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Viewing Sexual Violence: Audience Responses to *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract

In this article, we examine audience responses to representations of sexual violence in the fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*, 2011–2019) by analysing online survey data gathered by the international Game of Thrones Research Project (2016–2017). *GoT* has been subject to heated debate over its violent content, particularly the representations of rape. Many scholars have analysed the series' representations of violence, but relatively few studies focus on the show's audiences, let alone on the reception of sexual violence. This article seeks to fill this gap in earlier research by analysing the complex ways that viewers experience sexual violence in *GoT*. Our study sheds light on the ways in which audiences negotiate their (gendered) viewing experiences in the context of their personal histories and in relation to the functions and conventions of media representations, narratives, and cultural discourses.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*, Sexual Violence, Fantasy Television, Reception, Representation, Gender, Audience

Introduction: Approaching Representations of Sexual Violence

Recently, the #metoo movement has brought concerns of sexual and gendered violence to the forefront of global media. One media production that has sparked discussions on sexual violence is the massively popular television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–19, USA; henceforth *GoT*), a fantasy drama produced by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss for HBO (e.g. Zimmerman, 2014; Ferreday, 2015; Thompson, 2019; Bruney, 2019; Barker et al., 2021: 126). *GoT* made an impression on the global audience, despite – but also because of – the fact that its fictitious pseudo-medieval world is brutal and grotesque (e.g., Polack, 2017). The TV series originally started as an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's (b. 1948) epic fantasy novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–present) but as *GoT* progressed beyond the previous published novels, it developed in its own direction, often opting for violent narrative twists. The series attracted both a large fan following, with tens of millions of worldwide watchers (Dsouza, 2019) and critical acclaim, winning a record-breaking fifty-nine Emmy Awards (Koblin, 2019). The extremely popular series has also raised a huge amount of debate over its content, which has been viewed as cruel, violent, and breaching boundaries of 'acceptable' television, especially in terms of sexual violence such as rape (e.g., Ferreday, 2015; Gjelsvik, 2016; Reuser, 2017; Thompson, 2019; Barker et al., 2021).

In this article, we examine audience responses to the representations of sexual violence in *GoT* by analysing online survey data gathered by the international Game of Thrones Research Project (2016–2017) and led by Professor Martin Barker (see Barker et al., 2021).[1] Despite *GoT's* global popularity, there are relatively few investigations into the show's reception (Barker et al., 2021: 9-10). When it comes to audience-related themes, *GoT* has been studied, for example, in terms of storyworld and adaptation (e.g., Hassler-Forest, 2014; Klastrup and Tosca, 2014); viewing practices, such as piracy (e.g., Hardy, 2022) and spoilers (Castellano et al., 2017); paratextual discussions (e.g., Laukkanen, 2021), and (transmedial) fan productions and practices (e.g., Kustritz, 2016; Daniel and Westerman, 2017; Hannell, 2017; Florini, 2019; Koskimaa, 2019). According to Barker et al. (2021: 10), most audience-related *GoT* research is done specifically on fandom. Additionally, some researchers have done small-scale case studies of specific audiences, such as Argentinian, Spanish and German audiences (García-Rapp, 2022) and queer Indian fans (Dasgupta, 2017).

Considering how *GoT's* overlapping popularity and controversiality is tightly linked to the show's representations of sexual violence, it is perhaps even more surprising that hardly any research has been conducted about the audiences' relationship with the sexual violence in the show. Many studies have analysed the representations and politics of sexual violence and gender in *GoT* (e.g., Rosenberg, 2012; Frankel, 2013; Ferreday, 2015; Gjelsvik, 2016; Elwood, 2018; Reuser, 2017; Thompson, 2019), but these studies do not analyse reception, per se. Lorianne Reuser (2017: 156-157), for example, claims that rape is used in both *GoT* and Martin's novels as a narrative tool that emphasises the brutality of the fantasy world, reinforcing traditional rape myths. Anne Gjelsvik (2016: 64-71) argues that the most problematic aspect of adapting sexual violence from Martin's books to the screen is the lessened focus on the consequences of rape in

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[1] We dedicate this article to the memory of Professor Barker.

the TV show, which turns sexual violence into sexualised, 'watchable, quality entertainment'.[2] Whereas these textual analyses shed light on the cultural discourses and phenomena that *GoT* is connected to, our study focuses on the audience reception of such violence. As Reuser (2017: 158) puts it, when analysing representations of sexual violence in fantasy fiction, 'the audience's experience of a rape narrative, particularly on screen, cannot be dismissed'.

As exceptions to the rule, Debra Ferreday (2015) has analysed one of the most prominent rape scenes in *GoT* and the feminist online fan responses to it in the context of cultural debates about rape culture, and Puthillam and Karandikar (2021) studied *GoT* scenes evoking disgust, touching on the theme of sexual violence. Yet, these studies have significantly smaller data than we do. Using the same data as us, Barker, Smith and Attwood (2021: 120-142) have established that sexual violence, especially rape, is one of the biggest sources of controversy around the show. Whereas they focus on the rape of one character, we examine responses to sexual violence more broadly.

This article therefore complements earlier studies on *GoT* by zooming in on how viewers negotiate their experiences of its portrayals of sexual violence, and by situating these in the context of both popular cultural representations of such violence and the cultural and academic discourses dealing with *GoT's* violent content. Moreover, we study the gendered aspects of audience experiences of fictional sexual violence. To put it simply, we ask: How do audiences articulate their experiences of viewing sexual violence in *GoT*, and how are these experiences gendered? What kinds of gendered discourses, personal histories, and complex viewer positions are reflected in their responses? How are the responses related to broader cultural discourses, including academic debate, on sexual violence (in the series)? Our theoretical and methodological framework stems from reception and fan studies, (feminist) film and media studies, literary studies, cultural studies, and affect theory.

Violence is often defined as inflicting either physical or psychic harm on another person, and/or violating one's physical integrity (Karkulehto and Rossi, 2017: 12; Husso et al., 2022). We understand sexual violence as forms of violence that are related to sexuality, such as physically violating a person's sexual self-determination. Sexual violence is always intertwined with cultural conceptions of gender and power: regardless of the victim's gender, sexual violence is connected to the culturally masculine-coded exercise of power that humiliates and subjugates the victim by putting them in a feminised position. This maintains masculinity's culturally hegemonic status and the structural violence (practices of discrimination and other unequal societal power relations) it enables. Furthermore, it enables symbolic violence, which denotes cultural norms that help to uphold structural power relations (Ronkainen and Näre, 2008: 21; Shepherd, 2013; Karkulehto and Rossi, 2017: 9-14; Koistinen and Mäntymäki, 2019). Representations of sexual violence can be interpreted as taking part in this sort of symbolic violence as they produce and reinforce power relations. However – as our analysis establishes – representations can also challenge these same power relations.

Like the history of violence in popular culture in general, the history of violence inflicted upon women in Western popular fiction is long (Williams, 1991; Clover, 2000/1987; Prince, 2000; Projansky, 2001; Reuser, 2017). Sarah Projansky (2001) has even claimed that American popular

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[2] See also Hassler-Forest (2014) on sex and violence as tools for attracting adult audiences.

culture cannot be understood without considering the theme of rape. The violence faced by women in fiction is often sexual and/or gendered,[3] and dying or violated female bodies tend to be fetishised (Clover, 2000/1987: 142; Projansky, 2001: 62; Aaron, 2014: 56; Kosonen, 2017: 98). The dying or violated woman often serves as a narrative tool that furthers the storyline of a male character (Projansky, 2001: 3, 49, 50; Reuser, 2017: 155). Moreover, sexual violence is frequently used in fiction to construct women as vulnerable: often this vulnerability is the outcome of women's sexual transgression or active role in society (Clover, 2000/1987; Projansky, 2001: 27, 30-35, 62-63; see also Koistinen, 2017). As sexual violence is often used to police and punish women in fiction in this manner, it makes these representations examples of symbolic violence.

Representations of violence can thus have crucial consequences for cultural power structures. Myths about rape and sexual violence circulated in the media can even affect the way victims of rape and sexual assault are encountered in real life; women are often made to feel responsible for the sexual violence they have suffered (Projansky, 2001; Moorti, 2002; Reuser, 2017; Lehtinen, 2021). Violence in fiction may cause violent behaviour in some individuals, but the causal effects between fiction and everyday actions remain contested (Berkowitz, 2000/1984; Felson, 2000/1996; Prince, 2000: 17-25; Barker et al., 2021: 138-139). The 'injection model' that assumes that fictional violence simply engenders violent behaviour has indeed received much criticism (e.g., Karkulehto and Rossi, 2017; Barker et al., 2021: 10-12). In this study, we interrogate how audiences themselves articulate their experiences with violent fiction. Even though our research does not shed light on how violence affects audience behaviour – neither does it seek to do so – it brings to the fore the complex responses that brutal representations of sexual violence evoke in today's media landscape.

Data and Methods

The Game of Thrones Research Project survey gathered 10,636 responses from 133 different countries. The survey included twenty-four questions, both closed and open-ended, ranging from definitions of genre to personal experiences of the series. The data is unique not only in the sheer number of respondents, but also in the fact that no other study regarding the series has offered the viewers a chance to answer as many questions and to contextualise their responses as thoroughly. Of all respondents 50.6% (5,385) were male, 48.3% (5,135) female, and 1.1% (116) identified differently. The majority of the respondents (73.9%) were between sixteen and thirty-five years of age, but there were respondents from all age groups.[4]

The topic of this research can be particularly sensitive to research participants. It is therefore important to note that the survey was not specifically aimed at any vulnerable group,

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[3] By gendered violence, we mean forms of violence which are directed against a person because of their gender or whose explanatory models and meanings are related to gender (see also, e.g., Ronkainen and Näre, 2008: 21; Karkulehto and Rossi, 2017: 13; EIGE, 2023). Whereas sexual violence can be interpreted as always intertwined with gendered violence, not all gendered violence is necessarily sexual.

[4] The age groups were: under 16, 16–20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, 41–45, 46–50, 51–55, 56–60, 61–65, 66–70, 71–75, 76–80, and over 80.

nor those affected by sexual violence personally or through their close environment. The survey questionnaire itself mentioned sexual violence only in a closed-ended question where respondents were asked to choose all options which they feel describe the series – one of these options was 'Sexploitation (featuring an excess of nudity, sex and sexual violence)'. None of the open questions asked respondents to describe their attitudes, reactions, or responses to depictions of sexual violence; however, many respondents chose to do so voluntarily when participating in the study. To protect the identities of the participants, we have left out any personal information that is not relevant to the interpretation of their response.

We first searched the data with the phrases 'sex* & haras*', 'sex* & abus*', 'sexploitation*', 'rape*, rapi*', 'sex* & viol*', and 'molest*.'[5] Overall, we found 10,274 hits with these search words, indicating the prevalence of discussions of sexual violence around the series. Different searches yielded overlapping results, meaning the same response could be included in several searches. Most hits were in the responses to Q4 ('Is there one debate or controversy that has particularly stood out for you? What were your views on it?') and Q16 ('Has there been a scene which has made you particularly uncomfortable or angry? Can you tell us about it?') (see also Barker et al., 2021: 120-121). We then decided to focus on the latter question, Q16, to narrow down the data and to better grasp the viewers' affective and personal responses to violent fiction. To better understand the viewing positions and reasons behind the respondents' reactions to the representations of sexual violence, we also examine the responses to Q23 ('Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about *Game of Thrones* (whether as books or as TV series?)'), since some respondents elaborated there on topics they discussed in Q16.[6]

The final research data consists of responses from 1,788 survey participants to Q16.[7] The participants who discussed scenes of sexual violence in their responses to Q16 more often identified either as female (59.7%) or differently than male or female (2.1%) than the participants who did not discuss these scenes at all (female 45.8%, identify differently 0.9%). This indicates that respondents who did not identify as male found the scenes of sexual violence worth mentioning more often than those who identified as male. Barker et al. (2021: 118, 127) also note that the respondents who found the scenes containing sexual violence most uncomfortable were often young women, whereas those who responded that there were no uncomfortable scenes at all tended to be men.

Using qualitative thematic analysis, we categorised the responses to the open-ended questions through meticulous close reading of the data, searching for recurring patterns and

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[5] Respondents were encouraged to answer the questionnaire in their chosen language. We are aware that responses in languages that do not include these search phrases in their vocabulary for sexual violence were thus excluded from our data. However, as the questions were presented in English, almost all answers were written in English. Here we only analyse the English-language responses.

[6] Here our research departs from Barker et al. (2021) who focus on Q16 and Q15 ('Do you have a most memorable moment from the series, one that you like retelling to other people? Could you retell it to us?').

[7] Originally the data consisted of 1,794 respondents. However, six responses were excluded from the data since they only referred to an earlier response given by the respondent (saying, e.g., 'see above') and could therefore not be interpreted.

themes.[8] Cross-tabulating the responses to Q16 with closed questions, we also found that slightly fewer respondents who mentioned sexual violence (48.5%) than those who did not mention sexual violence (51.7%) found the series *extremely* important for them to follow and enjoy. This suggests that finding the scenes of sexual violence uncomfortable did not crucially affect how important they found the series, or that viewers had found ways to negotiate these scenes as part of their viewing experience. However, the differences were very small in other choices in the same question, as well as for all choices when asked how important the respondents found the series as 'a commentary on our world'. Our qualitative analysis also shows that a small number of men (sixteen respondents) and women (twelve) mentioned sexual violence precisely to highlight that it was *not uncomfortable* for them. In what follows, we delve deeper into the open-ended questions.

Affective Experiences and Differing Stances

The responses to Q16 mention sexual violence a) in reference to a specific scene or character; b) with a reference to a specific type of sexual violence, usually rape; c) generally, without referring to any specific type of sexual violence; or d) with a specific reference to the role of gender in sexual violence. These can also overlap: sometimes the respondent, for example, first mentions sexual violence more generally and then describes the treatment of a particular character. Rape is by far most often discussed in reference to specific characters (in 1,431 responses). The responses frequently deal with rape and quite often with its gendered aspects: approximately 91.4% of the respondents mentioned rape at least once. This focus on rape is in line with the media discussions and academic criticism related to both the TV and the book series (e.g., Ferreday, 2015; Reuser, 2017; Bruney, 2019; Thompson, 2019).

Especially the rapes of central characters Sansa Stark (played by Sophie Turner), Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) and Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) are prominently discussed in the data (cf. Barker et al., 2021: 120). Daenerys is raped in the very first episode of the series by her husband Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa), whom she has been forced to marry; Cersei is raped in season four (episode three) by her brother and incestuous lover Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) in the death chamber of their son Joffrey (Jack Gleeson); and Sansa is raped by her forced husband Ramsay Bolton (Iwan Rheon) in season five (episode six). The treatment of Sansa, specifically, is mentioned often (see also Barker et al., 2021: 120-125), which reflects the broader media reception of the series (e.g., Bruney, 2019; Reuser, 2017; Gjelsvik, 2016; Ferreday, 2015).

Furthermore, we found that the responses related to sexual violence can roughly be divided into four stances (Figure 1): 1. C*ondemning/criticizing* (44.2%). In these responses viewers question the necessity and ethics of representing sexual violence in fiction, often also highlighting their feelings of uncomfort. 2. *Disliking yet not condemning* (20.1%). These responses express the viewer's personal distress or dislike of the representations of sexual violence without

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[8] The analysis was conducted mostly by the first and second author, with the first author having the main responsibility. All four authors, however, regularly discussed the reasoning behind the categorisation and analysis of the data.

condemning or criticising them, per se. 3. *Stating* (19.8%), meaning that the responses merely named an uncomfortable scene without providing any further reflection; 4. *Understanding/explaining* (15.8%). In this stance, the viewers express more 'understanding' views on the role of sexual violence in fiction, giving complex reasons to the inclusion of such violent content in *GoT*. The responses included in this category include nuanced, even contradictory, explanations and contemplations on the role and necessity of representing sexual violence. Scenes of sexual violence were, for example, often considered uncomfortable, but they were simultaneously seen as relevant for the fictional narrative – or beyond, as raising important societal concerns. The stance also included ambivalent views articulating conflicting and contradictory ideas and mixed feelings of enjoyment and repulsion. In addition, a small number of respondents emphasised that the representations of sexual violence did not make them angry or uncomfortable at all, nor should they. In these responses, the personal and cultural meanings of fictional violence tend to be dismissed or downplayed. The diversity of stances brings attention to the complex, differing, and ambivalent responses a media production can evoke: in the *Understanding/explaining* category, viewers could, for instance, express disdain for one rape while defending another. The stances resonate with previous findings by Barker et al. (2007: 2), who divided viewers into 'embracers' and 'refusers' of sexually violent scenes in film – acknowledging the ambivalent positions between these two (see also Barker et al., 2021: 124-127, 138-139).
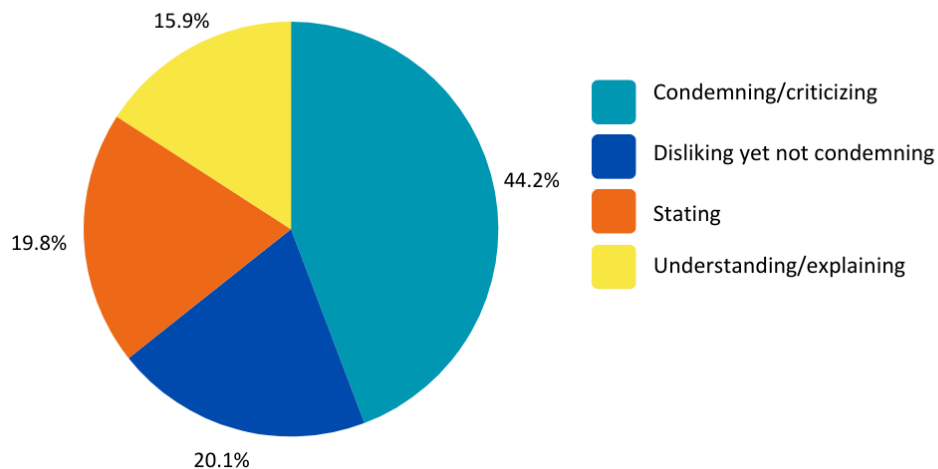

Figure 1. Proportion of each stance of the total number of responses.

For most respondents, viewing sexual violence in *GoT* was a very affective experience – implicated by the setting of Q16 in itself. Most participants tend to describe their experiences with affect-laden (see Ahmed, 2014/2004) language. They write of emotional or physical reactions, such as 'literally vomiting'[9] (#3433) or 'wanting to tear the attacker apart slowly'

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[9] The quotations are reproduced in the article as written by the respondents, except for some clarifications in brackets. All quotations are from responses to Q16 unless otherwise stated.

(#4143). Images of sexual violence can be considered particularly affective. Connected to cultural, political, and social tensions, they are, to use Sara Ahmed's (2014/2004) term, 'sticky' – full of potential to deeply impact the viewer by evoking varied sensations and emotions. Some responses demonstrate how depictions of sexual violence are felt to transgress the boundaries of what viewers wish or are able to watch. These respondents state that their affective reactions were so strong that they needed to quit watching the show – temporarily or permanently. One respondent, for instance, writes that Sansa's rape 'had a heavy emotional impact on me and I had to pause the show and go outside for a while before I could continue the episode' (#356). Another one (#440) states that the rape makes her[10] 'physically ill', which is why she has not watched the scene again.

A small number of respondents, in turn, specifically emphasise the lack of strong or personal affects or otherwise distance themselves from the representations of sexual violence. This indicates that some did not see fictional violence as having that much effect on their viewing experience – nevertheless, the need to emphasise the lack of strong emotions suggests that the viewers are very conscious of the affective nature of these representations and the media/fan discussions circulating around them. These respondents were mostly men (a total of twenty-five respondents, from which sixteen were male and nine female).

Some responses also directly indicate that the respondents' gender and/or personal history with sexual abuse influenced their reactions. In both Q16 and Q23 combined, sixty-two respondents brought up their gender (forty-nine female, twelve male, one other). Twenty of them mentioned their gender in responses discussing sexual violence directed to a character of their own gender. Eighteen female respondents addressed scenes containing sexual violence against varied female characters and two male respondents discussed the castration scene of Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen). Some of these respondents (6/20, all female) talked about gender specifically to contextualise their criticism of sexual violence in *GoT* (belonging to the *Condemning/criticizing* stance), but most just provided explanations for why the representations of sexual violence provoked emotions in them or were hard for them to watch (therefore, mostly falling in the category *Disliking yet not condemning*). For example, some of the female respondents said that scenes containing sexual violence either remind them of what they had been through or of what could happen to them – thus, viewing sexual violence against someone of their own gender made them feel vulnerable. This resonates with the claim that representations of violence proliferate ideas about women's sexual vulnerability (Clover, 2000/1987; Projansky, 2001: e.g. 30-35). The two male respondents did not state that they experienced the scenes as something that could happen to them. As one female respondent states (#6228): 'Rape scenes make me uncomfortable. Perhaps as a small short female it's a real fear and watching it on tv faces me to that if anyone wants to hurt me they can'. Another discusses her emotions and very physical reactions in more length:

> There is a scene where Ros, a prostitute, was murdered by Joffrey. [...] This was
> very troubling because for me, Ros represented sexual and personal confidence

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[10] We refer to the respondents by she/her, he/him or they/them, according to the gender they reported in the survey (Female / Male / Identify differently, respectively).

and female empowerment. Also, as a trans woman, all I could think about is how people like me are often killed in similar manners, through acts of hate, apathy, and/or psychotic behavior. I personally know trans women who were murdered like her. I personally am a victim of assault, torture, and being hold again my will. When I saw her die, I saw a possible future where I experience the same, I was left with a sense of vertigo and had flashbacks; this is PTSD. It was very scary to watch. To this day, I still take her death very hard, because she was more than a fictional character, she represents every woman who ever suffered violence from men. (#7097)

Here, the respondent highlights her history as a trans woman and the fact that her minority position makes her more vulnerable to violence – which has led to PTSD – also when viewing fiction. In total, in both Q16 and Q23 combined, thirty-two respondents (twenty-seven female, three male, two other) chose to talk about their traumas and mental health issues, with eighteen of them (all female) discussing traumas and/or mental health issues related to their experiences of sexual violence. Five of these eighteen respondents fall into the *Condemning/criticizing* stance, while half of them (9/18) can be categorized as *Disliking yet not condemning*. Some respondents, for example, emphasise their dislike and unwillingness to watch a show that would stir up the traumatic events they went through and emotions related to these events. One respondent (#7311) comments the representations of incestuous rapes in the series by saying: 'I am a sexual abuse surviver and that arch really stuck a soft spot with me'. Another (#10356) criticises the visual depiction of Sansa's rape since it brought back memories: 'I've been raped and I don't want to relive it'. In three responses, including the quotation addressing the respondent's position as a trans woman (#7097), discussed above, it is clearly articulated that the respondent's gendered experiences intersect with traumatic history.

The responses above seem to suggest that representations of sexual violence may be likely to invoke disturbing emotions especially in some female viewers, at least ones suffering from trauma. As some felt the need to shield themselves from the show, it is reasonable to interpret that they consider representations of sexual violence as somewhat harmful to them. Yet, despite their strong reactions, most of the women who mentioned their gender and/or mental health in Q16 or Q23 did not condemn sexual violence in the series as such. However, it should be noted that within our data, these respondents that discussed gender and/or their mental health comprise a very small group. These responses nevertheless reflect ideas about the power of fiction more generally, and indicate that people with different embodied histories view fictional violence differently (see Eastin, 2013: 86-87; also Trend, 2007).

Additionally, in the whole data, almost half (46.8%) of all female respondents and over half (58.3%) of respondents identifying as neither female or male expressed condemning or criticising views toward sexual violence in the show. When compared to male respondents (39.6%), non-male respondents were all in all more condemning or critical of representations of sexual violence. These results reflect the overall constitution of our data: women tend to mention scenes containing sexual violence as most uncomfortable more often than men. Figure 2

illustrates the relationship between respondents' gender and their stance towards sexual violence in *GoT*[11].

	Condemning/ criticizing		Disliking yet not condemning		Stating		Understanding/ explaining	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
	791	100.0%	359	100.0%	354	100.0%	284	100.0%
Female	500	63.2%	208	57.9%	218	61.6%	117	51.5%
Male	270	34.1%	148	41.2%	128	36.2%	106	46.7%
Other	21	2.7%	3	0.8%	8	2.3%	4	1.8%

Figure 2. The interrelation of different stances and the respondents' gender.

There are previous studies suggesting that the reception of sexual violence in fiction may be gendered, and more harmful or uncomfortable to women than to men. In one of the few reception studies on *GoT* that touch upon sexual violence, psychologists Puthillam and Karandikar (2021: 11) found that female participants rated scenes of sexual violence in *GoT* as more aversive than other participants. C. J. Ferguson (2012: 889, 896) also established that viewing fictional sexual violence against women incited anxiety in female viewers and negative attitudes toward women in male ones. However, if the scenes watched included 'strong' female characters, both the anxiety in women and the negative attitudes in men decreased. Thus, Ferguson (2012: 896) concludes that 'the context of portrayals of women is of greater value than the presence or absence of sexualised violence in regards to attitudes towards women' (on the importance of context, see also Barker et al., 2007: 3).

Viewer responses to sexual violence are therefore complex and difficult to foresee. Writing on rape culture and the feminist reception of *GoT*, Ferreday (2015: 35) argues that the series has become 'a space of potential opening up of feminist debate, but also of violence, backlash and closure'. Barker et al. (2007: 3) have indeed highlighted the complex relationship between pleasure and dislike in the (gendered) reception of violence. They conclude that sexual violence in fiction may evoke arousal in both men and women. Yet 'this can associate with greater condemnation of the violence because the arousal heightens awareness and involvement, and thus imaginative participation in the implications of the scene' (Barker et al., 2007: 3). Ferguson (2012: 895) also notes that 'negative representations' of sexually violent media may even inspire women to feel a 'sense of solidarity in the face of sexist and misogynist portrayals'. In our data,

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[11] The survey used the term 'sex', but we have opted to use the more socio-culturally oriented concept of 'gender'.

these conflicting impulses ignited by violent fiction were most evident in the responses we categorised as *Understanding/explaining*, but are, to a lesser extent, visible in the other categories. Fiction thus allows space to negotiate one's responses to violence, and the role of research is to tackle the complexity and diversity of the responses (see also Barker at al., 2021: 117). We do this in the following.

Viewer Reflections on Sexual Violence as Fiction

Under the aforementioned four overarching stances on sexual violence, in most responses, viewer experiences were related to three overlapping themes related to the series' fictionality: 'Narrative construction and fidelity', 'The treatment of characters', and 'Fiction versus reality'. In these discussions on fictionality, what is significant for the viewers is not only *what* fiction represents but *how* the representations are framed or the narratives constructed, resonating with previous research on the reception of violent fiction (Barker et al., 2007; Ferguson, 2012). Barker et al. (2021: 128-130) have identified seven ways of relating to Sansa's rape in the *GoT* data: 'Not in the books', 'Out of character', 'How a character "arc" is supposed to unfold', 'Scenes that are simply "not necessary"', 'Gratuitous', 'Adaptation and the discussion of rape culture', and 'Scene construction'. Confirming these findings, these seven ways are visible in our three thematic categories. As our focus here is on sexual violence and abuse beyond the treatment of Sansa, we broaden the scope of these findings below.

Narrative Construction and Fidelity

Many responses discuss *GoT's* way of handling – or more precisely, *not* handling – the theme of sexual violence. The fictional representation of rape in narrative elements, such as plot, character development, or techniques of focalisation (i.e., point of view) is often commented on. The most frequent criticism focuses on narrative incongruence or the uselessness of sexual violence in terms of storytelling. As one respondent (#9345) describes it: 'All the unnecessary rape scenes. Especially Jaime/Cersei. I saw NO plot reason for that'. These respondents do not necessarily criticise sexual violence *in itself*, but its role in the story is under scrutiny. Some particularly emphasised that rape, however uncomfortable to the viewer, is not a problem itself, unless it does not fit the story.

One way of criticising the pointlessness of violence for the story relates to the common debate of the fidelity of an adaptation to the 'original' (Hutcheon, 2013/2006: 6-7). Sansa's rape does not appear in Martin's books – or rather, in the books a similar scene happens to another, much less central female character. Many respondents noted this, which has more to do with their wish for the series to remain faithful to the original story than the representation of sexual violence as such. Yet, as Gjelsvik argues, questions of sex, gender, and power are usually at the core of discussions on *GoT's* fidelity to its source text and its values. Scenes that in the book portray consensual sex have been transformed on TV into ones of sexual victimisation, which has provoked much criticism (Gjelsvik, 2016: 57-58). The problematics of adapting consensual sex as rape tend to be discussed in relation to Daenerys's rape. Gjelsvik's notions are also visible in our

data. One respondent (#6363), for example, criticises the 'victim falling in love with her rapist' storyline of Daenerys and her husband:

> I felt uncomfortable during a scene in the series, after Daenerys and Drogo's wedding. When they consumate their marriage Drogo pretty much rapes Dany even though it was consensual in the books. I'm glad they fall in love with each other eventually, but it made 0 sense to me how she can fall in love with someone that raped her.

This storyline enacts the troubling linking of sex, romance, and sexual violence that has pervaded Western media culture (Reuser, 2017: 163). The respondent's gladness that Daenerys and Drogo fall in love despite it making zero sense to her exemplifies the complex responses evoked by this sort of violence.

Many respondents note that Martin's books take a more responsible stand on sexual violence. Thus, rape scenes in *GoT* are seen as an indication of the production team's poor adapting, directing, or writing skills and inability to take responsibility for representing rape. For example, in the case of Cersei's rape, the anger of many was directed towards the showrunners, D. B. Weiss and David Benioff, for turning yet another consensual sex scene into a rape, and the episode's director, Alex Graves, who persistently claimed he had not depicted a rape (see also Gjelsvik, 2016: 61, 63; Reuser, 2017: 170).

> When Jaime raped Cersei under Joffrey's corpse. I was mad that so many fans, and the director himself, didn't even recognize that the scene depicted a rape, (no means no, how fucking hard is that!?) The scene just did not need to happen, at least not that way. Neither character seems to have changed as a result of it. All it did was put a black stain on Jaime's character, then everyone in and out of the universe just decided to pretend it never happened. (#9571)

The comment above connects to the broader cultural discussion about responsibility for representations that has taken the media by storm since the #metoo movement (see also Barker et al., 2021: 119).[12]

Contrary to the arguments of sexual violence as unnecessary or gratuitous, some respondents defend scenes of sexual violence by explaining how they fit the plot. As one respondent (#150) states: 'We cringed at the Sansa rape scene, but frankly it was integral to the story as it is unfolding, so I do not hold it against the show writers or directors'. In some responses rape is also justified by its tasteful depiction: if portrayed discreetly, showing rape is not considered exploitative or 'embellished in a creepy way' (#9331). Some respondents also gave credit to Sansa's rape being well shot, written, acted or directed, which affected the viewing experience. As one respondent puts it: 'Seeing Sansa get raped was uncomfortable but it was

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[12] Debate on the responsibility of media representations is nothing new. In feminist media studies, discussions have moved from positive and negative representations of gender to the complex and conflicting cultural influences and viewing experiences prompted by the media (e.g., Cherry, 1999; Projansky, 2001; Paasonen, 2010; Ferreday, 2015; see also Barker et al., 2021: 138-139).

masterfully directed, and no other show could elicit such emotions from me' (#1290). Some respondents even point out how it is proper that a scene containing sexual violence is hard to watch, and that the stir Sansa's rape caused in *GoT* fandom shows the scene successfully depicted something horrible. As one respondent notes: 'The scene is meant to be uncomfortable and I applaud the way it was constructed' (#6013). Again, these responses exemplify the complex and ambivalent reactions to – and pleasures of – viewing sexual violence in fiction.

The Treatment of Characters

When it comes to characters, sexual violence is often criticised as not making sense for the narrative arc of a certain character: they acted 'out of character' in relation to their book counterparts or to how they had previously been portrayed in *GoT*. This is especially discussed in relation to the rape of Cersei. Whereas the responses dealing with Daenerys's and Sansa's rapes concentrate on the victims, in the case of Cersei they focus on the perpetrator, Jaime:

> Jaime raping Cersei, in the books that never happened, it was consensual and that takes away bigtime from Jaime's redemption arc. It makes him continue to look like a villain where in reality [sic] he is a much different person than the one still wrapped around Cersei's finger. (#2303)

Fan discourse has in fact typically centred on how rape is out of Jaime's character instead of on Cersei as the victim (Ferreday, 2015; Gjelsvik, 2016: 62; Reuser, 2017: 170-171). This could be influenced by the fact that Jaime's character development – which our respondents often name 'a redemption arc', as in the quote above – does not support the audience in interpreting the scene as rape (Reuser, 2017: 170; Barker et al., 2021: 86). Jaime develops from an immoral antihero to a hero during *GoT*, in comparison to Cersei, who remains more morally dubious – the bad woman that brings rape upon herself (Reuser, 2017: 170-172; see also Moorti, 2002: 49). Murray Smith (1995: 75, 188) has argued that viewers tend to be more sympathetic to characters they consider morally preferable (over other characters). Moreover, Ferreday (2015) has claimed that the way in which viewers tend to defend Jaime reflects real-life narratives that aim to silence female victims' experiences while avoiding labelling 'promising' men as 'rapists' (see also Valenti, 2014).[13]

Respondents also articulate their criticism in terms of the character development of the victims of sexual violence. The decision to have Sansa raped, for example, is seen as a narrative choice that undermines Sansa's growth as character. Rape is also disapproved by some who feel Sansa has already suffered enough. As Barker et al. (2021: 135) point out, Sansa's rape is often assessed against ethical imperatives related to the treatment of characters – that is, if it is 'permissible to treat this character in this way'. Some respondents express distress specifically about characters they are fond of and do not enjoy watching going through horrible experiences.

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[13] One viewer even explains that Jaime raping Cersei was nothing compared to the rape of Sansa, because Jaime and Cersei 'love each other and we know that Cersei forgives him' (#2354), evoking a troubling tendency to overlook sexual violence in intimate relationships.

As one person writes: '[Sansa is] a character whom we've seen grow up from childhood on screen. It's like someone violating your little sister' (#5684). Here, the strong bond established between the viewer and the character, enabled by a long-running series, comes to play (see also Mittell, 2015: 156; Barker et al., 2021: 62, 132-137).

Furthermore, respondents criticised the use of rape as a 'plot device': for example, as a narrative instrument to 'empower' the victim. In these responses, the themes of 'Narrative construction and fidelity' and 'Treatment of characters' intersect:

> the writers try to convince us [Sansa] needed to be raped for her to be strong enough a person to play "the game of thrones." Then, her rape proceeds to be a plot point that is largely forgotten except when the narrative needs to invoke it for whatever reason. Afterwards, we are meant to cheer her as she becomes "empowered" by killing Ramsay and smirking because "that's what all the cool women do" (#222)

This response criticises the way Sansa's story arc relies on the discourse common in popular culture, where a woman finds empowerment through rape, often leading to vengeance: the rape–revenge trope (Reuser, 2017: 165). Contradictory to the above responses, sexual violence can be seen as necessary for the victims' growth. As one respondent voices: 'Sansa's rape on her wedding night. That said, I do think it belonged in the storyline and fit for what her character was going through, and it was the needed catalyst for her growth in season 6' (#596).

Rape narratives and their reception thus tap into complex cultural discourses and power relations. Even though rape is used as a tool for empowerment and character development, it nevertheless emphasises women's vulnerability. Reuser (2017: 175-177) points out that most of the women subjected to violence in *GoT* are not empowered but disempowered, silenced, and often killed by it. Perpetuating representations of women getting raped may strengthen the rape culture that trivialises, naturalises, and normalises sexual violence as women's everyday experience and a 'part of our fantasies, fears, desires, and consumptive practices' (Projansky, 2001: 2-3, 9; see also Reuser, 2017; Barker et al., 2021: 117-120).

Representing women as victims of rape arguably reflects the gender division of sexual violence – not only in fiction, women are victims of rape and sexual abuse more often than men (e.g., NSVRC, 2023; Ronkainen and Näre, 2008: 29) – but again, the *ways* in which sexual violence is represented becomes the issue. Several (ninety-three) respondents criticise the way that *GoT* exploits the old and popular trope of using a woman's rape to further a male character. Reuser (2017: 177) claims that *GoT* makes visible how 'women in fantasy narratives, even the strong ones, continue to fall victim to narratives that privilege the male experience'. A noteworthy example of this is Sansa's rape by her husband, Ramsay. The scene is shown from the point of view of Theon, Sansa's foster brother, who is forced to watch the act as a form of psychological torture. The viewer does not see Sansa, only Theon's pained facial expressions. One respondent criticises this narrative choice:

> The writers choosing Sansa to go through this ordeal with Ramsay was bad enough, but having to actually witness her being raped by him was horrific. They

> also focused the scene on Theons face, which added insult to injury. They made her suffering more about Theon than her, which is infuriating and insensitive to survivors of sexual violence. (#10079)

The scene thus ends up prioritising Theon's pain over Sansa's (Reuser, 2017: 159, 162-165). Theon's point of view can nevertheless also be seen as inviting viewers to grasp the awfulness of the situation, as noted by one respondent: 'Theon served as a stand-in that helps the viewer experience it from his very close and helpless point of view' (#5645). Some also claim that Sansa's rape, frankly, could and should be expected from 'a creep like Ramsay' (#123). Rape as a narrative tool for the development of another, usually male, character is not contested in these responses.

The responses that highlight the monstrosity of Ramsay can be connected to another worrying narrative trope: portraying rapists as barbaric and insane monsters, downplaying sexual violence conducted by so-called normal men (Reuser, 2017: 162; see also Ferreday, 2015: 30-31). Representing rapists as monsters in *GoT* is also a deeply racialised discourse, since the barbaric rapists are connected to racial and colonial fears of 'the Other' (Ferreday, 2015: 31; Reuser, 2017: 159-164; see also Projansky, 2001: 6-9; Moorti, 2002; Ahmed, 2014/2004).[14] Jaime is portrayed quite differently than the darker-skinned Khal Drogo, and even, to some extent, the dark-haired yet white-skinned Ramsay (Reuser, 2017: 160-170). In the reception of *GoT,* other rapists have attracted a lot of criticism for their offences, whereas Jaime is defended (Ferreday, 2015), as comes across in our data.

Fiction versus Reality

An interesting juxtaposition in our data – and in the fan discussion surrounding sexual violence in *GoT* (Ferreday, 2015: 30) – is that sexual violence is both justified and criticised on the basis of the 'realness' or 'unrealness' of the show (see also Barker et al., 2021: 119). The storyworld of *GoT* is often connected to broader questions of rape culture and the politics of representation outside fiction – that is, how fictional sexual violence may produce, uphold, or challenge structural power relations (Karkulehto and Rossi, 2017: 13). *GoT*'s showrunners are blamed for inconsiderately adding rape scenes to the show just for 'shock value', as discussed by Barker et al. (2021: 129). Adding shocking scenes to gain attention arguably participates in rape culture by presenting sexual violence as entertainment (Gjelsvik, 2016: 71). This is considered especially problematic by those who have experienced sexual violence, as respondent #233 explains in Q23:

> I am an abuse survivor and while I don't abhor violence or graphic material in the media I consume, I feel personally very strongly about the way *Game of Thrones* handles difficult issues. Or rather the way in which it doesn't. I truly feel that most of the violence, especially sexual violence has no significance to the story what so ever. It's just there to shock people, and I think it's not only cheap story telling but fetishizing misfortune that is very real for many people.

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[14] However, though race is occasionally mentioned in the data, it is not mentioned in relation to sexual violence.

GoT is also criticised for normalising rape through representations of 'casual rape' or 'sexual assault as scenery' (#9597), which are felt to exclude the effects of rape. Discontent with rape not having a lasting effect on either the victim or the perpetrator is expressed in many responses; as described by respondent #6444, rape is 'devalued as an essentially traumatic part of the human experience'. One respondent even claims that continuously exposing the viewers to gratuitous violence 'reduces our compassion' (#10093). Moreover, Cersei's rape was described as a reflection of a very current issue of consent (in the wake of #metoo) with a concrete reference to rape culture: 'it was not consensual since Cersei kept on saying no. This can relate to the huge problem that is rape culture in our society where people cannot understand that no is no' (#1220).

In contrast, other respondents express a firm view that representations should not be connected to politics outside fiction. Some state they are aware of the controversies surrounding the show's depictions of sexual violence but emphasise how they are 'just fiction' and should not be taken too seriously. Interestingly, others justify the events seen in *GoT* by its supposed historical accuracy. Ferreday (2015: 30-33) groups these kinds of viewing positions under the concept 'enlightened spectatorship' referring to the viewers' desire to express that they know that what is shown on screen is either 1) a constructed media production that depicts a fantasy – and *just* a fantasy, highlighting a traditional understanding of fantasy as escapist fiction – and/or 2) a historical realm in which scenes of sexual violence function as realistic representations for a medieval world and for a world at war (see also Barker et al., 2021: 110, 119, 150). In both cases, sexual violence is perceived as unrelated to off-screen rape culture (Ferreday, 2015: 32). Some respondents to the *GoT* survey easily fall in this category of enlightened spectatorship:

> Angry or uncomfortable in real life? Honestly no. It's a TV show that is fiction, it would be hard to upset me. The only thing I can think of that comes close to answering this question would be Sansa being raped. Even then though, it shows the rape as something terrible. It doesn't glorify it or make it out to be something that it's not. It shows the stark, brutal reality of rape. I imagine that is enough to get some people upset, but it's just a TV show so I don't mind. (#6096)

> It is a medieval show after all and that's how [women were] treated, as uncomfortable as it is to watch. (#1017)

According to Ferreday (2015: 30-33), enlightened viewers consider their viewing experience superior to that of others because they recognise fiction as fiction or because they understand that sexual violence is a self-evident part of a medieval and/or warfaring world (see also Barker et al., 2021: 110). This attitude comes across also in our data, as some viewers seem to place the responsibility for 'wrong reactions' on other viewers. This contrasts sharply with those that highlighted the responsibility of the production team, seen in the analysis of characters and narrative. As one respondent provocatively puts it:

> I accept the show for what it is, and I can appreciate unabashed creativity within reason. I know there are some controversies given the violence and nudity, but most of it is in accordance to the story so to take it out would mean that the story would lack authenticity in order to please God knows who... For example, Sansa being raped by Ramsey Bolton, quite frankly I expected no less from him, to make him nicer then he is in order to please some "butthurt" people or political ideologies, would take away form the actual story. It's a story-T.V. I know how to separate it from real life, what to take, and what to leave. (#1007)

A few responses even seem to ridicule the vulnerability of others in reference to their alleged inability to face disturbing material (cf. Kyrölä, 2018a). One respondent uses the term 'snowflake' to emphasise their point (#5555). There are also some respondents who express critical views of people that consider sexual violence as merely fiction. One respondent, for example, calls those who do not find rape scenes uncomfortable 'sociopaths' (#3685), whereas another one ponders, if trigger warnings could have been used to protect vulnerable viewers (#313). These conflicting attitudes found in the data reflect contemporary culture wars and overall cultural polarisation (see Kyrölä, 2018a: 44, 46; Scott, 2019). Suzanne E. Scott (2019: 3) argues that in a 'fan culture war', minority calls for diversity in representation are met with claims of 'a censorial rise of "PC culture"'. This war is characterised by 'fanboys'' misogynistic attitudes towards women in fandom. In a similar vein, Ferreday (2015: 30) notes that 'enlightened' viewers often negotiate their viewing position against the readings of feminists and women. In our data, one respondent (#9288) indeed wonders if it may be harder for women to enjoy *GoT*, since to them the threat of sexual violence is not 'just fantasy' but very real. Interestingly, in our data, enlightened spectatorship is not a distinctively gendered position; while respondents that identify as male more often occupy an 'enlightened' position, there are also female respondents that downplay those viewers who criticise sexual violence – for example, the quotation above (#1007) is by a female viewer.

Respondents also point out the hypocrisy of considering some rapes as more acceptable than others – the rape of Sansa has caused a more significant outcry than the rapes of sex workers or low-classed women, or the more eroticised portrayal of the rape of Daenerys. Scholars have criticised *GoT* for representing the rape of beautiful and high-classed white women as more important than the rape of other women (Ferreday, 2015: 30-31; Reuser, 2017: 162). However, respondents who chastise other viewers of this 'hypocrisy' overlook the power of the narrative that invites viewers to care more about Sansa than less prominent characters, as she has had to face a fair share of hardships (see also Barker et al., 2021: 132-133, 136).

One respondent also criticised the different responses elicited by male and female victimhood in *GoT:*

> No, I found the outcry over certain decisions stupefying. Particularly the one made of Sansa's "rape" on her wedding night. [...] In particular much of the "Ermahgerd! Egregious abuse against women on a consistent basis - MISOGYNY!" annoyed me because the "'fandom"' of the show was particularly quiet when Theon was being

flayed and having essential parts and pieces removed, but a woman? Hell, call the
UN! (#10049)

The response refers to a scene in season three (episode seven) where Ramsay sends two women
to Theon's cell, where they undress and sexually assault Theon despite his initial protestations,
after which Theon is castrated. Gjelsvik (2016: 65-69) argues that 'the assault [...] is depicted as
something slightly funny and sexy', perpetuating the idea that a man being raped is not to be
taken seriously (see also Koistinen, 2017). Even though the response highlighting Theon's
treatment above raises an important concern over the different ways that female and male
victims of sexual violence are culturally perceived, it nevertheless reproduces the dynamics of
many popular discussions, where concerns over men's rights must be accompanied by belittling
the rights of women. It is also noteworthy that, in our data, only nineteen respondents
mentioned Theon's sexual abuse – this could reflect the difference in how seriously sexual
violence is perceived, based on the gender of the victim.

In addition to the 'enlightened' views, some respondents claim that sexual violence in
GoT represents both Westeros (fictional continent on which most action in the series takes place)
and our current world accurately.[15] Some describe the scenes of sexual violence 'uncomfortably
realistic' because Westeros and, consequently, our world 'is not a nice place for women' (#4).
Others offer a very different view:

> I don't really agree with the "it's just realistic women got raped a lot back then"
> bullshit because if they really wanted to strive for realism they'd all have shitey
> teeth and all die of the plague or a splinter or some shit (#4827)

This respondent points out the paradox of demanding historical accuracy from fiction set in a
fantasy world. Respondent #10435 nevertheless notes that 'rape is part of conflict, to ignore it
would be to ignore an important and horrible part of our own history'. This serves as an example
of responses stating that showing uncomfortable scenes of sexual violence is necessary, not to
belittle other viewers but to criticise the desire to boycott the show for addressing taboos. Some
even say they are prepared, or even excited, for horrible things to happen, and are quite pleased
by how *GoT* 'does not flinch away from any topic' (#5302) – this resonates with notions that
viewers may find pleasure, even arousal, in violent fiction (Barker et al., 2007). Responses such
as these express the belief that fiction should be free to discuss controversial subjects:

> I don't really get uncomfortable and angry, but I could see why some would regard
> the rape scenes as unsavory. I say to those people that as much as they dislike it,
> it happens in our world, and having a fantasy perspective allows us to think about
> how these kinds of events impact our view of the real world. Should we silence
> stories of rape, even some are unnecessarily explicit? I don't think so. (#10338)

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[15] A few of these responses could, too, be interpreted as expressing an 'enlightened' viewpoint, as in them the
respondents belittle the people who, in their opinion, have not realised that it is only natural for *GoT* as an
infamously violent show with infamously violent characters to contain sexual violence.

> [O]ther than Dani's rape, I don't think that the scenes glamorize or aestheticize rape. I think they present it in a painfully difficult to watch way, which strikes me as right somehow. But I still don't want to watch that, so I opt not to. I understand that they're trying to show how misogynist the society was, and it is their decision to show that in part through sexual violence. (#2924)

In the latter response, the criticism of glorifying and aestheticising rape is also reflected against the idea that scenes of sexual violence may communicate something important about misogynist society. Fiction can even provide a (safer) space to encounter and reflect upon violent content, as noted by two respondents:

> Sansa's rape scene was pretty tough to watch but I believe it's important for shows to confront such graphic subjects as it gives us a safe perspective from which to learn about issues that we would do our best to avoid or not discuss in the real world. (#5324)

> I was uncomfortable with Sansa's rape, because I was sexually assaulted once, many years ago. I'm unconfortable with any scene in any movie or TV show that depicts rape, because of that. It was good to see her face Ramsay. It was epic. (#6404)

This reflects the notion that fiction – and art more broadly – can serve as a safe space to negotiate the experiences of others and to engage with uncomfortable content and difficult cultural discussions (e.g., Karkulehto, 2012; Lähdesmäki and Koistinen, 2021; cf. Keen, 2007).

Conclusions

Representations of violence and the cultural discussions about them shape what is considered as violent – acceptable or punishable, right or wrong – in society. As stated by Marita Husso et al. (2022: 8), 'violence is a context-dependent phenomenon, and what counts as violence in a certain time or place also varies'. The viewer responses analysed here are thus negotiating cultural understandings of sexual violence. In our study, we set out to examine how viewers articulate their responses to viewing sexual violence in the fantasy series *GoT* and what these responses reveal about the gendered aspects of the series' reception: What kinds of gendered discourses, personal histories, and viewing positions are found and how are the audience responses reflected against broader cultural and academic debates and discussions?

First of all, we discovered that although the survey did not directly ask about sexual violence, many respondents voluntarily shared their experiences of and thoughts on viewing sexual violence in *GoT*. This is telling of the prominent role of sexual violence in the series and its impact on viewers. We found out that women tend to mention sexual violence as the most uncomfortable scene most often, whereas men tend to mention it the least. This alone reveals the gendered reception of the series. That said, being uncomfortable may be perceived as

negative or positive – or more complex – by all genders. Most often sexual violence is discussed in the context of rape, as in media and academic discussions related to *GoT*.

All in all, as implied by the setting of Q16, for many respondents, viewing sexual violence was a very affective experience. This was, however, not always the case, and the viewers could simply mention a scene without describing their affective experiences further. Some of the respondents, clearly aware of the affective stickiness of representations of sexual violence, specifically chose to dismiss any affective impact of them. We found four stances on sexual violence articulated in the responses: *Condemning/criticizing*, *Disliking yet not condemning*, *Stating*, and *Understanding/explaining*. Of these, the first one was most common, with almost half of the responses falling into this category. Almost half (46.8%) of all female respondents, over half (58.3%) of respondents identifying as neither female or male, and 39.6% of male respondents expressed views that we categorise as condemning/criticizing. Men thus tended to be less disturbed or less critical by the representations of sexual violence than other genders. Our research therefore resonates with previous studies suggesting that women may find fictional sexual violence more disturbing or harmful than men (Ferguson, 2012; Puthillam and Karandikar, 2021). It also seems that viewers find scenes of sexual violence more harmful, or feel a need to shield themselves against it more, if they have experienced sexual violence or consider it a possible threat to themselves. These viewers tended to identify as other than male (and most often as female). However, the number of respondents that explicitly explained their responses in terms of their gender is very small; the survey did not specifically seek to tackle the relationship between fictional violence and traumatic experience, such as gendered/sexual violence, and a study focused on this specific question would be needed to gain more comprehensive results.

Within the four stances mentioned above (*Condemning/criticizing*, *Disliking yet not condemning*, *Stating*, and *Understanding/explaining*), viewer responses to sexual violence were mostly negotiated in the context of the series' fictionality – divided in our analysis into three themes of 'Narrative construction and fidelity', 'The treatment of characters', and 'Fiction versus reality'. This negotiation is testament to contemporary viewers' knowledge of and interest in the narrative construction of complex television series as well as the cultural discourses surrounding them (see Mittell, 2015). It is evident that the respondents are well aware of the functions and conventions of media representations, cultural discourses, and fictional narratives. In their discussion of the three themes, respondents tap into many cultural discussions and phenomena, such as rape culture or current culture wars, and reflect concerns expressed in academic discourses on media representations.

When the issue of sexual violence is attached to the questions of narrative construction (the first theme in our data), responsibility of representations, and the adaptation's fidelity to the original source, various opinions emerge. There is often a strong juxtaposition between the books and the show – usually in favour of the books, criticising the show for the narrative incongruence connected to scenes of sexual violence, for the irresponsibility of adding these scenes, and for crossing lines of what is acceptable for an adaptation. However, some respondents applauded the show's cinematic decisions and certain boldness in discussing the theme of sexual violence.

As for treatment of characters (the second theme), *GoT* was, again, compared to the books and judged on terms of fidelity, as some characters facing or committing sexual violence

in the show were considered to act 'out of character'. Loud criticism was also aimed at the showrunners, for failing to take responsibility for representation. The respondents often condemned the way the show uses rape scenes as a plot device: an all-too-easy instrument to 'empower' a raped character or to further the narrative arc of another (male) character at the (female) victim's expense. Many discussed the uncomfortable feelings evoked by the rape of a familiar character. This discomfort sometimes led respondents to criticise the responsibility of these representations, yet others emphasised that representations of sexual violence are *meant to* evoke uncomfortable emotions. Uncomfortable representations of violence may therefore serve a purpose in fiction – depending, again, on how violence is represented and framed.

Fiction's relationship to reality (the third theme) also evoked complex responses. On the one hand, the series is criticised for maintaining rape culture. On the other hand, some respondents strongly emphasised that representations of sexual violence are not – and should not be – connected to politics outside fiction. They are 'just fiction' – or justified images of our distant past. In addition, some discuss how representations of sexual violence may contribute something valuable to the cultural debates surrounding sexual violence. Often articulating an ambivalent stance on representations of sexual violence, these respondents acknowledge fiction's right – and responsibility – to address difficult subjects. Interestingly for an analysis of fantasy fiction, representations of rape were both condemned and justified by their realness and unrealness.

Discussions of *GoT's* status as fiction strongly indicate that the injection model associated with violent imagery gives a false impression of the audiences' relationship and ability to deal with violent fiction (see also Barker et al., 2007; Barker et al., 2021: 10-12). The overall reception of *GoT* is quite complex: the same or similar scenes and themes are approached and interpreted in very different ways. What comes across clearly from the data is that the viewers' stances on fictional sexual violence are highly dependent on *the ways* such violence is represented and narrated: cinematography and screenplay matter to the viewers' perception of sexual violence. What also matters are the viewers' *own contexts*. Little more than a third (36.9%) did not mention anything in Q23. This suggests that most viewers consider personal contexts worth mentioning and relevant to their viewing experience.

The representations of sexual violence and their reception in fiction differ, and the results of this research should thus be used as a reference point for analysing the reception of other fictional texts. Furthermore, when it comes to the limitations of our research, an intersectional analysis focusing on aspects such as age, education, class, or race in addition to gender might help to approach the different positionalities and power relations that play a role in viewer experiences – for instance in our data (Q23), the respondents often mentioned their occupation, implying that they are aware of how this sort of cultural capital can influence their interpretation of *GoT*. Intersectional analysis was, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article, but would be useful in the future to specify the finer nuances of audiences' affective response to fictional sexual violence. Lastly, the ambivalent, conflicting views and mixed feelings of enjoyment and repulsion found in our data would warrant more research in order to grasp the complex ways in which audiences experience the portrayals of sexual violence in fiction. While violent fiction may cause distress in viewers, for some it may, however, function as a tool for negotiating difficult

themes and complex societal issues precisely because of the discomfort it evokes.[16] Future research should therefore delve deeper into the ambivalent responses to violent fiction and the intersectional positionalities of its audiences.

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[16] For the pedagogical potential of feeling discomfort when viewing violent fiction, see Kyrölä (2018b).

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