

#PrettyLittleLiars:

ABC Family in TV's Post-Network Era

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the branding of ABC Family as a home for ‘Millennial’ viewers through its original TV drama programme, *Pretty Little Liars*. ABC Family emerged during what Amanda Lotz (2007) terms the ‘post-network’ era of American television, a period that has been characterised by fierce inter-network competition and the availability of TV programming on a larger array of platforms, including online platforms. These revolutionary changes have been coupled with the emergence of a commercially desirable demographic known as the ‘Millennials’, a group of young people who are considered to be ‘native’ to this ‘post-network’ environment and whose media use and preferences are challenging networks to revise their strategies and develop programmes that aim to solicit their attention and engagement.

Pretty Little Liars has been specifically constructed to assert the brand identity of ABC Family as a channel “for and about Millennials” (Liesse A2). This programme has sought to distinguish itself within teen-oriented TV drama by incorporating cinematic aesthetics, serial storytelling, narrative complexity, and intertextuality – all of which have been characteristic of adult-oriented ‘high-end’ TV drama in the ‘post-network’ era. *Pretty Little Liars* has supplemented these efforts to distinguish itself by cultivating a thriving online presence. Important to this online presence are the use of ‘transmedia storytelling’ and social media. As this thesis demonstrates, transmedia storytelling and social media have the capacity to significantly extend the experience of a TV programme beyond what is aired on television. Importantly, their deployment in support of *Pretty Little Liars* has been successful in encouraging consistent viewing of new episodes as they are broadcast, a pattern that persists despite the post-network era’s capacity for delayed viewing on alternative platforms.

This thesis undertakes an in-depth examination of ABC Family’s ‘post-network’ strategy in three chapters, each of which takes a different critical

perspective. Chapter One examines the internal and external challenges that contributed to the emergence of ABC Family's rebranding. Chapter Two analyses *Pretty Little Liars* as a 'high end' teen-oriented TV drama that functions to elevate the profile of ABC Family while simultaneously engaging 'Millennial' viewers. Finally, Chapter Three explores the transmedia extensions of *Pretty Little Liars* that function to supplement the television narrative in ways that encourage and reward consistent viewing patterns and long-term loyalty.

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Introduction

When viewers in the United States want to ‘watch TV’, they are faced with seemingly unlimited options in terms of what programme to watch and through what device. Viewers can choose between the programmes airing ‘live’ on broadcast, ‘basic cable’ and ‘premium cable’ channels. The Internet provides additional video-on-demand and subscription-video-on-demand services, even as it also enables illegal and unprofitable options such as file sharing, all of which allow viewers to pick specific programmes that they wish to view at a given moment. In addition to these options, time-shifting technologies give viewers the ability to customise their viewing patterns in ways that suit their personal schedules and lifestyle. Important to this flexibility is the fact that technology has evolved to allow television programmes to be viewed on mobile devices and laptops. Drawing viewers away from the traditional TV set and from linear schedules, these additional viewing options are challenging historic notions of what it means to watch television.

This is the experience of television in what Amanda Lotz has termed the ‘post-network era’, a period in television history that began in 2005 and has only continued to evolve to include more options to give viewers the ability to “select what, when, and where to view from abundant options” over the last decade (15). The name ‘post-network’ recognises an erosion of the oligarchical power of the original ‘big three’ broadcast networks (CBS, NBC and ABC) in this American television industry environment. However, as Lotz underlines, the ‘post-network’ label does not suggest the end of broadcast television, but rather a decline in the “control over how and when viewers watch particular programs” that broadcast networks enjoyed in past decades (15).

The proliferation of American TV channels and services has been accompanied by the digitisation of content, which has enabled TV programmes to be accessed through other devices that can now function as viewing

platforms alternative to those for traditional broadcast and cable television. These platforms have also allowed programmes to be watched outside of the particular channel schedule for which they were created. The additional platforms, combined with the expansion of TV channels and services, encourage increased production of original TV programmes, thus generating a sense of abundant options for viewers. However, this rapid growth in programme and platform choice has also brought fierce inter-network and multi-platform competition. A key consequence has been an unparalleled and ongoing level of audience fragmentation. This development means that television, which has traditionally operated as a 'mass medium', no longer has the same capacity to attain the large and broad audiences implied by this tradition.

In addition, the emergence of a young adult demographic known as the 'Millennials', a generation born between 1982 and 2002 which has grown up immersed in the post-network environment, has further intensified the challenges for competing TV networks. Jane Feuer observes that since the 1970s, young adult, urban viewers have been considered 'quality demographics' because of their desirability to advertisers (4). However, Lotz explains that Millennials have been accustomed to the regular use of "a range of communication technologies from birth", this enabling them to move "fluidly and fluently" across different platforms and services in order to customise their viewing experience (17). These reception behaviours have cultivated the perception that Millennials do not engage with television in the same way as their predecessors (Lotz 18). Millennials are perceived as 'native' to this current television environment and thus the young adult demographic, which for almost five decades has been considered by the television industry as one of its most valuable audience segments, has become the very segment that most embodies the significant challenges of television's post-network era.

With so many TV channels and platforms vying for viewer attention, it has become crucial for television networks to develop a clear brand identity that is coherent across different platforms in order to distinguish itself and its programmes from the wide array of options available. The pursuit of the young adult demographic across this wide array of viewing options constitutes an unprecedented challenge for the television industry. Attracting the Millennials demands a network strategy that can not only appeal to their programming preferences but can also address their viewing patterns, including the regular use of websites and social media.

One channel that has been especially successful in capturing the attention of the Millennial demographic is ABC Family. ABC Family is a basic cable channel that since 2006 has explicitly deployed what it has termed a 'Millennial strategy' (Liesse A4). This strategy involves commissioning original dramas that appeal to Millennials and supplementing these dramas with online features that expand the experience of the programme on to other platforms. Former ABC Family President Paul Lee asserts: "We market to [Millennials] on all platforms [and we] tell them stories on all platforms" (Liesse A4). This thesis seeks to explore ABC Family's post-network and multi-platform strategy. In particular, it will argue that ABC Family has tailored *Pretty Little Liars* (2010 – present) to be distinctive in ways that specifically target, attract and engage Millennial viewers.

Pretty Little Liars (2010 – present) is a programme that has become enormously popular with young adult audiences and in 2014, it became the number two cable series for women 12 – 34 (Kissell, "ABC Family Finishes"). It tells the story of a group of teenage girls (Aria, Spencer, Hanna and Emily) who live in an affluent small town named Rosewood. The programme begins one year after the disappearance and presumed murder of their friend and leader Alison DiLaurentis. On the anniversary of her disappearance, the members of her former clique begin receiving messages from a cyber-bully known only as 'A'

who threatens to reveal their secrets. Although the programme continues to address similar issues portrayed in other teen dramas, it is arguable that part of the reason for its popularity with Millennial viewers is the unique way in which this programme combines the familiar elements of a teen-oriented drama with the characteristics of today's 'high-end' drama.

Trisha Dunleavy argues that 'high-end' dramas are imbued with 'must-see' allure that engenders 'addictive' weekly viewing, are often created by high-profile writers and directors with 'auteur credentials', involve a 'cinematic' visual quality, and deploy a 'complex' narrative structure that demands a higher level of engagement (*Television Drama* 211 – 222). In the post-network era, 'high-end' drama programmes are used to attract adult audiences, specifically "well-educated viewers with higher levels of disposable income" (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 199). *Pretty Little Liars* deploys the above narrative and aesthetic characteristics of 'high-end' drama as a way to assert its sophistication and status within the teen drama genre.

The programme's use of film noir references, flashbacks and multi-season story arcs is a reflection of the expectation that Millennials are media literate. Millennials are expected to be "the smartest, best-educated young adults in U.S. history" (Strauss and Howe, *Millennials Go to College* 60). Combined with the fact that Millennials are perceived to have grown up in a media-saturated environment, there is therefore an expectation that Millennial viewers have the capacity to comprehend the more challenging storytelling techniques deployed by *Pretty Little Liars* in order to ensure that every episode is an 'unmissable' event.

Pretty Little Liars further asserts its sophistication within teen TV drama by using its complex narrative to address contemporary issues that are considered important to Millennial viewers. For example, the programme has been

nominated three times for Outstanding Drama Series in the GLAAD Media Awards for its portrayal of same-sex relationships. One of the main storylines in *Pretty Little Liars* is Emily's struggle with keeping her sexual orientation a secret in the face of the threat of exposure by 'A'. The mystery of *Pretty Little Liars* is therefore able to function as a point of departure for audience talk about teen sexuality. In addition to elevating the profile of the programme through innovative storytelling techniques, narrative complexity asserts its sophistication by addressing modern issues in ways that attract critical acclaim. Because of this heightened level of sophistication, *Pretty Little Liars* is also alluring for older viewers, as evidenced by its position as one of basic cable's top-five scripted series for women 18 – 49 in 2014 (Kissell, "ABC Family Finishes"). Since the programme premiered on ABC Family, *Pretty Little Liars* has won numerous Teen Choice Awards as well as several People's Choice Awards including 'Favourite Cable TV Drama', illustrating its appeal to its Millennial viewers.

The programme is also supplemented by online extensions that expand the narrative beyond the confines of TV drama text, aiming to encourage a heightened level of investment and continued engagement by viewers. Through this multi-platform strategy, ABC Family is able to use *Pretty Little Liars* to assert its position as "a network for and about Millennials" by capitalizing upon the Millennials' perceived fluency with technology (Liesse A2). This strategy is reflective of what Henry Jenkins refers to as 'cultural convergence'. Working in concert with the ability to access TV programmes through alternative devices, Jenkins argues that the circulation of media within culture has also changed, enabling stories to be developed across multiple platforms (Jenkins, "Convergence? I Diverge"). ABC Family takes full advantage of these possibilities in order to engage Millennial viewers. *Pretty Little Liars*, for example, uses both a web series and numerous social media extensions to supplement its narrative.

The Season Three web series, *Pretty Dirty Secrets*, functioned to expand the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* on to the ABC Family website. This series can be considered a form of what Jenkins refers to as ‘transmedia storytelling’. Jenkins argues that a transmedia story “unfolds across multiple media platforms” and that “[r]eading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption” (*Convergence Culture* 97 – 98). *Pretty Dirty Secrets* was uploaded on to the ABC Family website during the annual *Pretty Little Liars* summer hiatus, introducing a new character and various storylines that fed into the upcoming episodes. It functioned to ensure that viewers were engaging with the programme even when the show was off the air. The series was tailored to address a perceived Millennial tendency to move fluidly between different platforms, encouraging a greater investment in *Pretty Little Liars* by providing viewers with a deeper understanding of narrative developments and incentivising their viewing of future episodes.

Pretty Little Liars is also augmented by what Jason Mittell refers to as ‘transmedia extensions’. In contrast to transmedia stories, these texts are primarily designed to generate the kind of hype that works to promote a core text (Mittell, “Transmedia Storytelling”). Viewers can subscribe to *Pretty Little Liars*’ official accounts on platforms such as Snapchat, Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Each of these platforms provides information such as clues, behind-the-scenes content and even messages from the programme’s creators and actors. Lee believes that Millennials are “social networking all the time. They are likely to be using five pieces of equipment at the same time” (Liesse A6). ABC Family’s perception of Millennials as multi-taskers is reflected in its social media strategy. Even though the viewers are likely to be using multiple devices as they are watching the programme, ABC Family ensures that their activities are somehow related to what is on the screen.

Lee emphasises that the ABC Family brand is “about great storytelling, and community, and where those two things intersect” (Liesse A4). This strategy is particularly evident in how Twitter is integrated into *Pretty Little Liars*. During live broadcasts, *Pretty Little Liars* incorporates hashtag suggestions on-screen, giving viewers a code to use on Twitter in order to talk to fellow viewers as they are watching the programme. This strategy helps to connect viewers with one another to speculate about and discuss the events on-screen. This ensures that although viewers are simultaneously using other devices during the programme, they are still engaged with the story.

In addition, Twitter also gives viewers the ability to interact with actors during a live broadcast. These actors comment about the episode while answering fan questions, their ‘tweets’ functioning to encourage continued engagement throughout the episode. This Twitter engagement strategy has proved very successful for *Pretty Little Liars* as evidenced by the fact that it has become the most watched television telecast for females 12 – 34 for every episode it has aired since 2010 (Burt, “Pretty Little Liars Ratings”). In an age of audience fragmentation, *Pretty Little Liars* is not just attracting viewers, but also ensuring that these viewers are watching the episodes live thanks in part to the incorporation of social media strategies.

Pretty Little Liars has been specifically tailored to address the perceived tendencies of Millennials in order to attract and engage them in the post-network era. The programme’s incorporation of ‘high-end’ drama features into the teen-oriented narrative and its supplementary use of web platforms is designed to assert the identity of ABC Family as a home for Millennials and engage viewers in an era of fierce inter-network and multi-platform competition. This thesis undertakes an examination of ABC Family’s strategy in three chapters, each of which takes a different critical perspective.

Chapter One, “The Millennial Opportunity” examines the context in which ABC Family emerged. This chapter details the development of an unprecedented number of channels and the proliferation of digital technologies, beginning with what Lotz terms, ‘the multi-channel transition’ before analysing the post-network era and the ways in which the current period has required networks to develop a clear channel identity. It then analyses the discourse of the entertainment industry for the emerging ‘Millennial’ demographic by outlining William Strauss and Neil Howe’s generational archetype for this generation and the 2014 reports of Verizon Digital Media Services (*Millennials & Entertainment*) and Nielsen (*Millennials – Breaking the Myths*). Important to this is the question of how the television industry perceives the Millennials’ relationship with social media and how these ideas are reflected in the range of strategies being deployed to target viewers. The chapter concludes by outlining the unique challenges that led ABC Family to align their channel in order to target Millennial viewers.

Chapter Two, “ABC Family’s ‘Sophisticated’ Millennial Drama”, examines *Pretty Little Liars* as a teen-oriented example of ‘high-end’ drama. It outlines ABC Family’s initial attempts at original programming aimed at Millennials, acknowledging the contributions of *Greek* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* in distancing ABC Family from its origins as a channel for parents and their children. The chapter then takes an in-depth look at how *Pretty Little Liars* continues this tradition by incorporating elements into the programme more commonly found in adult-audience dramas aimed at affluent and educated viewers. These elements combine to give this programme a greater complexity and sophistication than its teen-oriented drama contemporaries. The chapter analyses the programme’s use of intertextuality and embedded intertextual clues as important indicators of this complexity and sophistication. Another example of these elements can be found in the narrative structure of the programme, specifically in its seasonal and inter-seasonal complexity, a feature

that needs to be balanced with the requirement that its serial narrative remains accessible to new viewers. This chapter uses its textual analysis of *Pretty Little Liars* to investigate how this programme has been constructed in order to create a narrative that is unparalleled among its teen drama contemporaries, elevating the profile of ABC Family while simultaneously creating an engaging experience for viewers.

Chapter Three, “Beyond TV: #PLL and *Pretty Dirty Secrets*”, explores how the *Pretty Little Liars* narrative is expanded and supplemented by the use of online platforms. It first considers how networks have deployed fan activities to generate hype and investment in their programmes before undertaking a close examination of ABC Family’s previous attempts to create a multi-platform experience, highlighting the key goals of these strategies. The chapter also explores how the web series *Pretty Dirty Secrets* expands the narrative in a way that deepens investment in the programme and generates hype for the upcoming season without distracting viewers from the unfolding core text. The chapter then focuses on *Pretty Little Liars*’ Twitter presence, using Porter et al’s ‘Scene Function Model’ to analyse how the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* is augmented in ways that encourage and reward consistent engagement and live viewing. Finally the chapter analyses the content of the tweets exchanged between viewers, actors, directors and producers in order to demonstrate how a sense of personal connection is constructed for viewers as a way to encourage long-term loyalty to the programme.

Chapter One:

The Millennial Opportunity

Introduction

The television industry during the 'post-network' era faces many challenges in attracting and engaging viewers. The intensification of inter-network competition, coupled with new technologies has generated a crucial need for a channel to establish a clear brand identity so as to distinguish itself amongst the array of other options. Working alongside these challenges is the emergence of the 'Millennial' demographic, as viewers who are "native" to this digital environment and are thus challenging the television industry to retool how these young adult viewers should be targeted. This chapter begins by investigating some of the factors that led to the fragmentation of audiences during American television's 'multi-channel transition' and 'post-network' eras. It will then discuss the characteristics of the 'Millennials', exploring their viewing patterns and overall value to the television industry. This discussion leads to a consideration of how courting 'Millennials' has affected the branding of ABC Family. It will analyse how the channel tailored its brand identity to this generation, using original programmes that speak to the perceived capacity of 'Millennials' to enjoy complex storytelling in concert with a multi-platform strategy that extends viewer experience on social media. By doing so, ABC Family transformed itself from an outlet for off-network shows to the provider of some of television's most popular original programmes.

Industry: Change, Competition, Choice and Control

ABC Family emerged during a phase of fierce inter-network competition and rapid technological change. What this environment created was the necessity for TV channels to develop a distinctive channel identity in order to attract an

audience in an increasingly fragmented and multi-platform market. However, before this situation emerged, the television industry first went through gradual technological and regulatory change beginning in the 1980s. Amanda Lotz calls this period, the ‘multi-channel transition’, an era that expanded viewer choice and control (245). During the first decades of television (from approximately 1952 through the mid-1980s) which Lotz terms ‘the network era’, the three largest American broadcast networks (CBS, ABC and NBC) competed almost exclusively with each other, enjoying a combined audience share of over 90 per cent (Hilmes 218). Consequently, the majority of viewers in the United States were likely to be watching the same programmes. However during the ‘multi-channel transition’ (the period of the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s), the percentage of those watching broadcast television declined from 90 to 64 (Lotz 13). This decline to the combined audience share of American broadcast networks was due to a range of factors.

Rogers et al explain that the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism in the late twentieth century shifted the imperative of the television industry from targeting mass audiences to one that values “niche marketing” (44). During the ‘network era’, American television was focused on maximising its audience share, usually providing “least objectionable programming” (LOP) in order to appeal to a broad range of viewers (Thompson 39). TV programmes that attract a large amount of viewers are very attractive for advertisers that wish to generate exposure for their products and, as an advertiser-funded medium, a large audience is very important to television. Jane Feuer observes that this perspective changed during the 1970s. Networks began to narrow their focus towards specific audience groups, favouring the targeting of particular demographics over attracting a mass audience (Feuer 3).

This led networks to begin pursuing ‘quality demographics’, the young adult, urban viewers who are extremely desirable for advertisers, which developed in

the 1980s and 1990s toward a particular focus on professionals aged 18-49 (Feuer 4). Trisha Dunleavy explains that advertisers were willing to pay a significantly larger amount in order to gain access to these viewers due to their higher disposable income and consumer power (*Television Drama* 140). Despite a smaller amount of viewers, the premium that advertisers are willing to pay to gain access to a desirable demographic proved more than enough to compensate for the decreased audience size. The descriptor 'quality' therefore refers to the advertisers perception of the value of this demographic. Feuer explains that as a result of this drive for 'quality' audiences, all three original broadcast networks began to push for 'relevance', adding programmes to their schedules that aimed to be more relatable to these young adult viewers (4). As a result, programme diversity began to increase as channels began to create programmes that were designed to target different segments within this 'quality demographic'.

The Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (Fin-Syn Rules) and the Prime Time Access Rule (PTAR) also fuelled this era's increase in diversity of television content. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) first established these rules in 1971 in an attempt to limit the oligarchical power of the original 'big three' networks and also increase the diversity of programming (McAllister). The Fin-Syn rules allowed broadcasters to only own 15 hours a week of non-news programmes (Hilmes 225). This meant that instead of in-house productions, broadcasters were required to acquire most programmes from independent producers thereby restricting vertical integration. In addition, these programmes could only be bought for a limited time. After the first run, the rights to the programme reverted back to the producer, allowing them to profit from selling the show into syndication (Hilmes 225). Working in concert with the Fin-Syn rule, PTAR required networks to dedicate the 7 – 8pm primetime slot of affiliate stations to air its own local programming (such as half-hour local news

programmes) or buy either 'first-run' (new) or 'off-network' (re-run) programmes from the newly independent producers (Hilmes 225).

These regulations paved the way for encouraging competition and increasing diversity in programme form and style. It did so by spreading production over a much larger amount of providers and also producing for a range of channel schedules. Cable channels were exempt from the Fin-Syn rules and it is arguable that the regulations further promoted competition by creating an incentive for the creation of these alternative channels. By 1985, cable penetration had reached almost 50 per cent of homes in the United States (Hilmes 251). These channels gave viewers access to more specialised programming. Unlike the broadcasters, cable channels were given the ability to purchase and own programmes, allowing them to recoup their investments and make a profit without any restrictions (Laffer). The Hollywood studios (such as Tri Star Pictures in 1982) were producing content for cable and first-run syndication but gradually began to move into cable channel ownership (Hilmes 245 – 246). Thus, new cable channels, including subscription-funded channels, began to emerge, adding to the array of viewer options. After achieving what they had been designed to do, Fin-Syn and PTAR were first relaxed and ultimately withdrawn in 1995 (McAllister).

With the renewed ability for broadcasters to produce primetime programming in-house, producers Warner Bros and Paramount also decided to create their own broadcast channels, The WB (1995) and UPN (1995), to ensure continued distribution of their content. Along with Fox (1986), which emerged during the liberalisation of American media regulations, these new broadcast networks targeted broad but differentiated audience segments. Fox originally aimed its programming at the "young black urban market" (Hilmes 296). UPN was created for males 18 – 49 and The WB emerged as a network for 12 – 34 year olds (Hilmes 297). The emergence of new broadcast networks and of many new

cable channels combined to erode first the dominance and ultimately the combined audience shared of the 'big three'. The consequent gradual process of audience fragmentation intensified network competition, giving viewers a wider range of programme choice.

In addition to these industrial and institutional factors, new technologies also began to emerge during the 1980s and 1990s. These developments led to a significant shift away from the historic tendencies of television 'flow' that Raymond Williams outlined in 1975. 'Flow' was a marked feature of the environment of relative channel scarcity that, in American television, is represented by the network era. Writing at a time of peak impact for channel scarcity, Williams positioned 'flow' as "the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form" (86). The concept of 'flow' operates on the idea that viewer attention is focused on one TV channel for the evening, relying heavily on the programme schedule. The programmes and the advertising all blend together in a seamless fashion, seducing viewers into a continuous pattern of viewing.

The new technologies during the late stages of the network era and the dawn of the multi-channel transition gave TV audiences more control over their activities. Remote control devices became standard in the 1980s, allowing viewers to switch between available programmes (Lotz 13). Additionally, the 1980 introduction of VCRs provided the ability to time-shift, stripping TV programmes from their channel schedules. This technology enabled viewers to choose when to watch specific programmes, in addition to allowing them to archive what they have recorded and build "personal libraries" (13). It was the VCR that established the option of 'time-shifting', whereby viewers could watch and re-watch programmes at their own convenience. VCRs also contributed to the increasing entertainment industry competition by giving viewers the alternative option of watching movies at home (Hilmes 251).

By the late 1990s, these technologies had matured into more sophisticated devices under the new influence of digitisation. The 1997 introduction of Digital Video Discs (DVDs) to North American markets provided an alternative to videotape cassettes, enabling TV programmes to be viewed in their entirety without delay or commercial interruption. Additionally, Digital Video Recorders (DVRs) such as TiVo (introduced in 1999) can be programmed to record programmes and automatically evade advertising content, essentially creating a personalised schedule for the viewer. Time-shifting technologies changed the very nature of television. Their effect has been not only to separate programmes from their originating schedule but also to allow viewers to skip the advertisements that have funded commercial broadcast channels since television's inception.

American cable channels and their carriage systems were also maturing. The amount of cable channels began to grow and targeting became narrower than ever. For example in the early 2000s, three channels – Lifetime (1984), WE (1997) and Oxygen (2000) – were all specifically targeting women with clearly differentiated programming in order to satisfy divergent interests (Lotz 15). Trisha Dunleavy explains, “the take-up of cable TV was strongest in more affluent homes, a trend which, as cable saturation increased, threatened to erode the value of broadcast TV's advertising slots” (*Television Drama* 135). Cable channels that were able to successfully cultivate niche audiences became fiercely competitive in the television industry, drawing viewers away from broad-audience broadcast channels.

These developments paved the way for the digital era of television, and for what Lotz terms the ‘post-network’ era (the period 2005 - present), as one that saw an intensification of the factors that changed the American television industry during the multi-channel transition. In addition to providing viewers with unprecedented choice and control, Lotz observes that this era brought viewers

convenience, customisation and community (245), the first two of which were inherited directly from the previous era's advancements in choice and control. By 2005, audiences had an unprecedented number of channels and devices through which they could access programmes. In addition to growing inter-network competition, the digitisation of content has meant that there is no singular mode of viewing (Lotz 16). iTunes and the increased popularity of DVDs allow viewers to customise their viewing schedule by choosing specific programmes to purchase. This method of accessing content can be considered a "bookstore" model of television, allowing viewers to personalise their viewing activities (Newcomb 575 - 576).

The digitisation of media content (what Henry Jenkins calls 'technological convergence') has played an important role in expanding and diversifying the range of platforms through which viewers can access TV content during the post-network era (Convergence? I Diverge). This digitisation has led to the development of Internet viewing options, central to which have been Video-on-demand (VoD) websites and subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services (the dominant current example of which is Netflix). Illegal options such as file sharing and streaming from unauthorised websites also became available for viewers. Additionally, mobile devices, notably tablets and smart phones, became sophisticated enough to function as another option for viewing TV programmes. These new ways of accessing TV content have allowed audiences to watch television whenever and wherever they may be. All of these developments mean that many programmes can be viewed out of their original television context, further shifting away from the historic tendency for viewers to watch television en masse.

These new technologies were met with a shift in technological literacy. Lotz explains that the growth in home computer ownership from 11 per cent in 1985 to 67 per cent in 2005 marked a new technological aptitude, further blurring the

distinction between the uses of television from the computer (17). Dan Harries refers to this new relationship with television as “viewsing”, blending together the activities of ‘viewing’ and ‘using’ (172). Websites like YouTube give viewers the opportunity to create, share and view amateur content. This relationship with media content reflects what Henry Jenkins refers to as ‘cultural convergence’, a term that recognises the ability of amateur users to “archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content” (“Convergence? I Diverge”).

Many of these creations use copyrighted material including clips from television shows, creating an intellectual property issue.¹ These online activities started during the multi-channel transition, as viewers began circulating television clips and participating in fan communities (Hilmes 348). Lotz speculates that this desire to connect with other viewers “may result from viewer efforts to reestablish some of the shared cultural experience that had once been more typical of the [television] medium” (245). This notion of community continued to expand during the post-network era as more platforms (such as social media websites) emerged to enable these activities.

These post-network developments of audience fragmentation and advertising evasion means that TV channels no longer have the same capacity to draw viewers to a specific time and place as they once did. In response, advertisers experimented with alternative options through which to address the decreased impact of the thirty-second commercial. Examples of this are product placement, product integration, branded entertainment and single sponsorship (Lotz 165 – 176). However, none of these alternatives have so far been able to successfully replace the thirty-second commercial. In order to address the issue of post-network fragmentation and advertising, channels in this era have reconfigured their tactics to create more targeted opportunities for advertisers.

¹ See McDonald’s “Digital Discords in the Online Media Economy”.

The Nielsen Company's Portable People Meters helped to facilitate this move towards narrower audience segments. Although initially introduced in 1987 during the multi-channel transition, this technology has continued to advance over time, ensuring their ability to track viewing patterns in today's digital context (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 136). This system of measurement can "identify who is watching and when, including 'time-shifted' viewing—the watching of recorded programming up to seven days after an original broadcast" (The Nielsen Company, "Television Solutions"). Using this technology allows TV channels to specialise in a particular audience segment, aggregated in a number of ways such as age, income and lifestyle.

Barbara Selznick argues that these smaller targeted audiences are "expected to be valuable for their willingness to follow texts across media platforms, for their loyalty to media brands" ("Branding the Future" 178). For this reason, niche demographics are incredibly valuable in terms of advertising and long-term network success. However, as Ien Ang remarks during the multi-channel transition, "audiences are not gullible consumers who passively absorb anything they're served, but must be continuously 'targeted', and fought for, grabbed, seduced" (*Living Room Wars* 9). What this means is that audience fragmentation creates a need to continuously convince viewers to stay with a channel in order to encourage long-term loyalty.

Channel Brand and Identity

With so many available options vying for audience attention, a clear brand, whether as a channel or as a programme, is incredibly important. Catherine Johnson argues that the "branding of television networks enables them to compete effectively in an increasingly crowded marketplace by creating strong, distinctive and loyal relationships with viewers" (7). Due to the fragmentation of audiences across different channels and different platforms, the creation of a

clear brand identity can help a channel to distinguish itself to viewers. In addition, a clear brand identity can also help to convince potential advertisers and even cable system providers of the channel's worth. In the post-network environment, a clear channel identity has "emerged as *the* defining industrial practice" (Johnson, C. 6).

Of course, during the multi-channel transition, being distinctive was already an important aspect of inter-network competition. A prominent example of this is HBO, which began as a premium cable channel in 1972 and managed to transform itself from a movie and sports channel to a major media power in less than thirty years. As a 'premium cable' channel, access to HBO requires a subscription. It needs to constantly justify that it provides something unique that is worthy of the monthly fee. In its early years, HBO did this by offering access to sporting events and commercial-free films that were unsuitable for broadcasters (Berger). However with the increasing competition during the multi-channel transition, HBO decided to diversify its content by moving into original programming. By 1984, HBO's original programmes made up 30 per cent of its content (Rogers et al 50).

Rogers et al explain that these new programmes were made to target "affluent, educated males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four", an elusive segment from the broadcast networks (50 - 51). As a premium cable channel, HBO is not subject to the same FCC programming restrictions of broadcasters. HBO attracted this high-value segment by offering "edgy, controversial programmes", supplemented by movies with more violent and sexual content (Rogers et al 51). In 1995, HBO adopted the slogan, "It's Not TV, It's HBO" in an attempt to assert its brand as being superior to broadcast television. This campaign was combined with the creation of HBO's award-winning dramas. *Sex and the City* (1998 – 2004), *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001 – 2005) worked individually and together to justify HBO's

monthly fee. Through the involvement of critically acclaimed actors, producers and directors and the use of complex and often controversial narratives, HBO offers its viewers a genuine alternative to advertiser-funded broadcast television.

These programmes were designed to assure current and potential subscribers that HBO provides something more sophisticated than its competitors. The HBO example illustrates the branding power of original programmes. Innovative and experimental original content has the ability to become ‘flagships’ for the channel, a term that recognises their function in defining channel brands and cultivating channel loyalty (Dunleavy, *Ourselves in Primetime* 9). As Selznick explains, these notable programmes are not only capable of affecting ratings, but also “draw attention to the networks that run them and help to shape viewers’ (and advertisers’) images of these networks” (“Branding the Future” 184). A notable programme contributes to the brand image by giving the channel a point of difference from its competitors.

The hype that it is possible to generate around original programmes is an important way to build the reputation of a TV channel, helping to contribute to the construction of its identity. With such a vast array of other channels to choose from, a notable TV programme that is tailored to the preferences of a particular demographic can aid viewers in making their choice. In broadcast television, networks invest in ‘high-end’ original programmes like *Lost* (2004 – 2010) in order to target the affluent and well-educated viewers of greatest value to advertisers (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 199). However, a successful original programme can have an even greater impact in transforming a ‘basic cable’ channel into a major player in the post-network era.

Unlike premium cable, ‘basic cable’ channels are “bundled” meaning that subscribers are charged a monthly fee by a cable system operator in order to receive a package that includes several channels (Mullen, *Television in the*

Multichannel Age 16). Accordingly, basic cable channels have two income sources: advertisers and per-subscriber (per-sub) monthly payment from the cable operator (Hilmes 253). Importantly, this two-part income puts basic cable channels in a stronger position for risk-taking and targeting niche audiences than broadcast channels. They may be unlikely to attract a mass audience but given the right strategy, they have the potential to deliver a valuable narrowly targeted audience for advertisers.

One example of this transition is AMC (1984) and its original programme *Mad Men* (2007 – 2015). Like HBO, American Movie Classics (AMC) began as a movie channel limited to airing “second-tier movies or ones you could get anywhere” (Sepinwall 303). AMC had nothing unique to offer viewers which meant that it was unlikely to build an audience and even less likely to have a significant identity. In addition, the movie channel was not affiliated with a particular cable empire and AMC executives feared they could be replaced and removed from cable ‘bundles’ completely (Sepinwall 303). Former AMC executive Rob Sorcher explains that the AMC Networks CEO Josh Sapan decided to invest in original programmes because he believed that “[w]hat AMC need[ed was] a show, a critically acclaimed and audience-craved show that would make [the channel] undroppable to cable operators” (Sepinwall 303). This statement illustrates the three key tasks of basic cable channels: They must convince cable system providers to include the channel in their line-up, attract an audience, and signal to advertisers that their channel can offer them access to their desired target market. A high-profile original programme can help to achieve all three of these goals.

AMC’s identity before *Mad Men* has been described as “an obscure movie channel marooned on the backwaters of Cable TV” and thus creating a programme to redefine the AMC channel was of higher priority (McDuling). Original programmes have the capacity to generate an increased audience

awareness of a given TV channel and, if these prove popular or gain critical acclaim, can in themselves help to attract viewers and gain the interest of cable system operators. *Mad Men* centres on the professional and personal life of a 1960s Madison Avenue advertising executive. This period drama was unlike anything else on television and was therefore an ambitious endeavor. However, as Sorcher explains, Sapan was unconcerned about ratings during this time (Sepinwall 303). With the support of basic cable's additional revenue from the per-sub fee, AMC was in an optimal position for risk-taking.

Mad Men won instant critical acclaim and the series premiere became AMC's highest-rated original series telecast (Nordyke). The cachet of an innovative programme such as this often generates a lot of media attention, helping to raise the profile not just of the show itself but also of the host channel. Christopher Anderson explains that basic cable channels often focus on raising the profile of a single series at a time "in order to create a phenomenon that attracts media attention" (84). A high-profile programme helps the channel to be more attractive to cable system operators and can even be useful in negotiating a larger per-sub fee (C. Anderson 84). Additionally, this relationship with the cable operators is important in that being "bundled" into a cable package provided by a large provider such as Comcast, can help to expose the channel to more viewers, further raising its national profile and strengthening its brand.

Although at times *Mad Men* was met with lukewarm ratings (Season Five, for example, ranked at number twenty-one among all cable TV dramas), the innovative and critically acclaimed nature of the programme is tailored to attract "young, upscale, male viewers" which is a smaller but more elusive segment of the male demographic that is highly sought-after by advertisers (Selznick, "Whose Stories Matter?"). 53 per cent of *Mad Men*'s viewers between the ages 25 to 54, are from households with incomes that exceed \$100,000, a level of viewer affluence that is reportedly unparalleled by any other primetime drama

series (Pallotta). This turn to original content was very successful in revolutionizing AMC, allowing the channel to align itself with the sophisticated type of programming that will continue to attract this smaller but more valuable audience segment that allows the channel to charge advertisers a larger fee. In 2009, AMC further asserted its brand identity for quality programming by adopting the slogan, “Story Matters Here” in addition to the creation of popular and critically acclaimed dramas *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013) and *The Walking Dead* (2010 - present).

In the post-network era, it is important to have a distinct identity in order to demonstrate a channel’s worth to niche audience segments, advertisers, and even to cable providers. Brand distinction is crucial in order for a channel to stand out among the array of platforms and services that separate the post-network era from earlier eras of television. Channels, particularly basic cable channels targeting smaller audience segments, need to be tailored to the requirements of a specific demographic and/or audience, in order to maximise their appeal to this particular type of viewer.

The Millennials

A significant factor that has shaped demographic targeting in the post-network era is the emergence of the generation known as ‘Millennials’. As discussed earlier, viewers in the post-network era are equipped with a certain level of technological literacy. What makes ‘Millennials’ unique from other viewers is they are considered to be ‘native’ to these revolutionary changes in technology and do not relate to television in the same way as their predecessors. ‘Millennials’ are perceived to embody the challenges put forward by the proliferation of new technologies and the raft of broader changes in the television industry. As Lotz argues, “Many of the distinctions such as broadcast versus cable – let alone between television and computer – that have structured

understandings of television are meaningless to those born after 1980” (Lotz 17). The members of this demographic are often considered in the television industry as a new type of individual and potential viewer.

Laura Nathanson, Executive Vice President of Advertising Sales at ABC Family explains, “There is no mainstream marketer who is not targeting this group right now” (Lafayette). The ‘Millennials’ have become a very valuable demographic and there have been countless marketing studies geared towards understanding how to engage with this generation and the opportunities that they present for the development of new brands. Although this thesis is not primarily concerned with how audiences respond to the programmes that they watch, or even the accuracy of the generalisations about this demographic, it is important to know how assumptions about the ‘Millennial viewer’ have affected the way in which programmes and channel identities are constructed. Understanding the discourse of the entertainment industry that has developed for the ‘Millennials’ is crucial to comprehending the multi-platform branding and programming strategies being deployed in order to attract them.

William Strauss and Neil Howe coined the term ‘Millennial’ to describe the generation born between 1982 and 2002, a group that will come of age during the first decades of the millennium (*Millennials Rising* 414). Strauss and Howe’s generational theory is based on the idea that generations occur in cycles and that there are core traits shared by people born in the same generation. This is a ‘persona’ that defines the generation as a whole even if some members do not share these traits or even actively resist them (Strauss and Howe, *Millennials Go to College* 59). Strauss and Howe argue that “Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory” and that they have the potential to become “America’s next great generation” (*Millennials Rising* 4 – 5). This expectation is largely due to the seven core traits identified by Strauss and Howe that distinguish the Millennials from previous generations.

Firstly, Strauss and Howe argue that Millennials are *conventional* (*Millennials Go to College* 69). This generation accepts the values of their parents but are also putting a new twist on familial relations and traditions. Strauss and Howe assert that Millennials are “starting to think they can apply these values, and someday run the show, a whole lot better” (70). This acceptance of parental values is illustrated by Strauss and Howe’s findings that the members of this generation “describe closer ties with their parents than any teens in the history of postwar polling” (69). Millennials find it ‘easy’ to talk with their parents about sex, drugs and alcohol, conversing together about topics “far beyond what Boomers ever dared tell their own moms and dads” (69).

Millennials are also imbued with the feeling of being *special*. This generation grew up in an environment where national issues such as the ‘War on Terror’ and unemployment were discussed in terms of the impact on children (*Millennials Go to College* 60). Consequently, these young adults have been instilled with a general feeling of importance. Millennials are also *sheltered*. As children, they were subject to child-safety regulations and were “buckled, watched, fussed over, and fenced in by wall-to-wall rules and chaperones” (*Millennials Rising* 119). This feeling of being protected continued into their adolescence and the experience of post-Columbine security concerns (*Millennials Go to College* 63). Millennials are *confident*; they are upbeat and optimistic about their own future but they are also *pressured* in that they feel a higher level of stress at a young age than previous generations (*Millennials Rising* 184).

However, this feeling of pressure is also “what keeps [Millennials] constantly in motion – moving, busy, purposeful, without nearly enough hours in the day to get [everything] done” (Strauss and Howe, *Millennials Rising* 184). This works in concert with the Millennial trait of *achieving*. Millennials are anticipated to be “the smartest, best-educated young adults in U.S. history” due to higher school

standards (*Millennials Go to College* 60). Finally, Millennials are *team-oriented*. They establish “tight peer bonds”, a trait that was first reflected in their participation in youth soccer and eventually in their participation on social-networking platforms (Strauss and Howe, “7 Core Traits”).

Strauss and Howe believe that “these are not traits one would have associated with Silent, Boomers, or Gen Xers in youth” (“7 Core Traits”). The Silent (1925 – 1942), the Baby Boomers (1943 – 1960) and Generation X (1961 – 1981) are the names of the generations that have come before the Millennials (Strauss and Howe, *Millennials Rising* 414). Strauss and Howe distinguish the Millennials from these previous generations, arguing that their unique traits “will entirely recast the image of youth from downbeat and alienated to upbeat and engaged – with potentially seismic consequences for America” (*Millennials Rising* 4). This idea is reflected in the changes occurring in the television industry in terms of the range of strategies being deployed to target this demographic. Although Strauss and Howe’s theory makes large generalisations, their ideas about Millennials help to construct the perception that knowledge about the disposition and behaviors of previous ‘youth’ generations will be unhelpful to the effort to attract this particular audience segment.

One of the many names for Millennials is ‘Echo Boomers’ because they are the children of the ‘Baby Boomers’, the first generation of a large group of young people with significant spending power (Strauss and Howe, *Millennials Rising* 6). Baby Boomers “fueled the growth of massive marketing campaigns and the introduction of new products” that were specifically designed to target them as teenagers (MacUnovich). As the largest generation in the history of the United States, Millennials are expected to “redefine brands the way Baby Boomers did” (Ulaby). Like their parents, the Millennials’ sheer number and potential spending

power are of great interest to advertisers wanting to understand and reach today's youth audiences.²

In 2014, the Verizon Digital Media Services (Verizon) report, *Millennials and Entertainment*, found that this demographic is “commanding \$1.3 trillion in consumer spending” (Verizon 4). Because of the opportunity they present for the television industry and advertisers, one television executive echoed Strauss and Howe’s assertion of the Millennials’ potential by describing the demographic in *Advertising Age* as “the new Greatest Generation” (“Target: Millennials”). Although the Millennial demographic is still relatively young, it has been estimated that they have “11 [per cent] more buying power than the Baby Boomers did when they were young” (Lafayette).

In addition to Millennial spending power, the value of young adult audiences to advertisers is amplified because they have yet to establish brand loyalty. Former Managing General Partner of The WB, Jamie Kellner supports this idea and explains, “People make their brand decisions at an early life, and follow them for the rest of their life” (Graham D3). Gaining access to young viewers is therefore crucial for advertisers in order to cultivate long-term brand loyalty. Despite all this potential, Evan Shapiro, president of the network Pivot explains that Millennials are in fact, “underserved as a group on television, considering that right now the Millennial generation is 60 per cent of the 18-to-49 demographic (“Target: Millennials”). As an underserved but potentially lucrative audience segment, the Millennials have become an extremely sought-after demographic.

² This also highlights one of the constraints of thinking about Millennials as a demographic. Most of the studies regarding Millennials and the entertainment industry are primarily focused on the young people of the United States. Accordingly, media industry understandings of this demographic are filtered through and largely limited to a North American perspective.

As a generation born during the multi-channel transition, there is an expectation that Millennials have always had access to the technologies that have revolutionised the television industry. Consequently, they are considered to be a demographic with a very different understanding of television. Jason Mittell uses a personal anecdote regarding his first DVR in order to reflect on the changes in the perception of television by younger viewers:

When my daughter asks 'what shows are on?', she is not referring to the TV schedule – rather she means what's on the TiVo's menu. For her, the transmission of television via a simultaneous schedule is an entirely foreign concept, even though this has been one of the defining elements of television as a medium for decades" ("TiVoing Childhood").

What Mittell's experience suggests is the idea that earlier relationships between networks, linear schedules, and the programming that these create are becoming meaningless distinctions for younger viewers. As one market researcher argues, "Millennials are time-shifting, streaming, capsulizing, and pretty much doing anything in their power to personalize content to their schedule" (Fischer). This comment reflects how the Millennial demographic is constructed and imagined by marketers as viewers who watch television in a way that fits their individual lifestyles. As a result of these viewing behaviours, the TV programmes they consume are often stripped of channel brand identity. Although older generations are also using these new technologies, Millennials are considered unique because of the assumption that they grew up immersed in this media- and technology-saturated environment. This leads to the belief that Millennials are difficult to engage. Their viewing patterns are extremely fragmented and to that extent unpredictable.

However, while these viewers may not be watching their media through traditional methods of TV content delivery, they are no less engaged with TV programmes. The viewing behavior of Millennials discussed above indicate that

they have become accustomed to choosing their content, often bypassing the traditional thirty-second spot advertisement. Unsurprisingly, the Verizon study found that 54 per cent of Millennials are more likely to search for specific shows rather than to simply browse a particular menu, compared to 41 per cent of non-Millennials (31). This perceived aversion to linear services and related patterns of viewing further highlights the necessity for a network to develop captivating and original programming in the post-network environment, an idea that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two. What this illustrates, however, is that a notable TV programme, as distinct from a coherent schedule line-up, has become crucial as a means to establish the identity of a channel.

Millennials are also known as “digital natives” (Lotz 17). Lotz explains that Millennials “...were introduced to the Internet before graduating from high school, and carried mobile phones with them from the time they were first allowed out in the world on their own” (17). This assumed fluency with technology has challenged the entertainment industry for decades. As Lotz points out, the older half of this generation contributed to the need for a new economic model in the music industry after a surge in illegal downloading (17). The way Millennials interact with new technologies has thus led to the concern that they have the potential to create unprecedented problems for the entertainment industry. Yet, Lotz also mentions that younger Millennials “made their first music purchases from online single-song retailers such as Apple’s iTunes” (17). What this suggests is that the technological literacy of the Millennials does not necessarily have to be considered a threat. It has the potential to be harnessed towards new ways of watching television.

For instance, Verizon’s report observed that Netflix, a SVoD website that allows viewers to choose what to watch, is one of the top ten brands for Millennials while none of the broadcasters made the list (47). In fact, The Nielsen Company (Nielsen) report, *Millennials – Breaking The Myths*,

discovered that Millennials make up 50 per cent of households that do not own a television, substituting smartphones and laptops instead (36). This is supported by market research company Vision Critical's findings that, "younger Americans are unequivocally watching less live programming than Gen-Xers and Baby Boomers, but relying on streaming services and social media to overcompensate" (Fischer). The Millennial generation may pose challenges to older economic models but understanding their relationship with technology presents an opportunity to engage them as a demographic and redirect their activities towards a particular product or brand.

Nielsen's 2014 report refers to this generation as 'the social generation' (2) because of the way Millennials are "tethered to their smartphones and social media 24/7" (38). The Verizon study supports this claim with the discovery that only 34 per cent of Millennials rarely use other devices while watching television compared to 51 per cent of non-Millennials (41). The belief that Millennials enjoy multi-tasking while watching television has created another opportunity to reach these viewers. The gadgets used while watching television are known as 'second screens', allowing Millennials to interact with other media while they engage with a TV programme. Although this second screen may be used for activities that are unrelated to the programme being consumed, it presents an opportunity to engage viewers in a way that supplements the programme. TV programmes like *Lost* take advantage of the second screen by releasing supplementary mobile apps to enhance the viewing experience. Other programmes, as exemplified by *Pretty Little Liars*, reach out to their demographic through social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in order to generate discussions regarding episodes.

Vision Critical's study discovered that "brands [need] to continuously communicate with their target audience, especially young people, if they wish to compete in this constantly evolving landscape" (Fischer). Second screen activity,

particularly the use of social media, allow channels to facilitate this type of communication with Millennial viewers. The Verizon study discovered that Millennials use social media more than non-Millennials, with 81 per cent using Facebook and 48 per cent using Twitter on a weekly basis (16). The conversational and instantaneous structure of social media platforms like Twitter can help to build loyalty, and a sense of community and perhaps even reinvigorate television's potential to be "an initiator of water-cooler conversation", a form of discourse that Lotz claims was lost during the multi-channel transition (14). Shapiro argues that in the current television environment, "...must-see TV has become hashtag TV" (Target: Millennials). This idea will be further explored in Chapter Three however what it demonstrates is that the Millennials' fluency with technology has created an opportunity for continuous interaction which could help to facilitate deeper engagement with television.

In addition to finding ways to address the technological literacy of Millennials, networks are also tailoring programmes to target this demographic. Unlike the young adult TV programming of the past, most of these programmes use more sophisticated and challenging storytelling techniques. For example, *Dawson's Creek* (1998 – 2003), one of the first television shows aimed at the older half of Millennials, often incorporated references from films such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Jaws* (1975) into the narrative without worry of alienating its younger viewers. In the past, challenging programmes with dense narrative structures were primarily used to attract older, educated, high-income demographics. However, as Lotz explains, "Most members of this generation...never knew a world without cable" (17).

In addition to the expectation of being better educated than previous generations, Millennials are also perceived to have grown up in a media-saturated environment. Valerie Wee reflects this idea by suggesting that while some of the popular cultural texts referenced in teen TV programmes may have

initially belonged to older generations they were also “accessible and familiar to teenagers [...] via cable and video” (“Teen Television” 54). These technologies enable Millennials to access media texts from a range of different time periods in a way that was unattainable to previous generations. As a result of this immersion in a variety of different media texts, it is arguable that Millennials have developed an aptitude for more complex storytelling strategies.

The Pioneering Influence of The WB

In 2013, the Millennial generation constituted approximately 92 million people 12 to 34 years old, or about 68 million people in the 18-to-34 demographic (“Target: Millennials”). Channels like The CW (2006), FXX (2013), Pivot (2013) and ABC Family (2001) are tailoring their strategies to attract Millennial viewers. MTV President Stephen Friedman remarks that the emergence of these new channels “confirms the importance of this audience” in terms of their “buying power” (“Target: Millennials”). With this perception of value, buying power and potential loyalty, it is not surprising that so many networks have chosen to align their brand with this demographic.

Addressing the needs of young audiences has been the goal of other channels in the past. MTV and Fox emerged during the 1980s specifically to attract young viewers. However, one of the first channels to target Millennials specifically is The WB. Former The WB managing director Jamie Kellner explains, “We knew there was going to be another echo boom [...] and we knew that advertisers wanted those younger demographics and would pay a lot of money for them” (James). Although the channel premiered in 1995 and has since become defunct, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, The WB tailored its programming for the emerging demographic and became the first home of Millennial programming. Even though The WB was a network that emerged during the final years of the multi-channel transition as distinct from the post-

network environment that ABC Family occupies, the strategies of The WB demonstrate the challenges of targeting what the industry considered a new type of viewer. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported, “The content of Kellner's WB network would be dictated by the country's changing demographics and the soft spots of his competitors” (James).

Although it was a broadcast network, The WB turned away from the general demographic of 18 – 49 year olds that the other broadcasters were aiming for, in favour of a narrower focus of 12 – 34 year olds (Wee, “Teen Television” 46). As Wee asserts, “Kellner's strategy was to market the network to a specific segment of viewers and advertisers by committing to shows that would appeal to this core audience” (“Teen Television” 46). The WB was operating in the same manner as a genre-defined cable channel even though it was a nationwide broadcaster. Starting from the late 1990s, The WB began to court young viewers through original programmes specifically designed for them.

While MTV had already been targeting teenagers through cable for more than a decade, Wee explains that The WB provided a different brand identity. The WB constructs its teenagers as “morally idealistic” as opposed to MTV's “irreverent, hedonistic and anti-establishment teens” (Wee, “Teen Television” 49). What is revealing about this comment is that this differentiation between the two brands is reflective of the way Strauss and Howe distinguishes Millennials from Generation X (Gen X). Gen X is considered much more individualistic and cynical, particularly with regard to authority. Strauss and Howe explain, “Like a whole generation of Breakfast Clubbers, [Gen Xers] face a Boom-driven culture quick to criticize or punish them but slow to take the time to find out what's really going on in their lives” (*Generations* 332). MTV's programming echoes this notion with shows *Dead at 21* (1994), a dystopic sci-fi teen drama about a secret government experiment performed on young people and even animated

sitcoms like *Daria* (1997 – 2001), which centred around a witty teenager girl with a cynical outlook on high school life.

The WB was no doubt also influenced by the constraints of being a broadcaster, unable to address risqué topics in the same way as a basic cable channel like MTV. However, the alignment of its programming with Millennial traits combined with a noticeable shift away from the storylines tailored for Gen Xers has greatly influenced today's Millennial dramas. The WB produced many successful teen dramas, the first of which was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 - 2003), shortly followed by *Dawson's Creek*, *Roswell* (1999 – 2002), and *Charmed* (1998 – 2006). As discussed above, *Dawson's Creek* effortlessly incorporates popular culture references in its dialogue and storylines, relying on the idea that its media-savvy viewers will be able to understand. *Buffy* also draws from other popular cultural texts. One notable example is that the core characters often refer to themselves as 'The Scooby Gang' or 'Scoobies', a nod to the programme's similarities to the monster/mystery-of-the-week structure of *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (1969-1970).

The sci-fi and fantasy themes of *Buffy*, *Roswell*, and *Charmed* also demonstrate how teen dramas became more complex. The diegetic worlds of these programmes often involve unpacking a more complex background mythology that requires a high level of engagement and commitment. While the storylines are still dealing with teen angst, romance and feelings of isolation, this melodrama is often informed by sci-fi or fantasy themes that open up potential for narrative experimentation. This innovation can be seen in episodes such as "Hush", an almost completely silent episode of *Buffy* or *Roswell's* "I Married an Alien", a reimagining of the programme as a 1960s sitcom in the style of *I Dream of Jeanie* and *Bewitched*.

While *Dawson's Creek* may be more conventional in comparison to these sci-fi/fantasy programmes, its narrative complexity is made apparent by its supplementary interactive website, 'Dawson's Desktop'. 'Dawson's Desktop' extended the experience of programme on the Internet. The website allowed visitors to read Dawson's emails, look at his screenplay ideas, read his journal and even pry into the contents of his recycling bin (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 117 – 120). This desktop was updated daily, acting as a way of bridging the episodes together. This idea of transmedia storytelling and transmedia extensions will be explored in Chapter Three but what it demonstrates here is how The WB anticipated the idea of the Millennial television experience extending beyond the weekly episode and across multiple platforms.

Despite producing teen dramas, The WB was praised for its ability to deliver "a concentrated group of young, impressionable viewers to advertisers" that included "teens and people in their early 20s" (James). Arguably, the incorporation of more sophisticated storylines and storytelling strategies helped these programmes to also entertain older viewers. The intricate storylines and intertextual references can be considered "the network's attempt to acknowledge and engage with its media-savvy, target teen audience while simultaneously interpolating them into a more mainstream adult culture" (Wee, "Teen Television" 54). The plots of *Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy*, and *Roswell* may have all been set in high school but their appeal transcends the teenage years through its coming-of-age themes. The reverse is also true. As Rebecca Feasy explains, although programmes like *Charmed* revolve around women in their twenties, its focus on the quarter-life crisis is not unlike the themes of uncertainty and changes involved with impending adulthood (4). The storylines of The WB's programmes, which focus on a transitory period, helps to make the channel relevant to a wide range of young adults.

Unlike MTV which “actively and overtly alienated and distanced non-teen audiences”, The WB’s strategy was to be accessible to a broader range of young viewers (Wee, “Teen Television” 54). From an industry perspective, this was necessary as The WB was a broadcaster that needed to maximize its audience share. This need is confirmed as The WB struggled with profitability and eventually merged with another teen channel, UPN, to form The CW (2006 - present). Although it is now defunct, The WB demonstrated the value of the Millennial market in the highly competitive post-network era, leaving a legacy that influenced the way in which ABC Family would successfully rebrand its network as the home for young female Millennials.

Post-Network Case Study: ABC Family and Millennials

The strategies of The WB left a significant impact on the way in which the Millennials will be targeted by the television industry. Of all the channels vying to attract a younger audience, none have made their targeting of Millennials more explicit than ABC Family. Unlike its sister channel, the broadcast television network ABC, ABC Family is a basic cable channel. Instead of providing content to various local affiliates nationwide, ABC Family is distributed as part of a cable system ‘bundle’. However, television executives and industry insiders still commonly refer to this channel as a ‘network’ that deploys its own specific ‘network strategy’ for attracting viewers.

This strategy has been very successful for ABC Family and in 2014, the channel became the year’s top-rated cable network for young women (Kissell, “ABC Family Finishes”). Its flagship programme, *Pretty Little Liars*, was 2014’s number two cable series for females 12 - 34 and one of basic cable’s top five scripted series in adults 18 – 34, women 18 – 34, women 18 – 49 and viewers 12 – 34 (Kissell, “ABC Family Finishes”). Through its original programming and transmedia extensions, ABC Family does not simply continue the legacy of The

WB but improves upon it in order to become a major player in the post-network environment.

ABC Family is a channel that has a strong history of being used to target families and younger audiences since its conception. However, the overall tone of the channel is drastically different than what it once was. The channel's original name was CBN Satellite Service. Marion "Pat" Robertson, a former Baptist minister turned media baron, originally founded the channel in 1977 as part of his Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) (Murphy 18). The channel carried Robertson's controversial religious news show, *The 700 Club*. It also aired a few original Christian programmes and other off-network syndicated programmes that did not conflict with Robertson's conservative views. When Robertson's son, Tim Robertson, took charge of the company during the multi-channel transition, he renamed the channel in 1988 as The CBN Family Channel before simplifying it in 1990 to The Family Channel. Murphy explains that the younger Robertson felt this new name "communicated a brand identity more effectively" in reaching audiences looking for "programmes parents and children could watch together" (18).

The Family Channel was successful for several years and was part of the array of channels offered by cable providers nationwide (Murphy 18). News Corp and Saban Entertainment purchased the channel in 1997 as a joint venture in order to target young viewers (Murphy 18). It was renamed Fox Family and allowed Fox to compete with the basic cable channels, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and The Disney Channel, which had cornered the youth and family demographics (Deggans). President of Fox Family Networks, Rich Cronin, explains, "Our focus is on families that are a little younger, more suburban or urban, more plugged into pop culture - what we call contemporary families who appreciate a network with attitude" (Pierce). However when Fox purchased the channel, it did so on the condition that it needs to retain the word 'Family' in the

network name and also air *The 700 Club* twice daily (Ulaby; Carter, "On Television"). Although Fox agreed to these conditions, it also drastically changed the programmes on the channel.

Shows like *Hawaii 5-0* and *Bonanza*, which attracted older viewers, were replaced with programmes to target children and young adults during daytime and programmes for families at night (Walker 3). The obligation to air *The 700 Club* (1966 – present) conflicted with Fox's new youth-oriented programmes and the change in the network's overall theme alienated a lot of the existing older and more conservative viewers. This is illustrated by the 35 per cent ratings decline during primetime (Levin). Media analyst Derek Baine explains that Fox Family's strategy "chased away some of the older viewers and never really replaced the core audience" (Levin). These low ratings led to the channel being passed on yet again in 2001, this time to the Walt Disney Company.

The Walt Disney Company purchased the channel as part of the \$5.2 billion acquisition of Fox Family Worldwide (Murphy 19). The new ABC Family channel was to be the cable supplement to Disney's 1996 purchase of Capital Cities/ABC (Murphy 19). The channel was intended to be a place to 'repurpose' programmes, meaning it would act as a sister channel for ABC by airing programmes a second time in the same week. By doing so, it would help ABC to recoup the cost of its original programmes. In 2001, Disney's Chairman, Michael D. Eisner, considered it to be "the beginning of a new trend in the American broadcast and cable environment" (Carter, "Disney Discusses"). He believed the channel, which reached 84 million subscribers through its cable system distribution deals, to be "beachfront property" and hoped that this large viewership would expose ABC to more viewers (Orwall and Flint). However, it was soon discovered that ABC did not own the syndication rights to many of its programmes and as a result, ABC Family could not be used as intended

(Suehle). The purchase was considered “a multi-billion-dollar blunder” and the network had to reconfigure the purpose of the channel (Grego).

Some of the programmes that were able to air on the channel included *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter* and *The Bachelor*. These repurposed programmes became the highest-rated programmes on the channel during its first year (Dempsey, “Alphabet Spells”). Murphy explains that these initial successes with repurposed content helped to prepare for ABC Family’s re-orientation toward the Millennial audience (19). As argued earlier this chapter, exclusively airing second-run content is not enough to create a significant brand identity. However, these successes demonstrated that ABC Family was attracting a young audience. While sister channels ABC and Disney Channel targets mature viewers and children respectively, ABC Family gives the Disney-ABC conglomerate access to the young adult viewers located between these two audience groupings.

In an attempt to solidify its relationship to a younger audience, ABC Family tried to rebrand itself as XYZ (a reversal of ABC) (Suehle). However, as with Fox Family, ABC Family inherited the same obstacles: an obligation to air *The 700 Club*, constraints regarding the network name and a conservative viewership that had been cultivated for several decades (Barnes). In order to shed this name, ABC Family would need to officially shut down the channel and create XYZ from scratch. However, using this strategy would also invalidate the channel’s distribution deals (Schneider). ABC Family would be officially closed and cable and satellite providers would be under no obligation to put XYZ in its place, conflicting with the initial reason for the channel’s purchase.

The combination of *The 700 Club*, the ‘Family’ name and the conservative viewers immediately frames ABC Family in a certain way. What had once been a successful recipe for CBN proved incredibly difficult to attracting the younger

viewers that the successive owners desired. The existing links to Robertson's legacy confuses the channel identity and hinders the potential connection with young audiences. Former Chief Creative Officer, Kate Jeurgens, explains that in the beginning, the executives of ABC Family thought of the channel name as "a burden" as they worried the word 'Family' deterred the young viewers that the network was seeking (Ulaby). In order to overcome this problem, ABC Family looked to the programmes produced by The WB.

With the intention of supplementing their repurposed content, ABC Family purchased the rights to air popular programmes from The WB such as *Gilmore Girls* (2000 – 2007) and *7th Heaven* (1996 – 2007). Murphy explains that during this time, The WB was still on the air and despite being a rival channel ABC Family may have inadvertently supported its competitor (19). While this may have been true, it is also arguable that this relationship helped ABC Family to cultivate its future as the home for Millennials. Tom Zappala, ABC Family's former Vice President of Acquisitions and Scheduling remarks, "Our audience composition is compatible with the WB's. These shows make a nice fit for the 12 to 34-year-olds we try to reach on a regular basis" (Dempsey, "Frog Leaps"). With these programming links to a channel that had successfully captured the demographic, ABC Family could be seen as courting Millennials away from The WB, putting the channel in the prime position to promote original programmes by airing them alongside popular WB programmes. ABC Family essentially built a bridge for Millennials to seamlessly transition between the two channels, even though The WB and ABC Family were direct rivals. By using successful WB shows as the gateway, ABC Family was able to put itself on the Millennial radar.

As the Millennial audiences slowly became aware of ABC Family, the network decided that in 2006, it would reclaim the meaning of its channel name by using the slogan, "A New Kind of Family". ABC Family's market research discovered that, "the word 'family' is no longer necessarily uncool for 15-to-30-year-olds

today. They're more connected with their parents than previous generations. Indeed, they often still live with them" (Ulaby). As ABC Family's former Senior Vice President of Marketing John Rood explains, "We learned that Millennials value their families. As a network called ABC Family, that was music to our ears" (Liesse A2). This discovery parallels Strauss and Howe's assertion that Millennials are a 'conventional' generation. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Strauss and Howe construct the Millennials as a generation that is close to their parents and comfortable with their family lives. ABC Family's research highlights that Millennials did not have a problem with the concept of 'family' itself but with "family television – specifically the stereotypical conservative, boring or insincere aspects of family television" (Liesse A2).

The expectation of a new type of viewer that is more accepting and comfortable with family relationships put ABC Family in the optimal position to redefine what 'family' means to the channel. Jeurgens explains that "[ABC Family] wanted to represent family in a contemporary and authentic way, but [they] also didn't want to run away from the word family" (Linton). Part of ABC Family's branding strategy involves distancing itself from the traditional and conservative values of *The 700 Club* by using a disclaimer to explicitly acknowledge that the programme is directly in conflict with their channel's values (See Figure 1.1). The addition of a disclaimer helps ABC Family to assert its new slogan by emphasising that the channel's idea of 'family' is separate from the conservative values of Robertson's *The 700 Club*. This strategy helps ABC Family to acknowledge and embrace the apparent closeness of the Millennials to their families in a way that is not associated with the channel's previous identity as a conservative Christian channel.

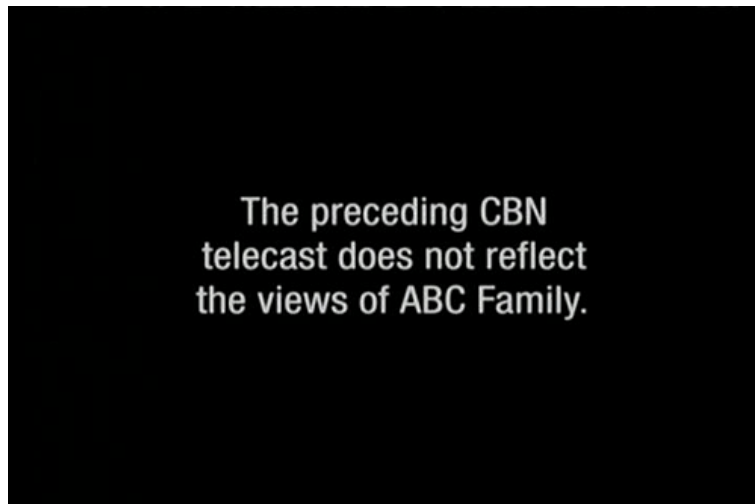


Figure 1.1 - ABC Family's disclaimer for *The 700 Club*

In addition to attracting their target demographic, ABC Family's branding strategy also ensures that advertisers view the channel as a valuable platform to promote their products. ABC Family launched a campaign in 2007 to show advertisers that Millennials are "a new kind of viewer" and that ABC Family knows exactly how to attract them ("ABC Family Upfront"). As former Disney-ABC television chief Anne Sweeney explains, "A meeting doesn't go by when we don't talk about something new that [former ABC Family President Paul Lee] has discovered about his audience" (Weprin). The campaign to align ABC Family to the Millennial generation included commissioning a study "about young viewers and how to appeal to them" conducted by market research company Frank N. Magid Associates (Liesse A2). The results of this study was published in a 2007 *Advertising Age* sponsored article written by Julie Liesse entitled, "Getting to Know the Millennials".

In the article, Millennials are constructed as "a new kind of teenager coming of age in America" (Liesse A2) and that they are "poised to take over the media and marketing world" (A1). Notably, this article defines Millennials as being born between 1977 and 1996 (A1). The article does not use the same definition given by Strauss and Howe, despite citing their research. Instead, it opted to use the

definition provided by Frank N. Magid Associates which, at the time the article was published, better matched the 14 – 34 age range that ABC Family defined as the “adult Millennials” that is their target demographic (Disney ABC Cable Networks Group). Accordingly, ABC Family can be seen to be aligning their brand with the Millennial generation rather than merely with teenagers, promoting the idea that they understand this demographic better than any of their competitors.

This is supported by ABC Family’s ‘upfront’ presentation entitled “Meet the Millennials”. In the marketing summary of this video, ABC Family’s marketing team explains that the purpose of this video was to “aggressively remind clients that [ABC Family] is a must buy to reach adult [M]illennials” (Disney ABC Cable Networks Group). The video shows a variety of young adults in their teens and twenties talking about how they watch television. The group chosen was a mix of males and females of various races in order to demonstrate that Millennials are “a new kind of generation” who do not believe you have to be related in order to consider someone ‘family’ (“ABC Family Upfront”). ABC Family’s marketing team explains, “Our clients see the word ‘family’ and assume that we are a network FOR families and want to buy us for 25 – 54 year olds” (Disney ABC Cable Networks Group”).

This video helps ABC Family not only to further distance itself from pre-conceived notions of the word ‘family’ but also to shift the perception of their channel’s core audience from that of children and parents (as with Fox Family) to the more desirable young adult demographic. In addition, the video acknowledges the way young viewers engage simultaneously with television and media technologies. ABC Family’s sponsored article reflects this idea by arguing that “[multi-tasking] is hardwired into the Millennial brain” (Liesse A6). ABC Family’s marketing team explains that as audiences become more fragmented across different channels and platforms, the network became

“concerned that clients would spend less money on television” (Disney ABC Cable Networks Group). Accordingly, ABC Family uses this ‘upfront’ presentation to assert that their channel understands these Millennial viewing habits and can address them effectively.

In order to deliver these Millennial viewers to advertisers, the channel began to commission original programming described as “scripted [M]illennial dramas” in an attempt to represent more contemporary values and lifestyles (Comcast). Original programmes, as argued earlier this chapter, help channels become more competitive by strengthening its brand identity. Offering a unique product that cannot be found anywhere else is an attractive proposition not just for viewers but also for cable providers who will want to retain the channel in their line-up. In a continuation of ABC Family’s links to The WB strategy, it was Kate Jeurgens who oversaw the creation of these Millennial-oriented programmes. Before being hired by ABC Family, Jeurgens was the Senior Vice President of Development at The WB (Murphy 21). Murphy highlights that ABC Family’s success with Millennial women is largely due to a “strategy that utilizes and mimics the tactics employed by The WB, and later, The CW to target a similar audience” (20). This is supported by the fact that producer Alloy created some of ABC Family’s most popular original programmes including *Pretty Little Liars* and *The Lying Game*. Alloy also made The CW’s *The Vampire Diaries* and its longest running series, *Gossip Girl*.

The original programmes commissioned by ABC Family feature contemporary issues such as teen pregnancies (*The Secret Life of the American Teenager*), adoption (*The Lying Game*), and gay families (*The Fosters*). On the Disney-ABC press website, ABC Family is described as “a top home for Millennial audiences that features programming reflecting today’s families, entertaining and connecting with adults through authentic and relatable programming about today’s relationships – told with a mix of diversity, passion,

humor and heart”. In a noticeable contrast to its CBN roots, ABC Family’s programmes often involves families that are alternative to the traditional notion of family and incorporates what could be seen as controversial topics for young people in order to assert itself as a network for modern viewers.

As well as tackling teen issues, ABC Family’s basic cable status allowed the channel to experiment with edgier storylines than what would traditionally be associated with teen TV. As a channel for young adults, ABC Family is designed to “bridge the gap between Disney Channel and ABC” (“Disney ABC Cable Networks Group”). The channel acknowledges the idea that Millennials are an educated and media literate demographic by commissioning narratively complex programmes that require a high level of audience engagement. Programmes such as *Twisted* (2013 – 2014) and *Chasing Life* (2014 – present) look towards adult-audience TV dramas in order to create more youth-friendly versions of challenging material. For example, *Twisted* has been described as a “Muppet Babies version of *Dexter*” (Fienberg). The programme focuses on a young man who becomes the prime suspect in the investigation of the murder of his aunt. *Chasing Life* revolves around a woman who discovers she has cancer, not unlike the premise of Showtime’s *The Big C* (2010 – 2013).

These programmes reflect an important feature of ABC Family. The demographic they are targeting is one that inhabits a life phase between childhood and adulthood. These TV dramas can be considered junior versions of adult-audience programming, tackling challenging stories in an accessible and youth-friendly way. The most notable of these edgier dramas is *Pretty Little Liars* (2010 – present). The programme goes beyond the norms of teen TV by experimenting with narrative style, requiring a more dedicated sense of engagement than what is typically seen in young adult programming. Although it is a teen drama, *Pretty Little Liars* has been described as “*Twin Peaks* Lite” because of its cinematic noir influences and incredibly complex interweaving

storylines (McNamara). *Pretty Little Liars* has become one of basic cable's top programmes, elevating the profile of the channel through its experimental narrative style and edgy storylines. This teen drama has become ABC Family's flagship programme, often making the news for its record-breaking online presence. Its gripping cliffhangers and narrative spectacles have been highly publicized, essentially becoming a 21st Century water-cooler show.

In addition to attracting Millennials through tailored programming, ABC Family has also adapted some of The WB's multi-platform strategies. In 2007, the college drama, *Greek* was released with a website that allowed viewers to join a fraternity or sorority, just like the characters on the programme. Today, the Disney-ABC press website declares ABC Family to be "one of the most social networks in television" (Disney-ABC Television Groups). One of ABC Family's most prominent features is the way it supplements the *Pretty Little Liars* narrative with webisodes and Twitter campaigns that encourages loyalty to the programme and consistent live viewing. Frank N. Magid Associates researcher Jack MacKenzie asserts, "It's not that [Millennials] want to multitask, it's that they have to" (Liesse A6). ABC Family harnesses this perceived Millennial tendency to multi-task in order to strengthen the channel viewership, an idea that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three. However, what it illustrates here is that ABC Family is in the process of building a strong brand identity that is supported not only by its original programmes but also by its presence on a range of platforms.

ABC Family's branding strategy demonstrates how the channel embraces the challenges of engaging the Millennial demographic. Its rebranding as "A New Kind of Family" highlights the network's determination to assert its position as a channel that understands Millennial viewers. It addresses the belief that Millennials possess an unprecedented level of media and digital literacy by tailoring its programming and promotional strategies to the viewing preferences

of the demographic. In doing so, ABC Family has transformed itself as a highly successful post-network Millennial channel, distinguishing itself from all the other channels that are vying for this demographics' attention.

Conclusion

Channels in the post-network era face a number of challenges. This period has led to a level of inter-network competition that is unprecedented in the television industry. In addition to broadcasters, channels must also compete with an increasing number of premium and basic cable channels that are specifically tailoring their strategies to attract commercially valuable niche demographics. Also, the proliferation of alternative platforms from which to access content has undermined television's ability to reach a mass audience. These new technologies enable viewers to customise their viewing experience, which often results in programmes being effectively dislocated, in the minds of viewers at least, from their original host channel. The fragmentation of audiences that has resulted from these changes has combined with this dislocation, to necessitate the cultivation of a clear brand identity in order to reassert the value of the channel to viewers, advertisers, and to cable system operators.

The emergence of the Millennials, a demographic that is believed to be 'native' to these industrial and technological changes, has posed an additional post-network challenge. These young viewers, though extremely valuable to advertisers, are believed to have a very different relationship to television and technology than previous generations and, as a result, engaging them requires a reconsideration of television's earlier strategies. The unique challenges and position of ABC Family gave it the opportunity as well as the incentive to target this Millennial audience. In addition to the external challenge of distinguishing itself from the vast array of channels vying for the same demographic in the post-network era, ABC Family also needed to resolve the internal problem of

inaccurate or insufficiently clear perceptions of its channel identity, a problem caused by some of its key inherited components.

By aligning itself to the viewing patterns and preferences of Millennial viewers, ABC Family has been able to emerge as a successful post-network channel for young adult viewers. As ABC Family's 'flagship' programme, *Pretty Little Liars* has played a crucial role in this channel's evolution. This programme serves to both appeal to the media literate Millennial demographic while simultaneously elevating the profile of ABC Family through the incorporation of 'high-end' drama elements. The following chapter will analyse *Pretty Little Liars* as a narratively complex, channel-defining programme that has helped ABC Family assert its brand identity as a channel for Millennials.

Chapter Two:

ABC Family's "Sophisticated" Millennial Drama

Introduction

ABC Family's rebranding as a Millennial channel during the post-network era was an ambitious move. In order to pursue this emerging demographic, the channel faced both a fiercely competitive environment and a fragmented target audience with unprecedented media and technological literacy. Former ABC Family President, Michael Riley claims, "*Pretty Little Liars* is brand-defining and demo-defining for ABC Family" (Taylor). The programme is often described by ABC Family as "sophisticated", highlighting its distinctiveness from other teen TV programmes. By commissioning *Pretty Little Liars*, ABC Family created a 'high-end' teen drama that appeals to the unique characteristics of Millennials while simultaneously elevating the profile of the channel. Through its mixed genre, incorporation of 1940s film noir elements, intertextual clues and use of narrative complexity, *Pretty Little Liars* is able to align itself with adult-audience dramas, attempting a level of innovation and risk-taking that is unparalleled by any of its contemporaries. These elements have led *Pretty Little Liars* to not only develop a consistent and loyal audience but also establish its brand identity as the home of "sophisticated" Millennial dramas.

'High-End' Drama

Contemporary 'high-end' drama is designed to target high-value demographics, specifically "well-educated viewers with higher levels of disposable income" (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 199). Trisha Dunleavy explains that these programmes typically have a 'must-see' allure that engenders 'addictive' weekly viewing, they are often created by high-profile writers and directors with 'auteur credentials', involve a 'cinematic' visual quality' and utilise a 'complex' narrative

structure that demands a higher level of engagement (*Television Drama* 211 – 222). Producing ‘high-end’ drama requires a great deal of investment with some exceeding US\$3 million per hour-long episode (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 198). ‘High-end’ drama has been a feature of primetime American television since the 1970s, with programmes such as *Rich Man, Poor Man* (1976), *The Winds of War* (1983) and *Twin Peaks* (1990 – 1991). In the beginning, the unusually high cost limited the presence of these types of programmes in channel schedules (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 199). However, Dunleavy suggests that intensifying competition has not only made ‘high-end’ dramas more prevalent in American television than before, but has also ensured that a greater diversity of networks are involved in creating them (*Television Drama* 199).

Because of their potential for creative experimentation, these programmes often become a key ‘flagship’ programme for their channel, drawing in viewers and helping to define a channel’s brand identity. Despite their high cost, this potential for innovation has become increasingly attractive for channels looking to create unique and distinctive TV programming that will help to aggressively pursue ‘quality’ audiences, a term that foregrounds viewers who are keenly sought by networks and advertisers on the basis of their relative affluence or consumer power (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 199). Although ‘high-end’ drama has tended to be developed mainly for adult ‘quality’ audiences in past decades, the post-network era has seen a marked increase in the volume and range of TV dramas designed for young adult audiences that incorporate ‘high-end’ elements into their narrative and aesthetic characteristics.

Before the 1990s, TV programmes targeting a ‘teenage’ (13-19) demographic were largely limited to soap operas and sitcoms. Sitcoms such as *Saved by the Bell* (1989 – 1993) and *Blossom* (1990 – 1995) that explored teen issues were constrained by their genre convention of narrative circularity. Teen issues were

often treated as “Very Special Episodes”, or stand-alone episodes that dealt with a particular youth issue in a relatively sanitised way, neatly wrapping up the narrative with a happy ending (Nussbaum). The serial structure of primetime soap operas allowed for deeper exploration of the teen issues. Dramas such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990 – 2000) were able to highlight contemporary teen issues such as date rape and suicide by exploring the subject and its impact on characters and community over several episodes.

During the late 1990s, The WB built its channel identity by commissioning ‘high-end’ teen-oriented dramas such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 – 2003) and *Dawson’s Creek* (1998 – 2003). *Buffy* differentiated itself from its contemporaries by addressing adolescent anxieties through a complex mythology. Every week, the protagonist encounters a different demon that she must defeat, acting as a metaphor for the many challenges young adults face during the teenage years. In contrast, *Dawson’s Creek* took a more conventional approach. Matt Hills observes that the programme “sought to elevate itself above a devalued ‘teen TV’ status both textually (via its representations of relationships and character reflexivity) and intertextually (by aligning itself with Williamson’s other, high-profile work in teen horror cinema)” (“Dawson’s Creek” 54). Although both *Buffy* and *Dawson’s Creek* would continue to explore issues that resonate with a young adult audience, they asserted distinction from their contemporaries by incorporating the markers of ‘high-end’ drama to add a level of prestige to the channel. This creates the perception that dramas on The WB are more sophisticated than the ‘average’ teen TV programme, opening the channel to a wider audience. ‘High-end’ teen dramas target teenagers, but aspire to be more mature and substantial than others of their kind.

In the 2000s, these ‘high-end’ teen dramas began to evolve with programmes such as *The O.C.* (2003 – 2007) and *Gossip Girl* (2007 – 2012) by integrating cinematic aesthetics into their visual style. Building on *Buffy*’s influential

innovations, the narratives of contemporary 'high-end' teen dramas such as *The Vampire Diaries* (2009 – present), *Teen Wolf* (2011 – present) also became more experimental through the incorporation of supernatural and fantasy elements that add an additional layer of complexity to the serialised storylines. Although these teen programmes neither aspire to nor reach the same calibre of innovative storytelling demonstrated by 'high-end' dramas aimed at adult audiences, they can be considered to constitute a different class of teen-oriented drama programming from what has been produced in the past.

ABC Family's 'High-End' Dramas

The creation of 'high-end' drama helps channels to demonstrate their value by showcasing a kind of storytelling that could be considered more sophisticated or substantial than the programming aired by their rivals. ABC Family commissioned *Pretty Little Liars* with this idea of 'sophistication' in mind. Former Chief Creative Officer Kate Jeurgens explains, "It allowed us to get sexy in a way we hadn't before and it opened the door to a more sophisticated kind of programming" (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars"). In 2014, *Pretty Little Liars* was not only the most popular programme on the channel but also the number two cable series for women aged 12 – 34 (Kissell, "ABC Family Finishes"). What this illustrates is that by incorporating 'high-end' elements into the programme, *Pretty Little Liars* is able to establish itself as a prominent drama series for Millennials and the kind of programme that will distinguish its host channel ABC Family.

Although ABC Family's Millennial rebranding began in 2007, the channel had already commissioned original programmes to air alongside their off-network acquisitions. Senior Vice President of Marketing credits ABC Family's original programmes such as *Wildfire* (2005 – 2008) for helping to distance the channel from the "stereotypical conservative, boring or insincere aspects of family

television” and gain the attention of Millennial viewers (Liesse A2). The programme centres on a young jockey trying to re-establish her life after spending time in a juvenile detention centre. This programme was followed by sci-fi/mystery *Kyle XY* (2006 – 2009), ABC Family’s first ‘high-end’ drama. In the pilot episode, the protagonist, Kyle, wakes up in a forest without any recollection of how he got there, who he is, or even if he is human. The rest of the series is focused on trying to uncover the mysterious circumstances regarding his identity.

In different ways, the achievements of both these programmes led to ABC Family’s decision to create other ‘high-end’ dramas as a way to target young adults. Once ABC Family had rebranded itself with the tag-line ‘A New Kind of Family’, the ‘flagship’ dramas that followed *Kyle XY*, albeit more conventional in narrative style than this forerunner, often dealt with mature and controversial topics. *Greek* (2007 – 2011) was ABC Family’s first official step in terms of its “evolution into a network for and about Millennials” and involves “slightly older characters with more sophisticated social dilemmas” (Liesse A2). The programme explores the “Greek system” of fraternities and sororities with a particular focus on the university party scene. This was followed by *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008 – 2013), which returns the focus to a younger cast but centres around a pregnant fifteen-year-old girl and the way her pregnancy affects her family and friends’ outlook on sex and relationships. These programmes made specific contributions to ABC Family’s new philosophy. Their controversial nature is very clearly a means of distancing ABC Family from its roots as a channel for parents and children and helps to assert the idea that it speaks to Millennials, specifically to teenagers and ‘twenty-somethings’ who are mature enough for ‘adult’ topics.

Despite the success of *Greek* and *The Secret Life*, neither was able to achieve the same level of popularity as *Pretty Little Liars*. After just one season, the success of *Pretty Little Liars* was able to help raise the profile of ABC Family,

enabling its rise to become one of cable television's top 10 networks for adults 18 to 49 (Barnes). What is significant about this figure is that *Pretty Little Liars*, despite being about teenagers, is also attracting an older segment of Millennials. *Pretty Little Liars* reportedly attracts a median viewer age of 21 (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars"). Through its concept, narrative strategies, aesthetics, and structure, *Pretty Little Liars* represents an unusual level of creative risk-taking and innovation, particularly in comparison to its broadcast television contemporaries such as *Glee* (2009 – 2015), a high school comedy-drama with a largely episodic structure that focuses on one core theme every week, or even *The Vampire Diaries* (2009 – present) which, despite its supernatural elements, is primarily focused on the love triangle involving the protagonist and two rival vampires.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, 'high-end' dramas often involve a creator with 'auteur' credentials. The creator's reputation is deployed to attract viewers and bring a level of prestige to the TV programme and the trade-off is that this creator gains a higher level of creative independence than might otherwise be expected (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 215). *Pretty Little Liars* does not fit this tendency. Before *Pretty Little Liars*, the showrunner and executive producer, I. Marlene King, had limited credentials to her name. Although she is the writer of the female coming-of-age movie, *Now and Then* (1995), she was by no means a television juggernaut like Joss Whedon or even Josh Schwartz whose programmes *The O.C.* (2003 – 2007) and *Gossip Girl* (2007 – 2012) helped to shape the teen TV landscape in respect of 'high-end' drama programming.

Instead of focusing on a high-profile writer, ABC Family chose to attract viewers by commissioning a programme based on a high-profile young adult novel. Sara Shepard's *Pretty Little Liars* was a book series that appeared as a Top 10 children's series on *The New York Times* Best Seller list. Alloy Entertainment then adapted the books series into a television series for ABC

Family. In the past, Alloy Entertainment had developed young adult novels *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries* into successful contemporary teen dramas for The CW. ABC Family used King's experience with female coming-of-age stories in order to support the television iteration of the already popular *Pretty Little Liars* franchise.

The creator was never the focus during the promotion of *Pretty Little Liars*' debut. Although the trailer for the pilot episode introduced the programme as being "from the producers of *Gossip Girl*", this producer is unnamed ("Pretty Little Liars Official Trailer"). This highlights that, although Millennial viewers are well-versed in popular culture (as was discussed in Chapter One), 'auteur' credentials do not hold the same significance with younger audiences. Instead, ABC Family appeals to the perceived media literacy of Millennials by referring to the programme's connection to other teen dramas and its initial success as a successful book series. This is supported by Shepard's cameo in the episode "The Homecoming Hangover". The initial allure of the programme was therefore very heavily linked to its literary origins.

This is a notable departure from the usual institutional representation of 'high-end' dramas and is indicative of a different approach to promotion in respect of teen TV viewers. 'High-end' drama programmes are designed to provide an ongoing point of difference for the host channel. Actively comparing the programme to one produced for another network, notably to The CW's *Gossip Girl*, initially seems contradictory. Yet it is also unsurprising in respect of ABC Family, which initially built its Millennial audience via its acquisition and scheduling of The WB's original programmes. Although the link to *Gossip Girl* and to the book series may have contributed to the initial 'buzz' about the new programme, *Pretty Little Liars* instead established itself as being a distinctive and 'more sophisticated kind of programming' through its narrative. In doing this, the programme not only aligned itself with leading existing teen TV dramas but

also positioned itself as being superior to and/or more substantial than these counterparts, helping ABC Family assert itself as channel that understands Millennial viewers.

Pretty Little Liars' ambition to become a 'high-end' drama was nonetheless a risky endeavour. *The Hollywood Reporter* describes the programme as "a world previously unseen on ABC Family" (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars"). The programme begins with the disappearance and possible murder of Alison (Ali), a beautiful teenager leading a double life. The mystery occurs in a small picturesque town full of ugly secrets and its townsfolk were left with no choice but to solve an increasingly complex mystery. This murder mystery plot (also known as a 'whodunnit') has been recycled countless times in both film and television. Since it was popularised by *Twin Peaks* in the 1990s, *Veronica Mars* (2004 – 2007), *The Killing* (2011 – 2014) and *True Detective* (2014 – present) have all deployed the above type of trope and setting, albeit in different ways.

Executive Producer I. Marlene King acknowledges the particular influence of the innovative soap opera/murder mystery of *Twin Peaks* on *Pretty Little Liars* by stating that when she pitched the programme to ABC Family, "*Twin Peaks* was definitely part of our vocabulary" (Paskin). One critic even describes *Pretty Little Liars* as "'Gossip Girl' goes 'Twin Peaks Lite'" (McNamara). This linkage also highlights that the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* involves what Jason Mittell terms 'generic mixing'. Mittell explains generic mixing as "an ongoing process of generic combination and interplay" (*Genre and Television* 154). It involves the mixing of conventions and associations from different genres in order to create something genuinely different from what has previously been seen on television.

This concept provides a contrast with Todd Gitlin's concept of 'recombination'. Coined in the network era, it recognised that the conception of TV drama was largely limited by the tendency to borrow and 'recombine' successful elements

from earlier programmes in order to create a 'new' premise, this practice underlining the risk-adverse tendency of networks in regard to an untested television show (Gitlin 63). Although 'recombination' was important to drama creation in past decades of television, the creation of distinctive original programmes has become an important business strategy for television networks in the post-network environment. For that reason, 'recombination' may be considered too conservative an approach to concept design as compared with 'generic mixing'. In recent years, generic mixing has characterised such leading 'high-end' dramas as *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013) and *Game of Thrones* (2011 – present). This approach has thus demonstrated an unusual capacity to generate both popular success and critical acclaim in TV drama created for a post-network environment.

As Dunleavy argues, generic mixing helps 'high-end' dramas to achieve a "conceptual and/or aesthetic novelty" that contributes to the overall brand of the channel (*Television Drama* 216). The use of generic mixing in *Pretty Little Liars* assists the programme and its host channel in distancing themselves from the traditional conventions of teen TV. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson explain that television programmes targeting young audiences are usually seen as "low culture" (8). Although contemporary teen programmes *The Vampire Diaries* and *Teen Wolf* also experiment with generic mixing, *Pretty Little Liars'* blend of teen-oriented soap opera and murder mystery allows the programme to explore much darker themes. This innovation helps to align *Pretty Little Liars* more closely with the perceived sophistication and quality of such successful and acclaimed adult-audience dramas as the HBO and AMC examples mentioned above.

Like *Twin Peaks*, *Pretty Little Liars'* generic mix involves reconciling soap opera's traits of a focus on personal relationships, the use of melodramatic aesthetics, the evasion of closure, and multiple interweaving storylines, with the different characteristics of a murder mystery plot. In the past, murder mysteries

proved to be successful in generating an initial allure for programmes like *Twin Peaks* and *Veronica Mars*. However, these programmes have also demonstrated that it can be very difficult to sustain this success. As Marc Dolan observes, a murder mystery, “stimulates its audience to expect unequivocal narrative closure” (37). The initial reception of these programmes was characterised by a mix of popular ‘buzz’ and critical acclaim but within two seasons these initially promising reactions had fizzled out.

Murder mysteries are a type of detective fiction. As Tzvetan Todorov explains, this type of narrative “contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (44). The detective’s investigation progresses the story to an ultimate conclusion and at the same time, this conclusion provides closure to the crime story, as the reasoning behind the disturbance at the beginning of the programme is made clear (Todorov 44 – 45). Because of this narrative structure, tying a television drama’s premise too firmly to a resolvable murder places limits on the ability of the programme to prolong and refresh the story.

For example, the murder mystery of *Twin Peaks* may have been successful in the short term, but as Dolan explains “it was probably their biggest mistake in terms of sustaining viewer interest over the long haul” (36). When Laura Palmer’s murder mystery was solved in the second season of *Twin Peaks*, the ratings “dropped dramatically” and the programme was cancelled (Mathees 99). As more clues to reveal the identity the killer are uncovered in a murder mystery there can be a presumption, this deriving from the historic conventions of this trope, that the story will have a conclusive ending. This expectation exists in conflict with the unfolding of a continuous narrative, which means that murder mystery plots can be difficult to manage in ‘high-end’ drama, in which long-form storytelling is the dominant approach.

Although the use of the murder mystery plot in *Pretty Little Liars* could have limited the lifespan of the programme, it did not. In 2014, ABC Family renewed the programme for two more seasons, guaranteeing *Pretty Little Liars* an unbroken seven-season run by 2016 (Ng, “ABC Family Renews”). Part of *Pretty Little Liars*’ success can be attributed to the balance of its generic mixing. As King emphasises, “The mystery is only [thirty] per cent of each episode. Seventy per cent of it is the world these girls live in and their love stories, their hardships, their hates, and difficulties” (Paskin). By shifting the focus to personal relationships and private issues, the programme is able to prolong its narrative while still benefiting from the intrigue and suspense of the murder mystery.

Pretty Little Liars’ generic mix of a teen-oriented soap opera and murder mystery addresses the problem of a long-running serial narrative in two ways. Firstly, the programme incorporates an omniscient cyber bully known only as ‘A’ whose storyline is deeply intertwined with Ali’s disappearance. ‘A’ torments the four core characters (the Liars) threatening to damage their personal relationships by revealing their secrets. This antagonist is not unlike the anonymous blogger in *Gossip Girl* who threatens the reputations of the young members of Manhattan’s high society. However, unlike The CW’s teen drama, *Pretty Little Liars* unique generic mix makes these threats seem far more credible and sinister. The plot of *Pretty Little Liars* is thus not entirely contingent on prolonging the murder mystery storyline but on discovering the identity of ‘A’.

Secondly, instead of one detective, there are four archetypal teen characters trying to solve the mystery. Aria is the sensitive artist, Emily is the athlete struggling with her sexuality, Spencer is the highly-strung academic, and Hanna is the popular socialite. The Liars are reminiscent of characters found in teen movies such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985). Even Ali, as the clique leader, could be considered a ‘Queen Bee’ archetype from films such as *Heathers* (1988) and more recently, *Mean Girls* (2004). These characters, although heavily

stereotyped, are representations of high school identities, reflecting the different paths that a teenager might choose to take. This allows viewers some different avenues for identification with what are evidently 'relatable' characters that they can follow throughout the programme's run. Character evolution is just as important as the resolution of the overarching mystery.

Inserting these familiar characters into a murder mystery enables *Pretty Little Liars* to explore teen issues in a more sophisticated way. Dolan observes that in *Twin Peaks*, "the branches of the various soap-opera plots were intended to 'grow' out of the central detective-story plot" (36). This is the same with *Pretty Little Liars*. Many of the programme's storylines deals with the impact of 'A's' threats to the Liars' personal lives. For example, in "Can You Hear Me Now?", 'A' tells Aria that she must reveal to her mother that her father had an affair. When Aria refused, 'A' sent an anonymous letter detailing the relationship to her mother. This led to Aria's parents separating and her brother committing acts of violence and vandalism. In this way, the 'A' threat becomes a point of departure for the exploration of the issue of divorce and its impact on families.

In generic mixing, as Mittell argues, the "combination of generic assumptions makes each genre's norms richer and more vibrant through clever practices of fusion" (*Genre and Television* 157). In *Pretty Little Liars*, the depictions of contemporary teen issues are often heightened to an extreme level. Ien Ang emphasises that personal life in soap opera is often "dominated by conflicts and catastrophes, which are blown up to improbable proportions" (*Watching Dallas* 60). This dimension of melodrama is illustrated in *Pretty Little Liars*, which often uses the 'whodunnit' element of the plot to turn contemporary teen problems into life-threatening situations. For example, Spencer is introduced in the pilot as someone under a lot of family pressure to excel. In an effort to balance the 'A' mystery with her academic goals, Spencer abuses the prescription drug Adderall – a drug that has made media headlines for being abused by students

to help them focus on their studies (Yanes) – whereupon her mental state rapidly begins to deteriorate, alienating her from her friends and family. As a result, the exploration of this contemporary issue is deeply intertwined with the quest to discover ‘A’'s identity.

Additionally, in Season One, Emily's swimming talent causes tension with her highly competitive teammate, Paige. Many of Emily's scenes revolve around her struggle with being bullied by this character. *Pretty Little Liars* takes this rivalry to a darker place when Paige attempts to drown Emily in order to scare her into leaving the team ("If At First You Don't Succeed"). It is later revealed that part of the motivation for Paige's actions is her struggle with her own sexuality and her growing feelings for Emily ("The New Normal"). While *Pretty Little Liars* continues to explore the same type of teen angst and issues as those examined in such teen dramas as its contemporary *Gossip Girl*, its murder mystery influence ensures that the story arc will often take on a more sinister life or death tone.

The murder mystery influence helps to diversify the ways in which teen issues can be addressed. For instance, the portrayal of Emily, Ali and Paige's sexual orientation helped *Pretty Little Liars* to be nominated for Outstanding TV Drama in the GLAAD Media Awards. This award functions to "recognize and honor media for their fair, accurate, and inclusive representations of the LGBT community and the issues that affect their lives" and in 2015, *Pretty Little Liars* received its fourth nomination (Martin). Arguably, because of the unique generic mix of *Pretty Little Liars*, the narrative of the programme is able to provide a wider range of obstacles that enable the characters to address contemporary issues in more diverse and creative ways. This helps to further distinguish the programme in ways that attract the attention of critics, helping to further assert *Pretty Little Liars* as being superior to its teen drama contemporaries.

Moseley argues that teen TV “deal[s] with questions of difference [and] otherness”, giving the sense that “to be a teenager is to be not quite human” (43). She cites programmes like *Buffy* and *Charmed* to demonstrate the sense of isolation of the main characters. Although the Liars are very much human, the fact that they are trying to determine what happened to Ali creates this same feeling of isolation from the rest of the community, particularly because there is a cloud of suspicion regarding their involvement with Ali’s disappearance. Each of the Liars could be seen as having a motive for being involved in Ali’s disappearance. For example, Ali was blackmailing Spencer about her relationship with her sister’s boyfriend (“Pilot”). In addition, the Liars are also revealed as having caused an explosion that blinded a fellow classmate (“The Jenna Thing”). This adds a layer of uncertainty to the *Pretty Little Liars* characters.

These elements ensure that viewers can never truly trust the protagonists’ innocence, a fact that is confirmed in the episode “I Am Your Puppet” which reveals that Spencer had joined ‘The ‘A’ Team’, a secret group of people who use the ‘A’ pseudonym while working under the instruction of ‘A’ (also known as Big ‘A’). Morally ambiguous characters are more commonly found in ‘high-end’ crime dramas like *The Sopranos* and *Dexter*, which were produced for premium cable channels and, as such, can push the content boundaries of television. By incorporating this element into the narrative, *Pretty Little Liars* adds a level of uncertainty and suspense to the programme that is uncharacteristic of teen-oriented TV dramas.

These contemporary young adult issues, as well as the romantic storylines expected in a teen-oriented soap opera are intertwined with narratives addressing murder and blackmail. This generic mix shifts the focus of the narrative to the personal impact of ‘A’ on the Liars’ lives and, in doing so, reduces the usual narrative pressure to solve the murder immediately. This

tactic allows the programme to keep evading closure, distracting the audience with teen melodrama as the mystery slowly unravels. Through *Pretty Little Liars*, ABC Family has created a 'high-end' teen drama that combines the allure and sophistication of a narratively complex murder mystery with the accessibility and narrative continuity of soap opera.

Teen Noir Aesthetics

The mysterious tone of *Pretty Little Liars* is supported by its visual quality and style. In the past, the aesthetic quality of television was considered inferior to that of cinema (Nelson, *State of Play* 110). The television image was perceived as being technically less stable than cinema because of transmission interference and differences in adjustments to brightness and colour both at the transmission and reception end of the broadcast process (Nelson, *State of Play* 110). Additionally, the smaller screen limited the potential for stylistic innovation especially in comparison to film's capacity to show detail and experiment with camera angles (Nelson, *State of Play* 111). Television was known as "the close-up medium" due to many of its camera shots being constrained to cutting from one talking head to another (Nelson, *State of Play* 111).

Many of these visual issues have been remedied by the new technologies of the post-network era. In concert with the use of cinema-like film formats in 'high-end' television drama production, which allow "greater resolution, luminosity, and depth of image, compared with [other] videotaped dramas", digital transmission has further stabilised the resolution and sound of television (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 219). These changes have worked together with the advent of HDTV (high-definition television) and widescreen television monitors to ensure that the experience of a 'home cinema' is more attainable than before (Nelson, *State of Play* 111).

Pretty Little Liars is filmed with the Red One MX camera using the RedCode RAW format (“Pretty Little Liars Technical Specifications”). Whilst not a ‘film’ medium, this format highlights how ‘high-end’ video is now capable of achieving a ‘cinematic’ visual quality. Dunleavy explains that this digital format has a visual quality that “can match and even exceed the sensory capacity of 35mm film” (*Television Drama* 222). This video format is also used in feature film production as well as for other ‘high-end’ drama serials such as *House of Cards* (“House of Cards Technical Specifications”). These new technologies have opened up a greater potential for TV drama to be produced as well as conceived with cinematic aesthetics and techniques in mind.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, cinematic aesthetics are a characteristic of ‘high-end’ dramas, helping them to exude a heightened level of sophistication in comparison to other shows. The post-network environment is fiercely competitive and, as Dunleavy observes, this pursuit of visual sophistication in drama underlines the “increased cultural, aesthetic and commercial value that television has placed on style itself” (*Television Drama* 220). Rather than merely being influenced by an aspiration to emulate cinema, style has become “an objective in its own right” for television drama (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 221). ‘High-end’ dramas, therefore, are apt to fully exploit the cinematic opportunities offered by new technologies in order to experiment with style and assert their place in the post-network era.

Although this heightened visual quality has been mostly linked to adult-audience dramas, it has also been demonstrated in teen-oriented programmes as the adolescent market has become more commercially valuable. Moseley acknowledges that contemporary programmes for young viewers have incorporated the “high production values associated with quality prime-time television” (42). However, while adult-audience programmes like *Lost* (2004 – 2010) have been praised for being able to “surpass the cinematic look of such

quality predecessors as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*” through their use of visual spectacle, the style of *Pretty Little Liars* is notably modest by comparison (Pearson 244).



Figure 2.1 Screencap from “The Blond Leading the Blind”

The cinematic aesthetic of *Pretty Little Liars* does not aspire towards contemporary blockbusters but instead works within its limited budget to emulate a 1940s-like aesthetic through its mise-en-scène. The disappearance and potential murder of Ali establishes the ‘loss of innocence’ theme that is central to the murder mystery genre, especially to its 1940s – 1950s iteration, film noir. Although *Veronica Mars* also experimented with the idea of a teen noir, it did not incorporate the aesthetics of noir into its visual style to the same extent as *Pretty Little Liars*. Figure 2.1 shows how the programme’s use of noir aesthetics includes chiaroscuro, a lighting technique that emphasises contrasts between light and dark. This lighting contributes a visual representation of the overall theme of *Pretty Little Liars*, which revolves around secrecy and the fear of exposure. As Janey Place and Lowell Peterson explain:

Unlike the even illumination of high-key lighting which seeks to display attractively all areas of the frame, the low-key noir style opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes – and, by extension, motivations and true character – in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown” (qtd. in Keating 271)

Pretty Little Liars uses “expressive lighting” in the same way as film noir in order to set a tone that acknowledges its mixed genre (Keating 271). Norman Buckley, one of the *Pretty Little Liars* directors, explains that the “production design and photography combine to create a world that is both familiar and mysterious” (Buckley, “Pretty Little Liars”). The characters of Rosewood are secretive and duplicitous but their actions take place in much the same kind of upper middle-class and immaculately presented neighbourhood seen in other teen dramas. Given the incongruity between this ordered setting and what happens within it, the visual style of the programme highlights the idea of nefarious but well-concealed activities in a small town. *Pretty Little Liars* uses this aesthetic in order to build a more suspenseful and mysterious tone that makes it ‘darker’ than and distinctive among other teen dramas.

The programme films most of its scenes in the Warner Bros lot (Buckley, “Pretty Little Liars”) and uses many of the same sets as The WB’s family drama, *Gilmore Girls* (Karlin). Rather than being a hindrance to its ‘high-end’ aspirations, Buckley explains that using the Warner Bros lot in order to portray the town of Rosewood helps *Pretty Little Liars* attain “a dreamlike quality to some of the compositions, feeling melancholy and mysterious, very Hopper-esque” (“Pretty Little Liars”). Edward Hopper was an American realist painter who specialised in 1940s urban scenes. His work became a stylistic inspiration for the cinematography of several noir films including *Psycho*, *The Killers* and *Force of Evil* (French). Buckley explains:

[*Pretty Little Liars*] is a smart, clever show and, like Hopper's art, examines private moments, and the mystery that exists within the commonplace. The show revolves around the differences between the public and the private [...] and there is a voyeuristic quality to its narrative. We watch people in the same way that Hopper seems to catch them, unaware that they are being observed. ("Pretty Little Liars")

There is a very careful and deliberate incorporation of this Hopper-esque noir aesthetic in the visual style of *Pretty Little Liars*. Buckley describes the production offices of *Pretty Little Liars* as displaying Hopper's work everywhere as a source of inspiration for their work ("Pretty Little Liars"). This inspiration is illustrated in the episode "The Remains of A" where one of the scenes is composed to be a direct reflection of one of Hopper's most iconic works, 'Nighthawks' (See Figure 2.2). Producer Joseph Dougherty insists that *Pretty Little Liars* "comes from a place of respect for classic filmmaking: Hitchcock and the '40s. We're writers who pay back the debts to the writers we loved that made us turn into writers" (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars' EP"). By going directly to the same source that inspired classic film noir, *Pretty Little Liars* is truly going beyond the norms of teen drama.

In addition to Hopper, Buckley states that he also takes inspiration from classic films and will sometimes show the director of photography or production designer certain sequences in order to deliver the same effect for the programme ("Sometimes Unconscious"). This is exemplified by the episode "Salt Meets Wound" in which a wheelchair-bound Hanna is unable to leave the house and has to hide herself in the dark when she suspects that someone else is in there with her (See Figure 2.3). This scene was inspired by a sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* in which the protagonist is caught in a similar situation in his apartment (Buckley, "Pretty Little Liars").



Figure 2.2 - Screenshot from "The Remains of A"



Figure 2.3 – Screenshot from "Salt Meets Wound"

Even the movements of the actors are choreographed to reflect gestures from classic movies. Buckley explains that at times, he shows the actors sequences from classic movies so that they would know “precisely the behavior [he] was looking for” (“Sometimes Unconscious”). Figure 2.4 shows how Ashley Benson emulates gestures performed by Bette Davis in *All About Eve* to convey her distractedness and contemplation as she snacks at a school dance in “There’s No Place Like Homecoming”. These examples highlight that *Pretty Little Liars* takes great care in framing its mise-en-scène and narrative in ways that achieve a textual dialogue with cinema. Even though it is a teen drama, the producers of the programme have gone out of their way to construct a perception of aesthetic quality.

The intertextual references to these classic films in *Pretty Little Liars* are what Brian Ott and Cameron Walter refer to as “parodic allusion” (435 – 437). This is a stylistic device in which “one text incorporates a caricature of another, most often, popular cultural text” (Ott and Walter 435). Unlike the literary device of parody, the aim of parodic allusion is not to offer commentary or criticism of the original text. Instead, it “seeks to amuse through juxtaposition” (Ott and Walter 436). Buckley insists that the writers of *Pretty Little Liars* are “all voracious readers and they draw upon the great heritage of literary, art, and film references” (“Sometimes Unconscious”). The use of parodic allusion in *Pretty Little Liars* challenges the viewers to comprehend and identify the reference.



Figure 2.4 - Norman Buckley's Comparison of "There's No Place Like Homecoming" to *All About Eve*³

³ Source: Buckley, Norman. "Norman Buckley's PLL Reference: All About Eve (1950) – Joseph L. Mankiewicz." *normanbuckley.tumblr.com*. Tumblr, n.d. Web. 10 May. 2015.

In “UnmAsked”, there are many references to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. For example, like the infamous Marion Crane scene, Hanna is stalked by a shadowy figure as she showers in her motel room (See Figure 2.5). Additionally, after Hanna’s friend Mona is revealed to be on ‘The ‘A’ Team’, she is institutionalized, mirroring Norman Bates’ demise at the end of *Psycho*. “For Whom The Bell Tolls” also references Hitchcock’s work. In the episode’s climactic scene, Ian, one of the key suspects in Ali’s disappearance, chases Spencer up the town bell tower, mirroring Detective Ferguson’s pursuit of Madeline in *Vertigo*. Unlike the film, it is the male character, rather than the female character that falls to his death in *Pretty Little Liars*. The film references in the programme can therefore also serve as clues as to how the episode will unfold. However, as demonstrated in “For Whom The Bell Tolls”, the programme is constructed to surprise viewers by providing a slight twist to what they are expecting.



Figure 2.5 - Screencap from “UnmAsked”

These intertextual clues illustrate how *Pretty Little Liars* is aligned to the presumed media literacy of the Millennial audience. Ott and Walter explain that intertextual references transforms the audience “into the site of critical

commentary; they are judged worthy by the text and subsequently themselves if they possess sufficient cultural knowledge to recognize the popular references” (Ott and Walter 436). Although comprehending the reference still rewards viewers with a feeling of ‘worthiness’, in *Pretty Little Liars*, there is an even greater reward as the references can act as clues to how the episode will unfold. The programme is constructed using what Jason Mittell calls, “a game aesthetic” meaning that the narrative is built like a puzzle, “inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretative codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies” (“Narrative Complexity” 38). The programme demands a higher level of engagement and commitment than other contemporary teen dramas in order to identify and comprehend the meaning of the clues embedded in the narrative.

Additionally, despite being centered on teenagers, these techniques that dip into wider popular culture helps *Pretty Little Liars* to be relevant even for older viewers. King believes that *Pretty Little Liars* “has become more sophisticated as the show continues to grow” (Friedlander). She explains that this programme has become “very relatable to adults” and that it is the “sophisticated mystery that keeps [their] older audience coming back” (Friedlander). Through its aesthetics and composition, *Pretty Little Liars* is able to visually convey a level of sophistication to elevate the programme beyond the teen drama category that it belongs to. This further strengthens the programme’s aspiration towards ‘high-end’ drama by creating a ‘must-see’ allure that encourages addictive viewing patterns by demanding a high level of engagement and dedication.

As discussed earlier, ‘must see’ allure is another characteristic of ‘high-end’ drama in the post-network era (Dunleavy *Television Drama* 212). Dunleavy explains that these programmes “engender ‘addictive’ rather than merely ‘appointment’ viewing” (*Television Drama* 212). This allows the programme to build a dedicated viewership in an era of fierce inter-network competition. Mark

Jancovich and James Lyons explain that ‘must-see’ programmes compel viewers to “organise their [own] schedules around these shows” (2). Although the fragmentation of audiences across different channels and platforms has largely eradicated the shared cultural experience of television that was characteristic of the network era, a ‘must-see’ allure helps to enhance and generate buzz around a programme that could lead to a greater sense of ‘talkability’ (L.R. Williams 51).

Linda Ruth Williams describes *Twin Peaks* as “classic ‘watercooler TV’”, with its ability to foster discussion between people the following day (51). This ‘talkability’ helped to generate a ‘buzz’ that arguably inspired viewers to keep returning to the programme in order to participate in the discussion. The use of intertextual clues on *Pretty Little Liars* helps to generate a similar ‘talkability’. Dougherty explains that there is “a hunger” with their young audience for intertextual references, with viewers using Twitter to celebrate their successful identification of a reference or to reach out for help in comprehending the clue (Keveney, “Pretty Little Liars Looks Back”). *Pretty Little Liars*’ Twitter presence will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three but what this example illustrates is how the use of intertextual clues encourages a deeper sense of engagement with the programme that helps to foster discussion and consistent viewing.

***Pretty Little Liars* and Narrative Complexity**

The clues embedded in the intertextual references are only one of the many aspects of *Pretty Little Liars*’ complex narrative that compels viewers to watch consistently. In addition to deciphering the significance of its popular cultural references, the programme combines a dense narrative structure with the use of disorienting narrative devices in order to promote cult-like engagement and dedication from its viewers. Jason Mittell coined the term ‘narrative complexity’

to describe a narrational mode of television fiction that is “an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception” (“Narrative Complexity” 29). It allows for creativity through narrative experimentation, a feature that helps programmes stand out from their competitors.

Dunleavy highlights three main innovations of narrative complexity in television drama: increasing serialisation over the traditional episodic form, the use of what Robin Nelson has termed a ‘flexi-narrative’ episode structure that allows for multiple interweaving storylines, and the incorporation of intertextuality (*Television Drama* 133). These strategies all have the ability to create programmes that deviate from the narrative traditions of long-form television drama. These strategies allow TV programmes such as *Lost*, *True Blood* (2008 – 2014) and *Game of Thrones* to explore, for example, multiple perspectives, alternate dimensions, and hallucinations. Because of its ability to create a distinctive and innovative programme, narrative complexity has become one of the key features of ‘high-end’ dramas.

Narrative complexity plays a significant role in *Pretty Little Liars*. Through its use of multiple interweaving storylines, flashbacks, cliffhangers and intertextual references, the programme has been structured to promote consistent and loyal viewing patterns. Although *Pretty Little Liars* would certainly not have the same budget as narratively complex programme like *Game of Thrones*, it is clear that the influence and innovations of these ‘high-end’ dramas have trickled down to this ABC Family teen mystery. *Pretty Little Liars* commands a more demanding viewing experience than the average teen TV programme, highlighting ABC Family’s presumption that the media literacy of its Millennial audience will allow them to understand and enjoy the story.



Figure 2.6 – *Pretty Little Liars* Title Sequence⁴

The narrative complexity of *Pretty Little Liars* is immediately apparent in its title sequence. As shown in Figure 2.6, this sequence begins with what at first looks to be a young girl getting dressed, applying makeup and doing her hair. These images mirror the makeover montages popular in teen films such as *Clueless* (1995) and *The Princess Diaries* (2001). The scene then reveals that what the audience is actually seeing is a body being prepared for burial. The camera pans out and shows four girls standing with unease around the casket, before zooming in on one character who makes a “shush” gesture. These images work together to generate a sense of secrecy and mystery, highlighting the idea that nothing in *Pretty Little Liars* is what it might originally seem. The ominous tone of the title sequence is further established by the theme song which has an eerie aural quality that is combined with the lyrics: “If I show you

⁴ Source: Jennifer29. "Pretty Little Liars Song." *Stuffpoint*. stuffpoint.com, 2013. JPEG file.

then I know you won't tell what I said / 'Cause two can keep a secret if one of them is dead" (The Pierces).

Robin Nelson explains that opening titles can act as, "a microcosm of the series" and that these titles are "vital, as 'hook' to the programme's success" (*TV Drama in Transition* 37). The *Pretty Little Liars* title sequence functions to pull the audience in and prepare the viewer for a higher level of engagement by implying that there is something ugly hiding beneath the surface of what at first seems like a glossy and 'aspirational' teen drama. Each *Pretty Little Liars* episode plays this sequence in full, which is a rare feature in contemporary teen dramas. For example, The CW's 'flagship' programme, *The Vampire Diaries*, does not have a title sequence at all and instead, only briefly shows the name of the programme before beginning the episode.

These opening credits illustrate *Pretty Little Liars*' aspiration to be a 'high-end' programme. Following the critical success of HBO's first original TV dramas, elaborate title sequences have become a signature feature of 'high-end' drama, with conspicuous examples in *Dexter* (2006 – 2013), *True Detective* and *Game of Thrones*. They are used to both evoke a particular mood but also to attain a certain visual and cinematic quality, helping the programme build a point of difference from its competitors. Elaborate credits help distinguish *Pretty Little Liars* as a teen-oriented 'high-end' drama, working to align it with the visual sophistication more commonly found in adult-audience dramas. Additionally, before the episode even begins, the *Pretty Little Liars* credits establish the tone and complexity of the programme. It reveals the theme of secrecy and keeping up appearances, alluding to the narrative layers of the text.

Pretty Little Liars is constructed as a 'complex serial' rather than using a combination of the 'series' and 'serial' form (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 154). Dunleavy explains that 'complex serials' adapt a 'closed serial' form, this term

recognising a limited number of episodes and the narrative emphasis on “a single, overarching story that runs through all the episodes” (*Television Drama* 154). As discussed earlier, the programme is adapted from literature, and following the structure of the novels, is completely serialised. It follows two predominant but deeply intertwined mysteries: “Who killed Ali?” and “Who is ‘A’?”. Although a closed serial may initially seem at odds with *Pretty Little Liars*’ inclination towards the continuing and multiple storylines of a teen-oriented soap opera, the programme has been constructed to allow the relationship conflict to emerge from the mystery itself.

The question of “Who is A?” therefore becomes the ‘narrative enigma’ that drives the story of *Pretty Little Liars* as this omniscient figure continues to threaten the personal lives of the core characters (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 154). The Liars contribute to this as both ‘A’’s victims and the detectives trying to uncover the identity of ‘A’. Dunleavy explains that in a complex serial, “each new episode brings the overarching story a step closer to resolution” (*Television Drama* 155). Every episode of *Pretty Little Liars* continues this investigation as the Liars slowly discover new clues and suspects. This feature is another means through which *Pretty Little Liars* cultivates a ‘must-see’ allure. It cannot be enjoyed on a ‘casual’ viewing basis because the storyline progresses with every episode.

The risk of this approach is that, as it develops, the narrative becomes inaccessible to new viewers. However, Mittell explains that narratively complex programmes are aided by the proliferation of time-shifting technologies such as DVRs in the post-network era (“Narrative Complexity” 31). Additionally, the ABC Family website also gives viewers the ability to ‘catch-up’ by accessing its online archive of older episodes. This ensures that *Pretty Little Liars* can be watched on other media platforms and re-watched by loyal fans that want to investigate episodes for clues regarding the mystery. This extension of the narrative to

other platforms will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three but here it highlights one of the many ways that *Pretty Little Liars*' seemingly alienating narrative structure has anticipated and addressed the problem of late entry.

In addition to these technological facilitators for viewers' late entry to the programme, many of the episodes of the first season are centred on school events. "There's No Place Like Homecoming" centres around a homecoming dance and in "The Perfect Storm", the Liars are taking their SAT exams. These events give viewers plenty of opportunities to engage with *Pretty Little Liars* in its first season. Although this is no longer a regular feature of the programme, these themed episodes increase audience access into a narrative that becomes more complex with every episode. By Season Three, the programme had become more determinedly serialised, which meant fewer episodes being devoted to specific or singular adolescent activities. This was possible, in part, because *Pretty Little Liars* had already established a loyal viewership. At the time, the Season Two finale, "UnmAsked" became ABC Family's most watched telecast ever in women 18 - 34 (ABC Family, "Pretty Little Liars' Finale"). These high ratings meant that Season Three could begin its run strongly, since the programme was already attracting a significant volume of viewers. From this more established audience position, the programme could afford to be more concerned with storylines devised to reward viewers for their continued engagement.

Although serial narratives are common in the narratively complex dramas produced for networks like HBO and Showtime, whose premium cable footing obligates them to demonstrate their superiority to other channels, ABC Family has more constraints. HBO and Showtime are subscription channels and their innovative programmes are designed to prove the channel worthy of the cost of a monthly subscription. Because ABC Family is a basic cable network, which means that a proportion of its income comes from advertising, it needs to find

ways to ensure that its programmes are accessible to new viewers in order to maximise the size of its audience. Yet as a basic cable channel, an important avenue toward audience size is the potential of an innovative and creative new TV programme to itself generate ‘buzz’ and in doing so, convince cable system operators that a specific network or channel is ‘undroppable’ for them.

A typical *Pretty Little Liars* season has 22 to 25 episodes and begins the first half in June and ends in August (part A). The programme is on hiatus until the second half (part B) airs, beginning in January and concluding in March. This allows for a mid-season point of entry to the *Pretty Little Liars* storyline. For example, in Season Three, part A (3A), the dense narrative of the programme comprises five main storylines including a mini mystery about who killed Emily’s girlfriend, Maya. This mini mystery is developed in 3A and the murderer is revealed in the 3A final, just before the hiatus. This final episode of 3A also ends on a cliffhanger that reveals that Spencer’s boyfriend Toby is working for ‘A’ (“The Lady Killer”). In 3B, the mystery is then refocused to the overarching ‘A’ storyline by unravelling the extent of Toby’s involvement in the main mystery.

This structure gives *Pretty Little Liars* the ability to use the first half of the season to engage new viewers. The overarching ‘A’ mystery, which had been developing for two seasons by Season Three, is arguably too complex for newcomers to immediately comprehend. The mini-mystery is specifically constructed to be a point of entry, giving new viewers something to follow for half a season. After its conclusion in the 3A finale, these new viewers can then use the five-month hiatus to ‘catch-up’ on the programme, now armed with at least some understanding of the *Pretty Little Liars* diegesis. They can then re-join *Pretty Little Liars* in 3B fully caught up, in order to finish the season.

During the hiatus, *Pretty Little Liars* also airs special holiday themed episodes. Underlining the extent of its seriality, these holiday specials are the only stand-

alone episodes. ABC Family usually airs themed movies and episodes from their programmes during the seasonal programming blocks ‘13 Nights of Halloween’ and ‘25 Days of Christmas’. The function of the holiday special is twofold. As ABC Family’s most popular programme, it can help strengthen the channel’s holiday schedule by giving existing fans a reason to tune in. Additionally, the holiday season can help introduce new viewers to the programme.

For example, the Halloween episode, “The First Secret”, takes place the year before Ali disappeared. The casual viewer is given an accessible but suspenseful storyline revolving around Ali being taken from a party and attacked in an empty house. At the end of the episode Ali reveals that she was playing a prank on the Liars as a Halloween joke. The story comes to a complete conclusion, a spooky standalone episode to complement ABC Family’s line-up of Halloween themed movies. However, near the end of the episode, Ali receives a text that says, “Dying to know who I am? You’ll find out. –A”, rewarding loyal viewers with the reveal that ‘A’ was not only threatening the Liars but had also tormented Ali before she disappeared. This episode serves to progress the ‘A’ storyline while also being welcoming to new viewers.

Seasonal Narrative Complexity

As discussed earlier, running parallel to these mystery storylines are individual relationship storylines for each Liar. In an interview with *Vulture*, Marlene King states that the programme contains “emotional arcs” and “mystery arcs” (Goldstein). This comment is somewhat deceptive. While it is true that in contrast to the mystery arcs discussed above, the emotional arcs can be related to developing relationships or family problems, these emotional arcs often contribute to the overarching mystery in interesting and surprising ways. These narrative strands, which seek to address teen issues, are not exclusively for

character development. They also often serve a purpose to the mystery that is not revealed until the finale.

Returning to the Season Three example above, there are five main storylines in 3A: Story One centres on Emily's involvement with Ali's body being stolen from her grave. Story Two follows the decline of Spencer's mental state. Story Three centres on Hanna's refusal to abandon Mona after discovering her involvement with 'A'. Story Four is about Aria finding out her boyfriend Ezra has a child and Story Five revolves around finding Maya's killer after her murder in 2B's cliffhanger. Stories One, Two and Three are all continuations of the 'A' mystery. These storylines serve to complicate the narrative by revealing new clues over the season such as the existence of The 'A' Team and their motive for stealing Ali's remains. In contrast, Story Four is introduced as an emotional arc for Aria. This story arc leans more towards teen melodrama than mystery, serving to highlight the challenges of a partner's romantic past and of teenage motherhood.

In this story arc, Aria learns that Ezra's high school girlfriend became pregnant but lost the baby ("The Kahn Game"). This leads Aria to visit Ezra's ex, Maggie, and discover that she has young son named Malcolm ("Single Fright Female"). Aria's visit convinces Maggie to admit to Ezra that she had lied about her miscarriage and that he truly is Malcolm's father ("The Lady Killer") and in 3B, Ezra leaves Rosewood to get to know his son ("Out of the Frying Pan"). When he returns, Aria tries to get to know Malcolm but struggles to look after him, leading her to worry that she is too young to be a stepparent ("Out of Sight"). Initially, this storyline seems completely separate from the others. While the other Liars are uncovering the 'A' mystery, Aria's dilemma seems to serve as a commentary on becoming a young parent. However, in the penultimate episode of Season Three, the narrative strands come together when 'A' abducts Malcolm while under Aria's care ("I'm Your Puppet"). Story Four intersects with

both the 'A' mystery and Spencer's storyline in the finale, when Malcolm tells Hanna that the person who took him was Spencer, revealing to the Liars' that she had joined 'The 'A' Team' ("A DAngerous GAmE").

The narrative strands of *Pretty Little Liars* may begin in the season premiere as separate storylines but come together in unexpected ways in the season finale. In this way, narrative density contributes to the 'must-see' allure of the programme, in that it encourages viewers to continuously follow the story for fear of missing out on an important development or clue. However, because the programme is built to continue the mystery over several seasons, it can be argued that loyal viewers do not expect to be rewarded with a solid answer to the driving question of "Who is A?" in the season finale. Instead, this finale is designed to give clarity to the events of the season and how it contributes to the overall story.

This inter-season narrative complexity is exemplified by Spencer's storyline. In Season Three, it was implied that Spencer was being consumed by the 'A' mystery, however the extent of her struggle was not revealed until Season Four. In "Bite Your Tongue", her stress reaches a new level when she asks a fellow student for Adderall in order to juggle her schoolwork with finding 'A'. Spencer then begins to purchase the pills regularly which culminates in her having a black and white hallucination, highlighting the toll of the substance abuse on her mental state ("Shadow Play"). This incident reveals that Spencer has been struggling with this addiction for several years. Her dependency meant that at times she would act violently, occasionally even suffering from memory loss. This storyline reaches climax when Spencer recalls following Ali while holding a shovel, the night that she disappeared ("Cover for Me"). The two of them had a heated argument and in "Unbridled", Jason (Ali's brother) confirms that his mother believes Spencer was involved in Ali's murder.

This reveal invites viewers to reconsider Spencer's previous behaviour in the overall *Pretty Little Liars* narrative. Although made explicit in Season Four, Spencer's addiction can be seen from the beginning of the series. As an over-achiever with very demanding parents, Spencer would turn to the drug in order to cope with the pressure. In the pilot episode, the girls wake up after a night of drinking to see that Spencer and Ali had disappeared. Spencer returns to tell the other girls that Ali is gone. Ali reveals that she drugged the girls so that she could sneak away but Spencer, who had been using amphetamines, was wide-awake and saw Ali leave ("A is for Answers"). Spencer's inability to cope with her stress (and its impact on her mental state) therefore adds depth to Spencer's decision to work for 'A' in Season Three.

This careful interweaving of narrative strands means that viewers are able to admire how seemingly separate stories from different seasons can unexpectedly come together in order to contribute to the overarching mystery. Mittell refers to this as the "narrative special effect" ("Narrative Complexity" 35), or a moment that foregrounds the intricate way in which the narrative has been constructed. Mittell explains that viewers watch narratively complex programmes "not just to get swept away in a realistic narrative world (although that certainly can happen) but also to watch the gears at work, marvelling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics" ("Narrative Complexity 35"). The season finale may not resolve the overarching mystery but instead it is designed for the amalgamation of the narrative strands to create a spectacular ending to the season, highlighting the programme's narrative craftsmanship. This episode demonstrates the narrative's ability to present a surprising reveal or even put past events in a different perspective. Such strategies not only help prolong the life of the programme but also illustrate the sophistication of its narrative construction.

With such a large number of storylines to develop in each season, *Pretty Little Liars* faces the challenge of telling multiple stories per episode. In order to do so, the programme uses a 'flexi-narrative' approach. Nelson explains flexi-narrative as: "A number of stories involving familiar characters in familiar settings are broken down into narrative bytes and rapidly intercut" (*TV Drama in Transition* 32 – 33). This method of storytelling was pioneered by soap operas but its use in primetime drama was popularised in the 1980s, beginning with *Hill St Blues*. This approach was fuelled by the conviction that 'quality' audiences are more sophisticated and are "ready for multiple perspectives" in their television programmes (*TV Drama in Transition* 31). The use of flexi-narrative allows for numerous storylines to be addressed in each episode, presenting various perspectives.

This use of flexi-narrative is illustrated by the Season Three episode, "Crazy". Maya's cousin, Nate, who had recently started dating the Liars' enemy, Jenna, visits Emily at work. He reveals to her that Jenna and Maya were close friends, casting suspicion that Jenna is involved in Maya's murder. The scene then switches to Hanna's house, where Aria and Hanna find an Ouija board. Hanna accidentally cuts her hand on the planchette and finds a message underneath that says, "See how easy it is for me to get your blood?" This is a continuation of a storyline developed in the previous episode when blood was found on Ali's anklet and 'A' is implying that he/she has framed Hanna.

The scene cuts to Hanna and Mona playing with the Ouija board, a flashback from before Ali's body was discovered. The board reveals that Ali is still alive and Hanna sees her standing outside her window. The scene switches back to Hanna and Aria in present day and they are surprised by the sound of a vase smashing outside the house, ending the scene on a suspenseful note. The scene then cuts away again to focus on Spencer talking to Jason about the aftermath of handing in Ali's anklet to the police. Jason informs Spencer that he

once dated Cece, a close friend of Ali's who had recently come back to Rosewood. He implies that the relationship ended on a bad note, causing Spencer to be suspicious of her homecoming.

With four core characters, numerous supporting characters and even flashback scenes, the flexi-narrative structure helps *Pretty Little Liars* to sustain viewer interest throughout. This strategy ensures that "[a]ny lack of interest of an audience segment in one set of characters or story-line is thus not allowed to last long as another story with a different group of characters is swiftly taken up" (Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition* 33). This technique reminds viewers of the various events that are occurring simultaneously and aids the programme in sustaining a level of suspense for the majority of the episode. Additionally, as a basic cable programme, *Pretty Little Liars* needs to accommodate commercial breaks. The rapid intercutting between scenes creates opportunities for commercial breaks to fit seamlessly into the narrative.

Sarah Kozloff observes that television narratives "have learned to compensate for and even take advantage of the inevitable interruptions in various ways" (90). The above example illustrates how *Pretty Little Liars* utilises its suspenseful narrative to retain interest between scenes. For example, when Emily discovers Jenna's link to Maya, the programme is able to close the scene on a suspenseful note as it cuts to a commercial break. This tactic holds the viewer's attention in anticipation for the programme to then come back to Hanna and Aria finding an Ouija board in the house. With so many different storylines and perspectives to address, the flexi-narrative approach helps to keep the pace of the programme while taking advantage of the commercial break to build suspense.

Narrative Devices

The placement of Emily's scene before a commercial break also illustrates how the multiple storylines of *Pretty Little Liars* are aided by numerous narrative devices, the most significant of which are cliffhangers and analepses. As a mystery, there are many clues embedded in the episodes that hint at future events. With so many storylines to cover in an hour-long drama, the programme has used these storytelling devices to reveal new information in creative and engaging ways. In "Crazy", the scene ends just as Emily finds out that there is a connection between Jenna and Maya. This small reveal generates intrigue designed to foster audience speculation as to what Emily will do with this information. This device helps to keep viewers engaged even as the episode switches to the next scene.

Cliffhangers can also build anticipation in the space between episodes. Almost every episode of *Pretty Little Liars* ends on a cryptic scene. These scenes are often out of context, encouraging the viewer to guess what is happening. In "Please, Do Talk", the closing credits show a person, visible only as a pair of sneakers, vandalising Ali's memorial. This ends the episode on a high point of interest from which the next episode, "The Perfect Storm", is able to pick up. "The Perfect Storm" opens with Emily frantically changing out of her muddy shoes, leading viewers to presume that she was the one shattered the memorial. The episode later reveals that the vandal was actually Lucas, a victim of Ali's bullying. These teaser endings are often confusing and create a feeling that there is nothing certain about what is being portrayed on screen. This often leads viewers to speculate online as to their meaning. This idea will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three but what it highlights is how these cryptic cliffhangers generate anticipation over how the story will unfold in the next episode.

One of the challenges of serial programmes is that they “must generate enough viewer interest and involvement to survive their hiatus” (Kozloff 91 – 92). Earlier it was discussed how *Pretty Little Liars* creates intrigue between the two halves of a season. However, a season finale often provides more closure or clarity than a mid-season finale by fusing the various narrative strands and concluding some of the smaller story arcs. To ensure that viewers will return for the next season, the cliffhanger needs to be much more shocking and, as Kozloff adds, “the longer the hiatus, the higher the cliff” (92). To address this issue, *Pretty Little Liars* typically ends its season with a murder. The first was Ian’s murder in the Season One finale, Season Two was Maya’s murder and Season Four was Mrs DiLaurentis’ unexpected death. At the time of writing, only Seasons Three and Five ended without bloodshed. Instead these seasons ended with shock reveals that Ali may still be alive and the revelation of the identity of Big ‘A’. All of these storylines generate a lot of questions, enabling *Pretty Little Liars* to return with another season in order to provide answers.

The most common way that *Pretty Little Liars* provides answers is through the use of analepses or ‘flashbacks’. Mittell explains that analepses are not unique to narratively complex programmes but is used more frequently, becoming a ‘norm’ of this mode of storytelling (“Narrative Complexity” 36). This technique is particularly useful for *Pretty Little Liars* because of its ability fill in the details and add depth to characters. Many of the analepses centre on the way Ali used to bully her classmates when she was alive. In “Please, Do Talk”, Hanna befriends Lucas and analepsis is used to reveal that Ali and the Liars used to call him ‘Hermie the Hermaphrodite’. This flashback casts suspicion on Lucas because his background indicates that he has a reason to be angry with Hanna and the other Liars. Consequently, Lucas also has a potential motive for being involved with ‘A’ and Ali’s disappearance.

Because of the mysterious circumstances surrounding Ali's disappearance, many of the flashbacks are also used to show fragments of what happened the night that she disappeared. These flashbacks were slowly revealed over several seasons through different characters' recollections of that night. Each of the characters offers a different perspective of what they think happened to Ali. In Season One, it was believed that Ian was the last person to see Ali alive ("Know Your Frenemies"). Over the course of the programme, the Liars converse with various secondary characters regarding the night Ali disappeared and each of these characters relay their recollection through a flashback.

These flashbacks revealed that, in fact, Ali encountered numerous other people including Spencer, Toby, Police Officer Garrett and Spencer's sister, Melissa. For example, in "This Is a Dark Ride", Spencer interrogates Garrett about the night Ali disappeared. Analepsis is used to show his recollection of the night, revealing that Garrett saw Aria's dad, Byron, conversing with Ali and overhears her threatening him. This revelation therefore adds Byron to the list of potential suspects in Ali's disappearance ("This Is a Dark Ride"). Analepses help viewers gain a better understanding of Ali's relationships with other characters, creating a backstory that reveals other characters' perspectives and potential motives. Fans have even uploaded compilations of these flashbacks online, putting them in chronological order to create a coherent narrative from the night Ali disappeared.⁵ Flashbacks serve to create the feeling that there is always more to the story than the viewers currently realise, thus demanding deeper engagement with the programme.

Dreams and Hallucinations

Another strategy used by *Pretty Little Liars* to encourage engagement is the use of dream sequences. Starting from Season One, Ali has visited each of the Liars individually while they were in a disoriented state, offering cryptic clues as to her

⁵ See for example De Xis' YouTube video "The Day/Night Alison Disappeared".

disappearance. Ali first visited Hanna in the hospital, telling her: “The four of you combined, you remember more about that night than you think you do” (“Moments Later”). Emily also dreamt of Ali in Season Two after she collapsed from being exposed to carbon monoxide (“Over My Dead Body”). She asks Emily to “come with [her]”, which seemed to be a metaphor for dying. In the same season, Spencer, after having taken painkillers, wakes up to see Ali in her house (“If These Dolls Could Talk”). Ali tells her that she is “getting warmer” in her investigation. The last of these dreams is in Season Three when Aria is bedridden and Ali asks her, “Do I look dead to you?” (“Misery Loves Company”).

These moments occur while the Liars are disoriented or unwell in some way. Because of this, the scenes are often presented with a hazy or cloudy filter that is often associated with dream sequences or hallucinations (See Figure 2.7). Additionally, the Liars always see Ali when they are alone. For that reason, they do not have anyone who can corroborate if what they saw really happened. These visits to the Liars, which seem to indicate that Ali is alive, is discredited with the incorporation of a scene involving Mona that utilises similar aesthetic cues (see Figure 2.8). After Mona is institutionalised, Hanna goes to Radley Sanatorium to visit her. While she is there, Mona sees Ali reading a book in the chair behind Hanna and it appears as though she is the only one who sees her (“It Happened That Night”).



Figure 2.7 - Screencap from “Misery Loves Company”



Figure 2.8 - Screencap from “It Happened That Night”

Viewers are never truly sure if these scenes are hallucinations or are evidence that Ali is still alive. When Ali returns in “A is for Answers”, the viewers are forced to reorientate themselves with the programme as these past scenes take on new meaning. This revelation can be considered a “narrative spectacle” referring to the idea that “the plot makes unforeseen sharp twists that cause the entire scenario to reboot” (Mittell, “Narrative Complexity” 36). By the time Ali was revealed to be alive, these hallucinations had already become a norm of the programme. As a result, this reveal encourages viewers to pore through the previous episodes in order to uncover hints that Ali was always alive.

Each of the hallucination scenes has discreet but tangible clues that Ali was truly there. For example, in “Moments Later”, Ali drinks from a cup and leaves a lipstick stain and in “Misery Loves Company”, Ali picks up a doll and leaves it on a different bench. Even the things that Ali said to the Liars take on new meaning. For instance, Ali’s comment in “Over My Dead Body” wasn’t a suggestion that Emily was going to die; it was an invitation for her to go into hiding with Ali. This use of “narrative spectacle” helps to strengthen the ‘re-watchability’ of *Pretty Little Liars* and helps the programme to reduce predictability by giving new meaning to old scenes. The use of such ‘complex’ narrative strategies also helps the programme stay ‘fresh’ over the seasons, continuing to engage viewers by generating a feeling of consistent uncertainty about the story. It also reflects how ABC Family has aligned the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* to meet the expected media literacy of Millennial viewers. These disorienting scenes rely on the viewer’s capacity to pick up on the aesthetic cues that indicate a dream sequence in order to misdirect them into believing that the scenes are hallucinations rather than real interactions. This leads to a more shocking and impressive reveal when their suspicions are finally confirmed.

Pretty Little Liars has also created an entire episode centered on a “narrative spectacle”. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the programme incorporates

noir elements in its aesthetic. “Shadow Play” takes place in Spencer’s mind as she re-imagines her life as a 1940s film noir. Before this episode, it has been revealed to the viewers that Aria’s ex-boyfriend, Ezra, is not who he says he is. Although the Liars are unaware of this fact, Spencer is getting closer to finding out Ezra’s true identity. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her friends, Aria has started dating Ezra again. At this point in the narrative, all the potential surprises have been revealed to the viewers. It is clear that Ezra’s involvement with ‘A’ and his relationship with Aria will soon be discovered. However, because the viewers are already aware of these secrets, the emphasis is not placed on the secrets themselves but *how* these secrets will be revealed to the other characters.



Figure 2.9 – Screencap from “Shadow Play”

The episode uses Spencer’s deteriorating mental state and drug addiction in order to construct a black and white narrative. The majority of the episode is Spencer’s hallucination and she imagines her friends to be stock characters found in film noir such as Ali, the femme fatale and Toby, the detective (See Figure 2.9). By building the fantasy sequence around the hallucination, Spencer is able to step back from her investigation and objectively observe the ‘A’

mystery as a movie. This then enables her to see the deception that she has been overlooking. However, although the episode is still advancing the narrative by developing the mystery, exploring Spencer's addiction, and addressing the relationships in *Pretty Little Liars*, the focus of the episode is primarily on how it has been constructed.

"Shadow Play" was filmed on the same set as *Dial 'M' for Murder* and incorporated many intertextual elements from classic film noir (Keveney, "Pretty Little Liars Looks Back"). For example, a large painting of Ali features prominently in the episode, in reference to the movie *Laura*. Director Joseph Dougherty, describes wanting to "get the feeling in your bones for this heightened world" (Reiher). In addition to the set and the film noir props, the Liars were also costumed to each emulate a 1940s icon. Lauren Bacall was used for Spencer's look and Ava Gardner inspired Emily's outfits (Keveney, "Pretty Little Liars Looks Back"). All of these elements help to elevate *Pretty Little Liars* as they demonstrate the creativity and risk-taking behind "Shadow Play" that is unparalleled by other teen programmes.

Although programmes like *Buffy* may have experimented with "narrative spectacles" in the past (such as the silent episode "Hush" and the musical "Once More With Feeling"), this can be largely linked to the autonomy of their 'auteur' creators. In contrast, "Shadow Play" is an idea that came from the executives of ABC Family (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars' EP"). In fact, the writers of *Pretty Little Liars* were reluctant to do the episode because it was "a major visual shift" (Keveney, "Pretty Little Liars Looks Back"). Dougherty explains that the network provided the writers with research "that younger audiences now do not have a prejudice against black-and-white films the way audiences slightly older did [and instead, they] see it as an artistic choice" (Keveney, "Pretty Little Liars Looks Back").

What Dougherty's comment implies is that "Shadow Play" was a deliberate Millennial marketing and branding strategy by ABC Family. The network utilises the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* in order to align itself to the media literacy of younger audiences and differentiate itself from the competition. Dougherty tweeted "[ABC Family] plan to make it a big event with publicity about the look and design". The purpose of "Shadow Play" is to generate 'buzz' about the programme and push *Pretty Little Liars* (and its host channel, ABC Family) into the media spotlight. This episode, along with the incorporation of elements pioneered in adult-audience dramas, helps to distinguish *Pretty Little Liars* and its host channel ABC Family, fostering audience expectations of the show as an innovative and creative Millennial drama and of the channel as a provider of such programming.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore how ABC Family's 'high-end' teen drama, *Pretty Little Liars* has been constructed to simultaneously engage Millennial viewers and elevate the status of the channel. Through a unique blend of teen-oriented soap opera and murder mystery, combined with a film noir aesthetic, *Pretty Little Liars* is a stark contrast to its contemporaries, pushing the boundaries and challenging the traditional conventions of teen-oriented drama programming. It allows the programme to continue to address contemporary teen issues against the unique backdrop of a murder mystery more commonly found in adult-audience television dramas. This level of risk-taking and innovation helps to elevate the profile of the channel by providing an experience that is unparalleled by any of its teen-audience contemporaries.

This distinctiveness is further asserted by a creative use of intertextual clues and narrative complexity that demand a heightened level of audience engagement. *Pretty Little Liars* is tailored to the perceived media literacy of the

Millennial demographic, challenging the audience to comprehend the popular cultural references that double as clues for how the narrative will unfold. The use of narrative devices such as cliffhangers, flashbacks and hallucinations also help to challenge viewers by generating a consistent feeling of uncertainty about the story that requires them to watch the programme closely and consistently. In addition, *Pretty Little Liars*' serial structure combined with seasonal and inter-seasonal complexity engenders 'addictive' viewing patterns, demanding a sense of loyalty and continuous engagement with the programme. The programme's experimentation with narrative structure, mixed genres and aesthetics are evidence of a certain confidence from the network that its viewers will not only have the capacity to comprehend the innovations but also appreciate how the programme has been constructed.

The narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* is further supplemented by a thriving online presence that aids continued engagement with the programme even when it is not on the air. The complexity of the *Pretty Little Liars* narrative lends itself well to online fan communities where viewers can watch the show together and communally unravel the mystery. Through transmedia storytelling, *Pretty Dirty Secrets* is able to extend the narrative on to web platforms in order to generate hype for upcoming episodes. In addition, Twitter supplements the shocking reveals and unexpected twists created by cliffhangers and narrative spectacles by giving viewers a platform through which they can share their thoughts, allowing fans to speculate together about what is yet to come and thus, generating a reason to stay with the programme. These transmedia extensions allow *Pretty Little Liars* to cultivate an online presence that amplifies the success and longevity of the programme and will be examined in the following chapter.

Chapter Three:

Beyond TV: #PLL and *Pretty Dirty Secrets*

Introduction

The first thesis chapter examined the institutional factors that led to the conception of *Pretty Little Liars*. It argued that ABC Family's branding strategy identified an emerging audience segment and constructed its original programming in order to engage the media literate Millennial demographic. This chapter will explore how the *Pretty Little Liars* narrative is supplemented by a thriving online presence that taps into the perceived technological literacy of Millennial viewers. It will consider how the network extends viewer engagement across multiple platforms using 'transmedia storytelling' and 'transmedia extensions', making 'second screen' viewing an integral part of the *Pretty Little Liars* experience. ABC Family employs network strategies that help to guide activity, harnessing fan practices in order to sustain interest in, as well as deepen engagement with, the programme. The network constructed *Pretty Little Liars* as a multi-platform experience, redefining the relationship between network, producers, actors, and viewers.

Convergence and Overflow

As discussed in Chapter One, the digitisation of content during the post-network era and the late stages of the multi-channel transition is known as 'technological convergence', enabling viewers to access television content on a variety of other devices such as computers and mobile phones. ABC Family's multi-platform strategy is reflective of what Henry Jenkins calls 'cultural convergence' (*Convergence Culture* 3). Jenkins defines cultural convergence as "[t]he explosion of new forms of creativity at the intersections of various media technologies, industries and consumers" ("Convergence? I Diverge"). He argues

that the way media circulate within our culture has drastically changed as digital technologies become more prevalent in society. As a result, content flows “fluidly” across co-existing media platforms and audiences migrate between these technologies “in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want” (*Convergence Culture* 322). This cultural convergence has thus opened new possibilities for developing and engaging with television content across multiple platforms.

For some users, this engagement involves participation in online fan communities. Jenkins argues that “the age of media convergence enables communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception” (*Convergence Culture* 26). In the past, the activities of online fan communities primarily took place on Internet forums that allowed viewers to discuss television with other fans. These forums acted as ‘paratexts’ that supplemented viewers’ understanding of a TV programme. Jonathan Gray defines paratexts as “texts that prepare us for other texts” (25). He explains that before a viewer even watches a programme, paratexts such as trailers, books, and even fan comments, work to frame how the reader understands the core text (Gray 47-79). Gray observes that TV programmes “give us significant time between episodes to interpret them” and explains that devoted fans seek out more information online to inflect their “re-entry” to the following episodes (Gray 42).

The way that fans use fan forums in order to gain a better understanding of a programme illustrates its function as an ‘orienting paratext’ (Mittell, “Orienting Paratexts”). Jason Mittell explains that this type of paratext can take the form of recapitulation (recaps) or wikis but can also include “more ephemeral processes of conversation” (Mittell, “Orienting Paratexts”). As a narratively complex TV drama progresses, it becomes a more demanding viewing experience and conversing with others makes this process more manageable. Online fan communities enable users to discuss the events of the programme with one

another and extend their engagement with the text long after the episode has finished. Some of the more prominent examples of this are the Usenet discussion boards alt.tv.X-Files⁶ and alt.tv.twinpeaks. In 1990, alt.tv.twinpeaks allowed fans to share photos, interviews and build theories as a community in order to find Laura Palmer's killer (Jenkins, "Do You Enjoy" 58 - 62). At the time, this kind of intense engagement was limited to "sophisticated television viewers", a small group of older, devoted fans with the skills to navigate these new technologies and a deep engagement with the intricacies of programme (Jenkins, "Do You Enjoy" 53).

The notion of online fandom gained traction with Millennials during the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the *Twin Peaks* message board was largely limited to fans armed with the necessary technical skills, it is arguable that the Millennials' access to and fluency with technology helps them to organically engage with programmes on a similar level. Television Without Pity (TWP) was home to discussion boards dedicated to exploring Millennial programming such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 – 2003) and *Veronica Mars*⁷ (2004 – 2007). Fans of *Roswell* (1999 – 2002) even created Crashdown.com, an unofficial website that provided compilations of fan-sourced materials and the opportunity to interact with actors on the message boards. Participation in these types of communities allowed fans to share and expand their knowledge of the mythology and thus deepen their relationship with the text. This long-term devotion is reflected in the success of The Veronica Mars Movie Project Kickstarter campaign in 2013 and the popularity of the canonical continuation of the *Buffy* television narrative into comic books (Allen).⁸

⁶ See Matt Hills' "Virtually Out There".

⁷ See Jennifer Gillian's "Fashion Sleuths and Aerie Girls".

⁸ This intense level of on-going exploration and long-term devotion to a programme suggests that these shows could be considered "Cult TV". This is an important dimension of these programmes. However, as Roberta Pearson explains, "Cult TV" should be considered as a "mode of reception rather than a mode of production" and therefore extends beyond the scope of this thesis, which is primarily concerned with network-prompted practices rather than grassroots consumption (Pearson, "Observations on Cult Television" 8).

This ability to deepen viewer commitment combined with the Millennials' willingness to continue engaging with a programme online creates an opportunity for networks to extend the experience of their programmes beyond what is available on television. In 1999, the producers of *Dawson's Creek*, one of the first Millennial dramas, saw how fans were interacting with the content online and were 'inspired' to expand the story by creating the supplementary website, 'Dawson's Desktop', which allowed viewers to go through the characters' computer files including emails, journal entries and the contents of the recycling bin (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 119). The website thus extended the narrative of the programme by enabling viewers to learn more about an episode that they watched and even gave information about what is to come in the future.

Will Brooker refers to this type of narrative expansion as television 'overflow', arguing that texts like *Dawson's Creek* (1998 – 2003) overflow beyond the boundaries of television (458). Brooker explains how "[i]nstead of waiting for the next installment, the fan is invited to extend the show's pleasures, to allow the show into her everyday life beyond the scheduling framework" (461). The notion of overflow suggests that a single medium cannot contain all the information that informs the narrative. Thus the programme itself only acts as "the starting point for further activity" by viewers (Brooker 461). The creation of this website allowed The WB a degree of control over online fan activities, sustaining viewer interest through an online platform in a way that enhances the story and directs viewers back to the upcoming episodes.

This notion of networks harnessing Millennial fan activity continued in 2003 when Fox created *The O.C. Insider*, an official online magazine that supplemented the teen drama, *The O.C.* (2003 – 2007). Sharon Marie Ross explains that *The O.C.* became popular "just as the Internet was becoming solidly integrated into younger people's everyday lives" (S.M. Ross 140). The

show sprouted several TWoP message boards and fan-operated websites. Executive Producer Josh Schwartz observes: “It seems like people are live blogging. They’re watching the show while they’re posting” (S.M. Ross 140). Matt Hills refers to this fan relationship with Internet technologies as ‘just-in-time fandom’ (*Fan Cultures* 178). These are fan practices that are “enmeshed within the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting” (Hills, *Fan Cultures* 178). The instantaneous nature of new web technologies enable fans to go online in-between commercial breaks in order to discuss the events with one another, eradicating the time-lag in previous iterations of fan forums. Because of its popularity with ‘digital natives’, Ross calls this the “Millennial way of watching” (140).

Like ‘Dawson’s Desktop’, *The O.C. Insider* also gave its network a degree of control over online fan activities. This online magazine granted viewers access to official chat forums, helping to aggregate the online conversation about the programme in one place. This also ensured that users could access ‘insider information’. Ross explains that *The O.C. Insider* published interviews with “insiders” that helped to assure viewers that the serial storylines are “going somewhere” (S.M. Ross 143). For example, after the death of the character Marissa in Season Three, *The O.C. Insider* uploaded a transcript of an instant message conversation with one of its “insiders” that both confirmed the character was not returning and also teased viewers by hinting about the upcoming events of Season Four (S.M. Ross 143 – 144). *The O.C. Insider* served to sustain the buzz around the programme, ensuring that viewers remain excited and engaged with the text.

As discussed in previous chapters, Millennials are challenging the entertainment industry through the way they interact with web technologies. This demographic is often constructed and imagined by marketers (as demonstrated by the Verizon study and ABC Family’s ‘Millennials’ campaign discussed in

Chapter One) as being media-savvy and technologically fluent, moving seamlessly between platforms in order to access entertainment. However, the above examples demonstrate how networks can harness this comfort with technology in a way that helps their channel sustain fan interest and deepen engagement with a programme.

ABC Family's strategy is constructed to take advantage of the opportunities created by the Millennials' perceived technological fluency. Former ABC Family President Paul Lee explains that Millennials are "incredibly comfortable on all platforms" and that they are "likely to be using five pieces of equipment at the same time" (Liesse A6). To address this perceived Millennial tendency to multi-task, ABC Family has deployed a multi-platform strategy that extends the experience of its programmes from the television screen and onto the web platforms that the Millennials are thought to inhabit (Liesse A6). Through 'transmedia storytelling' and 'transmedia extensions', ABC Family is able to continuously engage viewers even when the show is on hiatus, helping to continue the momentum built by an episode until the next installment.

ABC Family's Transmedia Strategies

The previously discussed 'Dawson's Desktop', which helped to build anticipation between episodes, is an example of 'transmedia storytelling', which Jenkins defines as:

[A] process where integral parts of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (*Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment* 944).

Pretty Little Liars is one of the many narratively complex programmes that have expanded their stories onto other platforms. ‘High-end’ dramas such as *Heroes*, *The Walking Dead*, *True Blood* and *Lost* are just a handful of contemporary examples that have used ‘transmedia storytelling’ in order to extend their diegesis.

Video games, webisodes and websites like ‘Dawson’s Desktop’ contribute to narrative complexity by expanding the diegetic world of TV programmes, allowing viewers to further immerse themselves within the story. As Jeffrey Sconce observes, “[V]iewers now have the opportunity to ‘inhabit’ a given television show for hours on end” (110). These additional platforms help viewers to explore vast diegetic worlds that cannot be fully accessed in the duration of an episode. Unlike episodes that are delivered to television screens weekly, transmedia storytelling requires viewers to actively seek out narrative extensions on various platforms. This mode of storytelling demands a higher level of engagement because the larger narrative space requires viewers to invest more time in unifying the contributions of each platform to fully comprehend the overall story. Transmedia storytelling is thus very popular with programmes that wish to appeal to a more sophisticated and educated viewer.

In addition, the ability to cultivate a loyal viewership makes this storytelling mode an attractive feature in the hyper-competitive post-network era. As discussed in Chapter One, audience fragmentation and time-shifting technologies have challenged the television industry by decreasing the value of traditional thirty-second commercials. Jenkins explains that as a result, the television industry is focusing on understanding the type of consumers who have a “prolonged relationship and active engagement with media content” and those who “show a willingness to track down that content across [...] a range of other media platforms” (*Convergence Culture* 67).

Jenkins' comment highlights the increasing importance of cultivating a strong fan base in the post-network environment. In the network era, networks ignored fan bases when making decisions because they were "unrepresentative of the general public" (*Convergence Culture* 76). However, devoted fans can no longer be dismissed as being merely the "geek fringe of a show's audience" (Andrejevic 27). These fans or "loyals" are in fact extremely valuable because they are "more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products" (*Convergence Culture* 63). Matt Hills builds on this idea, explaining: "Fandom has begun to furnish a model of dedicated and loyal consumption which does, in point of fact, *appeal* to niche and non-terrestrial TV producers and schedulers operating within a fragmented multi-channel media environment" (*Fan Cultures* 36).

The idea of building commitment through multi-platform strategies reflects Jenkins' notion of 'affective economics', a marketing theory that explores "the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions" (*Convergence Culture* 61 – 62). ABC Family's strategy encourages viewers to invest time in exploring the extensions of *Pretty Little Liars* in the hope that this investment will foster an emotional, long-term connection to the series. This network strategy is designed to ensure a consistent viewership and thus, deliver an audience for its advertisers.

Although *Pretty Little Liars* has been ABC Family's most publicised foray into multi-platform experiences⁹, it is by no means the network's first attempt at transmedia storytelling. When teen sci-fi *Kyle XY* (2006 – 2009) was on the air, it was accompanied by an interactive webpage on the ABC Family website. This webpage gave users access to behind-the-scenes footage, a fan community discussion board and an online game called *Cluetracker*, which allowed the user to explore an abandoned building from *Kyle XY*'s diegetic world. This building

⁹ See for example Kahler's article on the *Pretty Little Liars*' 'transmedia universe' or Puschmann's article on the programme's success in Social TV.

contained various interactive features such as a computer with secret files that offer information related to the programme's narrative. Users played mini-games within this website in order to unlock the other secrets in the building. Louisa Ellen Stein explains that "[e]ach subspace/subgame within *Cluetracker* yields [clues], which, put together, offer further insight into the mysteries posed by *Kyle XY*" ("Word of Mouth" 135). The programme was also supplemented by working websites for the fictional corporations in *Kyle XY* including Madacorp, the company that created the protagonist (Stein, "Word of Mouth" 135). This webpage helped viewers to further explore the narrative of *Kyle XY*, rewarding those who were willing to follow the story across platforms with additional layers to the narrative.

Greek (2007 – 2011) took a slightly different approach. Unlike *Kyle XY*, *Greek* is not sci-fi but a comedy-drama about sororities and fraternities in fictional Cyprus-Rhodes University. Instead of allowing viewers to conduct investigations, *Greek* supplemented its first two seasons with a website called 'virtualrush.com'. This website gave users access to behind-the-scenes footage and previews of future episodes. Additionally, 'virtual-rushers' were also given the chance to experience Greek life by giving them the ability to "rush" or be recruited into one of the six houses of the university (West). 'Virtual-rushers' could also create a personal profile to the website as well as interact with fellow users, incorporating a social media aspect to the *Greek* online experience.

Lee explains: "'Virtualrush.com' shows just how successful a social network can be as part of a television franchise like *Greek*" (M&C). The social media response was so remarkable that ABC Family ran a competition. 'Virtual-rushers' could participate in online challenges and other users would vote for them based on the results as well as the content of their profiles. The six most popular profiles were then to participate in the spin-off online reality show, *Rush'd*, competing for the chance to win a walk-on role in the following season of *Greek*.

Episodes of this reality show were then made available on the ABC Family website, during *Greek*'s summer hiatus to engage fans while the programme was off the air.

As two of the first Millennial-oriented programmes to be commissioned by ABC Family, the transmedia strategies of *Kyle XY* and *Greek* are revealing. Firstly, these websites are designed to deepen viewer engagement with the text. The incorporation of clues in *Cluetracker* that only hold significance when viewed in relation to the core text demonstrates how viewers are encouraged to continuously seek more and invest their time in *Kyle XY*'s diegesis. This makes the programme especially ideal for Millennial viewers who are comfortable following their stories across media platforms. Secondly, the websites are designed to retain engagement beyond the programme's timeslot. *Cluetracker* allows viewers to explore the mystery after the show has ended and 'virtualrush.com' encourages viewers to live as a character from Cyprus-Rhodes and form relationships with fellow 'virtual-rushers'. Both of these websites also provide access to behind-the-scenes footage to help generate anticipation for episodes yet to come. Lastly, these examples reveal how social media seems to be central to ABC Family's multi-platform strategy. Fans of both *Kyle XY* and *Greek* are given the opportunity to interact with fellow viewers on the ABC Family website which provides them with a space to discuss the programme.

This is further confirmed by the fact that on the night of *Greek*'s series premiere, ABC Family re-launched its website to debut a platform that interweaves community interaction on every page (Liesse A4). Lee explains that this will allow their viewers "to not only constantly connect with our shows ... but also with each other. We're confident that this enhanced interaction will only help to strengthen our [c]hannel's relationship with viewers" (ABC Family, "ABC Family Lets Viewers Share"). In 2007, ABC Family even experimented with the idea of an online 'Viewing Party' which allowed viewers to watch the programme

with their friends on the website while sending each other comments, combining online streaming with a chat room function (Liesse A4). ABC Family places a lot of value on the ability to foster a sense of community during the airing of its programmes. Although both the 'Viewing Party' and interactive features of the ABC Family website are no longer regularly available, these community aspects are precursors to ABC Family's 'live-tweeting' strategy which will be discussed at length later in this chapter. The function of these transmedia texts is largely supplementary, designed to build loyalty and engage fans without distracting them from the main programme, directing users back to the television.

Pretty Dirty Secrets

ABC Family's multi-platform experiments with the *Greek* and *Kyle XY* would inform *Pretty Little Liars*' transmedia strategies. In 2012, ABC Family used web series *Pretty Dirty Secrets* to supplement *Pretty Little Liars* by engaging viewers while the programme was off the air. It was promoted as a stand-alone series designed to be "an organic 'spin-off'" of the main text (Ng, "Pretty Dirty Secrets"). None of the webisodes involve the core cast and instead features several supporting characters: Garrett, Noel, Lucas, Cece, Jason and new character, Shana.

The webisodes were uploaded weekly to the ABC Family website starting the week after the Season Three mid-season (3A) finale. There are eight installments and each episode was released on a Tuesday, the same day that a new episode of *Pretty Little Liars* would usually air. ABC Family Vice President of Digital Media Beth Johnson explains, "This gives [the viewers] something new to talk about every Tuesday that is organic and true to the overall show experience" (Edelsburg). As addressed in Chapter One, several studies of the Millennial generation have found that the majority of this demographic

watch their programmes online. *Pretty Dirty Secrets* was produced to meet these viewers where they are.

The series chronicles the events leading up to “This Is A Dark Ride”, Season Three’s Halloween special. Most of the episodes are set in the Halloween store where Shana is introduced as a sales assistant, helping the teenagers of Rosewood to get ready for the upcoming Halloween Ghost Train Party. Although it was promoted as a stand-alone series, the webisodes make little sense without the core text. Other than Shana, none of the characters appear on-screen in the webisode twice, meaning none of the stories introduced in the series reach closure. The structure of the episodes suggests that the series primarily functions to engage viewers during the mid-season hiatus, building anticipation for the show’s return.

For example, in “A Voicemail”, viewers are shown an answering machine that is playing recorded messages. One of these messages is from Officer Garrett, telling his mother that he has ‘the tickets’, urging her to pack immediately. This is then followed by another message that contains only heavy breathing. The next webisode provides more information. “I’m A Free Man” reveals that someone has been calling Garrett’s mother’s house and intimidating her, thus explaining why Garrett is eager to take his mother out of Rosewood. Neither Garrett nor his mother appears again in *Pretty Dirty Secrets*, leaving the story unresolved in the web series. However, this storyline becomes extremely significant in “This Is a Dark Ride” when Garrett is found murdered on the train. Although the content of this episode does not offer anything crucial to the murder, viewers who watch *Pretty Dirty Secrets* are given more of a build up to the Halloween episode, foreshadowing Garrett’s death.

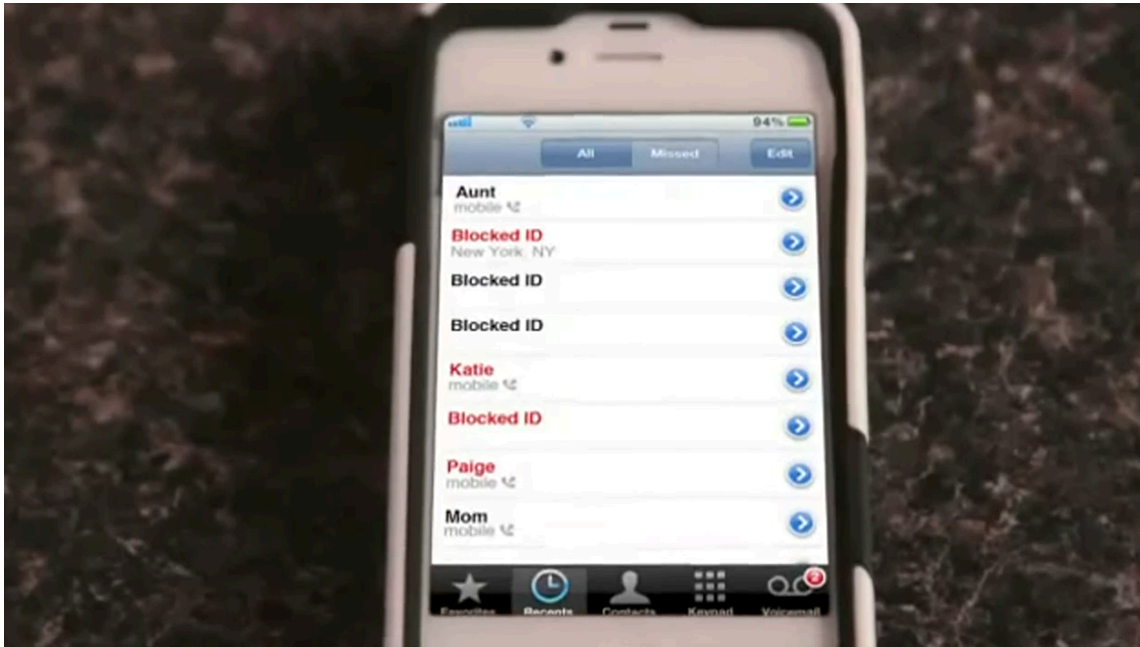


Figure 3.1 – Screenshot from “AssociAtion”



Figure 3.2 – Screenshot from “TrAdE Off”

The other webisodes follow a similar narrative structure, each featuring intriguing elements without revealing the exact significance and are deliberately left ambiguous, ending with a cliffhanger to encourage audiences to speculate. For example, “AssociaAion” shows Shana’s calling history, which encourages viewers to speculate on her connection to Emily’s girlfriend, Paige (See Figure 3.1 above). “TrAde Off” teases viewers with a scene that shows Lucas handing a package to a masked character (See Figure 3.2 above). The webisodes are thus constructed similarly to the cryptic closing cliffhanger scenes of *Pretty Little Liars* episodes discussed in Chapter Two. Like the weekly cliffhangers, these webisodes are also designed to provoke viewer speculation and build anticipation for what is to come.

Because none of these stories reach closure, these webisodes can seem like a collection of confusing, nonsensical scenes. However, when viewed in conjunction with *Pretty Little Liars*, it is clear that the series plants many seeds for numerous multi-season story arcs. For example, in addition to contextualizing Garrett’s murder, the introduction of Shana is linked to Ali’s storyline when it is revealed she is from South Carolina, where Ali’s grandmother lives. After *Pretty Dirty Secrets*, Shana becomes a recurring character in *Pretty Little Liars* and eventually becomes a crucial part to several plots in the future, including the main revelation that Ali is still alive.

The web series serves to further align *Pretty Little Liars* to the perceived media literacy of Millennials by adding complexity to the narrative, demonstrating to the viewer how carefully planned and integrated the television and web platforms are in telling the story. However, because *Pretty Dirty Secrets* merely hints at future events without revealing anything crucial to the mystery, the primary purpose of this series is to extend the core text, generate

buzz for the upcoming Halloween special, and to foreshadow future events.¹⁰ *Pretty Dirty Secrets* thus occupies a space in-between ‘transmedia storytelling’ and ‘transmedia extensions’. Jason Mittell explains that while transmedia storytelling is designed to expand the narrative of a story, transmedia extensions are designed to “hype, promote and introduce a text” (Mittell, “Transmedia Storytelling”). *Pretty Dirty Secrets* is constructed to serve both of these functions.

Johnson explains that *Pretty Dirty Secrets* provides “the perfect platform to delve more deeply into [the story], which [the creators] wouldn’t normally have time for on-air” (Edelsburg). Viewers rarely see minor characters without the involvement of the Liars meaning that their connections with one another are often concealed. A shift in focus to minor characters from the main story arc helps to deepen the diegetic world of Rosewood, exposing viewers to the schemes that are being hatched. This perspective shift reflects Jenkins’ notion that transmedia storytelling allows “insight into the characters and their motivations”, “bridge between events” and “flesh out aspects of the fictional world” (“Transmedia Storytelling 101”). Viewers of the web series are able to get to know the characters, particularly the threats being made against Garrett and his family. It offers a “unique contribution” to the story that is coordinated with the overall diegesis of *Pretty Little Liars* (“Transmedia Storytelling 101”).

However, Jenkins also explains that the individual pieces of transmedia storytelling should ideally be accessible on their own (“Transmedia Storytelling 101”). Showrunner I. Marlene King explains that watching *Pretty Dirty Secrets* is not compulsory in order to understand the upcoming episodes but there are moments “fueling storylines going into 3B” (R. Ross). As discussed above, none of the webisodes hold significance when viewed separately from *Pretty Little*

¹⁰ However, it was only available for American viewers on the ABC Family website. Although fans later uploaded compilations of the web series on platforms like YouTube, it does highlight the fact that international audiences are often excluded in participating in these narrative extensions.

Liars. The text may allude to threats and suspicious connections but there is not a single stand-alone storyline that is introduced and resolved within the web series. *Pretty Dirty Secrets* is thus largely subordinate to the core text of *Pretty Little Liars*.

Mittell refers to this as “unbalanced transmedia” meaning that there is a “clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole” (“Transmedia Storytelling”). He cites the competitive nature of the television industry and refers to the desire to protect this core text and drive viewers back to where the advertisers can access them (“Transmedia Storytelling”). *Pretty Dirty Secrets* ensures that even though the season is taking a break, the speculations and the interest around the show will continue. However, once the weekly programme returns, it is the core text that is most important.

In fact, this web series is no longer available on the ABC Family website. Other than versions uploaded on YouTube and Vimeo by fans, *Pretty Dirty Secrets* is now only officially available as a DVD bonus feature in *Pretty Little Liars: The Complete Third Season*. This suggests that the series was only significant when the core text was unavailable, a fact supported by Johnson’s assertion that the series “was created to drive social conversation while *Pretty Little Liars* is off the air”, thus reasserting the claim that the series’ main purpose was to generate anticipation for ABC Family’s annual *Pretty Little Liars* Halloween episode (Edelsburg).

It is worth noting that although *Pretty Little Liars* has a holiday special each year, webisodes have not been made available during any other hiatus. Because Mona was originally revealed as ‘A’ in the Season Two finale, it can be argued that *Pretty Dirty Secrets* acted as a form of insurance for the programme. As mentioned in Chapter Two, part of the reason why interest in *Twin Peaks*

dwindled was the resolution of the murder of Laura Palmer. *Pretty Dirty Secrets* can be understood as ABC Family's way of nurturing viewer engagement after a potentially fatal reveal. Johnson adds, "[W]e have crafted the webisode series to be a huge conversation starter" and that ABC Family expects "a lot of wild theories about what's coming next" (Edelsburg). Because the programme utilises a serial narrative, it is important that audience attention is retained over the inevitable breaks between episodes, whether weekly or during a hiatus. This drive to talk about the programme is further cultivated by the programme's social media presence.

#PLL and Social Media

While *Pretty Dirty Secrets* may fill the gap created by a summer hiatus, ABC Family uses social media to engage viewers between seasons, episodes and even between scenes. *Pretty Little Liars* is the most-followed scripted TV series on Twitter, the most followed TV programme on Instagram and has more than 14.5 million Facebook 'likes' (Aguilera). In comparison, *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW's own narratively complex 'flagship' drama targeting the 18 – 34 demographic) has only 1.4 million Twitter followers (compared to *Pretty Little Liars*' 2.77 million). *Pretty Little Liars*' social media footprint is instead more comparable to premium cable drama *Game of Thrones* (14.8 million Facebook "likes" and 2.63 million Twitter followers). As Ng observes, however, the programme averages only 3.9 million total viewers, making its social media footprint seem "disproportionately large" ("Pretty Little Liars").

Despite this social media success, *Pretty Little Liars* has never matched critically acclaimed *Game of Thrones*' viewership, which was an average of 6.8 million viewers per episode in 2014 (Kissell, "HBO's 'Game of Thrones' Finale"). Instead, this "disproportionately large" social media footprint is reflective of the way ABC Family promotes the use of social media as a component of *Pretty*

Little Liars, inviting its viewers to follow the narrative across different platforms in order to benefit from the synergistic experience of the programme. ABC Family's strategy is to "give value for that Facebook like or Twitter follow" (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars"). These official pages give subscribers a behind-the-scenes look at the programme. As a result, ABC Family is able to build anticipation for the show and provide a consistent incentive for viewers to tune in. As *Advertising Age* reporter Scott Donaton explains:

As advertisers lose the ability to invade the home, and consumers' minds, they will be forced to wait for an invitation. This means that they have to learn what kinds of advertising content customers will actually be willing to seek out and receive" (qtd. in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 67).

Although Donaton is primarily talking about the decreased effectiveness of the thirty-second commercial in an era of prevalent time-shifting technologies, this same logic informs ABC Family's social media strategy. Union Metrics co-founder Jenn Deering Davis explains that ABC Family aims to let fans "feel like they're insiders. It's not just tweeting at them, it's retweeting, replying, getting talent to tweet, giving special access" (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars"). By actively providing incentives to interact with and through the *Pretty Little Liars* social media pages, ABC Family is cultivating a dedicated online fan community.

As demonstrated by Figure 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5, producers often use Instagram, Twitter and Facebook to promote the same episode but in different, complimentary ways that takes advantage of each platform's features in order to incentivise subscription to all accounts. For example, Figure 3.3 shows how ABC Family used Facebook's "event" function to encourage fans to watch the *Pretty Little Liars* Spring Finale. Although there is no actual event to attend, using the platform in this way to promote the episode "Welcome to the Dollhouse" simulates the feeling of being personally invited to a friend's party and as Figure 3.3 demonstrates, 78,092 people accepted.

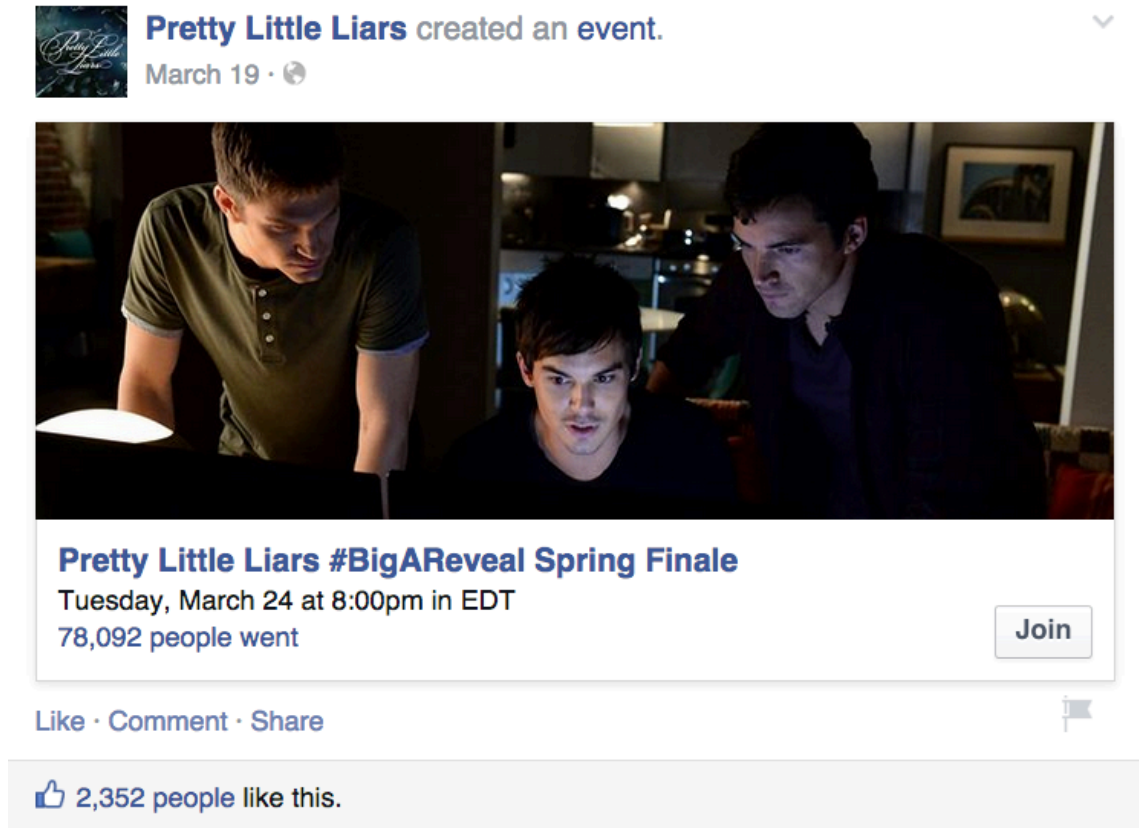


Figure 3.3 – *Pretty Little Liars* Facebook Event for Spring Finale



Figure 3.4 – *Pretty Little Liars* Instagram Clue

In contrast, Figure 3.4 above shows how ABC Family uses the photo-sharing website Instagram to share a close-up photo of a prop for this same episode. ABC Family refers to this photo as a “clue”, teasing viewers about how the episode will unfold. Reflecting Jenkins’ theory of ‘convergence’, the Millennial audience is “courted” through various social media sites (*Convergence Culture* 3). Unlike *Pretty Dirty Secrets*, this social media activity is purely a transmedia extension because it does not expand the diegesis of *Pretty Little Liars*. Instead, these platforms are primarily focused on working together to build hype through multiple avenues and encouraging consistent engagement with *Pretty Little Liars*.

By far the most prominent aspect of *Pretty Little Liars*’ social media strategy is its Twitter presence. Twitter is a micro-blogging website that allows users to post public ‘tweets’ or messages of up to 140 characters. According to Pew Research, the platform is particularly popular with Millennials: 31 per cent of Twitter users are under the age of 30, compared to 19 per cent of adult users 30 – 49 (Ng, “Pretty Little Liars”). There is no charge to make an account meaning that it is open to all users who have access to the Internet on either computers or mobile devices. Figure 3.5 demonstrates how, like Instagram, Twitter can be used to generate hype by showing a sneak-peek of the prom dresses in the episode.



Figure 3.5 – @ABCFp11 tweets about “#BigAReveal”

However, ABC Family mostly benefits from the platform’s public, instantaneous and conversational structure. Figure 3.5 also shows how ABC Family uses Twitter to ask users to speculate on what is happening on-screen as the episode is airing. It is thus an ideal platform for cultivating the ‘just-in-time fandom’ that is popular with Millennial viewers. ABC Family also actively prompts followers to not only share their thoughts with ABC Family but also (because of its public nature) with fellow viewers. *Pretty Little Liars* consistently receives media coverage for its record-breaking Twitter activity, even currently holds the record for Most Tweeted Scripted Telecast after generating nearly 1.9 million tweets during the telecast of “Now You See Me, Now You Don’t” (“*Pretty Little Liars*’ Summer Finale”).

In contrast to Facebook, which requires both parties to accept an invitation to become ‘friends’, Twitter allows users to subscribe or ‘follow’ another user

without an expectation of reciprocity. On Twitter, the user is able to view and respond to the tweets of people they follow regardless of whether those users are following them back. This asymmetric relationship helps to make Twitter a popular platform for celebrities who wish to share information with their fans. Public figures tweet messages to their followers and may even choose to respond to tweets that are directed at them, helping to foster a feeling of 'closeness' and 'intimacy' with the Twitter community (Marwick and Boyd 147 – 148). Once a user is following an account, these posts feature on their homepage, allowing them to instantaneously see updates.

For *Pretty Little Liars*, the combined followers of the four main actresses and the official Twitter account (@ABCFpII) totals 14.6 million. Actress Lucy Hale (@lucyhale) alone has 4.32 million followers. This means that even if fans choose not to contribute to Twitter conversations, a significant number of followers are receiving tweets about the programme on a regular basis. It is likely that some fans are also following multiple accounts meaning that a number of followers are constantly exposed to the series from multiple sources on Twitter alone, in addition to Facebook and Instagram. In fact, the *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter account reaches so many viewers that ABC Family often uses @ABCFpII to promote its new programmes. Figure 3.6 shows how the *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter account actively encourages its followers to follow the Twitter accounts of ABC Family's new programmes, *Twisted* and *The Fosters*. While this is no guarantee that these followers will watch the new show, it does provide the channel with another way to generate exposure.



Figure 3.6 – @ABCFp11 tweets about *The Fosters* and *Twisted*



Figure 3.7 – Tweets using “#PLL”

Twitter can also be accessed on mobile devices, making it ideal for second screen activities, particularly Social TV. Social TV technologies allow “remote viewers to socially interact with each other via the television set, smart phones, tablets or the PC, where viewers might be separated in time and/or in space” (Cesar and Geerts 94). Twitter facilitates Social TV through ‘live-tweeting’, meaning users watch a programme while simultaneously communicating with each other on Twitter through their respective devices. As depicted in Figure 3.7 above, users can utilise the “@” sign to reply to another user or “RT” (retweet) to share another user’s tweet. Users can also choose to “favourite” or archive a tweet by giving it a gold star.

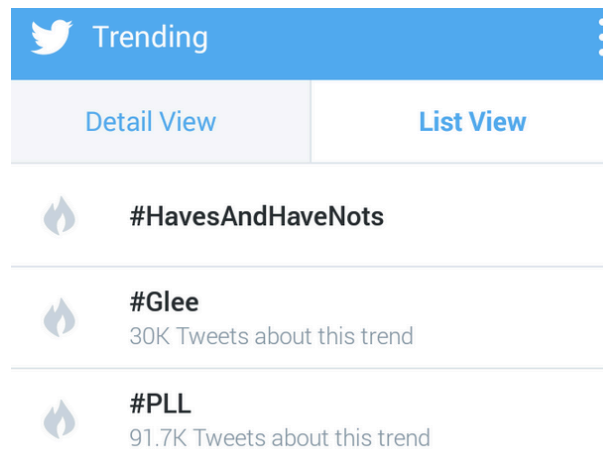


Figure 3.8 – #PLL trending on Twitter

In order to search for tweets, users can either type in key words or use hashtags (#) that help to categorise messages. For example, if a user searches for the terms #PLL, #PLLChat and #PrettyLittleLiars, they will be able to view all the comments on the platform that are using these *Pretty Little Liars* codes. Retweeting or favouriting a tweet makes the message more likely to appear as a top tweet when searching for a particular topic on Twitter (“FAQs About Top Search Results”). Users can also create their own hashtags. For example in Figure 3.7 above, @AllThingsPLL uses the hashtag #Spoby, a fan-generated portmanteau of the names Spencer and Toby that has become popular with

Pretty Little Liars fans. Fans of this couple's relationship/friendship can use this 'shipper name' to reach fellow Spoby fans. If the hashtag becomes popular, this code will appear in the "trending" section of Twitter (see Figure 3.8 above), exposing the hashtag to all Twitter users and increasing the visibility of the topic

Doughty et al observe that the "online domain has facilitated the formation of communities which transcend natural barriers" (80). Communities formed on digital platforms, allow users to interact with like-minded people who share their interests such as television programmes. Gruzdt et al explain that Twitter can therefore function as an "imagined community" (1297). This is a term used by Benedict Anderson to describe how "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Much like the members of a nation, the majority of users in online communities will never meet one another. However, users do share a common language through linguistic connections like "RT", a shared sense of temporality and an organization around "high centres" which take the form of popular individuals and organisations (Gruzdt et al 1301 – 1306).

Hills disagrees with the idea of online fan communities as an imagined community, arguing that it is instead a "community of imagination" (*Fan Cultures* 180). He remarks, "The community which, rather than merely imagining itself as coexistent in empty clocked time, constitutes itself precisely through a common affective engagement" (Hills, *Fan Cultures* 180). The online fan communities of Twitter should thus be considered real communities because they are bound by a shared respect for the text. ABC Family uses its multi-platform strategy to facilitate this 'community of imagination'. The network aims to nourish this feeling of connectedness between *Pretty Little Liars* fans in order to establish a sense of loyalty and deepen viewer commitment to the programme.

The Digital Water-Cooler

As a popular website for Millennials, many viewers of *Pretty Little Liars* are likely to already be on Twitter. This means that unlike previous iterations of fan forums, participation in Twitter discussion, particularly 'live-tweeting', is accessible to more viewers. As Schirra et al explain, "Twitter allows for more open conversations among interested viewers, beyond friend groups" (2442). More people are thus able to engage with the text on a deeper level. In fact, the inclusiveness of Twitter helps to reclaim the "water-cooler conversation" that was once thought to be lost in the post-network era (Lotz 32). Amanda Lotz explains that the synchronized and limited offerings of network-era television once provided viewers with "shared content for discussion" (32). Linda Ruth Williams highlights the importance of water-cooler conversation, explaining that *Twin Peaks* predicated its success on its 'talkability' because its complexities required "some public airing around what it all could possibly mean" (51 - 52). Conversing about episodes helps to maintain the *Pretty Little Liars* 'must-see' allure discussed in Chapter Two by simultaneously generating a "buzz" around the programme while creating an incentive for viewers to keep watching weekly.

However, because of Twitter's instantaneous nature, the discussion about the episode does not occur the following day but in the exact moment it is broadcast. Because of the prevalence of social media, for some viewers, "the water-cooler has gone digital" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 26). Through Twitter, devoted fans can collectively engage with the text instantaneously. *Pretty Little Liars*, like *Twin Peaks*, involves narrative elements that generate discussion and become a shared subject of exploration. ABC Family's Vice President of Marketing Danielle Mullin describes the programme as having "a lot of unique elements that set it up for success in the social-media space: an on-going mystery, plot twists and turns, cliffhangers and what we call OMG [oh my God] moments" (Keveney, "True Sign"). The relationship between these

moments and Twitter activity can be seen in Figure 3.9, the Twitter conversation trend line generated by Bluefin Labs¹¹ during the 3A finale, “The Lady Killer”. In 2012, this episode made media headlines for setting a new record for most social media comments for a single episode television episode with 1.6 million tweets (Edelsburg).

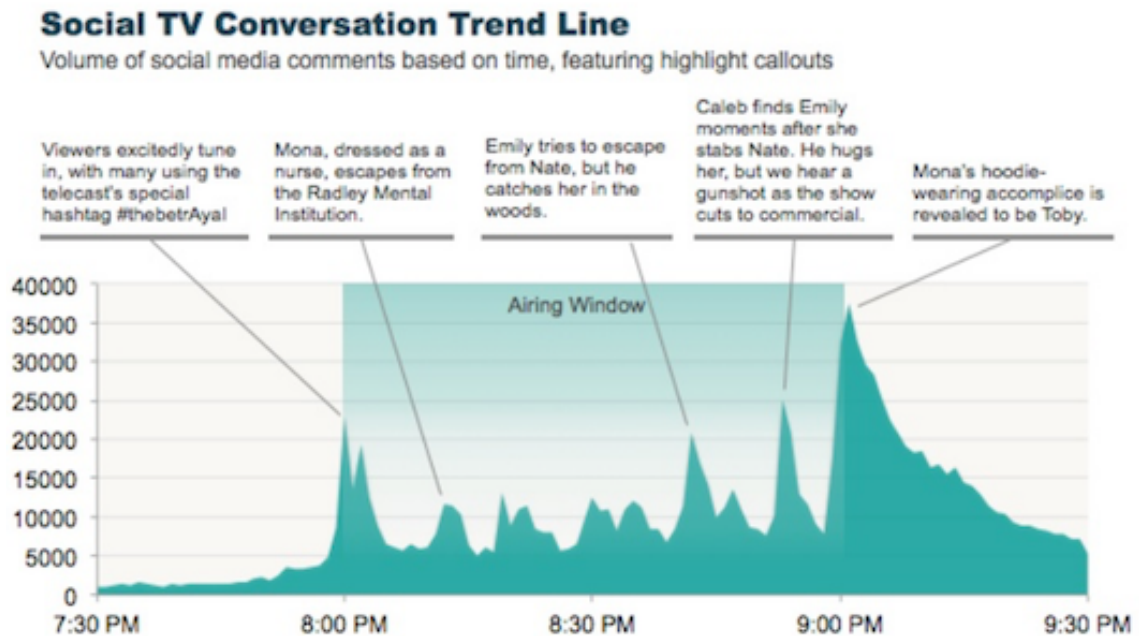


Figure 3.9 – “The Lady Killer” Conversation Trend Line¹²

The “OMG moments” that Mullin is referring to can be best understood using Porter et al’s Scene Function Model. This model uses Seymour Chatman’s concepts of ‘kernels’ and ‘satellites’ and builds on the theory in order to show how events in the narrative serve to advance or enhance the story (Porter et al 25). The Scene Function Model is used in order to demonstrate “how a scene enhances various storylines, adds to the layers of meaning, and engages viewers with different levels of commitment to the series” (Porter et al 25). Each

¹¹ Bluefin Labs is a company that analyses social media data to measure viewer engagement with television.

¹² Source: Edelsburg, Natan. “‘Pretty Little Liars’ Launches Web Series for Social-Savvy Fans.” *AdWeek*. Prometheus Global Media, 30 Aug. 2012. Web. 10 Jan. 2015.

scene varies in importance to the narrative and thus is likely to generate various reactions on Twitter depending on its nature.

Kernels are events that present “a critical juncture in the story” (Porter et al 25). Scenes that contain kernel events have the capacity to change the very nature of the storyline and its removal will cause a significant change to the narrative. Because these are crucial moments, they are likely to generate an organic reaction from both the fans that have been following the story from the beginning, and also those who may have only started watching during the current season. Because kernels are designed to make a significant contribution to the narrative, they can be strong triggers for ‘live-tweeting’. Primarily, these are scenes that are directly related to the main ‘A’ mystery or any of the other mini mysteries such as Maya’s murder in 3A.

For example, in “The Lady Killer”, the main spikes in Twitter activity can be attributed to an ambiguous opening scene that implies the death of a character (19,000 tweets), the resolution of the Maya’s murder (25,000 tweets) and the revelation that Toby is part of The ‘A’ Team (37,000 tweets). Many users ‘live-tweeted’ during these scenes, sharing their reactions to the plot twists with fellow viewers. Figure 3.9 above shows the nature of some of the tweets posted during the kernel scene between Nate and Emily. In this scene, Emily discovers photos in Nate’s phone that indicate that he may not be Maya’s cousin as he originally claimed. She tries to run away from the cabin but encounters Nate in the woods. She exclaims, “You scared me half to death!” and Nate ominously replies, “Not yet, but I will” (“The Lady Killer”). This exchange implies that Emily has found herself in a dangerous situation leading to approximately 21,000 tweets on Twitter.

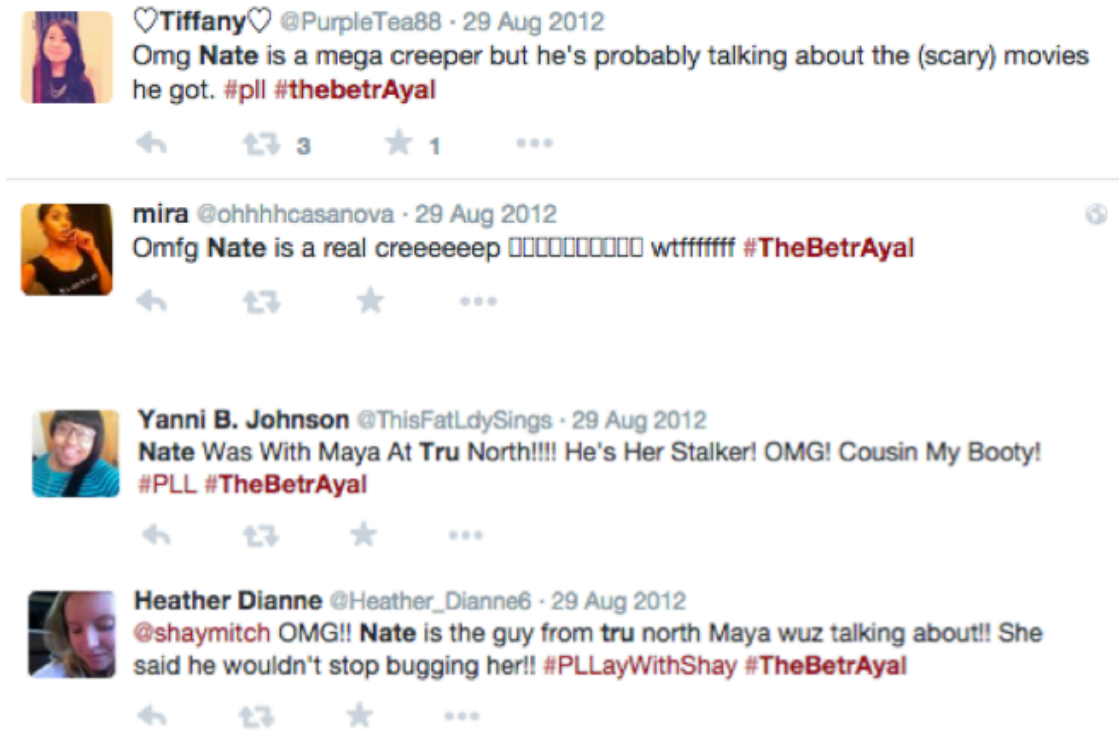


Figure 3.10 – Twitter reaction to Maya and Nate in “The Lady Killer”

The reaction to this scene is varied. Figure 3.10 shows how users like @ohhhhhcasanova used Twitter to remark that Nate is a “creep”. Other users like @PurpleTea88, who are used to the red herrings in the *Pretty Little Liars* mystery, tried to negotiate with the scene. She concedes that Nate is a “mega creeper” but speculates that he was actually referring to scaring her with the horror movies that he had previously mentioned bringing along to the cabin for them to watch. Four users show their agreement with @PurpleTea88 by favouriting and retweeting her message which could be understood as an indication of their shared comprehension of the show’s propensity for misdirection.

However, users like @Heather_Dianne6 and @ThisFatLdySings tried to view the scene in relation to the wider narrative. Nate had previously introduced himself as Maya’s cousin. However, the photos Emily found in the scene indicate that Nate had gone to Tru North, a reform school. In the Season Two

episode, “A Kiss Before Lying”, Maya returned to Rosewood from Tru North and was receiving messages from an ex-boyfriend whom she jokingly referred to as her ‘stalker’. These viewers have put together these facts to come to the correct conclusion that Nate is Maya’s stalker.

With Twitter acting as a digital “water-cooler”, users can collectively guess how the episode will unfold and instantaneously share theories about how events connect to the rest of the narrative. Twitter supplements the viewing experience by acting as an instantaneous orienting paratext. Seeing these tweets as they are watching a scene can help remind viewers of information from previous scenes or episodes that they may have overlooked. As Mittell explains, orienting paratexts “exist outside the diegetic storyworld, providing a perspective for viewers to help make sense of a narrative world by looking at it from a distance” (“Orienting Paratexts”). The dense narrative is made more accessible through this shared viewing experience. Viewers can then use ‘live-tweeting’ to communicate their agreement or disagreement with the idea, or indicate their support for theories by ‘favouriting’ the tweet or retweeting the message to their own followers.

In contrast to kernel scenes, satellites scenes, which are mostly focused on character development and setting, are less likely to lead to a dramatic increase in Twitter activity. Chatman explains: “[A] satellite can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot, though its omission will, of course, impoverish the narrative aesthetically” (qtd. in Porter et al 25). Its purpose is thus to enrich the story by providing additional information to elaborate on storylines, introduce new characters or even provide relief after a tense scene (Porter et al 26). Figure 3.9 above shows that after opening with a gripping kernel scene, Twitter activity is significantly reduced and remains constant at approximately 5000 tweets. During this time, the programme cuts to several satellites scenes depicting the Liars’ on-going distrust of Paige and the continuation of Aria’s

dismay at finding out her boyfriend has a child. These are both scenes that serve to further develop previous storylines without revealing new information therefore the Twitter activity is largely dormant until the next kernel scene.

Although I. Marlene King claims that the relationship between *Pretty Little Liars* and the Twitter users grew “organically”, ABC Family enhances the programme’s ‘talkability’ by openly promoting the use of Twitter (Ho). Instead of leaving the narrative twists to prompt viewers to tweet, Jenn Deering Davis asserts that “ABC Family [asks], ‘When do we get the highest tweets per minute and at what point in the episode? How can we nurture that?’” (Ng, “*Pretty Little Liars*”). This comment illustrates that the network is aware of *Pretty Little Liars*’ potential to generate conversation and explicitly tries to find ways to take advantage of the programme’s narrative elements in order to cultivate a more intense level of fan engagement. For instance, “The Lady Killer” was highly publicised by ABC Family, explicitly promoting ‘live-tweeting’ by advertising the episode using the hashtag #TheBetrAyal.

Figure 3.11 shows how this promotion began weeks before the episode aired on August 28. The official *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter account, @ABCFp11, was regularly tweeting about #TheBetrAyal in an attempt to generate anticipation for the event. The message tweeted on the day the episode aired even explicitly challenges the fans to get #TheBetrAyal to trend on Twitter. Figure 3.11 shows that each of these tweets received hundreds of retweets and favourites indicating that fans were responding to ABC Family’s tactics by showing their support and excitement for the episode. This is also reflected in Figure 3.9 above which illustrates how Twitter activity spiked with viewers tweeting #TheBetrAyal even before the provocative opening scene, suggesting that ABC Family’s social media promotional strategy was successful in generating anticipation for the episode.



Figure 3.11 – @ABCFp11 tweets about “#TheBetrayal”

This Twitter promotion was supplemented by a Facebook app called Suspect Tracker¹³ (see Figure 3.12). @ABCFp11 promoted the “The Lady Killer” by teasing that a major character will betray the Liars. Viewers could tweet a designated code such as #EzralsGuilty or #PaigelsGuilty in order to use the Facebook app to vote on who they think will be commit the betrayal. Additionally, by clicking on the suspect’s photo, the app shows the user other fans’ messages that accompany these votes, such as the reasoning behind their choice. This transmedia extension highlights how *Pretty Little Liars* attempts to engage its viewers through a variety of avenues and ensure constant exposure to the programme.

¹³ A then-upcoming film entitled *The Possession* sponsored *Pretty Little Liars*’ Suspect Tracker. Although this thesis is not concerned with ABC Family’s sponsored advertising, it is important to note that the cultivation of an online fan community has widened ABC Family’s advertising potential, further emphasising the importance of social media to the channel.

Although the app is essentially just a poll on viewer opinion, releasing the app ahead of “The Lady Killer” meant that viewers could vote for weeks, using information they gained in preceding episodes to inform their choice. By encouraging viewers to contribute to this app, ABC Family is trying to deepen the viewer commitment to the text. “The Lady Killer” becomes a game of viewers trying to outsmart the writers by guessing how the narrative will unfold. Voting essentially becomes an investment in the programme as the viewer will have to continuously tune in to cast an informed vote and also requires the viewer to watch “The Lady Killer” to see if they guessed correctly. This app serves to further deepen engagement with the text and generates a need for continued loyalty to *Pretty Little Liars*.



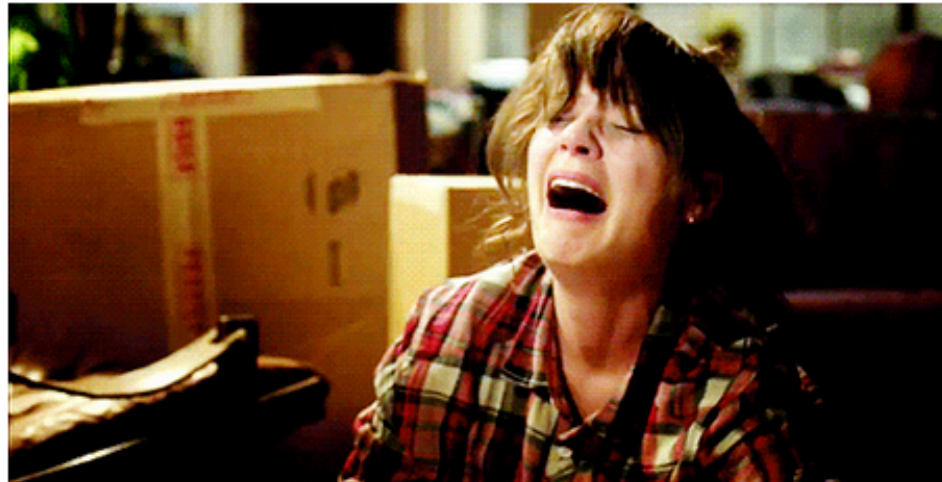
Figure 3.12 – #TheBetrAyal Suspect Tracker



★ Sara Avery ☆ @SaraWalker92 · Mar 5

Photo: monariaisa: When **#endofezria** comes on my screen.
tumblr.co/ZJZWTw1eyqmCg

Tumblr



By ★ Sara Avery ☆ @SaraWalker92

[View on web](#)

1 1

[View photo](#)



dominos. @AmyLRobertson_ · Mar 4

queenashbenson: **#EndOfEzria?!?!?!?! UM NO I DON'T THINK SO ABC FAMILY DON'T PUT THAT HASHTAG ON MY SCREEN**
tumblr.co/ZQUsYx1ewugw_

2 2

Figure 3.13 – Twitter reaction to “#End of Ezria”

In addition, ABC Family regularly adds Twitter hashtags to both kernel scenes and satellite scenes during broadcasts, suggesting conversation topics in order to sustain dialogue on Twitter throughout the episode. For example, in “To Plea or Not to Plea”, a hashtag appears in the episode with the words **#EndofEzria** when the characters Ezra and Aria decide to break up. This couple has been the main romantic pairing in *Pretty Little Liars* since Season One and thus their break up in Season Five is a significant moment for many viewers. As demonstrated in Figure 3.13, viewers reacted to this scene by voicing their dismay about the breakup using the ABC Family suggested hashtag. @SaraWalker92 posted a GIF of a woman hysterically crying to show how she

felt about the scene. @AmyLRobertson_ even tweeted her annoyance at ABC Family for highlighting such an upsetting moment. Hashtags that appear during kernel scenes functions as a reminder to the viewers to tweet their reaction and share how they feel about the climactic moments.

This example also illustrates how ABC Family sometimes appropriates fan-created portmanteaus like “Ezria” in their official hashtags. Jane Roscoe observes how programmes that utilise multiple platforms often mimic the way that users would usually use them in everyday life. She explains, “For a section of the audiences, then, the mode of engagement is already embedded within their social and cultural lives” (365). While Roscoe was talking about *Big Brother*’s website and SMS extensions, the same can be seen in *Pretty Little Liars*. It is arguable that incorporating fan vernacular into ABC Family’s suggested hashtags makes it easier to connect with their viewers and encourage to them to tweet as they are likely to already be familiar with using these words when they talk about *Pretty Little Liars*.

On-screen hashtags are particularly interesting when they occur during satellite scenes. Because satellite scenes can lead to stagnation in Twitter activity, ABC Family often embeds humorous hashtags in the frame. For example, in “I’m Your Puppet”, Emily and Hanna have sneaked into a morgue in order to verify the identity of a John Doe that they believe to be Toby. Hanna is unhappy about being in a room full of bodies and complains, “I smell dead people”. As shown in Figure 3.14, these words then appear in hashtag form on the top left corner of the screen. Figure 3.15 shows that some viewers like @MarisaGasbarra responded to this hashtag by tweeting about how Hanna made her laugh. Others like @helenaaavalla tweeted their amusement at ABC Family’s choice to use this phrase and four users favourited her tweet in response. All of the comments that use this hashtag, contributed to #ISmellDeadPeople becoming a trending topic on Twitter.

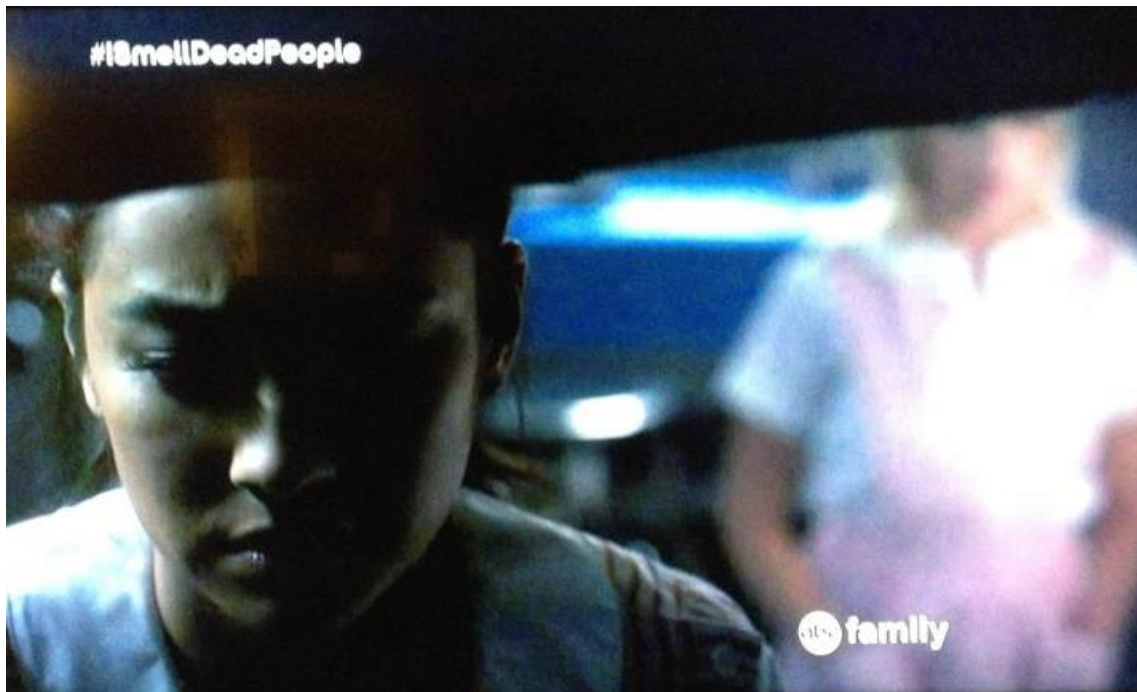


Figure 3.14 – Screenshot from “I’m Your Puppet” showing the network-generated hashtag “#ISmellDeadPeople”¹⁴

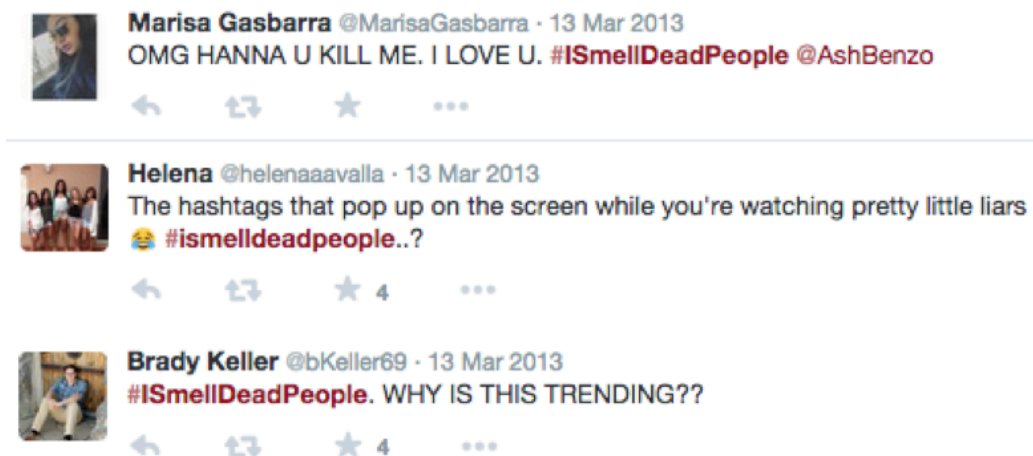


Figure 3.15 – Twitter reaction to “#ISmellDeadPeople”

¹⁴ Source: Pwils02. “Pretty Little Liars// I’m Your Puppet.” *Save It For The Commercial Break*. commercialbreaktv.wordpress.com, 13 Mar. 2013. Web. 12 Jan. 2015.

This use of humorous on-screen Twitter prompts during satellite scenes can thus help to generate a significant increase in tweets. For example, in “She’s Better Now”, the hashtag #shirtlesstoby appears when Spencer and Toby are in a hot tub. This scene’s purpose is to affirm the relationship while reminding the audience of Toby’s secret alliance with ‘A’. The scene is essentially gratuitous partial nudity included in the episode as fan service. ABC Family acknowledges this fact with the tongue-in-cheek hashtag in order to prompt users to tweet about actor Keegan Allen’s physique and Bluefin’s data reveals that this strategy was effective, generating approximately 17,000 tweets (Seles).

This use of unusual or humorous phrases arguably also helps the hashtag to stand out if it becomes a trending topic on the platform. Some Twitter users who do not watch *Pretty Little Liars* may see that this hashtag is trending and become intrigued, leading them to question what it means by either clicking on the hashtag to see what others are saying or, as @bKeller69 has done in Figure 3.15 above, ask the users on the platform using this same hashtag, thereby contributing to the trend. This exposure on Twitter gives *Pretty Little Liars* the opportunity to be seen prominently on the platform and demonstrates how ABC Family uses these trending hashtags in order to raise the profile of the programme through Twitter conversation.

ABC Family is well aware of how they can use the power of their social media fan base. King states, “We have a remarkable tool. Those fans are very empowered, and they can make things happen. They can, if we say ‘Let’s trend #Emison if you want Emily and Alison to be together,’ and, within five minutes, Emison will be a trending topic on Twitter” (Burt, “Marlene King”). Using the word “tool” reveals how ABC Family views the purpose of cultivating this social media community. The purpose is not to extend the narrative but to manage the popularity of the programme. This strategy helps to raise the profile of the programme by setting social media records while simultaneously ensuring that

viewers are constantly engaging with the programme, making sure they do not tire of it even when the scene is not action-packed.

ABC Family's strategy is to harness Twitter fan activity by actively guiding how viewers engage with the programme during its initial broadcast. As Melanie Brozek observes, the episodes available on the ABC Family website do not contain these hashtags (14). These hashtags are also absent in DVD releases and any reruns/syndicated episodes, suggesting that ABC Family is using the hashtags as a way to encourage viewers to watch episodes live on television in order to participate, putting an emphasis on 'just-in-time fandom'. Mullin explains that Twitter "plays into this phenomenon of FOMO – fear of missing out. When you're on Twitter and your entire feed is people talking about something, if you're not watching you start to feel left out" (Rancilio). The integration with Twitter also leads to the possibility of spoilers. With so many users talking about *Pretty Little Liars* on Twitter, it becomes difficult to avoid comments that may ruin surprise developments.

The *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter community generates a kind of social pressure for watching an episode the night that it is broadcast. It creates a need for activities to become patterned with the "rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting" (Hills, *Fan Cultures* 178). Watching *Pretty Little Liars* on television the night that it is broadcast also means that viewers will be less able to bypass commercial breaks. As a result, *Pretty Little Liars* will be more attractive to advertisers who want access to ABC Family's Millennial viewers. As Alloy Entertainment CEO Leslie Morgenstein explains, "In an environment where TV has become fragmented, the show has become stable, and they're watching it live" (Ng, "Pretty Little Liars"). The inclusion of network-created hashtags in live episodes places a premium on timely responses and thus time-shifting is not an option if the fan wants to participate in these online activities. This strategy has proved very successful for *Pretty Little Liars* as evidenced by the fact that it has

become the most watched television telecast for females 12 – 34 for every episode it has aired since 2010 (Burt, “Pretty Little Liars Ratings”).

Celebrity Tweets

As an added incentive for viewers to watch live, actors, writers and producers often join the Twitter community in ‘live-tweeting’ in order to further cultivate a feeling of community and sense of connection with the viewers. ABC Family’s Vice President of Marketing, Danielle Mullin explains this aspect of the network strategy: “We act like a friend to our fans [and] friends don’t use a corporate tone of voice when they talk to you. So they actually do think they’re speaking to their friend. And that’s really an incredible opportunity for marketers” (Ulaby). With this statement, ABC Family is being very clear about the tactics they use to engage fans on Twitter. This strategy further parallels Jenkins’ concept of ‘affective economics’. The network courts their fans on a personal level, giving viewers social media access to the actors in order to create an emotional connection to the show.

Troian Bellisario explains that tweeting has become a part of her job as an actress on *Pretty Little Liars* as it is “kind of required by the network” (Ng, “Pretty Little Liars”). A significant number of fans use Twitter to not only talk with fellow viewers as they are watching the programme but also with the actors who are in the show. Although the actors can choose how they interact with their fans, ABC Family gives them “a digital asset package” (Ng, “Pretty Little Liars”). Mullin explains that this package give the actors “suggestions” on what to post including photos and clips from the programme (Ng, “Pretty Little Liars”).

Whenever a new episode airs, there is at least one actor or producer who is ‘live-tweeting’ with the viewers. Each episode is constructed to feel like a shared community experience between those who work on the programme and the fans.

One of the main actors, Shay Mitchell, uses her Twitter account (@shaymitch) to regularly host an activity she calls #PLayWithShay, answering fan questions and responding to comments using this hashtag. For example, as shown in Figure 3.16, a user named @leavehanna uses #PLayWithShay to ask Mitchell if viewers will soon know who killed Mona. Mitchell quotes this tweet and teases the user by saying “maybe” followed by a winking emoticon. This evasive response implies that viewers need to keep watching in order to find the answer.

Many of Mitchell’s tweets direct Twitter users back to the programme. For example, during the episode “Fresh Meat”, Emily (Shay’s character) attempts to cook but her friend Spencer refuses to eat the food because there is a hair in it. Emily tells Spencer to “eat around it” and Mitchell humorously tweets “Yeah Spencer, just eat around it!” echoing her character’s response (See Figure 3.16). This reminds viewers that Mitchell is watching the programme with them, helping to generate a feeling of a shared experience with the actress. Fans showed their amusement by retweeting and favouriting her tweet almost 2000 times.



Figure 3.16 – Shay Mitchell’s tweets using “#pplaywithshay”

In Mark Andrejevic's study of TWoP users, he describes how users were "captivated" when producers and actors would participate in fan forums (31). One of his respondents remarks that the presence of celebrities on forums may even lead him to watch shows more often because of the "stronger connection" he feels (31). The structure of Twitter makes the platform ideal for cultivating this type of relationship because fans can direct messages to a celebrity in the same manner that they would contact people that they know in real life. This interaction is limited as the celebrity will not be able to answer all tweets. However, Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd explain that Twitter allows celebrities to "create a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers" (147). Over time, as celebrities share more personal information, these tweets can "[create] the illusion of first-person glimpses into their lives" (Marwick and Boyd 148). The constant stream of information being shared on these *Pretty Little Liars* celebrity accounts is designed to simulate the feeling of being friends with the actors.



Figure 3.17 – Ashley Benson's Instagram photo

Followers of these celebrity accounts can also gain access to behind-the-scenes photos taken during the filming of the show. These photos can be teasers that hint at future storylines or can be uploaded shortly after an episode to show how certain scenes were filmed. For example, actress Ashley Benson (@AshBenzo) tweeted the words “before mug shot” accompanied by a link to a photo from her Instagram account (Figure 3.17 above). This photo shows the actress getting her make-up done before having her mug shot taken for the episode “To Plea or Not to Plea”. This tweet functions to make Twitter fans feel as though they are privy to the inner workings of the programme.

Mitchell also participates in sharing behind-the-scenes information. Marwick and Boyd explain that when celebrities identify other celebrities on Twitter as a friend, this can be considered “a performance of backstage access” (145). Returning to Figure 3.16 above, while watching an episode of the programme, Mitchell comments that she loves her scenes with @SleepintheGardn (Troian Bellisario). She remarks that they “laugh way too much”, indicating to viewers that the two of them are friends off-screen, thus sharing her personal life with her fans by sharing her feelings for her co-star. Additionally, by identifying Bellisario by her Twitter account, Mitchell’s tweet can be considered “a public endorsement” (Marwick and Boyd 145). Mitchell, who has more followers than Bellisario, can help to promote another *Pretty Little Liars* affiliated account, widening the reach of the programme.

This is an important aspect of the celebrity Twitter accounts. Following these users, sending them messages and seeing their updates regularly on the homepage constantly exposes fans on Twitter to *Pretty Little Liars* content, even if those messages are not overt promotion for the programme. Even during a hiatus, fans can regularly see updates from the actors that can act as a consistent but subtle reminder of the programme. Because the sources are actors from the programme, these behind-the-scenes tweets and photos help to

simulate the feeling that followers are friends with the celebrities and that they are privy to insider information. The existence of the 'digital asset package' suggests that ABC Family plays a significant role in constructing this perception of closeness. Fans will never know just how much influence ABC Family has on these celebrity tweets because they are deliberately constructed to make fans feel they are "speaking to their friend" (Ulaby). The perceived intimacy can be understood as a way for the channel to utilise the star-power of their actors in order to engage fans.

King's presence on Twitter offers viewers something slightly different than the online activity of actors. Although she also 'live-tweets' during episodes, as the showrunner and Executive Producer, fans have the added benefit of being able to use King as a resource for interpreting the many disorienting scenes in the programme. Fans often reach out to King to ask her questions about what they have seen in the episodes. Figure 3.18 demonstrates how @hhoagie mentions a scene to King that made her laugh. King responds by reminding her that this scene is the Liars' interpretation of Ali's written account of her meeting with Toby, meaning that other people's perspectives cloud the flashback. A second user, @EllieMellie1120 sees this exchange on Twitter and asks King if this means the flashbacks are not true. This illustrates how King's online presence can act as an orienting paratext. Viewers are able to reach out to King when a scene is particularly confusing and she can personally respond to these questions in order to clarify. With this ability to question the showrunner directly, comprehending *Pretty Little Liars*' the complex narrative is made a little easier for its viewers, which encourages future viewing.



Figure 3.18 – Twitter exchange between @imarleneking, @hhoagie and @EllieMellie1120

Viewers also treat the content of King's tweets as a source for potential clues. As the creator of the programme, many viewers treat King's tweets regarding the narrative as gospel and thus her comments often become analysed for hints about the mystery. For instance, in 2015, it was announced that the identity of 'A' would finally be revealed in the Season Five finale, "Welcome to the Dollhouse". Many viewers tweeted King for help identifying clues that they may have missed from previous episodes. Some viewers even asked King to clarify tweets that she had posted in the past. Figure 3.19 shows how @DaisyPeberdy

asked King to clarify one of her old tweets that revealed ‘A’ was in the pilot episode. King replies that the original tweet was referring to Mona’s ‘A’ but that the presence of Big ‘A’ cannot be ruled out.



Figure 3.19 – Twitter exchange between @imarleneking and @DaisyPeberdy

This exchange illustrates how interacting with King on Twitter helps to generate a feeling that anything she says has the potential to reveal clues about *Pretty Little Liars*. King’s tweets supplements the programme by giving viewers an additional source to analyse for meaning. Interacting with King and encouraging viewers to speculate about her tweets serves to help fans deepen their investment in the programme by encouraging them to seek out clues across the different platforms and incentivizing viewers to keep watching by hinting at what is yet to come.

The relationship between people who work on *Pretty Little Liars* and the fans also functions to gauge how viewers are responding to the programme. King explains: “I’m always on when the show airs and talk to fans. I watch what they’re saying to each other, what they like, what they dislike. It’s a wonderful

giant focus group” (Ho). King’s statement reflects Andrejevic’s study of how fan sites can often become “an impromptu focus group, providing instant feedback” (25). The Internet is not only uniting viewers but also giving producers access to audience feedback that can help them decide where to go with the story.¹⁵



Figure 3.20 – Twitter reaction to Ezra reveal

One clear example of this is in Season Four when Ezra was revealed to be an author who was secretly penning a novel about Ali’s disappearance. Because he has been Aria’s boyfriend since the beginning of the series, this was a shocking twist that upset many fans. Figure 3.20 shows how users used the network-generated hashtag #AriaFindsOut, to voice their reaction on Twitter. User @jackswoes laments that she was a fan of the couple. Additionally, @louisnziam and @MissyAlexWright want to know the reason why the story had to unfold this way considering the prominence of the relationship. Executive Producer Oliver Goldstick explains, “We had always planned to redeem Ezra Fitz [...] but knowing how badly the fans wanted it certainly nudged me in that direction sooner than later” (Reiher). King supports this statement by saying if

¹⁵ This ability of the Twitter community to act as a ‘focus group’, combined with the way ABC Family uses tweets in order to become a trending topic on the platform, highlights what Andrejevic calls “value-enhancing labour” (24). Although the concept of digital labour extends beyond the scope of this thesis, which primarily seeks to explore the cultivation of engagement and loyalty in the ‘post-network era’, this example illustrates the crucial contribution of *Pretty Little Liars* fans in the success of this multi-platform exposure.

there is popular support for something, they “absolutely take it under consideration” (Aguilera).

However, Goldstick clarifies that even though they listen to fans, the episodes air long after the programme has been written, making it difficult to retrofit for fan-demanded storylines (Reiher). Instead, as Andrejevic explains, there is “a certain amount of public relations value to be gained from suggesting that online fans influence the production process: it helps to foster the multi-platform (internet plus TV) marketing of the show and thus build loyalty” (36). Implying to fans that their social media activity has the power to affect storylines helps to further support the idea of a *Pretty Little Liars* community. The production of programme is (seemingly) a shared communal experience for actors, writers, producers and, of course, the fans.

By welcoming feedback and encouraging the growth of the online fan community so intensely, ABC Family generates a feeling of connectedness with the *Pretty Little Liars* fans. This connection can then translate into a deeper level of commitment and engagement with the programme. However, it is arguable that encouraging so much social media hype around the programme can also raise the expectations of the viewers. When the programme fails to meet these expectations, fans can react very negatively. The Season Five finale, “Welcome to the Dollhouse” illustrates this problem. The episode was promoted on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter using the hashtag #BigAReveAl, promising to reveal the identity of Big ‘A’ the central antagonist of the series. Like #TheBetrAyal, ABC Family tried to generate anticipation for the event by consistently reminding viewers about the significance of this episode. King even personally responded to some of the fans questions about the episode, going so far as to declare “Welcome to the Dollhouse” as “the most important episode of PLL ever” twice on Twitter.

The viewers responded well to this promotion, generating almost 1.3 million tweets during the episode (Fratti). The episode drew its largest total viewership since the season premiere (2.6 million), becoming the programme's highest-rated episode in women 18 - 49 since August 2013 (Kissell, "Pretty Little Liars' Ratings Soar"). However, this episode reveals that 'A' is actually a man named Charles, a character that has not been known to the audience until this episode. In addition, Charles remained masked throughout "Welcome to the Dollhouse". Aside from alluding to his familial connection to Ali, viewers were given no information about Big 'A' other than his name.

Many of the viewers reacted negatively to the reveal. The name "Charles" was reportedly "the top topic in the *hate*, *upset*, [and] *unsure* categories" with 9,000 tweets using these words to express their feelings about the reveal (Fratti). Figure 3.21 shows some of these Twitter reactions. Users like @WeJustLovePLL tweeted that they were disappointed by the episode and hundreds of other users retweeted and favourited these tweets to communicate their agreement. In addition, viewers like @meg_of_wickham and @EmilyxWilliams complained that "Welcome to the Dollhouse" had too much hype considering the content of the episode.

As discussed earlier, official fan forums can be used to assure viewers that serial developments will eventually pay off. Rather than releasing official statements, King and recurring director Norman Buckley used Twitter to assure viewers that the programme will not disappoint in the end. Figure 3.22 shows how King defended the reveal, by directly responding to user @donbalon21, saying that she never actually promised to reveal A's face. Arguably, because users treat Twitter as an orienting paratext, the platform gives producers the opportunity to instantaneously and directly address any misunderstandings or perceived grievances from the audiences in order to clarify and defend their narrative.



Figure 3.21 – Twitter reaction to #BigAReveal

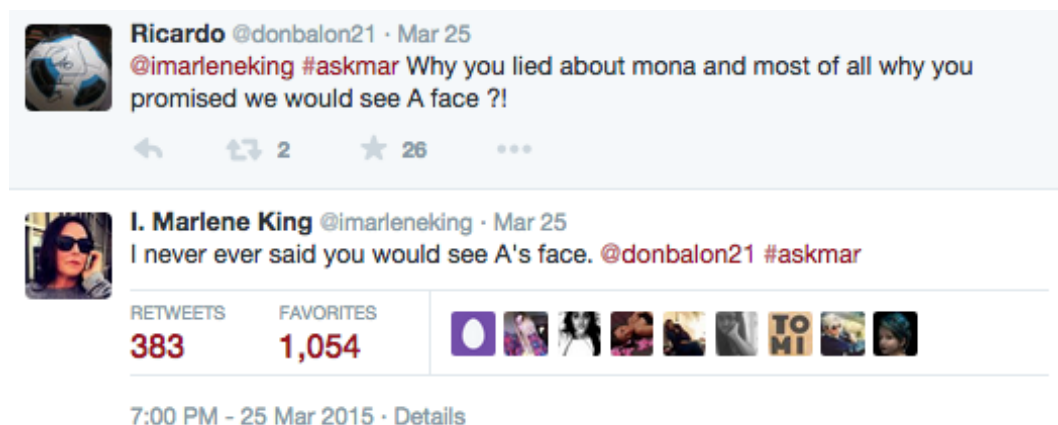


Figure 3.22 – Twitter exchange between @imarleneking and @donbalon21

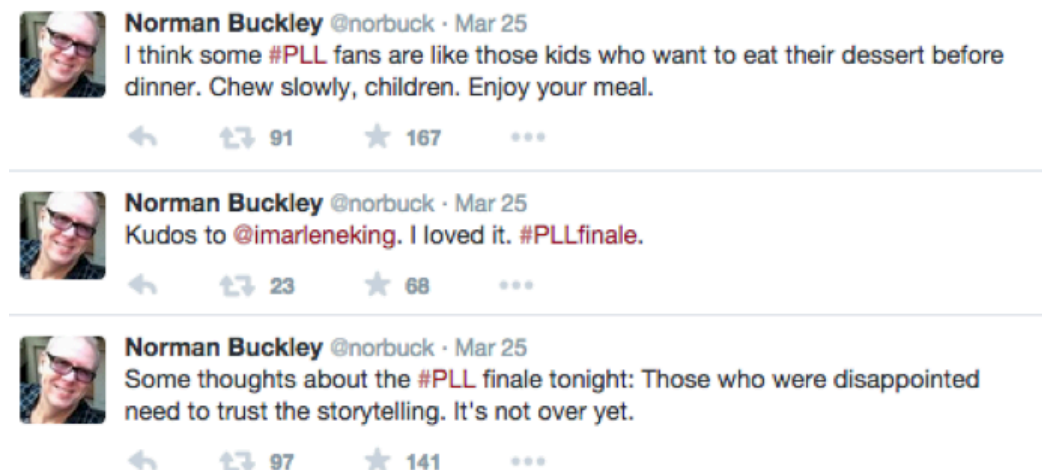


Figure 3.23 – Norman Buckley's tweets about "Welcome to the Dollhouse"

In addition, Buckley, who did not direct this episode, used Twitter to praise King for the finale. He tells the viewers to “trust the storytelling” and implies that disappointment is unfounded because “[the story] isn’t over yet” (Figure 3.23 above). These tweets are intended to subdue the negative reaction. Instead of an official press release, the perceived connection between the fans and the producers can be used to reassure viewers in a more casual and conversational manner. Even though many were disappointed with the finale, Buckley is able to use Twitter to promise viewers that they will not be left disappointed while simultaneously urging them to stay with the programme. This reaction of disappointment is testament to the effectiveness of *Pretty Little Liars*’ social media success. ABC Family courted fans via social media on a personal level, helping to sustain engagement and generate hype. However, the core text is still the centre of its transmedia strategy. ABC Family can only benefit from this cultivation of a devoted online fan community if *Pretty Little Liars* is able to meet the expectations that have been generated by the hype.

Despite this social media success, it is still uncertain whether tweets can boost the ratings of a programme. In 2013, Nielsen found a correlation between increases in Twitter commentary and increased live viewership (Kafka). However in 2015, Nielsen reduced the significance of this revelation by stating that instead, Twitter buzz can identify potential success when it comes to new programmes, acting as a ‘signal’ that can predict how a programme will be received when it airs (Koh). While the exact correlation may be unclear¹⁶, what is certain is that ABC Family’s use of social media helps *Pretty Little Liars* cultivate continued engagement and loyalty from their viewers.

¹⁶ Twitter reportedly acquired Bluefin Labs in 2013 for \$90 million (Isaac). This acquisition could give Twitter insight on targeting viewers that can be shared with both advertisers and content producers. This acquisition indicates the increasing significance of the relationship between television and social media that ABC Family has been utilising in order to build its channel brand.

Conclusion

ABC Family has taken the perception of the Millennials' technological literacy and used it to shape their online presence. Although the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* is already constructed in a way that compels users to reach out to one another, ABC Family supplements these textual features by extending viewer engagement on to web platforms. The primary function of these transmedia extensions is to be supplementary to the core text, encouraging viewers to engage in a way that increases the visibility of the programme and encourages consistent live viewing. *Pretty Dirty Secrets* was designed to add narrative complexity to the main *Pretty Little Liars* story by encouraging viewers to move across platforms in order to deepen their understanding of the mystery while the show is on hiatus. By doing so, viewers are able to further engage with the programme and invest in storylines that will be developed in the future, thus generating speculation and anticipation for the show's return, giving viewers a reason to continue watching *Pretty Little Liars*.

ABC Family's social media campaigns for *Pretty Little Liars* further add to this drive for continued engagement. The textual features of the *Pretty Little Liars* narrative offer shocking moments that demand speculation and ABC Family's Twitter strategy harnesses this activity by actively adding suggested hashtags to promote participation in online conversations. This strategy helps to encourage continued engagement with the episodes, serving as a reminder to tweet a reaction on Twitter even when scenes are not action-packed while simultaneously generating exposure for the programme if these tweets become trending topics. 'Live-tweeting' helps to cultivate a sense of community between Twitter fans, incentivizing viewers to watch the programme live in order to contribute.

In addition, the presence of actors, producers and directors on the platform gives viewers the ability to directly interact with those involved in the creation of the programme. 'Live-tweeting' with actors helps to forge a sense of personal connection, helping to simulate a sense of friendship that allows viewers to feel as though they are sharing the experience of the programme with these famous actors if they are watching it live. Interacting with directors and producers serve a different function, guiding the viewer comprehension of an increasingly complex narrative whilst assuring them that continued loyalty to the programme will not leave them disappointed.

Pretty Dirty Secrets and the *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter activities are constructed on the idea that Millennial viewers are comfortable and willing to follow stories across different platforms. By creating this multi-platform experience, ABC Family is further asserting their network as a channel that understands the viewing patterns of this demographic. Tapping into the social media activities of Millennials allowed *Pretty Little Liars* to attain a steady, loyal audience that is still following the central mystery five seasons since its premiere. The use of hashtags combined with the presence of actors, writers and producers in the *Pretty Little Liars* online community helps ABC Family to support its programming, moulding the patterns of fan activity towards the objectives of the network.

Conclusion

ABC Family tailored its strategy to harness the perceived challenges of engaging Millennial viewers in the post-network era and transformed its channel from a so-called “multi-billion dollar blunder” (Grego) to a channel “for and about Millennials” (Liesse A2). The channel achieved this feat by embracing the television industry’s perception of Millennial viewers as a generation that engages with television in ways that are different to any of its predecessors. The commissioning of *Pretty Little Liars* – a distinctive and innovative programme that serves to distinguish and elevate the profile of the channel by directly appealing to the perceived media literacy of Millennial viewers – has been a central, and very successful, contributor to this ABC Family strategy. This strategy has responded directly to the perceived technological literacy of Millennial viewers by expanding the narrative and experience of *Pretty Little Liars* onto alternative, including social media, platforms. With *Pretty Little Liars*, ABC Family has deployed a web series and social media strategy to redirect viewer attention to live television broadcasts, thus boosting viewership for and ongoing loyalty to the programme, as well as increasing anticipation for new episodes. These strategies have been augmented by on-screen prompts and interactions with celebrities so as to develop and encourage a more focused form of audience engagement.

The unique challenges of ABC Family regarding its roots as a channel first, for right-wing conservatives, then later, for parents and their children, necessitated a redefinition of its brand identity in order to clarify and communicate its intended audience. Struggling to build its audience in a post-network context of fierce inter-network and multi-platform competition, ABC Family (as with many other cable channels) found that a schedule focusing on programmes that had been previously successful on its sister channel, ABC, and its rival channel, The WB, was simply not sufficient in demonstrating to

audiences, advertisers or cable system operators that the channel could offer something distinctive and different.

As explained in Chapter One, Strauss and Howe's assertion that the Millennials are a generation who are close to their parents and comfortable with their family lives (*Millennials Rising* 69 – 70) was a fortuitous development in respect of the market position of ABC Family, helping provide a commercial rationale for the channel to reformulate its inherited name. ABC Family's own market research supported this perception, finding that "the word 'family' is no longer necessarily uncool for 15-to-30-year-olds today. They're more connected with their parents than previous generations" (Ulaby). In 2006, ABC Family adopted the slogan "A New Kind of Family" in order to distance the channel from "the stereotypical conservative, boring or insincere aspects of family television" (Liesse A2) and assert its identity as a Millennial channel. Former Chief Creative Officer Kate Jeurgens explains that "[ABC Family] wanted to represent family in a contemporary and authentic way" (Linton). In addition to this new slogan, ABC Family's strategy involved a disclaimer to *The 700 Club* to disassociate itself from the conservative values of the programme. More significantly, the channel also developed programmes that depicted the modern families and current issues that reflect the society in which Millennial viewers live.

Former ABC Family President Michael Riley declares *Pretty Little Liars* to be a "brand-defining and demo-defining" programme for ABC Family (Taylor). Although the programme is not about a specific type of modern family in the same way as *The Fosters* or *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* which address same-sex relationships, adoption and teen motherhood, *Pretty Little Liars* focuses on a group of close friends and its narrative is designed to address contemporary problems affecting young people such as divorce and drug use. However, although *Pretty Little Liars* continues the theme of addressing contemporary issues that affect Millennial viewers, it does so by

deploying a relatively sophisticated form of storytelling that helps to distinguish the programme and its host channel from their closest rivals.

Millennials were born in the latter half of what Lotz (2007) terms the era of multi-channel transition (1985-2005) and became young adults during the subsequent post-network era (2005-present). They are therefore perceived to have been consistently immersed not only in a media-saturated environment, but also in an emerging multi-platform environment. In addition, Millennials are expected to be the “best-educated young adults in U.S. history” (Strauss and Howe, *Millennials Go to College* 60). Assertions such as this have informed television industry perceptions that these viewers have developed a level of media literacy that is unmatched by the young adults of previous generations. *Pretty Little Liars* has adapted to this by incorporating narrative and aesthetic features more characteristic of adult-audience ‘high-end’ dramas into its teen-oriented drama concept. This strategy functions to not only create an experience that is unparalleled by any other contemporary teen programme, but also to create a narrative that acknowledges and rewards the perceived media literacy of a Millennial demographic.

Chapter Two discussed how one of the main innovations of *Pretty Little Liars* is the sophisticated generic mix of a teen-oriented soap opera combined with a murder mystery plot. This generic mixing enables the programme to distinguish itself from its contemporaries by enabling it to tackle the portrayal and representation of teen issues in alternative and innovative ways. For example, ‘A’ terrorises the Liars by threatening to reveal their darkest secrets such as illicit relationships, sexual orientation and drug use. This not only allows the programme to directly address current problems faced by today’s teenagers, but also means that these discussions unfold against the backdrop of a compelling murder mystery. *Pretty Little Liars* uses the mystery as a departure point for addressing similar problems to those portrayed in other, more conventional,

teen-oriented dramas such as *Glee* and *Gossip Girl*. This murder mystery narrative is one more commonly found in adult-audience dramas such as *Twin Peaks* and *The Killing*. Its deployment in *Pretty Little Liars* ensures that the consequences of ‘A’'s threats take a more sinister tone. Although the issues being addressed are not entirely dissimilar to those of other teen-oriented programmes, the generic mixing of the above two elements helps to imbue *Pretty Little Liars* with distinction, ensuring the programme an appealing point of difference from its contemporaries on American broadcast television.

This generic mixing in the premise and narrative is augmented with particular impact by the programme's visual style. The programme works within its limited production budget to construct a unique 1940s-like American noir aesthetic. Director Norman Buckley cites the art of Edward Hopper and films of Alfred Hitchcock as inspiration for this visual style, which, as analysed in this thesis, provides another specific example of how *Pretty Little Liars* has challenged and extended the aesthetic potentials of teen-oriented TV dramas (“*Pretty Little Liars*”; “*Sometimes Unconscious*”). Its aesthetic qualities and innovation serve to visually distinguish *Pretty Little Liars* from its teen drama rivals. Although subsequent teen dramas may well seek to emulate it, its visual style foregrounds the risk-taking and originality of *Pretty Little Liars*.

This aesthetic, also adds complexity to the programme's narrative by functioning as a source of intertextual clues. The insertion of these clues, some of which function as parodic allusions, assumes that Millennials are media literate and well-versed in popular culture. Many episodes incorporate caricatures of such classic film noir movies as *Psycho* in order to subtly suggest how the episode will unfold. Recognising the texts to which these parodic allusions refer can enable viewers to decipher their possible significance for *Pretty Little Liars*' own narrative trajectory. By using narrative strategies such as these, the programme demands an intense level of audience engagement and,

as Ott and Walter explain, the successful recognition of these popular references can reward viewers with a “sense of accomplishment” (436). Parodic allusions serve not only to allow *Pretty Little Liars* to acknowledge and reward the perceived media literacy of its Millennial viewers but also entice them to pay close attention to the programme’s details. Together, these strategies work to encourage consistent and loyal viewing.

This demand for continuing engagement is further intensified by the programme’s adaptation of the ‘closed serial’ form, a narrative structure that is incompatible with casual viewing practices (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 154). Each episode contributes new information to the multiple interweaving storylines and “brings the overarching story a step closer to resolution” (Dunleavy, *Television Drama* 155). This generates a ‘must see’ allure that requires loyal viewers to keep up-to-date with the programme (Jancovich and Lyons 2). However, as a basic cable drama, a proportion of ABC Family’s income comes from advertising, which requires its programmes to remain accessible for new viewers. *Pretty Little Liars* attracts such ‘late-entry’ viewers by incorporating some stand-alone episodes, such as Halloween specials, as well as running additional ‘mini’ murder mystery plots that begin and end within half a season. These limited storylines serve to generate broader audience interest in the programme, introducing new viewers to the narrative in ways that can incentivise continued engagement.

To incite audience speculation about new episodes, *Pretty Little Liars* utilises cliffhangers between seasons, between episodes and even between scenes to promote continuous anticipation about what is to come, generating compelling reasons for viewers to return to the programme. Many scenes end on a suspenseful note, creating a sense of anticipation for what lies ahead in the narrative. The programme also uses flashbacks to generate a feeling of uncertainty. A large part of unravelling the mystery of what happened to Ali

involves discovering new information about the night she disappeared. The use of flashbacks helps *Pretty Little Liars* to gradually reveal more information about that night from different perspectives. Additionally, the use of different perspectives on this pivotal event works to destabilise or challenge what viewers know about that particular night, a strategy that boosts to the allure of new episodes as well as rewarding audience loyalty. The narrative challenges of multiple perspectives are intensified further by the insertion of dream sequences, which seem designed deliberately to disorient viewers. Ali's appearances through the series provide a strong example of this; they serve to generate uncertainty about her death, which is exacerbated by the usage of the same aesthetic cues as when a character is hallucinating and dreaming. Tactics like these mean that viewers can never truly be certain about whether or not what they are seeing is only in the minds of the Liars.

The uses of the above devices demonstrate the influence and importance of narrative complexity in *Pretty Little Liars*. Because this degree of complexity is so strongly associated with adult-audience high-end dramas, it serves to distinguish *Pretty Little Liars* from other teen dramas and provide a viewing experience that is more edgy and experimental than has been characteristic of teen-oriented TV dramas. Yet the success of such narratively complex strategies as these, relies on the media literacy of Millennial viewers in that such strategies can only be effective if viewers can accurately interpret them. It is important, for example, for viewers to be able to read the aesthetic cues that distinguish dreams and hallucinations from authentic narrative developments. Such 'complex' strategies also keep the story of *Pretty Little Liars* 'fresh'. They suggest to viewers that nothing in the programme is certain, demanding that they watch the programme weekly in order to see how the narrative will unfold.

Chapter Three demonstrated how the complex narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* is supplemented by a thriving online presence for the programme, this activity

illustrating how ABC Family aligns itself with Millennial viewers by using transmedia texts on web platforms. As ‘digital natives’, there is an expectation that Millennials are fluent users of media technologies whose viewing experiences involve regular movement between media platforms. ABC Family has responded to these elements of Millennial viewing behaviour by creating a web series in Season Three, *Pretty Dirty Secrets*, which expanded the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars* beyond the boundaries of the television text. Inviting viewers to deepen their engagement with and understanding of the text, this web series depicts the activities of characters who have supporting roles in the main programme.

As Jenkins explains, allowing viewers this new level of insight “refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty” (*Convergence Culture* 98). The focus on secondary characters in *Pretty Dirty Secrets* yields additional information about how these more marginal characters are inter-connected, a tactic that deepens audience understanding of the diegetic world of *Pretty Little Liars*. Watching this web series also serves to engage viewers during the intervals between seasons. None of the stories that were introduced in *Pretty Dirty Secrets* were resolved in the duration of this series. Instead, *Pretty Dirty Secrets* offers storylines that fed into the upcoming seasons of the TV text and thereby worked to generate speculation and anticipation about new episodes. Importantly, the web series was designed to deliver viewers back to the TV programme, aiming to provide information and insights which could heighten the viewing pleasure that is derived from *Pretty Little Liars* itself.

The social media presence of *Pretty Little Liars* is important in fuelling the enthusiasm of loyalists to talk about the programme. The perception of Millennials as multi-taskers who use multiple technologies as they are watching television is harnessed by ABC Family through the incorporation of hashtags within the live broadcasts. These hashtags function to sustain viewer attention

through the episodes, ensuring that, although viewers are using multiple devices as they watch these, their activities are still focused on the programme. *Pretty Little Liars* already incorporates ‘kernel’ scenes that offer what ABC Family’s marketing VP refers to as “OMG moments” or significant twists to the story that are designed to trigger audience discussion and speculation (Keveney, “Sign of Liars’ Success”). However, the incorporation of on-screen hashtags functions to encourage these conversations to occur on Twitter. The on-screen hashtags during ‘satellite’ scenes, which are less likely to trigger a spike in audience talk about the show, is also an effective way to insist that viewers continue to watch these satellite scenes, regardless of their lesser importance than the kernel moments.

Because of the instantaneous, conversational orientation, and public status of Twitter, viewers are motivated to use their second screen devices to communicate with other fans whilst a new episode is airing. This helps to cultivate an online fan community in which viewers interact by sharing their theories about the mystery as well as their reactions to the specific scenes as they are unfolding. Watching an episode of *Pretty Little Liars* live while ‘live-tweeting’ thus becomes a shared communal experience. It facilitates instantaneous “water-cooler conversation” and generates a certain social impetus to watch the programme live in order to be able to participate.

Encouraging the use of Twitter during live broadcasts ensures that time-shifting is not an attractive option if the fan wants to participate in the Twitter activity. Accordingly, the incorporation of hashtags functions to enliven and encourage fan activities in ways that serve the commercial objectives of the network, by motivating and rewarding the live viewing of new episodes. As a consequence, *Pretty Little Liars* becomes more valuable to advertisers in that viewers watching live are less able to bypass the commercial spots embedded in its episodes. This strategy has proved very successful for *Pretty Little Liars*,

as evidenced by its status as the most watched television telecast for females 12 – 34, an achievement that applies to every episode aired since 2010 (Burt, “Pretty Little Liars Ratings”).

Viewers are further incentivised to participate in the *Pretty Little Liars* Twitter community by having the opportunity to interact with the actors, producers and directors of the programme. The main actors, such as Ashley Benson (@AshBenzo) and Shay Mitchell (@shaymitch), often participate in ‘live-tweeting’ with *Pretty Little Liars* viewers, sharing their reactions to certain scenes and responding to questions put to them while the episode is airing. This interaction helps to simulate a feeling of friendship and “a sense of closeness and familiarity between [actors] and their followers” (Marwick and Boyd 147). Following the actors on Twitter, ‘live-tweeting’ with them, and seeing their updates regularly on the homepage constantly exposes fans on Twitter to *Pretty Little Liars* content. Even during a hiatus for the show, fans can regularly view updates from the actors that can act as consistent, but subtle reminders about *Pretty Little Liars*.

ABC Family plays an active role in generating this feeling of ‘closeness’ by providing actors with “a digital asset package” which includes suggested posts and behind-the-scenes content that is keyed to prompt Twitter conversation (Ng, “Pretty Little Liars”). The presence of the actors of *Pretty Little Liars* on Twitter is therefore a deliberate feature of ABC Family’s transmedia strategy. It is designed to generate a feeling of being friends with the actors, which, in turn, works to encourage consistent viewing and long-term loyalty to the programme.

The ability to interact with I. Marlene King and with other leading creative personnel for *Pretty Little Liars* serves a slightly different function to the programme’s Twitter presence. As the Executive Producer and showrunner of the programme, King offers help to viewers struggling to comprehend the

narrative as it becomes increasingly more complex over the seasons. Viewers can directly message King to ask her to clarify disorienting events and her answers are able to function as an 'orienting paratext', helping viewers to make more accurate sense of the events in the episodes (Mittell, "Orienting Paratexts"). Her presence on Twitter helps to make *Pretty Little Liars*' complex narrative more accessible to viewers, a very important feature that helps to encourage them to stay with the programme. Additionally, because King's Twitter activity is treated as an official source of information, many viewers use her tweets as an additional source of clues to the *Pretty Little Liars* mystery. Interacting with King helps fans to deepen their investment in the programme by encouraging them to seek out clues across the different platforms and incentivizing viewers to keep watching by hinting at events yet to come.

Pretty Little Liars' Twitter presence helps to ensure that viewers remain constantly engaged with the programme throughout the episodes and throughout the seasons. ABC Family generates a feeling of connectedness with *Pretty Little Liars* fans that enable the channel to use Twitter to see how fans are responding to the narrative and also helps them to generate a 'buzz' around upcoming episodes to ensure that viewers will tune in. However, encouraging so much social media hype around the programme also raises audience expectations of it. As demonstrated by the disappointed Twitter reactions to the #BigAREveal, when the programme fails to meet the hyped expectations, fans can react very negatively. In this type of event, *Pretty Little Liars* is able to use Twitter to subdue the negative reaction by using the above connections established with viewers as a way to reassure disappointed fans while simultaneously urging them to remain loyal. ABC Family's use of Twitter to supplement *Pretty Little Liars* is thus designed to protect the core text, functioning to sustain audience interest and encourage continued engagement.

ABC Family's success with the multi-platform strategy it has deployed for *Pretty Little Liars* has enabled the channel to shed its former image as a channel for families in order to become a successful youth-oriented, basic cable channel. Because a large part of ABC Family's success is directly connected to a television programme that will one day reach a conclusion, it remains to be seen as to whether or not ABC Family will be able to continue this level of achievement. However, the success of *Pretty Little Liars* has enabled ABC Family to not only attract a large audience but also to assert its position as a home for sophisticated storytelling for young adults. Even without *Pretty Little Liars*, ABC Family will be left in an optimal position to continue to create innovative programmes that are expected to push the boundaries of teen TV drama.

In fact, in the 2015 'upfronts', ABC Family shifted away from specifically targeting 'Millennials' and announced that the channel is for 'Becomers,' or what the channel defines as young adults in the 12 – 34 age range (Littleton). As younger generations continue to emerge, Millennials will one day no longer be considered so unusual as 'natives' to a digital age of television. The switch to 'Becomers' aligns the channel with the "universal life stage' of entering adulthood" and avoids restricting ABC Family to focussing on a particular generation (Littleton). However, it is through its experience and success with *Pretty Little Liars* that ABC Family has been able to assert itself as a channel that understands the viewing behaviours of young adults and can respond successfully to the significant challenge of delivering this audience to live TV programming.

The success of ABC Family's strategy more broadly demonstrates that the effort to engage post-network audiences, particularly Millennial viewers, has opened some new opportunities for branding and engagement. The perceived problem of these viewers' comfort with technology and fragmentation across

different platforms has served as the impetus for new strategies for creating innovative storytelling and achieving an extended audience engagement. As *Pretty Little Liars* demonstrates, these transmedia extensions can aid continued engagement and long-term loyalty in an age of fierce competition. Social media offers television networks some new opportunities through which to direct and focus viewer attention. Such strategies promise to become more common, in that other programmes including *Pretty Little Liars*' rival *The Vampire Diaries* and even adult-audience dramas like *Scandal* are emulating them (Stransky). Web platforms, particularly social media websites, give networks the ability to ensure that second screen activities are supplementing their programmes in ways that make them even more compelling.

ABC Family's success with the *Pretty Little Liars* multi-platform strategy is only the beginning for the future of today's television culture. Lotz defines the post-network era as a period of television that only began as recently as 2005. This suggests that there may well be many other challenges ahead in the television industry as new technologies that contribute to further audience fragmentation begin to emerge. That ABC Family has managed to embrace the challenges of engaging the fragmented Millennial demographic by tailoring its content, its storytelling techniques and even its audience engagement strategies highlights how the creation of television programmes is a process that can adapt to the challenges of the post-network era. The disposition of viewers who were born 'native' to the digital era of television can be addressed in ways that allow the TV programmes which target them to serve the commercial imperatives of television channels. *Pretty Little Liars* underlines that understanding and engaging with the disposition and behaviours of young adult viewers is clearly crucial to enabling television networks to find ways to respond effectively and successfully to continuing changes in the television industry.

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