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# Ariella Thompson

## An Examination of Audience Perceptions of Sexual Violence and Misogyny in *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup>.

*This research examines how representations of sexual violence and gender based discrimination equate to misogynistic perceptions. Game of Thrones<sup>TM</sup> (GoT) has been branded wildly misogynistic by critics yet is often praised for its strong female characters and feminism by fans. This research responds to calls to seek audience views about sexual violence and misogyny in GoT. Using a qualitative, inductive approach, ten participants were shown clips from GoT, framed with quotes from the literature, and afterwards were asked to discuss their responses.*

*This research suggests that audiences respond negatively to obvious incidences of sexual objectification of women. Participants justified the sexual violence and misogyny in GoT as ensuring historical accuracy or realism. Audiences believe representations of rape can have a prosocial value. The findings raise questions about men's perceptions of internalized misogyny. This work provides new information on audience perceptions of misogyny and sexual violence in GoT.*

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup>; Misogyny; Audiences; Perceptions; Sexual Violence.

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### INTRODUCTION

*“Game of Thrones<sup>TM</sup> is permeated by an underlying misogyny, whether it's using women as props during exposition scenes or altering female characters' plotlines and personalities to squeeze them into negative stereotypes.”*

(Thomas 2014 p.1)

HBO's popular TV series, *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> (GoT) has been branded wildly misogynistic by a range of critics (Thomas 2014; Frankel 2014; Bohanan 2016) for its sexual objectification, stereotyping and depictions of sexual violence against women. However, fans still praise the show and identify the range of female characters, some called 'strong', as meaning GoT is feminist. Female stars of the show have denounced claims that GoT is sexist (Hibberd 2016). It is this dichotomy that makes GoT an interesting case study when examining perceptions of sexual violence and misogyny.

Misogyny is near universal (Gilmore 2001) and depictions of sexual violence and violence against women are becoming increasingly common in popular culture (Frankel 2014). Donald Trump has proved that a man can say wildly misogynistic things and still be elected president of one of the most powerful countries in the world. These phenomena prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the notion of postfeminism, that feminism has achieved equality, is false. Young women routinely experience sexual harassment and assault but too often do not recognise it as such, and nor do the male perpetrators. It is clearly relevant and important to explore the perceptions that people do hold about misogyny and sexual violence in our culture.

The media holds the power to subvert or promote the status quo (Street 2011) and as such it is pertinent to question, as many scholars have done (Mulvey 1975; Projansky 2001; Borgia 2014; Bonomi et al. 2016; Frankel 2014; Ferreday 2015; Vance et al. 2015; Nair and Tamang 2016; Brigley Thompson 2017), the influence of popular culture products like films, television shows and books on perpetuating or challenging misogyny. However, while much has been written from a theoretical perspective, little research has been done that studies audience perceptions, and none that examines audience perceptions to the sexual violence and misogyny in *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup>. Proctor (2016) argues that instead of making suggestions about audience reactions to the sexual violence and misogyny of GoT, or writing from a theoretical perspective, scholars should instead ask audiences how they respond to GoT. That is precisely what this study aims to do.

The overall aim of the research is to examine how representations of sexual violence and gender based discrimination equate to misogynistic perceptions. This research will use GoT to seek an understanding of the perceptions that university students hold about sexual violence, and quotidian attitudes toward the degradation of women.

This research first examines the current literature to draw out four key concepts for use in the methodology; misogyny, internalized misogyny, rape and sexual objectification. The methodology lays out the rationale for using qualitative, individual interviews to examine participants' narratives. This research was conducted using four clips from GoT that relate to the themes identified in the literature review, framing each clip with a relevant quote. The participants were questioned about their reactions to each clip. The data converged into three key areas for discussion: sexual objectification to such an extent that it was deemed "unnecessary" by participants; male participants did not recognise behaviour that female participants identified as internalized misogyny; and finally, that rape in TV shows is "necessary".

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Contextualising *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup>

*Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> (GoT) is a hugely popular television series created by the television network, HBO. GoT is an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's series of novels, '*A Song of Ice and Fire*', which is set in the high fantasy world of Westeros. Westeros is a quasi-medieval world, where magic, dragons and the terrifying White Walkers

are mostly considered myths or ancient beings long since lost to time. As the series progresses it becomes clear that magic, dragons and White Walkers are not so mythical and are, or will become, vital to the plot. However, the fantasy elements are of lesser focus, compared to the deadly political dramas and power-plays that concern most of the series' characters. The story follows three major plot lines that cross and overlap. The first story arc chronicles the dynastic struggles of noble families to claim the Iron Throne of Westeros, and of several noble families fighting for independence from the throne. The second covers attempts to reclaim the throne by the exiled last child of the realm's deposed ruling dynasty. The third chronicles the threat of the impending winter and the White Walkers in the North.

Both the TV series and the books are renowned for graphic depictions of violence and sex, often in the most shocking of ways. '*A Song of Ice and Fire*' has a huge number of characters, and while GoT manages to slim this down for viewers, the show is still known for its large ensemble cast and epic scope. Within this mass of characters are some women: many prostitutes, and then a handful of other main female characters who fall into particular archetypes (Frankel 2014). There are the mothers: Cersei and Catelyn; the warrior women: Brienne and Arya, and a few lesser characters; the maiden: Sansa; the femme fatales: Melisandre and Margaery; and finally, arguably the most popular woman on the show: Daenerys, who goes from innocent pawn to powerful ruler in her own right. The breath of female characters, some of whom are described as strong, has seen many fans describe the show as feminist, however critics disagree (Frankel 2014; Don 2014; Thomas 2013; Carpenter 2012; Bohanan 2016). Frankel (2014) argues that any strong females are undermined by:

“a number of characters who resort to sex to get ahead or abandon all trace of womanhood as a path to power leaves very few women playing the *Game of Thrones* in their own right, and even fewer who enjoy being female. As behavioural models, most of these are sadly lacking.”

(Frankel 2014 p.1)

Daenerys is the character most often identified as feminist, even by people who problematize the characterisation of other characters. However, Carpenter (2012) notes that Daenerys strategically embodies patriarchal gender archetypes for as long as it takes to gain enough authority and legitimacy to begin to subvert them, but her actual ability to do so is extremely limited by the rigidly and violently patriarchal cultures around her.

Like any adaption from a book to the screen, fans of Martin's novels sometimes note the differences in plot lines and creative decisions taken by the showrunners. While the TV series format allows for a far more faithful adaption from the source material than a film would, some decisions are taken to streamline plots or characters. Other decisions to change things seem to have less logical reasons, and are based more in seeking to entertain or titillate. For this reason GoT has come under criticism by some (Thomas 2013; Frankel 2014; Proctor 2015) who state that the showrunner's creative decisions make the show more sexist than the books, and conform to the patriarchal paradigm of popular culture. Such criticism is levelled particularly at the addition of several rape scenes that were never in the original books.

As Clapton and Shepherd (2015, p. 10) note: “The television show is widely critiqued for its gratuitous depictions of rape and sexualized violence.” However, given the immense popularity of the show (Robinson 2016), it would seem audiences in general do not take issue with the scenes and plot lines that scholars (Frankel 2014; Clapton and Shepherd 2015; Ferreday 2015) deem misogynistic. Indeed, Don (2014) uses the phrase ‘hiding behind Westeros’ to denote a means of feeling distanced from the show’s violence and misogyny.

### Conceptualising Misogyny

Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) the term ‘intersectionality’ provided a basis on which communities were able to understand the depth of injustice and discrimination within society. The term turns away from discrimination only being regarded as gender and racial bias and highlights intertwining factors that impact profiling, stereotyping and oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Hankivsky (2014, p. 2) states that:

“Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., ‘race’/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion).”

Hankivsky (2014) explains that these human interactions function within structural systems of power that generate ‘privilege’ and ‘oppression’, through which colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia and patriarchy are exercised. The formation of these systems of power such as racial discrimination within the Women’s Liberation movement, and sexism within the Black Liberation movement led to the development of the Black Feminist movement (Smith 2016). With White feminism recognised as a more traditional or equality focused form of feminism, it is i Misogyny has been called “the male malady” (Gilmore 2001 p.iii) and can be defined as a cultural attitude of hatred for females because they are female (Johnson 2000). Similarly, Oxford English Dictionary (2017) defines misogyny as “Dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.” Piggot (2004) describes misogyny as a cultural practice that functions to maintain the power of males through the subordination of women. Women and female associated characteristics are therefore devalued which results in a fear of femininity (O’Neil 1981; Worell and Remer 2003). Similarly, Gilmore (2001, p. 9) calls misogyny “a fear or hatred of women... a sexual prejudice that is symbolically shared among men in society.”

Within the context of this dissertation misogyny will be further understood to mean the internalized hatred of women that manifests itself in subtle and unsubtle ways across the modern world. As Flood (2007) so accurately noted:

“Though most common in men, misogyny also exists in and is practiced by women against other women or even themselves. [...] Women have internalized their role as societal scapegoats, influenced in the twenty-first century by multimedia objectification of women with its culturally sanctioned self-loathing and fixations on plastic surgery, anorexia and bulimia.”

(Flood 2007 p.443)

Sexism and misogyny are often used interchangeably, and indeed it could be argued that most people do not recognise a difference between the two terms. Sexism is defined as “Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017). Given the similarity in definitions, and the interchangeability of the terms in the vernacular, for the purposes of this dissertation misogyny and sexism will be considered one and the same when regarding the literature.

Misogyny takes many forms, from obvious manifestations like rape, sexual abuse and sexual harassment (MacKinnon 1979), to more subtle manifestations like a girl being called ‘bossy’ when a boy exhibiting the same behavior is called ‘assertive’. These subtle occurrences comprise the background of everyday interactions and experiences (Benokraitis and Feagin, 1995). The prominent manifestations stand out clearly as misogyny and sexism in action, however, scholars (Swim et al. 2001; Alfieri et al. 1996; Breines et al. 2008) recognise that it is the subtle incidents and interactions which can, over time “have just as profound an impact on women’s experiences” (Bearman et al. 2009 p. 11). Bearman et al. (2009) identify a number of subtle things which are manifestations of misogyny, for example:

“women and girls may learn to have low expectations of their capabilities[...] may lack female role models in professions of interest[...] may find their opinions discounted[...] may be valued and appreciated primarily for their looks, bodies, or sexualities.”

(Bearman et al. 2009 p. 11)

Misogyny can be found at play through abusive relationships and unvalued female characters in a number of popular works of fiction including two contemporary best-selling series, the *Twilight Saga* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise (Borgia 2014; Srdarov and Bourgault du Coudray 2016). The women in these books (and film series) have no agency and are completely subservient to the men who dominate them, ultimately both female leads, Bella and Anastasia, only matter in relation to a man (Bonomi et al. 2013; Borgia 2014; Srdarov and Bourgault du Coudray 2016). The damaging influence of such popular misogynistic fictions cannot be overlooked, and indeed may contribute to women internalizing negative messages about their self-worth (Bonomi et al. 2016).

Szymanski et al. (2009) found that misogyny in all its forms contributes to women’s mental health problems due to women experiencing sexist events and internalizing negative and limiting messages about being a woman. Scholars have found that internalized sexism and misogyny contributes negatively to women’s experiences, and ultimately serves to oppress women (Chesler 2001; Cowen 2000). Internalized misogyny and sexism is a subcategory in internalized oppression (Cudd 2006; Tatum 1997) which consists of oppressive practices that continue to take place even when members of the oppressor group are not present. As Szymanski et al. (2009) note, internalized misogyny may be expressed through minimizing the value of women, mistrusting women and exhibiting gender bias in favour of men.

Misogyny and sexism are practically ubiquitous (Gilmore 2001) however, that is not to say that everyone is consciously a misogynist or sexist. It is more an inherent socio-cultural problem, as Bearman et al. (2009) note:

“Because of the variability of sexist practices, it is no surprise that sexism is often unintentional; both the agents and the targets of sexism are often unaware of the sexism in their interactions.”

(Bearman et al. 2009 p. 11)

## Rape

Rape is an important facet of misogyny which needs to be addressed in this literature review, defined by Papp and Erchull (2016 p.110) as “nonconsensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration by a body part or object”. Rape can be considered an act of patriarchal power that subjugates women (Brownmiller 1975; Ferreday 2015). Rape is a reality that many women face; rape culture sums up a social reality where “sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes” Buchwald et al. (1993 p. xi).

“The very term ‘rape culture’ indicates the need to understand rape as culture; as a complex social phenomenon that is not limited to discrete criminal acts perpetrated by a few violent individuals but is the product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture.”

(Ferreday 2015, p. 22)

Ultimately, rape is one of the more violent, and more obvious, manifestations of misogyny. While rape is something that women encounter, a reality that many people live it, it is also a frequent narrative device. As argued by Projansky (2001), rape as a topic is “virtually timeless, functioning as a key aspect of storytelling throughout Western history” (Projansky 2001 p.3).

While Projansky’s (2001) seminal work on watching rape was written 16 years ago, and therefore discusses popular culture representations of rape from before that time, it could be argued that popular culture in the years since has seen even more graphic representations of rape gain prevalence. Frankel (2014) supports this notion, arguing that “rape as entertainment and titillation appears around the world in a truly disturbing current of violence” (Frankel 2014 p.8). Frankel (2014) is referring to depictions of rape in popular culture, and particularly, in *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> (both the TV series and books) which she argues feature an excessive amount of depictions of rape.

Many scholars have problematized media and popular culture representations of rape (Projansky 2001; Frankel; Ferreday 2015; Nair and Tamang 2016; Brigley Thompson 2017) for their inaccurate depictions and the effect that this has on society. Depictions of rape tend to adopt what Mulvey (1975) termed ‘the male gaze’ (Projansky 2001; Frankel 2014), where the world is depicted from a masculine point of view and women are simply objects of male pleasure (Mulvey 1975). Papp and Erchull (2016) identify rape myths as depicting male sexual aggression as natural and provoked by women. Nair and Tamang (2016) identify representations of rape as contributory to rape culture in which such rape myths exist:

“It is in growing up with such depictions that shape our understanding of the cause and effect of rape, or what has been termed as the production of a rape culture, in which the media play no small part.”

(Nair and Tamang 2016 p. 614)

Problematizing rape for different reasons, Brigley Thompson (2017) writes that media representations of rape victims often brush over the true trauma of rape and suggest that happiness and healing can be found through heteronormative 'happiness scripts' such as finding a husband and having a child. Alternatively, representations cast the victim who refuses to forgive and forget as a killjoy. Brigley Thompson (2017) argues that neither does justice to the truth that rape survivors experience. This echoes Projansky's (2001) crucial argument that most mass mediated representations of rape fail to deal with rape in a complex way. Projansky (2001) makes the argument that the sheer prevalence of representations of rape, and their lack on complexity and sensitivity render postfeminist arguments that feminism has achieved its goal of equality, flawed. However, Proctor (2016) argues that whether representations of rape are flawed or not, they provide a way to discuss a much silenced topic with the wider population.

### Sexualisation and Objectification

Sexual objectification has been identified as a manifestation of sexism and misogyny by scholars (Mulvey 1975; MacKinnon 1979; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Bearman et al. 2009; Szymanski et al 2011). Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire (Bartky, 1990). Szymanski et al. (2011) state that being sexually objectified is a very common occurrence for many women in the United States. Sexual objectification is exacerbated and perpetrated by the media (Mulvey 1975; Kaschak 1992; Bearman et al. 2009). As Kaschak (1992) notes, one way in which sexual objectification appears in the media is through the male sexual gaze, which occurs when a man looks at a woman, usually unreciprocated and unwanted, and often with the purpose of sexualizing her; the link between sexual objectification and Mulvey's (1975) male gaze concept cannot be overstated.

Sexual objectification is something that women experience in real, day to day life and well as something seen in the media. Bearman et al. (2009) summarise sexual objectification in the following quote:

"Due to the omnipresence of media images of women, and through the direct gazes of men, women are immersed in social environments in which they and other women are regularly looked at, evaluated on the basis of their appearance, and treated as if their bodies and looks represent something essential about their personhood."

(Bearman et al. 2009 p.16).

Szymanski et al. (2011) note a definitive link between sexual objectification and the occurrence of eating disorders, substance abuse and depression among women. Vance et al. (2015) similarly state that women who frequently experience sexual objectification are more likely to internalize this objectification which can lead to negative mental health consequences. This is closely related to other research which has noted the link between internalized sexism/misogyny and psychological problems (Szymanski et al. 2009, Bearman et al. 2009).

Sexposition is a related concept to sexual objectification. Sexposition is defined by the Berwick (2012 p.1) as "keeping viewers hooked by combining complex plot

exposition with explicit sexual goings-on.” The idea of sexposition is to use sexual activity to hold audience attention during a period of plot exposition that has the potential to bore audiences. The term was coined by commentators in response to a specific scene in *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> which is used in this research (see Figure 1). Sexposition has retrospectively been applied to other TV shows. In the GoT scene, a male character divulges information about his personal history and motivations ostensibly to two prostitutes he has recently employed. While he does this the two women are, very convincingly, simulating sex to the distraction of the audience. Male gaze (Mulvey 1975) and sexual objectification is clearly evident in this scene where the narrative is driven primarily by the man, and the women serve purely an exhibitionist role onto which men project their fantasies.

### The Role of the Media

The Media’s role in sexual objectification and in rape culture has already been discussed. Here, the role of the media is discussed in a more general sense. Media is hugely powerful; media can serve and subvert authority (Street 2011) and media can undoubtedly influence people. Heath et al. (1981) explain that a key aspect of media influence comes from its ability to create a dominant ‘reality’ that reinforces dominant power relations. The media exposes people to events and experiences which are beyond their own life experiences and through this second-hand reality, shapes their beliefs and perceptions of events (Gerbner et al. 1980). Mediatisation is a term that describes the increasing role of media in shaping and changing the practices of actors within, and the structure of, social institutions (Schulz 2004). Hjarvard (2008) argues that mediatisation results in a “shared experiential world” (Hjarvard 2008 p. 129) that is regulated by media logic. Over time media can influence how social issues are perceived and responded to.

Two studies (Oxman-Martinez et al. 2009; MacDonald and Charlsworth 2013) have specifically investigated the way news media frame and present violence against women and sexual harassment. In both studies, the authors found that the media frame incidents in such a way that reinforces the dominant, patriarchal system and classifies each incident as isolated ‘one off’ occurrences rather than suggesting that violence and sexual assault are symptomatic of wider societal issues. As MacDonald and Charlsworth (2013, p. 95) summarise: “Media representations limit opportunities to frame sexual harassment as dynamic, complex, and part of the practice of gendering.”

Easteal et al. (2015) suggest that the media frame violence against women, including sexual harassment and assault, using a recurrent theme of mutuality of responsibility for the violence. This contradicts a feminist understanding of this violence as symptomatic of misogyny. Similarly, feminist theorists have observed that media representations of violence against women reflect the media’s ambivalence towards feminism (Mendes 2012; Walter 2010).

People dismiss the sexual violence they see on GoT as just fantasy that has no relationship to real life and real culture (Don 2014). But Projansky (2001) argues that representations of rape always go some way to supporting rape itself. Representations in media, even if they’re fiction, are always reflecting the world around us, they’re never ‘just fantasy’. This is of vital importance given Rowley and

Weldes' (2012 p. 514) assertion that "popular culture is the 'real world', providing us with meanings, including about world politics". Following Shapiro's (2009) argument that cinema can be used to create empathy and therefore challenge violence in war policy and other questionable issues within the field of International Relations, Clapton and Shepherd (2015) used *Game of Thrones*<sup>™</sup> to draw lessons from gender and power issues. Clapton and Shepherd (2015) argue that popular culture products like *Game of Thrones*<sup>™</sup> can teach us to make connections to gender and authority and, as Ferreday (2015) argues, other issues like misogyny and rape culture. As Ferreday (2015) notes:

"It is particularly productive to analyse the relationship between 'real' rape and representations of rape at the current historical moment, when media representations are deeply enmeshed with cultural practices through which we make sense of everyday lives and of lived experience, including the experience of living in societies where the ever-present threat of sexual violence is lived alongside a proliferation of media images of violated female bodies."

(Ferreday 2015 p. 23)

## Summary

In summary, this literature review has examined some of the scholarly perspectives on misogyny as a concept and how misogyny can be internalized to the harm of women. Rape has been discussed as a facet of misogyny that is often represented in the media, particularly in fictional popular culture. Sexual objectification has been defined and noted as a way of devaluing women. These four concepts can be seen in *Game of Thrones*<sup>™</sup>. The discussion of the role of the media has illustrated the power of shows like GoT to perpetuate or counter misogyny. This research will use the four concepts discussed to examine how audience reactions to sexual violence and discrimination of women within GoT relate to misogynistic perceptions.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is concerned with thoughts and feelings that are intangible and this means a positivistic research philosophy was not appropriate. An approach was required that enabled an understanding of the subjective world to be developed, therefore the philosophy adopted was interpretivism (Bryman and Bell 2003).

Theory on misogyny in *Game of Thrones*<sup>™</sup> is limited, therefore it was not possible to develop a hypothesis to be tested as would happen using deductive reasoning. In contrast, an inductive approach was used for this research. Theory was developed from the data, following Grounded Theory (GT) which can be defined as "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p.1).

Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are concerned with understanding individuals' perceptions of the world (Bell and Waters 2014). This research is concerned with examining participants' perceptions of misogyny; perceptions are highly subject phenomenon that cannot be observed. Therefore, a method was

needed that provided access to people's thoughts and feelings rather than observations.

"Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including... the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate."

(Mason 2002, p.1)

As such, qualitative data was required for this research.

### Interview Design

Qualitative interviews explore participant's feelings, opinions and perceptions within their "deeply nuanced inner worlds" (Gubrium and Holstein 2002, p. 57). Semi-structured interviews enable perceptions within pre-established categories to be explored (Fontana and Frey 1994) while also allowing the flexibility for the interviewer to ask follow up questions and delve more deeply into some of the issues discussed (Brennen 2013). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for this research.

Individual interviews have been chosen over the focus groups applied by other research (Bonomi et al. 2016) due to a desire to avoid a 'hive mind' effect where participants' responses to the sensitive subject matter are influenced by the presence of other people in the discussion.

Four key themes were identified from the literature:

- misogyny as a concept
- sexual objectification
- rape
- internalized misogyny

In order to prompt participants to discuss these topics, one clip for each topic was selected from GoT. In addition, each clip was framed with relevant quotes from the literature which were presented to participants. The same process that followed the four key themes was used consistently throughout the interviews, thereby limiting variation. Selecting four themes allowed the researcher to narrow down the fields discussed, making comparison easier.

### Sampling

Participants were chosen who had watched some or all episodes of GoT. This decision was made so that clips could be shown and discussed with some understanding of the context. In addition, participants were required who had not read the books because the debates that surround the choices that showrunners have made when adapting from the source material might detract from the focus of the research. This allowed the research to focus on perceptions of misogyny rather than a discussion of intentions of the author vs the showrunners.

Qualitative research is not concerned with seeking generalizations that can be applied to a large population. Qualitative research is concerned with gaining an in-

depth understanding and therefore a sample size of ten was considered appropriate. Purposive sampling was used because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Participants needed to be comfortable with the researcher in order to discuss the issues as openly and honestly as possible. For this reason, participants were all known to the researcher and an informal, friendly approach was used to invite participation.

Sex and gender issues are at the core of the subject matter and as such the researcher felt it was vital to include participants of both sexes. This allowed the researcher to clearly see any differences in perceptions between the sexes.

A consistent approach was used to conduct the interviews to limit researcher influence and reduce variation (Bell and Waters 2014). The interviews were conducted using a laptop and a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation provided the structure for the interviews, displaying the quotes and links to each of the video clips. The quotes from academic literature were presented to participants before they viewed the relevant clip to frame the clip. After they had viewed the clip, they were given the option of again reading the quote. Participants were then asked first what they thought of the scene, and then how the scene made them feel. The four clips and their respective quotes serve to structure the interviews in a consistent way while still allowing for the flexibility of further exploration within the discussion phase following each clip.

#### Ethical Considerations

This research is focused on examining perceptions of misogyny and a discussion around the concept and representations of misogyny was essential. Therefore, this research involved a discussion of sensitive topics: misogyny, sexual assault and rape. The methodology for this study included showing participants clips from *Game of Thrones*<sup>™</sup>, a show that is known for its nudity, rape scenes and violence. By showing these representations of misogyny to participants, it was possible that they could find the content of the scenes, or a discussion about them, triggering, or uncomfortable. However, this was mitigated through the inclusion in the sample of only participants who had seen GoT before. Participants therefore had a pre-existing knowledge of the kind of scenes they were shown, if they had not already seen those scenes, and therefore were comfortable with the graphic and adult content of GoT.

Participants were also clearly informed prior to the interview that the research would involve viewing and discussing rape, sexual assault, violence and discrimination against women, both verbally and through a participant information sheet. Participants were asked to consent to viewing and discussing these topics. They then signed the participant consent form prior to starting the interview. It was made clear to the participants that they may ask to stop the interview at any point, and withdraw their consent up until the anonymization of data, without any negative consequences.

#### Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded. Two of the interviews were fully transcribed and analysed, from these interviews key themes were identified. Codes were created

from these key themes to show correlations between the interviews. Notes were made from the eight other interviews and the codes applied to these.

#### Evaluation of Research Design

All participants in this study were known to, and friends with, the researcher. This could potentially affect the authenticity of the research due to the participants not wishing to express extreme views for fear of repercussions within the friendship. However, this research is, as already discussed, concerned with sensitive subject matter and the participants feeling comfortable with, and trusting the researcher was essential in order to complete the interviews. Therefore, this risk was considered acceptable.

A pilot interview was conducted to ascertain how long the process would likely take, and whether any adjustments needed to be made. The pilot interview was successful and the interview design stayed the same from there so the findings from the pilot interview were included in the research.

#### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Ten interviews were conducted in Spring 2017. All participants were Bournemouth University students, known to the researcher. Five men (M 1-5) and five women (F1-5) were interviewed. M3 and F1 were fully transcribed (See Appendices 1 and 2).

Six themes (1-6) were identified and from these, two were further broken down into sub-themes (1a+b and 5a+b+c). A comparison between all participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Coding and Findings.

Clips	Coding		Interviewees										
			M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	
Clip 1	1a	Gender discrimination	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	1b	Historically justified	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Clip 2	2a	Unnecessary	✓		✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
	3a	Sexual objectification	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Clip 3	4a	Rape?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	5a	Necessary to educate/inform	✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
	5b	Necessary for accuracy (historical or real world)		✓			✓	✓	✓				
	5c	Necessary for character development			✓								
Clip 4	6a	Internalised misogyny						✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

M1 = “Mark” M2 = “Stephen” M3 = “Robert” M4 = “Eric” M5 = “Jack”

F1 = “Julia” F2 = “Annie” F3 = “Maya” F4 = “Karol” F5 “Katie”

The findings and themes from the discussion around Clips 2, 3 and 4 are presented below in the order the clips were shown to participants. The discussion around Clip 1 was closely linked by participants to the discussion of rape as necessary for historical accuracy and therefore is discussed with this theme.

#### Unnecessary Sex Scenes and Sexual Objectification

The second clip that participants viewed was a lengthy sex scene in which a main male character had a monologue while two female prostitutes engaged in sexual activity essentially in the background, adding only a few words to the conversation. Seven out of ten participants identified the sexual activity within the scene as “unnecessary” and nine out of ten identified the scene as sexually objectifying of the female characters. Maya summed up both these perspectives when she stated “There doesn’t have to be boobs in this scene, they could just be talking.” The consensus from participants of both genders was that the sexual activity served no

narrative purpose and was simply there for the sake of including some sex and nudity. Given that *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> is a notoriously sexually explicit program, participants felt that another sex scene which didn't add to the story was unnecessary. The scene in question was the scene that caused commentators to coin the term "sexposition" which was defined for the participants before watching the clip. As Robert noted,

"They're quite clearly trying to use this whole sex thing for something. Though it's not particularly clear what... I just think it's unnecessary."

(Robert)

Karol, a 24-year-old PR student, corroborated this view in noting that to her "It just feels very unnecessary."

These participant responses overwhelmingly refute the effectiveness of sexposition as a technique to hold audience attention, at least at the level of conscious recognition among audiences. Participants seemed to react negatively to what they identified as sexual objectification of the women in the scene. Participants noted that the scene was targeted at heterosexual and used male gaze (Mulvey 1975) in both the way the scene was set up and shot. However, the male participants did not find it sexually appealing, quite the opposite, with several making negative comments about the male character's behaviour.

"He's just really sleazy, the way he's looking at them and directing them. I would never talk to a woman like that... it's just wrong and weird."

(Stephen)

"It's so awful and he's so creepy in that scene in terms of the way he's looking and the things that he's saying."

(Robert)

## Necessary Rape

Seven out of ten participants described representations of rape in the media as "necessary" for different reasons. Two primary reasons were identified, the first was rape as necessary to ensure historical accuracy or realism (5b). The second was rape as necessary to educate and inform viewers about the realities of rape and potentially stimulate a conversation about the issue (5a). One participant identified a third reason; this was rape as necessary for the development of a character (5c). However, because this reason was identified by a single participant, rape as necessary for character development will not be further discussed here.

### Rape as Necessary for Realism or Historical Accuracy

Realism (5b) was highlighted by four participants who stated that they felt that TV shows should include representations of rape in order to ensure that the show is realistic. Jack, a 24-year-old Sports Management student, summarised this in saying:

"The whole program is really graphic and if you want to make it really graphic then rape is one of the really graphic things our world has. Rape is really horrible but then cutting someone's head off is really horrible too and that happens in the program and I think we're

desensitized to that. *Game of Thrones* is a graphic show and I think it fits into the show contextually.”

(Jack)

Similarly, Stephen, a 20-year-old Advertising student, commented:

“If you start taking away that element [rape] from it [*Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup>] are you going to start taking away the violent elements of it?”

(Stephen)

However, Julia, a 24-year-old PR student, noted that some of the depictions of rape in GoT are problematic in their depiction of the consequences, or lack thereof, of rape. She spoke about the story arc that follows from the rape scene shown in the third clip that participants viewed. She described how the two characters go on to fall in love and noted that this made her feel uncomfortable and lacks realism:

“It makes you feel uncomfortable because you’re like and then she ends up falling in love with this guy! And there’s all the connotations with that you’re just like this is... mmm I don’t know what to make of this in some ways. Like that’s clearly rape yet they [Daenerys and Drogo] then go on to have a really loving relationship and you’re like well does that negate the fact he was raping you for the first time... and they [the showrunners] never really address that.....

“It’s just a tough one with that whole relationship. It goes from him raping her to her wanting to please him sexually... and you’re like... how are you not still horrified? Like I know he’s your husband now but how are you not still horrified, why would you want him anywhere near you?”

(Julia)

Her ultimate issue with that scene and the story that follows it, is that it lacks any real reflection of the lasting, damaging effects of rape. As Frankel (2014 p.13) notes, the scene is “titillating with full nudity and no lasting trauma seen”. Nair and Tamang (2016) argue that one-dimensional depictions of rape are common in contemporary media, but that depicting rape in a stereotypical way silences the complex truth of survivors. Likewise, Daenerys’ story arc fits Brigley Thompson’s (2017) observation that happiness post-rape can be found in a heteronormative marriage.

Following the same theme of necessary for realism, some participants noted that GoT is set in a quasi-medieval era during which, historically, rape would have been more common. Participants therefore believed it was necessary to include rape scenes to have historical accuracy. As Julia commented: “If you didn’t have any rape at all in *Game of Thrones*, it would feel less true historically.” Similarly, when responding to the first clip, all participants identified what they witnessed as discrimination based on gender (1a), however seven out of the ten said that this was justified given the era that *Game of Thrones* is set in (1b). Participants noted that males carried on the family name and could inherit the throne and that women’s role in society was vastly different from today. They pointed to these factors as meaning that Tywin’s disregard of his daughter was acceptable or understandable at least.

The responses about historical accuracy support Don's (2014) concept of hiding behind Westeros. Participants felt distanced from the misogyny and sexual violence that they saw on screen due to the show being set in the quasi-medieval Westeros. However, as Don (2014) notes, 'historical' films like Westerns reflect the time in which they were made, and she argues that *GoT* is no different. Likewise, Projansky (2001) argues that the stories we tell about rape and how we represent rape, tell us a great deal about societal attitudes. It is clearly that participants are desensitised to the sexual violence they witnessed, though their justification of rape.

#### Rape as Necessary to Inform or Educate

The other reason participants gave for rape depictions in popular culture was to inform or educate audiences. Six participants identified this as a reason to include rape in *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup>.

"I don't think it [rape] should be glorified but then I guess there's two sides to the coin... it shouldn't be glorified or played down but at the same time people need to be made aware [of rape] ... like I said it's two sides of the coin, it's got bad things and good things about it [representations of rape in media]."

(Mark, 23-year-old Sports Management student)

The consensus on this subject was that rape is not a topic often talked about, but is a problematic thing that should be talked about in order to change attitudes and prevent it from happening. Participants felt that by including representations of rape in popular culture, it could stimulate a discussion about rape that might help prevent it. By showing the horror of rape, TV shows like *Game of Thrones* have the potential ability to elicit an emotional response from the audience that serves to raise awareness of the issue. This idea, noble though it is, is critiqued by Projansky (2001) who argues that representations of rape in popular culture lack the complexity to stimulate a truly feminist discourse about rape. Projansky (2001) also argues that representations of rape go some way to supporting the existence of rape in reality. However, the views presented by six participants support Proctor's (2015) argument that *GoT*'s rape scenes can have a 'prosocial' value and may open a dialogue about rape.

#### Men Do Not Recognise Internalised Misogyny

The even gender split of participants in this research meant that any significant differences in perceptions between genders would be easily identifiable. The stark difference in perceptions of internalised misogyny is the most obvious example of gender difference. This research did not set out to say whether the final clip shown to participants depicted internalized misogyny, the clip was simply framed with a quote that described how internalized misogyny may be expressed. However, when shown to participants, most female participants made a strong connection between the quote and the behaviour of the female characters. Four out of five of the female participants clearly identified the final clip as depicting internalized misogyny. In contrast, none of the male participants made the same identification and indeed, several went so far as to distinctly deny any link between the quote that framed the clip, and the clip itself. For example, Robert, a 21-year-old Business student, said "I don't think there's a lot of gender issues in that scene." When discussing his reactions to the scene in question, he could not make a link between the quote and

the clip in any way. Similarly, Stephen noted that although “She [Cersei] has almost taken on the role of a male in that scene” that,

“They are enemies so you can understand why she’s talking to her like that. When I think about the show as a whole I can understand it more and I don’t see the misogyny.”

(Stephen)

Insightfully, Maya, a 22-year-old Marketing student, noted “I don’t think guys even know how much this [internalized misogyny] goes on.” When she discussed her reaction to the clip, she was instantly able to relate that kind of female on female nastiness to her own experiences; from her own behaviour, other women’s behaviour towards her and behaviour she had witnessed between women. This participant noted that you only had to look at the comments section of women’s YouTube videos to see internalized misogyny in the form of women tearing other women down, a factor identified by scholars (Bearman et al. 2009; Chesler 2001).

## CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this research was to examine how representations of sexual violence and gender based discrimination equate to misogynistic perceptions. This research has used *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> to seek an understanding of the perceptions that university students hold about media representations of sexual violence and the degradation of women. The literature review defined misogyny and conceptualised some of the ways in which misogyny manifests itself: through sexual violence like rape and through sexual objectification. This work also examined how internalized misogyny may be exhibited and discussed the harmful influence of this. In discussing the role of the media and popular culture representations of misogyny, the importance of examining audience perceptions of sexual violence and the degradation of women has been demonstrated. Misogyny, sexual objectification through sexposition, rape and internalized misogyny were the four key concepts identified for this study. These themes proved valuable in prompting discussion with participants.

Participants found the sexposition in Clip 2 to be “unnecessary”. It would appear that when sexual objectification is too dramatic, over the top or obvious, it causes a negative reaction in the audience. The sexual objectification was noted by participants as utilising male gaze and being targeted solely at heterosexual men, both points were identified as negative. Participants found themselves either ignoring the sex to focus on the monologue, or distracted by the sex in a way that was annoying. This suggests that sexposition as a technique to engage or maintain audience attention is ineffective. Sexposition has been discussed previously (Berwick 2012) but no research has been found that refutes its efficacy. Further research is required to wholly understand the efficacy of sexposition.

Rape was identified as necessary for two reasons: historical accuracy or realism, and to educate and inform. Participants justification of representations of rape, and also discrimination against women, in *Game of Thrones*<sup>TM</sup> for historical accuracy supports Don’s (2014) concept of hiding behind Westeros. Participants felt distanced from the show’s misogyny by the quasi-historical, fantasy setting. Participants noted that

rape happens in the real world, so to be realistic it must be included in GoT if other brutal things like murder are included.

However, this research found that the story following the rape scene shown was considered by participants to be unrealistic and lacking complexity. This is somewhat contradictory to the idea of rape being necessary for realism but is consistent with scholars' (Projansky 2001; Nair and Tamang 2016) assertions that media representations of rape lack complexity. Participants noted that the rape victim falling in love with, and seemingly forgetting her trauma was unrealistic, this is similar to Brigley Thompson's (2017) argument that rape victims in fiction only find happiness through heteronormative marriages. In this way, this research supports the literature and raises questions about what messages are sent to the audience.

Despite the issues with the representations of rape, it is clear that participants in this research believe that rape in the media can have a prosocial value. Participants note that the rape scene shown was distressing and elicited an emotional response in the audience. They suggested that this could begin a discussion that may increase awareness about rape and potentially help prevent it. Participant responses supports Proctor's (2015) argument that rape in GoT can perform a prosocial function even when the representations are flawed. Proctor (2015) and this research contradicts some scholars' (Projansky 2001; Nair and Tamang 2016; Brigley Thompson 2017) who have problematized media representations of rape. It seems that this relationship is complex; while the proliferation of media images of violated women accompanies rape cultures (Ferreday 2015), audiences themselves believe some representations can have a positive impact.

Finally, male and female participants responded very differently to Clip 4, which featured one female character threatening another. Female participants identified the behaviour seen as reflective of internalized misogyny and recognised that kind of behaviour from their own real lives. Male participants on the other hand did not recognise the behaviour as internalized misogyny, and some went as far as to utterly reject any link between the scene and the quote that illustrated internalized misogyny. This research did not uncover previous research on male perceptions of internalized misogyny. Therefore, this could be an interesting area for further study.

Another area for further research is representations of rape as necessary for character development. This was mentioned by one participant but not explored further here. Additionally, this research could be extended in terms of diversity. All participants were white, young and relatively well off. Further research could expand into the perceptions of participants from different backgrounds, ethnicities and economic prosperity.

This research demonstrates that the relationship between representations of misogyny and sexual violence in the media and misogynistic attitudes in reality is complicated. Further research is required to fully understand the nuances of this relationship.

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