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## **The fourth wall and "The Wall": GoT's reception in Argentina, Spain, and Germany**

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HBO's global success, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), is known for having an active international fan base. In this qualitative interpretive study of the show's reception in Spain, Germany, and Argentina, I examine themes emerged from interviews with 21 viewers. I interpret their readings on the series together with online and offline engagement practices. Rather than marked cultural contrasts, the study identifies common patterns across nations: varying degrees of analytic and emotional engagement (Chin and Morimoto 2013) leading to diverse fan subjectivities within their 'locality'. Theoretically, I draw from Mittell (2012) as well as Jenkins, Ford, Green (2013) to argue how *GoT* provides an arena for casual viewers and die-hard fans to move on both axes of engagement: drillability and spreadability. To finalize, I reflect on dominant academic discourses that reinforce notions of proper fandom and propose to apply anthropology's cultural relativism and respect for the emic perspective to acknowledge agency.

It is evident that TV media texts and audiences are, and have been for some time, subject to transnational processes: simultaneous release of content, flexibilization in terms of mobilities and access, together with the individualization of lifestyles and a substantive globalization of products (Lobato 2019). This article contributes to media and cultural sociology with a cross-cultural analysis of the fandom of globally and transnationally popular texts (Chin and Morimoto 2015). Part of mapping fandom of specific media content across geographies is to examine local reception of imported (Anglo-American) media texts (Livingstone 2003; Chin, Punathambekar, Shresthova 2017).

Taking this into consideration, addressing and comparing across transnational dimensions means to operate with categories that go beyond the national as unit of analysis such as macro themes: identification, modes of reception, engagement with related paratexts, or affinity. As Livingstone (2003) explains, from an ethnographic understanding of research

practice, we need to keep the culturally generalizable and the idiosyncratic in dialogue. Analysis and interpretation work between contextualized, data-driven, or emic categories and theoretically- driven, a priori, or etic concepts.

Apart from the explicit transborder character of the temporal and spatial convergence of media industries and markets, there is a more meaningful and productive way of understanding the transcultural, particularly for the field of fan studies; namely as a productive methodological tool, as a mode of inquiry rather than a theoretical framework (Morimoto 2017). Practicing a transculturally oriented fan studies means not keeping global fandoms at the margins of mainstream fan studies. It implies reflecting on and making visible in our research “the ways that fans and fandom have been imagined in English-language scholarships” (187). In line with this, it means rethinking assumptions and making visible privileged and rejected readings of dominant accounts that work as a “self-sustaining ecosystem inhospitable to work originating outside its intellectual tradition” (187).

Given my interdisciplinary research interests located at the crossroads of media studies with audience research, sociology, and anthropology, I often find myself in ambiguous positions; at the margins –which for me embody productive borders of contact– of various fields of study. This means I am often reminded when reviewing literature that I speak from within but also from outside "mainstream" fan studies, as the white, anglophone discipline it started as (and still is). With "mainstream" it is meant in its dominant, more widespread stream, with its particular imagined fans and perceived fannish practices (Morimoto and Chin 2017).

Seeing the practice of transcultural fan studies as a much needed epistemology that questions dominant anglophone accounts and their normative fans, platforms, and artifacts, I went to seek out voices of female viewers and non-English Speaking fans, including those who consider themselves casual viewers or anti-fans to provide insights into their experiences and incorporate a wider variety of voices. Here I sought to identify practices and discursive tactics of members of the audience from Argentina, Spain, and Germany to understand how viewers read mediated texts and take part in processes of meaning-making driven by affective pleasures and investments.

Following the premises of anthropological research (Wollcot 2010; Lange 2014; Boellstorff 2008), I value a respectful engagement with the social worlds I research without taking a higher moral ground or dividing cultural manifestations in 'worthy' or 'unworthy' (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Livingstone 2003). I seek to theorize the popular from an inclusive perspective aiming to promote cross-cultural awareness and understanding. The study acknowledges the reception of foreign (turned global) texts as an inherent practice across boundaries that reflect audiences' subjectivities within a dynamic, diversified media landscape. To counteract restrictive views, I argue for a research agenda and cultural critique that embraces the diversities of social formations and acknowledges the variety of plausible fannish experiences.

As a series with a strong international fanbase, I focus on *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2010-2019), an adaptation of the novels written by George R.R. Martin. The high-production-value drama, winner of 59 Emmys, combined the cinematic visual spectacle of medieval fantasy with the register of "Quality TV" (Steiner 2015; Bourdaa 2014), adapting what was generally viewed as an immature, niche genre to HBO's respectability (Hassler-Forest 2014). The geek genre of medieval fantasy was successfully adapted to mainstream engagement and enjoyment.

The Wall takes here the form of a wordplay analogy. The huge Wall made of ice, eventually destroyed by a dragon, was a key element in the narrative of the series. It separated and protected the Westeros continent, where most of the characters lived, from the unknown and scary North, free folk territory, infested by a zombie menace. According to film theory, the "fourth wall" is a performance convention in which an invisible, imagined wall separates the diegetic world from the audience. While the audience can see through this "wall", the convention assumes, actors act as if they cannot. The act of "breaking the fourth wall" happens when an actor directly addresses the audience, looking and talking into the camera. I draw from this analogy to further interpret the self-reflexive character and awareness of their roles that members of the audience demonstrated during interviews.

According to collected data, there were die-hard fans of the series that I labeled "analytical fans", also several self-identified "casual viewers" and a smaller group of "fans of the books", the original series of novels. I focus on the latter as well as issues around adaptation and the cultural legitimacy of media forms in a separate article (García-Rapp 2021). The identified three patterns or ways of engaging with the series were evident in all three countries; there

were German, Spanish, and Argentinian analytical fans *and* casual viewers. Books' purists were mainly Spanish and included some Argentinian participants. In particular for the case of "analytical fans", I further explore their practices of expanding their engagement with the storyworld by moving from the series to the novels and then social media or online forums.

I draw from Mittell (2012, 2015) and tie back findings to his argument explaining how some complex texts make possible for fans to delve into them through "drilling", looking to further interpret, speculate and search for hints by discussing the plot with others and exploring paratexts to deepen their experience. I exemplify how, in this case, audience participation often takes place on both axes, as GoT is both "drillable" and "spreadable" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Some casual viewers move along the spreadable axis liking and sharing memes, while others prefer to drill the text by turning to the books and looking to engage with others online, and many clearly engage in both axes.

I sought to find the idiosyncratic; cultural subjectivities within a borderless globalized fandom. I found diversity within a common framework, not as much in the national contexts as unit of analysis but in the affect-driven relationships, pleasures and engagement members of the audience experienced. There were, once again, common patterns that bypassed the national (see also Sandvoss 2005).

### **Methodology and methods**

I am a qualitative social sciences researcher who works within the fields of media studies, (cultural) sociology and anthropology. My theoretical frameworks, epistemology and axiology are influenced by sociology and anthropology. By the former particularly in its themes of identity and the two-way relationship between society and technology, by the latter in its cultural relativism, its fieldwork aims and the relevance of the emic perspective (Wolcott 2010; Agar 2006). Working from a symbolic interactionist perspective of social interaction (Blumer 1962), I highlight the inherent semiotic productivity of audiences (Fiske 1992; Thompson 1995).

The underlying methodology of this paper is consistent with interpretive epistemologies (Baym and Markham 2009; Charmaz 2006). Exploring media studies from an anthropological

lens means not only embracing but also advocating for people defining themselves. It is about reporting and interpreting the emic perspective and who better than viewers, audiences, users, and fans themselves to label it, by referring to their preferences, pleasures, and contexts within popular cultures.

My research rationale follows an inductive, data-grounded approach beginning with data, analyzing, and interpreting to achieve theories. This study follows the aim of understanding fans' views on the series, how they made sense of their experience of watching in three countries. I focused on their reception experience, their readings on the narrative, and any societal reflection or parallels to reality.

Based on interpretive techniques of data analysis and coding (Merriam 2009), 21 semi-structured interviews of between 10-45 minutes long were performed in person and over Skype. Collected data consisted of 10 hours of audio material. Participants –9 female and 12 male– were middle-class, urbanite, technologically savvy and between 24-34 years old. Eight viewers were from Argentina, seven from Spain and six from Germany.

I employed purposeful sampling strategies (Patton 2002; Cresswell 2013; Bazeley 2013), more specifically, convenience sampling in the beginning (based on availability and opportunity) contacting a variety of more and less engaged audiences, such as people I knew were fans, but also others who were just viewers or members of the audience who had stopped watching the series to offer a wider variety of cases. Then I applied snowball sampling by asking people to recommend others, and it was purposeful again –more specifically, theoretical sampling (Merriam 2009; Charmaz, 2006)– when I had to look for specific cases that were missing such as more German women. This is in terms of internal sampling within the case itself.

Regarding the general sampling strategy, the countries were chosen following an a priori, purposeful sample, considering the languages I speak and my own intercultural background. While the particular countries were accessible cases, they followed at the same time the mentioned deeper epistemological and theoretical effort to diversify audience research and transculture the field.

The data sample was clearly not representative, so internal comparisons and contrasts between the three countries remain anecdotic. Still, as all research is comparative at heart in the sense that we are always comparing and contrasting across categories to identify patterns or atypical examples (Livingstone 2004; Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren 1992), findings remain a valid point that might be picked up in the future.

Interviews were performed in German and Spanish, then transcribed in the original languages and manually coded in English first assigning descriptive and verbatim codes to tag data. Later, during second cycle coding, more comprehensive codes were applied such as code landscaping and code mapping to visually grasp and interpret inter-relationships (Saldaña 2011). Questions of the semi-structured interviews were originally arranged around three themes, while giving space to participants to expand their topics.

### **A transnational research practice**

Research within fan studies too often still focuses on the same reduced group of hallmark practices associated with participatory culture as outlined by Henry Jenkins back in 1992, privileging certain trends, formats, or communities while marginalizing others (Bury 2018; Bennet 2014). Identifying and interpreting hierarchies of value and legitimation within the communities that we study is a key aspect of what we do as scholars. Precisely because of it, it is also necessary that we also apply this strategy when reflecting on our own research field as a whole and on our own discourses. Let us make our local hierarchies visible to at least establish the merit and existence of different readings (other scholars' and most importantly fans' own understandings) on this.

It is not only the reach and diversity of audiences that is exponentially widened with Internet-distributed TV –where content is scattered across a myriad of websites and apps without losing its broadcast and cable distributed medium character (Lobato 2019, 7). We as scholars need to remain aware of the fact that our own upbringings, socialization, and current contexts are inherently diverse. to acknowledge, and embrace, that we bring our own interpretive sense and cultural orientation with us to the field, and subsequently to our interpretations.

The transnational component embodies a methodological position with the goal of challenging and rethinking fan studies. Parting from a scholarship often framed by its "ideal types" of fans and their particular fannish activities, we could advance to including the voices of non-Anglophone fans who do not produce fan artifacts and texts as understood by the discipline, as we will see exemplified here by interviewed members of the audience. Those viewers or fans –it depends on their own claims to that cultural category– who do not post but just read, like, and share online content (dismissingly labelled lurkers) are usually not considered by mainstream fan studies and if so, rather peripherally.

According to Click et al (2017), the danger lies in academic discourses canonizing the 'good' fan as someone who holds all the positive qualities, such as desirable levels of affect, –and I would add taste– while downplaying other undesirable aspects for us academics. By dismissing how the 'organized active fan' or the 'mainstream fan' are subjective, artificial constructs, we risk ignoring a wide variety of fan activity (Van de Goor 2015).

I examine digital and popular cultures with a socio-cultural focus rather than from a political economy or industry-centered dimension. I build on "user-centric" theoretical frameworks (Bechmann and Lomborg 2013). These scholars bring forward a useful encompassing typology to conceptualize the two dominant discourses within media studies, something that also applies to audience and fan studies. Research efforts in these fields often stem from either an industry-centered perspective (macro-structure and macro-perspective of society, power, the a priori themes of race, class, gender and economic interest are key) or from a culturally-embedded focus that draws from users' own understandings, experiences, and goals (a more micro-level, usually immersed practice focused around emergent, emic themes but also usually gratifications, domestication of technology, self-development and subjectivities). I always believed that, aside from corporate interests, the most insightful elements of reception processes must lie by users/audiences/fans themselves and the uses they make of them.

As Lobato argues for the case of understanding the role of Netflix, opposed interpretive frames "bring with them a set of assumptions and invoke a particular history of industrial and technological evolution" (2019, 21). This is clear in, for example, the conversation around participation between Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) who evidently understand the same

concepts –participation, production, consumption– from different theoretical frameworks, which often implies opposing views on their meanings, values, and affordances.

Stemming from differing spheres of interest, scholarship or experience, the audience-centered and the industry-centered perspectives often clash and are expressed as incompatible positions, at the risk of believing the myth of the existence of any complete account or sort of final truth in social theory (Livingstone 2003). Still, we should still be able to move between and across them with respect and acknowledging each other without paternalistic or dismissive attitudes. To "avoid the intellectual lock-in effects that results from following one line of thinking too closely" (Lobato 2019, 22), it is worth recognizing not only other perspectives but also the openness and empathy needed to capture a certain analytical moment in the contingent development of human interaction and cultural practices.

A transnational research effort is, at its heart, connected with an anthropological axiology of reflexive methods that include forcing an awareness of the translation process, de-privileging the researcher's role and an ethical concern of respect for the culture we study (Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also Livingstone 2003).

### **Theorizing the popular: analytical fan, casual viewer, and books' fan**

In this section, I present empirical findings emerged from interviews. I am proposing possibilities of theorizing about fan identities while acknowledging how these are always in flux and situated within a vast continuum of possible practices, identities, and cultural identifiers.

While differences make rhetorically more engaging stories, in this case there were no marked national contrasts other than Spanish fans being often "books' fans" and displaying a more hierarchized conceptualization of media forms marked by varying degrees of cultural legitimacy. As similarities need to be explained too (Livingstone 2004), the reason why there were repeated patterns of observations across nations made by similar "types" of viewers ('casual viewer', 'books' fan', 'analytical fan') might be due to shared qualities as age and Western socialization.



“Books’ fans” were at the same time mainly “analytical fans” (and critical of the series) but some were also “casual viewers”. They valued fidelity to an original’s oeuvre and followed romantic notions of authorship. As mentioned earlier, the prevalence of discussions around the inherent value of books and series as different types of media during interviews, marked the need for a second article (García-Rapp 2021) in which I further explore these themes.

The word ‘casual’ is often used, both in fan communities and within academia, as a common derogatory term to describe ‘bad’ fans, those who apparently somehow do not reach the status of fan. Similar to lurkers within the online realm (Van de Goor 2015; Bury 2005, 2018). In this case, it was their own definition. Ontologically, this is the only definition that counts. Granted, epistemologically and analytically we always can, and should try to unpack concepts, complicate them to discover further aspects and broader connections. These participants referred to themselves as relaxed, laid-back, mellow viewers for which the show was an entertaining pastime. They did not engage with the series outside the moment of reception other than maybe by liking a Facebook meme.

### **Casual viewers**

As introduced before, casual viewers characterized themselves as not that involved, did not invest time in the storyworld besides the moment of reception and saw the series as a pastime. When enquired about the activities they considered fannish they would mention remembering names of episodes, full names of characters, or scene dialogues by heart, re-watching episodes or looking for spoilers or plot hints online.

Because, you know, there are people who become fans and start "In this and that chapter this or that happened", or those who are, like, fans of the Simpsons and things like that, and I really don't remember episodes by heart, or scenes, or anything. I mean, I remember what I watched yesterday or something like that, but not more than that.

I never really expected anything because I'm kind of calm, I'm not like "a big fan" of ...when I'm watching on a daily basis, then yes, I'm active and engaged,

but afterwards, no ... it's not something that keeps me awake. I'm not a big fan of anything in that regard.

Interestingly, downloading or streaming the series as soon as it was available to them constituted common practice. This choice and socio-technical possibility were no longer seen as terrain reserved for die-hard fans who could just not wait to watch. Taking for granted an almost immediate exposure and contact to their chosen text –and the reward and satisfaction it implies– as “something audiences do” speaks to contemporary conditions of circulation, distribution and incorporation of media texts in everyday lives. Immediate access to content thanks to the ubiquity of customized, personalized, domesticated technologies immersed in our media habits and daily routines are essential conditions for us to enact and enjoy being “just” casual viewers.

### **Analytical fan**

Throughout the three-country sample, there is always a type of viewer who analyzes the characters not entirely emotionally but logically according to the narrative. They were able to “zoom out” and meta-analyze the series narrative in terms of its effect on them as audience members. This is not to say that casual viewers did not apply critical or analytical strategies during interviews but rather that they were simple less engaged with GoT’s storyworld, by their own accord, causing a more restricted interpretation of the intricacies of being a fan of the series. At the end of the day, both groups choose for themselves how to spend their time within and across popular culture.

Most “analytical fans” them were at the same time die-hard-fans of the diegetic universe of Game of Thrones, be it the series or the books. As I will explain later, for some the moment of reception is not enough and choose to delve deeper into the storyworld by reading the books or participating in online forums or following memes on Facebook.

I'm quite fanatic. For me, it's the series of all that I've seen. I kind of got hooked from the beginning It already showed strong, heavy scenes, they shock you and you say "ahhhhh, I watch one chapter after the other!", and for many series,

the first episode is strong and then you notice that they're stretching it, but no, not for me. My engagement always stayed the same throughout the seasons.

They are aware of their roles and know what they are looking for as audience members. They often interpreted scenes and characters' actions from an analytical perspective, by assessing what was good and coherent according to the presented storyline instead of from an emotional side. The motto being 'If it makes me feel something, it is a good character'. These fans, in contrast to most of "casual viewers", understand open questions about 'worst scenes' or 'worst characters' as those not completely developed or whose participation does not support or make the overarching story advance. E.g. 'Cersei is my favorite character' (instead of most hated, as mentioned by others), 'She did what she was supposed to'.

For me, unfortunately, the moment when Cersei takes the throne, and it's not because I agree with her, but because it's something that gives the series a lot of life [...] here in Argentina there are many who hate Cersei... for me, personally, she's one of my favorite characters because she and Bolton are both villains. Villains have to be strong, because if not ... there is no challenge, no one to beat. As I said before, I'm not on their side but ... with no challenge to overcome, everything loses strength.

Bolton is a character that I really liked. You hate him, you hate him, you despise him, you're not going to be on his side, but he gives the plot dynamism, and it gives ... what those characters give to others, it's precisely what was expected of them. It's perfect that they have already taken him out, because it was going to be too long, but that character is one of the ones who contributed the most to the plot, especially as a rival to the Starks and Jon Snow [...] characters who you're indifferent to, they don't contribute anything to you. A character that you hate, they're making you feel something, and that, for me is worth a lot, they're making me hate someone, or that I don't want someone to die, they are making me feel, In other words, I am not a spectator who simply accepts what happens and that's it. They make you more of a participant

They reflect on what 'works' and what doesn't and make connections beyond merely entertaining aspects. There was an understanding that the story needs to honor its characters. Instead of naming Bolton or King Joffrey as worst characters, they mention the last appearance of the dragon as being 'off' because of the animation, or the participation of the 'man in the tree', who helps Bran Stark, as not 'useful' or not enough capitalized for the story when apparently, he knows everything about past and future.

A key element to what first struck interviewees, "analytical fans" in particular, as innovative and engaging about GoT was that even main characters could get killed. 'Anyone can be killed any time, not like regular series with a hero', referring to Starks' deaths. Many viewers established a contrast between GoT and other popular series that were not able to successfully continue a convincing, engaging storyline as Lost, The Walking Dead, Breaking Bad and also Peaky Blinders. If the most engaging aspect to follow the series was unpredictability, then the 'resurrection' of main character Jon Snow was not well seen by some of these fans. In line with this, being in it for the 'realness' –crude, harsh, unpleasant when it has to be– of the experience implies that predictability, repetitions as well as a sense of "no aim" to the story and characters are negative elements to criticize.

### **The two axes of engagement within Game of Thrones' storyworld**

For many, the moment of reception was not enough, and they were looking to deepen the experience by reading online forums to engage with speculation, spoilers, and further interpretation of the scenes (García-Rapp 2021). They would re-read books and re-watch episodes and sometimes look to interact with others –being it discussing the series with colleagues at work or over WhatsApp with friends or engaging with strangers online– to communally decipher symbolism or hunt for clues (Figure 1).

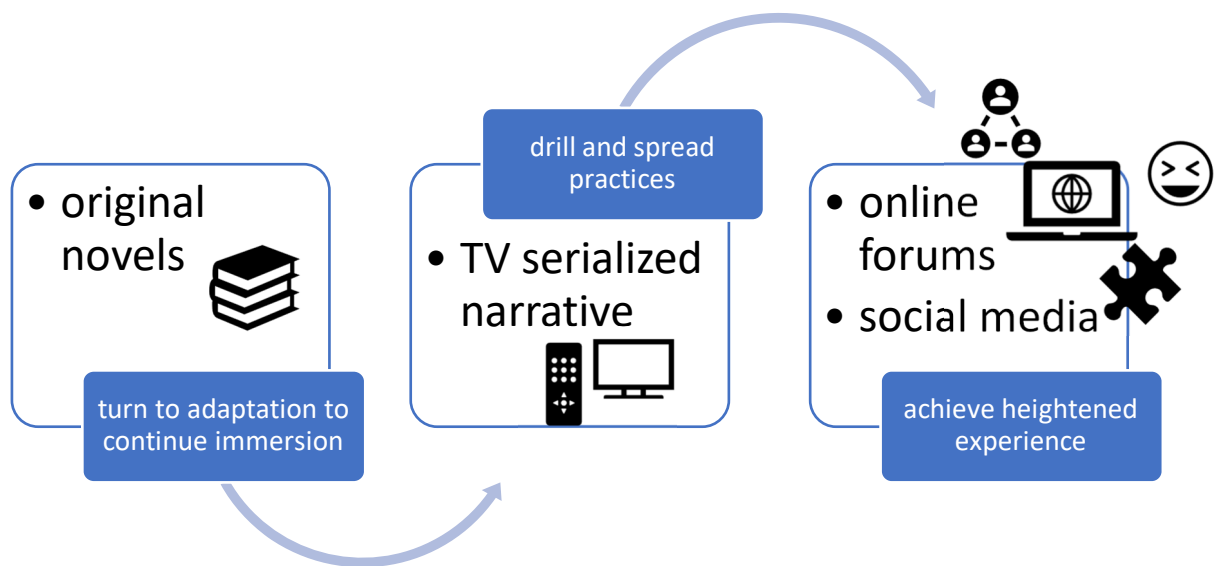


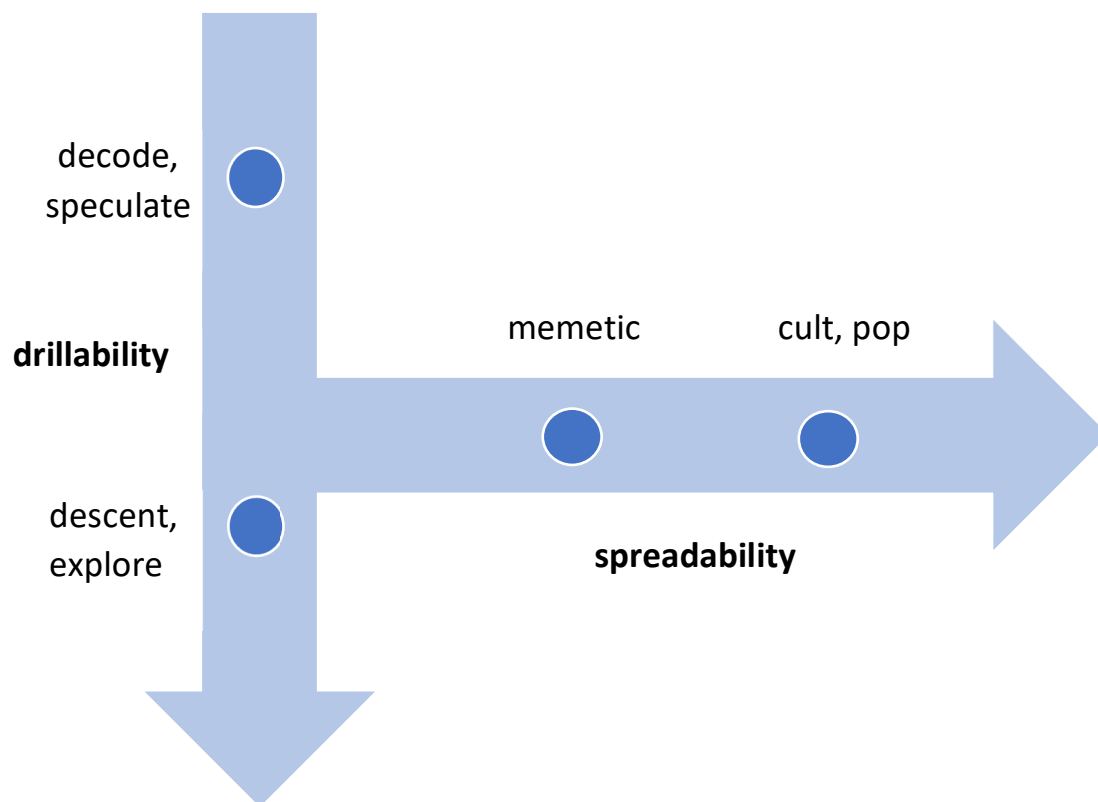
Figure 1. Continuum of immersion in GoT's storyworld

For some fans, the storyworld is too engaging to end the immersion with the reception. Several die-hard fans of the series (often “analytical fans”) looked to deepen the experience by interacting with others, searching for para-textual data to connect the narrative dots, explore intricacies, and predict outcomes. Some media texts “encourage a mode of forensic fandom that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling” (Mittel 2009, 1) beyond the inherent commitment and time investment that long form of episodic television required from viewers (Dearman 2016; Steiner 2015). The concepts of “forensic fandom” and “drillable text” were introduced by Mittel (2009, 2013) to define consumption patterns of complex serialized narratives. One of the examples of drillable text that the author mentioned was the series *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010) but it also fits GoT perfectly.

Related to “drillable” media texts is the concept of “spreadable media” (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013). Spreadable texts are popular because they spread easily travelling across platforms when audiences share, like, follow and comment around them. GoT came from a niche genre but achieved the stickiness and necessary spreadability to reach sustained mass appeal. Even “casual viewers” were not exempt of the high memetic character of the series and took part in its digital global reach often leaving behind digital material traces in the form of metrics (Baym 2013). GoT memes often include external cultural references to other series, or to

political spheres (García-Rapp 2021; Alhayek 2017). The inherent intertextuality of humorous memes includes GoT itself turning into a “cult” element, as increasingly being cited in other memes and cultural texts like series and movies.

What Mittell (2012) understands as legitimate but opposing vectors of engagement taking place in different types of texts, I see blended in GoT as an engaging, complex, and popular media text (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. The spreadable and drillable axes of engagement of GoT.*

Drawing from Hassler-Forest’s conceptualization of GoT as a double adaptation (2014), I argue its duality is also reflected in its marked drillability and simultaneous spreadability. HBO achieved an adaptation in the literary sense and the second adaptation was bringing a traditionally niche genre into the arc of “Quality TV” and mass popularity.<sup>1</sup> On the drillable axis there are the complex narrative together with the geeky genres of fantasy and medieval narratives. On the spreadable axis there are the mainstream appeal and memetic dimensions of a cult text. It is the geek and complex narrative of medieval fantasy turned into mainstream that is both drillable and spreadable. Thanks to this duality, it depends on members of the

audience themselves to choose the axis they engage with, offering a wider than usual universe to explore and experience. Now, how do the axes look like based on practices and experiences of interviewed fans?

Despite being a qualitative, non-statistical sample, which often risk skewing representative data points as average and median values, activities and preferences disclosed by audiences' members are here in consonance with reported wider national tendencies. Active social media users as percentage of total population in 2018 was 46% in Germany, 60% in Spain, and a whopping 76% in Argentina, superseding the US (Hootsuite, 2020). In Argentina as a whole, the relevance of Facebook is larger than in Spain and Germany, which was confirmed by participants' responses on their own online engagement with posts and memes around the series.

In terms of engagement, statistics show that the average Argentinian user likes and comments more Facebook posts than German and Spanish users (Hootsuite, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. Fitting these trends, interviewed German fans and almost all Spanish fans, apart from two exceptions, mainly discussed the series either in person or through WhatsApp with acquaintances and family members. A few Argentinian audience members, participated or had participated in the past in online forums and exchanged views with other fans on Facebook or in the case of a female fan, Twitter. These practices were also shared by French and Italian fans of the series, as explained by Bourdaa and Lozano (2015), and Spano (2016) in their respective studies. Only a minority reported engaging in public online discussions around the series, while they did follow posts and comments. As I found out for the case of German and Spanish fans, Italian GoT audiences (Spano 2016) also preferred to discuss the series over WhatsApp rather than online.

An example of experiences connecting to the spreadable character of GoT –that quickly rose to global popularity even among non-fans of the fantasy genre or medieval settings– is Argentinian Marcela's first discovery of the series and her binge-watching habits to heighten pleasurable moments of affinity with the narrative. When the show was on, during the streaming season, she usually checked out and like Facebook memes, but she underlined that she was not "a fan of anything" in the sense of regularly engaging with paratextual elements beyond watching the episodes.

When it's live, during the season, yes .... I kind of see things on Facebook, here and there ... I have shared a photo or something with the people who watch it, but I am not much of ... I am not a very "ultra-fan" of following everything there is ... I am calmer, I am not a very fan of ... it is not something that keeps me awake ... I am not a very fan of anything in that sense.

Argentinian fan Germán is an example of an analytical fan who enjoys discussing the series with his wife and friends while also delving into GoT's universe, including the books and reading other fans' theories online. Despite this engaged mode of consumption, he does not spend much time along the more public, spreadable axis of experience, meaning posting and closely following social media posts around the series.

I comment here and there with a couple of people on Facebook, or, I don't know, some lost website. When I have time, I check out some "9gag" memes and sometimes I share those on Facebook. But I don't search for memes much, usually they are things that friends share within Facebook. I am not one to follow so much those things.

Alejandra, Germán's wife, as well as Alexa, from Germany, told me that they seldom share memes, like posts or comment about the series as they want to avoid reading spoilers.

Like Marcela, and also from Argentina, Melisa is a viewer who enjoys the series when having dinner with her husband. He is in charge of looking for a stream and setting up Spanish subtitles, mainly for her benefit as he did not need any. He is "more of a fan" meaning he is more engaged while she just takes the series as an enjoyable pastime.

Because there are people who become fans and start "No, you missed it, you have no idea what happened in that episode", you know, those people who are big fans of the Simpsons and those things, and I really don't... I don't remember episodes by heart, or scenes, or anything. I mean, I remember what I saw yesterday or something like that, but no more than that.

Melisa refers to fans like Rodrigo, from Spain. He remembers dialogues and confidently references scenes and seasons as he used to regularly watch episodes several times over, at



least twice. First on his own in English as soon as they streamed globally and later the same week dubbed in Spanish, when it showed on Spanish cable TV, with his girlfriend. For him, Game of Thrones had a stronger meaning as it represented a greater gratification, to which he returned weekly or even more frequently. He is an example of fans inhabiting both axes of engagement, where affinity, entertainment and affect blend to embody a powerful pleasurable dynamic.

I watched the episodes subtitled in Spanish, as they streamed, then I watched them dubbed in Spanish. I didn't start watching the series right from the beginning, and yes [my interest], it has been definitely been in crescendo. I remember everything, many scenes. Last season, I used to read spoilers (...) I watched YouTube videos with theories, read many online forums, but not this year, this year I already said no, because I want to feel that surprise and that emotion and I don't want to read anything or know anything about spoilers or anything like it.

He recommended the series to his relatives, got them “hooked”, and now discusses and enjoys in a communal way with them, including his father, something he highlights as particular since he is from a different generation.

I “hooked” my partner, I hooked my brother-in-law, my sister-in-law is still to be hooked, my father started watching too, and also coworkers... My father, note that he is an older person already ... in his sixties, but ... he loved the series, he is super hooked, so for example when the trailer of the seventh season came out, I downloaded it directly to my phone and sent it to him via WhatsApp

Like Rodrigo, Magalí from Argentina shares with him a drillable mode of engagement that includes immersing into paratexts beyond the official books to include spoilers, hints and theories, interpretations of the plot both by acquaintances (in person or through WhatsApp), and by strangers (in online forums and social media) who share their intertextual pleasures around GoT's diegetic world.

I think that once I entered the official forum ... and read about the topic, or theories of who was Jon Snow, several years ago, I'd say three, four years, and that's where I found out there was also the theory that he was son of Lyanna and Rhaegar. And then the theory that Tyrion can also have dragon blood and be the son of the "Mad King" but those were always just assumptions.

I mainly share my opinions with friends, like, before, when I was younger, I was one of those people who got into forums and discussed and commented on Twitter or whatever, and now that doesn't really motivate me anymore. Now I talk in person with people who also watch it or with people who read the books ... or some Facebook comments "Ah ... no, I can't believe" "Ah, yes , I cried a lot ", " No, no, really bad, I want this to happen ". But I am no longer interested, for example, in commenting with people who ... I don't know and who don't ... won't think the same as me but ... I keep my opinions for ... for friends and acquaintances who also watch it.

To summarize, and as seen in the diversity of fan responses, not all fans are equally (visibly) active, discuss the series in public, engage with paratexts and immerse themselves "drilling" into the narrative but that should not mean they do not matter for our scholarship. Some members of the audience do not define themselves as fans, but it is still worth to consider their practices and voices. What is more, even those interviewed who self-ascribed as "fans" do not engage in the main activities analyzed in fan studies literature such as fan artworks, as Bourdaa and Lozano's survey to 175 Spanish and French fans of the series also confirmed (2015). Another example of the importance of cultural trends even within the same fandom is that, in this case, there was no fan engagement with platforms as Tumblr and Reddit, often relevant within Anglophone fan studies scholarship. All these ambiguities, heterogeneities and complexities speak to the need of rethinking roles related to the production and consumption of fan-created artifacts and their implications for our definitions.

## **Between the ontological essentialism of “the fan” and the messy world of cultural identifiers**

Following Chin and Morimoto’s finding (2015) that common fan subjectivities often triumph over cultural identity, this study also showed similarities across patterns of fan subjectivities rather than marked cultural differences based on national or linguistic contexts. I found varying degrees of analytic and emotional fannish engagement (Zubernis and Larsen 2012) leading to diverse fan subjectivities (Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2002) within their 'locality'.

As mentioned before, the fourth wall as a cinematic strategy is a physical distance brought forward by aesthetic and technical means that aims to maintain the suspension of disbelief allowing audiences to immerse themselves in the diegetic world. “Analytical fans” from the three countries were able to temporarily transpose this implicit quid pro quo between the audience and the text and move through the wall. They were able to alternate between being inside (to be immersed, experience) and outside (to reflect, theorize). During reception they allowed themselves to feel but then during interviews they consciously detached themselves from that situation to delve deeper into meanings, better and worse narrative choices, and their own preferences. They positioned themselves to be there, be a spectator, enjoy that role and then re-interpret not only the series but their own practices.

These fans’ analytical self-reflexivity and awareness of the intertextual, polysemic aspects of media texts but also of cultural identifiers as “fans”, is clearly beneficial and productive for interviews but it also connects them with a broader theme. Choosing not to participate in a communally enacted fandom but to experience one’s emotional attachment to a text in a more private setting (Redmond 2006; García-Rapp 2017) might render this inauthentic if we consider fandom as necessarily emerging within historically-rooted groups (Linden, Linden 2017). Yet, affinity and affect are lived in various ways, it may be within a fandom community, loosely formed groups or individually by drilling a text, discussing it with others, convincing others to watch, organizing viewing parties, travelling to shooting locations, or merely sharing, liking, commenting or posting social media content.

While here I seek to identify and interpret my interviewed participants’ readings, at the same time, I agree with and have always defended the idea that “being a fan” –as an inherently

open cultural identity– is and should remain a flexible, contingent, inclusive tag. Being a fan is just one aspect of our identities but most of us are fans of something (Sandvoss 2005; Jenson 1992). Particularly relevant for us in this context are media texts, but, as mentioned before, it could also be music, celebrities, sports teams. Even after acknowledging cultural hierarchies and legitimacy issues within fan communities themselves, engaging as a fan with an object of fandom or enacting a certain fan identity should not be something we need to “qualify for” according to externally defined milestones. In any case, at least not to be considered a fan by us scholars, if they self-define as such.

To consider usually hidden fans, I included so-called lurkers (Barker 2018; Bury 2005), and regular, laid-back viewers without including condescending, paternalistic remarks, or preconceptions about their critical abilities. They do not produce content, and some do not even consider themselves fans either because they are not “active” enough within offline and online contexts or they simply watch the show as a distraction and consider it just entertainment. On the other end of the spectrum –because there is always a continuum of engagement– there are die-hard members of the audience who regularly engage in fannish activities and invest more time beyond the reception moment reading online forums, sharing and interacting with social media content, convincing others to start watching or re-watching episodes.

Tensions within academic circles around defining the dominance of particular objects of study (or fans) happen, like the engagement with GoT, on two axes. One is the perception and space of fandom studies as a relevant and legitimate field within the humanities and social sciences and the other happens internally, within the field, and reveals our own regulations when measuring lurkers, laid-back fans, and people not enacting fandom within a community.

By reinforcing the canon of “proper practice” when prioritizing transformation and productivity in the form of text –the most examined aspect of fan culture as most visible and lasting– can prevent us from examining a diversity of fan practices (Click et al. 2017). Often, non-normative fans are seen as “fans in waiting” against active fans involved in canonized practices of the so-called participatory culture and academic circles find them lacking, not worthy of fully claiming the “real “ fan identity (Bury 2018; Barker 2018). Jenkins and Deuze argue (2008) that the line between media users, fans, or audiences is a fine one, and each

individual continually exhibits a variety of levels of engagement with a media text or fan object, as well as with other individuals. There is a multiplicity of purposes, needs, and contexts that frame viewers' roles, interpretive resources, and modes of reception. Let us not dismiss and diminish those who do not fit with our field's current dominant tendencies.

As Chin and Morimoto argue (2015), we should be wary not to let political orientations, including those ingrained in our scholarship, blur the cultural relevance of practices, texts and groups. The scholars argue for an open socio-cultural perspective of analysis instead of the established socio-political stance characteristic of most of the English-speaking work on fans, where the dominant view was "subversive or nothing". Nothing meaning here automatically "normative", "trivial" and not worthy of our time. If certain fannish practices and objects of fandom are more acceptable or valuable than others for our research, it is relevant to ask how much freedom we allow to be 'different' inside fan culture and how boundaries are policed (Van de Goor 2015).

When examining popular cultures, we often deal with antithetical, opposing spheres of interest and action as commercialism, cultural and aesthetic values, consumption, and creativity. Social worlds and human interaction are messy fields that often reveal themselves ambivalent and contradictory. We should embrace the complexity of it all.

At the end of the day, as I argued elsewhere (García-Rapp 2019), the study of audiences is the study of ourselves as inhabiting diverse roles and performing a myriad of daily sociocultural practices. Being a fan of the series, or a casual viewer, is just one aspect of audiences' identities. By listening to people engaging as users, viewers, lurkers and fans alike when they define themselves and their practices –by drawing from the emic to theorize on cultural subjectivities– we might successfully complicate and reformulate our own overarching readings and move towards a renewed awareness of the value systems scholars have in place when analyzing fans and objects of fandom.

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<sup>1</sup> I further explore elements of both the original text (novel) and the adapted text (TV series) on a related article (author, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Data from 2018 and 2019 consolidated by Hootsuite in their global report based on statistics provided by leading market research companies as Similarweb, GlobalWebIndex, Statista and Alexa.