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The “Charmed” Audience:
Gender and the Politics of Contemporary Culture

Existing work on gender and the politics of television culture suggests that seemingly tough girls such as Emma Peel (The Avengers, 1961-1969), Jaime Sommers (The Bionic Woman, 1976-1978) and Jill Monroe (Charlie’s Angels, 1976-1981) were less action chicks than they were powder puffs. After all, despite the seemingly active roles that these characters played from week to week, the strength, intellect and autonomy of these women was routinely undermined in a variety of ways, including marriage, male-rescue and masquerade. Moreover, these programs have been critiqued for emphasizing the surface appearance and sexual attractiveness of their stars as a way in which to diffuse the threat posed by second wave feminism. With these notions of feminism, feminine beauty and desirability in mind then, it is relevant to consider the ways in which representations of today’s tough girls can be understood within a wider discussion of contemporary feminism.

Theorists such as Charlene Tung, Renny Christopher, Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg have recently praised the representation of strong female characters such as secret agent Sydney Bristow (Alias, 2001- ), Officer Aeryn Sun (Farscape, 1999-2003) and Xena Warrior Princess (Xena: Warrior Princess, 1995-2001) for challenging earlier representations of beautiful, feminine and heterosexually desirable heroines. However, although contemporary theorists seem happy to applaud such shows for their characters’ combination of intelligence and physical action, they seem reluctant to examine those protagonists who combine female strength and femininity.

With this in mind then, if one considers that the long-running Charmed (1998- ) series has been dubbed “Charlie’s Angels with broomsticks” and “Charlie’s Witches,” respectively, it is interesting to consider the ways in which this contemporary text can be understood in a wider debate about female power, strength and surface appearance in the post-feminist period. I have previously suggested that a relationship exists between the women of Charmed and the politics of post-feminism, due to the fact that those ideas of power, sisterhood, style and desire that recur throughout recent work on contemporary feminism by Charlotte Brunsdon, Joanne Hollows, and Jacinda Read are the very same ideas that are routinely showcased in the Charmed universe. However, because this study was based solely on textual analysis, I was only able to theorize about the pleasures available to the viewer. With this in mind then, it is necessary to look at the reception of the text in question. Therefore, rather than focus on the ways in which the viewer could or should read Charmed as an empowering site of post-feminism, it is relevant to consider the audience as the author of meaning. After all, if one considers that “the popular media are never feeding their audience a single message about women’s roles,” and that a single text can offer countless different, if not altogether contradictory, messages for the female viewer, then it is worth noting the ways in which the Charmed viewer locates meanings and pleasures from the popular text in question. However, before I examine the ways in which Charmed
becomes meaningful for its audience, it is necessary for me to give a brief overview of the program, its schedule and its target audience.

Charmed

Charmed is a glossy supernatural drama that explores the relationship between twenty-something sister witches, who, after finding out that they possess supernatural powers, are reluctantly thrown into a world of magic and a lifetime of sorcery. The eponymous “Charmed ones” are Prue, Piper, Phoebe and Paige Halliwell played by Shannon Doherty, Holly Marie Combs, Alyssa Milano and Rose McGowan. Prue is the head-strong and highly-driven older sister who has stood in as the authority figure of the family since her mother’s early death, the sister who has the ability to move objects with her mind, and the sister who gave up her steady job in an auction house to follow her dream as a freelance photographer. Piper is the highly-strung middle sister who has the ability to freeze time and the sister who changed the focus of her career from restaurant manager to club owner and became a single mother when her dream marriage to Leo Wyatt/Brian Krause, her guardian-angel-esque “whitelighter” ended in separation. Phoebe is the carefree younger sister of the original “Charmed ones” who has the powers of premonition, the empath and levitation, the sister who graduated as a psychology major before taking a high-profile job as an advice columnist, and the sister who falls in love with, marries and then vanquishes Cole Turner/Julian McMahon—a half-demon turned mortal lawyer. Paige is the long-lost half sister who joined the series in its fourth season to recreate the power of three after the character of Prue was written out of the series. Paige is a young, free and single caring social worker turned full-time witch who has the power of telekinesis and the ability to “orb” between planes.

Targeting the Charmed Audience

In terms of scheduling these modern multitasking witches for the viewing public, it is worth noting that the British cable and satellite channel LivingTV is currently showing early episodes of Charmed back to back every weekday afternoon, and airing the most recent series of the supernatural program on Thursday evenings. With this in mind, I would argue that the channel’s dedication to this supernatural program provides evidence of a unique relationship between the target demographics of the channel and the target demographics of the program in question. According to Joanne Lacey’s recent work on LivingTV, we are told that the channel provides programming to meet the needs of its core female audience. However, rather than simply trying to target all women, Lacey argues that the channel targets specific categories of what its marketing calls “modern” women. We are informed that these “modern” women would rather identify with the feisty television actor and late-night comedy presenter Liza Tarbuck than the maternal face of morning television, Lorraine Kelly, and, moreover, would rather watch Cold Feet (1998-2003), a quirky comedy about thirty-something couples than Heartbeat (1992- ), the gentle feel-good drama about a British police constable and his doctor wife. Similarly, we are informed that these “modern” women would rather dine at the trendy Pizza Express over the child-friendly Pizza Hut, and likewise that these same women would rather exercise at their local gym than count calories at their local Weight Watchers meeting. Although Lacey’s work does not provide a detailed breakdown of the LivingTV audience in terms of age, class, ethnicity or income, what the research does provide is an attitudinal description of the target audience in question. And it is this physically fit and forward-thinking LivingTV viewer that is relevant to my ethnographic research for this particular paper.
Examining the *Charmed* Audience

In order to explore the ways in which viewers create meaning from the *Charmed* universe, I wanted to recruit members of the program’s audience for a small group discussion. With this in mind, I decided to enlist participants by an email request to both staff and students at Bath Spa University College. The email request was brief, asking the questions: 1) do you watch *Charmed*? 2) if so, would you like to take part in a short research project? Because prospective participants should be told what the purpose of the discussion group is, who the researchers are and what they represent, I included a short paragraph outlining the purpose of my research project and the participant’s role in the research. My email request stated, “Although *Charmed* has become the focus of recent academic debate, theorists continue to overlook the ways in which this popular program is understood by its audience. Therefore, I would like to arrange a small discussion group with members of the *Charmed* audience in order to discover the meanings and pleasures on offer in this particular text. If you, or anyone that you know locally watch this program and would be happy to talk to me and other members of the *Charmed* audience, please contact me.”

The responses that I received were in themselves rather telling in terms of a discussion of television’s active heroines and the politics of contemporary popular culture. On more than one occasion male respondents nominated girlfriends and daughters for my discussion group. For example, one male stated, “I’m nominating my girlfriend to talk with you about *Charmed*—it’s not my cup of tea, but she is a huge fan;” another suggested, “my daughter loves *Charmed* and will happily talk to you about it … I vaguely watch it … but what the hell do I know.” Either way, it is clear that the potential male audience views the program as a popular cultural text not worthy of their popular or critical attention. Therefore, in order to locate an audience who would be happy to both think and talk about their viewing pleasures, it soon became clear that I would be focusing on a female audience. With this in mind then, I chose to hold a small discussion group with five female viewers who responded to my initial email. Rather than extend my search in order to access a broad range of respondents of differing ethnicity, class and age profiles, I decided that my initial research would be based on a small discussion group with a sample of Living TV’s target viewer—namely white, “modern” women, ages twenty to twenty-eight.

At the outset of the discussion I outlined the purpose of the research, the reason for recording the session, the notion of anonymity, the right to withdraw from the proceedings, and, finally,
my role as the moderator. After asking each participant to introduce themselves, I asked them in very general terms “what they thought about the program” in order to give them the chance to define both the frame of reference and the language for the ensuing discussion.\textsuperscript{15}

It soon became clear that the frame of reference for the discussion was gender specific, with the viewers pointing out the program’s female-orientated nature. LivingTV makes it clear that its target audience is female, and likewise the Charmed viewers in my discussion group formed a consensus when they referred to Charmed as a female-defined program about “female defined issues.”\textsuperscript{16} When I asked the group to tell me who they thought watched the show, I was told that “the audience is anyone female up to the age of about fifty … with twenty to thirty as the core audience,”\textsuperscript{17} or what one respondent referred to as the “the uber-Charmed viewer.”\textsuperscript{18}

**Charmed Company**

I was particularly keen to find out about the viewing practices of the women in the discussion group, in terms of the company they kept while watching the program. The young women echoed their earlier sentiments concerning Charmed as a female-defined text as they informed me that watching the program was in fact a female-centered activity. One respondent stated that “if my mum is around … she might sit down and watch it”\textsuperscript{19} while another said, “I … watch it with my sister and my mum.”\textsuperscript{20} Furthermore, one respondent stated that she has been known to watch the program with her phone to her ear while one of her relatives does the same: “I have a cousin who lives miles and miles away—and she’s just recently got into the program … and there have been evenings, where I have to confess, to having sat watching Charmed, phone to my ear [my cousin] at the other end of the phone, watching Charmed.”\textsuperscript{21}

The ways in which the Charmed viewers in my discussion group refer to watching the program as a female-centered activity echoes the sentiments of Living TV’s Charmed forum. On the eve of a recent Charmed weekend marathon, one respondent wrote:

Well I have my weekend all set! I am chucking my hubby out of the house and sitting down with a huge bowl of popcorn and chochcy.\textsuperscript{22}

And likewise:

I found Charmed by accident one Saturday evening whilst channel hopping … Now my daughters and I watch avidly, even the re-runs … Anyway, my name is Jayne, I’m 44 my daughters are Lisa who is 23 and Laura who is 17. My cousin in Leeds is also a fan and named her 4-year-old daughter Piper.\textsuperscript{23}

It is clear here that the focus group and the members of LivingTV’s Charmed forum alike view the experience of watching Charmed as a specifically gendered activity that draws together female viewers and fosters a sense of sisterhood for the female audience. In this way, the focus on watching the program as a female “bonding experience” as one respondent put it\textsuperscript{24} can be seen to pick up on the theme of female camaraderie that runs throughout the text itself.

…”the secret of the charmed ones lies in their sisterhood”\textsuperscript{25}

When I asked the discussion group to suggest what they considered to be at the heart of the long-running program, one participant made it clear that it was the bond between the three sister witches rather than the magic or sorcery that was the basis for her attraction to this particular text. After all, while each sister witch in the Charmed universe has her own special power, they become an unbeatable team when their powers are combined. As Participant #3 suggested, “the bond between the sisters … defines the whole thing.” Others stated that the program was about “the camaraderie between the girls” and “sisters doing it for themselves.”\textsuperscript{26} More specifically, one respondent pointed to the ways in which each sister witch has, in turn, made an effort to leave the family home and live alone or with a partner, highlighting that in each and every case, without exception, the “Charmed ones” return to the
Halliwell manor because “their family bond” is given priority. Similarly, members of LivingTV’s *Charmed* forum pointed to the pleasures of female bonding in the program’s universe. One respondent stated that sisterhood is:

> a very important part of the show, without the bond between the sisters the power of three would not be as powerful as it is and it is interesting to see how their individual powers combine to create an unstoppable force for good against evil.

With this in mind, one might suggest that this idea of sisterhood, or female camaraderie that is articulated by both my discussion group and members of LivingTV’s *Charmed* forum could be understood as one of the ways in which the audience is able to make sense of debates concerning contemporary feminism and feminine identity. After all, the emphasis on a shared bond between women acting collectively to support each other is one way in which feminist concerns have entered into mainstream popular forms.

> “…you can’t go hunting demons in heels”

If one considers that the emphasis on female bonding is one of the ways in which feminist concerns have entered into mainstream popular forms, then it is also relevant that the *Charmed* viewers point to the pleasures offered by the surface appearance of the sister witches in the program. After all, recent work on the politics of post-feminism can be seen to champion those women who are capable of combining female power, feminism and femininity through ideas of both sisterhood and style respectively.

In her work on post-feminism and shopping films, Charlotte Brunsdon finds that contemporary feminism is enthusiastic about the pleasures of shopping and the power of consumption. She
writes that “wearing lipstick is no longer wicked,” and that notions of identity have “moved away from a rational and moral axis and are much more profoundly informed by ideas of performance, style and desire.” With this in mind then, the ways in which the discussion group pointed to the “Charmed ones” as strong women with an even stronger sense of fashion can be understood as part of a wider commentary concerning the contemporary feminist.

During a conversation concerning the significance of fashion on the program, the group pointed to the fact that not only do the sister witches “have such fantastic clothes,” but that each of the women has her own sense of style in the program, be it Piper’s “conservative” state of dress and Phoebe’s “catwalk” attire, or Paige’s “quirky” wardrobe. Although one might expect the group to pick up on the alternative identification figures available to the female audience, what I found most interesting here was the ways in which the group highlighted a distinction between attainable and fantasy clothing styles as they are related to the sisters.

Participant #3 mentioned that although she had “never seen Piper wear anything that [she] wouldn’t wear [her]self,” her response to Paige’s sense of dress was “admiration” for the “adventurous” wardrobe rather than a desire to resemble, imitate or copy the style of the sister witch. Taking this distinction as a starting point then, I asked the respondents to think about why it was that they might see Paige’s eclectic wardrobe as mere fantasy while Piper’s attire was seen as both likeable and more importantly, as wearable. Participant #5 suggested that the wardrobe was only as important as the figure of the sister wearing it due to the fact that “out of the three of them Piper’s got more … curves than the other two … she has a more real figure.” The group then agreed that “if you’re going to be aspiring to be one of them” Piper’s figure and hence style is perhaps “more attainable” than the other sisters in the program.

The ways in which the group made distinctions between the aspirational and attainable fashion styles foregrounds the pleasure of identification for the modern female viewer. After all, they did not merely focus on the notion of imitation in which the audience uses particular characters as role models for clothes or hairstyles, nor did they pinpoint the fantasy realm of transcendence in which women imagine themselves taking on the roles and identities of the females on screen. Rather, they created pleasurable readings from the combination of fantasy and reality found in the surface appearance of the sister witches. Furthermore, this process can be seen to echo the ways in which they made meaning from the themes explored in the text itself.

**Fairy-Reality-Tales**

When I asked the group about the role of fantasy and sorcery in the *Charmed* universe, they initially spoke about the escapist nature of the program as something of a “fairy-tale” that encouraged you to “suspend your disbelief” for the period of the narrative. Because the group seemed to be pointing to the escapist pleasures of the...
fantasy text, one might assume that they were rather stating the obvious, and that their responses simply corroborated the familiar assumption in studies of popular culture that suggest that because the program is unrealistic and based firmly in the fantasy realm, it must be “more closely related to fairy stories and myths than to serious considerations of pertinent human problems.” However, rather than perpetuate this popular theory by suggesting that the Charmed viewer is seeking to find an escape from wider social concerns, it is worth noting that the respondents did not actually champion the fantasy realm per se, but rather referred to the pleasures afforded by the juxtaposition of the fantasy realm with the “emotional story arcs” as they are presented in the program. For example, I was told by Participant #3 that, “They’ve got that nice balance in Charmed, it’s set in the city, the things that they do are real life things, you see them shopping, you see them working, so you’ve got real life, you can associate with real life, but alongside that you’ve got the fairy-tale.”

This combination of the magical fairy-tale with the realistic emotional thread picks up on the ways in which the writers of the long-running series foreground the text in question. One writer of the show has commented that:

... whatever happens, we try to play it real. Whether it be a character divorcing, getting pregnant, losing a sister or losing a mom, falling in love, falling out of love, we try to play it real and that has given the show an honest feeling. You can’t do leprechauns and mermaids and not have it feeling like an untethered balloon unless you are going to start with the premise that you’re dealing with real people and real situations.

The ways in which both the respondents and the writers of the program talk here about the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality make it clear that the pleasures available in the program are not inhibited by a focus on reality or limited to mirroring everyday experiences. Moreover, the Charmed viewers look at the fantasy universe not as pure escapist fantasy, but as a combination of magic and a presentation of women’s real experiences—a combination which encourages the viewers to apply information learned about the fictional Charmed universe to the events and occurrences taking place in their own lives. One respondent was particularly eloquent as she stated that “the fantastical setting of the program lets your mind get a better handle on the everyday concerns that you are actually trying to deal with.” Therefore it is clear that the supernatural series offers the modern woman explanatory frameworks for a magical realm that may be applied to the social world in which they live, in terms of models of femininity, female strength, dress and behavior.

“Yeah … but you don’t need dick”

When I asked the Charmed viewers what they thought the women in the series represented for contemporary female audiences, the answer came back as a resounding feminist message. One respondent claimed that “the feminist message in it … is so powerful” while another stated that “there is a huge underlying feminist message [in the series], because you’ve got three independent women, who run their own household and who don’t depend on any men...” This notion of the contemporary feminist as a woman whose strength and power lay in her social and financial independence from men was picked up by Participant #5 as well, who saw that “the men [of Charmed] are not there all the time” giving the example that the women “call Leo when they want Leo” rather than the women looking to the men in the series as a boss, mentor or prince charming figure. Likewise, I was told by Participant #1:

Phoebe’s relationship with Cole was an affirmation of that feminist thing—she decided to go to college, get a qualification and get a really good job. The problems she came across weren’t because of her abilities, but because of her relationship with Cole … [a relationship that the character tried to work at, found wanting and finally ended in the fifth season of the program].

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Respondents routinely said that they found the women of Charmed “inspirational,” with Phoebe once again being singled out as the most empowering of the sisters due to the character’s emotional growth, success and bid for independence since the outset of the series. Phoebe is understood by these viewers as a feminist role model due to the fact that the character can be seen to “juggle work, school, relationships, and the daily responsibilities of domestic life on top of saving humankind.” In this respect, I was told that:

Phoebe has really come out as the most feminist in my eyes because she has gone from being a bit of a no hoper … at the very beginning … going nowhere, she went through studying and stuff, she got herself this really good job, but she has done it all on her own, with all these crazy things going on in her life—and she is really really successful.

The group went on to suggest that the women of Charmed were not simply strong multi-tasking women and fashionable subjects, but that their status as sexually active young women was of particular relevance to the text. One respondent said, “I think that’s why it is such an acceptable program to us because it is how we would like to be, nowadays women can be sexually active—reflecting the change in society from ten to twenty years ago.” Another told me that the program was “happy to present Phoebe being really cranky because she hasn’t got laid in a while, and suddenly being serenely happy when she eventually gets some.” Drawing on Charlotte Brunsdon’s work on the post-feminist girly, one might suggest that the particular configuration of desirable and desiring that we find in the program can be understood as one more way in which to read Charmed as a contemporary feminist text. After all, the Halliwell sisters are not only desirable but actively desiring, a position which, we are told, is informed by feminism.

Conclusion

While recognizing the small scale of this research, the preliminary analysis of my small group discussion has indicated the importance of examining viewer responses to particular representations of gender on television. Moreover, the ways in which the group members create meaning and, more importantly perhaps, pleasure from the Charmed universe highlights the ways in which the “Charmed ones” can be understood and admired as role models for the contemporary feminist period. According to the group, the program is said to present the witches as sisters and friends, desiring subjects, fashionistas, and strong, multi-tasking modern women, women who can be understood as post-feminist insofar as they remain both dependent on, and dismissive of, traditional feminist identities. With this in mind then, one can see the characters marking historically specific “changes in popularly available understandings of femininity and a woman’s place.”

In light of the ways in which the women in my discussion group presented Charmed as a positive and powerful post-feminist text, it might be interesting to think about the relationship between the female-defined program and its wider viewing audience. For example, further research on those fathers and boyfriends introduced at the beginning of this paper would prove enlightening in terms of a discussion about viewing practices, gender and the politics of contemporary culture.

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Notes


2 Ibid., 32.


7 Inness, Tough Girls, 49.

8 LivingTV presents acquired American programs such as Charmed and Will & Grace (1998- ), and home-grown commissions such as Most Haunted (2001- ) and I’m Famous and Frightened (2004- ).


10 Ibid.

11 Such small group work has proved popular in the field of media research due to the fact that it produces rich qualitative material while allowing the researcher to observe how audiences make sense of and formulate meanings about the media through conversation and interaction with others. See Anders Hansen, Simon Cottle, Ralph Negrine, and Chris Newbold, Mass Communications Research Methods (London: Palgrave, 1998), 257-63.

12 Ibid., 270.

13 Personal correspondence with the author.

14 Although one might suggest that such a partial sample can have no pretensions of being statistically representative, it is relevant to note that the small group discussion highlighted several important points concerning the ways in which the audience create meaning from the Charmed universe. Moreover, those comments concerning the meanings and pleasures granted by the text in question must not be understood as “exceptional data” due to the fact that the respondent’s statements about the women of Charmed and what the program said about being a woman were routinely repeated within the group by several members of the discussion.

15 Hansen, et al., Mass Communications Research, 274.

16 Participant #5.

17 Participant #3.

18 Participant #1.

19 Participant #5.

20 Participant #2.

21 Ibid.


24 Participant #2.


26 Participants #3 and #1, respectively.

27 Participant #2.


29 For more on this tendency, see Karen Hollinger, In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Chris Holmlund, Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies (London: Routledge, 2002), 31-50; Yvonne Tasker, Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema (London: Routledge, 1998), 137-60.

30 “The Power of Three Blondes.”


32 Brunsdon, Screen Tastes, 85.

33 Participant #4.
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34 Participants #3 and #5, respectively.
36 Participants #5 and #1, respectively.
37 Stacey, Star Gazing, 136 and 145.
38 Participants #3 and #5, respectively.
40 Participant #1.
42 Radway, Reading the Romance, 187.
43 Participant #1.
45 Participants #1 and #3, respectively.
47 Participant #5.
48 Participant #3.
49 Participant #1.
50 Brunson, Screen Tastes, 94.
51 Ibid., 101.