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### #PrettyLittleLiars: How Hashtags Drive The Social TV Phenomenon

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#PrettyLittleLiars: How Hashtags Drive The Social TV Phenomenon

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## #PrettyLittleLiars: How Hashtags Drive The Social TV Phenomenon

**ABSTRACT:** *Twitter is used by many TV shows to promote discussion and encourage viewer loyalty. Most successfully, ABC Family uses Twitter to promote the teen drama Pretty Little Liars through the use of hashtags and celebrity interactions. This study analyzes Pretty Little Liars' use of hashtags created by the network and by actors from the show. It examines how the Pretty Little Liars' official accounts engage fans about their opinions on the show and encourage further discussion. Fans use the network-generated hashtags within their tweets to react to particular scenes and to hopefully be noticed by managers of official show accounts. I suggest that Twitter has helped to revamp how the modern world watched television.*

### **Introduction**

Recently, many television shows have been using Twitter to promote discussion among viewers and to encourage fans to watch each episode religiously. Twitter is used as a tool to get fans hyped up to watch and engage in conversation about the plot of the show or discuss topics related to the show. A useful part of Twitter for this process is its hashtags, or simply using the “#” sign. Hashtags are mainly used for conversations, so Twitter users do not need to “follow” other users in order to engage in a conversation. As long as the users do not have their accounts set to private, their hashtagged tweets will appear when searching that particular hashtag on Twitter. What’s interesting about the use of hashtags on Twitter is how television companies are using them more frequently in order to create an ongoing discussion about their particular show. The television show *Pretty Little Liars* has recently started using this tactic during live viewings of their show as a means of forming a community that discusses the show live.

*Pretty Little Liars* is a show on ABC Family about “four friends who band together against an anonymous foe [called “A”] who threatens to reveal their darkest secrets, whilst unraveling the mystery of the murder of their best friend” (“*Pretty Little Liars*,” *IMDB*). The show first aired in 2010 and is heading into its fourth season in June.

Recently, *Pretty Little Liars* has started using hashtags featured during the show's episodes in order to engage users to chat about events occurring in the show. ABC Family suggests these hashtags to start conversations between users about a particular scene or event that is occurring in the show. User-generated hashtags concerning the show are also used on Twitter by fans and by actors' Twitter accounts. Actors from the show such as Ashley Benson and Shay Mitchell will view the show when it airs and live tweet with the fans using their own created hashtags or the ones suggested by the network. The official account, along with the actors, will retweet users discussing the show and @reply to various tweeters. *Mashable* reports that the summer finale of the third season broke the record for "most social media comments for a single episode in a TV series (Dowling).

Originally, Warner Brothers studio had banned anyone affiliated with the show from tweeting about it. Since then, the studio has realized just how successful *Pretty Little Liars* is through social media. *Entertainment Weekly* reports that the four stars of the show reach 5.5 million followers. The magazine reported three major reasons why this show dominates social media: the show's focus on texts sent and received by "A," the cliffhangers, and the show's demographic of 14-to 34-year-old women who already are invested in social media (30). By not being a part of social media, viewers are missing out on the conversation occurring behind the scenes and the discussion of the network-generated hashtags that appear on the screen. The use of social media while watching television has become increasingly common. Episodic shows create a must-watch atmosphere by promoting hashtags as well as telling viewers they can watch live and discuss the show with the actors, the *Pretty Little Liars*' official account, and other fans.

Executive producer of *Pretty Little Liars* comments on the effect of Twitter by saying, “Because of social media, [fans] want to watch *Pretty Little Liars* live The water cooler talk becomes instant” (33). In my thesis, I will examine how the influences of hashtags are used to promote *Pretty Little Liars* and whether it helps fans engage in conversations about the show. I will also be looking at how each official account attempts to create buzz about the show before, during and after each live airing.

### **Transmedia Storytelling**

*Pretty Little Liars* aims to engage its audience over multiple media platforms, which is also known as transmedia storytelling. As a basic definition of transmedia storytelling, Henry Jenkins writes that it is a “process” where the elements of fiction are dispersed over multiple media platforms “for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.” Therefore, each media platform “makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins 944). Examples of platforms can range from social media to print books. Carlos Scolari’s opinion on transmedia storytelling is that it “makes economic sense.” Scolari quotes Henry Jenkins who says, “if each work offers fresh experiences, then a crossover market will expand the potential gross within any individual media” (590). The use of transmedia storytelling allows movies and television shows to be promoted over a variety of different platforms, which allows the name of the brand to expand. Teen television shows such as *Dawson’s Creek* used transmedia storytelling by promoting an online website, clothing merchandise, and spinoff narrative novels. Brooker writes, “the fan is invited to extend the show’s pleasures, to allow the show into [the fan’s] everyday life beyond the scheduling framework” (461). Commenting on the techniques *Dawson’s Creek* producers use,

Brooker writes that shows like *Dawson's Creek* used transmedia storytelling to keep the show on the minds of the fans and allow them to have access to different aspects of the show on a variety of media platforms. As for *Pretty Little Liars*, this show actively uses social television as part of its own transmedia storytelling. Sheila Seles of Bluefin Labs discusses in the company's blog how the show uses the books it's based on, along with actively participating in social media to create compelling storylines as well as encourage fans to live-tweet episodes (Seles). The *Pretty Little Liars* book series, written by Sara Shepard, was published in 2006 and currently contains fourteen books. The last book released at the beginning of 2013 was a prequel to the series entitled *Ali's Pretty Little Lies* and two more books will be released in 2013. In 2011, the book series was number six on the New York Times Best Seller List for Children's series ("Best Sellers," New York Times). The show's major use of Twitter is what has made transmedia storytelling a success for *Pretty Little Liars* because it keeps the discussion going way past the airtime of new episodes.

### **Twitter's use in Social TV**

Twitter, a social media site developed in 2006 has since become a social media phenomenon, ranking in the top ten most visited sites worldwide. It allows users to create free accounts and update their status in 140 characters or less. Users can then "follow" others and interact by using the "@" sign (to reply to a user), click "retweet" or write "RT" (to forward a message). To understand the world of Twitter and how celebrities get their messages out to communicate with fans, Mary Cross explains the Twitter "statusphere" stating, "That's the major draw, collecting followers who will read your tweets. The more followers you have, the more status in the Twitter world" (52). Cross

explains how Twitter has become a global safety net and even serves as an “advanced alert system” (59) alerting the public of natural disasters and protests before traditional news coverage. Cross shows that Twitter contains timely information. Not only is timely information useful for news outlets, it is also useful for people watching live shows or programs. Although Cross does not directly state this, entertainment news relies on the timeliness and continuous updates that Twitter offers. Entertainment news is nearly not as important as news concerning natural disasters, but the alert-like fashion of entertainment tweets appear in a very similar way. Cross says Twitter offers a “constant stream of real-time information” and “has meant an enormous upswing in up-to-the-minute communication among global populations” (62).

The entertainment industry, along with other American businesses has learned that Twitter is, “a way to connect with consumers and, especially, a way to measure the market for its products” (Cross 54). Marwick and boyd agree with Cross in their study, focusing on fan management and the bond Twitter creates between fans and celebrities. The timeliness of Twitter is very useful to celebrities when interacting with fans about certain subjects because the response time is immediate. Marwick and boyd write, “Famous people mention fans to perform connection and availability, give back to loyal followers, and manage their popularity” (145). Fan interaction helps to build celebrities’ brands as well as allow fans to feel included in the process. The points that Cross brings up about connecting with consumers relate to how the *Pretty Little Liars*’ cast uses Twitter by asking viewers if they like the episode they just watched or asking what they thought about certain characters’ actions. Cross’s book provides insight on how Twitter works as a whole with the transformation of popular culture, while I am specifically

focusing on how Twitter is used to brand a television show, allowing actors to engage with fans on the social media site.

### **Celebrity to Fan Communication via Twitter**

Since the rise of Twitter in 2009, everyone from ‘regular’ people to celebrities have the opportunity to make a name for themselves on this social media site. Twitter is a site that makes self-branding easy and is a great tool for celebrities to keep in touch with their fan base. By studying the 300 most followed accounts of 2010, Marwick and boyd were intrigued by how high-profiled celebrities maintain interaction with their fan base and how fans attempt to seek attention from their idols.

This obsession of being thoroughly involved in the entertainment culture has been prominent long before the invention of social media. Brooker uses examples from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a television show from the late 90’s, and describes how teens changed the show into a “lifestyle experience” (460). He describes that instead of just watching *Buffy*, fans of the show are invited to “live” *Buffy* by knowing the character intimately. He also stated that the experience of following a favorite TV show was already changing the way fans watch television. The show *Dawson’s Creek* is another teen show that created an experience for fans past just watching television episodes. Brooker discusses how American Eagle and J. Crew were the official clothing lines for the show and how the show was marketed with a “multimedia complex” in mind. This included a *Dawson’s Creek* website in which fans could create their own fan fiction or listen to songs from the latest episodes. The website also included a “slam book” where fans could fill out surveys about themselves but could also read what *Dawson’s Creek* characters wrote. Brooker called this experience “stimulation,” writing, “rather than

merely reading about characters, [fans enjoy] the illusion of participating in their lives and interacting with them as friends” (460). Pre-twitter, fans would interact with premade online character personas. Nowadays, modern technology has allowed fans to create bonds with the actual celebrities though social media. Marwick and boyd expand on Brooker’s study and explore the “friendship bond” in the present. Twitter is one of the main social media sites that is presently used to form celebrity to fan relationships. Twitter creates bonds with fans and celebrities to the point where they feel intimate, as if they are actual friends with celebrities. Twitter has definitely played a key role in the shift from fans interacting with just the characters from the show to communicating with the actual actors. Twitter gives fans the opportunity to ask actors their opinions on the characters they play as well as discuss other aspects of the actors’ life. It takes *Dawson’s Creek’s* method of online character personas to a whole new level. Following Marwick and boyd’s study, I can analyze how the actors of *Pretty Little Liars* attempt to influence their fan base by their response to fans on Twitter and what types of tweets they prefer to retweet that have to do with the show. Fans constantly tweet and engage when they know that an actor from the show is watching with them, which forms the illusion of ‘real’ friendships between the actor and the fan. Mike Proulx and Stacey Shepatin, writers of *Social TV*, are also in agreement with the fact that “social media creates the feeling of a more direct and intimate interaction between celebrities and their fans” (19). Social media has led to a “more engaged audience” and causes people to watch shows live rather than record them for later on their DVR (Proulx and Shepatin 19). Proulx and Shepatin write, “the lure of connecting within a community through shared real-time experience is a compelling force” (20).

As for celebrity relationships with other celebrities on Twitter, Marwick and boyd provide examples such as the played-up friendship between Miley Cyrus and Demi Lovato in order to protect the Disney brand. Cyrus and Lovato tweeted to each other that they were best friends after an alleged fight between the Disney stars. It is assumed that Disney arranged for the two stars to make their rekindling public in order to protect the company. Often, celebrities will use Twitter to show their fans that they are friends with a certain celebrity by @replying to them or mentioning that they are hanging out. Marwick and boyd use the example of Mariah Carey tweeting Jasmine Dotiwala, an MTV producer and gossip columnist. By Carey mentioning her and using her Twitter name, “This establishes intimacy between Carey and her followers by sharing personal details from her life while publicly identifying @jasminedotiwala as a friend – a performance of backstage access – and inviting her followers to check out Jasmine’s Twitter stream” (145). This perspective of the article will help to analyze how the friendships perceived on Twitter by the *Pretty Little Liars* actors assist in expanding the brand.

### **Hashtags and TV Shows**

To gain greater insight on the use of hashtags on Twitter, Ruth Page provides a great outlook on how hashtags, the prefix ‘@’ symbol, and the abbreviated ‘RT’ (retweeted) are used to attract attention. Page states, “hashtags are a crucial currency which enables visibility and projects potential interaction with other members of the site” (184). Hashtags are created by users about a specific topic and are used in “participatory culture.” This study of hashtags is useful for my research because Page presents data on how hashtags are used by a variety of Twitter accounts. Hashtags enable “ambient affiliation.” This means users can engage in a conversation about a celebrity, game, or

election using hashtags without having to follow the other users involved. Ruth Page discusses how it is not necessary to follow users to partake in a hashtag because, “The non-reciprocal nature of Twitter networks means that this affiliation can be similarly asymmetrical and need not involve dialogic exchanges” (Page 184). Twitter users do not have to engage in conversation with every user. They could just discuss the topic or ‘@reply’ to the celebrity or account associated with the hashtag. In *Pretty Little Liars*, hashtags provided by the network will appear during certain scenes and the actors also watching the show will participate in the trending hashtag as well. The actors are not necessarily following the fans that participate in the hashtag, but still “ambient affiliation” allows for everyone to participate in the real-time backchannel.

The rise of social media has caused what Proulx and Shepatin call a “backchannel,” which is made up of real-time “organic social expressions that act as a participatory companion to our favorite TV broadcasts” (10). Today’s backchannel on social media compares to the classic sender-message-receiver model of media communications but the real-time backchannel of today is far superior. The classic sender-message-receiver model gave television users a message to respond to directly from watching the show, but there was no real-time response mechanism in which viewers could immediately post their opinions about the received message. Nowadays, the major backchannel outlet for TV viewers is, in fact, Twitter, which is why hashtags are very useful for categorizing discussions of television shows. Before Twitter existed, conversations about live television shows or events were contained to the household or left for discussion with friends after the event occurred. Many people also participated in discussion boards online, but responses were nowhere near as immediate as Twitter is today. The raw in-

the-moment reactions or thoughts were not captured like they can be today through social media.

In her research, Page discusses how hashtags are created by members of Twitter and consist of various topics, and as Proulx and Shepatin point out, Twitter has become a very user-friendly site. Proulx and Shepatin discuss understanding how Twitter works with watching television shows, quoting former Twitter employee Robin Sloan, “with Twitter, you can put a hashtag on screen or an @ handle and people know what you’re talking about” (13). I want to branch off of this research because many hashtags are created by users, but now television networks are starting to incorporate them during live broadcasts of shows, which applies to episodes of *Pretty Little Liars*.

Modifying retweets is a way for users that are retweeting the content to add their own opinion or comment into the tweet. Page found in her research that celebrities had a higher rate than average users of modifying retweets, or adding personal comments in front of a retweet. Modifying retweets builds relationships with the fan base of the user and their reputation as a tweeter as Page states, “The positive evaluation added by the corporation or celebrity practitioner functions as face-building relational work” (197). Television shows are realizing just how powerful hashtags are and it is becoming very common for hashtags to appear at the corner of the show’s live broadcast. Proulx and Shepatin write that Twitter has found a “2 to 10 times increase in the number of backchannel tweets created about a given TV show when an onscreen hashtag is included in the broadcast” (17). My thesis looks at specific celebrity accounts such as actress Ashley Benson (@AshBenzo) to see how often they modify their retweets to build their brand and create publicity for the show. I am also observing if what they are retweeting

consists of the hashtag that is currently the most popular during the episode. Page's study provides data on the types of hashtags used and for what purpose they are used for by different accounts. With the hashtag data provided in this article, I can focus on how *Pretty Little Liars*' hashtags are used to engage fans in the discussion of the show, whereas Page did a general study of how hashtags are used on Twitter.

### **Selective Use of Hashtags**

Further observing the use of hashtags, Proulx and Shepatin provide examples from the television show *The Voice* and how their strategic use of hashtags has helped increase its backchannel. Instead of just leaving the hashtag #TheVoice on throughout the whole program, the hashtag appeared "when the Twitter backchannel conversation was most likely to amplify" (Proulx and Shepatin 22). For example, during the battle rounds of this particular show, a judge has to send home one contestant and choose the singer they want to remain on their team. When the intense moment of choosing their team member occurs, #TheVoice would appear so viewers can discuss the decision the celebrity judge has made. The results showed that 70 percent of the tweets about *The Voice* included the show's hashtag (Proulx and Shepatin 22). Looking at *Pretty Little Liars*, I am observing at what moments the network's hashtags appear on the screen. Since this show selectively displays hashtags just as *The Voice* does, Proulx and Shepatin provide useful information on how hashtags contribute to the overall social television experience.

Twitter has become a very useful tool for making live television a social event. When it comes to transmedia storytelling, television shows have branched out in the forms of media they choose to reach, such as different social media sites. Does the technique of displaying hashtags during heightened moments in *Pretty Little Liars* amplify discussion

on Twitter or does this show bring in other techniques? What techniques does the television show use to keep the conversation going, whether it be about the show, behind-the-scenes discussions, or talk about the actors on social media?

## **Method**

The method I chose to use to collect data on *Pretty Little Liars* was by examining tweets from the two episodes of the winter mid-season premiere, “She’s Better Now” (Se03Ep14) and “Mona-Mania!” (Se03Ep15). I chose these particular episodes because so much hype was created prior to the winter premiere. The show had been on break since the Halloween special, so fans had been anxiously awaiting the January premiere. Picking these episodes also gave me the opportunity to watch them live. The summer finale from *Pretty Little Liars* had broken records in social television, so I wanted to observe a brand new episode to see exactly what strategies are used on Twitter. While watching these episodes live, I observed the social media backchannel on Twitter. To do so, I followed the official *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter account (@ABCfp11) and chose to observe the tweets of two of the actors. I chose to observe Shay Mitchell (@shaymitch) who plays Emily on the show and Ashley Benson (@ashbenzo) who plays Hanna. These two actors were chosen because they have active Twitter feeds throughout the live viewing of the show, while the other two main actors aren’t as consistent with updates. Although it is difficult to determine if the account is actually authored by the actor, the *Pretty Little Liars*’ accounts are verified on Twitter. This means that the celebrity or representative from the celebrity has confirmed that the account belongs to them. Marwick and Boyd discuss in their article how many celebrity accounts are maintained by either the managing team or a “ghost-twitterer.” This means that the celebrity will hire someone

to tweet on their behalf. From observing Ashley Benson and Shay Mitchell's tweets, I believe that their tweets are authentic because of the language they use and their photo/video updates they attach in their tweets from sites such as Keek, a site that allows users to post short, unprofessionally recorded video updates. Shay Mitchell was also chosen to observe because she watches both the east coast and west coast episodes live and tweets throughout both airings. I observed the East coast airing at 8:00pm because this was the first airing of the new episode. The show does air at 8:00pm pacific time, but I chose to watch the East coast viewing because the discussion on Twitter would be fresh and it also allowed me to watch the episodes live.

To conduct my research, I saved images of tweets from the chosen accounts and observed who was retweeted and replied to. Prior to watching the winter premiere episode, I observed the tweets from these accounts that were sent out during the all day marathon of the show to see the effect it had on social media. The hashtags used by the network were also observed and I recorded the episodes using a DVR while also watching the episodes live. Since the episodes online did not include hashtags, I took pictures when they were shown on screen during the live episodes. I then searched these hashtags on Twitter and took screen snapshots of different accounts using the hashtag. Other hashtags I focused on were major ones generated by the network Twitter account or by the actors such as #PLL and #PrettyLittleLiars. Shay Mitchell's hashtag #PLLAyWithShay was also part of my main focus.

The website [hashtags.org](http://hashtags.org) was very useful in providing information of how effective each hashtag was during the hours of that day. The data from this site is compiled into a line graph and shows the analytics from the past 24-hours. I obtained this

data in a timely fashion in order to see the true effects of the hashtags. Using the SocialGuide app and website was also effective because it gives the rankings and social buzz associated with each show that is currently on the air. This program is currently owned by Nielson and is “fast becoming a new, press-release-worthy benchmark in the TV industry” (Stransky, 33). SocialGuide was the first to develop a program that measures Twitter TV and audience engagement through using analytics. Since this is a new concept, SocialGuide is still developing its technology that measures how Twitter affects how people watch television. I trust using this app because over 35% of top broadcasting companies use it to measure their data. I was able to process the data I observed by compiling the images and notes I took into an application called Evernote. I was then able to categorize the tweets and images by subject and episode, which allowed me to properly sort through the data.

### **Analysis**

Even before the airing of the winter premiere, Nielson’s SocialGuide, a website that monitors the social buzz during broadcasts of television shows, documented *Pretty Little Liars* as the number one talked about show at 3:41pm with two percent of the social buzz. SocialGuide documented that at 3:41pm, 55,618 people were discussing the show and the marathon that aired from 11:00am to the time of the premiere at 8:00pm.

Comparing this to the second most social show on the air at the time, which was the English League Cup Soccer, showed that only 9,325 people were discussing this. The constant promotion on Twitter seems to have greatly influenced the social media buzz of *Pretty Little Liars*. Actors from the show tweeted about the premiere hours before the show’s scheduled premiere while also retweeting fans that showed excitement about the

show. The types of tweets that I found in my research were tweets that discuss the show from actors and fans, promotional tweets concerning *Pretty Little Liars*, retweets, and hashtags. A main characteristic that I observed from the tweets was the language they were written in, by fans, actors, and the official account. The casual tone used by the actors and the various uses of hashtags played a huge part in their engagement on Twitter.

Before the premiere aired, the official Twitter @ABCFp11 created a retweeting contest where fans could win prize packs for retweeting “I can’t wait to watch the winter premieres #PrettyLittleLiars & #LyingGame tonight at 8pm/7c on @ABCFamily #SweepsEntry.” By creating a contest and hashtagging *Pretty Little Liars*, the network is encouraging fans to retweet by promising retweeters prizes. Since the show’s brand uses Twitter as part of their promotional purposes, this is just one tactic ABC Family uses to engage the fans and to create excitement about the show. This creates a “cause and effect” scenario because @ABCFp11 gives tweeters a “cause” to tweet by providing a prize and the “effect” is many members of their fanbase retweeting the tweet. From this contest, an ongoing discussion is created through #PrettyLittleLiars. Hashtags.org provides a graph on the amount of estimated tweets per hour and shows #PrettyLittleLiars was mentioned 1,500 times at 11:00am, during the start of the all-day marathon, to over 4,500 tweets after 2:00pm. This was around the same timeframe @ABCFp11 notified their followers of the contest. The hashtags #PLL and #PrettyLittleLiars are used frequently in these promotional tweets because as Page writes, it “enables visibility and projects potential interaction with other members of the site” (184). The official account also takes time to retweet actors of the show such as Lucy Hale (@lucyhale) encouraging users to share their thoughts on *Pretty Little Liars*. Ashley

Benson (@ashbenzo) actively participated in promoting the show's premiere by asking followers who was going to be watching live with her? Generating this question gives viewers that intimate feeling knowing actors from the show are viewing the episode at the same time they are. Marwick and Boyd refer to this as "performative intimacy." Because @ashbenzo is sharing that she will be viewing the show, she also encourages her followers to respond to her question by retweeting users that mention the #PLL hashtag and proclaim they will also be viewing the show. The constant encouragement to tweet from @ABCFpll and the various actors showed results when right at 8:00pm #PLL became a worldwide trending topic. SocialGuide also reported that around 8:00pm the social buzz was at five percent and 169,121 people were discussing the show.

The second episode I observed, "Mona Mania," did not contain as much social buzz in the beginning of the show the buzz was at one percent and the amount of people discussing the show was 53,101 at 8:05pm. By 8:50pm, the number of people discussing the show had increased immensely to 91,608, causing the buzz to go up to 3 percent. There may have not been as much social buzz in this episode because the initial hype of the show returning may have died down. Before the premiere episode, there had been a significant Twitter promotion heralding the show's return.

A variety of Twitter accounts partake in encouraging users to tweet throughout the show, some may even participate with intentions of having their brand recognized by official *Pretty Little Liars* accounts. This is known as cross-promotional tweeting. Another brand that may have had some affiliation with *Pretty Little Liars* in the past will mention the show in their tweets and most likely gets recognition. For example, the @ABCFpll account retweets accounts such as *Seventeen Magazine*, which quotes

portions of the episode. The official account also retweets celebrities like Kendall Jenner who is a fan of the show. @ABCFp11 will acknowledge clothing designers by retweeting them if they mention one of their characters is wearing an outfit they created. The account @LauraSabaStyle, which is the account for ABC Family's fashion stylists, is retweeted by @ABCFp11 in the premiere episode and their tweet promotes a bracelet Hanna is wearing. The tweet provides the twitter account of where the bracelet is from and a link of where to purchase it. By notifying followers of Hanna's bracelet, it may cause some of the fans to consider purchasing the bracelet since some fans have noted they admire the fashion choices of the characters. Since @ABCFp11 retweeted their fashion stylists, more of the show's fans will be aware of the tweet because the show's account has way more followers. In the second episode, Shay Mitchell retweets Bongo Jeans because the jean company tweets a quote from Emily's dad and hashtags it #PL1ayWithShay. Bongo Jeans has used Ashley Benson and Lucy Hale as spokesmodels in the past and currently, Bongo.com has listed Lucy Hale as the spokesmodel for 2013. By Bongo mentioning the show that their models star in, they are promoting that this company also views *Pretty Little Liars*. Mentioning @shaymitch in their tweet and participating in #PL1ayWithShay shows Bongo's followers that the company partakes in similar interests. This concept also relates back to Brooker's discussion of clothing lines for *Dawson's Creek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Official clothing lines were designated for those shows, but for *Pretty Little Liars*, the show has the ability to document many different items of clothing and provide links to the clothes because of social media. Bongo Jeans is also giving the show free promotion on Twitter, while @shaymitch is as well by retweeting them. The company also used #P1laywithShay, a

very popular hashtag, so if Twitter users were to search that hashtag, their tweet would be a part of that search, creating more exposure. As I had mentioned before, *Seventeen Magazine* does in fact tweet quotes from the live episodes. In the past, the actors of the show have been featured on various covers of the magazine. *Seventeen* is aware of how popular this show is among the readers of their magazine, so by mentioning *Pretty Little Liars* in their tweets, they can actively engage with their followers by discussing a topic they are particularly interested in.

The show is constantly trying to engage viewers to participate in conversations on Twitter by discussing topics or events in the show that may even lead to possible spoilers. For example, Shay Mitchell (@shaymitch) asks her followers, “Who loves Hanna’s Grandma?!” @shaymitch is encouraging conversation about the show amongst her followers and is also proving that she is watching the show live with everyone else. @Ashbenzo will ask her followers questions and also voice her personal opinions about the show, such as tweeting “mona is creeeeeepy,” allowing followers to respond to the statement she has made. Official accounts constantly make statements or opinions about the show to get reactions out of their fans. They want them to express their opinions on what has been said to keep the backchannel constantly flowing with new tweets. Maintaining an active real-time backchannel encourages viewers of the show to watch it live, for the fear of content being spoiled since @Ashbenzo is stating what is currently occurring in the show. Another example is from “Mona Mania” when Spencer and Mona are competing to be the captain of the academic decathlon team. @shaymitch retweets @Camila\_Casotti who says “#PLL #PLLayWithShay totally pissed Mona won.” Someone who is not watching the show live and follows Shay Mitchell will then know

that Mona won the spot as captain and the intense “quiz-off” between the two characters would be spoiled. @Ashbenzo also tweets about the reunion of Hanna and her boyfriend Caleb by saying, “haleb is back!!!!!!” Haleb is an established nickname used by the official accounts to emphasize that Hanna and Caleb are in a relationship. This nickname is well-known by fans of the show so tweeters would know exactly what @Ashbenzo is talking about and may even use it in their tweets. This tweet could be an obvious spoiler because people not watching are unaware Hanna and Caleb are reunited once again. As for the amount of people who attempt to avoid spoilers, Proulx and Shepatin reported in their book that 20 percent of TVGuide.com users are watching broadcasts live for fear of people within their social networks ruining the plots of their favorite shows (14). This show is tailored towards a social audience, so missing a live episode airing means missing out on the social engagement on Twitter.

Pretty Little Liars truly takes advantage of its social media community by providing its fans exclusive background information through the official show account and the actors of the show. So, fans of the show that scroll through their timeline and follow PLL-related accounts are very likely to come across spoilers since this show’s community enjoys discussing the plot live. Yes, people can go back through Twitter and reread tweets discussing the most recent episode, but this particular Twitter user would not be a part of the real-time backchannel the show has established.

Often, @Ashbenzo will tweet about the experiences she has while filming the show. These experiences could be spoilers to viewers, but they also give her followers an inside glimpse into to her thoughts about the scenes she is in. For example, @Ashbenzo tweets during “She’s Better Now” about her opinion on a particular scene saying,

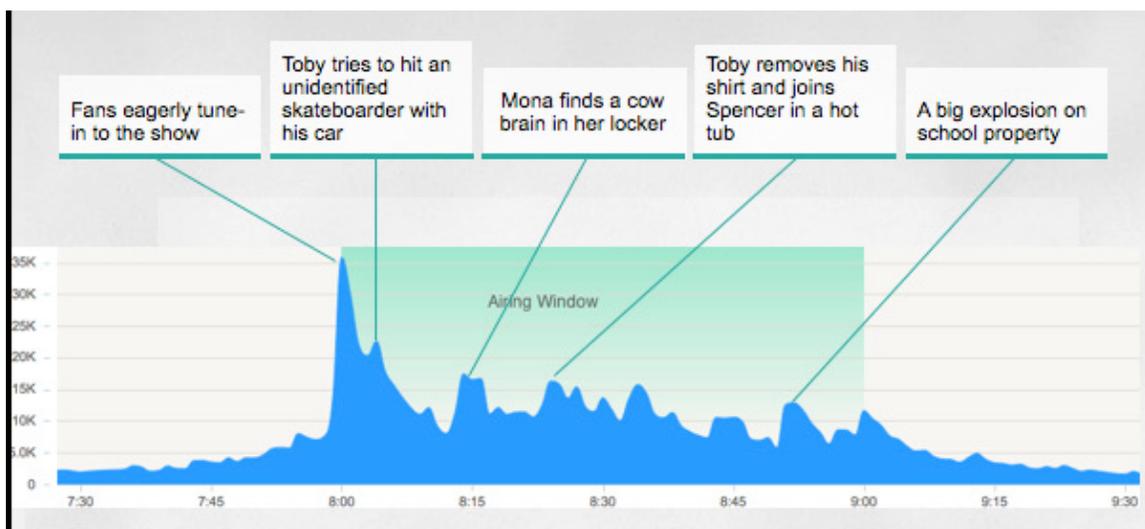
“EWWWWWWW I was so grossed out filming this scene...” In another tweet, @Ashbenzo mentions @shaymitch saying, “loved filming this scene with @shaymitch #sneaky.” These tweets are more examples of “intimate interactions” that Marwick and Boyd discuss in their article. @Ashbenzo is expressing her personal thoughts to her fans about filming and is even including @shaymitch in one tweet. A tweet that @Ashbenzo retweets on her timeline even comments on how fans love that she shares her personal thoughts. The tweet is from @FoodlenaBenzo stating, “I feel like you’re watching this the first time, you’re so shocked and interacting with everything. It’s so nice.” This tweet shows that viewers and fans truly appreciate that they can view the opinions of the actors from the show. According to Marwick and Boyd, fans consider their tweets exclusive content because they release information that fans would normally not have known from just watching the show.

The use of hashtags is vital in keeping the conversation going about the show and ABC Family encourages the use of hashtags by not only providing users with just #PrettyLittleLiars or #PLL. They encourage discussion about certain topics occurring in scenes of an episode. During certain scenes, network-generated hashtags will appear to encourage conversations. During the premiere episode, two network-generated hashtags were used throughout the whole episode. The first hashtag to appear on screen during “She’s Better Now,” was #monaisback. The hashtag flashed on screen during the scene of the girls heading into school. It appeared on the left-hand corner right when Mona is visible and stayed there throughout the whole scene outside the school. ABC Family uses these hashtags in what Proulx and Shepatin call “strategic times” and almost in an “alert-like fashion” (22). The hashtag was shown when Mona, a prominent member of “The A

team” is shown returning back to school after being locked up in a mental institution. ABC Family strategically placed it there to spark up conversation about what the four main characters will do knowing that Mona is back in Rosewood. @Ashbenzo asks her followers a question using the hashtag tweeting, “should Hanna be friends with Mona??? #monaisback.” By asking her followers this question, it is encouraging them to tweet their answers back to her while also using the hashtag. The hashtag allows viewers to express their opinion on what they think of Mona being allowed back at school. The second network generated hashtag from the premiere episode was #OhBoy. This hashtag was shown on-screen when Aria leaves her boyfriend Ezra’s house. Aria is keeping a huge secret from Ezra, which is that he has a 7-year-old son. “A” is aware that Aria is keeping this secret from him so “A” leaves a baby shower basket and a note to Aria to torment her. #OhBoy stays on the screen during the time Aria finds the basket until the scene of her reading the card from it ends. Page’s discussion on ambient affiliation is relevant to this situation because viewers will tweet with the hashtag #OhBoy to engage in the conversation. Users participate by using the hashtag, but that does not mean they need to be following each other to have a discussion about what will happen with the baby basket. When #OhBoy was tweeted, hashtag.org reported that during that timeframe, over 12,000 tweets had mentioned that hashtag. When observing this topic on Twitter, tweeters would ask open-ended questions like, “what will Ezra do when he finds out?” to engage with the rest of the tweeters viewing the show.

During the premiere episode, @ABCfp11 brought back the hashtag #ShirtlessToby which had been used in previous seasons, by tweeting it when Spencer and Toby are in the hot tub together. This sparked the interest of followers and soon

#ShirtlessToby was a trending topic worldwide. This hashtag has seen previous success in trending, which may have been why ABC Family decided to use it once again. The show's demographic, being mostly female, is motivated to use this hashtag because Toby is known for being a very attractive male character. When his shirt comes off in an episode, the discussion about it increases, which is shown in the Social TV Conversation Trend line (Figure 1). As for this particular hashtag, comments are usually made about the character instead of viewers asking questions. The show attempts to make great use of their hashtags by using them at the right moment in the episode. Other hashtags that aren't shown on air as well are ones generated by the actors of *Pretty Little Liars*.



(Figure 1) This chart explains where the peak of discussion was during “She’s Better Now.” (Bluefin Lab chart in Seles)

As for the second episode, “Mona Mania,” #bewareofmona and #chasinga were the network-generated hashtags. #bewareofmona appears when Hanna confronts Lucas, her socially awkward friend, about her knowing he was in the basement of the school when the four girls were there searching for Ali’s diary. An uneasy Lucas has a conversation about how it is impossible to stop Mona. #bewareofmona appears when Lucas talks about trying anything he can to stop her and says “as long as Mona is back here we are not safe.” Last season, the four girls found out that Mona was “A” and she attempted to push Spencer off Look Out Point. Ever since then, they have not trusted her because they do not know what she is capable of doing to them. I think that ABC Family chose to place the hashtag here so viewers can discuss the information Lucas told Hanna. Viewers also find out that Lucas blew up the shed in the previous episode in order to scare Mona so this is also up for discussion. @t\_haitsma brought this up in his tweet saying, “We should all #bewareofmona. And who thought Lucas blew up the shed #prettylittleliars.” These are the kinds of tweets ABC Family is aiming for because the hashtags are allowing the users to engage with the plot. ABC Family pinpoints the discussion by providing hashtags during certain scenes that cause excitement or are suspenseful. By acknowledging that these scenes will promote discussion, they are organizing the ongoing conversation into one place by providing a hashtag. Since there is a designated hashtag for the topic, it’s easier to find and ABC Family attempts to keep this particular conversation in one place.

The hashtag #chasinga appears when Emily starts chasing a black-hooded figure that is presumed to be “A” through the woods. The scene is very suspenseful and the hashtag gives the audience a prompt to discuss Emily’s actions. While searching this

hashtag on Twitter, I found that many people commented on how brave Emily was for going after the “A” figure into the woods. @VenlVidVlssa tweeted, “Emily #ChasingA?! She’s been super ballsy lately, I love it! Lol #pll.” @ABCFpll also retweeted this opinion. Many people also had opinions on how it was a bad idea to leave the car in the middle of the woods and chase “A.” @Jullllia commented on this tweeting “makes perfect sense to leave your car parked in the middle of a dark scary forest. OH, and #chasingA through the woods sounds fun too.” The varieties of opinions from viewers are shown within these hashtags and allow a place for everyone to express their thoughts. It seems as though @ABCFpll encourages these opinionated responses to get the reactions of their viewers. Stuart Hall would describe this process as part of encoding/decoding the hashtags ABC Family displays on screen (Hall, 53). When the show displays the hashtag on the screen, they are encoding a message to the viewers, which then allows viewers to decode the message by tweeting their own opinions. ABC Family could also be picking and choosing which messages they want to convey to their viewers. For instance @VenlVidVlssa was retweeted, which was an approving comment of Emily’s actions while @Jillllia’s sarcastic tweet was not. It is not entirely clear how @ABCFpll decides which tweets to retweet, but they do have the ability to select the ones they would like to display.

The @ABCFpll account also participates in the network-generated hashtags by stating the hashtag and adding their own input or comment about it to entice viewers. @ABCFpll acts as if they are viewers to by tweeting hashtags and sometimes adding their own comments. By @ABCFpll participating, it engages viewers to participate in the backchannel. For “She’s Better Now,” @ABCFpll tweeted, “#MonaisBack! Mona 2.0

#PrettyLittleLiars” During “Mona Mania,” @ABCFpll’s tweet using the hashtag was just “BewareofMona #pLL” and their other tweet was, “#ChasingA is never a good idea! #PLL” The network possibly tweeted using #pLL and #PrettyLittleLiars because they are very frequently mentioned hashtags. According to Rachel Charatan of Bluefin Labs, from June 5, 2012 to the present, #pll was the most common hashtag. Tweeting using these two hashtags increases the chances of one of the *Pretty Little Liars*’ hashtags to trend. Users can search #PLL or #PrettyLittleLiars to see what is being talked about from the show and then can see the network-generated hashtags from that episode. Using those two hashtags also increase visibility because they are so popular.

The actors of the show use their own versions of hashtags that they tweet with every time they view an episode live. @shaymitch has a very popular one that even became the number one trending topic on Twitter by the end of the winter premiere. @shaymitch uses #PLLAYWithShay at the end of her tweets when live tweeting during the show. She encourages followers to use it by rewarding certain users with a retweet. Marwick and boyd discuss in their article how retweeting and replying to followers gives fans a feeling of intimacy and a social bond with them. @shaymitch even calls her followers ‘Mitchies’ after her last name Mitchell. This is a practice many celebrities have taken on when addressing their devote fans; Marwick and boyd use the example of Mariah Carey addressing her fans as her ‘lambs.’ @shaymitch not only retweets, but @shaymitch encourages her followers to ask her questions about her life and the show. For example, @shaymitch retweeted @heyheyziam who asked “how do you like working with Keegan? :-) #PLLAYWithShay” to which she responded, “I love working w/ everyone in the cast, they’re all A-mazing ;)” Her response features a play on words, with

“A-mazing” referencing to “A.” A Emoticon that is winking is added to the end of the tweet just to reemphasize her writing “A-mazing.” @shaymitch encourages her followers to tweet at her using #PLayWithShay by responding to a number of people throughout the episode. Although the use of hashtags in tweets is not always necessary to get noticed by the official *Pretty Little Liars*’ accounts, I have noticed that @shaymitch will only retweet users that put the hashtag #PLayWithShay in their tweets while viewing the episodes live. The reasoning behind this is because the more people that use this hashtag, the more likely it is for it to become a trending topic. @shaymitch will ask her followers to get #PLayWithShay trending by retweeting or @replying her using the hashtag. During “Mona Mania,” she tweeted, “Let’s get this trending!! #PLayWithShay xxx.” @shaymitch has been successful in getting her hashtag to trend; in “She’s Better Now,” #PLayWithShay became the number one trending topic around 8:50pm. The hashtag also was trending around the same time during “Mona Mania.” By encouraging followers to tweet with this hashtag, @shaymitch has created publicity for herself and the show.

The language that @ashbenzo and @shaymitch use when talking to their followers is very casual and friendly. Marwick and boyd refer to this as affiliation, because the actors are using words and conventions that their followers would normally use. A discussion between a fan and the actors “de-pathologizes the parasocial and recontextualizes it within a medium the follower may use to talk to real-life acquaintances” (Marwick and boyd, 148). For example, @Ashbenzo refers to her grandmother on the show when she sings the national anthem by tweeting “my gram is werrrrking that song.” She is not only engaging in what is occurring in the episode, but

@Ashbenzo is also using slang that her followers would understand. In response to this tweet, @Ashbenzo retweets @peace\_love\_alex tweeting “hannah’s grandma is absolutely adorable! WERK THAT ANTHEM GRANDMA MARIN!!” This tweet shows the affiliation between @Ashbenzo and her followers by using the same casual language. In another example, @sabrina\_1118 asks @Ashbenzo “serious question: do you keep the clothes you wear on set they’re hella cute,” to which @Ashbenzo replies, “no...i wish @sabrina\_1118.” The way that @sabrina\_1118 talks to @Ashbenzo is as if she is good friends with the actor. These examples show how Twitter gives fans access to their favorite celebrities. Although this particular user didn’t use any hashtags, @Ashbenzo may have just been going through her @replies and decided to answer her question. The casual language used in tweets allows followers to discuss the show as if they were just talking to their friends, which is what Marwick and Boyd imply by affiliation and connections with followers. @ABCfp11 uses casual language in their tweets but punctuation and proper grammar are used more frequently. They bring in casual language by calling their followers “Little Liars.” Their tweets are used to represent the overall *Pretty Little Liars* franchise, while @Ashbenzo and @shaymitch have more freedom expressing their thoughts. @shaymitch will tweet “this is my fav part!” just like @Ashbenzo will tweet “oh toby...how you frustrate me...grrrrrrrrrrrrr.” These tweets are from actual people whereas @ABCfp11 represents *Pretty Little Liars* as a whole.

Although a majority of viewers that participate in the constant discussion of *Pretty Little Liars* are fans, the success of the show on Twitter has caused a backlash of tweets from Twitter users who don’t participate in discussing or watching the show. For

example, many Twitter users will write tweets complaining using the words “PLL” or “Pretty Little Liars.” By tweeting or mentioning these words, they are still contributing to this topic trending. Therefore, users should not mention “Pretty Little Liars” if they do not want the topic to trend because then these users would still be contributing to the backchannel. By just mentioning “Pretty Little Liars,” even in a derogatory tweet, saying the name will boost its chances of trending. Every tweet about *Pretty Little Liars* is included among the majority of positive or neutral tweets concerning the show.

According to data from Bluefin Labs, the mid-season premiere episode contained 26% positive comments, 63% neutral comments, and 11% negative comments. Other tweets I have observed are users stating that they are tweeting solely because the network told them to. They are referring to the alert-like tweets that pop up within the episodes. For example, @alexirland tweeted “according to ABC Family im supposed to hashtag #chasinga.” I again observed another tweet like this one from the hashtag #bewareofmona from @ThatgirlSHANA who says, “Tweeting #BewareOfMona because ABC Family told me to.” Users tweeting this are stating that they know ABC Family wants them to engage in conversation about the show over Twitter. It seems that people who tweet this want their followers to be aware that they know this by saying it in a sarcastic sort of way. This also relates to Stuart Hall’s discussion of negotiated encoding/decoding, where readers do acknowledge the message but do not accept it the way the encoder intended to (Hall, 60). In this case, the tweeters understood that ABC Family wanted them to discuss the show, but these particular tweeters chose not to and instead responded sarcastically. Regardless, tweeting with the hashtag only increases this topic’s chances of trending and becoming the most talked about.

Even after the show is aired, the *Pretty Little Liar's* franchise seems the most interested in keeping the conversation going beyond just during the episode by addressing anything related to *Pretty Little Liars* during the time episodes are not being aired. The actors and the official @ABCFpll account will thank the viewers for watching the most recently aired episode. @Ashbenzo tweeted after the first episode aired, "So much fun watching the #PLL premiere w/u guys! Keep sending your theories for next week's #TheoryTuesday" She is letting her followers know just how much she appreciates the live discussion of the show, and also invites them to further discuss the episode with a created hashtag called #TheoryTuesday since the show airs on Tuesdays. This hashtag is used for fans to guess what will happen in next week's episode by posting from when the episode they just watched ends until next Tuesday. This is how *Pretty Little Liars* keeps the conversation going way after the episode has been aired. @ABCFpll tweeted numerous times about the mid-season premiere the day after with links to watch the episode and retweets from fans expressing their thoughts. The account also takes the time to thank their followers for getting them to trend all over Twitter during the premiere. Their effort to keep the discussion going is also seen in this tweet that says, "RETWEET if you were as obsessed with last night's flashbacks as we were! #PrettyLittleLiars." Again, the hashtag #PrettyLittleLiars is used because it is easy to search and contains the name of the show. Initiating a continuous discussion and asking viewers for their theories on the next episode creates that feeling of a community and gives them the option to voice their opinions.

## **Conclusion**

Through my analysis of *Pretty Little Liars*, I have attempted to show the extensive use of social television from this show and how engagement on Twitter is used to spark

conversation among fans. The hashtags provided by the network, which are shown at strategic times, are a huge part of the ongoing discussion occurring on Twitter. Although fans may not be having conversations with each other through the hashtags, they are still letting their opinions be heard by writing their thoughts about the show while including the suggested hashtag. Suggested and frequently used hashtags such as #PLL and #PrettyLittleLiars are guaranteed to be seen because, as Page discusses, hashtags are searchable and visible.

The scholarship that I have researched thoroughly backs up my analysis because the literature discusses how Twitter creates a feeling of intimacy between fans and celebrities. Viewing the show and live tweeting with the actors creates the idea that fans have formed this virtual friendship with the actors. Marwick and boyd's research particularly backs up this feeling of friendship with their discussion of fans having casual conversations with celebrities.

A key piece of scholarship that greatly influenced my research was Prolux and Sherpatin's book discussing social television. Fans thoroughly engage when watching shows and live tweeting because they become a part of the "real-time experience." They connect with a community that is also watching the show live. This concept, along with affiliating with official members of the *Pretty Little Liar's* community, is a part of the major themes I have touched upon in my analysis. This scholarship has helped lead me to one of my major findings: that fans of the show would rather watch the show live so they do not miss out on the interactions that take place on social media. Complications with watching the show live are that the show airs on the East coast at 8pm first and then at 8pm on the West coast, so the tweets of viewers and the official accounts that watch

during East coast time could potentially spoil the show for the West coast. Viewing the show online also brings in difficulties because a majority of online versions do not have the network-generated hashtags displayed. I observed sites such as Hulu and the hashtags were not provided while watching the show. Fans strive to be a part of a community that discusses the show and do not want to be left out of the live discussions taking part using network generated hashtags. The constant updates from official accounts and engaging questions are what make fans so responsive and willing to be social while watching their favorite television show. Although fans have the ability to search the hashtags at a later date on Twitter, their input would not be part of the real time backchannel, and therefore, would miss voicing their opinion that could possibly be heard by an actor or the @ABCFpll account. This is why DVRing the show and watching it later causes viewers to miss out on the real-time backchannel. Although they have the ability to see the hashtags, they are no longer relevant because the discussion occurred when the show originally aired.

As for initiating conversation, *Pretty Little Liar's* official Twitter, along with the actors of the show, attempt conversation by asking viewers questions about the show and encouraging them to respond. Actors Shay Mitchell and Ashley Benson highly encourage fans to ask them questions and respond to their tweets during the live airing of the episodes by retweeting selected fans. Through my analysis I have noticed that official accounts start conversation about the show hours before the new episodes air. The constant buildup and excitement about the new episode is what encourages fans to tweet.

Just a single episode of *Pretty Little Liars* generates over 1.4 million tweets, so it is nearly impossible to analyze all of them. This is why I limited my study to observe two

actors' accounts, along with the @ABCFpll account. When searching how other Twitter users used the hashtags, I selected only the first page of each hashtag to look at. Future studies may want to observe a bigger sample of the hashtags to have a clearer idea of how these hashtags are used. For the purpose of my study, selecting only a few of these hashtagged tweets helped to me generate the data that I needed for my analysis.

Furthermore, analyzing user-created hashtags could be beneficial, especially ones like "Time for PLL," because this particular one ended up trending on Twitter in the United States. Research can also be done on how tweets affect the West coast airing of *Pretty Little Liars*, such as looking at if the discussion about the hashtags is similar or different since these same topics were just discussed 3 hours earlier on the East coast. The official accounts can also be looked at and if they just restate their tweets or if they bring up new points to engage and discuss.

To further examine how *Pretty Little Liars* uses social media to spark conversation about their show, research can be conducted on the other social media sites that the actors bring up in their tweets. For example, @ashbenzo states "I will be live "keeking" during the #PLL premiere! Follow me on Keek to tune in!" Research done on how *Pretty Little Liars* integrates other social media sites into Twitter by providing links such as Instagram or Keek could help to better understand how this show became the most social show in television history. As the seasons progress and the show moves onto its fourth season, the show has attempted many new social media tactics, such as creating a fake Twitter account for a character on the show and creating live Q&A sessions between actors and fans. What's so fascinating about this topic is new ways to socially communicate with fans on the Internet are constantly emerging and official accounts urge

their fans to keep up with the new technologies they present to them, so research can always be conducted on these new sites.

Towards the end of my research, I discovered that Nielsen, assisted by SocialGuide's data, will be teaming up with Twitter and launching the Nielsen Twitter TV Rating. *Entertainment Weekly* calls it an "industry-standard metric" and a "complement" to the traditional TV rating (Stransky, 33). This program will attempt to decipher how the social media buzz actually affects TV ratings. It will also look at how advertisers integrate their ads onto multiple platforms to cater to second-screen experiences. Since this program will be out after my thesis is completed, further research using this program can be conducted to officially prove if social media affects ratings.

After analyzing how *Pretty Little Liars* engages viewers in conversation with the social media site Twitter, I have found that network-generated hashtags help to facilitate the ongoing discussion of the live episode. With official accounts constantly engaging users with questions, it is allowing users to know that they should express their opinions on Twitter while also using the suggested hashtag. *Pretty Little Liars* also opens discussion about what fans think will happen in following episodes by using the hashtag #TheoryTuesday. When the actual episode is airing live, the suggested hashtags on the screen, along with constant posts from official accounts, often using suggested hashtags, is what engages fans to communicate their thoughts on Twitter. This knowledge about how the show uses Twitter can help other television shows revamp their presence on social media. This also leads to the question, will *Pretty Little Liars* continue this social media strategy into the fourth season, or will their presence on Twitter change? With technology constantly changing, *Pretty Little Liars*' official accounts may continue to

present new social sites via Twitter. As for now, #PLL as well as other related hashtags, can almost be expected to be seen trending on Twitter during the airing of new episodes. The strategic use of Twitter by *Pretty Little Liars* has greatly helped amplify their backchannel and create ongoing discussion during live episodes through fan to celebrity interactions, retweets and most importantly, hashtags.

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