

Chapter 86

Gendered Representations of Fandom: How Female Fan Identity Is Constructed in Mixed-Gender Online Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Lost is a transgeneric, transmedia television drama that aired from 2004 to 2010, a period which coincided with the emergence of several participatory online Web 2.0 platforms including blogs, forums, YouTube, and Twitter. Thus, Lost audiences used various platforms to form communities and discuss the show. This chapter analyzes the discursive practices of audiences that compose the transgeneric audience discourse of Lost, and the tensions that arise when romance fans and science fiction/mystery fans are situated in conflicted positions regarding certain storylines. The analysis provides a critical discursive perspective that demonstrates that gender dynamics plays a role in interpreting the material related to fiction and the points of view of the other fan groups. The audience discourse that is shaped and negotiated by men and women who deliberate the so-called gendered interests in online mixed-gender platforms offer insights into how female audiences use online discussion platforms to empower themselves by constructing their identities as equal audience groups with legitimate interests.

INTRODUCTION

The availability of digital technologies that enable easier access to making and sharing information has transformed television into what can be termed ‘post-network television’ (Lotz, 2007; Gray et al., 2009; Murphy 2011). Transmedia television is an example of how post-network television makes use of digital technology to disperse production, as well as how audiences use such technology to experience and engage with televisual narratives (Jenkins, 2009; Mittell & Gray, 2006). Such transmedia productions often feature complex narratives (Mittell, 2006) and require audiences to pay attention, perform tasks, and use digital media in order to make sense of the narrative. These complex narratives of post-network

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television, including *Lost* (2004–2010), often incorporate several genre traits and conventions so as to reach multiple audience groups (Johnson, 2011). Louisa Ellen Stein describes the way in which such television productions mix generic discourses in text and meta-text to blur generic divisions (Stein, 2008). The transgenericism of transmedia television is evident in the discourses produced by the industry, the producers, and the audiences (Mitell, 2007). Here, genre is seen as a series of discursive threads that are produced by fans, audiences, critics, producers, and the media industry rather than as categorizations that are derived from the text (Mittell, 2001; Stein, 2008). On the one hand, the transgenericism in *Lost*, a show which depicts a group of plane crash survivors' adventures on a mysterious island, has utilized the feminized genre traits and content of soap operas, such as serialization and character drama. On the other hand it has also included a number of conventionally masculinized genre themes, such as action-adventure and science fiction, among others (Johnson, 2011). These generic traits have traditionally been seen as gender-specific interests with a pronounced devaluation of soap opera as a female-oriented genre; therefore, the transgeneric narrative of *Lost* is susceptible to clashes of interests among audience groups. In these clashes it is often the feminized genre traits and the female audiences who advocate for them that are in a position to negotiate the legitimacy of this focus in the series. Online participation in mixed-gender blogs and forums offer a site for these negotiations where different audience groups of *Lost*, each of whom have different genre interests, negotiate their identities as fans when they participate in online discussions among mixed-gender groups. If such sites of struggle in media texts, specifically gender conflicts in online media, offer the resources for active audiences to construct positions of empowerment (Duncan & Brummett, 1993), then online *Lost* deliberations can offer insights into how female audience groups shape empowerment through textual representation of audience identity.

This chapter studies *Lost* audiences who produce discursive manifestations of their interests and reception of generic themes in *Lost*. An empirical study of data collected from participating audiences can demonstrate how gender and generic themes intersect and how audiences make sense of this intersection. Following Lisbeth Van Zoonen's feminist challenge to move beyond gender-specific domains of audience discourse and identity (2011), this chapter pinpoints how gender plays out in the textual representation of discourse in purportedly gender-neutral platforms as sites of social interaction. These public platforms provide valuable datasets that can help answer the following key question that is relevant to this study: how can female audience agency manifest itself in audience groups where a male-oriented interest is assumed to be dominant? What role do digital media play in empowering female audience of the so-called lesser interests?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used in order to discover which genres fans draw on to form their discourse as well as which genre discourses 'compete' and interact. CDA is also used to analyze how these interactions reflect gender and fan identity. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 2000; Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002) focuses on the role of discursive practices in sustaining the social order and/or constituting social change; furthermore, it posits that the relationship between texts and social practice is mediated by discursive practice. As Phillips and Jørgensen observed, '... it is only through discursive practice – whereby people use language to produce and consume texts – that texts shape, and are shaped by social practice' (2002, 69). In light of this principle, the discourse analysis in this chapter will focus on the formation of genre discourse as a sociocultural practice which reflects the questions of gender and fan identity. The gender-neutral online blog DarkUFO, where several fan groups have visited to read and comment on specific information related to *Lost* episodes called 'spoilers', has been selected as the site of discourse production (Mittell & Gray, 2007). Spoilers offer a gender-neutral field of production to analyze audience discourse. Data

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