HOW FEMALE FANS MAKE SENSE OF GENDER, POWER, AND GENDERED

VIOLENCE IN HBO'S GAME OF THRONES

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State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

Violence and abuse towards women are common themes in media today. HBO's television series, Game of Thrones, is filled with scenes of women being tortured, raped, and abused. Yet, Game of Thrones was one of the most watched shows of the 2010s (Hibberd, 2014). In this study, I explore how women view the relationship between power and gender in Game of Thrones and how they make sense of justify gendered violence. Interviews were conducted with 20 women who had seen more than one season of the series. The goal of this research is to gain insight into these perceptions in order to dispel internalized sexist ideals and create more understanding of internal biases. Results suggest female fans demonstrate feminist ideas in their critiques of the series' portrayal of women but assess characters and plotlines in a way that values masculine qualities and masculine forms of power.

Keywords: feminism, feminist theory, Game of Thrones, gendered violence, media violence, rape, television

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

1. INTRODUCTION

Considered to be one of the most popular shows of the 2010s, Game of Thrones connected with millions of fans and greatly impacted the fantasy genre (Hibberd, 2014). It was highly praised for containing lead female characters and feminist ideals. Yet, throughout the series, women are subjected to trauma and repeatedly abused. Specifically, two young female characters, Daenerys Targaryen and Sansa Stark, both endure such violence in their storylines. As they become respected leaders within the realm, they begin to shed their feminine characteristics and arm themselves with more masculine qualities. Yet, Game of Thrones has a strong fanbase consisting of both men and women. For so many women to support a series that reinforces such ideas, there must be covert messages aside from the examples that violence and trauma erase feminine characteristics and result in powerful women. This paper aims to understand what these messages are and how female fans (females who have watched multiple seasons of Game of Thrones) perceive or make sense of the notion that women within the show must subdue their femininity in order to gain power.

Media has mainly focused on lead male characters and storylines, so Game of Thrones is praised for having lead female characters and is considered a pioneer in representing feminism in media (Alkestrand, 2018). Feminism is not universally accepted by all; even some women choose to reject it. Many women are afraid of identifying as a feminist because of the connotations surrounding the term, along with the negative representation of feminism in media (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). As gender norms are deeply engrained and highly prevalent in both society and the Game of Thrones world, women are taught to avoid positions that are not considered to be feminine (Van Gilder, 2019). On top of that, women who do identify with feminist beliefs still often hold internal gender biases (Van Gilder, 2019).

Existing scholarship provides only partial answers to the question of how women make sense of Game of Thrones. Previous research on this type of content in media suggests that violent actions such as rape and abuse are dismissed as ways to further the plot (Ferreday, 2015). Viewers of television shows that fall within the realm of fantasy also tend to dismiss such behaviors because they tend to match their preconceived notions of fantasy (García-Rapp, 2021). It is important to note this previous research has not been specific to Game of Thrones. My study looks specifically at the series through the lens of how violence is perceived by female fans. Research has also shown that the intensity of Game of Thrones viewers correlates to their disgust levels in regard to violent scenes (Puthillam & Karandikar, 2020). While we know that more intense viewers tended to be more accepting of violent scenes, my study aims to understand how women make sense of these difficult-to-watch scenes. Using data from the interviews conducted for this study, I argue that while female fans recognize some gender stereotypes in the series as problematic, their valuing of masculine forms of power and justification for rape reveal more deeply internalized ideologies about gender, power, and gendered violence.

While Game of Thrones may be viewed as a series with feminist ideals, women within the show are still held to a different standard and must be violated to achieve power. Game of Thrones provides a popular culture lens to analyze such dynamics. While these issues exist within the show, they are just as prevalent in society today. Because so many women watched and supported the show, I am interested in understanding how women make sense of the violence and the relationship between power and gender. This type of behavior should not be accepted or ignored in any capacity, so such knowledge may help dissipate these ideals in the future. I will conduct in-depth interviews with women who have watched multiple seasons of Game of Thrones to gather perspectives and explore these questions and dynamics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Game of Thrones is a fictional series that aired from 2011 to 2019 and was based in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros and the continent of Essos (Benioff & Weiss, 2011-2019). A seemingly medieval show, it exists within the fantasy realm of media, with dragons, magic, and white walkers driving the storyline. The main plot of the series revolves around the succession of the Iron Throne to rule all Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, but there are several simultaneous plotlines that contribute to the overall storyline. House Targaryen had ruled for hundreds of years until Aerys Targaryen went mad and Robert Baratheon killed him and usurped the Iron Throne. Throughout the series, Daenerys Targaryen works to take back her family's rule while the Baratheon family tries to hold on to theirs. Simultaneously, the North, one of the seven kingdoms and ruled by the Stark family, attempts to break off and become independent of the kingdom.

Media tends to perpetuate the idea that women only become powerful after they have endured trauma and shed their feminine qualities while trading them in for masculine personality traits (Ferreday, 2015). Specifically, Game of Thrones enforces this idea that such traumas must consist of sexual violence before a woman can be considered a leader or main character of the plot. Yet, the wildly popular show, Game of Thrones has a strong fanbase consisting of both men and women. For so many women to support a series that enforces such ideas, there have to be covert messages. Two of the female characters, Daenerys Targaryen and Sansa Stark, are prime examples of female characters enduring sexual abuse and trauma before becoming powerful leaders. Both Daenerys and Sansa start out as young, innocent girls, but throughout the series, they slowly shed their feminine qualities as they undergo trauma. In the end, both have been hardened by their life experiences, but because of this, they are two of the most powerful figures in the series. Towards the end of the series, in regard to the abuse she has endured, Sansa states,

"Without Littlefinger and Ramsay and the rest, I would've stayed a little bird all my life" ("The Last of the Starks"). Ultimately, they both achieve their goals, but their success is attributed to the masculine qualities they have picked up throughout the series.

2.1. Family Trees

In this section, you will find a map of the Stark family tree (see Figure 1), the Targaryen family tree (see Figure 2), and the Baratheon family tree (see Figure 3). These family trees are presented to clarify information to readers on the connections between characters discussed within this paper.

Figure 1

Stark Family Tree (Debnath, 2020)
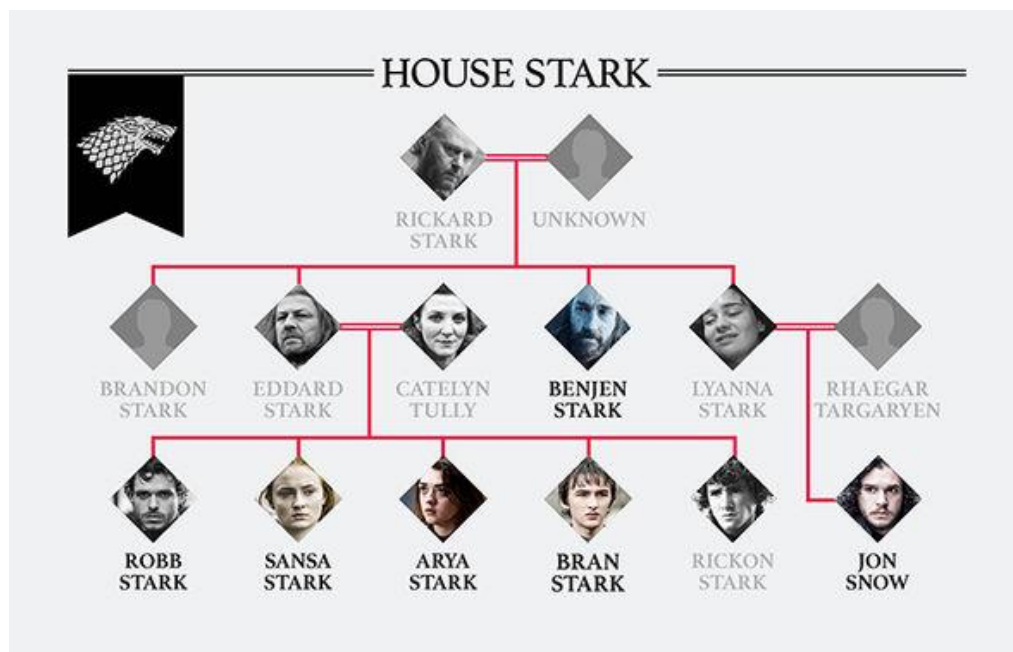
Figure 2

Targaryen Family Tree (Debnath, 2020)
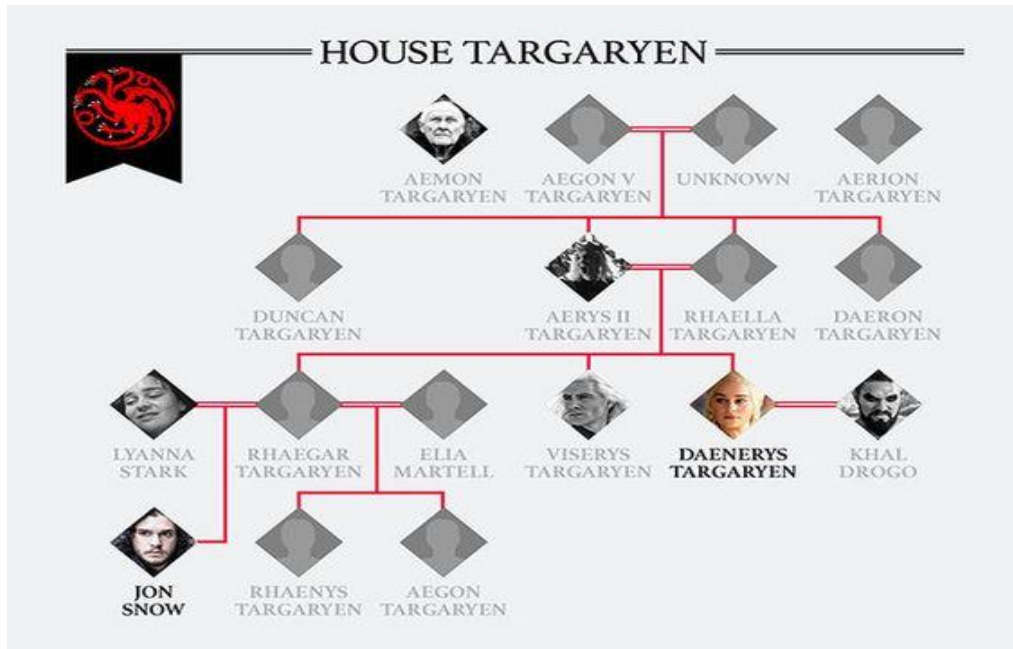
Figure 3

Baratheon Family Tree (Debnath, 2020)
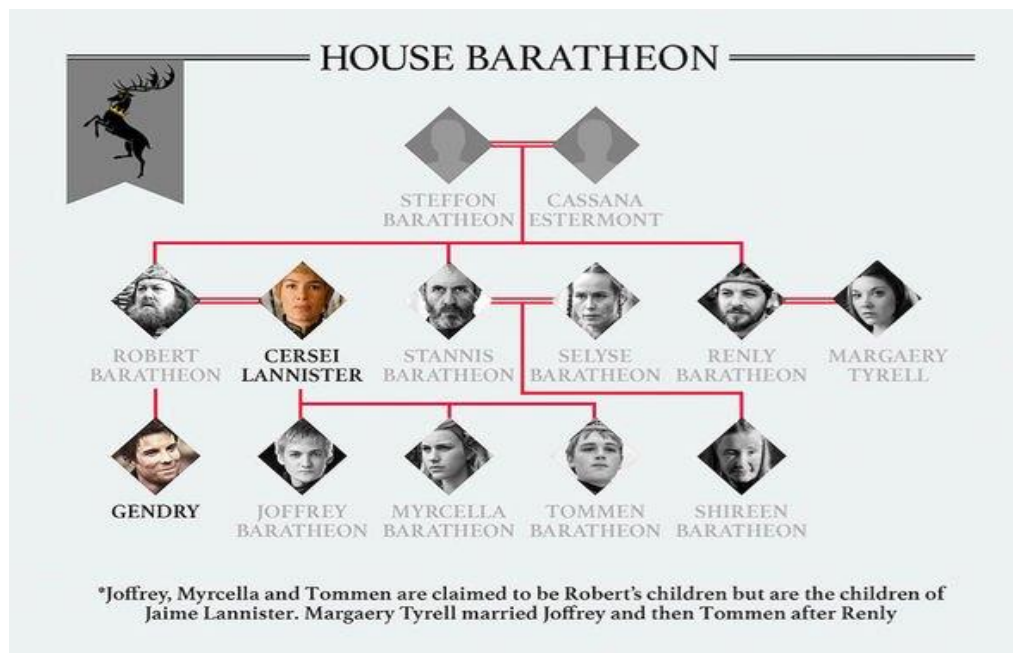
2.2. Gender and Power

Game of Thrones' appeal may be attributed to the continuing value of masculinity in contemporary culture. Masculinity has traditionally been associated with power and gendered values that remain heavily embedded in society today, from gendered tasks within the home to gendered roles in workplace settings (Harbert, 2020). Yet, gender is an instituted social identity that has been perpetuated over the course of time (Butler, 2020). The body is just actively embodying cultural and historical constructions that it has learned and must act or perform. "It connects social structure with the formation of personality, via the idea of role learning or internalisation: thus, women become feminine by learning the 'female role'" (Connell, 1985, p. 262). This not only reinforces the subordination of femininity to hegemonic masculinity, but also the subordination of other masculinities. These practices legitimize the patriarchy and reinforces

male dominance (Schippers, 2007). Women who do break through gendered barriers often downplay their feminine characteristics and arm themselves with more masculine qualities in order to succeed professionally (Harbert, 2020). While this theme remains prevalent in society, we don't know the extent to which female viewers apply these cultural logics to the shedding of feminine characteristics within Game of Thrones.

While feminism seeks equality for all genders, some women do not identify as feminists due to the negative connotations that exist surrounding this term (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). Other women perform 'emphasized femininity' by clinging to patriarchal norms and accommodating the interests and desires of men (Schippers, 2007). They do this because such beliefs are so deeply engrained in society and because this can be beneficial to women (Connell, 1985). Those who do openly identify as feminists experience discrimination at higher levels, and many feel pressured to contain such beliefs to their personal lives while not letting them infiltrate their professional lives (Sang, 2018). Because of this, some women are scared to reach for equality (Van Gilder, 2019). They are often held back by customary gender stereotypes (Connell, 1985). When they do strive to hold positions of power, women are often viewed as a threat to effectiveness and productivity within an organization (Van Gilder, 2019). This often results in women being overlooked for roles or positions solely based on their gender. This is also another common theme in Game of Thrones. Women have to essentially prove that they possess masculine qualities to come into positions of power and, even when they do achieve this, they are constantly questioned on their ability to lead based on their gender. We don't know if having a feminist identity impacts sense-making of gendered roles.

Sexual harassment is an ongoing problem that many women deal with both in today's society and in the world of Game of Thrones, but many choose not to share their experiences or

even report their issues (Carstensen, 2016). We understand that women often are afraid to speak up because they fear they will not be believed, they will be blamed for it, or they do not want to assume the role of victim (Cassino & Besen, 2019). Culture and media also influence how sexual harassment is viewed, so understandings of the issue may be muddled, and significance may be diminished (Keplinger et al., 2019). The issue of sexual harassment stems from the larger problem of inequality and also misunderstanding. While sexual harassment may occur for a variety of reasons, we know that the chances of men participating in sexual harassment are much higher when their sense of power or control feels threatened (Cassino & Besen, 2019). Gender stereotypes are clearly damaging for women, they are also damaging to men as well. Because of the hegemony that masculinity holds, men struggle with being able to express emotion, which can result in more aggression. We see this when men use sexual harassment as a weapon to assert dominance and secure their perceived masculine roles through biological reductionism (Connell, 1985).

Society holds masculine values with greater esteem, so women are often not treated with the same level of respect that men are. While this gender gap exists in so many spaces, there is a clear lack of gender representation in roles of leadership and power (Kook & Harel-Shalev, 2021). In fact, women only occupy 10% of top management positions in S&P 1500 companies and earn $0.82 to every $1 that men earn (Warner, 2018). Strong stereotypes in regard to gendered occupations are also still extremely prevalent in the workforce (Pinar et al., 2014). Role theory also plays a part in occupations that people fill because they are trapped by stereotypical expectations (Connell, 1985). Women are often associated with roles such as receptionists, clothing store salespeople, and restaurant servers, while men are usually associated with higher-status jobs such as doctors, pharmacists, dentists, and professors (Pinar et al., 2014). In order to

fill such roles and be considered successful, women must often shed feminine-viewed qualities such as sensitivity, gentleness, and nurturance and arm themselves with more masculine-viewed qualities such as independence, assertiveness, and leadership instead (Warner, 2018). We see this in Game of Thrones as the female characters are expected to spend their time embroidering and raising children, while the men are all focused on sharpening their fighting skills and rising to new positions of power.

2.3. Game of Thrones Fandom

Within the media industry, lead characters mainly consist of straight, white males and the industry strongly lacks representation and diversity. All too often, female characters exist to support and define male characters, but they do not hold lead roles of their own and gendered violence often takes the shape of such definition (Harrack, 2016). Mulvey viewed the gender power asymmetry as a way that cinema was controlled and constructed in order to satisfy male viewers (1975). This highlights how cinema is so deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies. The male viewer is seen as the target audience, so perspectives to meet their needs are prioritized. While this has always been an issue, platforms like Reddit now give fans an opportunity to discuss such problems and connect with one another (Stickle, 2020). These conversations lead to the development of new ideas and can help fans develop varying perceptions (Stickle, 2020). Reddit also gives fans a platform to express other concerns, such as the lack of feminine representation in many films and television shows. To satisfy this lack of diversity, the media industry often attempts to do so by creating lead female character roles (Swink, 2017). Yet, shows that seem to have lead female characters often portray men in a more feminist light or view women through the male gaze instead (Swink, 2017). While Game of Thrones is considered

to be a leader in including feminist lead characters, the female characters are still not equal to their male counterparts.

We are aware that fantasy is known to be a genre of film that predominately caters to specific audiences and lacks representation (Young, 2014). More specifically, it often consists of straight, white male characters as lead characters that, in most instances, hold all of the power and take up the majority of screen time (Coppa, 2006). The fourth wave of feminism has brought a more gender-balanced approach to genres, such as fantasy, by incorporating more female characters into the plot (Harack, 2016). While there are female characters within the genre, their roles mainly exist to define male protagonists instead (Harack, 2016). Media is also often written to satisfy the male viewer's perspective (Mulvey (2001). Essentially, women in media are seen by viewers from a heterosexual man's perspective. This most often includes being seen as objects of male desire, This dynamic often results in gendered violence within fantasy media as well (Brubaker, 2021). Understanding this male-female relationship in media is important because aggression in the media may reflect the real-life paradigm of verbal aggression and ultimately lead to physical aggression (Glascock, 2021). Fandoms can become intensely engaged with their media, so this can be exceptionally dangerous (Glascock, 2021). We don't know if fan engagement informs female sense-making.

Fandoms can also have positive effects on their members. Reddit's success lies in the fact that threads are monitored by moderators instead of corporations, so the entire experience is controlled by fans (Stickle, 2020). In regard to Game of Thrones, we know that Reddit was ablaze with threads focusing on Sansa's narrative of a young woman's victimization and survival (Naylor, 2016). Sansa, in particular, endures many tragic scenarios. As a young girl, she is manipulated and abused, and, as she grows into a woman, she is tortured and raped. Yet, Sansa

finds a way to overcome her situation and achieve her family's ultimate goal (Naylor, 2016).

Many Reddit threads called for justice for Sansa. Some fans even felt that the writers of the show

took it too far with Sansa's storyline. In some ways, this discussion was the introduction to

feminism for many young women (Naylor, 2016). What we don't know is how women made

sense of such unnecessary and blatant acts of rape and abuse within the television series.

2.4. Game of Thrones

With its multiple lead female characters, Game of Thrones is viewed as a leader in

feminist representation in media (Askey, 2018). Yet, many women within the series are raped,

tortured, and abused. These actions are often explained by show writers as an attempt to further

the plot of the show. We do not know why women in the show are forced to undergo such drastic

changes to develop into strong lead characters. While many of these actions seem inexcusable to

the casual viewer, fans of the show often find ways to explain such actions by either dismissing it

or chalking it up as a reason to further the plot (Ferreday, 2015). We also don't know how and

why fans are able to separate fantasy from reality when dismissing these actions.

Game of Thrones has been praised as a rhetorical device that helps to explain how

authority and power are established, performed, and repeated both in the series and in the real

world (Clapton & Shepherd, 2017). The series utilizes identity and gender norms to best explain

power in both instances as well (Olesker, 2020). Because Game of Thrones tends to connect to

real-world issues quite strongly, scenes of rape and abuse may also have connections to modern-

day sexual harassment and assault actions (Walton, 2019). We don't yet know whether this

connection exists in viewers' minds.

Fans of fantasy texts or media often place different expectations on certain behaviors and

waive them as acceptable in settings that seem to further the plot (Ferreday, 2015). Rape is often

considered either real or 'not real' based on how much a woman is believed by those around her, so the series itself had control in shaping the views of how fans perceived actions (Ferreday, 2015). More intense fans of Game of Thrones were more accepting of the violence and difficult-to-watch scenes within the series than casual viewers (García-Rapp, 2021). Die-hard fans are considered fans that often "look to deepen the experience by interacting with others, searching for para-textual data to connect the narrative dots, explore intricacies, and predict outcomes" (García-Rapp, 2021, p. 9). On the other hand, Game of Thrones fans who did not have as strong of a connection to the show exhibited higher signs of disgust to violent scenes (Puthillam & Karandikar, 2020). When combined with information about the context and sociocultural context of narrative, plot twist theory also helped to provide plausible explanations for viewers' negative reactions (Pérez & Reisenzein, 2020). We don't yet know what other factors allowed fans to explain or dismiss such actions.

While rape and abuse are strongly prevalent throughout the series, part of Game of Thrones' success lies in their use of women as main characters (Alkestrand, 2018). Throughout the show, women rise to positions of power while challenging the traditional views of women in leadership roles (Askey, 2018). Women and eunuchs both are forced to fight for identities that are not aligned with femininity or lack of masculinity (Askey, 2018). In fact, towards the end of the series, female characters occupy some of the top positions of power within the fictional Game of Thrones world (Askey, 2018). Yet, to achieve this, these female characters had to discard their feminine qualities for masculine qualities while the male characters were able to stay more consistent throughout the series (Marques, 2019). There are multiple transformations from damsel-in-distress to heroine including Sansa and Daenerys (Mitchell, 2018). The life experiences these female characters endure, such as rape and abuse, are credited with their

character development from season one to season eight (Marques, 2019). Men are naturally considered powerful, so they do not have to undergo violent experiences to develop into important and strong characters.

2.5. Research Questions

While there has been research on certain aspects of Game of Thrones, there is still a lack of scholarship on femininity throughout the show. This study will use Game of Thrones as a device to analyze female audience perspective of show elements, such as violent rape and abuse scenes, that are frequently seen in television. On top of that, we still don't know how women make sense of the power distance between genders within the series. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do women make sense of the relationship between power and gender in Game of Thrones?

RQ2: How do women justify gendered violence in Game of Thrones?

3. METHODS

The purpose of this study is to understand how women make sense of the hit television series, Game of Thrones. To be more specific, I am interested in understanding the relationship between power and gender and how women make sense of the gendered violence within Game of Thrones. I chose Game of Thrones as a rhetorical device to analyze this topic as it provides significant examples. My research question originally began with "Why do women like Game of Thrones?," but research questions are often fluid throughout the research process to allow key ideas and information to emerge and shape the process. Thus, after a semester of investigation, the final research questions were created.

Qualitative research is ideal for exploring individuals' attitudes and beliefs regarding a phenomenon and focuses on gathering information through interviewing participants and data analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Because we are interested in understanding what makes women support a television series full of violence and inequality towards female characters, qualitative methods were the best fit. Interviews were selected as a way to derive information because this type of research allows participants to share actual lived-in experiences, describe their perspectives, and enhance the human part of the story (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I avoided surveys because I did not want predetermined response options to limit the type and range of information that could be invoked from a response. Interviews allow participants to be prompted, while surveys eliminate the ability to probe for more information. Because experience with gender inequality is a personal and sensitive topic, the human connection between the researcher and participant also encouraged them to share more throughout the interview.

3.1. Participants

Participants in the study met two inclusion criteria. They identified as women and they needed to have seen multiple seasons of Game of Thrones. It was important that participants had seen multiple seasons so they had an informed opinion of character development throughout the show. Participants were derived from my personal network as well as a mid-sized Midwestern university. My personal network was selected as it provides people who have seen Game of Thrones and allowed for greater variance in factors such as age range. While my personal network provided much insight into viewers' beliefs, the student population gave more variance in perspective. The study was open to all students within the university, but there were two posts in the learning management system utilized for an introductory communication course (see Appendix A). Students within the communication course had incentives for participation in the form of research participation points as well. Snowball sampling was also used for gathering participants in my personal network. I began with contacts in my network who met the inclusion criteria by reaching out through posts via my personal social media network (see Appendix B). I also had participants recommend people who met the criteria and share the research notice social posts to their connections. The informed consent was completed virtually through Qualtrics (see Appendix C and Appendix D). The sample contained 20 participants (female n = 20, 100%). There were 14 (70%) participants from my personal network and 6 (30%) participants from the mid-sized Midwestern university. The participants from the university consisted of 5 (83.3%) first-year students and 1 sophomore student (16.7%). Mean participant age range was 18-24 years old (42.86%). The age range of participants was between 18 and 24 years old to between 50 and 60 years old. All 20 participants reported themselves as White/Caucasian (See Appendix F).

3.2. Procedures & Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interview protocol was semi-structured with 14 questions and optional probes for follow-up questions (See Appendix E). The main topics of the interview revolved around interest in Game of Thrones, power within the series, and the relationship between power and femininity. Questions such as, "How do you see characters gaining power in Game of Thrones?", "Do feminine qualities help or hinder you in the world of Game of Thrones?", and "Some people have criticized Game of Thrones for its abuse, rape, or torture of female characters. What's your take on that?" were asked to participants (See Appendix E for the full list of questions). Throughout the interview process, questions were altered and added as well. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality for participants. Incentives in the form of 10 'Research Participation Points' for the COMM 110 class were offered to the students who participate, but women recruited from outside of the COMM 110 research pool participated without compensation.

3.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom. The transcriptions were then formatted prior to coding. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation had been reached at 20 interviews. The data was then approached from a perspective informed by feminist theory, including Butler's gender performativity, Mulvey's male gaze theory, and R.W. Connell's theories including hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Values coding was used to code the data. Elements related to gender inequality, sexism, and power had the most focus. Codes were combined into three major themes, presented in the next chapter.

4. RESULTS

Analysis of the interviews produced 25 individual codes, which were then categorized and combined (Saldaña, 2016). This paper will focus on three key themes that inform how women make sense of Game of thrones: Critique of Gender Stereotypes, Influence of Gender Stereotypes, and Justifications for Gendered Violence. Within each of these three themes, I will present data based on codes. See Table 1 for codes associated with each theme.

Table 1. Code Distribution by Theme

Critique of Gender Stereotypes	Influence of Gender Stereotypes	Justifications for Gendered Violence
Women Need Other Components to Be Respected or Gain Power	Masculine Qualities Hold Power	Trauma Shapes People
		Pain Causes Empathy
	Negative Perceptions of Femininity	
Male Gaze		Medieval Times and Other Cultures Have Different Standards for Women
Negative Female Stereotypes	Feminine Qualities Don't Hold Power	
Women With Masculine Qualities Are Considered Good or Powerful	Negative Motives for Power	
Feminine Qualities Hinder Women	Feminine Qualities Help Women	
Lack of Diversity		
Women in Power Feel Threatened by Other Powerful Women		

4.1. Critique of Gender Stereotypes

Female participants recognized gender stereotypes within Game of Thrones and did not condone many of these behaviors. From lack of diversity to negative perceptions of femininity,

participants were upset with the portrayal of women in the show and acknowledged these issues. The following codes make up this theme: Women Need Other Components to Be Respected or Gain Power, Male Gaze, Negative Female Stereotypes, Women With Masculine Qualities Are Considered Good or Powerful, Feminine Qualities Hinder Women, Lack of Diversity, and Women in Power Feel Threatened by Other Powerful Women (see Table 2 for definitions).

Table 2. Critique of Gender Stereotypes.

Code	Definition
Women Need Other Components to Be Respected or Gain Power	Women are unable to achieve power or respect on their own; they must rely on other components such as men or dragons to gain it
Male Gaze	When women (and everything else) are viewed through a male perspective
Negative Female Stereotypes	Women are portrayed in a negative light solely based on their gender characteristics
Women With Masculine Qualities Are Considered Good or Powerful	Women are portrayed as more powerful, likeable, or good when displaying masculine qualities
Feminine Qualities Hinder Women	Feminine qualities negatively impact women's ability to be successful in the world of Game of Thrones
Lack of Diversity	Straight white men don't bring understanding or diversity to the writing room or world of Game of Thrones
Women in Power Feel Threatened by Other Powerful Women	Powerful women feel threatened when other women are also successful; There is no room for anyone else at the top

4.1.1. Character Descriptions

Many of the participants' critiques of gender stereotypes focused on storylines involving Sansa Stark and Daenerys Targaryen. I provide brief descriptions of both here to help the reader understand the analysis and what participants are responding to.

4.1.1.1. Sansa Stark

      At the beginning of the series, Sansa is known for her needlework and lady-like etiquette. She is betrothed to the king's son and heir, Joffrey. Sansa and her younger sister, Arya, move to King's Landing with their father. When first arriving at King's Landing, Sansa makes poor choices to fit in with her future family. As the political climate in King's Landing slowly declines, Sansa's father, Ned, is executed. From there, Sansa is forced to endure torture, abuse, and humiliation on multiple levels. At one point, one of Joffrey's guards, the Hound, offers to take Sansa away and rescue her, but she refuses. When a new lady catches Joffrey's attention, he casts Sansa aside as his betrothed on grounds of her family's betrayal. The violence continues and she ends up being forced to marry Joffrey's uncle, Tyrion Lannister, as a cruel joke. The night of her wedding to Tyrion, Joffrey threatens to rape her while two of his men hold her down.

      When Joffrey is poisoned and dies, Petyr Baelish (aka Littlefinger), a supposed family friend, helps Sansa escape and plans to have Sansa marry Ramsay Bolton, the recently legitimized son of the current warden of the north. Sansa is hesitant to this marriage as the Boltons betrayed her family, but Petyr tells Sansa this may be an opportunity for revenge. At this point, things go very wrong for Sansa. On their wedding night, Ramsay rapes and abuses Sansa. She becomes a prisoner; she is locked in her bed-chamber and violently raped each night, among many other forms of torture. She finally escapes and reunites with her half-brother, Jon Snow.

      In the end, Ramsay murders Sansa's youngest brother in an attempt to recapture Winterfell. Jon beats Ramsay in combat but leaves him for Sansa to deal with. His dogs rip him to shreds while Sansa watches with satisfaction. Sansa and Jon rule the north together until Daenerys Targaryen returns. Sansa doesn't agree with Jon's choice to bend the knee to Daenerys.

When Daenerys arrives at Winterfell with Jon, Sansa and she are on tense terms. After speaking more privately, Daenerys and Sansa come to better terms, but the situation is still tense as Sansa believes the north should remain independent. After the battle against the white walkers, Sansa and the Hound talk about what they have endured since they saw each other last in King's Landing. He comments that he could have saved Sansa from all of the horrors she has experienced since then, but Sansa responds, "Without Littlefinger and Ramsay and the rest, I would've stayed a little bird all my life." In the end, Sansa becomes Queen in the North.

4.1.1.2. Daenerys Targaryen

As a baby, Daenerys flees Westeros after her father is killed. As a teenager, her abusive older brother sells her to a Dothraki horse lord, Khal Drogo, in exchange for an army to recapture the rule of Westeros. At the beginning of their marriage, Drogo rapes her and treats her as nothing more than an opportunity to produce an heir. Daenerys slowly adapts to the Dothraki lifestyle, gains Drogo's respect, falls in love with him, and becomes strong and confident. When Viserys angers Drogo, Drogo murders him making Daenerys the rightful heir to the Iron Throne of Westeros. Daenerys also becomes pregnant but loses both her husband and her unborn child. When Drogo dies, the majority of his clan leaves as well. Daenerys is left with nearly nothing, but she does hatch three dragons from their eggs and becomes the Mother of Dragons. She slowly establishes herself as a powerful and relentless ruler while gathering an army.

When she has built up her army and is ready to reclaim the Iron Throne, she returns to Westeros. She aligns herself with Jon Snow and falls in love with him but forces him to bend the knee and turn over all power to her. They defeat the white-walker army and save the continent from ruin. Daenerys then turns her sights on King's Landing, but in the process, goes mad, just like her father. Throughout her battles, two of the three dragons are killed. She uses her final

dragon to destroy much of the city and kill countless innocent people. In the end, Jon Snow, who turns out to be Daenerys' nephew, kills her to save the city and her dragon carries her off.

4.1.2. Women Need Other Components to Be Respected or Gain Power

Throughout the series, participants did recognize that women were able to gain power, but the cost was great. Liz stated, "Yeah, we see them gain power at the end, but, at the expense of their femininity. They are both raped. Daenerys is raped by Drogo. She goes through a lot. Sansa goes through the same thing with Ramsey." Liz realized how prevalent sexual assault was in shaping women into strong leaders. Mandy reiterated Liz's belief of this by saying, "Even though they were they got to places where they became leaders, they were literally thrown around by men for like the first few seasons like they were completely treated like trash." This was quite a common theme that participants picked up on. According to Monica, Mandy, and Liz, these moments are used as a catalyst for change and only after such brutality occurs are these women able to be accepted as powerful leaders.

Yet, for Monica, this exceptionally upsetting because men are not subjected to the same trauma for character development as women are: "They [Men] didn't have to go through as much as the women in order to get to the spot that they were in." Her response exemplifies that men aren't subjected to trauma or character transformations to be ready to receive power. Participants saw it as an immediate given that men can handle such power and control without any preparation or change while women are rarely, if not never, accepted as powerful beings in the first place. They also perceived that, unlike men, women must earn their power, endure trauma, or find outside sources.

Sexual assault is a common theme in the series and participants noticed how this stripped women of their feminine qualities. Many participants also pointed out how this reflected in the

characters' looks. As their characters grow and lose their femininity, their looks correlate with these changes:

> Daenerys is so extremely stunning and looks very feminine at the beginning of the series. She wears beautiful and flimsy and gaudy dresses but at the end of the show, her clothing choices are darker and more conservation. The same thing happens with Sansa. She looks so innocent to start but at the end, she appears very hardened both physically and emotionally. (Liz)

Liz saw this change in the two girls both in the way that they dressed and in their emotions. Dana also highlighted these visual changes that are seen in Sansa and Daenerys and credited them to the trauma that both women experienced throughout the show:

> We see this in the way that Sansa and Daenerys dress and are portrayed. Before the difficult things they experience, they both wear much more feminine clothing and hairstyles, while afterwards, they lose a lot of that. We see them wearing darker colors and more severe or masculine styles.

The changes were clear to participants, but the visual changes were especially prevalent. Both women are subjected to trauma and respond in the same ways as well.

4.1.3. Male Gaze

"I think Game of Thrones was definitely written for males. And we fully see that the male gaze is definitely prevalent there." Liz

In watching Game of Thrones, it's clear to see who the target audience is. From the scantily clad women to the excessive nudity and sex scenes, participants picked up on a strong correlation to the male gaze. While Sansa and Daenerys change their appearance based on their trauma, at the beginning of the series, participants noted how prevalent their looks were at the

beginning of the series. Many participants (11) acknowledged how the show catered to the male gaze as seen in Nora's quote: "I think much of that [beautiful women] is included for the same reason that prostitutes and graphic sex scenes are included, right? Because they think that'll get people to watch." Riley also echoed Nora's thoughts: "I really believe was like a marketing ploy because if you have naked woman on a screen, you're going to get more views." Dana also observed that these elements seemed to be used to draw specific viewers in:

> It almost seemed like Game of Thrones had a half-life in terms of nudity and sex. At the beginning of the series, there is way too much of that, but as the show progressed and the characters developed, there was less of it. I think they used the naked women to attract viewers, and I would say probably like men. Once they had a big enough fan base and people liked the show more, they didn't show as much of that stuff.

> Plainly, men were considered as the target audience when writing the series because of how women were portrayed. Participants realized how much the female body really was used to attract viewers.

4.1.4. Negative Female Stereotypes

While feminine qualities are held against women like Sansa, participants also noticed that if women try to act too masculine in the wrong context, they're still criticized for their behavior. Brienne of Tarth displayed extremely masculine qualities and was still negatively perceived. Dana pointed out, "Everybody acted like Brienne of Tarth was some kind of freak just because she was a woman who could do a man's job." She was faithful, strong, and moral, and while these qualities are all admirable, they were also held against her because she was a woman. "It's only ever negative in their character. Like, 'Oh she's just a girl (Annie).'" Brienne of Tarth was mocked by men for her loyalty and desire to good. Participant perspective pointed to the

23

belief that if a man displayed such character attributes, they would be praised for the same qualities that were held against her. Yet, they recognized that Brienne was shamed because she didn't have beauty to back femininity and still meet the standards of the male gaze. Dana pointed out, "If Brienne had been more physically pleasing to look at, she may have fared better in the world of Game of Thrones. Instead, men ridiculed her by calling her 'Brienne the Beauty' since she wasn't beautiful."

On the other hand, Daenerys also faced many negative perceptions and criticism based on her drive to succeed and reclaim her family's rightful throne. Monica acknowledged some of the sexist beliefs that existed in Game of Thrones, "In Game of Thrones, women are meant to be seen, not heard. Yes, there are some women who do succeed, but their looks play a major part in their success because of the society they live in." Rue also noted:

> As a society, we don't think about men in that same way, right? Like even as a woman, I see her [Daenerys] acting that way and I think, 'Oh my God, she's a backstabbing wench!' But if a man was to do the same thing, it's not viewed in the same light. And I think that has a lot to do with our society and how we perceive gender roles because if a man did some of the stuff she did, it wouldn't even get a second glance, right? But some of the backstabbing and conniving that she's doing, there's a whole episode dedicated to it. So, yes, it's a society thing, but it's also how they chose to tell the story. Like they really reinforced those roles, I feel.

Rue even recognized her own bias in this situation. She knew how much influence society had to even impact her perspective this way. Participants also noticed how women are naturally held to different and higher standards. Specifically, because Daenerys is supposed to have more feminine qualities, participants noted how she is criticized for displaying more masculine

behaviors. Yet, men are often praised for doing the exact same actions that she does. She isn't supposed to reach for power or success though. Participants found these unfair standards to be frustrating and limiting to women in achieving both power and respect.

4.1.5. Women With Masculine Qualities Are Considered Good or Powerful

Clearly, masculine qualities are viewed as powerful by participants. As reflected in the interviews, there are many instances throughout the series in which men are just given power withing having to earn it or prove themselves as worth. This cyclical nature is pointed out by multiple participants in the way that power is continuously passed from father to son through birthright and inheritance. Liz highlighted multiple instances in which power was given without being earned:

> I guess, in general, we see a lot of men coming into power based on birthright. For example, there's Joffrey Baratheon, the evil prince, there is Robb Stark, Ned's heir, of course, and Robin of the Vale. They're all people who have birthright into these positions. The only one who really shows that he deserved it was Robb. He steps up as a leader, whereas Robin of the Vale is just given power because of who his father was. And Joffrey is downright evil so it's kind of like they never would have gained power if they hadn't had it given to them.

Because they are given power, as explained by Liz, they don't need to display traits or characteristics that would earn them such positions. It matters who they are in terms of lineage. In regard to Jamie Lannister, a man inheriting much power based on birthright, Sybil stated, "Um he's kind of not the brightest and he's like not a good person, but he still has a bunch of power." Sybil recognized that Jamie didn't exhibit good traits of a leader, but because of who his family is, he was just able to step into that position. Annie also realized this and recognized how much

more powerful Jamie's sister, Cersei, was compared to him. Yet, she holds almost no power because she is a woman. "I'm certain it's because she's [Cersei] a woman. She even says many, many times, 'I should have been born with a penis.' She is like, 'Jamie, you go sit down. I'll take care of everything.' Which she's super smart, she's super talented… so it's like yeah, she should have been in charge, but because she's a woman, she was held back." Annie knew that Cersei is much more competent and clearly cut out to be a leader, but because she is a woman, the power is defaulted to her brother who is much less qualified. Her quote exemplifies that no matter how much Cersei proves herself to be intelligent, clever, or capable, she will never be regarded on the same level as her brother.

4.1.6. Feminine Qualities Hinder Women

Even though Game of Thrones has been praised for being a series with feminist ideals, participants viewed their portrayal and treatment of women as the opposite from feminism. Nora stated, "I think there is a pretty strong air of sexism throughout Game of Thrones." Mandy reiterated this in saying, "I feel like they [women] were taken so advantage of for their femininity and had all these terrible things happen to them because they were these weak, fragile women. They had to go away from that to honestly protect themselves." A common theme among participants was that femininity was a hindrance to women. Maia recognized such issues with needing to use femininity in order to gain favor with men and shared this viewpoint: "Women are often viewed as objects, so yeah, it obviously hinders them. They are seen for what they can physically bring to a situation in terms of beauty or sex, and not for any form of intellect or strategy." Kelly also recognized how Sansa's femininity was held against her:

Kelly: "She just gets put into these marriages and gets told what to do, and I think in those instances, yeah, gender does kind of dictate a lot of what you can do in the show.

McKenzie Lautt: "So you would say it hinders them maybe more so than helps?

Kelly: "Definitely, I mean that's an obstacle to overcome in the first place. It's just like assumed that as a woman, you will get married and be a lady. You aren't seen for much more than your body."

Kelly saw how the world of Game of Thrones influenced this view. She pointed out how these were all just standards women were expected to meet. As seen in participant responses, women's femininity is a major hindrance to them throughout the series and because of it, they are often less valued or respected. In fact, Mandy explained how even being associated with a powerful man still didn't help: "Even though she [Sansa] was daughter to the Head of House Stark and Lord of Winterfell and should be respected, she still wasn't. So I feel like even though she had the title and supposedly the power, because she was a woman, she was treated poorly because of things that were out of her control." According to Mandy's response, her feminine qualities alone were unable to bring her safety or power.

Some participants (8) believed that when Daenerys gained too much power, she took a major turn for the worse. Many described her early self in a positive way. Through her journey to reclaim her family's throne, she is built up to be this awesome ruler with a strong moral obligation who is concerned with helping others in any way that she can. Participants stated that almost out of nowhere, she burned down cities, cut alliances, and killed many innocent people. Some believe it was genetic considering her father was known as The Mad King (3 participants), but others believe it was because she was a woman who gained more power than she could handle (5 participants). "I don't know that she went mad like her father did. I feel that, in many ways, she didn't go mad; she just was fulfilling the arc of what a woman seeking power would do

(Nora)." This belief that Daenerys was just a crazy woman who could not handle the power

given to her was reiterated by many others as well. Kelly explained her character in more detail:

> I think she just kind of starts out as like this bright-eyed child that is being told, "You're
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> entitled to everything. You are the mother of dragons. You are this, you are that." And
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> through that, I think she just was emboldened and had this grand vision, this divine rite of
>
> passage. She thought she should be this person, like she's the right person. But while
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> having those thoughts, she didn't really do any of the work of what a good leader does.
>
> Like what does a good leader look like? What does it actually take? She just got
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> thrown into these positions of insane power right away because she had dragons and she
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> had to start from the top and try to run these complex organizations, without any
>
> experience whatsoever. I think, you know, as the season starts to go on, she starts to
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> unravel and realize, "I don't know how to do this, and I am just winging it and I'm so
>
> impulsive. I just know that I want King's Landing and I don't care what it takes to get
>
> there. I've been working for this my whole life. That's where I'm supposed to be." And
>
> she just gets like really blinded by it all.

And maybe some of what Kelly said is true. She recognized that Daenerys was able to gain a lot

of power fairly quickly and at an early age with little experience in ruling kingdoms. She wasn't

prepared for what happened to her, but her dragons gave her something that no one else had.

Monica also recognized the sexism surrounding Daenerys' downfall and questioned,

"Why wouldn't they reverse the role and have that happen to Jon Snow?" Of course, she

recognized that the writers of Game of Thrones chose the demise of Daenerys to take place

instead of using this character arc with one of the men's storylines. Participants noted that

throughout the series, male characters are built up with positive traits and changes as well, but

their fates do not come crashing down around them because they gained too much power. Daenerys wasn't allowed to be seen as a strong leader who could balance all the power she came into. On the other hand, Bran, for example, became the Three-Eyed Raven and stepped into more power than he could have imagined. Annie stated, "Bran was literally handed the kingdom of Westeros and yet, his storyline does not end with him going insane, killing tons of people, and eventually being killed himself. Instead, he becomes the king of Westeros. He does not even want the power, but it is still given to him." She recognized how different his plotline turned out because of his gender. Ultimately, he was able to handle all of the power just given to him much better than she was ever able to handle the power she achieved.

Overall, there are many negative perceptions of women who do end up achieving power as well. Game of Thrones specifically "doesn't do a whole lot of favors to women in power" (Annie) or just to women in general either. Jill gave an example of these negative perceptions: "She [Cersei] is portrayed as having these more stereotypically womanly features and then she's portrayed as being like evil and crazy." If Cersei were a man, her actions may have had different connotations from crazy or evil. Ultimately, women are perceived as too emotional, unstable, and crazy to be able handle power.

4.1.7. Lack of Diversity

Game of Thrones has been labeled as a series with feminist messaging, but many participants (10) believed otherwise. Jill recognized the lack of diversity in the writing room and stated, "I'm just like that doesn't really make sense to me, but it also is a show written by two, white men who you know are probably straight. I don't actually know, but you have to think about that when you're watching stuff sometimes. You know, think about how that is impacts the writing of things." While there are more lead female characters in Game of Thrones, their

29

plotlines don't uphold to these feminist values. Jill pointed out, "Because if you're living in the world that the writers wrote, which you would be, it's going to put you at a disadvantage, and I feel like it's definitely written in the context of where there's obviously sexism and the power struggle between the two genders." Participants picked up on the themes of conflict that the writers wrote in between the two genders. Kelly also agreed that "writers just need to be diverse and can introduce a lot of perspective that you don't often get for characters." But instead of introducing new perspectives, Maia noted that this lack of diversity was especially evident in the characters written as contenders for the throne, "I honestly feel like the male characters were probably the main focus of the show. When you look at it, like who really Daenerys was, she was the only female that people thought would be able to take over the throne. So I think for the writers, it was just mostly that men were the main focus and they kind of forgot to include women." She thought that women were seen to have so little of importance that they were even forgotten.

Nora pointed out, "I think that it's easier for them [men] to gain power because it's the default, right? And that's not necessarily something about the show that would be great, but I mean it's kind of loosely based off of Britain and that's just how that worked." Kay also justified the lack of diversity in regard to the time period: "The reason so many men are in the show could be like the setting. It's medieval times. I mean I know it's not real medieval, not like the real world, but I think in olden times, which we kind of equate with Game of Thrones, there just wasn't diversity." But Annie had a varying opinion about the setting:

> You literally created a fantasy world. Why wouldn't women have power in that
> world?... You don't have to base it on any tropes. I don't think there is any matriarchal
> society anywhere. Not north of the wall, not Dorn. [In Dorn] women are more

respected, but they're not necessarily in power. The sand snakes took that power and

exploited it in, again, a really negative way, and so I would say actually turn the tables.

You don't have to be writing something medieval and stick with all the stuff that you

know as medieval. You can gender bend, you can flip the script, you can change

it. You don't have to stick with what you know. Get someone in there who's got a

different voice from you and actually listen to them and take their ideas and put them

into what you're doing because, I love the show, but I could talk smack about it all day.

And I also could sing its praises all day. I love the world they created, but they could

have done more for women, because it is uncharitable [to them].

Annie recognized the lack of diversity within the writing room and pointed out how it obviously translated into the show. She realized that the nature of fantasy allows for much more creativity than most genres of television, but the writers clearly failed to capitalize on this opportunity. Annie wanted the writers to go against those stereotypes and give women a fairer chance. Participants believed that while writers included more female characters within the series, they were unsuccessful in portraying them as powerful, respected women in the world of Game of Thrones.

4.1.8. Women in Power Feel Threatened by Other Powerful Women

Because there are more female characters in Game of Thrones, there are more opportunities for them to interact with other women. Sadly though, not only did writers of Game of Thrones fail to include more diversity within the series, according to many participants, they also extremely missed the mark in their portrayal of female relationships as well. Kelly reasoned:

Maybe it's just outdated perceptions of female relationships. I mean it's written by a man, so there are so many like cliches of like cat fights and sisters hating each other and whatever. I think that would be the main reason just outdated gender norms and if the show was written by a woman, she would show how two powerful women interact and it wouldn't be with like disrespect and petty comments. It would be with admiration and respect because powerful women support powerful women, and that is just all there is to it.

These outdated perceptions of women focus on the negative aspects and cliches that exist instead of using the space to show women supporting women. Kelly recognized that over and over, they missed the mark on facilitating female relationships. Sophie echoed Kelly's response:

We don't really see them having friends, do we? And when I think they might have friends, it kind of turns around to burn them in a way… It seemed that the focus of the women was to end up with the most powerful husband or married to the king. So there was always that competition element. With Sansa and Daenerys meeting, I think there was a distrust too.

She noticed that women really weren't perceived to have other female friends or be lifting other women up throughout the show and that they seemed to only be focused on competing with one another instead. In fact, a common message that many participants (13) shared was that women in power feel threatened by other powerful women:

Between the main characters, it almost feels like they perceive each other as a threat or that there could only be one strong female versus all these men. You wanted strong men on your side of the army because that's how you guys kept each other safe, and you look

out for each other. In war, that's what you need - to have strong people on your side.

Whereas, I feel like for women, it's almost like it's so hard to get to a point where you're

perceived as a leader and being strong and having power to influence, so I almost feel

like it's a threat because it's hard enough to for one person to do it, let alone multiple. So I

feel like when they do meet each other it's like, "I don't want you to take away my power.

How can there be two of us working and having people listen to both of us when we can

barely get people to listen to one of us." So I feel like that's like a hard thing to do.

(Mandy)

Mandy noticed that women were scared to share their power because of how challenging

it was for them to earn it in the first place. Instead of allowing them to support each other in such

an unfriendly climate towards women, she recognized that the show turned powerful women

against each other and that they mainly just competed against one another. Monica noted that

these female relationships can often turn into a "power struggle between the two." Dana also

recognized that "the writers obviously don't value the camaraderie between women." While this

is very prevalent in the medieval and fantastical world of Game of Thrones, Rue also noted how

prevalent these ideals are in today's society and how this impacted the portrayal of these

relationships in the show as well:

Because in society, women tend to not build up other women, right? So many women

have this mentality that it's me or you, and it can never be both. And so it's easy to do in a

story right, it also makes it more dramatic… But I think, really, if you look at society, the

societal impacts of it, women tend to not support other women because we have this

mentality that there can only be one good person and everybody else is bad, right? They

don't have the 'Empowered women empower women' mentality. It's "I'm going to win, and you aren't."

This replication of how women in the show were pitted against other women due to the reflection of the real world was not well-received by female viewers though. Liz stated, "There is no true female friendship and that's just disgusting." In fact, Monica noted that Jon Snow was the middleman who was able to make Sansa and Daenerys come to better terms with one another. She stated, "I guess, just because they wanted to portray the men in a better light. They were getting along with more people, and they were more like charismatic and better leaders than the women." Instead of allowing women to work out their difference and be able to get along on their own, a man had to be the one to help them see more eye to eye.

There are a few instances where women have good relationships with one another throughout the show though. Unfortunately, it's mainly if the power distance between the two is great enough, as stated by Sarah: "I mean, really, the only like the main female positive interaction was with Missendi and Daenerys. That was the only relationship that's not like a mother daughter relationship that we see in the show." Sally also noticed another relationship in the series that was positive because it was a superior to subordinate relationship: "Well, the only one Sansa did have a pretty good relationship with was Brienne of Tarth. Yeah, they had a decent relationship, but it was more like protector, and that type of thing, it wasn't a real friendship." Mandy made sense of this by saying, "They had relationships with people that were lesser power than them and weren't perceived as a threat to them, so I feel like that's why those relationships worked…because they needed to rely on somebody in those moments to stay strong and to have a companion, but then it's like when you're at the top and you're a female leader, others are a threat against you." Sadly, Mandy saw that women were perceived as being too

concerned with power to be able to have relationships with one another that empowered women and built others up.

4.2. Influence of Gender Stereotypes

While some participants recognized and rejected the gender stereotypes, others were more easily influenced by the gender stereotypes within the show. The following codes make up this theme: Masculine Qualities Hold Power, Negative Perceptions of Femininity, Feminine Qualities Don't Hold Power, Negative Motives for Power, and Feminine Qualities Help Women (see Table 3 for definitions).

Table 3. Influence of Gender Stereotypes.

Code	Definition
Masculine Qualities Hold Power	Masculine qualities, whether in men or women, are viewed as powerful
Negative Perceptions of Femininity	Femininity is viewed in a negative light
Feminine Qualities Don't Hold Power	Feminine qualities are seen as week or powerless
Negative Motives for Power	Women have negative motives for seeking power
Feminine Qualities Help Women	Feminine qualities help women in the world of Game of Thrones

4.2.1. Masculine Qualities Hold Power

The majority of participants expressed a dislike of characters with traditionally feminine qualities (12 participants). When asked which characters participants liked best, Arya, a young girl who displays very masculine traits, was one of the most common answers (11 participants). Rue stated, "Arya [is my favorite character]. She's like the girl who's really good at shooting archery and she like shoots with the boys and describes herself as a boy." Arya was highly

praised by participants for her affinity for masculine qualities and her attitude towards rejecting femininity. Participants realized that she may have been onto something with her tomboy attitude though. Sybil articulated, "Women either have to be attached to powerful men are pretend to be men to have like any kind of power." Arya was seen as quite powerful for many reasons, but she also pretended to be a boy for a while to save her own life and escape from the capital after her father was killed. These masculine qualities all contributed to her being most frequently named as the favorite character among participants.

4.2.2. Negative Perceptions of Femininity

While Arya was favored for her affinity to masculinity, according to participant response, her sister, Sansa, was strongly disliked for her femininity. Many participants stated that they did not like Sansa in the beginning of the series (15 participants). Reasons for disliking her ranged from, "Sansa in her pretty dresses didn't want to get dirty and very much like proper and prim and what you think of like a lady (Mandy)" to "We see her as this girl interested in marrying a prince and becoming the hopeful queen (Liz)." The common theme with all these answers regarding disliking Sansa is her femininity. Viewers disliked Sansa because she was following gender norms and did not want to stray from the path set out for her by society. In comparison to her tomboy sister, participants see Sansa being set up to be the villain for wanting and liking what she is told to want and like. In the end, Sansa is finally perceived as a more likable, respected character and she becomes one of the most powerful people. Approximately 15 participants attributed Sansa's positive transformation to the loss of her feminine qualities as we see in Sophie's quote:

> I think I'd say she's a character, who in the beginning, really annoyed me. In the end,
> I ended up respecting and liking her. So my opinion of her changed as things went along.

36

I don't know how old she was supposed to be in the beginning, but kind of an adolescent young teenager and just a little bit mooney. Like, "Oh, look at this guy! Isn't he handsome? I'm going to marry him." And wanting to be a pretty girl and everything. So yeah, you know, I didn't like seeing all the bad things that happened to her throughout her story, but I think the results of it, I guess, the strong woman she became in the end, it was fun to see the progression.

According to participant perception, their clothing choices seem to have a direct connection with the trauma that they endure and the loss of their feminine qualities. As Monica noted, "Especially at the beginning, both did dress a lot more provocatively." Instead of wearing beautiful and revealing gowns appropriate for strolling through the garden or entertaining others at court, they wear much more modest and masculine clothing suited for battle. Their choices move them away from the male gaze and more into positions of power. The general consensus among participants was that while some of this may have been necessary for the circumstances they were in (such as climate), it was a visual representation of the changes they had to endure to become powerful.

Participants considered women with masculine qualities more powerful than women with more feminine qualities. Arya is seen as powerful from the get-go due to her natural inclination for masculine qualities, but Sansa had to learn this the hard way by having her femininity taken from her. She finally understood how embracing masculine qualities would help her more than leaning into her femininity. This is seen in Daenerys, Cersei, and many other female characters throughout the series. While viewers did display feminist beliefs, they also tended to lean towards liking and appreciating the less feminine characters.

4.2.3. Feminine Qualities Don't Hold Power

A common theme among participant response was that while men are often just given power based on their masculinity, women must earn their power if they are to have any. They are not perceived as powerful unless they are associated with a man (4 participants), obtain other elements that bring them power (3 participants), or they endure trauma to lose their femininity (16 participants). Sybil explained, "I feel like a lot of the time, the women either have to be like attached to powerful men are like pretend to be men to have like any kind of power." She then provided the example of Lady Stark's power situation: "And then there are women like Lady Stark, and she is super smart. And so she does have some influence, but mainly because she's married to a rich man." Sybil believes that Lady Stark isn't respected for her own status or attributes; her power comes from being married to the ruler of the North. Once Lady Stark's husband is murdered, she relies on her son, the heir to her husband's title, Robb, for her societal standing.

> In Daenerys' storyline, Sybil stated, "She really only gets that way [powerful] after becoming the Khaleesi and having her dragons and things like that." This perspective perpetuates that women are only able to garner power based on their relation to something other than their own devices. And again, her position as Khaleesi was only gained from her marriage to Khal Drogo, the leader of the Dothraki tribe, and her ability to please him with her body.

Dana noted this as well:

> Daenerys really came into power when she was sold to Khal Drogo. Before that, their position to regain the Iron Throne wasn't looking that good. And once Drogo dies, the dragons really become her only hopes of reclaiming her birthright. Her power is directly

related to the dragons, and we see them mirror her growth as well. As the dragons grow,
so does her power.

Dana's response reflects that if Daenerys had not married Khal Drogo, she never would have been in the position to regain her family's throne. Once she loses her husband, her power over the Dothraki is lost and she must rely on her dragons to bring her respect and power. Many participants (8) believed that without her dragons, she is simply seen as a woman. And according to that belief, being a woman with no husband, she would have had nothing else going for her to be able to vie for the iron throne.

To further perpetuate the idea that women are incapable of being powerful on their own, Monica explained that "women in power, the only way they got there was by learning like a really hard lesson and kind of overcoming it." This statement explains that they are forced to undergo trauma and are stripped of their feminine qualities before they can step into their power.

Women endured a lot of trauma throughout the show and participants perceived Sansa's positive transformation to occur when Sansa shed most of her feminine characteristics throughout the series and armed herself with more masculine qualities. They viewed this new version of Sansa as more likable, intelligent, and respectable. These perceptions lead to the idea that in the world of Game of Thrones, Sansa may have never achieved this level of power if she had held onto her feminine qualities.

4.2.4. Negative Motives for Power

Women's motives for gaining power are negatively perceived throughout the series (4 participants). Yet, men are never questioned for wanting to obtain power. Nora believed that "revenge is kind of a key to women's use of power." She went on to explain:

I think that essentially, when any woman gets power or becomes a leader, it's driven by

revenge in some way, right? When Cersei gets power, it's because she's avenging Joffrey

and her other children. That's when she tries to take control. When Daenerys gets this

power at the end, it's because she's avenging Missandei's death and she's avenging these

other things that have been brought to her. When Arya gets her little bit of power, she

uses it to get revenge on the people on her list… It just kind of what happens when

women get power. They need to have some kind of desire for revenge, I guess…

you're driven by your emotions and that you're not making rational decisions. And that

you can't trust them because there's probably something else going on there. (Nora)

Nora's explanation dives into the internal sexism that highlights the belief that women

are not allowed to reach for power unless there is a perceived negative motive driving them to

achieve it. After all, according to gender norms, Nora believed that women are supposed to be

submissive and obedient to men, so they should not be grasping for control.

4.2.5. Femininity Qualities Help Women

Some participants perceived feminine qualities as a positive aspect for women in Game

of Thrones (11 participants). Those that reported feminine qualities helping women still had

messaging that points to femininity actually being a burden. Nora claimed, "I would say that they

[feminine qualities] help you because they allow you to get close to the men with power." Dana

similarly echoed Nora's sentiment stating, "Women are often able to use their bodies to get what

they want, so essentially, yes, feminine qualities help women in Game of Thrones." While we

know that women must often rely on men for their power, participants questioned why women

couldn't gain power on their own.

Other participants (7) saw femininity as helping women as it allowed them to appear as underestimated. Annie explained how this was helpful: "As with Sansa and Daenerys, it was allowed for people to underestimate them and so that does help them make those unexpected moves because people wouldn't expect them to be so cunning and so willing to do whatever it takes." She thought that women being treated with less respect actually helped them achieve their goals. Meg also backed Annie's belief:

> I think that they learn that they can use it to their advantage, and then it's not a disadvantage. I think, in the beginning, they're both of them are kind of told that women should be seen and not heard… In the end, they learned that they can use their feminine power to their advantage, but they definitely have to go through a lot to get there.

These examples show how participants perceived feminine qualities helping women gain power in Game of Thrones.

4.3. Justifications for Gendered Violence

Gendered violence is a common theme within Game of Thrones and many participants were willing to justify these behaviors. Game of Thrones is well-known for its willingness to explore new territories on television. According to participant perspectives, HBO didn't shy away from anything when filming this series and, because of that, there are many scenes of violence, especially towards women, portrayed throughout the show. In regard to the violence shown within the series, Sarah stated, "When I first started, I was watching season one. I didn't really fully know what to expect, so it was just like, 'Let me get HBO.' It has certain licensing where they can show something not normal like cable TV. So at first, I was like, 'Woah, this is a lot of nudity, this is a lot of brutal death.' And I mean, a child gets pushed out of a tower in the first episode. So you're like, 'Oh okay, it's this kind of show.'" While some participants (4) felt

uncomfortable watching the series, many (17) were able to justify why they were okay with such actions in Game of Thrones. The following codes make up this theme: Trauma Shapes People, Pain Causes Empathy, Medieval Times and Other Cultures Have Different Standards for Women (see Table 4 for definitions).

Table 4. Justifications for Gendered Violence.

Code	Definition
Trauma Shapes People	Past trauma influences who we are and how we behave
Pain Causes Empathy	When we see characters in pain, we feel more empathy for them
Medieval Times and Other Cultures Have Different Standards for Women	Women had less respect and were treated more poorly in medieval times; People believe GoT exists in medieval times. Rape is accepted as part of some cultures

4.3.1. Trauma Shapes People

While many characters experienced trauma in Game of Thrones, participants felt that Sansa and Daenerys were consistently subjected to violence, rape, and abuse to become the women that they were. In the beginning of the series, both characters are introduced to the audience as young and innocent little girls. By the final season of the show, participants noticed that both have endured so much trauma that they become hardened, yet respected leaders. According to participant response, these scenes are difficult and extremely uncomfortable to watch, yet Game of Thrones was still such a popular television show. Participants were able to justify the traumatic scenes for a variety of reasons. Jill attributed sexual assault to positive growth: "The sexual assault and how it's kind of used as a way for the female characters to get up stronger and now you're like more able to like take on these hard situations." Sansa, in particular, is much more well-liked at the end of the series. "They kind of painted her as a victim and then I feel like that whole situation created her character. She was like, 'I'm not taking this anymore

42

(Summer).'" Many participants (14) justified the violence she endured by attributing it to her positive growth as exemplified by Sarah:

> I think, yeah, going with like different traumatic experiences, I mean being with Joffrey, she was first in love with him and then he killed her dog. And so I think that's like step one. She's a little them more wary of him, and then they murder her dad and she's like, 'Oh this isn't actually that great.' And then he actually shows her her dad's head and just like this is not fun, and so I think a lot of those kind of start to turn her. And then, as soon as Marjorie comes along, she just gets pushed to the side. And so I think when she realizes how disposable she is. And then her aunt accuses her of wanting to steal Littlefinger, and so I think little traumatic things kind of helped like push her along to her growth. But none of them bring her to her edge

Sarah saw that Sansa had been through a lot starting from a young age but noticed that the change didn't occur until later. Sarah claimed that she had to endure more trauma to really grow from her experience. Going back to what Jill said, sexual assault seemed to be the main catalyst that really changed Sansa. While Sansa endured many awful things, like having to stare at her father's head on a spike, Maia pointed out the experience that really seemed to bring about Sansa's character growth:

> And then she got forced to marry Ramsay Bolton and he was literally evil. He physically abused and raped her and also psychologically tortured her too, which, I think, is where her character changes and she just starts to make more decisions for herself and ends up becoming this really powerful woman who has a lot of respect and following. Before that, none of the bad things happening to her really seemed to faze her enough to make her grow up and realize who she had to become.

43

Maia's perspective on what it took for Sansa to grow is especially interesting. She claims that the trauma Sansa had already been through didn't do enough to really affect her in a positive way. Only once she is sexually abused is she able to come into her full power. Maia, along with eight other participants, believes that the change only happens once the trauma is so bad that the character can't go back to their old ways. The change only happens once the trauma is so bad that the character can't go back to their old ways. Mandy agreed that without the sexual assault Sansa suffers, she most likely would have never gone through the same transformation that she did:

> If they would have taken like out the abuse, which is terrible, but I honestly don't know if Joffrey had just verbally attacked her and was very mean to her if it would have been enough. Of course, she would probably grow from that as well, but I think it's [Ramsay's abuse] a lot more aggressive. It causes a change versus if it was like them verbally getting in a fight.

Many participants agreed that the scenes of Sansa with Ramsay were absolutely brutal. Annie did recognize that these scenes could be upsetting, but instead of rejecting the series or the scenes, she justified that it made Sansa a more capable and likeable person in the end:

> I think you could be upset by the show's decision to like, she, you know she wasn't married to Ramsey in the books. I think you can sit, if you want to sit and be annoyed by that, you can, but to see the power of that and I don't think it was a great decision, the way they portrayed it, however, it made her grow in the show. So cool. Like she just becomes this powerful person and like uses all of the tools that people have used against her against her enemies.

Annie's justifications make the trauma and rape that Sansa survived seem almost like a positive thing. She believed that it truly was for the best in developing Sansa's character.

Participant perspective noticed that the writers of Game of Thrones did the same thing because instead of showing more realistic portrayals of coping with such negative experiences, they use it to improve characters. Writers may have meant to give messages of hope and positivity in these portrayals. Meg thought so: "I would say she's [Sansa] someone that faced a lot of adversity in her life, but she didn't let it make her any less hopeful. She let the adversity that she faced in her life push her to become better and stronger and she never gave up." This was a common idea among participants. Although there were scenes of trauma, some viewers focused more on the positive outcomes than what the characters actually endured. Nora was critical of this representation and believed it to be inaccurate:

> If your niece came to you and was like, "I was raped." or "I was molested." You'd never be like, "Well, thank God, now you get to find out what it's like to be a woman." You would never say. That's outrageous! But for some reason, when we can take a step back from it and see it on the screen, it's just so normalized to us in such a degree that we're like, "Oh yeah, that's fine!"

Nora disliked the portrayal of using rape as a positive catalyst. She recognized how detrimental this type of attitude was for viewers to see. While Nora disagreed with rape being a positive catalyst, Sansa wasn't the only one who had to deal with these bouts of abuse to become more powerful and respected within the show. Participants (9) also justified the trauma that Daenerys endured as a facilitator for her positive transformation as Sophie explained:

> I think she starts out as kind of a timid character who's being dragged along by her brother who was very domineering and self-righteous. and He treats her a bit like property and basically sells her to this horse warrior tribe so that he can gain his throne that he thinks he's the rightful successor to. On her wedding night, she is brutally raped

45

by her new husband, the Khal of the Dothraki. And so as she is adapting to life with this tribe, she starts finding her own strength… And then, yeah, we just kind of see her maturing and gaining more power and confidence.

Sophie explained how Daenerys was forced to endure a lot of trauma, but in the end, it really bettered her. Sophie saw even the scenes of rape as an opportunity to find her inner strength. Along with character development, many participants (8) also saw trauma as an opportunity to further the plot. Sybil stated, "I think some of its necessary [trauma] for the plot, but I think especially so at the beginning." Summer also felt this way in regard to Daenerys' plotline: "Like Daenerys with Khal Drogo, that was a plot of the storyline, so it's kind of hard because I don't know how that what could have developed without that whole situation going on." Without trauma, Game of Thrones may not have been perceived as interesting. After all, Sally pointed out, "I mean, definitely there's a part of TV that people are going to want craziness and that's what keeps the viewers." People are sometimes interested in gore and violence because these types of things aren't shown anywhere else.

Some participants were more uncomfortable with the violence, Meg highlighted:

I was very uncomfortable watching those scenes, especially the rape scenes and nudity. There are many of them and they just made me very uncomfortable. I can't imagine watching some of those scenes if I myself were like a survivor of sexual assault. I feel like that would be very triggering.

4.3.2. Pain Causes Empathy

Indie realized that there may be motives other than developing the plot or characters. She stated. "They bring in that shock factor of this deep terrible thing to make you feel that emotion for the characters, so I don't know, I think it's something along those lines." Game of Thrones is

known for showing characters in horrible pain, which tends to create empathy for the characters after seeing what they go through. She went on to further explain:

> But I also think it really forces you to have sympathy and empathy for a character and it really, really, really makes you hate the abuser. Like it really makes you hate them even if you think like, "Oh, that's a crap character, he sucks." It makes you hate them with more of an emotion, you know what I mean? Like it brings out really, really strong emotions. It makes you feel a lot more things about the show and about the characters. You really bond with them, whether you sympathize empathize or hate them, so I think that's one of the key things.

Meg, along with six other participants agreed with Indie. She stated, "They [traumatic scenes] definitely made me more empathetic towards the characters and I felt terrible for them." Participants noticed that the characters were put in positions where the participants were meant to feel empathy and create a connection with them.

Gender ideologies seem to inform empathy toward character pain. Participants pointed out how with women, the pain they endured is used as an opportunity for change, so there may have been less empathy surrounding these actions. Others who were viewed as less masculine also tended to gain less empathy. An example of this is seen with Theon Greyjoy. Theon is castrated, resulting in a loss of masculinity, and then both psychologically and physically tortured until he literally takes on a new persona to cope with what he has endured. Yet, despite everything he has endured, Theon is still not seen with the same empathy that other characters receive. To emphasize this, when Jamie Lannister's hand is cut off, even though he is seen as a pretty evil character, he is portrayed in a more empathetic light.

4.3.3. Medieval Times and Other Cultures Have Different Standards for Women

On top of justifying her abuse as character growth or a way to make her more likeable, participants (4) also reasoned that the rape she endured was part of the Dothraki culture. Sybil stated, "I feel like that is kind of necessary for the plot because it's the way that those men in the tribe are. That's how they treat the women and so that's kind of like building that aspect of what the Dothraki culture is, I guess." While Sybil saw rape as a cultural component of the Dothraki tribe, many other participants viewed rape as part of the assumed time period and used that as an excuse to justify what was happening to women. Sarah mentioned how such actions were permissible under the time period:

I mean, again, going with the time when it's supposed to theoretically take place, I mean it's based off really medieval kinds of things, and I think that was a norm. Unfortunately for that and that's how you have all these like powerful men and that's [rape] kind of how they feel powerful around the women around them. And so I think they were trying to show people, "Hey, this was probably normal in this time period, so we're going to include it." But, I mean, they do put, I think, trigger warnings in the beginning to be like, "Hey, just so you know, this happens!" And so I think, kind of that reason, just like the way the show was when it took place. I think it definitely adds to it. I mean, I don't think they depict it in a very like terrible way. They're pretty decently sensitive about it, I mean, obviously, it's something that's hard to watch, especially if you are someone that went through that though.

This was a common belief among participants (7). Although Game of Thrones is a fantasy world, because it has medieval themes, they were able to justify the rape and sexism as historical accuracy. Relating back to what she had said about positive character growth, Sophie

48

believed they took the historical issue and were able to spin it in an optimistic way: "You know how women had been treated in history, especially during the wars, and they brought that in and figured out how to shape characters from it." The perceived time period and fantasy themes really allowed viewers to excuse the chauvinist beliefs they were watching.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between power and gender using Game of Thrones as an application. Interviews gathered information from 20 women who had seen more than one season of Game of Thrones. Participant perception gave insight into how they viewed feminist ideas and gendered violence in relation to one another within the show.

In the following, a discussion focuses on current research regarding gender and power as well as research participants' perceptions of Game of Thrones. The proposed research questions will be answered with specific attention to how people justify gendered violence while still having feminist beliefs. From this, implications for this study will be provided which will direct consumers into more thoughtful media consumption. These implications focus on why viewers are okay with gendered violence in some settings. Finally, limitations to this study and paths for future research will be addressed as they pertain to the current study.

5.1. Character Descriptions

This is intended to help the reader understand the analysis and what participants are responding to by summarizing the characters and their storylines.

5.1.1. Sansa Stark

At the beginning of the series, Sansa is known for her needlework and lady-like etiquette. She is betrothed to the king's son and heir, Joffrey. Sansa and her younger sister, Arya, move to King's Landing with their father. When first arriving at King's Landing, Sansa makes poor choices to fit in with her future family. As the political climate in King's Landing slowly declines, Sansa's father, Ned, is executed. From there, Sansa is forced to endure torture, abuse, and humiliation on multiple levels. At one point, one of Joffrey's guards, the Hound, offers to take Sansa away and rescue her, but she refuses. When a new lady catches Joffrey's attention, he

casts Sansa aside as his betrothed on grounds of her family's betrayal. The violence continues and she ends up being forced to marry Joffrey's uncle, Tyrion Lannister, as a cruel joke. The night of her wedding to Tyrion, Joffrey threatens to rape her while two of his men hold her down.

When Joffrey is poisoned and dies, Petyr Baelish (aka Littlefinger), a supposed family friend, helps Sansa escape and plans to have Sansa marry Ramsay Bolton, the recently legitimized son of the current warden of the north. Sansa is hesitant to this marriage as the Boltons betrayed her family, but Petyr tells Sansa this may be an opportunity for revenge. At this point, things go very wrong for Sansa. On their wedding night, Ramsay rapes and abuses Sansa. She becomes a prisoner; she is locked in her bedchamber and violently raped each night, among many other forms of torture. She finally escapes and reunites with her half-brother, Jon Snow.

In the end, Ramsay murders Sansa's youngest brother in an attempt to recapture Winterfell. Jon beats Ramsay in combat but leaves him for Sansa to deal with. His dogs rip him to shreds while Sansa watches with satisfaction. Sansa and Jon rule the north together until Daenerys Targaryen returns. Sansa doesn't agree with Jon's choice to bend the knee to Daenerys.

When Daenerys arrives at Winterfell with Jon, Sansa and she are on tense terms. After speaking more privately, Daenerys and Sansa come to better terms, but the situation is still tense as Sansa believes the north should remain independent. After the battle against the white walkers, Sansa and the Hound talk about what they have endured since they saw each other last in King's Landing. He comments that he could have saved Sansa from all of the horrors she has experienced since then, but Sansa responds, "Without Littlefinger and Ramsay and the rest, I would've stayed a little bird all my life." In the end, Sansa becomes Queen in the North.

5.1.2. Daenerys Targaryen

As a baby, Daenerys flees Westeros after her father is killed. As a teenager, her abusive older brother sells her to a Dothraki horse lord, Khal Drogo, in exchange for an army to recapture the rule of Westeros. At the beginning of their marriage, Drogo rapes her and treats her as nothing more than an opportunity to produce an heir. Daenerys slowly adapts to the Dothraki lifestyle, gains Drogo's respect, falls in love with him, and becomes strong and confident. When Viserys angers Drogo, Drogo murders him making Daenerys the rightful heir to the Iron Throne of Westeros. Daenerys also becomes pregnant but loses both her husband and her unborn child. When Drogo dies, the majority of his clan leaves as well. Daenerys is left with nearly nothing, but she does hatch three dragons from their eggs and becomes the Mother of Dragons. She slowly establishes herself as a powerful and relentless ruler while gathering an army.

When she has built up her army and is ready to reclaim the Iron Throne, she returns to Westeros. She aligns herself with Jon Snow and falls in love with him but forces him to bend the knee and turn over all power to her. They defeat the white-walker army and save the continent from ruin. Daenerys then turns her sights on King's Landing, but in the process, goes mad, just like her father. Throughout her battles, two of the three dragons are killed. She uses her final dragon to destroy much of the city and kill countless innocent people. In the end, Jon Snow, who turns out to be Daenerys' nephew, kills her to save the city and her dragon carries her off.

5.2. Summary of Results

Two major themes emerged from the data. The first of these themes was the belief that many women have feminist ideals and recognize sexist behaviors and actions within Game of Thrones. Participants discussed issues such as the lack of positive female relationships, the inability for women to hold power without trauma, and that feminine qualities hinder women

within the series. Many were aware of the gap of respect shown between male and female characters and didn't appreciate these viewpoints.

The second theme that emerged was that even women with feminist beliefs found ways to justify gendered violence within the series. While women rejected the beliefs of inequality and claimed that they hoped for more equality and representation for women within television, most participants made excuses as to why the gendered violence within the series was necessary. From reasons such as being historically accurate or fitting within the fantasy genre to violence being used as a catalyst for growth, overall female participants seemed to be okay with gendered violence. The discrepancy between beliefs is interesting and will be analyzed through the following discussion.

5.2.1. RQ1: How Do Women Make Sense of the Relationship Between Power and Gender in Game of Thrones?

Throughout the research, it became clear that participants were aware of the gender inequality issues within the series. Common themes that participants picked up on were that women in the series were portrayed as too unstable to handle power, they had to endure trauma to become fit for power, or that their motives for wanting power were bad. There was also a major lack of diversity within the series. On the other hand, participants were aware of how much weight masculinity pulled within the Game of Thrones world. Participants had more feminist ideals than what was originally assumed, so this was a bit surprising. Gender norms were clearly played out within the series, but participants did have a problem with the portrayal of women in Game of Thrones. One outlier was that participants only perceived women as wanting power for negative reasons. Men are seen as honorable and impressive for wanting power, but women only want power for destructive or bad reasons.

Another common belief seen among women was the attraction to masculine forms of power. Almost every participant stated that Arya was their favorite character due to her tomboy-like qualities and her desire to reject femininity. The same participants stated that they didn't like Sansa for being too girly. While participants were aware of the gender bias within the series, their own internal bias led them to contribute to this issue. They claimed they didn't like the portrayal of women, but they also didn't support the women that were portrayed in a more feminine light. This contradiction was a common theme among participants. While participants seemed to have feminist beliefs, not all aspects of the show were viewed through a feminist lens.

While women were still very aware of the sexism within Game of Thrones, they were still so drawn to the show. Some of the main reasons participants attributed as to why they enjoyed the series was because Game of Thrones covered new territories that had never been seen on television before and that the series kept viewers on their seats never knowing what to expect. Overall, participants seemed to have strong feminist beliefs, and while they did not agree with the sexism so heavily prevalent throughout the show, they still enjoyed the series. Participants made sense of the relationship between power and gender in Game of Thrones by understanding that women were mainly forced to fit into stereotypically feminine roles since writers lacked diverse perspectives.

5.2.2. RQ 2: How Do Women Justify Gendered Violence in Game of Thrones?

Women found many excuses for justifying the gendered violence within Game of Thrones. In fact, even women with feminist beliefs still made excuses for the behavior. Explanations ranged from violence being used to further the plot and develop characters to fitting in with the fantasy genre or sticking to historical norms. Overall, it was just an accepted part of the storyline and plot.

Perhaps the most common justification for why gendered violence was seen as acceptable in Game of Thrones is that participants saw character development from it. This is especially problematic considering rape was consistently being used as a catalyst for positive change. Every time a woman was raped or abused, she was supposed to grow from the trauma. Yet, that is very rarely the case in the real world. Most often in today's society, rape negatively affects women sending them into a spiral of depression and trauma. But not in Game of Thrones. No – being raped only makes you better. The trauma is pushed aside and only then are the women able to step into their full power. They cast aside their feminine qualities and arm themselves with more masculine traits in the form of protection. This is seen as positive growth within the female characters though. Fans of Game of Thrones are able to justify the trauma because they see women basically rising from the ashes and becoming a better, more likeable, and more respected person within the show.

Other reasons that gendered violence was justified were because people thought it was historically accurate for the time period. Interestingly enough, Game of Thrones is set in a fantasy world in a make-believe time period. It's exceptionally surprising that women with feminist beliefs also made sense of the gendered violence because the feminism was lost in translation. Women acknowledged the issues with lack of diversity, the inability for women to hold power, and the sexism in the show, so why couldn't they also acknowledge the issues with gendered violence? Maybe because it is so engrained in society, so they were able to separate the two sets of beliefs. Overall, gendered violence seemed to be justified because it contributed something that drew people in. They were interested in the series, the plotline fascinated them, and they fell in love with the characters, so they allowed it to happen because they didn't want to feel uncomfortable enjoying something so bad.

5.3. Contributions to Scholarship

Masculine values are highly valued in the world of Game of Thrones and have traditionally been associated with power (Harbert, 2020), but participants were not impressed with this mindset. Many pointed out how toxic cyclical gender norms were in the series, which is in line with Butler's take on gender stereotypes. Women were expected to have children and look pretty, while men were expected to be strong and powerful. One specific example of gender norms that was reiterated by multiple participants was how power was passed to men without earning it. The line of succession held a lot of weight in Game of Thrones, but men didn't do anything to earn it. Schippers points out how such practices only legitimize the patriarchy and continue to reinforce male dominance (2007).

Participants were especially aware of this at play when analyzing Jamie and Cersei. Cersei was clearly the more capable and intelligent child, but Jamie had much more power because he was a man and he was physically capable. This is in line with Van Gilder's belief that women are often overlooked in positions of power and are sometimes even seen as a threat to productivity (2019). Even though Game of Thrones is a fantasy world, many beliefs carried over to the real world as well. Women struggle to obtain power and be respected solely based on who they are and not what male counterparts they are associated with. Interestingly, their dwarf brother, Tyrion, was also extremely intelligent and had a better moral compass. Yet, because he was shorter and less skilled in battle, he was also considered unfit to hold power. His lack of masculinity had an impact on him as well.

Obviously, masculinity is highly valued in Game of Thrones. Participants also pointed this out through the lack of diversity within the series and the writing room. Participants noticed and were upset with how prevalent the lack of female influence was in the writing room as they

saw Mulvey's male gaze at work. Women were mainly meant to be seen and those that did come into power either fulfilled the typical female arc of not being able to handle power and going crazy or shedding all feminine characteristics. This confirms Harbert's belief that women in the real world often downplay their femininity and focus more on their masculine traits in order to succeed (2020). Of course, Daenerys wasn't allowed to rule Westeros in the end. No, a job that important was given to a man. Writers created her storyline to end in destruction and sadness because the power went straight to her head.

Another stereotypical female arc prevalent within the series is the negative relationships between women. Research participants noticed how women were just not able to get along with one another due to issues like jealousy or pettiness. They were constantly pitted against one another even when they had similar intentions. This exemplified the common belief that women in power refuse to support other women in power because they are afraid there can only be one person in that position. This belief isn't too unrealistic, especially considering how few of women actually do find success. If women were to get along within the series, it was due to a large power distance between the two of them. Harrack's observation that women mainly exist to support men also connects with both participant response and Mulvey's understanding of who television is mainly written for.

While the main contenders for the throne were men, the women in the competition for power were mainly seen as wanting power for revenge. Participants mentioned Cersei's desire for revenge a couple of times, but the revenge she was seeking was for the death of all of her children. Some participants even blamed Daenerys' downfall on her desire for revenge after the death of her faithful friend and servant, Missandei. Sansa was also perceived as wanting power only to avenge what Ramsay had done to her. Perhaps, these beliefs are due to ingrained sexist

57

beliefs that subconsciously exist. It's interesting that even women with more feminist beliefs fell

into this trap. Feminist identities informed the way that women saw some aspects of the show,

such as the relationship between power and gender, but it didn't change the fact that even

feminist women are subject to male-dominated beliefs.

Time and time again, the idea that women had to endure trauma before they could come

into their full power was pointed out in interviews. This phenomenon that participants were

picking up on is in line with Ferreday's belief that media perpetuates the idea that women can

only become powerful once they have endured enough trauma to shed their feminine qualities

and trade up for more masculine traits (2015). According to Butler (2020), gender stereotypes are

cyclical and societies perpetuate these norms, and throughout Game of Thrones, there are many

instances in which perceived gender roles are either mentioned or acted upon.

In line with Ferreday's belief, many participants made sense of violent actions, such as

rape and abuse, as ways to further the plot (2015). Character development also fell into this range

as, according to participants, Sansa and Daenerys both grow so much from what they endure.

While participants acknowledged these changes, they weren't thrilled about the process it took

for them to come about, but they ultimately deemed it as 'necessary' for growth. Yet almost

every participant was a huge fan of the series and continued to watch the show even after

traumatic scenes. This confirms Puthillam & Karandikar's belief that more intense viewers tend

to be more accepting of violent scenes (2020). A common excuse for the violent behavior that

came up was the time period Game of Thrones took place in. Yet, Game of Thrones is a fantasy

world, so technically, it wasn't trying to be historically accurate as some participants claimed.

Perhaps, viewers associated this with history because of the medieval themes within the series,

but there were also dragons, white-walkers and other supernatural elements, so the story really

couldn't be too historically accurate in the first place. According to García-Rapp though, viewers dismiss issues within media if it falls within their preconceived notions of what fantasy is. While participants know the scenes are upsetting and wrong, they continued to support the series because they were so invested in the characters and plot. They didn't want to feel guilty for enjoying a show they loved.

5.4. Implications

The current study focused on participants' perceptions of the relationship between power and gender and how they make sense of gendered violence, specifically within Game of Thrones. Game of Thrones was an extremely popular show that many people loved and watched. While many participants had outwardly feminist views, there were still underlying beliefs dictated by masculinity and the patriarchy. Awareness of internalized or taught beliefs is important to overcoming such views, especially when media is saturated with messages like these. This research was done on Game of Thrones but has real-world connections to understanding how women are viewed in positions of power and why people accept gendered violence as part of society.

This study demonstrates the value of using popular culture to talk about gender issues. Many participants had not considered such ideas or had in-depth conversations on the gender ideologies within the series, so throughout the interview conversations I had with them, many participants came to the realization that they were holding their own internal bias towards women within the show and other gender stereotypes. Conversations like these can be really valuable in bringing awareness to problems that people may not realize even exist. The more that these internal biases are uncovered and discussed, the easier it is to understand where they are coming from and how to resolve them.

5.5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several limitations that must be considered when looking at further research in this area. First, this study focused solely on women's perspectives. Participants were limited to women who had seen more than one season of the series. If further study was to be done on this topic, interviewing those who identify as men and looking at the male perspective could shed some light on the other perceptions. Another limitation of this study is that the final season of Game of Thrones aired in 2019, so participants were making sense of an experience long after it ended. Many claimed that they didn't remember as much because it had been a long time since they watched the series. Because they are more removed from it now, their answers may have been different if they were interviewed during the series.

All participants in the series stated that they really enjoyed, Game of Thrones, so their perspectives were influenced by this. Potential for future study in this area could look at perspectives of viewers who do not consider themselves fans of the show. This study also mainly focused on Sansa and Daenerys, but there are other women in the series who come into positions of power or deal with similar situations. Future study on characters such as Cersei and Arya could round out a fuller picture of feminist beliefs within Game of Thrones.

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APPENDIX A. EMAIL SENT TO STUDENTS AT NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Email Sent to Students at North Dakota State University
NDSU   North Dakota State University
Department of Communication
P.O. Box 6050
Fargo, ND 58108-6050

Hello!

We are conducting a study to better understand how female fans of Game of Thrones make sense of the relationship between power and gender in the series.

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and last 45-60 minutes.

COMM 110 students will receive 10 research credit points for participating in this study.

You can participate in this study if you are:
- 18 or older
- Identify as a woman
- Have seen more than one season of Game of Thrones

You are ineligible to participate if you are in the following sections of COMM 110:
- Section 9
- Section 27
- Section 31
- Section 33

You also need a strong internet connection and camera access on your computer or phone for the virtual interview.

We are interested in a variety of perspectives from women who have seen multiple seasons of Game of Thrones.

If you would like to participate in this study, you can sign up for an interview by emailing me at mckenzie.lautt@ndsu.edu.

If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at mckenzie.lautt@ndsu.edu or the PI at carrieanne.platt@ndsu.edu or 701-231-7294.

Thank you,

     McKenzie Lautt
     Master's Student
     North Dakota State University

APPENDIX B. SOCIAL MEDIA POST SHARED WITH PERSONAL NETWORK

Social Media Post Shared with Personal Network

RESEARCH NOTICE

Hello! I'm currently in the second year of my master's degree in communication at NDSU and am in the process of conducting research for my thesis. I'm looking for women to participate in research interviews.

My thesis focuses on understanding how female fans make sense of the relationship between power and gender in Game of Thrones.

All women above the age of 18 that have seen more than one season of Game of Thrones are eligible to participate in this study. You must also have a good internet connection and camera access on your computer or phone. I'm interested in a variety of perspectives and would love to hear from you!

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and last 45-60 minutes.

If you would like to participate in this study, you can sign up for an interview by emailing me at mckenzie.lautt@ndsu.edu, DMing me, or commenting on this post!

Thank you so much!!

APPENDIX C. NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS CONSENT FORM

North Dakota State University Students Consent Form

NDSU   **North Dakota State University**
Department of Communication
P.O. Box 6050
Fargo, ND 58108-6050

Title of Research Study: Gender and Game of Thrones

This study is being conducted by:

McKenzie Lautt, a master's student in the Department of Communication at NDSU, and Dr. Carrie Anne Platt, a professor in the Department of Communication at NDSU.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are invited to take part in this research study because you are 18 years of age or older, you identify as a female, you have seen multiple seasons of Game of Thrones, and you are currently enrolled in COMM 110.

What is the reason for doing the study?

The purpose of this research is to learn more about how female fans make sense of narrative and character choices in Game of Thrones.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview via Zoom. You will be asked to talk about your experiences with watching Game of Thrones. Your interview will be recorded. Your responses will be transcribed, analyzed for common themes, and written about in papers and articles. Your name will be changed in the presentation of results to keep your responses confidential.

Where is the study going to take place, and how long will it take?

You can join the Zoom interview from a location of your choosing. It will take 45-60 minutes.

What are the risks and discomforts?

Some of the questions regarding abuse, rape, or torture within Game of Thrones may cause psychological or emotional distress. You may choose not to answer any question, for any reason. You can also stop the interview at any point.

What are the benefits to me?

There are no individual benefits resulting from taking part in this study.

What are the benefits to other people?

You will help scholars understand how people make sense of this particular show and gendered messages in popular culture. Results may also inform media literacy efforts.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time.

Who will have access to the information that I give?

- The researchers will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.
- Interview recordings will be stored in a password-protected Zoom account. Electronic copies of the interview transcripts will be stored in password-protected folders.
- Data and records created by this project are owned by NDSU and the researchers. You may view information collected from you by making a written request to the researchers. You may only view information collected from you, not information collected about others participating in the project.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will receive 10 research points for your COMM 110 course. Please contact your instructor for an alternative assignment to earn credit if you choose not to participate in this study.

What are my rights as a research participant?

You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at:

- Telephone: 701-231-8995 or 1-855-800-6717 (toll-free)
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP, 1735 NDSU Research Park Dr., NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: https://www.ndsu.edu/research/for_researchers/research_integrity_and_compliance/institutional_review_board_irb/.

Personal Network Consent Form

NDSU   **North Dakota State University**
                  Department of Communication
                  P.O. Box 6050
                  Fargo, ND 58108-6050

Title of Research Study: Gender and Game of Thrones

This study is being conducted by:

McKenzie Lautt, a master's student in the Department of Communication at NDSU, and Dr. Carrie Anne Platt, a professor in the Department of Communication at NDSU.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are invited to take part in this research study because you are 18 years of age or older, you identify as a female, and you have seen multiple seasons of Game of Thrones.

What is the reason for doing the study?

The purpose of this research is to learn more about how female fans make sense of narrative and character choices in Game of Thrones.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview via Zoom. You will be asked to talk about your experiences with watching Game of Thrones. Your interview will be recorded. Your responses will be transcribed, analyzed for common themes, and written about in papers and articles. Your name will be changed in the presentation of results to keep your responses confidential.

Where is the study going to take place, and how long will it take?

You can join the Zoom interview from a location of your choosing. It will take 45-60 minutes.

What are the risks and discomforts?

Some of the questions regarding abuse, rape, or torture within Game of Thrones may cause psychological or emotional distress. You may choose not to answer any question, for any reason. You can stop the interview at any point if you are uncomfortable or for any other reason.

What are the benefits to me?

There are no individual benefits resulting from taking part in this study.

What are the benefits to other people?

You will help scholars understand how people make sense of this particular show and the gendered messages. It may also inform viewers of media literacy efforts.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time.

Who will have access to the information that I give?

- The researchers will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.
- Interview recordings will be stored in a password-protected file accessible only to the primary investigator. Electronic copies of the interview transcripts will be saved and protected in the same fashion.
- Data and records created by this project are owned by NDSU and the researchers. You may view information collected from you by making a written request to the researchers. You may only view information collected from you, not information collected about others participating in the project.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?

No compensation will be provided. Participation is completely voluntary.

What are my rights as a research participant?

You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at:

- Telephone: 701-231-8995 or 1-855-800-6717 (toll-free)
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP, 1735 NDSU Research Park Dr., NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at:
https://www.ndsu.edu/research/for_researchers/research_integrity_and_compliance/institutional_review_board_irb/

APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hi! Thank you so much for taking time to participate in this interview! The purpose of my research is to gain a better understanding of the perceptions between power and Gender in Game of Thrones. Today, we're going to be talking about your opinions and perspectives of gendered dynamics within Game of Thrones. Your information will be confidential.

I may ask follow-up questions to something you've said throughout the interview in order to gather as much pertinent information as I can. Follow-up questions aren't meant to disagree with you, but rather allow me to understand your perspective better.

You should think of this interview as a conversation. What is said in this interview will stay between you, myself, and the principal investigator, Dr. Carrie Anne Platt of North Dakota State University. Your personal information will not be used during the final write-up. If at any point during the interview, you choose to stop, please inform me immediately. Otherwise, this interview is being recorded to maximize chances of a successful capture. This recording, after the transcription process, will be stored on a secure hard drive and out of reach from others.

Before we begin, I have a short consent form and demographic survey that I need you to fill out!

1. What originally made you interested in Game of Thrones? Who did you watch with?
2. When did you watch Game of Thrones?
    0. Did you watch it all at once or over a longer period of time?
    1. Have you watched the series more than once?
    2. How many seasons did you watch?
3. Did you use Reddit, Twitter, or other similar platforms to engage with other viewers?
4. Many viewers reported their interest in the series changed over time. What was your experience?
5. Who were your favorite characters?
    0. What made them your favorite?
    1. Did your favorites change over time?
6. How do you see characters gaining power in Game of Thrones?
    0. Can you give me an example of a male and a female character that have power within GoT?
    1. How did they get there and how did their journeys vary?

We have been talking about the series in general and you may have already mentioned these characters, but now I want to specifically focus on Sansa and Daenerys.

1. If you were to describe Sansa Stark as a character to someone who has not seen the show, how would you describe them?
    0. How do you see Sansa Stark change throughout the series?
    1. What brings about change
    2. Why do you think the show made those changes?
2. If you were to describe Daenerys Targaryen as a character to someone who has not seen the show, how would you describe them?
    0. How do you see Daenerys Targaryen change throughout the series?
    1. What brings about change

2. Why do you think the show made those changes?
3. What do these characters tell us about the qualities to become a leader in Game of Thrones?
    0. Do good rulers have masculine or feminine qualities?
4. Do feminine qualities help or hinder you in the world of Game of Thrones? How?
    0. How does this compare to the journey of male characters?
    1. Do you see their femininity changing throughout the series?
5. Some people have criticized Game of Thrones for its abuse, rape, or torture of female characters. What's your take on that?
    0. Why do you think that include that?
    1. Was it necessary for the plot?
    2. Do you see any other form of adversity that would bring about change? How does this vary with the male characters?
6. What is your take on the portrayal of negative female relationships within the show?
7. Based on what we've been talking about, what do you want creators of shows like Game of Thrones to know?
8. I've noticed in a lot of interviews that people get to a different place towards the end. Why do we not tend to think of these things as we are watching the series?

APPENDIX F. DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. What is your name?
2. What are your preferred pronouns?
   - He
   - She
   - They
3. What is your race or ethnicity?
   - Black or African American
   - African
   - American Indian, Native American, or Alaskan Native
   - Asian/Pacific Islander
   - Latino/Hispanic
   - Middle Eastern
   - White/Caucasian
   - Prefer to self-describe
4. Which of the following best describes your religious identity?
   - Christian - Evangelical Protestant (e.g. Baptist, Adventist, nondenominational, etc.)
   - Christian – Mainline Protestant (e.g. Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, UCC, etc.)
   - Christian – Roman Catholic
   - Other Christian denomination
   - Muslim
   - Jewish
   - Buddhist
   - Hindu
   - Spiritual not religious
   - Atheist
   - Agnostic
   - Prefer to specify:
5. What is your age?
   - 18-24
   - 25-30
   - 31-40
   - 41-50
   - 51-60
   - 61-70
   - Older than 70
6. Which of the following best describes your highest level of education level?
   - Some high school
   - Graduated from high school

- Some college
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Completed some graduate school
- Master's degree
- Ph.D., law, or medical degree
7. What is your employment status?
    - Not currently working
    - Working part-time
    - Working full-time

Questions Specific to the Student Survey

1. Academic Year
    - First year
    - Sophomore
    - Junior
    - Senior
    - Super Senior (120+ credits)
2. Major(s)
3. College
    - Agriculture, Food Systems, & Natural Resources
    - Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences
    - Business
    - Engineering
    - Health Professions
    - Human Sciences & Education
    - Science & Mathematics
    - Undeclared / University Studies
4. Are you an international student?
    - Yes
    - No