

"Lost" in Conversation: Complex Social Behavior in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT

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This study involves a sociological analysis of complex group behavior within an emergent computer-mediated community. This examination focuses on interpersonal relations and interactions within the context of a message board forum devoted to the television program *Lost*. Implementing qualitative methods including an extended case approach, netnography, as well as a grounded-based coding scheme, the findings of this study indicate that interpersonal relationships in online communities are structured by several characteristics. More specifically, behavior within this community is shaped by the norms, barriers, and conflicts that are distinct to this environment. Outcomes of this study include the identification of a clear link between the process of knowledge construction and the development of social ties in relation to a popular culturally-shared text.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In late modernity, social interaction is being radically reconfigured. Traditionally, physical structures and institutions have separated society into distinct spatial configurations and determined how interactions were carried out. However, late modern technological innovations including computer and other wireless devices have reorganized the basic structure of human interactions. With each new wave of technology, newer devices supplant older ones; as new and old forms of media collide, interpersonal encounters have been substantially modified. This convergence of interrelated media technology with human intellect has led to a new phase for social transformation. Each of these advancements reshapes how humans interact and connect with the rest of the world.

Much of that reconfiguration involves new online social networks and environments. Late modernity is defined by interaction mediated through computer-related devices. Due to this transformation, one's social sphere is no longer limited to individuals in close physical proximity, and individuals now have the potential to witness a social event without being physically present. By diminishing the significance of temporal and spatial considerations that typically structure face-to-face social interactions, these media-related technologies have also challenged the traditional definitions of community and now people lend meaning to group and collective processes. Addressing the conditions facing social institutions and grasping how social

relations are situated in an increasingly technologically-centered environment is critically important towards understanding modern modes of sociality.

Although reliance on technology has continued to rise exponentially, the social use of these spaces for communication purposes remains relatively unexplored. My analysis of late modern modes of sociality seeks to elucidate how patterns and fundamental aspects that typically define intrapersonal interactions and encounters are being restructured. The goals for this study are two-fold: first, to examine how groups are formulated and situated in relation to cultural texts; and second, to explore how both group and individual identity are formed in relation to the process of meaning construction and information sharing as well as how these interactions function in an environment where individuals respond to an absent audience. I will accomplish this goal by targeting a specific location, in this case a Web-based social site, frequented by viewers of the program, and exploring the interactions that occur within this site.

Through an analysis of complex group behaviors in the context of a specific online social setting, I seek to illuminate what types of adjustments are necessary to effectively communicate with others in new situations and spaces for interaction. Drawing upon work from the fields of sociology and communications, my aim is to revise current understandings of social interaction by focusing on the extent to which new technology influences the structure of social interactions. I intend to achieve this by focusing on a specific case study of the message board forums at Lost-Forum.com in conjunction with the television program *Lost* to analyze the influence that this social setting has on interpersonal relations. My analysis covers a terrain that has largely been

unexplored, and holds much relevance in bridging the gaps between social interaction and technology use.

First, I will discuss the social context for these changes. Next, I will introduce my case *Lost*, an intensely popular program which attracts a broad base of viewers who actively engage with the cultural text in a variety of social settings. This case was selected due to the complex narrative structure as well as the unique and overwhelming audience response to the series. *Lost* is the ideal site for this type of research because the program demands that audience members adopt a participatory role in questioning and examining the visual text. Strategizing the material in this manner has inspired viewers to expand beyond the realm of television and to engage with the text in online spaces. Then, I will explore the key location where these individuals come into contact with one another. Primarily, I will focus on a message board forum within the Web community devoted to *Lost* at Lost-Forum.com. This site was selected due to its clarity and heavy traffic of users. The community is comprised of a subculture distinguished by fans ardent devotion and enthusiasm for the show. In May of 2009 this site boasted over 88,000 members who contributed to roughly 1,138,000 posts. Isolating this subculture within the larger cultural framework of *Lost* fans is necessary in order to properly identify the characteristics pertaining to this distinct group.

In contemporary society, a majority of the population uses some sort of technology for communication purposes. Connection and interaction through instant messages, online social networks, e-mail, and text messaging on cell phones has become a facet of everyday life. In fact, researchers have notably characterized modern society as

a nomadic culture that migrates and travels through the web of media content. Media consumption is not merely reserved to sending or receiving messages. Rather, it has become abundantly clear that society communicates through technology, as well as communicates *about* technology.

Individuals rely on technology to resolve modern problems and situations. For example, individuals who play video games are able to log on and challenge one another virtually; or alternatively, to use others as a resource to navigate difficult portions of a game. What is surprising is how these interactions have spawned complex networks of individuals who organize themselves by forming groups in response to this new cultural paradigm.

Digital technology facilitates systems of communication and structures social life in late modernity. In this framework, social integration is based upon common threads of interest. Individuals choose the setting for communication that best suits their individual preferences, attractions, and ability to access. An assessment of the profound impact of computer-mediated communication makes an invaluable contribution to modern social theory. Mapping these virtual spaces designed for interaction purposes is critically important towards understanding how broader cultural changes influence late modern modes of sociality.

In order to examine this phenomenon more fully, the interpretive fan communities devoted to the television series *Lost* provide an exceptional case study in which to uncover how mutual interest in a program becomes a platform that is used to form a Web-based community. These computer-mediated communities provide access to

meanings and contests produced by a collective group. More specifically, through the process of navigating *Lost*'s televisual text, and aiding one another via the Web, viewers have established a community. Frequent communication and interaction within the group by the same actors is evident from the extensive accumulation of message board posts and threads, and these collective intellectual efforts serve as artifacts that reveal aspects of the group's shared objectives and identity. These message board posts provide insight to the interpretive strategies and meanings produced by *Lost* fans, and through a critical examination of the commentary within posts at Lost-Forum.com, I aim to identify the kinds of strategies that accompany identity building in this online setting¹.

Lost

Boasting one of the most expensive pilot episodes ever produced, the premise of *Lost* seems simple enough. A passenger flight traveling from Australia to America crashes on a mysterious tropical island. The 48 survivors, including an American doctor, an Iraqi soldier, a pregnant woman, a drug-addicted musician, and a Korean couple, among others, must cope with their current situation and struggle for survival. As the group explores the supposedly uninhabited island, the mythology surrounding the area begins to unfold. The group of survivors soon realizes the island holds unique scientific properties and begins to experience paranormal events. Among the more mystical elements, the "Losties," or original survivors of Oceanic Air Flight 815, encounter a

¹ Since the posts are publicly available I did not go through the Institutional Review Board process, which is typically necessary to protect the privacy of research subjects.

smoke monster, polar bears, a three-toed statue, murmuring whispers in the jungle, and a recurring pattern of numbers.

Lost incorporates a wide variety of cultural themes into the narrative including time-travel, mysticism, redemption, Oedipal struggles, birth and death, faith and reason, and the eternal struggle between good and evil. Numerous theories abound regarding the exact purpose of these survivors on the island, as well as what the island may ultimately signify. A turning point in the series occurs during the Season One finale when a portion of the passengers completes construction of a raft that will hopefully lead to rescue. After the raft sets sail, the group is overjoyed to spot a passing boat. However, once the boat nears it becomes clear that the group of individuals on board has malicious motivations and does not wish to rescue the survivors of Flight 815. These “Others”, purportedly natives of the island, seize Walt, the young son one of the passengers, Michael, and disappear on the coast. The questions surrounding this group of Others, along with Michael’s quest to locate his son, propel the action for the duration of the following season.

At the beginning of Season Two, the cast of characters expands with the discovery of a man, Desmond, who lives in a locked underground hatch. He landed on the island after crashing his sailboat and became involved with the remnants of the Dharma Initiative, a group of scientists who had previously conducted experiments and tested the scientific properties of the island. Desmond has been confined to this underground compartment for three years, and his tasks on the island include pushing a button on a computer every 108 minutes. The existence of this hatch provides the Losties

with food, shelter, and showers, and leads them to explore the other hidden structures on the island more fully.

Another critical moment in the textual narrative occurs in the latter half of Season Two when the group stumbles upon a hot air balloonist trapped in the jungle. The introduction of this character, Henry Gale, influences the plot significantly, and sets off a chain reaction of events. Eventually the Oceanic survivors find out that the individual masquerading as Henry Gale is actually the leader of the Others, Benjamin Linus. With the discovery of his true identity and status, the Losties immediately hold Ben captive in the hatch and begin negotiating his release. However, Ben secretly strikes a deal with Michael: his freedom in exchange for the return of Michael's son Walt. Michael, following Ben's wishes, goes on a rampage, kills two of survivors of the original crash, and ultimately frees Ben. Walt is returned to his father, and the two are allowed to escape the island on a boat with a promise to never return. As collateral, Ben takes Kate, Sawyer, Hurley, and Jack to the camp where the Others reside.

Season Three deals with the background and history of the Others, provides viewers with insight to their relationships and roles on the island. Also, this season further delves into the past experiences of all the inhabitants of the island revealing the interconnectedness of the characters in life prior to the island. This season concludes with a startling scene showing that Jack and Kate have somehow been rescued and are living in present day Los Angeles. How these two individuals arrived at this location and point in time and the fate of the others remains a mystery that is explored in Season Four.

While the main storyline continues to depict life on the island, this material is supplemented by scenes that reveal future events that occur off the island.

This event marks a shift from the traditional format of storytelling which is a definitive feature of *Lost* and includes the juxtaposition of action occurring on the island with contextual details concerning the characters lives prior to the plane crash which are presented in the form of flashbacks. Publications including *New York Times Magazine* have noted the complexity inherent in *Lost's* dynamic narrative structure, as these flashbacks supplement the overarching storyline and are crucial to character development. As plot devices, the flashes in time add to the complexity of the narrative; interweaving the past lives of the characters into the present action is what sets *Lost* apart from its contemporaries, and creates an unparalleled form of storytelling.

Non-linear forms of storytelling reflect the features of late modernity. Audiences are receptive to this format, which is featured prominently on *Lost* precisely because it mirrors the fragmentation that accompanies the convergence of media across multiple platforms. Information may be accessed at any hour of the day, at any location around the world through technology. Experiences are mediated through electronic devices, as "the instruments of human interaction are "being miniaturized, dematerialized, and cut loose from fixed locations" (Mitchell 2000: 4). This increased reliance on, and use of, computer-related technology "subverts, displaces, and radically redefines our notions of gathering place" (Mitchell 2000: 8). Ultimately, connection through escapist forms of entertainment, such as *Lost*, offers a solution to this chaos and displacement. In late modernity, these connections transpire on message board forums, which provide a

centrally located place for viewers to gather.

Due to this unique format, *Lost* has been categorized as part of a new wave of television shows that comprise “another way to assess the social virtue of pop culture, one that looks at media as a kind of cognitive workout” (Johnson 2005: 55). Modern viewing involves various tasks such as “analyzing complex social networks, managing resources, tracking subtle narrative intertwinings, recognizing long-term patterns” (Johnson 2005). This unprecedented form of intellectual engagement re-conceptualizes traditional notions of what being a fan represents, as viewers are encouraged to develop, and partake in the activities, of social networks.

Lost follows what is known as television’s “most challenging and elusive serial format,” what is more commonly known as a *mythology* show (Gilbert 2004). Typically, a mythology show involves some element of fantasy, which promotes a climate of escape, as well as reliance upon one’s own imagination. This tactic seeks to continually draw viewers “into the guesswork and paranoia of a giant mystery, leading them on with a trail of cryptic clues” (Gilbert 2004). An emphasis on the mysterious supernatural elements, which figure prominently in the show’s storylines, leaves the text open to multiple interpretations.

One prominent example concerns a set of numbers used repeatedly throughout the series. Initially a winning set of lottery numbers, 4, 8, 15, 16, 23, 42 appear everywhere, from the jerseys of a soccer team to the mileage on a car. Spotting the numbers has become a game, and numerous theories have explored the significance of these numbers. However, viewers cannot be certain whether or not the numbers are relevant or simply

conjured by the creators. These features contribute to the popularity of the program and yield a base of viewers who are willing to analyze the text after the program has ended.

What distinguishes fans of mythology shows is their intense level of engagement with the program's content. Avid *Lost* fans eagerly anticipate and welcome the challenges of following this complex narrative that demands the modern viewer to become critically involved and to seek out alternative sources for information to supplement the televisual text. A portion of *Lost*'s success may be attributed to the fact that it does not offer instant gratification, but instead urges viewers to use their imaginations and knowledge to interpret and uncover the mysteries. Audience members are expected to become detectives and seek out the expertise of others in order to unravel the clues and to decipher the program's secrets.

Lost is among a number of other series that are described as "multi-threaded dramas" due to the intense intellectual labor involved. This type of program frequently draws criticism and complaints from some viewers who find the divergent storylines difficult to follow. One example, *Twin Peaks*, was cancelled after backlash from the viewers led to declining ratings (Lavery 1995). In the case of *Lost*, the creators have managed to replicate the sentiments of the stranded cast of characters by making their audience feel similarly bewildered. *Lost* has managed to attract millions of viewers throughout its four year run on network television, and was among the first programs to take advantage of media convergence by actively promoting the use of message forums as a location where viewers could connect with other viewers. In fact, in an effort to drum up publicity, a viral advertising campaign was put in place before the series even aired in

September of 2004. Promotional sites and clips of the series were used to draw attention to the show and attract a loyal base of viewers.

Additionally, much of the appeal of *Lost* lies with its diverse cast. As producer J.J. Abrams stipulates, “the show is about an international flight that crashes somewhere in the Pacific, so the cast is going to look more like the world looks and less like ‘Beverly Hills, 90210’” (Rhodes 2004). The extensive cast of characters combined with complex plotlines necessitates that viewers maintain a mental track record of both the shifting social dynamics from week to week in addition to the ongoing storylines.

According to Nielsen Media Research, a significant portion of *Lost* viewers consist of young adults from the 18-35 demographic group coveted by advertisers (Seidman 2008).² Mythology shows like *Lost* typically tend to attract a younger segment of viewers, who may have predisposition for using technological devices. All of these factors combined point to a potential link between age and technology use, which helps to explain why *Lost* is considered one of the most popular shows watched online. Data from March of 2009 indicates that *Lost* was the most digitally downloaded program on the Internet, yielding 35.8 million viewers (Jenkins 2009). *Lost* intentionally structures its messages to be inherently vague and relies heavily on contradictory interpretations in order to foster interaction between these individuals after they have viewed the program. This ambiguity compels viewers to take an active approach and engage in computer-mediated discussions online in order to clarify and interpret the televisual messages.

² See Appendix A

As a perennial ratings winner in its time slot, *Lost* represents a site where a vast number of cultural texts serve as “interpretive keys” that may potentially unlock secrets of the show (Shyminsky 2006). Texts that have inspired the show range from literary masterpieces, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Ulysses*, to mainstream films such as *Castaway* and *Star Wars*. Other influential sources include Enlightenment philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Additionally, each episode leaves behind a trail of clues that fans have become adept at piecing together, and structurally speaking, this type of format requires viewers to hone their cognitive abilities. Viewing *Lost* involves “subtle and complex acts of cognitive reorientation” which result from each “new clue that contradicts, enhances, or totally redirects” the viewer within the course of a single episode (Shyminsky 2006).

Historically, television shows have engaged viewers in limited amounts of critical guesswork; however, it appears that creators and producers of other series have been naïve in speculating about the role that viewers want in relation to program content. Studies pertaining to *Lost*’s viewers indicate that either television networks “have been wrong all along or that *Lost*’s viewers are in no way typical” (Shyminsky 2006). A study conducted specifically on *Lost* fans concluded that all fan groups, “at some level, actively engage with the source text of their fandom” (Porter and Lavery 2006: 173). Yet, the uniqueness of *Lost* fans lies in the amount of effort and concentration that is spent “discussing, analyzing, and investigating their favorite series as though it were a distinct discipline of study” (Porter and Lavery 2006: 173). The results of their study indicate that on average, their sample population spent 11 hours per week engrossed in *Lost*-related

activities, a large portion of which included discussion of the series on message boards and speculation on theories that may offer solutions to the show's puzzles (Porter and Lavery 2006:170-172).

Porter and Lavery's (2006) research supports the notion that *Lost* fans display an atypical enthusiasm for, and engagement with, the show. Both intellectual and personal resources including time and energy are allocated to dissecting *Lost* with such fervor that it surpasses the bounds of an individualized leisure activity to become an organized subject worth examining. Subsequently, communities and knowledge networks have formed strictly for the purpose of dissecting the text of the show. A Google search in May 2009 for the terms "*Lost* message boards" yielded over 39,800,000 links, which displays the extent of these networks.

Lost is inextricably linked with the convergence of media-related technologies. Producers of the series have taken advantage of this convergence by fostering interaction through these devices. The network has profited greatly from media tie-ins, which include the *Lost Experience*, online games, as well as internet sites dedicated to discussing the program. Some of these sites are endorsed by ABC, while others are creations of fan devotion. All of these platforms offer an enhanced way of connecting with the series, and are attempts to draw viewers into the world of *Lost*.

Moreover, embarking on an analysis into the online environment of message board forums, and the individuals who frequent them, better equips social scientists to determine what skills are necessary to participate and contribute to the process of human interaction in a society that increasingly uses computer-mediated communication as a

replacement or addition to face-to-face conversations. To address this, my study aims to investigate the activities of both the individual, as well as the group, within the context of a socially mediated environment. Much insight may be gained from this analysis of how meaning and experiences are constructed, presented, and shared as information is passed through technologically mediated means. I intend to examine these issues within the context of emergent themes that arise from message board discussions. However, documenting this transition requires a theoretical framework that links the convergence of technology in relation to modern modes of communication.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview

The theoretical underpinnings of Anthony Giddens and Erving Goffman provide a framework in which to understand how modern modes of sociality operate. While Giddens adopts a macro structural approach to explaining the social world, Goffman embraces the intricacies and minute details associated with interpersonal interaction. More specifically, Giddens identifies the structural causes that influence interaction, and Goffman's reasoning remains bound up with personal and situational motives. These theories set the groundwork for a discussion on the forces that shape identity construction in modernity.

Structural Perspective

Giddens positions the discipline of sociology as the study of social institutions in relation to modern industrial innovations and discontinuities. Presently, modern society is undergoing a "reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations" that is a result of "continual inputs of knowledge" (Giddens 1990: 17). Modern social relations are shaped by the dynamic changes associated with living in a technologically-centered environment. Each wave of technological advancement fosters interaction outside of local environments, reshaping how, when, and where people communicate. These groundless interactions are rooted in trust or belief in others who are physically absent.

To become oriented in these situations, individuals establish identity, which in turn structures in the resulting interaction.

In order to grasp the transformation of social relations, it imperative to recognize the ways in which society is "situated" in relation to space and time (Giddens 1990: 17). Sociology, challenged by the duty of interpreting the modern social world, must assess the impact of removing social interaction from local settings to a more abstract form. The removal of social interactions from traditional contexts, and the reestablishment of them in virtual environments impacts social communication practices, but now remains an open question. Giddens' vision of a new order to the organizational patterns of interaction involves disembedding, or "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (Giddens 1990: 21). Distancing time from space expands the opportunities and possibilities for establishing social ties and connections. The adoption of technological devices into everyday life has expanded both the pace and scope of interaction, by making it possible for individuals to travel to virtual locations and freely exchange information globally, regardless of one's immediate surroundings.

With the addition of technological innovations to society, the practices and routines of daily life have been irrevocably altered. Technology has profoundly impacted the dynamics surrounding human interaction by providing a wider range of outlets for communicating, broadening one's social network, and alleviating the necessity of having

to share the same temporal frame. This increased reliance upon technology inevitably “tears space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others” who are physically remote (Giddens 1990: 18). These discontinuities directly alter ties of intimacy, as physical presence becomes an unnecessary component for communication.

Consequently, the very meaning of sociality is being redefined. This transformation impacting sociality is reflected in the ways in which groups and communities form. Rather than being organized by local involvements, social relationships are reorganized to incorporate interactions across distance. Modern communication is distinguished by the degree of time-space distancing, and characterized by interaction with anonymous individuals. For this project it is essential to recognize that technology is a gateway to entirely new social worlds, which includes message board forums. These new venues are sites where “faceless strangers” are put into contact with one another (Giddens 1990: 80). This idea is central to understanding how both individual and group identity is structured in the absence of direct physical respondents.

While social barriers may be minimized through an increased reliance on technology, only a few studies have recognized the magnitude of dislocating temporal and spatial aspects from basic social interactions (Menchik & Tian 2008). Giddens (1990) argues that the sociological community must address the ways in which culture has become disconnected from the past. Traditional perspectives and ways of

conceptualizing our culture must be put aside in order "to account for the extreme dynamism and globalising scope of modern institutions" (1990: 16). He refers to this social transformation in terms of "time-space distancing -- the conditions under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence" (Giddens 1990: 14). Through the capabilities associated with computer-mediated communication, physical presence and geographic proximity have ceased to be essential requirements for conversation. This lack of boundedness influences how social ties and connections are established, and is critical towards uncovering the functions of online interactions.

Furthermore, Giddens identifies the development of expert systems as one of the key mechanisms necessary for the process of disembedding to transpire. In this theoretical perspective, expert systems encompass "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today" (Giddens 1990: 27). He envisions this network as "achieved via the impersonal nature of tests applied to evaluate technical knowledge and by public critique" (Giddens 1990: 28). To satisfy the conditions of implementing this type of system, it is essential to have trust. Establishing trust in a technologically dominated, and largely impersonal environment, relies upon having "faith" in the competency of others and without questioning their expertise (Giddens 1990: 27). In Giddens' understanding, trust exists as a "form of faith, in which the confidence vested probable outcomes expresses a commitment to something rather than just a cognitive understanding" (1990:

27). Complete mastery of every task and subject matter is impossible to achieve, therefore reliance is placed on the knowledge of experts.

A lack of complete information leads to a system where trust is invested in the expertise of others. In modernity, the maintenance of social relationships involves "a reflexive project that has to be interpreted" through constant and active engagement (Giddens 2002: 224). At the core, "relationships are ties based upon trust, where trust is not a pre-given, but worked upon, and where the work involved requires a mutual process of self-disclosure" (Giddens 1990: 121). Personal relationships are built upon and sustained by an element of trust, which "demands the opening out of the individual to the other" (Giddens 1990: 121). However, the development of trust is directly connected to the absence of time and space as indicators that guide social interaction and the emergence of abstract systems shifts the formation of trust.

Modernity implies a break from traditions of the past, and one facet of this era is the removal of social interaction from a local setting to more abstract forms. The disembedding of social systems through time-space distancing inextricably links the "localised events of day-to-day life" through a process of "global integration" which has replaced the standard notion of community (Giddens 1990: 123). Rather than strictly forming locally, communities may now revolve, across time and space, around other common denominators such as shared experiences or interests.

Disembedding lifts social acts out of local contexts; yet, these events do not disappear altogether. Instead, they are reestablished in a more fluid environment, and what were once considered private acts now occur in a public domain. One question, then, is how we might revise our notions of community based upon these new modes of interaction. Modern interactions transpire outside the bounds of local contexts. Accordingly, social researchers have an obligation to investigate the sites where interactions occur in order to uncover the elements and factors that structure and sustain these relations.

As modes of sociality are reconfigured, the behavior of social agents is likewise adjusted alongside shifting social patterns. By widening the sphere of social life, technology minimally blurs the lines between frontstage and backstage actions. What was previously considered private behavior is now being conducted in public settings. This transformation to a global complex scope transforms how demeanor is expressed. At this juncture, Giddens' macro perspective intersects with a micro level approach which is useful in explaining how broader social shifts influence interpersonal interactions.

The Role of Agency in Late Modernity

With his theory of structuration, Giddens seeks to move beyond the divide that traditionally separates macro and micro perspectives. In bridging these two theoretical positions, Giddens emphasizes how individual identity does not operate independently of

broader structural forces, but rather is an integral part of the reflexive process that actually reinforces social structures. Borrowing from the theoretical roots of Goffman, Giddens affirms that society establishes rituals to shape the behavior of participants according to a given social situation. On a daily basis humans invariably rely on a repertoire of accepted behaviors that guide them in terms of how to interact. Most social situations contain an invisible set of rules that allow individuals to move freely from situation to situation without consciously acknowledging any shifts in behavior unless something goes awry. Through the process of socialization we learn the expectations and shared definitions that correspond with specific sets of social roles and settings. Likewise, individual and group behavior is shaped by these shared definitions of a particular situation, and the point I wish to highlight in my research concerns how users establish this definition in a computer-mediated situation.

In most cases when an individual undertakes a task that is new and undefined by society, the individual in question will "find that there are already several well-established fronts" to guide them through the social encounter (Goffman 1959:27). Typically, an individual perceives the appropriate behavior for a particular situation by selecting from a range of available options. For example, encounters in public places, such as passing another individual on a street, require individuals to follow the social protocols associated with this activity so as not to disrupt the performance. In face-to-face encounters, the use of tools, such as "tact and rituals of politeness are mutual

protective devices” allow individuals to interact without fear of deviating from social norms (Giddens 1990: 82). Coordinating one’s actions with surrounding others ensures that interaction will flow smoothly. However, the options and boundaries for participating in online social interactions require a different sort of negotiation primarily because mediated forms of communication reshape how these rituals are expressed as well as the impressions given and received during interaction. Pinpointing the processes that shape and control behavior in online environments is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of modern group behavior and interaction.

Moreover, Goffman provides a working definition of an interaction which includes "all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another's continuous presence" (Goffman 1959: 15). As stated earlier, Giddens notion of time-space distancing develops Goffman's notion of frontstage and backstage behavior by expanding where this event occurs, who is involved, and the time frame involved. Goffman (1959) argues that social interactions are directed by the establishment of a collective "definition of the situation" (Pg. 9). This overall agreement, or "working consensus", as Goffman refers to it, is malleable and highly dependent on the given context and is achieved through a series of negotiations. An individual contributes to this process by hiding one's honest emotions and feelings in order to maintain a "veneer of consensus" (Goffman 1959: 9-10). Whether participants

are able to achieve a consensus in the context of message board conversations remains a critical question that this study seeks to address.

In this framework of coordination action, it is essential for an individual to employ the use of "defensive attributes and practices" to protect the performance from any breaches in consistency or disruptions that threaten to disrupt the order or flow of conversation. Goffman distinguishes between two types of practices that serve to influence or control the impression that others have during a certain situation. Largely, these consist of "preventative practices" which "are constantly employed to avoid" any "embarrassments and that corrective practices are constantly employed to compensate for discrediting occurrences" (1959: 13). The use of these "strategies and tactics" by an individual as a protective measure of one's ideas is what Goffman labels "defensive practices" (Goffman 1959: 13). On the other hand, "protective practices" involve protective measures intended to benefit the definition of the situation. Combined, these "techniques employed to safeguard the impression fostered by an individual" while in the presence of others (Goffman 1959: 14). Detecting the strategies used to during a performance to maintain order in the presence of anonymous others is another key goal in this study.

More broadly, a "performance" consists of "all the activity of a given participant" within an encounter "which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman 1959: 15). Each participant must commit to the performance at hand; as agents

in an interaction, it becomes necessary at times to work with others to sustain a situational definition. Collective effort of this sort, or the formation of teams, relies upon "intimate cooperation" which "is required if a projected definition of the situation is to be maintained" (Goffman 1959: 104).

Teamwork includes gathering together to maintain a particular definition of the situation. Therefore, actions on behalf of each team member contribute to overall preservation of the definition of the situation. A team is not necessarily a grouping based upon "social structure or social organization but rather in a relation to an interaction or series of interactions in which the relevant definition of the situation is maintained" (Goffman 1959: 104).

However, Erving Goffman also emphasizes the individual role in a performance, and classifies the self as a dramaturgical tool that shifts according to the context of the situation. As actors, human beings take account of the setting and occasion to determine how the self will be presented to others. Typically, the self presented is molded to align with the distinct circumstances of the situation. This particular point is quite pertinent to my study because it is the self that reaffirms order in a given interaction and reinforces the cultural values and norms of the given social situation. Participating in institutional settings has a dual purpose in terms of selves; not only is the self produced by the outside environment, but likewise, the self also reflexively shapes the institution from which it has emerged.

Identity Formation in Relation to Late Modernity

One's concept of self is subject to the transformative features associated with modern social life. In late modernity, "against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes reflexively organised endeavor" (Giddens 1991: 5). Identity becomes a project, structured by the "sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives" (Giddens 1991: 5). Without the stability of specific temporal or spatial conditions, individual identities become flexible objects that may be explored and molded according to the circumstance or setting.

Fundamental features of modernity, especially technology, have spawned myriad social relations across time and space and transferred social ties to from the local to a global context. These shifts in broader social structures have trickled down to impact basic interpersonal relations by providing the resources to establish social networks. An increase in spaces for communication has reformulated how groups as well as individuals are situated in relation to one another and significantly altered the bonds of intimacy and influence how individual identity is formed and presented. One of the primary aims of this study is to identify the ways in which identity is asserted in computer-mediated environments.

Modern technological advances, including television and computers, expose the individual to an array of "mediated experiences" or opportunities to explore reality and identity (Giddens 1991: 26). These forms of electronic media are "as much an expression

of the disembedding, globalising tendencies of modernity as they are the instruments of such tendencies” (Giddens 1991: 26). One’s identity “is not to be found in behaviour” nor “in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens 1991: 54). By continually selecting events and incorporating them to an ongoing narrative of the self, an individual begins to develop a personal biography. Which elements of this biography are revealed varies according to the social or cultural setting. Examining the content and personal biographic information in message posts is especially pertinent to this study.

Additionally, the foundations of an identity lie in the unique experiences of the individual, which results in variations from person to person. As objects that are constantly being shaped by experience, identities are "sensitive to others' responses and appraisals" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 5). The flexible and malleable nature of identity has “allowed it to adjust to the rapidly developing challenges of modern life,” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 5). These features explain how individuals have adapted so readily to the demands of online social settings.

As participants in social life, each individual "is an other-seeking agent, one who directs behavior toward others, whose responses, in turn, provide definitions of who one is" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 10). Holstein and Gubrium (2000) state that throughout life "we perennially refer to our selves to make sense of our conduct and experience, and to guide related actions" (Pg. 10). From this position, our selves and identity are

something that each individual actively participates in constructing. Traditional notions of the self, like that of George Herbert Mead, envision a social self that is the product of feedback from an individual's social network. More specifically, an individual derives a sense of self by interpreting the reactions given by others. By internalizing societal input, including how others respond, an individual develops a concept the self.

Although he was unable to foresee the future changes in terms of identity formation, Mead's conception of the socially produced self remains useful. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) offer a perspective that revises Mead's response based self in an important way. Broadly, their conception views identity as a "social construction that we both assemble and live out as we take up or resist the varied demands of everyday life" (Pg.10). This vision emphasizes the role of human agency and active involvement in determining one's identity, rather than a fixed reliance on identities which are proscribed by society. This rendering presumes that one's identity is an object that is continually redefined and adjusted to coincide with the various circumstances and localities in which it exposed. In this manner, identity becomes an instrument that is molded to fit particular social roles or settings.

Contemporary selves are not merely a reflection of societal reaction. Rather, as active agents, individuals shape their identity "in light of biographical particulars" while "using culturally endorsed formats" (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 12). In modernity, multiple sites exist for conducting identity work, these spaces allow individuals to take

control and explore various modes of establishing and framing their identity. Creating a self is still a central part of everyday existence as the avenues for expressing identity have simply expanded.

The potential for self narratives to be explored and constructed has expanded alongside the invention and addition of new technology. Technology increases communication and provides outlets for narrative practice which is the basis for self construction. Narration through storytelling supports the notions we have regarding our selves and allows us to construct a version of our selves that we want others to see. This idea goes hand in hand with Goffman's idea of impression management. Individuals compose identity with a perceived audience in mind and Holstein & Gubrium note that, “local understandings circumscribe, even if they don’t determine, how these identities are presented” (2000: 13). Undoubtedly, identity is influenced by culture, but this is not the sole source. Cultural conditions loosely dictate how identity should be structured in an environment. This framework guides individuals as they become oriented to one another through mutual disclosure and the presentation of self.

Herbert Blumer’s perspective of symbolic interaction provides an additional explanatory framework in which to analyze the activities of individuals on message board forums. This perspective recognizes that actions are based upon the meanings given to objects. This framework is useful for examining the correlation between the meanings attached to *Lost*, and the subsequent interactions. These meanings serve as a springboard

to discuss other pertinent topics, such as personal experiences as well as the broader social world in which these individuals are active participants.

As users on the message board forum engage in the process of theorizing and interpreting the show, they also reveal aspects of their identity. Incorporating pieces of one's personal experiences into a post is one method of orienting one's self to the other users on the message board. Through the process of "interactionally conjuring up a self" a user "implicitly provides reasons for why he or she may have acted in a particular fashion or interprets things in a distinctive way" (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 12). Referring to one's real-world attributes or offline events serves to contextualize the post and qualify why and individual interpreted the information in that particular way. These details are integrated to explain one's logic or ideas, and comprehensively contribute to the formulation of mobile online identity that may be carried to various social settings.

Additionally, during these interactions individuals "take others into account" in order to "construct socially useful depictions of themselves" (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 12). Message board interactions amongst *Lost* fans indicate that members of this group are attuned to an absent audience, and shape their identity to fit within the context of this uniquely structured community. Individual users present themselves in ways that coincide with the norms and behaviors of the overall group, and subsequently identity becomes a project that is shaped by the complex social environments and structures.

Conclusion

This assessment of the various perspectives in relation to identity formation in late modernity positions identity as a project that shapes, and is shaped by, the context of the interaction. For the field of social science, taking a critical approach toward studying human interaction and communication in the digital world is paramount to bridging the gaps between the macro and the micro level of individual and group behavior. Applying Giddens theory of structuration, late modern social shifts, produced by the introduction of computer-related technology, constitute a framework in which to situate interpersonal social interactions.

A comprehensive understanding of the core elements that distinguish person-to-person communication in a virtual environment benefits the discipline as a whole by increasing knowledge about the conditions under which humans interact with one another. The definitive factors associated with computer-mediated interactions provide indicators for the prospects and possible limitations that this form of exchange has on broader social relationships and structures.

Communication technologies have expanded the capacity for individuals to connect with one another, and form social ties. Presently, one can only speculate about the extent to which these devices will further shape social bonds and human behavior and the immediacy of the shifts that society is currently undergoing makes present research all the more relevant. To navigate the Internet in the context of a new social terrain

requires researchers to adopt a cognitive lens that envisions a broad interpretation of human interaction. This includes the recognition that situations and patterns of interaction are no longer bound by physical settings, and neither is the corresponding knowledge. Although individuals are active participants in the social world, these new forms of social organization influence how individuals construct meaning.

In conclusion, convergence of various types of media has widened the sphere of social life and produced multiples sites for conducting identity work. Shifts in technology alter how the self is presented and consequently how social encounters unfold. The purpose of this study is to provide new insight on the connection between computer-enabled communication and the production of meaning. Next I will focus on a comprehensive review of the literature in regards to the influence of late modern media convergence on communication and interaction.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In the following literature review, I will address the many unresolved issues in the existing literature concerning participation and interaction in modern social environments. I will draw upon an interdisciplinary framework including works from both communications and social sciences to bridge the gaps between these two fields. With the addition of online forms of communication to social life, conventional notions about the conditions under which interactions occur have become unsuitable. In order to reconcile the gap in current literature, researchers must first recognize that the settings for conducting social research have expanded to include virtual realms. Likewise, it is imperative to both reevaluate and revise current theory in order to make it more applicable to the new sites for sociological research. Merging social theory with literature from the field of communications is a crucial step towards understanding interaction mediated by technology.

The Internet

For social scientists, the Internet has opened the door to an entirely new setting for documenting human interaction and social behavior. Still in the emergent stages, “the potential of the Internet as a tool or context for research” is intensely debated and explored as technologies advance (Markham 2004: 360). Consequently, the boundaries for conducting this type of research remain open, and one of the chief questions posed by

an inquiry into virtual spaces regards what exactly the Internet entails, and how precisely to define it in sociological terms.

The entity commonly known as *The Internet* may be described in several ways, but it fundamentally consists of a collection of computers that are linked together globally by a network. Multiple terms and expressions are used to refer to the ever-changing and complex structure that the Internet comprises. Likewise, this system of interconnected computers is associated with a wide range of activities which are constantly being defined and redefined. Most scholars agree that this ambiguity makes it possible for users to “interpret it freely, deriving and applying meaning of the concept” in a variety of manners to suit individual purposes (Markham 2004: 360). Each unique application of the technology merits its own definition, as one specific experience or methodology cannot adequately encapsulate all that the Internet encompasses.

Predominate ways of conceptualizing the Internet envision it as both a *tool* as well as a *place*. As a tool, the Internet constitutes “a network of electronic connections, a communication medium, a conduit that allows information to flow from one place to another” (Markham 2004: 361). In terms of research, this conceptualization of the Internet has a dual purpose. For the subject, the Internet serves as a tool that has the capacity to enable interaction with others in meaningful and symbolic ways. For a social researcher, the Internet is tool through which to study the social interactions that result from Internet use in a subject’s everyday life. In the broadest sense, one may study the space itself, by conceptualizing the Internet as a site for conducting sociological research. Alternatively, the focus may be narrowed to examine the “the interactions within these

spaces” that have evolved to include “the relationships and communities formed through the interactions” (Markham 2004: 362).

What distinguishes the Internet as a tool from the Internet as a place depends upon “the design of the interface, the level of engagement in the activity,” in addition to the length of time spent in the online environment (Markham 2004: 361). Making this transition from instrument/apparatus to space/location, necessitates a recognition that as a place, the Internet comprises a “separate environment where the self can travel and exist” (Markham 2004: 362). When one speaks of being online or going online, they are actually referring to the status of using a computer or other technological device to tap into a vast system and connect with others via a particular “location” on the Internet.

Computer-related technologies, especially those associated with the Internet, enable individuals to substitute face-to-face interactions with virtual modes of communication. This computerization of societal functions has become an inescapable trend, and involves “the process in which a domain of human activity becomes substantially mediated by electronic, programmable devices for rapidly storing and manipulating data in order to extract or transmit information” (Hakken 1999: 16).

Alongside the invention a World Wide Web of Internet sites, virtual “communities” have emerged to coincide with the distinct interests of Internet users. In order to understand the rise and evolution of these communities, it is necessary to identify the characteristics that exemplify these interactive spaces. To begin with, online environments do not altogether comprise a separate reality; rather, they are an extension

of real-life interactions and communities and provide users with a sense of familiarity by allowing them to develop ties with other in a singular space.

One category of an online community centers on the activities of fans. These specialized groups are organized based upon an interest in a culturally-shared text. While traditional fan groupings have roots to the physical world from which they originate; online communities have been embraced by fans across the globe, and led to a trend known as “immobile socialization” whereby individuals may interact and socialize without ever leaving the privacy of one’s physical environment (Bakardjieva 2003: 291).

One of the core features of these spaces designed for fan interaction include message board forums. These message boards serve a similar function as a bulletin board in that individuals “post” an item on the board for anyone to read. After a post has been made, others are instantly able to respond by posting their own reply. Responses may also be posted days, months, or even years after the initial post.

Furthermore, message board forums within emergent virtual communities illustrate the reorganization of communicative practices that is directly linked to shifts in media use. The introduction of new media into society has transformed how old media devices are used, and simultaneously led to an increased reliance upon electronic devices to facilitate communication.

Communications Literature

In addition to the theoretical contributions of Giddens and Goffman, the discipline of communications also provides a foundation for examining conversation related to *Lost*

in mediated contexts. In the 1960s, communications theorist Marshall McLuhan proposed that emerging communication technologies had the capacity for a global village to develop. Of course McLuhan was unable to predict the precise magnitude that joining human intellect with technology would have, but he foresaw the global reach that technological advances would potentially have on interaction.

Pierre Lévy and Douglas Englebart later updated this theory to in order to account for further technological innovations. This reinvention of McLuhan's original theory fleshed out the idea that electronic devices influence the organization of both people and knowledge. With the introduction of computers into society, it became apparent how human intelligence and cognitive processes had been irrevocably altered. The unparalleled relation between technology and communication significantly reshaped the way humans work, think, and interact with one another. Lévy's contribution centers on the idea that computer-mediated knowledge spaces allow human intellect to surpass human intellectual capacities through the formation of complex networks designed for the collective exchange of information. These knowledge spaces enable individuals to gain a broader perspective of social worlds beyond the local, and to achieve a higher cognitive potential through reliance on the expertise of others.

In this scenario, knowledge is not restricted to a single text or source; but rather, blurs the boundaries between disciplines, which makes it possible for a shared discourse to emerge. Technology makes it possible for communication, as well as the knowledge contained within the interaction, to be shared on a global level. Online spaces, and message board forums, contribute to the creation of a global platform of shared

intelligence and knowledge. These spaces diminish social barriers partially because they are multidimensional and characterized by combinations of “static images, video, sound, interactive simulation, interactive maps, expert systems...” (Lévy 1997: 174-175). The interrelationship between each of these produces a “universally distributed intelligence” whereby “no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity” (Lévy 1997: 20). This interpretation coincides with Giddens’ theory of disembedding, and recognizes the role of computer technology as an instrument that facilitates interaction and collaboration outside the boundaries of local contexts.

As individuals “search, inscribe, connect, consult, explore” online spaces, they create a collective body of knowledge that is “materialized in an immense multidimensional electronic image” (Lévy 1997: 217). According to Lévy, knowledge is now organized by what he refers to as the cosmopedia. This concept restructures how knowledge is formed and shared, and is imperative component of understanding the actions and activities that unite fans of *Lost*. From Lévy’s (1997) framework, intelligence is best understood as a tool “uniting not only ideas but people” (Pg. 10). Computers are a technical apparatus that allow people to congregate in virtual spaces establish social networks, and knowledge spaces relieve the individual from the burden of information overload by encouraging the individual to engage in collective thinking.

Dependence on others to cooperatively formulate knowledge is the basis for maintaining a computer-based group. These “expansive self-organizing groups” are “focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular

culture" (Jenkins 2006: 137). By actively piecing together the mysteries of *Lost*, the community I examined also display the qualities proposed involved in Lévy's description of a thinking community. Fans inform one another about the show's mythology as the entire community "pools its knowledge because no single fan can know everything necessary to fully appreciate the series" (Jenkins 2006: 139).

The types of knowledge communities depicted by Lévy are stabilized through the "mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge" (Jenkins 2006: 137). Collective intelligence relieves the individual from their own personal limitations, and increases the group's capacity to concentrate efforts in building a mutual command over the material. Lévy (1997) echoes this idea, agreeing that in a knowledge-based community, "no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity" (Pg. 20). Naturally, collective intelligence relies upon the "mobilization of skills" in order to form a system of "universally distributed intelligence" (Lévy 1997:13). Assembling as a group enables fans to create a network, the purpose of which is to "accumulate, retain, and continually recirculate unprecedented amounts of relevant information" (Baym 1998: 115 -116). Compiling an archive of material allows fans to compartmentalize and store information in a more manageable fashion, redefining how information is traditionally exchanged.

Furthermore, the convergence of multimedia and technology "enlarges the scope of self knowledge into a form of group knowledge and collective thought" (Lévy 1997: 23). Identity, on both the group as well as the individual level, is asserted, revealed, and negotiated through the continual exchange and accumulation of information and

knowledge. Collective intelligence is a useful framework for understanding how status and roles within the group are directly tied to one's comprehension of *Lost's* narrative text.

Communications scholar Henry Jenkins, who has applied the idea of knowledge communities to explain modern instances of groups devoted to popular culture, points out a very relevant piece of information embedded within Lévy's framework. Since meaning and information are continuously being exchanged, each becomes a "renewable resource" that has the capability to "revitalize social ties" (Jenkins 2006: 140).

Online fan communities are a site of social integration, and the social bonds within this context are solidified through the collaboration of ideas. These groups may be characterized as "voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations;" yet, they form on the basis of "common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments" (Jenkins 2004: 35). Online relationships are mediated by a mutual pursuit of a deeper understanding. Similarly, the glue that holds the social bond together at Lost-Forum.com is the transmission information and a shared commitment to unlocking the secrets of the series. Even though individual knowledge and experiences distinguish each actor in the interaction, when assembled in the context of explaining *Lost*, these details form the basis for group cohesion. This concept is crucial for my study because the passage of information on the message board enhances each individual's knowledge base and solidifies the strength of community attachment.

Although one's relation to knowledge secures their position as a member of the group, it must be noted that computer-mediated discussions are defined by anonymity,

which prevents one from knowing anything substantial about other individuals.

Therefore, instead of relying on *who* the individual is, the emphasis almost entirely rests upon *what* the individual knows. The knowledge conveyed by each individual contributes a piece to the overall puzzle of societal knowledge. In this instance, developing ties through participation on Lost-Forum.com, allows an individual to gain a broader view of the entire *Lost* universe.

Lévy's theories are an exemplar in the field of communications and describe the connections between knowledge, interaction, and technology. This work illustrates the possibilities associated with bridging human intellect on a global scale. In the modern world, "our living knowledge, skills, and abilities are in the process of being recognized as the primary source of all other wealth" (Lévy 1997: 9). New tools for communicating will strengthen our knowledge bases and the most socially valuable goal will undoubtedly be "to supply ourselves with the instruments for sharing our mental abilities in the construction of collective intellect or imagination" (Lévy 1997: 9). Thus, technology provides the tools that allow intelligent communities to emerge and develop. Message boards devoted to *Lost* illustrate how society has entered an era where communication technologies "serve to filter and help us navigate knowledge" and think in a collective manner (Lévy 1997: 9).

From Lévy's perspective, the modern world is defined by "our living knowledge, skills, and abilities" which "are in the process of being recognized as the primary source of all other wealth" (Pg. 9). Information is a modern form of currency, which is supported in that "the number of messages in circulation has never been as great as it is now..."

(Lévy 1997: 9). This condition of modernity also poses a crucial question as to what instruments may be used to “filter the pertinent data” since local social networks are ill-equipped to handle the steady stream of information in circulation (Lévy 1997: 9). To reconcile this problem, he proposes that the most socially valuable goal will undoubtedly be “to supply ourselves with the instruments for sharing our mental abilities in the construction of collective intellect or imagination” (Lévy 1997: 9). Since Lévy’s theory was written well before the most recent developments computer-mediated modes of communication, he was unable to envision how sites such as message boards, have become a solution to this problem.

Furthermore, new technology has resulted in unprecedented ways of connecting and communicating, and has reconfigured social relations by providing the tools for knowledge communities to emerge. Although Lévy’s optimistic conception provides a framework, it does not fully describe the potential possibilities and barriers that coincide with interaction in anonymous settings. This oversight is one of the significant avenues I will be exploring in my case study.

Structural Changes/Convergence in Technology

The introduction of communication technology is often described as an “epistemological turning point” in the evolution of collective intelligence. More specifically, the speed of the Internet has increased the rate of communication and given fans greater access to a wide range of diverse opinions. Until recently, fan groups resided on the outskirts of sociological study. This neglect reflects the fact that “fandom is a

vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups” that is used “to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations” (Jenkins 2005: 251). Status as a fan is never a solitary instance and the commonality between various fans performances lies in the fact that they “contest cultural norms” that govern behavior. Claiming a cultural identity based upon one’s affiliation to, or interest in, a television show runs in opposition to cultural norms. Consequently, fans are on the receiving end of much criticism and must constantly defend their commitment. Academics and society tend to regard fans as a subject that may be analytically overlooked. This disregard trivializes the “performative” qualities that derive from claiming and constructing a fan identity while engaging in a culturally accepted activity (Hills 2002: xi).

The in-depth interpretive practices of *Lost* fans are performed by a group of fans who draw upon the culture of everyday life to achieve an intellectual comprehension of the material. As their actions indicate, engaging with the text in this manner produces an attachment to a show which is expressed through an “emotional investment” (Hills 2002: 28). The process of reading a text and subsequently discussing it with “an attention to detail and programme continuity” is a sign of productivity that transforms the casual viewer to an active one and gives meaning and significance to both the subject and the object (Hills 2002:28).

Proclaiming one’s status as a fan may result in the creation of “a cultural space for types of knowledge and attachment” when given the proper context (Hills 2002: xi). As the case with *Lost*, online forums become a channel for fans to express concerns regarding the show and engage in an open dialogue with producers. Fan sites, and “fan-

related discourse,” have often been described as having a “formidable presence” on the Internet, one that begs the question of what sorts of implications these practices have on social interaction and communication (Bailey 2002: 240). One challenge of conducting research on fan groups concerns how to accurately gain a clear picture of the interpretive practices and communities in which fans become involved. For this reason, “fandom research is best seen as an open, cross-disciplinary space for grappling with the highly various consequences of being more than a casual interpreter of a text” (Couldry 2007: 141).

In order to conduct my study of an Internet-based community comprised of *Lost* viewers and to provide insight to the topic of how social participation operates in the virtual age, some qualifying conditions must be met. Primarily, individuals gather in the online space in order to share experiences as a fan. Status as a fan includes “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (Sandvoss 2007: 22). Ironically, becoming a fan does not require that an individual be a regular viewer. Rather, it is through the process of translating the visual text, sharing feelings or thoughts about a program with other individuals, or participating in a community-like atmosphere with other fans, that an individual displays the qualities of a fan. *Lost* is a key cultural text to which viewers have displayed an unparalleled level of devotion. Fans have been known to hold *Lost* viewing parties, both face-to-face as well as virtually, to share in the pleasure (and the frustration) of watching the show. Another common way of expressing one’s enthusiasm and engaging with the text involves participation on message board forums.

Analyzing the transfer of televisual textual material to hypertext with the aid of technology involves recognition that mediums coexist rather than supplant the other. While each medium retains a distinct and useful function, media convergence allows information to pass seamlessly. Following an intermedial approach allows one to focus on “the articulation and re-articulation of the media through the change of social and cultural contexts” and closely examine how meanings are attached as texts are transferred (Nikunen 2007: 112). Applying this to my study involves recognizing that viewers “lift” the visual text of *Lost* from the screen, and resituate it in the online world to begin the work of translating the text.

As individuals explore new social worlds and modes of communicating, the experiences and content related to one media source often become central to the activities of another. Likewise, as textual narratives pass from one media source to another, the underlying communicative practices shift as well. Media technologies allow “users to traverse the social world and penetrate previously unattainable regions of anonymity as well as to expand their social reach” (Bakardjieva 2003: 292). Lévy’s notion of the cosmopedia and a collective intelligence becomes achievable through the convergence of media devices.

New Sites for Interaction

Although “the study of how meaning is created in communication” has been a considerable “part of many 20th century sociological paradigms,” few scholars have analyzed the process outside the context of face-to-face human interaction (Menchik &

Tian 2008: 333). Ignoring the relevancy of computer-mediated communicative practices leaves a significant gap in the literature on the nature of modern social interaction.

In order to fully examine the dynamics of computer-mediated communication in modern society, it is imperative to first acknowledge the elements that define online interaction. Since interaction on message board forums consists entirely of textual content, it is necessary to employ a new analytical framework from which to examine and interpret these online communications. In the absence of nonlinguistic social cues, users on message board forums must make adaptations in order to get one's intended point across. Even though "the disjunctive, fragmented, and nonlinear character of text-based computer-mediated" interactions have become familiar features to users of computer-mediated technologies, adjustments are still required in order to accurately relay information (Markham 2004: 366). Computer-mediated communication "requires the cultivation of new techniques for specifically conveying the 'pragmatic information' that connects the meaning of words to their users" (Menchik & Tian 2008: 332).

Previous research has acknowledged the connections between media and interaction, few studies have actually investigated the sites in which modern interaction occur. My study remedies this omission by exploring the formation of identity, culture, and community on message boards. A wealth of textual data is available and ready to be extracted from messages board forums. These computer-mediated conversations are a gateway into the social world from the point of view of the users. Researchers may begin to interpret and chronicle the activities of these individuals within the context of the online community.

Because this area of social inquiry is underdeveloped, I want to lay out the merits and inadequacies of pertinent research in relation to fan studies. Positioning fans as subjects and online forums as sites for sociological research entails recognizing that experiences as a fan vary according to the specific group and community to which one belongs. However, fans' own understandings of the medium and cultural worlds in which they are involved have certain shortcomings that prevent them from sufficiently addressing the questions relevant to this study.

Even though critics may argue that online communities differ significantly from conventional communal life in the physical world, legitimacy lies in the ability of the virtually-based fan groups to "produce something of value to others – content, space, relationship and/or culture" (Bakardjieva 2003: 294). Typically, it is through the establishment of a common interests and mutual purpose that a group of individuals convenes to form a community. Likewise, organization through mutually aligned interests is the first step to the collaborative production of knowledge. The accumulation of cultural material directly influences the formation of collective intelligences.

Broadly speaking, "the particular and conspicuous patterns of fan consumption and the specific forms of social interaction that take place between fans have become an ever more integral part of everyday life in modern societies" as the micro level of the individual fan now merges into the macro world of the online environment (Gray et. al 2007: 9). In fact, various audience studies have identified a "deep-seated symbiosis between the cultural practice and perspective of being a fan and industrial modernity at large" (Gray et. al 2007: 9). As a subset of Internet users, *Lost* fans have embraced online

community life and are considered pioneers on the technological front. These fans are representative of broader social and economic organizational patterns, and recent studies of fan groups focus on capturing the "fundamental insights into modern life" by examining how social structures are replicated within subcultures (Gray et. al 2007: 6).

These insights are guided by the "the interactions that occur among media consumers, between media consumers and media texts, and between media consumers and media producers" (Jenkins 2006: 135). All of these elements are interconnected and display the complexity that accompanies the new participatory culture built upon knowledge construction. An additional component that stems from this framework includes the relationship between media producers and the media text. What is not revealed is whether the adoption a media text by fans may reflexively influence how producers reactively construct the narrative.

For the most part, "fan consumption has grown into a taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption" (Gray et. al 2007: 9). This oversight warrants further investigation to fully understand the implications of this transition. Interaction through one's status as a fan, as well as the types of programs and content that fans choose to view, each reveal much about broader cultural preferences. Accordingly, the ways in which "the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured" becomes "a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital" (Gray et. al 2007: 6). Fans groups reflect, and respond to, broader social inequalities and structures. Unearthing these issues embedded within the discussions

pertaining to *Lost*, and recognizing their role in the interpretive community is crucial in discovering the forces shaping interaction and identity.

Suitability

As familiarity with new media increases, it is quite possible that once an individual becomes accustomed to technology, “it may be a kind of inertia” that compels an individual to continue using the particular technology (Huh: 4). This theory provides an explanation of how virtual communities may be sustained and coincides with “genre loyalty,” the idea that a certain audience consistently expresses a tendency to view or prefer a certain type of program over another (Huh: 8). Research indicates that audience members who prefer dramas for example, are more likely to favor watching another drama rather than watching a comedy.

With its mind-boggling supernatural components, *Lost* clearly displays the classification attributes associated with the science fiction genre. The type of fans intrigued by, and drawn into, *Lost*’s mysteries are already primed to explore the new dimensions of fandom by participating in emergent online communities.

Overall, the effect of this ardent devotion to *Lost* combined with an opportunity for enhanced interaction. This creates an experience that “allows and encourages viewers to become agents and participants in the building of meaning” (Shyminsky 2006). Likewise, marketers and the producers behind *Lost* encourage viewers to become more involved with the show as evidenced by the barrage of video games that coincide with the narrative of the show. These media tie-ins, including Internet sites, serve to prolong

engagement with the original text and provide viewers with a complete experience of the *Lost* universe and to deepen the connection to the original text.

Likewise, the science fiction orientation associated with *Lost* “allows for a kind of thematic suitability for Internet discourse,” and accounts for its popularity both on and off the Web (Bailey 2002: 242). Typically, the fan-base attached to this particular genre has had a history of developing a cult following to the shows they choose to view and preferences amongst viewers are reflective of the broader demographic factors associated with certain audiences. This becomes especially important when discussing sci-fi audiences because this audience type has been shown to be particularly responsive to new forms of media and the formation of computer-mediated communities is the natural progression for expressing one’s fandom.

Similar to predecessors including *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks*, the mystifying and somewhat baffling plots of *Lost* invite a certain type of analysis that is aided by technological advances. The expansive cast of characters, in addition to the unique narrative structure of stories that occur simultaneously on and off the island, spur the quest for understanding amongst this fan-base. Viewers are encouraged to closely scrutinize the content of *Lost*, which propels them to consult one another in order to decipher whether or not certain images or words are simply flukes, or actual clues that have been embedded within the show. Fans are well aware that the producers love to plant false clues to tantalize them and to spark speculation. Henry Jenkins acknowledges that “media producers monitor Web forums...planting trial balloons” to gauge viewer reaction to potential plot points (Jenkins 2006: 2). This facet of convergence blurs the

lines between the producer and consumer of a media text, and indicates that producers may alter the text based upon audience reaction and feedback.

Part of the "marketable" appeal of *Lost* is its ability "to provoke and reward collective meaning production through elaborate back stories, unresolved enigmas, excess information, and extratextual expansions of the program universe" (Jenkins 2006: 145). These qualities appeal to viewers and provide them with an experience that is not offered by other televisual texts. In this manner, "new technologies provide the information infrastructure necessary to sustain a richer form of television content, while these programs reward the enhanced competencies of fan communities" (Jenkins 2006: 145). Spreading cultural knowledge by merging media and technology has the effect of turning it into a form of currency in that an individual's status derives from the knowledge they possess and are able to share with others.

Remarkably, in fan communities, traditional power dynamics become obsolete as the viewer takes control over media content with the aid of technology. The proliferation of media devices that has infiltrated the most intimate spaces of daily life has become a tool of empowerment that enable communities to form on the basis of common interests. Taking the role of fan constitutes a cultural practice, and its activities are closely tied to wider social processes and structures. *Lost* makes an excellent case in which to study these transformations because the program transcends the medium of television, and is a prime example of the convergence of media technologies.

Analytic Approach

A key query that derives from the work of Matt Hills (2002) concerns the cultural function that fans fulfill. To approach this issue, Hills rejects a “decisionist” theoretical narrative which either criticizes or applauds segments of fans, creating a dichotomy between what are deemed appropriate or inappropriate types of fan groups. Instead, he favors a “suspensionist” point of view that regards the contradictions inherent in fan communities as prime instances of “essential cultural negotiations” (Hills 2002: xiii). Instead of hindering the group, contradictory readings of the text and opposing points of view fulfill a functional purpose as these contestations provide evidence of the norms held by the group. Identifying conflict within the *Lost* community as users interact and navigate the cultural text is one way to pinpoint the strategies used in this environment to manage interaction.

This approach entails using a variety of methods and definitions since relying on a singular theory becomes too limiting. Examining the social world constructed and maintained by *Lost* fans and envisioning this culture as a part of a “dialectic of value” where “personalized, individual and subjective moments of fan attachment interact with communal constructions and justifications” allows each component to exist without fear of either overriding the other (Hills 2002: xiii). A representation of *Lost* fans, with an emphasis on the mediated social environment in which the group is based, is essential for exploring and describing how this interpretive community operates.

Previous studies have supported the idea that meaning is shared amongst audience members; however these findings neglect the meanings created by viewers. Early

television studies envisioned the individual viewer as a *bricoleur* who develops his or her own strategies for using materials in resourceful and inventive ways. This tactic involves “bringing values and attitudes, a universe of personal experiences and concerns, to the texts, the viewer selects, examines, acknowledges, and makes texts of his or her own” (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984: 70). The role of the researcher in this instance involves extracting and framing the messages of viewers relating to the television program. My research interests include a broader framework, as I seek to focus on the coordinated social interaction between fans collective efforts of the group as well as the formation of identity in order to gain a richer understanding of this community.

Additionally, traditional approaches usually include directly questioning viewers, or “asking the audience,” may be useful in many instances, but this tactic ignores the underlying processes at work (Hills 2002: 66). What this means is that “fan-talk cannot be accepted merely as evidence of fan knowledge. It must also be interpreted and analyzed in order to focus upon its gaps and dislocations, its moments of failure within narratives of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, and its repetitions or privileged narrative constructions which are concerned with communal (or subcultural) justification in the face of the ‘external’ hostility” (Hills 2002: 66). Hills refutes the use of ethnographic methodology when distinguishing between fan knowledge and fan affect, claiming that it “typically ignores the structured gaps and replications within the discursive frameworks” used by fans (Hills 2002: 68). For this reason, ethnographic studies of online communities must be redeveloped in order to coincide with the distinctive features of the group or community under analysis. These limitations have

impacted the methods I selected for the purposes of conducting this study. I will address this issue further in the methods section.

Meaning Construction

It has been acknowledged that “contemporary cultures examine themselves through their arts” which offer “a way of understanding who and what we are, how values and attitudes are adjusted, how meaning shifts” (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984:61). Using this viewpoint, television may be perceived of as an anchor to the real world, shedding light on a culture through its story-telling capabilities. Most television texts are vehicles through which important cultural topics may be addressed, and online environments are the locations where these discussions come to fruition. In this case, the narrative structure of *Lost* resembles some of the core features of late modernity. This cultural commentary is a direct reflection of the disembedding of social systems and acknowledges the bending of traditional spatial and temporal configurations.

In the virtual age, message boards have become a key site where the production of meaning is realized, and forums serve as a vehicle for expressing one’s status as a fan. Technological developments and devices enable the modern consumer to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" to suit one’s own needs (Jenkins 2006: 1). As previously mentioned, *Lost* viewers have actively accepted the role as conduits in bridging the gaps between media technologies. Through the act of consuming a text, and subsequently responding to the comments made by others, fans have effectively claimed the material and molded it for personal use.

Moreover, objects of fan devotion, including television shows, contain a "set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation;" and through which meaning is created (Sandvoss 2007: 22). Embedded within the content of "any episode are assumptions about who and what we are" (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984: 64). *Lost*'s producers are notorious for integrating outside texts including books, movies, and other television series, into the show's narrative. This tactic is used to tap into a set of broader cultural references and create links that familiarize fans with the material.

In fact, "conflicting viewpoints of social issues are the elements that structure most television programs" (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984: 64). These differences result in "directly contradictory readings" of the cultural text which means that viewers may obtain or attribute multiple meanings from any single media text (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984: 68). Yet, the varied range of responses serve as markers that the cue researcher and help" us to understand the reliance on and interest in forms, plots, and character types" that differ between individual experiences (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984: 61).

How *Lost* fans interpret and construct meaning in regards to these contradictions is a central focus of my study. Only in theory do comprehensive readings of the text by audience members involve a "simple realization of prepacked meanings controlled by the author" (Sandvoss 2007: 28). In actuality, "the structures and figures of the text collide with the reader's knowledge, experiences, and expectations" (Sandvoss 2007: 28). As dialogue and images are transmitted, "meaning is created as the reader 'concretizes' the

text” (Sandvoss 2007: 28). Humans actively engage with the material and use cultural frames in order to understand the text.

These frames may be described as “symbolic material that both expresses and constitutes experience” and “the world we live and act in is given shape, form, and meaning through our symbolic constructions” (Rowland Jr. and Watkins 1984: 108). Dividing social life into real life and virtual accounts ignores how as social beings “we construct accounts in the process of experiencing, and experience in the process of constructing accounts” (Rowland Jr. & Watkins 1984: 108).

Properly studying *Lost*’s content, and its subsequent interpretations by fans online, entails recognizing that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" (Barthes 1977: 146-148 in Gray et. al 2007: 25). It is through the process of reading a text and attaching meaning to it that viewers develop a sense of ownership or control over media text. These activities are shaped by the cultural experiences of the individual, and the interpretations made by fans feed back into the continual process of cultural production. Since fandom in its most basic form is about "having control and mastery over art by pulling it close and integrating it into your sense of self,” analyzing a text favored by fans is a gateway to examining human introspection and behavior (Jenkins 1998: 23). For the purposes of this study, the message board archives constitute an online artifact that displays the collective efforts of the group, and illustrates the group’s communal purpose and shared identity.

Additionally, the texts preferred by fans provide an avenue to express and create one's self, and "are both tools for thoughts and spaces for emotional exploration" (Jenkins 2006: 5). As "meaning is contextualized ...it grows out of an affective set of experiences, and is the vehicle for creating social connections with other people" (Jenkins 2006: 24). The act of sharing one's personal experiences and distinct viewpoints and attaching meaning to a media text facilitates the establishment of a social bond, even in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

Moreover, documenting the transfer of cultural material between mediums is facilitated by "the interactive nature of computer net discussion," which "makes it possible to trace the process by which television meanings are socially produced, circulated, revised" (Jenkins 2006: 118). These discussions tend to be ongoing, and therefore "net discourse allows the researcher to pinpoint specific moments in the shifting meanings generated by unfolding broadcast texts" (Jenkins 2006: 118). Underscoring the communicative practices of fans in online spaces is a "collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities" that results in a "subcultural cohesion" (Gray et. al 2007: 2). The utility of message board forums as a space designed for social interaction is revealed as individuals theorize and develop shared conventional understandings of the text.

Social Worlds

As social researchers, our duty is to explore the social worlds inhabited by human beings. As fans continue to prolong engagement with media texts by participating in

forums, it becomes necessary for researchers to follow suit and “inhabit the world” of the fan group in order to gain insight to how sociality and technology are inextricably linked in the modern social world (Hills 2002: 145).

An online community “offers an outpost,” which “exists between the real and unreal, with faith generating the bonds of connection” (Aden 1999: 153 & 165). To ground interactions in message board communities, it is essential to establish trust in absent others. Trust in expert systems reflexively shapes how the self is constructed and forms the basis for the development of social ties. Likewise, immersion in these virtual entails a transition that merges elements of both real and imagined worlds. Stepping away from one’s immediate surroundings to enter an online environment constitutes a symbolic pilgrimage of sorts that unites an invisible network of viewers in their common interests and quest for further interaction with the television program. This sort of pilgrimage may be described as a liminal encounter that transcends the television screen, but does not actually involve a physical journey. An integral aspect of this process includes collective community-building and knowledge construction.

By visiting the virtual spaces designated to discussing and analyzing a television show, fans embark on “symbolic pilgrimage” where “interaction of story and individual imagination” merge (Aden 1999: 10). Although the term symbolic pilgrimage is used mainly as a metaphor to describe fan practices, the act of inhabiting “extratextual spaces...forms an important part of cult fans’ extensions and expressions of the fan-text relationship” (Hills 2002: 144). Notably, the spaces created by fans for the purpose of discussing a show “sustain cult fans’ fantasies of ‘entering’ into the cult text,” while

allowing “the ‘text’ to leak out into spatial and cultural practices via fans’ creative transpositions” (Hills 2002: 151). This process of affectively relating to, and interpreting material, has broader significance as it “spills into and redefines material space” (Hills 2002: 144). Through the analysis of message board posts, my broader aim is to demonstrate how the online environments frequented by *Lost* fans allow them to enter the text, and inhabit the mythological places and spaces, in order to construct their own sense of meaning in relation to the program.

Furthermore, by highlighting the “testimonies of pilgrims,” in this case the messages posted on forums, and analyzing them “to draw attention to the social processes of pilgrimages,” the impact that media convergence has on interaction becomes visible (Hills 2002: 144). As information is shared and passed through interaction, meaning is constructed and attached to make sense of both the text as well as the surrounding social environment.

Unlike most other television programs, the majority of the action on *Lost* takes place on beaches and in the wilderness of a remote desert island. This unique setting makes it difficult for fans to actually track down and visit the mythological locations. Likewise, filming occurs under heavily guarded situations to reduce any potential leaks. Other popular series, such as the *X-Files*, have encouraged fans to make the trek to sites mentioned on the show, which “replicates the narrative structure of the program” and leads viewers on a quest that “has to skillfully be worked at via the discovery of hidden information” (Hills 2002: 148). The opportunity to have a tangible physical encounter

serves the dual purpose of reinforcing the authenticity in the mind of the viewer and allowing the fan to have a deeper level of involvement with the text.

Since many fans are unable to travel and visit the locations where *Lost* is filmed either due to expenses or the secrecy that surrounds the show, Internet message boards and virtual communities have cropped up to overcome the inability to directly experience the locations associated with *Lost*. Message board forums are an outlet for fan expression, and facilitate fan pursuits by offering an alternative route for engaging and connecting with *Lost*'s "distinctive places and spaces" (Hills 2002: 149). Instead of "seeking out actual locations which underpin any given textual identity," fans who frequent message board communities are taking advantage of another type of autonomy and engagement with the text that serves "to extend the productivity of his or her affective relationship with the original text" (Hills 2002: 149). Message boards allow the *Lost* audience to engage in advanced forms of media experience and interaction.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental principles underlying social science involves a commitment to analyzing society as well as the behaviors of people living within it. Bolstered by increases in technology usage, the emergence of new spaces for communication are on the frontier of sociological exploration and investigation. The interactions that transpire within these sites are indicative of the role of knowledge-based networks in constructing, sharing, storing, and collecting information. As media technology collides with human interactions, researchers have an obligation to follow

subjects and analyze these spaces where modern interactions are occurring. Message boards are a site that allow for the study human organization on both the community and group level. How groups evolve, are organized, and sustained are of prime importance in the field of social science. Uncovering the relation between new modes of communication and patterns of interaction in a virtual setting is equally as vital as studying face-to-face interactions.

Giddens' approach to modernity involves the lifting out of social relations from local contexts. Lévy and Jenkins agree that in replacement of traditional modes of connecting, knowledge and information have become the key mechanisms that structure interaction. In late modernity, "it is not the physical setting itself that determines the nature of the interaction, but the patterns of information flow" (Meyrowitz 1985: 36). Identifying how these patterns structure and influence communication in an online setting has been my primary goal for this study. However, in order to fully understand the patterns that are evident in a computer-mediated situation, it was necessary to also identify the factors that potentially impact how social interaction is structured.

Furthermore, my analysis of message posts constructed by *Lost* fans is geared toward understanding how individuals, groups, and meaning are structured and organized by this new mechanism of social communication. By merging Lévy's broad notion of a collective intelligence, with Jenkins contemporary interpretation of knowledge communities, we can begin to examine the influence of media convergence in relation to interaction based around a cultural text.

Convening on forums is a relatively recent practice; yet, the utility of these sites originates from distinctly modern necessity: the need to compartmentalize and share vast amounts information. Message board forums fulfill this purpose by facilitating the creation of social networks, which are sustained through the collection and production of knowledge. Individuals frequent these sites seeking advice from anonymous strangers and as information is passed, social ties begin to develop. These exchanges result in the formation of communities built upon knowledge collection.

Members of this message board community represent a new class of viewers, which is apparent by the active role they have taken in extending engagement with the program and visiting this Internet site. Their interactions are based upon information sharing, which provides a common ground to relate to one another and operate collectively as a group. A primary component of this online community is the forum function which mediates activities and provides a catalog of the interactions within the group. *Lost* is the mechanism around which this group is centered, and the only contact between individuals is through the textual exchange of posts. An analysis of the message board commentary is a key way to develop a contextual understanding of this distinct subculture of fans. This analysis contributes to the growing body of literature addressing how individuals express themselves in virtual environments.

Classic as well as contemporary symbolic interaction approaches support the idea that “the search for constructing, knowing, and performing the self often occurs in relation to designed physical environments” (Smith and Bugni 2006: 126). Environments provide outlets and context for self-expression, and my research focuses exclusively on

the links between conceptions of group and individual identity formed outside the context of a solid physical locations.

Furthermore, proper interpretation of another individual's message entails taking into account both the location and conditions that accompany computer-mediated interaction. An awareness of the unique format and the challenges associated with conversing virtually is essential. Adjustments on behalf of the researcher to the research setting are crucial, and this process strongly correlates to the composition of a cogent set of research questions. My research questions, and subsequent methods section, each address how I will overcome the inadequacies of previous studies to investigate the reciprocal relationship between technology and modern social interactions.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As indicated in my review of the significant literature from the fields of sociology and communications, "studies of fan audiences help us to understand and meet challenges far beyond the realm of popular culture" (Gray et. al 2007: 10). Specifically, these studies "tell us about the way in which we relate to those around us," as well as the ways society interprets mediated texts which "constitute an ever larger part of our horizon of experience" (Gray et. al 2007: 10). An analysis of *Lost* fans sheds light on "some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities" (Gray et. al 2007: 10).

Exploring online paradigms for interaction is imperative for advancing conceptions of social relations in modern contexts and this study contributes invaluable to conceptions of contemporary social order. At the beginning of this study, I formed a set of research questions based upon Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) commentary on conducting narrative ethnography. This approach is concerned "with the production and reception of stories in society" and emphasizes "the everyday narrative activity that unfolds within situated interaction" (Pg. 24). Holstein and Gubrium's version of narrative ethnography "requires that we step outside of narrative texts and consider questions such as who produces particular kinds of stories, where are they likely to be encountered, what are their purposes and consequences, who are the listeners" and "under what circumstances are particular narratives more or less accountable" (2009: 23). Essentially this method entails examining how narratives are constructed and revealed by individuals in the course of interaction. Analyzing narratives involves analyzing the experience of the

individual as well as the complex networks that shape the organization of the narrative. Narratives are produced and constrained by the surrounding environment and Lieblich (1998) describes one of the central uses for narrative texts involves gathering stories from a sample population in order to obtain a "preliminary in-depth view of the lifestyle of an unfamiliar group" (Gubrium & Holstein 2009: 8). Applying this framework, I seek to identify the factors that shape the narration of experiences, while in the presence of virtual others in a complex online environment.

Accounts vary from person to person, and this diversity stems from the unique background and experiences of each individual user. Tapping into narrative accounts articulated on the message boards at Lost-Forum.com is one way to access the distinct experiences users bring to this particular social world that differs from previous forms of socialization. My questions derive from this understanding, and are aimed at focusing on the substance of the message as well as the action involved in posting. The content of the personal narrative accounts presented on this message board forum is equally as important as the setting and the context in which these narratives transpire.

To narrow the scope of this project and guide my analysis, I have chosen four research questions. I have constructed these questions to guide my research in determining how interactions and individuals become oriented in online social settings. Based upon this conceptualization, I formulated the following questions that I wish to address in this study:

1. First, how are complex group behaviors structured in contemporary social settings and spaces designed for communication purposes?

2. Second, how is identity formed and shaped in an anonymous environment?
3. Third, how is intra-group conflict managed and mediated in an online setting?
4. Fourth, how is meaning constructed through the presentation of information and experience on message boards?

In order to address these questions, I intend to focus on "the communicative mechanisms, circumstances, purposes, strategies, and resources that shape narrative production" (Gubrium & Holstein 2009: viii). Discussions pertaining to *Lost*-related topics serve as the basis for narratives to unfold. While in the process of sharing information about the show, users also communicate details of their personal inner lives. Since the accounts given by users surpass the content of the textual material of *Lost*; these discussions provide insight into the broader social environments and worlds experienced by viewers. The environment in which a narrative is articulated influences "the internal organization and meaning" of the account (Holstein and Gubrium 2009:10). Through an examination of messages posts, I seek to understand how sharing experiences and narratives through textual messages operates within the context of a computer-mediated environment.

Typically, the theoretical tools used to analyze online interaction are borrowed from the study of face-to-face communication. Integral elements of traditional, face-to-face interaction are replicated online, which means that computer-mediated communication resemble traditional interaction in many ways. However, one of the most influential factors concerning computer-mediated interaction is the context in which it occurs. Previous methods of studying interaction ignore the definitive features that

distinguish online interaction and fail to account for the distinct differences and complications associated with online, text-based forms of communication. Therefore, it is imperative to apply a method that adequately addresses the challenges posed by computer-mediated interaction. In order to fully assess the issues in conducting online analysis, I will formulate a comprehensive methodology and research plan.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Overview

Interpretive social science is based on the premise that “human beings act on the basis of collective (cultural) understandings” which are constantly being negotiated through communication (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998: 3). Thus, the meanings and norms created by individuals exist in practice and derive from social relations. Cultural interpretations “are the products of people acting in a common spatio-temporal frame, with the meanings themselves embedded as objects of attention in each successive frame” (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998: 3). The process of audience members interpreting the meanings in one media text (televisions), and transferring these analyses over to the medium of the Internet has become a common social practice.

For the researcher studying media use in relation to interaction, it is imperative to view mediated communications as representative of distinct social relationships, and attempt to achieve “a conscious and systematic interpretation of the culture system” (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998: 4). This goal may be accomplished by a “persistent and sensitive attention to the stories, conversations, rituals, and routines” of a group (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998: 4). Computer-mediated communities devoted to *Lost* provide access to a visible discourse produced by collective group joined by shared interest. Through an analysis of social action and communication, it is possible to develop a contextual understanding of the functions of group.

The primary objective that this research aims to address is the development of a cogent understanding of the patterns of interaction and production of meaning accomplished by viewers of the television series *Lost*. In order to achieve this goal, a methodological design comprised of netnography, case-study, and a grounded-based coding scheme will be used to obtain insight into a virtual community dedicated to the purpose of discussing and dissecting the television program *Lost*. Data was gathered in the context of message board posts compiled at popular fansite: <http://www.Lost-Forum.com>. A combination of methodologies was essential to account for the unique research setting and unconventional means of data collection. Likewise, using a variety of methods yields a more thorough depiction of the interpretive practices and processes of this collective group. Additionally, the systematic coding scheme was developed and implemented to flesh out the details of the messages and to provide a theoretical framework from which to interpret the emergent data.

My criteria for selecting the message board at [Lost-Forum.com](http://www.Lost-Forum.com) as a site for analysis included the high volume of posts, broad range of topics discussed, distinct number of individual users, and consistent traffic flow. An additional consideration was the overall clarity of the site in terms of navigability, accessibility, and layout.

I will outline the principle methods from which I drew elements in order to conduct my Internet-based ethnographic study. These components allowed me to gain access and to observe participants in these new spaces for interaction. By implementing

and applying a variety of approaches it is possible to tap into, and to observe the actions, perceptions, and interactions *Lost* fans who frequent this particular message board forum.

Description of Web Site

Overall, “one can study the space itself, the interactions within these spaces, and the relationships and communities formed through the interactions” (Markham, p. 362). It is vital to describe the layout of the website to determine how conversation and interactions are structured. Chief among the reasons why this particular site was chosen for analysis is that it regarded as one of the first fan websites established with *Lost* as the focus. In fact, the banner at the top of the homepage proclaims the site to be “the official *Lost* fansite.” The site remains popular, which is reflected by the high volume of posts that have accumulated throughout the duration of the series. The central column of the site boasts the most recent articles written in relation to *Lost*, including profiles of the cast, and information about the upcoming season. The right side hosts ads for DVDs of the series, recent cast photos, and an extensive archive of news stories related to *Lost*. On the left side of the homepage, the Main Menu function offers links to a list of characters, media clips, episode recaps, a photo gallery, as well as the site’s own fan forum. Clicking on “*Lost* forum” redirects the user to *Lost* Media’s own discussion forum, which is located at: <http://Lost-Forum.com>. According to the site, the forum is located on a different server for the purpose of reducing the burden of the heavy flow of traffic that the site receives. At the top of the *Lost* Forum, the page explicitly states its purpose as a “discussion forum for the Emmy winning hit ABC TV series *Lost*.”

In the far right corner, a box provides users with the ability to login under a preferred username and password. Under the heading, a bar allows the individual to register, view FAQs about the site, check out the members list, or select the calendar option to see a detailed mapping of important dates that pertain to the series. Underneath the taskbar is a brief welcome message introducing the site with a reminder to new users to become familiar with the basic rules governing the forum. Registering for the site enables the user to be recognized each time he or she logs in to the site and to gain access to additional features and to have the ability to actually post messages.

The forum is divided into six main categories: 1) Forum stuff, which entails “feedback, suggestions, rules, script concerns;” 2) episode discussion, which is broken down into the four seasons as well as a separate thread labeled Purgatory; 3) basic *Lost* discussion that does not pertain to a particular episode or topic, this involves character analysis, theories, and general discussion; 4) the spoiler section is strictly used to share information about upcoming plot developments; 5) ‘Ships discuss the relationships amongst and between the characters; and 6)) lastly, a list of threads that do not correspond to *Lost* per se, but rather span music, sports, movies, and a collection of posts referred to as the Hall of Fame. Within each of these broader categories lies another subset of threads. For example, under Episode Discussion one would find a detailed list containing threads for each episode of a particular season.

Personal Details

The site displays the “screenname,” or chosen pseudonym selected by each user that accompanies each message and identifies who posted it, along with the time and date of when the post was made. Also, a record is maintained for how many threads are running under each category, and how many messages have been posted under each thread. Additionally, users may personalize their posts by attaching quotes or banners from their favorite television programs, which serve as a reference to other popular culture artifacts.

Participation in this social community requires one to sign-up to activate the posting function. However, anyone with internet access is able to enter the site and view messages posted by others. Although I did sign up as a member of the site, I decided to remain an anonymous observer and therefore did not actively post.

Data Collection

My analysis of social interaction at lost-fourm.com. is an exploratory study, and I applied a mixed-methodology approach to both gather and analyze the data. I devised my method by borrowing elements from grounded theory, netnography, and extended case study to devise my own methodological approach. Drawing components from each of these theoretical approaches, my aim was directed at creating a comprehensive method in order to conduct a thematic analysis of message boards posts within the context of the *Lost* forum.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory sets forth distinctive “guidelines from which to build explanatory frameworks that specify relationships among concepts” (Charmaz 2000:510). For this project, this perspective provides the researcher with freedom to determine the relevant posts, and to subsequently develop categories. These guidelines coincide with my aim to focus on how meaning is constructed through the presentation of information and experience on message boards. Following a grounded approach enables a researcher to use emergent categories to actually shape the process of data collection. These emergent categories may be used as a tool in which to explain as well as to conceptualize the data through either “common sense understandings” (Charmaz 2000). Another benefit of this method includes the ability to analyze the data set while in the process of collecting it. This allowed me to build bridges between relevant concepts and meanings constructed by the users. However, my method deviates from a pure application of the grounded approach, since I did not generate theory based upon my categories and ultimate findings.

Initially, data was collected from each of the program’s four season finales, which entailed selecting message threads containing the highest number of posts. Longer threads typically yield a larger group of respondents. This informs the researcher of which topics the group perceives as worth pursuing.

The data collection process was conducted over the course of two months, from December 2008 to February 2009. The following table displays the total number of threads and posts from which I derived my sample³.

Table 1: Total Sample Population

Season	Number of Threads	Number of Posts
Season One Finale: "Exodus"	16	703
Season Two Finale: "Live Together, Die Alone"	55	7,360
Season Three Finale: "Through the Looking Glass"	9	2,511
Season Four Finale: "There is No Place Like Home"	21	2,054

To begin my analysis, I systematically read every post within the largest threads for the first season finale. To narrow the selection process, I established a base of 100 posts as the minimum criteria for inclusion of a particular thread. The next step involved re-reading each of the qualifying threads, and combing through each message. This step is essential in order to narrow the data field and to pinpoint the key messages that embody the course of communication. The purpose of meticulously reading each post

³ Information derived from the homepage of Lost-Forum.com.

line-by-line reading is to identify key posts, or messages that best represent the course of the conversation. My purpose was to condense the thread, while still maintaining information that represented the topics under discussion. Once these messages were identified, I copied and pasted them into a separate blank document for organizational purposes.

This process was repeated with the largest threads from the other three season finales. A total of twenty-four threads were sampled. After the initial read-through and subsequent line-by-line reading were completed, my data consisted of twenty-four separate files containing a condensed account of the primary thread. I then conducted a secondary line-by-line reading of the compiled messages in each of the twenty-four files. At this stage, each message was briefly summarized based upon the content, and coded by a keyword. The purpose of this step was to create a descriptive summary of each post that collectively would provide an overview of the entire data set.

Throughout the process of working through the data by systematically reading, rereading the text, I began to code by placing a label next to any phrases, themes, or conflicts, and that appeared to repeat throughout the data. After the data was coded, I then listed all of the prominent categories or themes as well as the sub-themes that emerged in relation to my research questions. This step involved compiling all of the line codes, as well as any phrases describing the data set, and merging them into one file. This process is designed to create a link between the abstract codes and the data source and remain grounded in the original text.

After merging the codes and identifying the main themes, I went back to the twenty-four compiled files and extracted segments of the data, making sure to keep the descriptive labels attached. All posts containing similar or repetitive codes were grouped together to create a singular file containing all of the relevant coded messages. At this point I compared each piece of selected data and matched them with my most dominant emergent themes. This step was necessary to ensure that each message corresponded with the broader thematic category. Removing the data from the original context in this manner makes it more manageable to discern any patterns or themes that seem to reoccur. Finally, the message posts most representative of the major themes were chosen for inclusion in the findings section.

A key attribute of grounded theory includes an openness to pursue themes that may potentially emerge. More specifically, once repetitive categories begin to develop, the researcher is able to expand or to “refine” the sample in order to explore “emerging theoretical ideas” (Charmaz, 2000: 510). Accordingly, as themes became apparent in my data, I extended the scope of the sample to include alternative threads. Primarily, these threads centered on discussions concerning the dynamics of various character relationships as well as reactions to the news that ABC agreed to an ending date for the series in May of 2010. Additionally, while following my research questions, it became apparent that the concept of conflict within the group was a prominent part of the theorizing process within the community. Once this aspect emerged as a dominant theme I continued to pursue this theme by looking for evidence within my data to uncover how intra-group conflict was managed and mediated in this online setting.

Extended Case Study

Each research setting is unique in terms of the types of accommodations the researcher needs to make to obtain a solid sample and data set. Due to the concerns presented by Internet-based research, especially regarding anonymity and a lack of physical presence, a case-study design offers flexibility that is not afforded by other sorts of methodologies because it is adaptive to suit the distinct challenges presented by online environments. Because this area of inquiry is burgeoning, a case-study approach is appropriate because it provides the tools to understand and analyze online social interaction. Fundamentally, focus on a singular case enables “people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts” (Flyvbjerg 2004: 421). Thus far, online settings have been overlooked as sites for conducting social research. This oversight means that most researchers are not equipped with the appropriate skills and methods necessary to conduct this type of work.

In this instance, a case study approach enables the researcher to tailor the study to adjust to both this modern research site and the individuals who frequent it. Focus on a single case supports the research goal of accurately gauging how this one particular set of fans responds to, and interacts with, one another. I applied this method largely to examine how complex groups behaviors are structured in contemporary social settings, specifically those spaces designed for communication purposes. Therefore, I positioned

the users at Lost-Forum.com as a singular example, and I used an extended case study approach to frame the activities within this community and conduct an in-depth analysis

Admittedly, case-studies are limited in terms of generalizing to a broader phenomenon. Although the scope of this study may initially appear narrow, it holds the potential to be replicated in hopes of producing more generalized findings. Likewise, the case-study has value in “the preliminary stages of an investigation since it provides hypotheses, which may be tested systematically with a larger number of cases,” meaning that the case-study may serve as a model for future scientific research endeavors of a similar context (Abercrombie et. al 1984:34). This approach allows me to investigate this research setting and conduct an exploratory study, then expand my research population to test my findings against other cases. The findings of a single case may provide the building blocks from which to begin to generate theory, knowledge, and eventually expertise (Flyvbjerg 2004: 421).

A basic point of a case-study approach is that all human affairs vary according to the situation and therefore result in “context-dependent knowledge” (Flyvbjerg 2004: 421). Case-studies encourage the researcher to become involved in a particular research setting and engage in activities alongside research subjects. This type of immersion allows the researcher to develop knowledge in the context of the specific environment and equips researchers with the tools to enter a social setting to explain what is occurring. Accessing Internet locations, or sites such as Lost-Forum.com, is the first step to enhancing the skill set needed to facilitate a broader understanding of how to conduct online research. Only through experience may expertise and proficiency in the field be

achieved. Thus, an emphasis on the case method is undoubtedly warranted in this instance as researchers foray into a domain that lacks solid methodological and theoretical foundations.

Discoveries yielded from this single example, of message posted at Lost-Forum.com⁴, contribute to the overall accumulation of knowledge concerning the development of computer-mediated communication practices. This case was chosen for selection due to its richness of textual data derived from message boards posts devoted to the show as well as the high volume of posts that have amassed at this website since the program's launch. These factors suppress any qualms about obtaining sufficient amounts of quality information. *Lost* serves as an exemplar because it fosters an interactive dialogue by coordinating the activities of a large number of individuals and directing them to focus attention on a singular topic: the content of the show.

Netnography

Conducting research in an online setting requires recognition of the unique characteristics associated with this particular environment and a reconfiguration of existing research techniques. In order to properly study "the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications," the researcher needs to make adaptations and carefully design the study with these distinctions in mind (Kozinets 2002: 62). One way to accomplish this is to use netnography, which applies the principles of a traditional ethnographic methodology to an online setting.

⁴ This forum is independently run, and not affiliated with ABC/Touchstone Television.

Frequently, ethnographic methods have been “refashioned to suit particular fields of scholarship, research questions, research sites, times, researcher preferences, and cultural groups” (Kozinets 2002: 62). Typically, netnography has been used to conduct market research online, as it extends the basic tenets of ethnography to online social settings and provides access to a wide range of potential subjects for analysis. Netnography makes it possible to conduct an analysis using only posted messages and observations, essentially eschewing the need for field notes. In fact, netnographic data “might be drawn from a relatively small number of messages” as long as they “are interpreted with considerable analytic depth and insight” (Kozinets 2002: 64).

Netnography deviates from a person-centered orientation, by focusing exclusively on the broader contextual factors that impact the experiences of the individual. Netnographic approaches do not position the individual as the primary unit of analysis, but rather emphasize the “behavior or the act” that occurs within the context of social interaction (Kozinets 2002: 64). Posting on a message board may be considered a type of social action, “a communicative act or language game,” (Kozinets 2002: 64). Since posts center on the exchange of cultural information each post may not be analyzed, but rather must be placed in a larger explanatory framework. Therefore, the act of posting, the type of message posted, the content of the message, as well as the context in which the message was posted all have significant value.

Online communication is mediated by a computer and distinguished by public availability as well as a written textual format. One advantage that coincides with this new site for social research is the ability to use this information on message board forums

to study the meanings and artifacts produced by a particular social group. Activities and social interaction in these spaces are largely structured around the process of meaning construction in relation to a cultural text. I have chosen a netnographic framework to uncover the norms and rules that are distinct to this particular community, and to gain insight into the meanings and systems of interpretation created by *Lost* fans. Meticulously tracking these meanings and symbols contributes to cultural understandings of how group interaction is facilitated online.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the identities of the message poster's are generally unknown or hidden from the researcher. This distinction leads to a critical departure from traditional ethnography. Therefore, accurate representation the sample population necessitates that any conclusions drawn from a netnographic study should "reflect the limitations of the online medium and the technique" (Kozinets 2002: 65). One must keep in mind that the purpose of netnography is to analyze "the content of an online community's communicative acts" as opposed to "the complete set of observed acts" (Kozinets 2002: 65). Accordingly, my findings reflect the interpretations of a particular segment of users rather than the broader population of viewers. Employing a netnographic approach entails the use of "carefully chosen message threads" which "is akin to purposive sampling" (Kozinets 2002: 67). This method of data collection coincides with the strategies I used to obtain my data, as stated earlier.

Likewise, netnography grants the researcher the freedom to select an appropriate online community based upon criteria that is "suitable to the investigation" being conducted (Kozinets 2002: 63). An ideal community, such as the one I have selected,

should have a focused attention toward research questions and topics, display a significant number of posts and yield high numbers of “discrete message posters,” with “more detailed or descriptively rich data” (Kozinets 2002: 63). Another necessary element includes a substantial amount of interaction between members of the self-segmented community. These criteria differentiate netnography from other methodologies, and formed the basis for choosing Lost-Forum.com as my research site.

Coding Schema

As previously mentioned, qualitative researchers are often confronted with the problem of information overload. For my study, devising a classification system was necessary in order to categorize and analyze the vast amount of data that was generated by this online social setting. The basic design of this coding system was constructed in an effort to yield a set of data that reflected the tone of each thread while providing an accurate picture of the interaction. For the purposes of this study, data was initially sorted according to relevancy, and overall descriptiveness, which involved dividing messages into either “primarily social or informational” (Kozinets 2002: 64). Precision in classification and coding may come at the expense of constructing a coherent compilation of the textual discourse. However, this does not undermine the contextual richness that netnographic data contains, which originates from tapping into metaphoric and symbolic readings.

In their study of online communication through electronic mail, Menchik & Tian (2008) discovered the use of an alternative set of tactics to overcome challenges, and to

clearly express one's ideas and thoughts. These tactics are categorized as either emphatic, referential, or characterizing semiotic tactics (Menchik & Tian 2008: 355). More specifically, this involves placing an emphasis on the important words in the message that an individual is trying to articulate. Emphasis indicates the tone of the message or the key words necessary to interpret the message. Messages posted on a digital wall are not always transmitted simultaneously, resulting in some disparity in terms of the time between when a message was initially posted and the corresponding responses.

Likewise, interweaving threads of conversation also present obstacles for users who intend to reply to a specific post. Therefore, providing references orients others to previous messages that shaped the current message. This is crucial in an environment where communication is spread out across long periods of time. Characterizing information is the relevant situational details that an individual may include in a message to aid in another individual's interpretation of that message. This terminology provides a "theoretical vocabulary" to replace the traditional sociological view that unjustifiably positions computer-mediated conversation as an insufficient or inferior form of interaction.

The coding scheme I used loosely models the one developed by Menchick & Tian (2008). Messages that yielded a high response rate were of particular value, as well as items that were perceived as especially insightful or critical to the theorizing. Posts deviating from *Lost* discussions were also useful. On the surface these posts seemed to consist of extraneous information that held little value in terms of contributing to the overall analysis of the program. However, these posts contained crucial characterizing

information that coincided with my research goal of gaining insight into the identities and perceptions held by members of the group.

For a general reference example, S1, S2, S3, S4 denotes from which season the message was derived. Concepts that continually reappeared throughout the posts helped to identify recurring topics being discussed, and to inform the researcher of the prominent themes. Categories based upon substantive themes were coded more vigorously. The thematic categories that emerged from the first step of data collection process were:

- *Norms/Rules* - the normative rules or standards established by the group to control the behavior of community members. These formal and informal mechanisms are used to maintain order and keep actions in line so the interaction runs smoothly.
- *Language* - misspellings and use of “netspeak” or informal styles of which distinguish online text based forms of communication from face-to-face interaction. This includes the orientation or tone of a message. Netspeak indicates the informality of environment. Also a significant source of conflict.
- *Barriers* - the obstacles that impede conversation. These complications prevent meaningful conversation from occurring stem from the nature of the online setting.
- *Strategies/Maneuvers* - devices and tactics used to overcome obstacles presented by the structure of online interaction. A subcategory within this broader theme includes *attention seeking*, or the demand for acknowledgement or credit for one’s personal theories or contributions to the discussion.

- *Identity/Narrative of the Self* - presenting and sharing pieces of personal background. These details are used to contextualize a post and distinguish the individual user. Concretize the setting by allowing individual to create a virtual identity.
- *Expertise* - level of proficiency over the material displayed by the users. Measured by evidence of social/cultural capital, including prior knowledge and experiences, applied to concretize and understand the narrative text of *Lost*. Also used as a mechanism to contribute to the group as well as assert one's identity.
- *Teamwork* - instances where users worked collectively to piece together information and knowledge. Collaboration is the basis for solidarity within the community, in the form of group consensus.
- *Conflict* - debate in the online setting often leads to disagreement over content and information derived from the cultural text. Implicit in this environment due to misinterpretations, as well as within the process of theorizing with a diverse group of individuals. Another source of conflict includes the violation of norms. Additional categories were used to organize the data set as well.
- *Purpose of post* - was post intended as question, comment, or response? How, if at all, did the post impact the flow and transmission of information? This was measured by the open-endedness of questions: (whether the question was a general question of interpretation or a specific one directed at a particular instance within the text). Also, whether or not the post served as a catalyst to debate and discussion, or was it formulated in response to a question (this was apparent by whether a reply was evident (as indicated by the following posts)).

- *Structure* - or order of the messages. Specifically, was one question pursued, then, another presented, or are multiple questions pursued simultaneously?
- *Subject matter* - did the message have direct relevance to the message board topic or did the message deviate from the topic? Did the post inquire about a definitional ambiguity or questions of interpretation regarding the cultural text or posts of others?

Creating a catalogue of the predominate themes and subcategories that emerged from the vast amount of electronic data was essential for this project. Likewise, in the absence of direct social cues, a close reading of user's comments was necessary in order to distinguish the ways in which this computer-mediated community is socially constructed, and what "recognizably human purposes" it serves (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998: 8). Taking virtual presence into account requires the researcher to be attuned to how interactions are structured as well as whether certain individuals or topics tend to dominate the discussions.

Conclusion

As an anonymous and unobtrusive observer, a grounded, approach allows for patterns of interaction to emerge from the message content. For the researcher, "text-based online interaction requires active reflection on and management of very basic elements of conversation" (Markham 2004: 365). In this way, data pulled from message boards resembles data that is produced through traditional ethnographic fieldwork because the same basic principles that guide everyday interactions remain intact. Message board posts mimic face-to-face interaction in that they are used as either a response to

words, or in this case posts of others, or to stimulate further conversation and dialogue.

Using elements from each of these methods, I will describe the findings derived from my research group.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS

Overview

Drawing from Giddens' theoretical perspective and applying it to a specific context, it becomes apparent that computer-mediated interactions, which prevent an individual from reading the body language and social cues that typically present in face-to-face interaction, are a mechanism that contributes to the lifting out of social systems. More specifically, as communication surpasses the bounds of local contexts, one way in which the process of disembedding occurs is through the construction of message boards, Internet chat rooms, and other forms of computer-mediated communications.

Lost is an ideal text around which to center a computer-based community. The show boasts an intricate narrative structure that merges elements of science fiction within a dramatic serialized format and contains numerous unresolved and lingering plot threads that leave much open to interpretation. Through multiple viewings and intense debate, the group meticulously scrutinizes the text searching for clues that may potentially have a useful value in explaining or solving the series' puzzles.

By forming a network devoted to socializing, these individuals work as a group to untangle the mysteries occurring simultaneously on and off the island. Through the social act of posting behavior is displayed and demeanor is expressed by users who frequent these message boards at Lost-Forum.com. These interactions and activities within the group are a product of modern social situations and environments.

Although the task of compiling facts and clues about *Lost* is new, several social fronts are already in place to maintain group norms and control behavior in this complex

setting. In the social domain of a message board, performances "occur" in front of observers who remain relatively anonymous. The audience is virtually present, meaning that for the individual, everyone else is a member of the audience including those whose presence is not readily evident. Every post is subject to public scrutiny, meaning that segments of the audience have the ability to view messages undetected, without having to respond. Messages are constructed with this intended identity and audience in mind; however, one can never be completely sure of the scope and size of the audience. These individuals on the fringe of the performance, lurkers who observe and do not post, have access to the discussion, yet are not active participants. A critical question stemming from this concerns how one's audience is imagined in an anonymous environment? This question directly influences how a shared definition of the situation is established and maintained.

Findings

In general, online communities' popularity may be explained by their ability to "allow people of like interest to come together with little cost, help them exchange ideas and coordinate their activities, and provide the kind of identification and feeling of membership found in face-to-face interaction" (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998: 4). My case study of individuals at Lost-Forum.com reaffirms the qualities mentioned in this quote. The interactions on the threads I sampled indicate that users have developed a unique cultural system and social network within the context of the Internet.

This uniqueness stems from the ways in which the community has shaped the forum to fulfill three primary functions which include serving as a database for

information, a space for interacting with fellow fans, and as a location where collective information may be obtained and compiled by engaging in interpretive strategies. An outcome of participating in the theorizing process is the formation of a group and individual identity.

Norms/Rules

In the social domain of a message board, interactions "occur" in front of observers who remain relatively anonymous. To offset any potential barriers in communication, users make adjustments by engaging in certain practices. These strategies employed by users serve as tools that may be used to analyze the actions, behavior, and culture of the Lost-Forum.com community. The anonymity and fluidity of message board forums promote an unstructured environment in terms of the type of language interactions that are deemed acceptable. This informality results in a blurring of the boundaries regarding how an individual should perform or behave. Although clear stipulations on how to interact with others vary between Internet sites, the rules and organization of the observed group indicate the proper conduct one should adhere to in this particular context.

Given the significant number of individuals who are able to access to the public domain of a message board, it is necessary for the community to rely upon rules and norms of expectation to maintain order and align the actions of group members.

Additionally, one of the ways in which this collection of individuals forms a group identity is through the establishment of rules and norms that guide behavior in this online social situation. As one user, *stunnedtina*⁵, explained,

“I agree TheGibe and really I know some people are going to forget LOST but look at it this way...Lost is not something a casual viewer can just tune in and watch halfway through A Season. The fans like us, who are still sticking around the forums and still talking about Lost will tune in”

This quote reveals how users on this site identify themselves as part of an exclusive community, and actively display a commitment to both the series and the process of theorizing. In order to rules and norms to be implemented and obeyed, it is necessary for participants in the group to define their membership in the community.

Even though the task of compiling facts and clues about *Lost* is new, several social fronts are already in place to maintain group norms and control behavior in this complex setting. Users expect others to display tact and politeness in message posts, and have little tolerance for text that is perceived as rude.

However, through the process of constructing meaning about the series, questions over interpretations often arise. For instance, the topic of one thread centered on how members intended to spend time until the premiere of *Lost* the following fall. One user, *you think?*, lamented that in order to endure the situation he would “go into a coma.”

GaryOR-LFC replied,

“At first, I thought you were telling Exie to go into a coma, but then I looked at the topic title again! Haha!”

⁵ I retained all original usernames from the forum since these usernames are representative of the online environment and culture.

GaryOR-LFC became uncertain as to what the comment pertained to, or to whom it was directed, and initially believed that *youthink?* was referring to another user (*Exie*), rather than the topic of the thread. *youthink?*'s comments make a clear distinction that *Exie* is not simply another poster, but is an advanced member who fulfills a role as a moderator for the board. Moderators patrol various threads throughout the site, and ensure that each user is displaying appropriate behavior towards other users. This example indicates the users have an awareness of the hierarchy that is in place on the site, and align their actions to conform to this structure. The tacit rules stipulate that moderators are to be treated with respect. Any member who infracts on the rules is subject to a variety of penalties, the most severe of which includes being banished from the boards entirely.

However, it is not only the moderators who keep users in check. Within the threads, the users themselves serve as informal agents of social control and monitor behavior and actions of others. Users are quick to reprimand those who fail to adhere to the standards and expectations of the group. For instance, *mrs.dr.giggles* scolds another user for posting material that reveals details about future episodes,

“stpzeroridah alot of those points you have just made there would be considered spoilers on this page...because they are part of season 2 of the show. This board is for the final episode in season 2. I myself havent seen any of the 3rd season yet and do not want to see spoilers on boards i thought were safe to view. Sorry to sound grr (i dont meant to) but I purposly avoid boards such as the season 3 forum so i dont find anything out about episodes i havent seen.”

Specific areas are designated to prevent individuals from reading information that may potentially spoil critical plot developments and there is an ongoing commitment to protecting the secrets of the show. One of the most evident ways in which the rules of the group are expressed is through the use of informal mechanisms that guide interaction. For

example, tactics such as blacking out portions of the message (tagging) are employed to ensure that only those who seek spoilers will come across that information.

Socialization through both formal and informal means helps participants adapt to a virtual social environment and structures behavior. For instance, prior to the finale of season two, the moderator of the thread devoted to this episode, *Alicat*, issued a clear set of rules and warnings,

“we know from the producers that this is supposed to be explained in this episode. What happened? Who was involved? Was it really a crash or what? All aspects of the crash should be here. All spoilers that you know are spoilers **MUST** be tagged before 9PM EST (GMT-5). Sorry to inconvenience you lucky Canadians, but please spoiler tag **all talk** about what happens until 9. Speculation talk is welcome and does not require spoiler tags.”

This warning indicates that when posting messages, individuals should take precautions and take into account that the episode is airing at various times through various time zones. This strategic planning informs users of the rules and prepares them in terms of how to behave in the situation. In an online community, users come from a diverse range of locations and backgrounds, and interacting in this type of situation requires recognition of these dynamics.

Additionally, a crucial task of those who moderate the boards involves monitoring the language and content of posted messages. *Chris ov duki* was reprimanded for using “netspeak” or abbreviated words to express a theory,

“charlie could be in the coffin as his brother ~~don't care about~~ **doesn't care about** him ~~and~~ **and** he had no work mates or anything and jack is ~~responsible~~ **responsible** for the 40 deaths, therefore ben ~~sed~~ **said** ~~u~~ **u** you can save one person ~~and~~ **and** he saved kate 😊 but he feels guilty because ~~hes~~ **he's** left everyone behind to die ~~and~~ **and** ~~thats~~ **that's** ~~y~~ **why** he ~~sed~~ **said** we have to go ~~bak~~ **back**.”

Admin edit: we don't like netspeak on this forum. It's not going to hurt your fingers to type words out the way the English language is intended.

The moderator promptly issued a warning to this user which conveyed the standards expected for participation in the community. Moderators alert users to the rules concerning proper behavior and perform a vital function by monitoring threads to ensure that users do not divert from the thread topic and oversee the basic operations of the community.

Similarly, in an environment that relies solely on text to articulate one's writing style, particularly grammar and spelling, becomes an important feature of the conversation, as well as a topic of scrutiny. A seemingly innocent theory post by *skihuger* snowballed into a broader critique of language use,

“i feel like pen's dad must have been involved with darmha becouse really, how the Smurf could she know that an electromagnetic anomoly constituted where desmond is unless she had inside information. The "it" most definatly refers to the island, not the boat, again to the the EMA massage on the screen”

Netizenk in response to *skihuger*,

“It's ANOMALY not anomoly or anamoly. Wow, I must tell you I'm truly amazed with the level of illiteracy in this country... did you guys ever go to school? I went through 3 pages in this topic and 3 or 4 people managed to misspell a very simple 7 letter word in a hilarious manner... LOL. Well, I guess you can't expect too much from ordinary people if their president is incapable of pronouncing a very simple 7 letter word, yet he is a commander in chief of the most powerful military machine in the world that amassed a couple of thousand nucelar warheads... totally scary.”

Netizenk's criticism of *skihuger's* spelling transformed into a broader critique of societal intelligence in general. Ridicule in this public space sometimes spirals out of control because users are relatively uncertain of the tone or person's true intentions. It is difficult to determine if the comments are sarcastic or malicious. Another user, *Amelia* replied to *Netizenk's* comments,

“Wow, I must tell you I'm truly amazed with the level of rudeness shown by you...were you ever taught manners?”

You know you shouldn't make assumptions about people being Americans just because they post on this forum. You obviously wanted to use the opportunity to put down Americans, the President and those who might be less educated than you perceive yourself to be but it's really uncalled for, not to mention completely OT.

Even if they are all Americans and even if none of them can spell being condescending to others in order to make yourself feel superior only shows off your own insecurities. I'd also rather know people who are bad spellers and nice people than the other way around. 😊”

Amelia chastises *Netizenk* for showing a lack of manners and posting material that is not relevant to the topic. Also, *Amelia* points out the narrowness of *Netizenk's* comments in assuming that the forum only attracts Americans. Another user, *TheTaber*, sides with *Amelia* and offers an alternative view of communication in online settings.

TheTaber,

“Wow, I must tell you i'm truly amazed that you are actually going through a forum on the internet and checking spelling! Pretty sad... I'm pretty sure that most people don't give a darn as to how well they spell things in an internet forum. Most of the time they're just trying to type it as fast as they can to get it posted. Heck, it's more comon in today's internet culture to NOT spell things correctly, a lot of the time on PURPOSE!!

But thanks anyway Mr. High Horse... We'll make sure to work on getting our country's internet grammer up to the standards of your wonderful country...

Oh, and that was a wonderful Lost theory you shared with us! Oh wait, you DIDN'T share anything except for you ingnorance!!

Thanks Spelling Police... 😊”

TheTaber's comments reveal that the language used on the Internet follows an entirely unique format that cannot be measured against traditional standard forms of

communication. This defense brings insight to how Internet culture deviates from traditional communication practices and is built around speed and efficiency.

Furthermore, since manner is confined to the "tone" of the messages they post, the words chosen by the user signify the individual's demeanor. Reliance on slang or vernacular expressions delineates the distinctions between what is appropriate backstage and frontstage conduct. Through the use of informal styles of "speaking" individuals exhibit backstage behavior and create a more causal atmosphere. Norms and informal rules demonstrate to users the appropriate tone or demeanor to be implemented. However, as these examples indicate, failure to obey the rules often leads to confusion and misunderstandings.

Since this space is virtual rather than physical, one's "appearance" is restricted to the banner or captions, quotes that are selected by the user. Goffman (1959) notes that "while in the 'presence' of others" an individual "infuses" his or her actions with "signs" that serve to "highlight or portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure" (Pg. 30). This is especially true in the course of online communication. The lack of physical cues require individual to use various tactics to emphasize the material that they deem important and want others to notice. These signs are clues that reveal how one asserts an identity in an anonymous environment. One's grammar becomes critically important as an exchange between *Eastlad* and *pantsbench* illustrates. *Eastlad*,

"first time msg but here goes...

as much as i think this, i also dnt want 2 coz:

1. we dnt no much bout desmond yet, especially wiv Penny bein at the end.

2. Locke cnt b dead, coz lil birdie suggested 2 me. Sawyer (the original 1 who tricked Saywers parents) is in fact Lockes dad. both con men, coincidence?!!

i will leave u all 2 wonder bout my theory, ne comments il b glad 2 hear them”

pantsbench,

“I have a few comments about your grammar”

Eastlad,

“tryin 2 save time n space, as u can c i had alot 2 write”

“i dnt care, online i always type like this n it aint neva gona change. so unless u got constructive comments concernin wot i originally put i dnt want 2 hear it.”

Ched,

“lol they`ll give you stick for it mate trust me it`s easier to type propper, dont mean you have to talk propper though lol.”

pantsbench,

“Your ideas may be very interesting for all I know, but I can assure you most people won't take the time to read them when you write like you are text messaging.”

Eastlad,

“Seeing as I have been crucified for my latest yet first post I’ve decided to edit it once more into a proper format and not text language... I will leave you all to wonder about my theory, any comments I’ll be glad to hear them. Hopefully this new edited version is better for you.”

Eastlad’s failure to follow the established tone results in much ridicule. Eventually, this user concedes to pressures of the group to conform and eventually edits the posts to the appropriate format. If an individual wants to successfully communicate and have one’s theories taken seriously in the text-based environment, it is imperative to cooperate and articulate one’s ideas with clarity.

In virtual spaces, an individual becomes acquainted with the norms and socialized on how to participate by following the definition of the situation being presented. In the absence of direct social cues, participants in the interaction are given direction on how to behave by tuning in to indicators such as the politeness displayed, tone or manner of the messages. Although a significant amount of individuals has access to the public domain of a message board, the content issued by the team signifies the appropriate tone or demeanor and through the impressions given off by each message post, users are exposed to the norms of the group. Rules and codes of conduct have arisen to facilitate social exchanges in these new sites of interaction.

Barriers

Although following the norms and rules for posting messages is essential, the users on the forum still confront many obstacles that prevent them from effectively communicating with one another. While theorizing about the show, individuals are expected to use proper language and formatting; however, one additional barrier involves misinterpretation, which is a key feature of this setting. One frequent user, *pantsbench* addresses this issue by stating that,

“there are so many misremembered “facts” passed around on these boards that they begin to snowball and take on a life of their own. it’s like the telephone game, or US foreign policy”

Transferring information from the visual text to an online setting often presents many problems in terms of multiple interpretations. *Lost* is notorious for being open-ended which leads to much confusion as users exchange ideas and theories. In analyzing the

message boards posts, it became clear that the ways in which posts are worded as equally as important as the content of the messages.

A series of posts by *mr_bee* illustrate how the original text, as well as message board posts, are both subject to misinterpretation.

“EXACTLY! and didnt you hear it being whispered "elizabeth" when jack etc got shot with darts?? hmmm”

After posting this message, *mr_bee* clarifies the earlier post and replies,

“Sorry, i may of sounded patronizing there. i didnt mean to be 🙄 i meant to say "oh, but didnt you hear.." not "u didnt hear..Anyways i hope im forgiven 😊”

The ambiguity of posts creates confusion and requires individuals to develop and implement strategies in order to articulate one’s intended meaning. Users adapt to the environment a reliance on strategies to both clarify one’s own messages as well as to interpret the meanings of others. These devices facilitate communication in this social environment.

Furthermore, contradictory readings of the text form a significant barrier that prevents individuals from communicating successfully. Another user, *Moth* acknowledges these difficulties by asserting that:

“I do agree with you on the bit about people watching the same thing and coming up with all sorts of speculative readings...that’s definately something I notice a lot of on this board.”

With these barriers in mind, *mr_bee* proposes a solution to overcome the challenges of analyzing *Lost*. *mr_bee*,

“I think people kinda go off the track and forget the fundimental things about lost. We ALL know lost can go in absolutely every direction, and now its left us with so many directions to choose. But i think a good way to theorise the

next parts of lost is to take it in baby steps, analyse everything, but keep on moving gathering that information.”

mr_bee urges each user to continue building and a collective knowledge base through the contribution of small pieces of information. In the absence of a clear direction, *mr_bee* suggests this strategy to keep individuals on track by focusing on a common task. This plan also supports the goals of the group and maintains cohesion within the community.

Attention Seeking

Typically, in a conversation, individuals speak one at time in an orderly fashion. However, on the forum, messages are posted in synchronicity which leads to chaos and confusion. When multiple messages are posted at once, it becomes difficult for users to read every message being posted. Therefore, individuals may become selective about which messages they choose to read, which means that some messages may be overlooked. The following examples demonstrate the tactics used to grab the attention of other users and persuade them to read one's posts. *adkchamp* perceives that his/her ideas are being ignored and makes an attempt to get noticed by the group,

“NO ONE EVER LISTENS TO ME...i said that Jack's dad, Kate's step dad, and the real sawyer (and Hurley, i dunno but the numbers or it had to do with Dave (maybe he was real?)) is on the island!!!

In this situation, where multiple conversations are occurring simultaneously, the use of capital letters is one type of strategy employed to get one's "voice" heard. The difficulties associated with eliciting the attention of others require users to be innovative and adaptive to the problems presented by this asynchronous environment. *JeepJeep* expresses a similar frustration and laments,

“Post #309. I bet I could type out my credit card number here and not worry that anyone would read it^{???}🤔.”

Another method of attention seeking includes attempts to steer the direction of the conversation. The following exchange displays how users try to control the conversation according to their own distinct agenda. *mad hatter*,

"you guys did not even touch the main points of this episode."

To which *adkchamp* replies,

“dude we got like 8 months to talk about this...we want to express our feelings on the flash forward and how the producers kept this show alive by this...”

mad hatter felt the thread should center on the highlights of the particular episode while *adkchamp* had shifted the focus to the immediate reactions of viewers. This exchange reveals how users seek to shape the thread to coincide with the ideas and plot developments they find most relevant.

Another way to receive attention is to seek credit or acknowledgment for one's personal ideas. A common theme throughout the thread includes individuals claiming ownership over a particular theory, and demanding the appropriate recognition. *Swoon*'s comments to *buffyfan* indicate how information and ideas are claimed,

“oh, buffyfan
by the way:
You're not the first to come up with the theory that Jack and Claire are siblings.
I thought of it way before you. 🤔”

By clarifying when the theory originated, *Swoon* is attempting to declare ownership over this theory. Because knowledge is a type of currency in this environment, this type of behavior is quite common. Status within the group is dependent upon the possession of appropriate knowledge and correct information. The ongoing accumulation and exchange

of information allows each member to participate in a mutual task, and solidifies a group identity. Another example of claiming credit is apparent in a post by *BDT*,

“haha, this was so obvious, if you look at my messages you can see i posted it last week ...i can't help being so smart, i know all the rest as well if i think about it 😏 right here: <http://Lost-Forum.com/showthread.php...54#post1291354>”

This example also illustrates how posting a link serves as proof that establishes the original source of the material.

These separate messages posted by *Swoon* and *BDT* demonstrate how users attempt to gain acceptance through active contributions to the group. Displaying a proficiency or mastery over the material is also a way for an individual to manage the impressions others have, while reaffirming one's status as part of the group. The status that is sought by claiming ownership over a theory is part of a larger process of establishing an identity and distinguishing one's self in online situations. Feelings of belonging, as well as a common group identity are derived being an active participant in the narrative of the group.

Identity/Narrative of Self

As users engage in the process of theorizing and interpreting the show, aspects of one's personal identity are revealed, and a narrative of the self begins to emerge. Sometimes these narratives are purposely shared to lend support and credit to one's theories. Other times, a narrative is used to contextualize one's ideas. It is noteworthy how individuals seamlessly merge personal information while articulating ideas and thoughts about various episodes. These “characterizing tactics provide background and

situational pragmatic information that the sender thinks will be relevant to others' interpretation of her message" (Menchik & Tian 2008: 358). In lieu of visual indicators that accompany face-to-face interaction, users give context to posts by adding situational details to their messages, which anchor them to the physical world. As noted in the work of Menchik and Tian (2008), a "sender often includes information on her physical situation in the hope that others will better understand potential influences on the coherence of her message" (Pg. 359). In computer-mediated forms of communication physical details are obscured; therefore, to overcome this barrier individuals disclose personal contextual information to messages. These details facilitate group camaraderie and bonding. For example, *Anacosta* becomes integrated in the group by offering credentials that explain the textual information,

"Spider-Skot, take it from me. The two ice guys were speaking Portuguese. It's my native tongue and there is no way they were speaking any other language. I'm from Brazil and their "accent" wasn't based on Brazilian Portuguese that's for sure.

Brazil is a huge country (larger than the USA if you don't count Alaska and Hawaii) and have many different accents here (almost each state has a pretty different accent) but none of them was the one tried in that last scene. From the experience I have with Portuguese speaking communities that live in Rio de Janeiro, they were aiming for Portuguese or Angolan accents which are very different from the Brazilian one.

Not that it matters anyway, but you can be sure that was Portuguese they were speaking."

Anacosta's disclosure of personal background information is used to aid the group in discovering what is happening on the show. These details inform other users about the individual's personal biography and native language in the context of understanding *Lost*.

A portion of the communication on message boards consists of personal narratives or storytelling. Drawing from one's personal experience and knowledge and applying it to situation in order to explain the textual narrative of *Lost* is a common theme throughout the message boards. Evidence of this strategy is also apparent in *Blue_Morning's* comments,

"I haven't read all 15 pages (I have a toddler and am putting off cleaning the melon she smashed all over the wall to take a break and read), but my husband and I were talking about the shortened seasons and we've devised somewhat of a theory...We all know that around end of season two and beginning of season 3 that the show lost (no pun intended) some steam. A lot of not-so-serious viewers stopped watching because it was so convoluted. The consistency of the show's popularity comes from the die hard fans, and since we're in the young adult category they moved us out of the prime time slot and into late evening...we think this is why they have shortened the season. My husband and I are convinced they have done this to make the sale of their DVD's more popular. By the time season 3 is released in December everyone will be so desperate for more lost that the sales will probably be higher then if they were running a regular season like most other shows...it seems like a win-win situation. The show is loosing popularity on TV, so shorten the season, make the cult followers crazy, then release the DVD right when everyone will be so desperate for a Lost fix that they make buku bucks selling DVD's."

Although this user's personal circumstances are not directly related to the theory being discussed, this contextual information informs other users to how the distinct offline social environment offline have influenced the theorizing process. Incorporating personal details into one's posts is one method of orienting one's self to the other users on the message board. Through the process of "interactionally conjuring up a self," an individual "implicitly provides reasons for why he or she may have acted in a particular fashion or interprets things in a distinctive way" (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 12). Referring to one's real-world attributes, or offline events, serves to contextualize a post and to qualify why an individual interpreted the information in a particular way.

During conversation individuals “take others into account” in order to “construct socially useful depictions of themselves” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:12). The actions of *Lost* fans indicate that members of this group are attuned to an absent audience, and shape their identity to fit within the context of this uniquely structured community. Individual users present themselves in ways that coincide with the norms, and behaviors, of the overall group.

Expertise

A key element of creating an online identity involves expressing one's expertise or knowledge in relation to the show. This usually is manifested as an individual incorporates aspects of their personal life in order to explain what is happening on *Lost*. In the course of discussing the finale of season two, in which viewers learned details leading up the plane crash, *yakyak* offered some insight pertaining to the dynamics of the plane crashes in general,

“I fly airplanes as a hobby, so hopefully i'm correct here. The analog instruments will all work even if a EMP field hit them. All the guages use either vaccums or air-intake to take their measurements. These instruments are all you need in order to navigate the plane correctly. (i didn't include the turn-cordinator..but you don't really need that for navigation).*DG's are used because they are **not effected by magnetic disturbances** or have turning errors inherent to the compass.*”

Although this individual prefaces the comment by claiming to be a novice at flying, still relies on a basic familiarity with instruments in the cockpit and offers this information to build a possible solution. However, as a purported expert in the field, *JGSchmidt* questions some of the points made by *yakyak*,

“Are you saying the DG is used because it "does" or "doesn't" have

turning errors? I am a pilot as well and distinctly remember having to adjust the DG every 10 minutes or so on a X-C trip due to errors, albeit slight errors. Then again, I'm not an airline pilot and wonder if a Jet of that size would even have a DG amidst all the glass panels we see nowadays. I'll have to check my FAR/AIM again and see what is required backup instrumentation for IFR navigation.

Also, to address the individuals who believe that air traffic is dense, go outside and count how many planes are in the air right now in your line of sight. If you count more than two, I would be surprised. And that is over the mainland! If they are over the ocean, I highly doubt there would be anything within 3-400 miles, especially considering the routes of cross-ocean flights to be concentric circles. The likelihood of another plane in proximity is rather low.

The only time you would see numerous planes in the air closely positioned is around the major class B airports on both departure and arrival legs (like O'Hare, Philly, Washington, or the Big 3 in NYC to name a few)."

This message combines expertise knowledge with common logic to debunk the unlikely theory that another plane contributed to the crash of Flight 815. Referring to the precise instrumentation as well as the aviation regulation guide (FAR/AIM) supports the individual's status within the group as someone with an above average knowledge of the issue. Status within the group is reflected by the relation of the user to the collective knowledge.

To further illustrate how expertise operates within the community, I have included a few other examples. *Electromagnetism*,

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to step on your toes, but I am a pretty big physics geek and this makes no sense at all. What makes a plane fly has more to do with propulsion and aerodynamiaics, not air pressure. Do your homework on EMP's - EMP's do not split atoms."

Even though this individual does not possess professional credentials, he/she challenges the others to thoroughly research electromagnetic pulses before assuming this caused the crash.

Another user, incorporates personal information to explain how arrived at this theory. *JACKATE*,

"Hi everybody :)

First of all I do know nothing!!

I just want to say you probably think in the wrong direction..

I have a statistic course in this semester in my University..The first thing that they teach us how to choose a random sample to do your tests..So, if you want to make your result more accurate then choose samples that do not have links..So, they may choose these four character i.e. (Jack, Sawyer, Kate and Hurley) because they are different in their personality"

Mastery over the text influences the impressions that others have of a particular user.

By sharing and referencing offline situational details and background information, the user orients the reader to the message. These contextual pieces of information enable the individual to develop and express an online identity. Likewise, each individual's contribution of their personal experiences and/or knowledge enhances the overall community and forms a collective intelligence.

Teamwork

In fact, it is through the collaborative process of sharing and exchanging of pieces of information that the actions of each group member progresses to teamwork. Each contribution serves as a building block that forms the basis for a shared group identity. Users who frequent Lost-Forum.com come together in this social space and participate in discussions that revolve around theorizing about the series. By doing so, the group presents a collective image of the activity. As *Kelo-Vast* articulates,

"First and Foremost, let me just say thank you for responding with such detail. For me, this is what these forums are all about. Hashing out our theories and ideas together, sometimes arguing about them in an effort to come to a proper

conclusion that will likely be wrong on all counts anyway. I appreciate the respect of a well thought-out response"

This quote reaffirms the purpose and goals of the group and establishes a mutual respect and feeling of camaraderie toward the other users who post and discuss on the boards.

In response, *Dido* posts,

"Let me thank you Kelo-Vast for putting up a fight-the right contradicting evidence is always fool proof and is the best way to bring up two sides to an argument. I think that quote is what made me think that you thought the incident was just someone deciding to use the computer to talk...Im glad we got that cleared up."

The concept of teamwork is invaluable towards understanding the collective efforts of members on the message boards at Lost-Forum.com. Teams contain the qualities of a "secret society" in that each member relies on the other to contribute and formulate a base of collective knowledge that is distinct to the particular group. Through collusion and the process of collecting and sharing of information, the team adopts the characteristics of a secret society. Knowledge held by the group, or "inside" secrets, fulfill two purposes for the team: 1) to distinguish each "individual as being a member of the group" and 2) to enable the group to "feel separate and different from those individuals who are not in the know" (Goffman 1959: 143). Teammates rely on one another to sustain the interaction.

This interdependence is the foundation upon which the group is built. Both encouragement and support foster a team dynamic. *Emo*,

"now people are expanding beyond previous theories. Good job *jaded*. I remember learning in psych class that most MPD cases are caused by some kind of trauma or abuse usually before or around nine years old or later.

Emo congratulates *jaded* for his/her contributions and recognizes that productive theorizing requires each individual to continually draw from their experiences and

expertise. *Jmccreddie* assures the other users of his/her commitment to theorizing with the group, and requests that members join in the process,

“People i don’t think we need to focus on whats happened to those people ON the island... but what has happened in their past.. who they have come in contact with... major events we have seen etc. I need time to think bout this but i’ll be back doesn’t YOU ALL WORRY

P.s I think somebody who has lots of time on their hands needs to make a big character connections diagram... how they are connected ect. IF one doesn’t exist already that is. Peace”

Teamwork, in the context of the Lost-Forum.com community, consists of a reliance on others to provide supplemental information and pool resources to interpret the text. The community is sustained by the continual need to clarify details regarding the narrative text. This process is often accompanied by contestations over which interpretation is the most accurate or valid.

Conflict

At any point an individual’s actions (postings) may become disruptive or fail to coincide with the normative features of the team. These breaches in conversation, which often result from varying interpretations of *Lost* text, lead to conflict within the group. Another source of conflict involves disregard for the norms and rules that guide the group.

For example, *nickw23* becomes upset with the lack of direction in the thread and announces his/her complaints to the group,

“I would just like to say that half of this thread is a waste of time with lame jokes. You people aren’t funny, can’t we just theorize maturely?”

This user feels that fellow users are not displaying appropriate behavior and are failing to adhere to the standards of the group. Another user, *dribbling_fool*, counters,

“yeah, cos lost is so realistic and serious.”

To which *nickw23* defends stating,

“i didn’t say anything about being realistic, but it is serious.”

dribbling_fool then asks,

“you serious? Special powers, secret magnets and dominic monaghan? I cant take it seriously, i enjoy it cos its good fun”

dribbling_fool points out how the supernatural elements invite a certain type of interpretation and suspension of belief. *nickw23* responds,

“i’m just trying to say that it is annoying to read all the lame jokes on this site.
i’m not going to waste anymore time having an e-fight over it.”

This tension stems from the differing reasons people have for using the site. Some of the users engage in the task of theorizing with more serious attitudes and expectations, while other individuals adopt an open agenda.

Another source of conflict involves debunking theories posted by others in the group. This exchange between *Marvster* and *dcsipe* centers on the circumstances leading to the initial plane crash, and illustrates how conflict arises from the process of theorizing. *Marvster*,

“Also, are people still subscribing to the plane “crase” theory as in PLANE – FLOOR – WHACK ? There’s just no way in hell anyone could survive a fall from 30,000 odd feet in half a plane, in my opinion

dcsipe’s reply indicates how viewers struggle in explaining the reality of events on the series,

“So you can believe there’s an island that no one knows about that has a ‘smoke monster’ on it, as well as some crazy experiment, but you can’t fathom people surviving the crash???”

These varying interpretations of the plot often result in breaches in communication.

Marvster takes a realistic approach towards the program and justifies his/her position by citing quotes from the producers,

“Yeah, that’s the gist of it. Because...Everything is explainable – the writers have said so, so the ‘monster’ no matter how implausible, will eventually have a meaning. Fallin 30,000 feet? Not too many ways you can interpret that, but it’s physically impossible to fall that far and come out with cuts and scrapes.

dcsipe continues to refute the points made by *Marvster* and the debate continues until *refusnik* intervenes,

“Dudes, cool down. I see two PPLs are already pocking each other with pitot tubes before NTSB got there. C’mom – whatever happened in the series is part of the game and cannot be measured against real life experience simply because it wasn’t designed to be...just accept that it is possible, as a part of the game. Enjoy the show. Stop worrying about the rules.”

Marvster becomes frustrated, and eventually concedes to the pressure from other group members. He/she realizes that users are limited in terms of clarifying their ideas, and that misinterpretation is a fundamental barrier on the forum,

“*sigh* I know. My **point** is, that we dont need to accept it – they are alive, so there’s nothing to accept, since they blatantly did survive. Now, I’m only gonna say this once more because I’m getting bored of repeating myself. The plane could not have crashed as this would have resulted in the deaths of all the passengers. The speculation is about how, therefore, they happened to be on the island amid tons of wreckage. This show is all about speculation, and it’s clear that they could not have crashed. My point is that they must have therefore arrived on the beach via other means. That they survived is clearly not in question.”

Viewers recognize that *Lost* is built around contradictory readings of the text. This user expresses a willingness to suspend belief and put aside personal hesitations and questions in order to debate and analyze the more central plot elements. *Linnea_Land* argues,

“A number of people in this thread have argued that this plane crash was somehow, in some way, *planned* since so many people had connecting stories before the flight. I think this is a ridiculous argument. Here’s why.”

After presenting a detailed list of all the inconsistencies in the theory, *Linnea_Land* concludes that,

“Really, folks. I’ve seen this discussion come up again and again, including throughout this thread, and I don’t see it making any sense at all”

Relying on attention seeking strategies, *Milkman* attempts to redirect the conversation,

“EVERYONE LISTEN
you cant go arguing against things when what youre arguing isn’t fact either.
FACT: theres no point disproving other ideas because they dont make sense – almost everything about the programme doesnt make sense! smoke monsters? a cure for paralysis? a cure for whatever rose’s disease was? you cant argue your ideas as fact and disprove others cos they dont make sense. suggest ideas by all means. capiche?”

The validity of theories as well as line between fact and fiction on the series becomes a major source of conflict on this thread. These examples illustrate how competing interpretations of the text create conflict, and hinder the theorizing process.

Another instance where conflict arises involves the anonymity of the computer-mediated discussion. This example originates from a discussion of the finale of the second season when Michael must prove his loyalty to the Others in order to retrieve his son. *rokroll* sums up the episode,

“It’s obvious that michael was given a test, and he past the task...others were obligated to let him go...Everyone on this forum is a retard, especially the psycho people that come up with their own ideas. It’s all very self explanatory.”

Greenboro notices the hostility in the post and replies,

“dude, congratulations. over the past year i have seen some jackasses on this forum, but you sir are the king of all jackasses. what talent. insulting everyone who is mentally handicapped, or know someone who is, with your retard blast makes you a real jackass. but then adding the cherry on top by belittling this show and everyone on this site that thinks it is worthy of our time and enjoy further discussion, now that is top notch”

Provoked by *rokroll*'s comments, another user, *Bestshowever* responds,

“Hey rokroll,

Few things –


- 1) This post wasn't aggressive AT ALL
- 2) As others have pointed out you call other people retarded when you clearly have spelling troubles (past = events that have occurred prior to the current point in time, passed= successful in test)
- 3) You don't seem to understand self-explanitory. That is not a term you would use to describe *Lost*. If you ever get to an episode scratching you head over why something happened then the episode has clearly not explained itself.”

Without resorting to more formal and severe sanctions, the only way to keep *rokroll* in line and control the situation is by attacking the misspellings.

As a site for meaning production, this forum is also used as a platform to discuss broader cultural issues and topics. Certain subjects constitute another source of conflict among the group. For example, one user, *mystwoman*, expresses concern and distaste over discussion of the crash and makes a reference to the significant impact that plane crashes have had on American society,

“I dislike this crash language being used as if it was as significant as United 93 or Other flights of September 11. I hope the *Lost* producers are not piggybacking real and serious poignancy for cheap effect.”

This individual hopes that the producers are not attempting to capitalize on, or mock, the significant impact of plane crashes. Another user, *Alicat*, questions the relevancy of *mystwoman*'s comments in relation to the series,

“ It's a tv show. ALL TV shows play on our emotions. Politicians play on our emotions. What does that have to do with this episode, *mystwoman*?”

This thread is about the 815 crash on the Island. It's not about September 11 -- that's down in serious discussions.”

Dennie Hebels questions how the writers and producers should approach the topic of plane crashes in order to not offend viewers,

“Gee, let's ban *Lost* because it has a plane crash in it which might remind people of 9-11. What 'crash language' are the writers supposed to use then?”

This discussion reflects a broader commentary on what topics should be censored so as not to offend the general public. *johnny sack* reaffirms this by point out that,

“I agree that is ridiculous. So what, no movies or tv shows or music or anything can ever talk about a plane crash? It's not like they were glorifying plane crashes or something...And the plane didn't crash into the hatch or something, this wasn't anything to do with terrorists or anything . It's not even remotely related and until this post I never even once thought at sept 11 at all in relation to *Lost*.”

yaydieter,

“This whole argument is ludicrous. There is no 911 connection, and from 9/11 forward we aren't supposed to ever have any planes crash on TV, or Movies, etc. That's just dumb! 9/11 was a horrible, horrible tragedy, but.....time to movie on. Enjoy a TV show for god's sake! It's just television!”

This thread merges into a debate over where to draw the line between fiction and reality.

These posts reflect a critical site of conflict on the threads, which involves discussions over the realism portrayed on the series. Some viewers embrace the science fiction elements of the series, while others remain frustrated by the inconsistencies and lack of realism displayed by this form of storytelling.

A lengthy series of posts arguing over the lack of solid explanations given by writers of the series prompts a moderator, *Gabs*, to pronounce,

“I don’t particularly care who in here is pedantic or ostentatious or scurrilous or uncouth or any other word. Stop hijacking the thread. I’m going back and deleting posts from the last few pages; stay on topic or take a vacation from LF.”

The inability of the group to maintain a focused and civil conversation results in an intervention from a moderator. *Masterlubu* defends the writers and expresses faith in the direction of the series,

“My point is, just because we don't have an answer for something yet, doesn't mean we won't get it... We are watching events unfold from the eyes of people in a situation. We as viewers get to see things in a different perspective than say, Jack. Jack doesn't know about the video in the pearl hatch, all he's worried about is keeping people alive and making sure everyone is safe... Hopefully, this conflict with the others will force the losties into a new frame of mind, a frame of mind that facilitates them asking questions like Who are you and where did you come from? What do you want with us? Etc Etc.....”

chelshockx acknowledges that science fiction does not have to be based in reality,

“It’s television buddy. It does not have to be possible by what we’d deem as being possible. Sure, the writers said everything can be explained scientifically, but science fiction would still be scientific as far as television goes.”

JCoster wonders why *chelshockx* is trying to understand the series in terms of explainable scientific phenomena if the show is not grounded in reality,

“Yesss but dude, if it is only television where science fictions would still be scientific, then what the hell are we wasting our time on here for speculating about hoes at the poles or the properties of EMPs?”

Although these conflicts are not easily resolved, a pattern of acceptance emerges. Rather than avoiding conflict, members of the group view it a rational tool necessary to discussions.

Extended Examples

Within the episodes sampled, two threads in particular sparked an intense debate and high volume of posts. These series of posts provide evidence of each of the prominent themes within the coding schema. These exchanges also incorporate many of the strategies and attributes mentioned earlier in this section. *Sauron* and *BDT* engage in a debate at the conclusion of Season Two over the causes leading to the crash of Flight 815. *Sauron* begins,

“Well, BDT, seeing how you ignored my very last comment, I'll say that, no, I am not stupid.”

Ignoring posts is easily accomplished in this anonymous environment. *Sauron* criticizes *BDT*'s failure to reply, which finally prompts a response,

“ok then whiseguy, why did they tell "figure out why flight 815 crash" if they don't say anything about it? why do those russians get signals which you say just so small that they can only get some forks stick to a wall?? why did you think the plane crash?”

In a rebuttal, *BDT* defends his/her prior statements by referring to the promotional teasers that explicitly stated that this finale would resolve why the plane initially crashed. *BDT* continues, and explains that this position is just an idea, regardless of whether it is correct or not. This comment reflects a core value shared by group members. Generally, most theories are accepted as progress within the group, these contributions are considered valuable to discussions, even if they hold little merit. This is an example of how crucial teamwork is to the group, and how the collaboration of knowledge as a collective group is emphasized over any particular individual theories.

In an effort to stop the arguing, *ryanv1978* states that,

“none of us know the first thing about physics, and how/why the plane broke into tow pieces. Looking into it is just a waste of time.”

ryanv1978 assumes a lack of expertise among group members, and sees this arguments as baseless.

Moya takes another approach toward diffusing the tension by offering support and agreeing, “Yay! an ally.” Although this consensus helps to offset the conflict, it is not immediately apparent with whom or what *Moya* is agreeing.

Likewise, users continually make a point to acknowledge that differing points of view are accepted and encouraged by the group. Establishing consensus, either through direct support of another’s argument, or by agreeing to disagree, is vitally important within the thread because it forms the basis for group cohesion. *Still* reaffirms the value of debate as a necessary part of the theorizing process,

“clearly some people just can't accept our little theory & that's just fine. The whole point of this thread is to discuss the crash. now, what about my arguments, that Des didn't crash 815? as they would have us believe..(you'll have to read back a couple of pages)”

To orient other users, *Still* refers back to earlier message. The purpose of this tactic is to gain feedback or support. *neenaw* ,

“I don't believe that Des crashed the plane either...When he got the system failure alert there wasn't that much destruction within the hatch....oh but it pulled a plane from the sky - nah, it doesn't work for me.”

neenaw and *Moya* agree with *Still*. *Moya* points out the evidence that supports the idea that some type of magnetic force contributed to the crash. *Moya* posts the following message,

“Well I don't get it either because I'm not a physicist. All I can say is that there's magnetic forces on the island, there's lots of evidence towards this. Jut cos it's not

all been explained to us yet doesn't mean that we can't speculate if you know what I mean.”

Several hours later, *Pusher805* counters, “I have a bachelors degree in physics.” This statement is an example of the problem of synchronicity. In order to properly theorize and participate in the conversation, it is essential for users to follow an entire thread.

Moya points out the merits of *Marvster's* theory, which centers on the idea that the crash was staged for a specific purpose, namely so this particular group of individuals would land on the island. *Moya*,

“Marvster, I see what you mean, and I'm not saying it's rubbish at all, is a really well thought out theory and there is evidence to support it. But however, there is just as much evidence to refute it if you know what I mean. Unless something else happens in the next series to emphasize the stuff that can't be explained then there's not much chance I'm gonna believe that the crash was staged.”

Marvster sees that the individual is from the United Kingdom, then amiably agrees to bet on the issue of whether or not the crash was intentional. *Marvster*,

“Tell you what...if its staged, I'll give you a tenner next time I'm in manchester.”

Marvster then states,

“I agree I'm keeping an open mind about the whole crash scenario, although I am pretty damn sure it was staged. It should be debated though, and people shouldn't just say one theory is 'wrong' cos they don't agree with it”

This quote reveals the standards employed by the group. Through the collaborative process, the group relies heavily on proof to debunk theories, rather than personal opinions. This reliance on debate is what keeps the momentum of the group going.

neenaw counters the open-mindedness of *Marvster*,

“no offence, i don't think you are too open-minded about it. you're convinced it was staged and will give any reason at all to explain how it could be...no one is really saying a theory is 'wrong.' a theory is a theory afterall. but when there are

loads of holes in a theory people are gonna point out and be like 'c'mon, that's a big daft eh' aren't they?"

Marvster attacks the know-it-all attitude displayed by *neenaw*,

"Hey looks like we have the 3rd writer of the show here folks! I guess none of us have to watch anymore since you can tell us everything that happens. A little open mindedness? Cheers."

In order to build upon knowledge of the series and continue collecting information, it is necessary for members of the group to remain open to various ideas. However, *Sauron* replies that minimum criteria must be established to determine what information is worth pursuing and discussing,

"There is a thing as too much open mindedness, and I get tired of people saying "Hey it's Lost, anything could happen", because that's not true. Yes, there is a wide range of things that can happen, but in the end its realistic, mostly. The crash wasn't staged, we've known this since the first half of Season 2; the plane crashed, we've seen it,; and it's not a group hallucination, as we've also seen this, as we saw the reason why it crashed. So I wasn't really telling you anything you shouldn't already know from just watching it."

The users realize they need to establish some basic guidelines regarding what potentially could happen on the series in order to theorize collectively as a group. Likewise, cohesion and teamwork are dependent upon common interpretations and shared definitions of what occurred, or may occur, on the program. *Sauron* reiterates this point,

"Come on, explicit Visual evidence, there is a different between being open minded and simply believing every conspiracy or paranoia theory. I don't know if you are deliberately not understanding my point or what, but this show is all about pulling the wool over the audiences eyes...now i am progressively more and more amazed, with some of the fairy stories that some people come up with on this site, that people can't accept the premise that this MAY possibly, conceivably, maybe have some validity!!!! Lost isn't about lying to the audience, they may fool us, but they don't lie, and yes, there is a difference."

Sauron defends the importance of visual evidence for either proving or disproving a theory, and defends the show by claiming that tricking the audience is sometimes a necessary component of *Lost*. This statement reflects how *Lost* blurs the line between fiction and reality. Ironically, the group does not seem to recognize that this deception is what fosters teamwork as the group discusses and dissects the visual text. However, *Marvster* acknowledges the importance of continued debate,

“Apologies - I was under the impression that this site was about debating what was happening on the show, when in fact, opinions need to be given the a-ok...I feel that the crash was staged, feel free to lose sleep over the fact that I think that, and have such crazy notions as WHY WERE NONE OF THE TREES BROKEN AROUND JACK WHERE HE WAS LYING? Man, that's some damn careful falling.”

Sauron distinguishes between theorizing and gathering facts.

“If you want to crazily theorize and speculate you can go to the "Theories" board, where I would actually respect your theories. Heres? This is not a place for theories as far as I'm concerned, it's a place for facts, and the facts we know are that the plane crashed, since it's the basic concept of the show.”

This distinction divides the activities of the group. For some users, the purpose of the thread is to identify facts and then to build connections, while other users view it as a the space in which to test out theories. These competing uses for the site often lead to disagreements and hinder the overall productivity of the community. *Marvster* disagrees with *Sauron*, and points out that neither knows anything about the other,

“Sorry but thats utter garbage, and who said I wanted your respect? I don't even know you, and nor do you know me, so lets keep this cordial shall we? Facts are precisely the thing we dont have, unless you can show me some magic document that states in black and white "Yes the plane crashed"

Rather than engaging in a personal attack, *Marvster* suggests that each maintain a civil attitude by continuing to gather facts and pool information. This is a clear example of

how maintaining shared definitions of the visual text, as well as the objectives of the group, is crucial for the community to remain stable. *neenaw* interjects and defends what topics are acceptable for discussion on this thread,

“oh c'mon you can talk about anything relating to the crash in this thread, theory or not surely?”

Sauron, agrees and clarifies the tone of his/her previous message by justifying the reasoning behind the comments,

“Yeah, and I wasn't being rude btw, I was just pointing out where theories belong. Outside of that place they really shouldn't be used to explain things or argument, at least not solidly. And yes neesaw, you can, but not at the expense of visual evidence.”

Trying to quell the situation and avoid further conflict, *Marvster* responds,

“that is not the point. This is not a personal fight or me opposing you. (or anyone) This is about the Show itself debunking that general direction of theories. I just find it unbelievable that, with all the fanciful jibber jabber that gets posted here, that people treat my opinions on this thread like total nonsense.”

This example represents a clear instance of an individual trying to save face amongst the group. By drawing attention to his/her own personal theories and distinguishing them from the other posts on thread *Marvster* is attempting to gain recognition as a contributing member of the group. *Sauron*,

“Well, there is a difference between theory and speculation. But when the show discredits either, that's it.”

Marvster,

“IN YOUR OPINION

Why can't you admit the possibility that I might b in some way, on some level not entirely wrong...I post on here to discuss a show that none of us now much about, and I don't think that something that hasn't been proven or disproven (and it HASN'T) can be arbitrarily pooh-poohed like this.”

luckyhobbit,

“*yawns* this is getting really pointless, actually *falling asleep* ...let's see if i can stand coming back or not”

Another series of exchanges illustrate the confusion and misinterpretation that arises from the content of *Lost*. For example, a scene at the conclusion of Season Three marks the first time that the Losties are able to make contact with the outside world. One of the castaways, Charlie Pace embarks on a mission and ultimately sacrifices his life in order to send a message to a rescue boat. After *wahinetoa* posts comments relating to this development, *nitinrao* points out the discrepancies in *wahinetoa*'s interpretation from what actually happened. *nitinrao*,

“dood..you got this mixed up:

1. Check yo facts brotha. Penny said "Who's Naomi. What boat?! (confused)". And Charlie's last message on his hand is "Not Penny's boat".

wahinetoa is surprised at how the comments were interpreted, and defends this line of reasoning by inserting a link to the actual transcript from the episode to clarify the dialogue. *wahinetoa* replies,

“Geez lousie. You got all at what I wrote? Dude, perhaps you read it too fast?

1. I DID check my facts...thank you very much

Those facts I used are in the script. - points to the above - speculation on them, was mine alone. Please don't get the two confused...Lost has misled the audience a lot - such is their complexity - so nothing can be taken as black and white. It could be an elaborate ruse or simple truth twisted into a knot. Depends on how the writers go with it.”

nitinrao apologizes for the tone of the post, which was misconstrued as being abrasive,

“sorriy if I made it sound that way..and also I apoligize for being rude”

wahinetoa accepts the apology and says,

“🙄🙄No worries mate. I'm sorry for getting bent outta shape too - us Southern gals are kinda snippy 🙄🙄- we need a bit of reeling in now and then. 🙄🙄 We're cool. 😊😊😊”

In this example, emphasis is placed to indicate tone of the message. Emoticons, or smiley faces orient the reader, and are used to express one's mood or emotions. These symbols are used in lieu of physical gestures, which are impossible to express in online mediated situations. Also, emphasizing in this manner provides obscured information and details necessary to interpret the message. *wahinetoa* concludes,

“Have to say, it's quite lovely to figure out these kind of dilemmas with fellow lost fans. 🙄🙄 Makes ya feel like you're not the only one getting punked, when S4 rolls around and makes toast of all our ideas! 🙄🙄”

A part of the collaboration process involves developing a group sense of identity. A key component of the forum includes a reliance on other users to uncover and debate the facts. These collaborative tasks and endeavors support a sense of camaraderie and solidarity within the group. For example, *nitinrao* backtracks and admits to not having viewed the entire episode,

“alrite...waoh...I missed most of this episode, and couldn't find it online until now when I was reminded of i...damn im an idiot..lol I'll respond after watching this. But based on what you said...I see a huge connection that may tie most of what I said earlier...Damn I did not see that you were a girl...hehe I would've understood the 'reeling'. like i did...haha cuz I think girls are more passionate about these kinds of things than guys. to make up for my rudeness, I gotta say - the way you tie the facts and make contentions is impressive, and my first impression was that you are really smart....keep it up!”

nitinrao alters behavior and begins to address *wahinetoa* differently after of the discovery *wahinetoa* identifies as a female. After realizing that a faux pas has been committed,

nitinrao partakes in impression management to neutralize the situation. This revelation leads *nitinrao* to make amends for previous rudeness and praise *wahinetoa's* intelligence. Goffman would identify this as an instance of saving face in the course of conversation.

It must be noted that the message threads I examined range from a few to over 900 posts. Many of the threads are still ongoing, which means they contain posts dating back to over four years ago. The posts I have included are typical of recurring themes and topics from various threads and clearly trace the emergent rules and conflict within the group.

Discussion

In this discussion I would like to revisit the research questions that guided my analysis. First, how are complex group behaviors structured in contemporary social settings and spaces designed for communication purposes? Second, how is identity formed and shaped in an anonymous environment? Third, how is intra-group conflict managed and mediated in an online setting? Fourth, how is meaning constructed through the presentation of information and experience on message boards? Applying these questions to my case study, my examination of how information is accessed, transmitted, and shared within the group reveals that individuals use knowledge as a basis for initiating interaction, creating social ties, and asserting identity.

In regards to the first question, my observations indicate that complex behaviors in this environment are structured and constrained by the implementation of a shared set of norms and rules. Members of the group are socialized in terms of how to properly

behave within the group. By internalizing the norms, users learn what actions are permitted and which are subject to ridicule. In order to maintain status as a member of the community, users must comply with standards established by the creators of the forum, and upheld by a group of senior members, or moderators of the forum.

For the most part the community is self-organized; therefore, users tend to rely more on informal mechanisms to control behavior. For example, an individual is likely to be chastised by other users for posting messages containing spelling and grammatical errors. If the user consistently refuses to alter their messages, a moderator will step in and issue a formal warning of expulsion.

Interactions are also structured through the passing and sharing of information. Users rely on one another on the boards to help in the theorizing process. The purpose of interacting on the forum is to get feedback on ideas and contribute by offering one's own interpretation of the material. In order to accomplish these tasks the members must establish trust. The lack of physical cues prevents users from knowing anything tangible about the other posters. However, through the process of developing interpretive strategies, the users begin to rely on others to either supplement or to confirm information. In this way, the users at Lost-Forum.com are representative of Levy's vision of a collective intelligence. This network is sustained by a group of individuals who share a similar enthusiasm for the program, as they seek to collectively combine their mental abilities and knowledge.

Expanding beyond the immediate others in one's social network, and seeking out anonymous partners with whom to interact leads to the development of social ties

across the globe. Users rarely inform others of their location or nationality, unless the information has value to the theorizing process. In this way, connection and identification with others on the forum is based on relationship to material and information rather than physical geographic relations. Users are able to sustain discussions because they are based solely around topics that pertain to the show.

My next research question centers on the ways in which identity is formed and shaped on the forum. Internet forums, such as the one I studied, open questions about how individuals represent themselves. Because interactions through message board posts occur under conditions of anonymity, users are able to explore and perform alternate identities. These spaces redefine notions of identity and agency. Users on the forum demonstrate agency as they organize as a group in response to both the cultural text of *Lost* as well as to the convergence of media technology.

Primarily, a group identity is formed and shaped through the internalization of the group norms. Acceptance into group occurs by sharing valuable information or displaying expertise in relation to the series. Users gain acceptance by implementing a variety of tactics designed to draw the attention of others. In order to gain recognition users place emphasis on certain words or phrases. Another manner of distinguishing one's self within the group is through the use of emoticons. These smiley faces are a way to personalize one's message, and bring aspects of personal identity to the forum.

Also, identity is established by incorporating characterizing background information in one's posts. Posters bring experiences to the forum and share referential information in order to contextualize messages and theories. By contributing personal

material, the individual is able to demonstrate expertise in relation to the series. This information serves several purposes: solidifying the individual's role within the community, concretizing the text, and giving meaning to both the activity and the environment. Individual identity is shaped by the group norms and rules as well as the anonymous others, and individually held information becomes the basis for creating an online identity.

In summary, group identity stems from the shared commitment to abiding by the norms and rules as well as participating in the group activity of theorizing. This process of compiling information necessitates that each member share experiences and biographical information with other members of the group. Technology shifts how experiences, as well as the process of how they are related. The forum provides a space where individuals may perform an identity, and in this study I was able to uncover instances when identity was shared and presented while in the presence of an anonymous audience. Members of the forum use *Lost* as the vehicle around which to interact and to shape personal narratives, and I began this project with a keen interest in discovering how selves are storied online. However, my data does provide evidence of how identity narratives are formed in this environment.

My findings suggest that identity is often created in opposition to others. This relates to my following research question which concerns how intra-group conflict is managed and mediated on the forum. Theorizing is a group project, and the organization and rules of the forum stipulate that users are expected to display courtesy towards the ideas and opinions expressed by others, and to refrain from personal attacks. Yet, the

conditions of the environment result in situations where conflict arises. Disagreement and misinterpretation over the text of *Lost* are two of the most common factors that contribute to conflict. These sources of conflict stem from barriers produced by communicating via textual posts.

One of the distinct advantages this forum is the ability for a large group of individual to assemble and share information simultaneously. However, the overload of information and messages often undermines the efforts of this group. This ability to share unprecedented amounts of information actually creates chaos within the group and frustrates the users, especially when they are confronted with the difficulty of getting others to notice their posts and ideas. The lapse in time between when a message is posted and eventually read means that messages get overlooked, users become frustrated. Users overcome this obstacle by continually referring back to previous posts or copying and pasting previous messages in order to indicate to whom a message is intended.

Often, disputes are mediated by formal sanctions imposed by moderators. However, members of the group approach conflict as a functional and even necessary aspect of the theorizing process. Challenging ideas is an acceptable and even welcome part of the conversations, and many users support the argument that contradictory evidence facilitates discussion. Users continually become engaged in debates over the validity of knowledge and information. Rather than seeing debates as detrimental to the productivity and activities of the group, users defend these arguments as a functional method necessary to improve the quality of theories.

This network of users is formed on the basis of collecting information, and underlying this is an implicit trust in others. In this setting, trust is based upon a mutual willingness to theorize. In order to realize this goal, users must respect the ideas of others and compromise. Posters use the theories of others to generate ideas, even if the theory is being debunked. This voluntary commitment to dissecting *Lost* solidifies the users as a team with a distinct purpose and the formation of a collective intelligence has evolved from this enhanced experience of relating to *Lost*.

Within this knowledge community, the information held by each individual becomes a collective resource for the entire group. Working together in this manner to piece together bits of information has implications in terms of how meaning is constructed. Through the establishment of norms and rules and the formation of collaborative teams, the users on the forum give meaning to the environment as well as the activity. By combining resources and collectively strategizing, participants actively reaffirm and justify the purpose of the forum.

Within the message boards, users constantly negotiate the cultural value of the activities in which they are involved. These threads are used as a space for navigating new social roles. Often these meanings are produced through the presentation of personal information and experiences. These meanings are disguised within the content of information pertaining to discussions of *Lost*.

My findings suggest that these meanings cement the purpose and value of each individual within the group. These shared meanings enable members to interact successfully in spite of the challenges and barriers presented by this type of

communication. For example, misinterpretations, due to a lack of physical cues, often hinder communication and result in conflict. However, meaningful conversation is still possible, as long as users implement corrective strategies to overcome the obstacles. To resolve these issues, norms and rules are relied upon to guide behavior and keep the interactions running smoothly.

These transformations restructure the behavioral patterns of individuals in the context of contemporary social settings. Through the online transfer of information about *Lost*, this sophisticated network of users has developed a sense of belonging and collectively created a subculture based upon a foundational commitment to the shared task of collecting knowledge and information. Members of the forum are united in their dedication to the search for answers and explanations in regards to the series. In fact, knowledge is glue that holds these online social situations together, and the passage of information serves as a foundation for establishing and sustaining the community atmosphere. Knowledge about *Lost* serves as a universal resource and tool that facilitates communication and joins together not only ideas but people as well. Exchanging information through computer-mediation involves a series of negotiations that is highly dependent on the establishment of consensus and trust amongst anonymous individuals.

Clear distinctions exist between face-to-face and computer-mediated social interactions and how information is transmitted in this environment shapes the overall definition of the situation and the subsequent individual responses. My analysis yielded results in connection with the nuances in interpersonal interactions pointed out by Goffman. Users on the forum rely on variations of these situational cues and protective

practices to bring structure to the environment. Through the implementation of a set of shared norms and rules, the group establishes the site as a valid space for interaction. These tools reflect adaptations made in online social situations used to keep interaction free from disruptions.

Also, these tools equip users with the skills necessary to socialize in this environment and inform users regarding how to behave appropriately on the forum. Users follow norms in order to maintain involvement in group activities including theorizing. In addition, these rules also form the basis for framing and presenting aspects of personal identity. Identity and emotion are expressed through the incorporation of characterizing information within a post. Also, members draw upon referential information from the real world as well as personal experiences to make connections and become acquainted with other users.

An unanticipated outcome of this social setting includes new and creative ways of demonstrating self-expression. For example, the use of emoticons is a key way in which users are able to display and share personal emotions. This blurring of private and public boundaries means that users also have agency in determining how to assert individual identity to others. Personal identities are constructed with absent others in mind and individuals may conceal information since one may never be fully aware of the audience or "who" is viewing the comments in this anonymous environment. Performances within this computer-mediated social situation may not be categorized into distinctly frontstage or backstage behavior. Rather, these online acts blur the boundaries between private and public, as behavior is neither entirely visible to others, nor completely hidden.

Successfully navigating the forum requires the development of an additional skill set related to ensure that one's comments receive attention. These skills relate to expertise, which is used to gain recognition and achieve status within the group. While individuals seek attention for theories, meaning is only derived from the consensus given by others. In this instance, status is built around *collectively* acquiring and possessing knowledge in relation to *Lost*. Therefore, status is not hierarchal because information and knowledge are largely derived from the collaboration process. In this manner, aspects of collective intelligence are evident as the group forms a team based on the need to collaboratively pool knowledge.

Likewise, the establishment of a cogent set of rules and standards is accompanied by the struggle to construct meaning from competing interpretations. Through intense debate and contests over the cultural text, members of the group maintain Goffman's notion of a veneer of consensus by agreeing to respectfully disagree. Users repeatedly contend that the best theories are the ones that stand up to criticism. This consensus and mutual commitment to debunking faulty theories indicates that conflict is an expected and unavoidable aspect of the community.

Knowledge about the program's content opens the door to new social realms and ways of connecting with others via computer-mediated situations. Interpreting *Lost* involves translating the visual narrative into an accessible dialogue. Identity, at the individual level, is based upon having a solid grasp of the show's narrative text. Overall, the group claims an identity through the attachment of meaning and establishment of rules and norms within the environment. Users pride themselves on being privy to the

inside information or "secrets" of the show and becomes a form of cultural capital that is the basis for forming relations with other fans. This is a tool used to distinguish the devoted fans from casual viewers and even non-viewers are excluded from participating in since they do not possess this fundamental knowledge. Although outsiders are welcome to join, they must first be socialized to both the norms of the group. This process involves acquiring the information necessary to contribute to the conversation.

Users are expected to take precaution to not spoil information, to respect the opposing views of other users, use proper spelling, and only post information that is germane to the topic of the particular thread. Failure to conform or behave appropriately means the individual risks exclusion from the group. Overall, these norms, values, and attitudes held by the group guide how narratives are constructed and formatted within the context of this distinct community and define the culture of this online group.

The convergence of information across mediums significantly alters how individuals become integrated socially. The complexity of *Lost* necessitates the exchange of information on the forum, which in turn promotes teamwork. Collective tasks including pooling and trading knowledge facilitates social bonding and leads to the formation of a group identity. A mutual dependence on others solidifies cohesion within the group and a collective identity produced by collaborating intelligence and knowledge within the computer-mediated space.

Message boards expose individuals to new modes of connecting with others and processing information. Repeated exposure to crucial information including the key plots, characters, and mythology of the show is one way that newcomers hone their skills.

Demonstrating one's knowledge about the series is the final step in becoming ingratiated within the group.

Although many barriers exist in this new paradigm for interaction, members of the group consistently rely on the consensus of others to affirm the meaning one has constructed about the cultural text. Through my analysis of the message board posts I was able to observe the micro social relations and observe how individuals express agency and claim ownership over the content through own personal reaction and interpretation. The seamless passage of information in this environment facilitates the process of identity formation and the creation of substantial relationships. These relations are not free of conflict, which arises from misinterpreting *Lost* as well as the message posts of others.

Furthermore, stepping outside local boundaries, technology has altered social life so that “experiences have become common denominators that link all of us regardless of status or position” (Meyrowitz 1985: viii). The experience of watching and subsequently interpreting *Lost* is the activity that unifies this social group. Discussions and interpretations, along with shared reactions, form the common ground that facilitates group solidarity and identity.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of studying human interaction, sociologists have systematically noticed that behaviors vary according to a particular social situation. Behavior is dependent upon the setting, as well as the audience or the perceived presence of others. Late modern social encounters center around one additional component: the transmission of information. Computer-related technology modifies how society obtains and uses information; and subsequently, restructures the resulting interpersonal interactions.

This study of complex group behaviors in the context of the message boards at Lost-Forum.com has demonstrated that users make adaptations to overcome the significant barriers in communicating via textual messages. Participants in the interaction frame their interpretations and reactions in relation to *Lost* by incorporating aspects of their personal experience. These posts contain characterizing information and are instances of online identity performances. Users refer to attributes from the physical world in order to substantiate theories. As meanings are attached to the narrative text of *Lost*, the message board community also defines and negotiates this activity as well as the space in which it occurs.

Through a series of collaborative tasks the group creates a network in which social ties are developed. These affiliations are based on the faith that the whole community collectively may resolve the mysteries of *Lost*. This collaborative teamwork solidifies a group identity and reinforces each member's commitment to theorizing.

My observations also indicate the significant role that conflict has on interaction within the group. The main sources of conflict include misinterpretations stemming from the social environment as well as the cultural text itself. These barriers also indicate challenges posed by conducting online research.

Implications for Future Research

When social relations are lifted from physical locations, geography ceases to be a defining factor that stipulates who an individual is. Online spaces offer the ability to manipulate one's "gender, race, age, body shape, and economic status" (Mitchell 2000: 12). Primarily, this anonymity prevents the researcher from knowing anything substantial about the research subject. Another challenge includes the inability to discern whether a lack of physical cues influences people to interact or behave differently. Communication solely through textual messages makes it difficult for the researcher to detect sarcasm outside the context of vocal inflections or physical gestures.

This study also raises several issues concerning the credibility of the data. For example, the researcher cannot be certain of the credibility of the information being posted. Another concern centers on the misrepresentation of the sample population due to a lack of physical indicators. A final matter focuses on the fact that this community consists only of a subset of viewers and may not be representative of the total viewing population. Many viewers watch *Lost*, yet choose not to post on message board forums.

Cumulatively, these challenges illustrate the need to rethink and revise current methods for conducting a thorough online analysis. My suggestion to enhance the quality

of online research involves standardizing and refining the methodology applicable for these projects.

My analysis provides a framework for other analyses in similar research settings. As focus shifts towards the recognition of the Internet as both a practical tool and subject for social research, scholarly attention has also begun to spawn an interest in the potential benefits that may be derived from this area of research.

Although this study relies on a single case study, this type of research has implications for the emerging body of literature concerning modern forms of social interaction. For future research I recommend exploring the variations that may exist between computer-mediated communities. I propose to accomplish this by merging qualitative and quantitative methods to gather extensive information on users.

My examination of *Lost* message board posts is limited in scope as data was restricted to the content of the messages posted. Ideal resources for expanding this project include obtaining profiles of users containing biographical information such as age, geographic location, and frequency of participation on the site. Future studies should focus on interviews with users to supplement this preliminary research. Through direct questions, the researcher may gain additional insight to the perspectives held by members of the social group. The longevity of these affiliations remains to be seen; however, I feel comparing populations of *Lost* viewers on different forums may offer a more solid understanding of these relationships.

An additional area of interest involves incorporating the perspectives of producers of the series to address the reflexivity of *Lost*. More specifically, how much, if at all, does

the feedback of users on message boards influence the narrative of the series?

Uncovering the relation between the producers of the cultural text and the viewers would help to illuminate the how both groups coexist in a modern society that increasingly encourages the reader to adopt a participatory role.

Conclusion

Late modernity is defined by intense engagement with virtual technology. A product of this shift includes unparalleled forms of communication within these new sites of interaction. The encounters and situations I analyzed are characterized by anonymous others, asynchronous messages, and a lack of a distinct physical contact. This site represents a space where social ties may be established outside of local contexts; and likewise, alternative identities may be explored.

Social relations within the forum are indicative of the qualities of a collective intelligence. Knowledge and information are the key mechanisms that structure interaction in this setting and form the basis for social ties to develop. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) reaffirms that, “it is not the physical setting itself that determines the nature of the interaction, but the patterns of information flow” (Pg. 36). Identifying how the transmission of information structures and influences communication in this online setting has been my primary goal for this study. In order to fully understand the patterns that are evident in a computer-mediated situation, it was necessary to also identify the environmental factors that shape social interaction.

This forum offers individuals the capacity to expand their agency. This site represents a space in which a diverse population of individuals may draw upon their personal experiences to cumulatively build a collective base of knowledge. Members who frequent the site influence the operations and activities of the group. Likewise, another fundamental feature of this space is the opportunity to explore and to construct personal identity.

Computer-related technology impacts interactions and experiences on the individual level and reshapes how identity is formed and shared with others. These devices allow the individual to expand beyond immediate others to develop social networks across the globe. Interactions within these spaces are largely based on theorizing, interpreting, and constructing meaning.

In contemporary society, social ties are based upon one's relation to knowledge and information rather than physical geographic location. These factors organize and structure social relations. In this manner, social structure is evident in the daily tasks and in the interpersonal interactions, which are both mediated by computer-related technology. These devices extend co-presence to include larger groups of people.

As a cultural text, the content of *Lost* serves as a response to these conditions. The series reproduces the features of late modernity by positioning viewers in a similar situation within in this larger social moment. This experience is defined by the loss of fixed places. As technology continues to advance, the complexity of media convergence is only on the fringes of being academically understood. To reach beyond the infancy stage of scholarship, I propose the extension of work in the fields of sociology and

communications. Bridging these two disciplines is imperative in order to frame interaction in the context of changing social conditions and fluid social settings. A critical step towards achieving this relies on the development of consistent and reliable means of accessing these emerging environments. Exploring these new online social worlds is essential for understanding how contemporary identities are being constructed, and discovering the possibilities for agency in an increasingly participatory culture.

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APPENDIX A: “LOST’S” SEASON PREMIERE AND FINALE DATA

Date	Season	Episode	HH Rating/Share	Viewers (Millions) LIVE+SD	18-49 Rating	18-49 Viewers (Millions)
9/22/2004	S1 Premiere	“Pilot: Part 1”		18.6		
5/25/2005	S1 Finale	“Exodus: Part 2”	12.0/18	20.71	7.8	10.15
9/21/2005	S2 Premiere	“Man of Science, Man of Faith”	13.8/20	23.47	10.2	13.23
5/24/2006	S2 Finale	“Live Together, Die Alone”	10.3/16	17.84	7.6	9.84
10/4/2006	S3 Premiere	“A Tale of Two Cities”	11.1/17	18.82	7.7	10.09
5/23/2007	S3 Finale	“Through The Looking Glass”	8.0/13	13.86	5.9	7.69
1/31/2008	S4 Premiere	“The Beginning of the End”	9.4/14	16.14	6.7	8.83
5/29/2008	S4 Finale	“There’s No Place Like Home” (Parts 2 and 3)	7.1/11	12.2	4.9	6.41

All numbers are either LIVE or LIVE plus same day DVR viewing (which Nielsen didn’t measure going back a few years). 5/29/08 numbers are preliminary overnight estimates. Nielsen TV Ratings Data: ©2008 Nielsen Media Research, Inc. All Rights Reserved.