley articulates it most clearly: “whether it’s your time, your information, you know, whatever it may be, if they’re not going to get your money, they’re going to get something
out of you” (Riley 2019). Riley echoes the basic tenet of the social media economy: if you don’t pay for the product, you are the product (Cheney-Lipold 2017, Scholz 2013). While fans like Riley outline the trend of exchanging personal information for swag, and seem frustrated by it, they do not draw out the implications, namely that companies will store and analyze personal information.

The largest activations have shifted from optional to mandatory registration, i.e. demanding personal information as price of admission. FX’s activation illustrates this most clearly. From 2013 to 2018, the activation had a carnival atmosphere: a mix of immersive activations and low-key experiences like a Simpsons-themed food truck, free WiFi, and plenty of seating in the shade [Figure 5].

Figure 5. FX’s activation, 2013–18: easy access, low-key experiences, seating in the shade.
Source: Photo by the author.

It was easy to access and San Diego families mingled alongside SDCC attendees. In 2019, however, the entire area was fenced in and dominated by four white cubes [Figure 6].
Registration was required for entry. While the white cubes hosted elaborate environments, like the *What We Do in the Shadows* vampire lair, the welcoming environment had disappeared. This activation was engineered for dedicated fans, not for local families. This is another way in which activations that seem to be “free” are only free to those who can spend time in line and who understand the logistics of activations.

The shift toward mandatory registration and access control is unsurprising considering how thoroughly the trade of personal information for “free” services has become embedded in contemporary culture. Writing about experiential marketing for *AdWeek Magazine*, Patrick Coffee states that attending an activation “constitutes a purchase—even if the currency is time or the sort of behavioral and demographic data marketers crave” (Coffee 2017). Alongside mandatory registration, elaborate participation waivers require attendees to accept all responsibility for “the possibility of personal injury, damaged property, and death” and to give
permission to use “[m]y name and likeness in any manner whatsoever” (NBCUniversal 2019). Many activations require personalized RFID wristbands, which are used to track attendees. Giant Spoon co-founder Marc Simons explains that “[a]t each touchpoint [of Blade Runner 2049], we then knew who they were and the actions they were taking inside the space” (qtd in Coffee 2017). Regarding Giant Spoon’s 2019 NBC activations, Benson and Simpson explain that RFID data turned into “a valuable database of engaged superfans” for follow-up promotions and for offering “super specific ROI intel to our clients” (Benson and Simpson 2020).

Overall, the industry’s construction of activations’ value depends heavily on having faith in experiential marketing’s effectiveness. While social media shares and RFID data are quantifiable outcomes of activations, it remains difficult to trace how they contribute to future profit. Thus, the conviction that experience-based promotion yields results is the main force behind the proliferation of activations over the last ten years. Mike Fox, CMO of the media firm Culture Trip, puts it best: “you either have to believe in experiential or not because it's notoriously hard to measure with precision” (qtd in Swant 2019). As such, experiential marketing is the latest in a long line of advertising strategies deemed the best way to engage consumers—one that is deeply entwined with the values and ideals of brand cultures.

Closing Thoughts: Activations and Life in Brand cultures

“We cannot productively think about brand culture, or what brands mean for culture, without accounting for the affective relational quality—the experience—of brands.” (Banet-Weiser, 9)

The experience economy and immersive theater emerged as American culture transitioned into an age of brand cultures—a transition observed by both media scholars like Sarah Banet-Weiser
and marketing scholars like Bernd Schmitt and Wided Batat. Brands are no longer merely identities for companies; rather they are experiences offered to consumers (Schmitt 1999, 57). Moreover, branding has reached areas of life previously thought to be exempt from the reach of economics and capitalism, like religion, creativity, or how we define our inner selves (Banet-Weiser, 5, Batat, 53). Increasingly, we define and imagine our most intimate relationships in terms borrowed from the world of consumption and marketing. Banet-Weiser’s emphasis on the generative quality of brands as tools for meaning-making resonates with fans’ embrace of branded experiences at SDCC and their willingness to spend hours waiting in line to participate. The industry also has considerable stakes in the value of brands-as-experience as they invest large sums of money with shaky ROI prospects. Overall, I consider the micro- and macro-levels of activations—moving from parsing entertainment companies’ drive to create immersive, interactive experiences and fans’ engagement with them to the larger context of industry-fan relationships—as significant strands in cultural debates around brands and media consumption. Grasping the connections among experiential marketing, immersive theater, the experience economy, and brand cultures is crucial for understanding activations as exemplary cultural moments.

A digital companion piece to this article featuring images, videos, and maps is available at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c164784a9ca14b52bc852bf4586f51a7.

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