

Spring 5-3-2019

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Recommended Citation

Baumgardner, Emma, "Misogyny, Rape Culture, and the Reinforcement of Gender Roles in HBO's Game of Thrones" (2019). *Student Research Submissions*. 278.

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Misogyny, Rape Culture, and the Reinforcement of Gender Roles in HBO's *Game of Thrones*
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Abstract

In 2011, HBO's hit series *Game of Thrones* premiered for the first time, and fans have followed ever since. While the television series is based on author George R.R. Martin's book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, there are many artistic decisions that have been made while filming the show, many of which have been critiqued as misogynistic, perpetuating rape culture or reinforcing of stereotypical gender roles. This paper aims to bring light to these claims through the usage of the cultivation theory as well as drawing on information gathered from a survey that was distributed online which included viewers of the show 18 years of age and up. While this paper will focus on ideas from all seven seasons, there will be a particular emphasis on instances that occurred during the first three seasons.

Key words: Misogyny, gender roles, cultivation theory, rape culture

Introduction

In 2011, George R.R. Martin's book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, was adapted by HBO and turned into what is now one of the most highly awarded TV shows of all time – *Game of Thrones*. Currently, the show has won twelve Primetime Emmy Awards, making it the second most successful television series behind that of Saturday Night Live and even has a new season actively airing each week (Statista, 2019). Throughout the series, nine families compete against one another in hopes of controlling the seven kingdoms of Westeros, a mythical land, all while the looming threat of an ancient enemy makes their presence known (IMDB, 2019). While the show is set in historical times where females did not have as many rights and rape was common, it would be nonsensical to ignore the modern-day implications of the misogyny, perpetuation of rape culture, and reinforcement of gender roles that take place throughout the entirety of the series. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, misogyny is defined as “feelings of hating women, or the belief that men are much better than women” (Cambridge University, 2019). Because misogyny can take on many different forms, this creates implications on communication scholarship as well as in normalizing the ways in which viewers begin thinking about women, rape culture and how gender roles are formed. While the show has aired for seven seasons, this analysis will focus more heavily on episodes taking place within the first three seasons. Through this analysis, I will be drawing on examples from the show itself and how they relate to the cultivation theory – where viewers begin to be affected by what they're seeing on television thus forming their societal views (Mass Communication Theory, 2019).

Literature Review

Because *Game of Thrones* has been so widely viewed for nearly nine years, many scholars have taken to critiquing all that the show has to offer, both good and bad. Additionally, scholars would agree that while themes of gender subordination, rape culture, and misogyny are

present in each of the seven seasons, they are exceptionally apparent in seasons one through three (Needham 2017); however, these themes are not just limited to the experiences of women. Eunuchs, men who have been castrated, also play a prominent role throughout the series and suffer similar discrimination to that of women. This is due to the fact that that they too are seen to be lacking the necessary traits to hold power in a patriarchal society. For example, Askey (2018) argues how eunuchs, like women, have had to maintain control over their self-image and work to create and maintain their power. Because they do not have a penis, both eunuchs and women are seen as unfit to rule (Askey, 2018). Similarly, Sanqvist (2012) would argue that power is disregarded for females, regardless of being a rightful heir or of their capability to rule. Not only is sex important for those actively trying to rule but is also emphasized when women are expecting children. The joy and celebration surrounding the birth of a baby boy is far more than that of a girl (Sanqvist, 2012). In the first season, Daenerys, a rightful heir to the Iron Throne, is carrying a baby boy, and her husband, ruler of the Dothraki people, promises to claim the Iron Throne for their unborn son rather than for his wife. Through their analysis, Clapton and Shepherd go on to describe how this further emphasizes the notion that women are unfit to rule in Westeros (Clapton & Shepherd, 2017).

In addition to women being seen as unfit rulers, they are portrayed in ways very differently than that of the male characters. Throughout the series, both scholars and viewers alike noticed that there was a disproportionate amount of nudity when it came to males and females. In the first three seasons, Needham (2017) analyzed 33 scenes with sexual content and found that there were 188 shots of female nudity while there were only 145 that included male nudity (Needham, 2017). Not only is this statistic alarming, but many of the scenes containing nudity are paired with a monologue that is important to the plot development, forcing viewers to pay attention. This aligns with Needham's (2017) theory of "sexposition" where women are used

as tools of sexual exposition (Needham, 2017). Sexposition is a theory that scholar Valerie Frankel also draws upon when writing about the show. The long pans of the women's bodies that the filmmakers use force the audience to watch and analyze the show through the lens of a heterosexual male (Frankel, 2014). Consequently, women are repeatedly viewed as objects while men are the ones that are holding all of the power not only within the show, but also in the ways that the show is filmed and viewed.

While each of the aforementioned scholars touch on the amount of nudity or normalization of rape that occurs in the show, HBO still receives large amounts of publicity surrounding the series regardless of whether the topics being discussed are considered to be socially acceptable or not (Gjelsvik and Schubart, 2016). The concept of having sexual violence portrayed on TV is not new. Sexual violence has become increasingly prominent in crime shows. While HBO's *Game of Thrones* does not necessarily fall under the category of a crime show, it is no exception when it comes to the amount in which sexual violence is depicted (Crampton, 2014). While viewers are aware of all of the sex, gore, and rape happening within the show, they still find the plotline exciting as they continue to watch. In this way, viewers begin to accept these problematic traits as part of the show in exchange for the entertainment they are receiving (Penny, 2012).

To better understand the potential impacts of these plot lines and themes in *Game of Thrones*, this paper will utilize the cultivation theory. Through this theory, it is argued that there are societal implications for viewers that after repeated exposure, what they see in the media becomes their reality (Mass Communication Theory, 2019). Whether shows, such as this one, are based in a historical context can quickly become irrelevant because viewers then become less able to distinguish between fact and fiction. After doing more research on the *Game of Thrones* series, more questions come to mind regarding the power dynamics between characters,

especially those between male and female characters. Additionally, there was a desire to analyze the ways in which the show depicts characters, women especially, and tells its story through a misogynistic lens.

RQ1: How is misogyny depicted throughout the series?

Many of the aforementioned scholars would agree that the show favors the patriarchy in all aspects, especially when it comes to ruling over Westeros. Because noble families are very prominent throughout the series, which led to the second question:

RQ2: What is the relationship between gender and power?

Methodology

In order to best answer the aforementioned questions in relation to the cultivation theory, a survey was created and advertised throughout social media to gain a better understanding of how the show affects viewers and their perceptions.

The Survey

The survey was posted on Facebook, sent via SMS messaging and within a Slack communication channel as a way of recruiting participants. Through this, there were a total of $N = 56$ participants, all of whom were over the age of 18 with responses that were completely confidential. Each of the participants have viewed the show in some capacity, many of whom have seen beyond the first three seasons. A critical analysis was then performed utilizing the information gained from the survey.

Measurement.

The purpose of this survey was to gain a better understanding of views that participants have towards the series currently, including both positive and negative viewpoints. Because the series has been so widely popular for nearly a decade, it was important to see the ways in which the show actively impacted viewers despite it being set in a historical time. Additionally, it was

important to recognize a shift in the way characters are depicted as the series continued throughout the years. Several questions were then asked of participants, in hopes of obtaining a wide variety of responses to better create arguments when analyzing the different seasons. After opening the survey and giving their consent, participants were asked a variety of questions. These questions included: How they began watching the show; which gender they identified with; the gender of the person who recommended the show; if they identified as female whether or not it took a female's recommendation to begin watching the show; if they felt that there was a noticeable difference in the amount of nudity displayed in seasons 1-3 versus 4-7; if they felt that the monologues paired with nudity were important to advancing the plot; if male and female characters should have equal amounts of nudity depicted; and lastly if the show has affected their day to day views on rape and prostitution.

Description of Participants

Of the survey respondents, 68% identified as women. Participants were asked a series of questions ranging from how they identified, how they began watching the show, and whether or not they agreed with monologues being paired with sex scenes to name a few. As far as how people began watching the show, 75% of participants began watching the show after someone recommended it to them and only 7% of participants read the books prior to watching the show. The series makes a dramatic decrease in the amount of nudity that is depicted in seasons four through seven when compared to seasons one through three, a change that participants were asked about. Sixty six percent of respondents recognized this change in the later seasons. These responses were helpful in providing helpful insight when critically analyzing the show.

Analysis and Discussion

When watching *Game of Thrones* for the first time, it can be hard to avoid the blatant misogyny, reinforcement of gender roles and perpetuation of rape culture that takes place

throughout each of the seven kingdoms comprising Westeros. While the show definitely has both good and bad people in it, I would agree with Penny's (2012) argument that fans tend to ignore the severity of the acts the characters perform throughout the show in exchange for a rich plot and more exciting storyline. None of these qualities are taken into account when choosing a favorite character in the series (Penny, 2012). Through this analysis, the need for a survey will be further explained while simultaneously drawing on examples from the show itself.

One example of fans choosing to have an affinity for 'bad' characters is exemplified in the first episode, "Winter is Coming" where fans see Brandon Stark climbing the towers of his castle and in doing so catches Jamie Lannister having sex with his twin sister, Cersei. After being caught in the act, Jamie pushes Bran out of the tower window, paralyzing both of his legs for the remainder of the series (Season 1, Episode 1). The audience then learns that in addition to having paralyzed a boy, Jamie has also murdered a king, and often times has non-consensual sex with his sister. Despite knowing all of these things, I would argue that fans still somehow find themselves rooting for Jamie's character throughout the duration of the series because the show slips in redeeming qualities here and there to continue portraying him in a positive light.

With "Winter is Coming" being the first episode of the series, the audience is introduced to many of the main women that will be present throughout the series. The first time that viewers meet Daenerys Targryen, she is getting ready to meet Khal Drogo, the leader of the Dothraki people. Her brother, Viserys, arranged the meeting and potential arranged marriage hoping to have his sister be Drogo's queen in exchange for his army of Dothraki men. As she's getting ready for the meeting, Viserys comes in, strips her of her dress and emphasizes her need to be perfect whilst inspecting her naked body. Upon her meeting with Khal Drogo no words are exchanged, he merely looks at her and rides off, signifying that she is a suitable partner for him. Daenerys objects after the fact saying that she wants to go home and does not want to be married

to a stranger, a comment that is immediately disregarded by her brother. This signifies to the viewers from the first episode that women are equivalent to pawns and can be traded in order to further the political advantages of the men. Additionally, they get no autonomy over what happens to them. When leaving their wedding, Viserys tells her to "make him happy" furthering the idea that women are there for the benefit and pleasure of men rather than by their own will.

As the season progresses, the audience learns more and more about Drogo and Daenerys' relationship and the politics at hand ultimately furthering the idea that women are seen as subordinate to men. The majority of the scenes that show the two of them together either depict him actively raping her, or Daenerys talking with other women on how to make him happy sexually. Her wants and needs within their relationship are always second to Drogo's, if even discussed at all. While some might argue that the frequent raping of women is historically accurate, showing these scenes so frequently is not beneficial to any modern - day viewer. As the cultivation theory hypothesizes, what viewers see repeatedly in shows can sometimes be seen as reality (Mass Communication Theory, 2019); a risk HBO takes by normalizing and perpetuating rape throughout the entirety of the series. By doing this, it may impact how viewers make sense of and form expectations in our own world.

Unfortunately, rape is not an uncommon topic throughout the series. Through her analysis of Westeros, Frankel (2014) describes the ways in which the book punishes those who commit rape far more harshly than the television series depicts. The only time the show itself eludes to the punishment of rape is when they're describing how someone becomes a member of the Night's Watch, something that is only briefly mentioned at the beginning of the series. Throughout the show, viewers see a number of characters who are victims of rape and their perpetrators never receive an ounce of punishment. As Clapton and Shepherd (2016) point out in

their analysis, raping women becomes normalized and is seen as a natural consequence of war. For some, it is even seen as a reward after the fighting concludes (Clapton & Shepherd, 2016).

When looking at the relationship between gender and power that takes place throughout the series, this becomes apparent especially when looking at how noblemen and women operate in society. The audience is introduced to many noblemen and noblewomen during the series, yet it is understood by all of the characters that noblewomen are unfit to rule, something even the women themselves frequently acknowledge throughout the entirety of the series. Cersei Lannister, who is Queen Regent in Westeros, often finds herself sitting in on small council meetings throughout her time in the show while her father, who serves as Hand of the King, leads them. In all of these situations, she is a passive observer. Yet when the role becomes vacant, she sits in on the small council meetings, this time as an advisor and not an observer. When asked if she is serving as the new Hand of the King, she responds that "clearly it would not be appropriate for a woman to assume that role" (Season 5, Episode 2). By having comments such as this blatantly written into the show, it reinforces the idea presented by scholars Sandqvist (2012) and Needham (2017) that women are unfit to assume positions of power within Westeros.

Not only were women considered unfit to rule, but stereotypical gender roles were heavily reinforced throughout the series. One of the noblewomen that we're introduced to in the first episode "Winter is Coming" is Arya Stark. While her sister Sansa is interested in becoming queen one day, Arya is more interested in learning how to fight and wield a sword, something reserved only for boys. Before leaving home, Arya's half-brother gifts her a sword. This is a huge gesture as he is one of the only people who is willing to reject the societal and gender norm of only boys knowing how to fight. In the next episode, Arya and her friend Mycah the Butcher's boy, begin practicing their sword fighting until they find themselves confronted and taunted by the prince of Westeros. Soon, it turns into a tricky situation and it becomes her word against the

prince's. The prince's word is taken as truth, and only Mycah, who is both male and a commoner, is punished furthering the misogynistic views that women are seen as second class to men (Season 1, Episode 2).

Conclusion

Because the series brings in millions of viewers every episode, it is important to discuss the potential harms of perpetuating rape culture and displaying misogynistic views on a regular basis. By analyzing *Game of Thrones* through the lens of the cultivation theory, one can see just how quickly people can begin to take what they see on television and turn it into their reality. Because the survey was created prior to the analysis taking place, it became apparent that more pointed questions would have proven helpful, but it was important nonetheless to have basic questions to aid in the understanding of where participants were coming from when it came to discussing these sensitive topics. Through the questions asked, a better understanding of a viewer's current stance on the portrayal of nudity and the overall depiction of women was able to be understood. While the survey did provide valuable insight into the perceptions of viewers, there were some additional limitations to the study.

One of the limitations that this study presents is the fact that it does not go in depth about the relationships and gendered dynamics that eunuchs experience throughout their time in Westeros; this study primarily focuses on the experiences of women. Because a large amount of people are considered to be eunuchs within this fictional world, more scholarship and research ought to be created in order to best ensure that the struggles and discrimination that they face is properly researched and documented.

Further research will also want to take into account the progress in later seasons of the series. As the series has progressed, more strides have been made for women in the show allowing them to have a redemption arc of sorts. While the themes of rape and misogyny are still

present, the characters as a whole have become more accepting of people assuming roles outside of the stereotypical gender norm. For example, season eight is actively premiering each week and has already done a wonderful job of highlighting the strides that women have made. There are multiple women contending for the iron throne while simultaneously heading their houses, the knighting of a woman just took place for the first time, and women are actively being recruited to fight in the battles against the dead (Season 8, Episode 2). Conducting a comparative study on how the show has evolved from the initial seasons until now would prove useful when looking at the relationships between gender and power.

Overall, through current research and survey questions, valuable insight has been gained when looking into the ways in which people view and interpret HBO's hit series *Game of Thrones*. This analysis helped bring to light the different ways in which men and women reinforce gender roles as well as the potential effects of how the frequency of rape can impact today's society. Ultimately having the frequency of rape and reinforcement of gender roles has the potential to desensitize viewers to the harmful effects that these actions can have on society when analyzing the show through the lens of the cultivation theory. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see if and how the final season evolves to further include women, eunuchs and the abilities of other marginalized groups.

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