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UNIVERSITAT AUTONOMA DE BARCELONA

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF *GOSSIP GIRL*, *GAME OF THRONES* AND *BREAKING
BAD* ON THE LEBANESE AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the psychological effects of American television series on the Lebanese audience. The research was split into two studies: the first study was a quantitative analysis of the theories of identification and social learning, applied on a Lebanese female audience who watched the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*. The second study was a qualitative analysis of the theory of desensitization applied on two Lebanese participants, each watching respectively the series *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*.

In the first study, a total of 115 Lebanese female participants were split into two groups: 75 participants who had watched only *Gossip Girl* and had an average age of 18 years old, and 40 participants who had watched both *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* and had an average age of 25 years old. The participants completed a survey based on the Wishful Identification Scale, the Parasocial Interaction Scale, the Attitude Similarity Scale, the Character's Attributes Scale, the Connectedness Scale, and the Social Group Setting Scale. A T-Test and a Chi-Square analysis revealed that the Lebanese female audience of Group 1, with the average age of 18 years old, found similarities with the characters of the series *Gossip Girl*, which affected their identification with the characters, and their imitation of the characters' attitudes. Further, the analysis revealed that the Lebanese female audience of Group 2, with the average age of 25 years old, watched and discussed the series *Game of Thrones* in a social group setting, which allowed the participants to build parasocial interactions with the characters and identify with them.

In the second study, two participants were chosen based on the fact that one had never watched *Breaking Bad* and the second had never watched *Game of Thrones*. The participants were interviewed pre-series, and then interviewed throughout the exposure to several episodes. The qualitative in-depth analysis of the interview answers led to the results that after repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer, even if already tolerant to on-screen violence, experienced desensitization signs to the violence, drugs, incest and rape portrayed on-screen in these two series.

Findings of these results are discussed, along with the limitations, the contribution to knowledge it offers, as well as possible future research directions.

Keywords: Television Series, Identification, Social Learning, Desensitization.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Television is one of the most widespread communication media. By 2018, globally, more than 1.4 billion households reported owning at least one TV set, representing 79 percent of total households; virtually all households in the developed world now own a TV set while 69 percent own at least one set in developing countries (TV Technology, 2018). Today, television series are dominating the entertainment world. In a fast-paced generation, TV synergizes an at-home content delivery for a flat fee at the click of a button, as well as serialized, longer storylines than movies at the theatre. The viewer is then sitting in the comfort of his own couch, following a specific character for hours on end through numerous seasons. In the second quarter of 2017, consumers in the United States spent an average of 24.4 hours per week watching television (Statista, 2017). This impressive number calls for questioning the effects that this high level of exposure might have on the viewer. In fact, numerous studies have been conducted on the different psychological effects that television series have on the audience.

A. Objectives

In the years 2007, 2008, and 2011, three of the most prominent American television series aired in the United States of America: *Gossip Girl*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Game of Thrones*. Given the fact that all three shows are recognized worldwide today and have had an influence on the American culture in various ways, they were chosen for this research in order to analyze their psychological effects on a Lebanese audience. Researchers like Romeo (2009), Sayanajoki (2013), as well as various prominent American newspapers such as the New York Times have analyzed the identification of the audience with the characters of *Gossip Girl*, a fashion-forward television show, and the consequent imitation of the character's fashion styles.

Other researches have been conducted on *Game of Thrones* and studied how its audience builds parasocial interactions with the fictional characters, living vicariously through them, and sharing these experiences in social group settings of fellow viewers of the show (Latitude, 2014). *Game of Thrones* portrays a lot of violence, just as *Breaking Bad*, and according to researchers like Ceballo (2001), repeated exposure to violence could lead to desensitization.

All three shows have had an impact on American teenagers and young adults. This research attempts to add to the scholarly literature on the subject by examining the Lebanese viewership of *Gossip Girl*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Breaking Bad* and studying the level of identification, social learning and desensitization that those three series might have on the Lebanese audience.

B. Hypothesis

In order to analyze those psychological effects on the Lebanese audience watching *Gossip Girl*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Breaking Bad*, three hypothesis were developed. The first two hypothesis will be accepted or rejected through the analysis of data collected from Lebanese female participants who have watched either *Gossip Girl* (Group 1), or *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* (Group 2). The third hypothesis will be accepted or rejected through the analysis of in-depth interviews done with two participants who have watched respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*.

H1: The series in which characters have more similarities with the Lebanese female audience will have a larger effect on their identification and imitation of the characters.

H2: The series watched and discussed in a social group setting will build parasocial interactions with the characters, and affect identification and imitation of the characters.

H3: After repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer will experience desensitization to the violence portrayed on-screen.

C. Structure of the Thesis

First, a comprehensive look at the scholarly work associated with this study will be addressed. A well-structured literature review will go over the miscellaneous effects of television, then discuss previous scholarly findings on the identification with media characters on television shows. It will continue with an overview of social learning in television, then move on to violence in the media, towards previous research done on the desensitization to media violence. The literature review will finally cover studies done on *Gossip Girl*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Breaking Bad*.

Second, a framework on the theories will define social learning, identification and desensitization. Social learning and identification will be defined through a psychological approach, covering the constructs of wishful identification and similarities, connectedness, vicarious experience, imitation, parasocial interaction, and social group setting. Desensitization will be defined through the nature of the perpetrator, the justification of violence, the aversion to enjoyment of the violence, the decrease of emotional responsivity, and the aggressive thoughts.

Third, having established an academic foundation for this thesis, a methodology will be outlined. Since the research is split into both a quantitative and a qualitative study, an outline of the first two hypothesis that will be analyzed quantitatively will be presented, along with established support for the choice of survey and SPSS analysis as the most appropriate choice for this type of study. The third hypothesis that will be analyzed qualitatively will be presented, also along established support for choosing the interview process as appropriate for this hypothesis. Justification for the demographics of the interviewees will also be provided.

What follows is a chapter highlighting the results of both quantitative and qualitative studies. The quantitative results are organized into three categories:

Comparing Group 2 within itself, watching *Gossip Girl* and watching *Game of Thrones*,

Comparing Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* with Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones*,

Comparing Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* with Group 2 watching *Gossip Girl*.

The qualitative results will be categorized under the following six themes: nature of the perpetrator, justification of violence, level of exposure to violence, from aversion to enjoyment, decrease of emotional responsivity, and aggressive thoughts.

The last chapter of this thesis will marry the literature review with the interview results of this study in a discussion, accepting or rejecting the three hypothesis set for this research.

Conclusions will be drawn as reflection of the hypothesis initially posed, and limitations of the research as well as future directions will be mentioned.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to be able to discuss the psychological effects of three prominent American television series on the Lebanese audience, it is essential to review previous scholarly articles that have dealt with the subject. For lack of literature review in the Middle East, this paper will bring an original scholar literature to the already existing one by adding the effects of American television series on Lebanese viewers. Therefore, the following literature review will be organized as follows; first, it will discuss the miscellaneous effects of television on the audience. Then it will review scholar articles about the identification with television characters and social learning from television and shows. Afterwards, it will combine research done on the violence in the media, followed by the desensitization to media violence in many of its forms. Finally, it will put together previous research done around the three series that will be used in this present research: *Gossip Girl*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Breaking Bad*.

A. Miscellaneous Effects of Television

To understand the influence of media on the audience, it is necessary to review literature revolving around general television viewing habits. In fact, studies done in 1996 by Nielsen Media Research reports that adults over the age of 18 watch an average of 4 hours per day of television in the USA. In the UK, 95% of children watch it and in the Netherlands, 99% (Van der Voort et.al., 1998). With the advances of technology, and the myriad of new channels, shows and genres, those statistics have increased to 4 hours and 50 minutes per day in the USA in 2015 (Statista.com). A study conducted by Anderson et.al. (2017) entitled *Screen Violence and Youth Behavior* showed that adolescents spend around 9 hours per day consuming entertainment media that ranges from television, to video games, to the internet. Therefore, Americans are considered to be heavy viewers of television programs

(Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). According to Putnam (1995), introducing televisions to homes have created a shallower society, in which individuals have replaced leisure time social interactions with television time, from which they now learn the societal norms and behaviors. By being exposed to the medium repeatedly, the audience starts believing the fantasy they see on-screen, hoping it will turn into their reality, therefore highlighting the debate on the lasting effect of the televised series on the audience.

Another central question that is necessary to be asked when discussing the various effects of television on the audience: what do people learn from television? It is very important to note that the way people view television is bound to affect what they learn and take from it. In fact, Viewers who pay attention to the program they are watching would be doing an active, effortful processing of the medium's information, whereas viewers who use television as a "background noise" while engaging in other tasks are going through passive processing—both are using the medium for entertainment. It is proven that active processing results in better learning outcome from what is portrayed on the television (Moeller, 1996). Learning from television may affect the viewer's behavior, and cognitive skills (Moeller, 1996). Television can also affect the viewer's cognitive skills by enhancing spatial perspective taking, especially for children (Salomon, 1979), task persistence (Friedrich & Stein, 1973) and activating already existing mental skills (Brown, 1986).

It is very important to note that adolescence is one of the most significant periods of a life span when it comes to media psychology (Giles, 2003). Adolescence is a period during which children look for model figures beyond their circle of family and friends. In today's world, media provides adolescence with figures that play an increasingly important role in their life (Giles, 2003). According to Erikson (1968), the relationship that the teenager builds with the media character is a secondary attachment that is a transition between their primary attachment to their parents and their adult attachments. This attachment is related

to the process of role modeling, especially present when the mediated role model has attainable qualities (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). However, this becomes concerning when adolescents start focusing their attention on the glamor and the inaccessible lifestyle of the star, which turns the role model from good to bad (Giles, 2003).

Adolescent are influenced by parents, siblings, friends, and media when it comes to choosing the way they dress (Wilson & MacGillivray, 1998). The study entitled *Self-Perceived Influences of Family, Friends, and Media on Adolescent Clothing Choice* by Wilson and MacGillivray (1998) conducted a survey of 478 adolescent between the 6th and the 12th grade in two Midwestern school districts in the United States. The purpose of the study was to determine what influenced adolescents' clothing choice most. Clothing is one of the most noticeable aspects of adolescent culture and is an important mean by which individual adolescents express their identities (Dienstfrey, 1982) and gain social approval (Creekmore, 1980). Media's current influence has changed adolescents' experience and provided them with a variety of images and products that are not available within family and friends' influences. The Chi-Square analysis of the survey revealed that media influence increased as the grade level increased; therefore the older the adolescents get, the more they become influenced by media in their clothing choice. Female adolescents are confronted by a wide range of appearances, and this leads them to examine what media has to offer carefully when making clothing choices, especially when it comes to television, a medium that provides a substantial influence on adolescent clothing choice (Wilson & MacGillivray, 1998).

Nowadays, looking up to the digital world is more common than having parents or relatives as role models. In fact, the average adolescent in the United States spends more than forty hours a week using a media outlet, which is way more than they spend with their families; teenagers have placed celebrities on pedestals, wanting to look like them when it comes to

fashion, and therefore imitating them (Brown & Lu, 2007). Lately, celebrities are everywhere; from movies and television, to magazines, posters, advertisements, and lately, social media. Celebrities influence fashion choices and are considered trendsetters because adolescents look up to them as being the ideal of beauty and fashion (Roytman, 2014). Rihanna and Miley Cyrus, despite their over-the-edge look, are trendsetters; in fact, Rihanna's side-shaved hair drove a big amount of young girls to follow the hairstyle trend (La Ferla, 2008). Social media and television are the main reason behind the influence of celebrities fashion on teenagers; shows such as Fashion Police (E! Entertainment, 2015) feature every event attended by these celebrities and judge their style as being "acceptable" or "unacceptable", therefore setting this celebrity's style as a trend to follow. Television allows the audience to have visual access to fashion and brands and builds within them a sort of brand preferences, influencing their shopping behaviors (Peters, 1989). As stated before, the audience changes their attitudes and appearance to look more similar to the idolized celebrity. Wok and Mohd (2010) conducted a survey on 639 urban Malaysian women to determine the influence of media (TV and magazines) on these women's fashion and dressing. The analysis of the survey through SPSS revealed that media did influence fashion and dressing on adolescents and adult women.

Roberts (2004) found that it is not the amount of television exposure that influences girls and young women's images of their style, but rather it is the programs they are exposed to, such as *Gossip Girl*, *Sex and the City*, and other fashion-focused programs.

In a study entitled *Adolescent Students as Media Fictional Characters*, researchers Falcon and Diaz-Aguado (2014) discuss different conditions that increase the risk of imitating a television character which are features of the character's attributes that the viewer may want to share such as popularity, beauty or rebellion or even violence justified and showed as legitimate. Despite new media, adolescents seem to be mainly influenced by television

characters to build their identities (Loirq, 2008). One notorious example taken by the researchers and discussed is the movie *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The analysis revolves around how villain characters of the movie do not want the young heroes to gain knowledge, whereas the heroes' friends and family are educational figures. This narration provides a positive appraisal of the role of educators and the importance of learning. These movie narrations may inspire the young audience to emulate the lives they have seen on-screen even if reality is distorted (Harry Potter taking place in a magical world). Therefore, they will identify with the characters' beliefs and separate the magical unreal parts (Falcon, Diaz-Aguado, 2014).

Other researchers such as Fei Wang, Shengdong Ln and Xue Ke (2015) decided to analyze the effects of television series that revolve around intrigue. In their paper entitled *Just Entertainment: Effects of TV Series about Intrigue on Young Adults*, the researchers state that there are two opposite views on television series: one that considers them dark media that will eventually destroy viewers' values, and another one that says entertainment is just entertainment and does not intend to educate. Exposure to specific content can affect viewers in different ways. Studies have been done on violent media and its perception bias, desensitization, imitation and lessened empathy effects on the viewers, therefore researchers attempted to study the effects of intrigue series, where characters cheat, betray each other and struggle for power, hypothesizing that being exposed to such behavior will lead the viewer to become desensitized to morals and more incline to dishonest behavior. Through an experimental group, the researchers got to the results that this type of series did not desensitize viewers or prone them to engage in dishonest behavior, arguing that a number of interfering variables did not receive adequate attention (Wang et.al, 2015).

The entertainment experience indeed influences viewers to model the characters, from shallow imitation of the way they dress, to more behavioral imitation of their attitudes, and

sometimes aggressiveness. There are also gratifications that the viewers experience while watching television series such as thrill, empathic sadness, emotional engagement and vicarious release of emotions.

In order to study the role of emotions in entertainment gratification, Anne Bartsch (2012) in her research entitled *Emotional Gratification in Entertainment Experience. Why Viewers of Movies and Television Series Find it rewarding to Experience Emotions* conducted four studies to assess different types of gratifications that could be associated with the experience of emotions in movie and television audience. Qualitative interviews revealed rewarding feelings from watching movies and television series: fun, thrill and empathic sadness, as well as feelings that reflect the role of media on the audience's cognitive needs: emotional engagement with a character and vicarious release of emotions. The genre of the movie or series watched showed that light movies were associated to fun, action movies were associated with thrill and serious or dramatic movies were associated with empathic sadness. Fun, thrill and character engagement all predicted the audience's statement "I found the movie entertaining. As for vicarious release of emotions, it predicted the audience's statement "the movie left me with a lasting impression." It is worthy to note that character engagement is in relation with parasocial relationship built by the viewer with the on-screen character (Rubin & Perse, 1987). As for vicarious release of emotions, which has been linked so many times to anger release during exposure to media violence, is actually related to weak and vulnerable emotions (sadness, fear...) that are feelings avoided by the viewer in their everyday life.

In the research entitled *Viewer Aggression and Homophily, Identification and Parasocial Relationships with Television Characters* by Keren Eyal and Alan M. Rubin (2003), 219 undergraduates at a large Midwestern university of average 20 years of age were asked to complete surveys to assess their relationships with aggressive television characters. It was

noted that aggressive attitudes predicted identification with aggressive characters on-screen; in fact, viewers who watched the aggressive character more often were more predisposed towards aggression and towards identification with these specific characters. Therefore, the more there is identification to a character, the more there is a perceived homophily, and parasocial interaction happens in parallel with identification. While homophily and parasocial interactions involve the viewer as an external observer, identification allows the viewer's actions and reactions as the character himself (Cohen, 2001).

B. Identification with Media Characters on Television Shows

Researchers like Murray (1999) have examined the identification of viewers with television characters, in an attempt to understand what viewers take from these characters, and how do they use this identification in their everyday lives. In their study called *Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters: the Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes*, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) examined perceptions and responses of young adults towards their favorite TV characters. The study was conducted on 208 participants in a university in the United States, 130 of which were female whereas 78 were men, all of them ranging between the ages of 18 and 28 years old. The television shows were not limited by the researchers therefore there were choices up to 60 and 70 different favorite characters chosen by the participants. Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) perceived "wishful identification" as the desire to become like the successful and admired character. Wishful identification is also influenced by the manner in which characters are portrayed (Bandura, 1986). Research has shown that viewers evaluate media character in much the same way they evaluate real people in their social networks. Many studies involving children have examined the traits and behaviors of media characters that influence wishful identification. In a series of studies in the 1970s, Reeves and his colleagues examined how

well several character attributes predicted children's desire to be like or act like specific television characters. Hoffner (1996) examined the extent to which several character attributes, such as intelligence, success, attractiveness, humor predicted children's wishful identification with favorite characters. Hoffner (1996) also used similarity to characters as a trait to promote this desire to be like them, feel similar to them especially when they are from the same age, gender and race. Same-gender characteristics allow higher levels of identification. In fact, Hoffner and Buchanan's (2005) survey results showed a high level of wishful identification with characters of the same gender; viewers had been following their favorite characters for three years on average which allowed them to incorporate every physical and personal detail about them and therefore share similarities with them. Women's wishful identification was mainly with the attractiveness of the female characters after whom they modeled their own appearances; the character in the television show is usually very well dressed and has a perfect out-of-this-world appearance; aspects that make viewers go through the identification process. Moreover, viewers strive to be exactly like the successful character of the series (Murray, 1999). As for the attractiveness, this is a trait most girls are interested in when it comes to their favorite character. Characters that the viewers choose as role models tend to be role models within the series as well (Murray, 1999).

Based on the wishful identification scale, the attitude similarity scale and the character's attributes scale developed in this research by Hoffner (2005), the study showed that respondents were more likely to identify with characters that they felt more similar to themselves. Therefore, respondents reported higher level of wishful identification with characters who shared their own attitudes, and who were of the same gender. It is worth noting that women identified with female characters whom they perceived as successful, smart, attractive, respected and popular.

In her book *Reception And Cultural Identity: Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity, And My So-Called Life*, Murray (1999) conducted an online survey about the show *My So-Called Wife* and results showed that teenage girls attempted to imitate the main actress mostly by dressing like her and having the same hairstyle. In fact, according to her findings, girl fans of the show found meaning in the television series via the process of “participatory spectatorship, identification, the development of a relationship to an ideal self, and girl-culture activism” (Murray, 1999).

Reeves and Nass (1996) found a relation with wishful identification for girls who wanted to be as attractive as the characters who are way better looking than any normal individual (thin, tall...). Reeves and Nass (1996) also stressed the fact that it is important that the favorite character of the viewer is admired by the other characters, and influences them, pushing the viewer even more to look up to this character as a role model he/she wants to emulate.

In the quantitative study of connectedness undertaken by Russell, Norman and Heckler (2004), an unspecified number of undergraduate students from both genders completed a questionnaire on the shows *Seinfeld* (31.4% of the participants watched it), *Friends* (16.6% of the participants watched it), *Party of Five* (13.1% of the participants watched it), and *X-files* (6.3% of the participants watched it). Six factors were the scales of the study, and described the relationship developed by the viewer with the character, the factors being escape, fashion, imitation, modeling, aspiration, and paraphernalia. What is of interest are the results shown regarding fashion, imitation and modeling. Through a Chi-square analysis, the researchers were able to confirm that the participants were influenced by the character’s appearances in terms of fashion, that the individuals imitated not only the styles of the characters but also their words and even voices, and that they were affected by the

characters in their personal lives, which drove them to model the fictional character (Russell, Norman, & Heckler, 2004).

In a research entitled *Audience Interpersonal Identification with the Television Series Friends*, Renee Ruth Peckham (2006) discusses the identification of the audience with the show *Friends* and its characters. Psychologically, what is viewed on television affects the consciousness of the viewer (Peckham, 2006) and images viewed on television are role models to the viewer for making choices (Cote, 2000), which leads to the conclusion that there is a cause-effect relationship between viewing television and real-life behavior (Strasburger & Donnersteing, 1999). Based on the identification theory, Peckham (2006) conducted a qualitative research method by interviewing female participants between the ages of 23 and 30 years old, because they were the predominant watchers of the series. The results generated two forms of identification of viewers with *Friends*' series characters: 1) a desire to be like these characters, 2) similarities between the audience member and the character he/she identified with.

Focus groups conducted at a south-western university by Russell, Norman, and Heckler (2004) generated findings on fans who watch the television show *Friends*. They reported being influenced by Rachel Green's appearance; imitating her hairstyle, which became known as "The Rachel", term used up till today on Fashion Police (E! entertainment, 2015) to describe the haircut. In another study conducted by Russell and Puto (1999), results of the qualitative analysis of internet forums showed that one of *Friends* show fan wrote to Jennifer Aniston (the actress who performs the character of Rachel Green on the show) telling her that she imitates her hair, clothing style, and character portrayed on the show. Connected viewers who identify with their favorite show character rely on this show for the definition of their personal identity, through modeling behaviors or styles of the characters (Russell & Puto, 1999). Identification with TV shows' characters allows for a

certain degree of socialization between the people who watch the show. In fact, the focus groups conducted by Russel and Puto (1999) showed that some of the viewers of *90210* show were motivated to start watching in order to be able to discuss it with their friends who are already familiar with it. Even people who did not know each other felt connected during the focus groups, while talking about the same television show they identified with. Viewers also reported the imitation of certain aspects of the television show, from a character's lifestyle to a character's philosophy on life. This influence of characters leading viewers to imitate or model them is also relevant to marketers.

In a study entitled *Parasocial Interaction with Liked, Neutral and Disliked Characters on Popular TV series* by Qing Tian and Cynthia Hoffner (2010), three versions of an online questionnaire were given to 174 respondents between the ages of 18 and 64, asking participants to identify their favorite and least favorite characters, and the character towards whom they felt neutral; the following questions dealt with those characters. The questionnaire measured perceived similarity, identification, parasocial interaction, affinity and influence. *Lost* was the series chosen because it had more than 10 characters which were regularly appearing in the series.

As seen previously, much research has been done on television series effect on the audience, and it was shown that viewers form affective bonds with fictional characters. A "parasocial interaction" is an apparent face-to-face contact with a media character. As the audience becomes involved, they start interacting with the media character as if having a personal relationship with them, therefore involving emotions and behavior (Giles, 2003). While parasocial interaction involves responding to a media character as a friend, identification according to Cohen (2001) involves momentary psychological merge of the viewer with the character. Having said that, identification could be the contributor to the development of parasocial relationship; the audience is willing to step into the character's

shoes which will develop a bond that goes beyond simply viewing the mediated situation (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (2001), the more the viewer perceives similarities with the fictional character, the more he will adopt this character's behavior and want to be like him. In this particular study, not only are the favorite characters taken into the research, but also the disliked characters. That relationship with the disliked character is defined as "non-voluntary"; the viewer is detached and does not care what happens to this character (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). It was showed that perceived similarity with the favorite character of the TV series *Lost* played an important role in both the identification with this character, and the development of a parasocial bond with him –clearly results are taken during the viewing, as it is established that once the viewing experience comes to an end, the viewer is aware that he is a distinct entity from the character. As for perceived similarity, it was related to the fact that the audience wanted to emulate the character with whom they formed a parasocial relationship. As for the "non-voluntary" relationship of the viewer with disliked characters, it showed that the viewer expressed less identification, perceived similarities and parasocial interaction with the disliked character.

Identification has been linked to empathy in many ways, one of them being that empathy along with affective orientation are predictors of identification with television characters. In a research done by Rebecca Chory-Assad and Vincent Cicchirillo (2005) and entitled *Empathy and Affective Orientation as Predictors of Identification with TV Characters*, the researchers defined different types of identification as well as affective orientation and empathy. Cognitive-emotional identification is defined as the audience taking in the mediated experience as if it was happening to them, sharing the character's feelings and responses, similarity identification is defined as the viewer getting more involved with a character in whom they recognize similarities to them (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975), and group

identification is defined as viewers becoming involved with certain TV characters because they see in them traits of their own friends and family. Empathy tends to be necessary in cognitive-emotional identification, as viewers cannot identify without feeling with the character. Affective orientation as defined by Booth Butterfield in 1998 is the awareness of the viewer's emotional state, and the use of that to guide their social interaction (or in this case, their parasocial interaction). In Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo's study (2005), 211 participants were asked to name their favorite character from sitcoms, drama and non-fiction, and indicate their frequency of exposure to the character as well as their level of identification. Results showed that viewers' affective orientation led to cognitive-emotional identification; meaning their emotional state guided their parasocial interaction and created identification with their favorite character. It was also proven that similarity with a character also predicted the viewer's identification with this character; the more similarities, the more identification.

C. Social Learning and Television

Learning from television may affect the viewer's behavior, and cognitive skills (Moeller, 1996). In fact, through imitation, the mechanism proposed by social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), autonomic arousal that raises heart rate and blood pressure (Zillman 1982), and disinhibition that leads the viewer to let go of socially inhibited behavior after repeated exposure to it on the media (Berkowitz, 1974), the viewer's behavior is bound to change according to the media he is exposed to.

In the article entitled *Television and interpersonal influences on adolescent consumer learning* by Gilbert Churchill Jr. and George Moschis (1979), it was stated that to understand human behavior, the researcher must specify the social origin of this behavior, as well as the processes by which the behavior is learned and maintained. Consumer

socialization is the process by which young people acquire consumer-related cognitions and behavior; one main issue is the effect of television on the development of young people's consumer behavior, values and attitudes. The processes by which the learner acquires values and behaviors from the socialization agents (such as the television) are divided into three categories:

1. Modeling: which is imitation through a conscious attempt to emulate the socialization agent (such as the character on television)
2. Reinforcement: which involves reward or punishment
3. Social interaction: which is a combination of modeling and reinforcement

Several behavioral scientists have speculated that television affects the youth's aspiration to the material blessings such as clothes of certain television characters.

The study results are somewhat similar to the findings regarding television influences on aggressive behavior, discussed below. In both cases, the prowess of television appears to depend on the presence or lack of intervention by non-vicarious agents; such as parents.

Bandura's many works revolved around the Social Learning theory. For example, learning aggressive behavior happens vicariously through the observation of a model (family or peer) or a symbolic model (media character). The character's influence on the viewer has implications and cognitive functions ranging from vicarious participation to identity loss (Bandura, 2011). It is worthy to note that the social learning theory takes into consideration many factors that moderate the relationship between viewing on-screen violence and imitating these cues. Some of these factors include the characteristics of both the viewer and the on-screen character, the attractiveness of the character and the gender. Social learning theory takes into account homophily, identification and parasocial relationships. Homophily is the degree to which people interact with others who have the same beliefs;

this is important when building a parasocial relationship with an on-screen character since degrees of similarities affect the choice of the preferred character (Bandura, 1994). During identification, a viewer vicariously participates to the character's experience while viewing, which increases his desire to become or behave like the character (Hoffner, 1996).

The social learning theory of Bandura has been used in an attempt to understand the relationship between the exposure to media violence and the consequent aggressive behavior. The immediate effects of watching violent media are derived from social learning and cognitive theories. Imitation is one of the short-term effects studied by Bandura in the 1960s; a viewer is likely to imitate a character he likes or finds attractive. Also according to social learning theory, Huesmann (1986) believes that children who watch a great deal of media violence can develop aggressive behavior that was previously learned by viewing mediated models. This is increased when the child identifies with the character on-screen, and who believes that television is an accurate portrayal of social reality (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998).

According to Albert Bandura at the APA's 2004 Annual Convention in Honolulu, some long-running TV and radio shows that are founded on social psychology can help viewers make positive changes in their lives. The researcher believes that the realistic characters of the serial dramas airing in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and portraying strategies employed in the characters' everyday lives that helps them move towards a better future, are allowing viewers to make changes to their own lives. According to Bandura, the guidelines that spark the viewers' behavior were the contrasting of good versus bad role models in the series, the vicarious motivators towards a positive lifestyle compared to a harmful one, and emotional involvement in the program that would sustain the viewer's attention (Dittman, 2004). In an APA article in 2002 entitled *The Theory heard around the world*, Deborah Smith states that Albert Bandura's social learning theory is the foundation

of television and radio shows that have changed the lives of millions. In fact, in Tanzania in 1993, a radio drama called “let’s go with the times” had an underlying purpose about how to prevent HIV based on the theories of Albert Bandura. Two years later, scientific studies proved the increase of safe sex, as well as women’s status and family planning in Tanzania. In fact, the social learning theory states that people learn from role models whose behavior are emulated; therefore such television and radio dramas aiming at preventing unwanted pregnancies, reducing HIV and promoting literacy base their plots on Bandura’s theories. These shows are called “entertainment-education”. Their aim is to promote solutions to the world’s most urgent problems by featuring characters working on improving their lives, therefore connecting viewers with real-life events. These dramas capitalize on psychologists’ knowledge of the influences of television on its audiences.

One of the successful uses of Bandura’s social learning in television series was done by the Mexican television executive Miguel Sabido in 1975. He created a soap opera to entertain and to indirectly promote adult literacy. The show drew large audiences and attracted enrollments in adult literacy programs in Mexico. According to Albert Bandura himself, who was contacted by Sabido, this is a very creative implementation of theory into practice. Three important strategies should be adopted by show television executives and writers when creating programs that model positive change:

1. Extensive formative research; which is talking to the country’s government officials in order to determine the social behaviors that should be modeled.
2. Crafted characters; which fall under three categories: the positive role models, the negative role models, and the transitional models that start out negatively but turn into positive role models in the end.
3. Real-world connections: the lesson learned from each episode should be summarized in an epilogue.

Another example of the success of entertainment-education shows is the “happiness lies in small things” broadcasted in an Indian village, that persuaded its people to stop the practice of dowry and child marriages. The enrollment of girls in elementary and junior high schools had risen from 10% to 38% according to the PCI (Populations Communications International).

D. Violence in the Media

Many researchers have studied violence portrayed in the media, and its effects and consequences. Violence appears in the news, in movies, in television series, in video games, and also in music lyrics and/or music videos. It has been agreed upon in a lot of scholar literature reviews that media violence increases the probability of both short-term and long-term aggressive and violent behavior (Anderson et.al, 2003). It is also clear that media violence alone cannot be the sole cause of aggressive and antisocial behavior, and it is not every act of media violence that causes consequences (Smith &Donnerstein, 1998). In fact, most researchers such as Anderson, Brockmyer, and Cantor, state that media violence is definitely not the only or even the primary risk factor leading to anti-social behavior; it is one of the risk factors. Researcher Rowell Huesmann (2007) in his study entitled *The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research* suggests that aggressive or violent behavior do not result from one single cause (said cause being the media); they are due to multiple factors that, put together, contribute to such behavior.

The portrayal of violence on television was analyzed by the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) who reported a full 57% of television containing violence in 1998, from which 96% of violent programs use aggression as a narrative that is there solely for entertainment. The NTVS research also suggests that most violence on television is sanitized and glamorized; there is very little blood and gore portrayed, leading to think that

violence is not that “violent” (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). This “glamorization” of media is also apparent in the portrayal of the characters and their behavior, making their violence acceptable – for example: Bonnie and Clyde are extremely attractive characters (Giles, 2003). Statistics from a study entitled *The Influence of Media Violence on Youth* showed that 44% of violent interactions involve attractive perpetrators with whom the viewer can identify, which is also a glamorizing factor of media violence (Anderson, 2003).

There is a significant correlation between viewing television violence and aggressive behavior. The terms “aggression” and “violence” must be separately clarified: aggression is any action that intends to harm another person (physically or emotionally), whereas violence is an extreme form of aggression that physically harms another person. Therefore, not all aggressive behaviors are violent, but all violence is aggressive (Anderson et.al, 2017). Media “violence” mainly creates “aggressive thinking” and “aggressive emotions” which are attitudes and not physical actions (Anderson, 2003).

Studies by the NIMH have also revealed that exposure to media violence increases the viewer’s fear in real life, exaggerating his view of the violence surrounding him in the real world.

According to Jo and Berkowitz (1994), another main short-term effect of media violence is the priming effect; which is the activation of violent thoughts of the viewer related to the violence and aggression he has just seen on-screen. Watching media violence leads to priming effects; the basis of imitating a violent character is the fact that his actions stimulate thoughts and ideas about the similar aggressive behavior. These violent scenes can be reactivated if a proper cue is provided to the viewer (Giles, 2003). Many studies have focused on how media violence primes aggressive thinking and emotions. A number of laboratory experiments as well as survey analysis have come to the conclusion that youth

who watch violent scenes subsequently display more short-term aggressive thoughts and emotions (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001). In fact, in the research entitled *The Influence of Media Violence on Youth*, researchers randomly assigned groups of youth, one to watch a non-violent film and another to watch a violent film, and then observed their following interactions over the next few hours or few days at the maximum. Results show that exposure to media violence cause an immediate increase in aggressive thoughts and tolerance for aggression in older youth, especially when the youth considers the violence as acceptable and justified. There is evidence that youth who are pre-disposed to be aggressive are more susceptible to the short term effects of watching media violence.

In relation to the cultivation theory, it is believed that heavy exposure to media violence can change the viewer's perception of reality, making them think that the world is a much more dangerous place than it actually is. According to longitudinal investigations and meta-analyses, different cues can shape a person's learning of aggression, fear, and desensitization to media violence. 1) The nature of the perpetrator: According to Bandura's social learning theory, a viewer is more likely to identify with and learn from an attractive perpetrator, and one that he finds perceived similarity with. 2) The nature of the target: if the victim is an attractive character, the audience has more chance of empathetically sharing the fear and anxiety of the character. 3) The justification of violence: research confirms that justified violence in the media increases aggressive responses from the viewer, and decreases their inhibition towards violence, therefore creating desensitization. 4) The presence of weapons: the presence of weapons in the media indeed increases aggressive behavior in both angered and non-angered adults. 5) The extent and graphicness of violence: the more the viewer is exposed to gore and blood, the more he becomes desensitized to the real world's aggression. 6) The degree of realism of violence: the more realistic the portrayal of violence is, the more viewers are prone to respond aggressively

since the viewer identifies with realistic perpetrator rather than fantasy ones. 7) Rewarded or punished violence: according to the social learning theory, an aggressive behavior on TV that is not punished but rather rewarded may encourage the viewer's learning of aggressive thoughts and behavior. According to statistics, 75% of the violence is not punished but rather rewarded. 8) Consequences of violence: the depiction of intense physical pain and suffering may actually decrease the aggressive response of most viewers, except the over-angered subject. 9) Humor accompanying violence: humor is considered as a reward or positive reinforcement of violence; humor increases the level of arousal, and this leads to increased aggressive responding. In fact, 40% of the violent scenes involve some sort of humor. Therefore violence including humor may increase desensitization of the viewer. (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998).

Another side of media violence that is worthy of analysis would be the reason why people enjoy entertainment featuring fright and violence where characters are being attacked and victimized by others. One explanation of this enjoyment would be the transformation of the dysphoria to euphoria after a happy resolution. According to the excitation-transfer theory, enjoying suspense is related to both the negative emotion felt while watching, and the reaction to the solution; the arousal from suspenseful scenes will turn into a positive reaction towards a satisfying resolution, or will intensify the viewer's dysphoria (Hoffner & Levine, 2005). Another reason as to why people enjoy watching violent media, it could be argued that curiosity could drive a viewer to watch a censored movie. It is also a challenge for teenagers to watch an adult-only movie and prove that they are unaffected by it (Giles, 2003). Watching violence also has a cathartic effect; the viewer can then release repressed violent tendencies by acting them out vicariously through identifying with the violent character (Giles, 2003).

In the study entitled *Enjoyment of Mediated Fright and Violence: a Meta-Analysis*, researcher Cynthia Hoffner and Kenneth Levine (2005) argue that the emotional response to a film featuring fright and horror depends on different characteristics of which:

Empathy: empathy is the most important mediator of the viewer's emotional responses to television and film. The cognitive component of empathy is the fact the viewer shares the viewpoint and the perspective of the character on-screen, whereas the affective component of empathy (which includes sympathy and sharing negative affects) affects the emotions of the viewer directly. According to Tamborini (1996) the more viewers share the distress of the on-screen character, the more they experience dysphoria towards violence, therefore having more empathy with the victim. His theory appears to be inconsistent with Zillmann's (1996) who, as stated before, believes that dysphoria turns into euphoria once the resolution is happy. But according to Tamborini's model, it is unlikely that high levels of dysphoria towards violence could shift to a positive state. According to Strasburger and Wilson (2002), violence in the media affects empathy by desensitizing viewers to the true consequences of this violence.

Sensation Seeking: sensation seeking is the willingness to take many risks in order to find an intense sensation and experience. According to Zuckerman (1994), sensation seeking contributes to viewer's enjoyment of violence and fright, as high sensation seekers search for negative stimuli that allow them to reach high arousal, therefore turning the emotion into a positive one.

Aggressiveness: according to many researchers, it is believed that aggressive individuals are more attracted to fright and violence in the media, given that it may help them justify their own behavior (Atkin, 1985).

Gender and Age difference: According to Zillmann and Weaver (1996), boys are more prone than girls to enjoy fright and violence in the media, especially adolescent boys who can then prove to their peers that they are undisturbed by horror, while girls prove their sensitivity by being disturbed and shocked. Twitchell (1989) believes that the interest in media violence reaches its peak during adolescence, where mainly male teenagers are struggling with their aggressive impulses.

Excitation is another effect of media violence; the physiological excitement of watching a violent scene (sped heart rate, increase in blood pressure and adrenaline) carries over to a later activity where the reaction of the viewer is not due to the activity itself (example: an argument with a friend) but rather to the residual excitation from the violent movie. It is worthy to note that excitation-transfer does not only apply to violence; as the arousal can stem from anything else –like an erotic scene.

E. Desensitization to Media Violence

It has been widely studied that media violence increases the risk of aggressive thoughts and behavior among viewers. Priming, imitation and excitation transfer have been shown as short-term effects of exposure to media violence. In this section, desensitization as another effect of exposure to media violence is analyzed in more details.

Many studies have shown that the more an individual is exposed to media violence, the less he responds with anxious arousal in response to viewing violence, therefore becoming less responsive to violence on-screen, and less sympathetic to real-life violence victims (Mullin & Linz, 1995).

Most studies define desensitization as a reduced negative arousal towards violence on-screen; other definitions included an increase of positive arousal or enjoyment after habitual exposure to media violence. Initial exposure to media violence produces aversion, fear and

even disgust; innate negative responses to violence. However, after repeated exposure to screen-based media violence whether on television, on the internet or in video games, the viewer becomes desensitized to violence (Cline et.al, 1973). In fact, desensitization is the key mechanism proposed by many researchers such as Ceballo (2001), Strasburger and Wilson (2002) as attenuating cognitive, emotional and sometimes behavioral responses to violence. This mechanism is considered subtle, even accidental as a result to repeated exposure to aggressiveness. It becomes evident through numbing and lack of response to a stimulus that should elicit a strong response (Funk et.al, 2004).

According to Huesmann and Kirwil (2007), the more individuals are exposed to violent scenes, the more they enjoy watching them.

According to the APA, exposure to media violence at a young age could lead to long-term antisocial behavior if aggressive habits are learned early in life. This repeated exposure also leads to the desensitization of the viewer to violence (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). In fact, this repeated exposure to media violence risks the decrease of emotional responsivity to violent acts, therefore desensitizing the viewers to what they see on-screen. It has also been shown that desensitization affects viewer's reaction to violence in real life (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). In one of their studies, Smith and Donnerstein had male undergraduates exposed to five different movies that portray violence against women during five consecutive days. The comparison between the viewing on the first day and the viewing on the last day showed a decrease of the males' anxiety and depression, as well as a decrease of sympathy towards rape victims. Viewers were in fact becoming comfortable with anxiety-provoking situations. This reduction of anxiety after repeated exposure may reduce the viewer's perception of the amount of violence portrayed, and consequently, lead them to perceive aggressive films as less violent than they actually are.

In a study entitled *Violence exposure in real-life, video games, television, movies and the internet: is there desensitization?* Researchers Jeanne Funk et.al (2004) anticipated that repeated exposure to media violence would lead to a decrease in empathy and an increase of pro-violent attitudes. The study used a sample of 150 participants from schools. The participants were asked to complete four questionnaires asking about demographic information, media preferences and use, exposure to real-life violence, and empathy. As anticipated, the results of the study showed that video game violence was associated with lower empathy and stronger pro-violent attitudes. The intense engagement of the players could also predict the generalization of their behavior outside of the game. According to researcher Funk, children were prone to imitate their favorite fantasy character's action by wrestling at school. As for violent movies, the study reported a preference of violent movies when asked about television choices. It is worthy to note that the fact that the study targeted children still in school was the reason why video games were the primary choice of violent media outlet by the participants.

Another study investigating desensitization was done by Fanti et.al. in 2009 and entitled *Desensitization to Media Violence over a Short Period of Time* had the goal of analyzing repeated exposure to media violence over a short period of time, and its effect on the viewer. The sample consisted of 96 college students, 50% of them being females between the ages of 18 and 26. The participants had to watch different scenes from violent movies, and complete two questionnaires; one before viewing and one at the end of each video clip. The findings of this study were in line with its hypothesis; desensitization to media violence can occur after continuous exposure to media violence over a short period of time. In fact, initial exposure to media violence produces aversive reactions. During the first scenes, the participants did not enjoy the on-screen violence and actually felt sympathy towards the suffering victims. However, this psychological impact was reduced after several violent

clips, leaving the participants enjoying the violent scenes, and feeling less sympathetic with the victims. According to Smith and Donnerstein (1998), it is possible that this decrease in inhibition towards violence may result in aggressive behavior. This decrease of inhibition and sympathy towards the victim may potentially lead the affected participant to not be concerned in helping a victim of real-life violence (Mullin & Linz, 1995).

There is, of course, individual differences related to short-term desensitization; more aggressive participants are more likely to enjoy the violence than less-aggressive participants, as well as reporting less sympathy towards the on-screen victims.

A study entitled *Desensitization to Media Violence: Links with Habitual Media Violence Exposure, Aggressive Cognitions, and Aggressive Behavior* and conducted by Huesmann, et.al. (2011) examined the link between desensitization to media violence and repeated exposure to media violence as a predictor of aggressive behavior. A total of 303 students enrolled at the University of Potsdam, Germany, 215 men and 88 women with the average age of 23 years participated to the online survey and the lab session where they viewed film clips. The results showed that the more individuals were habituated to violent media content, the less they reacted physically to the violent scenes they were shown in the lab. In particular, women showed a greater positive arousal towards violent film the more they were exposed to media violence. The analysis of self-reports of emotional reactions to the violent films showed a decrease in anxiety and an increase in positive arousal the more they were exposed to violent media. There was desensitization to negative affect and sensitization towards violent stimuli. This proves the desensitization of habitual users of violent media. Therefore, repeated exposure to media violence weakens fear and anxiety and promotes pleasant arousal within viewers, ultimately and potentially initiating aggressive behavior.

Researcher Erica Scharrer published an article entitled *Media Exposure and Sensitivity to Violence in News Reports: Evidence of Desensitization* (2008). The study administered questionnaires about exposure to violent television programs and television newscast to 476 adults of an average age of 39 from Florida, Alabama and Massachusetts. It was shown that respondents with heavy exposure to violent entertainment programs reported weaker emotional responses in regards to news stories containing violence. The participants were less likely to perceive the real-life events covered in the news as violent, because of their habituation to violence through television programs, and therefore their development of emotional tolerance towards violence, perceiving the violent events of the news as common. It is also worthy to note that women in the sample not disturbed, shocked or emotionally more impacted than men; those exposed to heavy doses of violent media had the same tolerance to violence in the news.

TV aggression is most of the time justified and almost always rewarded; promoting once again that things will get better if some people are emotionally destroyed. In a study conducted by Potter and Warren (1998) on verbal aggression in comedic shows, it was shown that 45.2 % of verbal hostility was accounted for the shows, rarely punished or regretted. In fact, 62.4% of the heroes are the ones committing the verbal aggression, and 37.4% were shown without any negative consequence.

F. Gossip Girl, Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad

Most media programming originated in the United States (Harrington & Bielby, 2004). More specifically, American television programs have spread around the world and reached a large and diverse audience. In terms of international flow of entertainment, the United States is a dominant power, with Hollywood studios having 75% of the global distribution market (Centeno, 2005). American television series are programs designated to entertain

such as drama, sitcoms, reality TV shows etc. (Zhou, 2011). With the rapid growth of the internet, audiences who have limited access to the program on their national televisions due to government controls (i.e. China) now have access to the American entertainment media online (Chu, 2010). For example, the American series *Prison Break* starring Wentworth Miller had such an impact on Chinese audiences that he became the spokesperson of a local clothing line. Other American television shows became classics for the Chinese audience such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City* (Zhou, 2011). An analysis of the social network Instagram regarding *Gossip Girl* showed that thirty Instagram accounts were dedicated to the series, and named “*Gossip Girl*” or derivatives, even seven years after the end of the series (Instagram, 2019). In addition, the concept of hashtags is widely used on social media as words or phrases preceded by the hash sign, and used to identify messages on specific topics; therefore clicking on the hashtag word would lead to a series of pictures related to that specific word. The hashtag of *Gossip Girl* on Instagram led to the result of 1.7 million pictures related to the series (Instagram, 2019), and that is without counting the hashtags related to the characters of the series. As for *Game of Thrones*, the series has 32 accounts in its name on Instagram, as well as 9.2 million pictures under its hashtag. *Breaking Bad* counts 31 accounts and 2.4 million pictures under its hashtag (Instagram, 2019).

Gossip Girl

Television programs where fashion is the main part of the concept and where characters influence fashion trends are referred to as “fashion-forward television” (Warner, 2009). Researchers like Romeo (2009) and Heidi Säynäjoki (2013) have studied fashion-forward programs like *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City* to prove how important fashion is in these series, and how the audience identifies with the fashion of these series’ characters.

Sex and the City is one of the first television series where fashion is the main aspect, giving the show its bold meaning (Kuruc, 2008). There were still online conversations revolving

around the fashion of the show in 2012 on the homepage of *Sex and the City*, eight years after the end of the show (Säynäjoki, 2013). The series introduced fashion trends, and its main character Carrie Bradshaw has been a fashion icon up till today. The wardrobe designer of the show is Patricia Field (*Sex and the City*, 1994). The creator of the show stated that fashion will be an important part of the program (Kuruc, 2008). The focus groups conducted by Heidi Säynäjoki (2013) in her research paper entitled *Negotiated Meanings of Fashion-Forward Television Programs* showed that viewers of the show became used to the four main characters through their fashion style, identifying and relating to them. Thus, fashion became the fifth character that commands the roles of the women in *Sex and the City* (Kuruc, 2008). In addition to watching the show and identifying with the characters, fans also visited websites and took quizzes to see which character of the show they are likely to be, and which character's style is similar to theirs (Richards, 2003).

Gossip Girl is another example of fashion-forward television programs. In 2007, the first episode of the *Gossip Girl* series aired on the U.S. television on the CW Network. The plot is based in New York, more specifically in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where all the elite families live glamorous and luxurious lives. The show talks about a group of over-privileged high school students. Nevertheless, the distinctive element that makes the show stand out is its wardrobe; all created by the stylist Eric Damam (La Ferla, 2008). Throughout the episodes and the seasons, characters appear with the most varied kinds of clothing, making fashion the main topic of interest. The styling of the show is the creation of Eric Damam who is also one of the stylists of *Sex and the City*. Names of designers like Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch, and Chanel appear on almost every episode of the show. The fashion habits of the characters are an important aspect of the show and can be compared to *Sex and the City*, since each character has a signature piece that is noticeable throughout the episodes (Pattee, 2006). Many *Gossip Girl* fans believe that imitating the

characters' fashion on the show will allow them to have a similar glamorous life (Irving, 2008). When celebrating the 100th episode of *Gossip Girl*, a special reportage was conducted, filmed, and added as a bonus to the 5th season's episodes, entitled "Five Years of Iconic Style". It featured the co-creator and executive producer Stephanie Savage, the producer Amy Kautman, and the show's stylist Eric Damam. In the interview, Savage said that fashion has played a really big role in the long-term success of the show. She could not imagine who these characters would be without thinking of how they expressed themselves through their clothing. For example, Blair Waldorf's character would not "exist" except through her headbands, shoes collection, and Audrey Hepburn-inspired vintage outfits. Savage considers that the stylist Eric Damam knew what he was doing; he was ahead of the statement necklace trend, knowing that it would become fashionable after portraying it on the character Serena in the show. Savage ended her interview by saying she was proud that fashion has represented the show; the fashion community has embraced it seriously to a point where Karl Lagerfeld said "*Gossip Girl* has inspired me", and the fans have embraced it in an aspirational way. The interview went on with Eric Damam, the stylist who has created iconic styles through the show, who mentioned that up till the 100th episode, 100,000 wardrobe changes have been made. Blair's headbands became trendy and seen everywhere; even the front page of the New York Times revealed an article about the clothes of the show and their impact on sales. Bloggers were also interviewed, one of whom was Micah Jesse. He explained how blogs were dedicated to who wore what on a specific episode, and how to find this at home in a different way. Jesse believed that there was a fantasy element to the styles that fans could emulate (*Gossip Girl* season 5, January 30, 2012).

In an article of *Teen Vogue* by Julia Rubin (2012), *Gossip Girl's* fashion inspiration were discussed as being based on the model Kate Moss for Serena's style, and on old Hollywood

fashion such as Audrey Hepburn for Blair. It was noted that Serena's character style influenced the actress herself, as Blake Lively, who impersonates the fictional character, became a fashion icon with Serena's style drifting into her life, which featured her in Chanel advertisements. It can be said that this claim is reflexive; in fact, it is in a way history repeating itself; old Hollywood fashion icons such as Audrey Hepburn influencing this generation through fictional characters.

It is often unusual for high fashion designers to feature their clothes on television shows, because the shoot extends for three or four weeks, and the couture has to stay on set for that long. But when *Gossip Girl* aired and was such an influence on sales, designers such as Tory Burch and Elie Saab had their names mentioned on the series and designs worn more than once, giving the viewer an opportunity to see the products on the character they identify with, and therefore want to get the item (Rubin, 2012). The cast's wardrobes also feature Yves Saint Laurent, Lanvin, Moschino, and even new designers such as Mary Kantrantzou. Even if fans could often not afford the designers' items, they clamored for a little of the look, however they could get it (Rubin, 2012).

A study conducted by Zixuan Zhou in 2011 entitled *The Impact of American Television on Chinese College Students* showed that Chinese audience accesses American Television through the internet, within hours of it airing in the States (Zhou, 2011). Therefore, millions of Chinese teenagers spend hours watching entertainment television shows online (Chu, 2010). The interesting part is that *Gossip Girl* has affected viewers as well as non-viewers when it comes to fashion, since clothing stores in Shanghai advertise their items with announcements such as "As seen on *Gossip Girl*" (Zhou, 2011).

Marie Romeo studied the effects of *Gossip Girl* on viewers' fashion in her research paper (2009). According to Romeo, characters are perceived as fictional peers of the viewers, and act as role models thereby leading to audience's connectedness with the characters. Viewers

who identify with a character usually start imitating them through physical appearance such as clothing choice and hairstyle. In her paper *Television Study: Gossip Girl and its Effects on Viewers' Fashion*, Romeo conducted a content analysis on the 12th episode of season one, entitled "School Lies" which led to the conclusion that characters have each a signature piece in their wardrobes, and that the fashion in the show is prominent since there are numerous times per episode where each character appears with different clothes. In addition, Romeo also conducted in-depth interviews to correlate the fashion of the show with the audience, the age of participants unspecified. The findings showed that each viewer is affected by a specific character, and not by the show as a whole, leading him or her to imitate this character's fashion style, by searching for the exact same piece worn by the character, or for an exact replica at a lower price. These results were based on the theoretical framework used in this paper; Romeo gathered and analyzed the qualitative data, and drew the conclusion of identification of viewers with *Gossip Girl's* characters' fashion (Romeo, 2009).

The identification with *Gossip Girl* characters leading to the imitation and modeling of their fashion styles appeared to be predominant among American girls throughout the analysis of journals such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Spectator, the Leader Post, and the Trail Times. *Gossip Girl* became more known for its cavalcade of fashion than for its plot, having girls tuning in to judge the clothing (La Ferla for The Spectator, 2008). This led to an impact on retail with designers and consultants such as Stephanie Solomon, the fashion director for Bloomingdales, saying that *Gossip Girl* was one of the biggest influence on how women spend their money on clothes. In fact, fans would walk into shops asking for the exact outfits of their favorite character (La Ferla, 2008). According to Barney in the Washington Post (2012), women didn't just want to watch *Gossip Girl*, they wanted to live it. The New York Times dedicated an article to how *Gossip Girl* was

conceived as a fashion marketing vehicle (2008). In fact, some fall designers collections such as Marc by Marc Jacobs resurged school-girl like looks on their runways. Stefani Greenspan, another designer, admitted that *Gossip Girl* was part of her new line's inspiration. The show even had a website, where viewers could click on each episode, select a clothing piece and purchase it online. Shop managers and designers have witnessed an increase in sales after certain episodes where their names were mentioned; Rachel Grinney, manager of Intermix in Washington, talked about her customers seeking Serena's haute bohemian mix style, Ms. Lepore, a New York designer, received calls within days of her dress appearing on the show with the mention of the brand, and Tory Burch found that having an item of the collection in the show translated into sales (Kwan for the Trail Times, 2008).

Game of Thrones

Game of Thrones is an American fantasy drama television series created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. It is an adaptation of George R.R. Martin's series of fantasy novels. It is filmed in Belfast and elsewhere in the UK, Canada, Croatia, Iceland, Malta, Morocco, Spain, and the United States. The series premiered on HBO in the United States on April 17th, 2011, and its seventh season ended on August 27th, 2017. The series will conclude its eight season in May 19th 2019 (Hibberd, 2017).

Set on the fictional continents of Westeros, *Game of Thrones* has several plot lines and a large ensemble cast but centers on three primary story arcs. The first story arc centers on the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms. The second story arc focuses on the last descendant of the realm's deposed ruling dynasty, exiled and plotting a return to the throne. The third story arc centers on the longstanding brotherhood charged with defending the realm against the ancient threats of the fierce peoples and legendary creatures that lie far north, and an impending winter that threatens the realm.

Game of Thrones has attracted record viewership on HBO and has a broad, active, international fan base. It has been acclaimed by critics, particularly for its acting, complex characters, story, scope, and production values, although its frequent use of nudity and violence (including sexual violence) has been criticized.

In addition to audience viewership, the effect of *Game of Thrones* extends to it being mentioned in other television shows; its references becoming figures of speeches. For example, in the USA-produced television show *Suits*, characters use an essential motto of *Game of Thrones* “winter is coming”, used as a warning in the original show as well as in *Suits*, therefore becoming a figure of speech in a way (*Suits*, USA, 2007). Another time, the same character in *Suits* uses another motto taken from one of the *Game of Thrones* families; the Lannisters. The *Suits* character says “I am a Lannister, I always pay my debts”, referring to him owing another character, and using a *Game of Thrones* reference to do so. Throughout the series, other characters mention *Game of Thrones* as being the show they are currently watching in their free time. Referring to *Game of Thrones* in another television show takes the importance of the series to another level; one higher than simple audience viewership. It states that *Game of Thrones* impacts real people but also fictional characters.

The series is generally praised for what is perceived as a sort of medieval realism. George R.R. Martin set out to make the story feel more like historical fiction than contemporary fantasy, with less emphasis on magic and sorcery and more on battles, political intrigue, and the characters. Martin has stated that “the true horrors of human history derive not from orcs and Dark Lords, but from ourselves” (Itzkoff, 2014).

A common theme in the fantasy genre is the battle between good and evil; just like people's capacity for good and for evil in real life; Martin explores the questions of redemption and character change (The Guardian, 2011). The show allows the audience to view different

characters from their perspective, unlike in many other fantasies, and thus the supposed villains can provide their side of the story. Benioff said, "George introduced gray tones into a black-and-white universe" (Cogman, 2014).

In early seasons, main characters were regularly killed off, and this was credited with developing tension among viewers (Fowler, 2017). In an article written in *Forbes Magazine* by Alice Walton (2014) writes about some of the reasons why the audience is so hooked on *Game of Thrones*. The show is very compelling due to many factors. First of all, the complexity of the show aims at an adult audience, as mentioned by Barna Donvovan, PhD. professor of film and media studies at the Saint Peter's University in New Jersey. The fact that the show is so complex engages the viewer cognitively and allows him to vicariously navigate around this world; the viewer's brain has no choice but to stay engaged and emotionally invested in what happens with the characters he's come to build love-hate relationships with. These very complicated characters make the concept of "good" and "bad" arguable and proves that they are human and thus, flawed. According to psychoanalyst and film consultant Phillip Freeman, the characters are so unpredictable that the question of good and bad is not important anymore. The viewer is therefore faced with moral blows. In addition, the story set in Westeros is definitely un-politically correct; good guys are killed and bad guys become powerful. But the series handles many other issues such as gender, race and multiculturalism. According to Hamid Dabashi in his article *why are we so drawn to Game of Thrones?* Written in *Al Jazeera* newspaper (2017), the series fiction is truthful; staging our own history, and allowing us to identify with many characters, even the most devious ones. In fact, as viewers, they know the characters more intimately than they know their own friends, neighbors or colleagues.

This loyal audience keeps getting bigger; in 2015, 8.1 million people watched the finale live while in 2016, 8.9 million people watched the season finale live; a 10% jump in live

viewership. If we include reruns, streaming and DVDs the viewership goes up to 25.7 million per episode according to Madeline Berg from Forbes (2017). The creators surely know how to tell a story that makes it worth coming back to watch more.

The audience's reactions are at the heart of *Game of Thrones*' psychology. As the number of viewers grows, so do their emotional reactions, according to emotional analytics company Canvs. Jared Feldman, CEO and founder of Canvs, claims that the expression of emotional reactions inspires people to tune in and watch more.

The popularity of the show has much to say about TV viewers given the fact that millions tune in to watch the fantasy drama. According to Aymar Jean Christian, assistant professor in the department of communication studies at Northwestern University, the uncertainty of characters adds suspense to the viewer; anything can happen. The viewer can be rooting for a character in the first season, and then find it more conflicting to keep rooting for him or her in the next seasons.

In a study conducted by Latitude (2014) entitled *My Game of Thrones: An Audience Self-Portrait*, the show's fans across the United States were asked to talk about their viewership. Twenty fans were asked to self-record videos in which they would talk about their routines and rituals around the show, and then their responses would be presented to 200 other fans who will provide their own feedback on the ideas expressed in the videos. In regards to viewer's psychology and the reason why they watch *Game of Thrones*, 54% of fans agreed that the element of fantasy, mixed with the epic and intimate, real and unreal, allowed the audience to put realistic characters in fiction settings. There was also a sense of living vicariously with and like the characters, their fears and hopes, as the viewer could never predict what was about to happen or what the characters was about to do in many situations. Fans also sank deep into the characters' ambiguity and complexity. When asked to describe fans of *Game of Thrones*, the participants were proud to talk about their high IQ needed to

understand the imaginative and adventurous plot, as well as the character developments. They also found that the intimate relationships they vicariously built with the show's characters allowed them to build similar relationships with fellow viewers of *Game of Thrones*, creating socialization within a niche audience. The participants provided several different favorite characters, therefore saying that there was someone in the show for everyone who watches. Participants also showed signs of immersing themselves in the environment of *Game of Thrones* by personifying the characters.

Other psychological reasons through which *Game of Thrones* is believed to satisfy the viewers' needs were studied by Tom van Laer, senior lecturer in Marketing at the University of London, in his article (2017). He conducted semi-structured interviews with 55 people from 14 countries to get more details about the needs of viewers satisfied by *Game of Thrones*. Some of the answers led to the discovery that some people watch the show because they can relate to the battle between good and evil, while others enjoy it because they feel a personal stake when another character dies. The study also showed that viewers are able to vicariously navigate other lives that are not their own through the show. Others take the show seriously enough to visit its filming locations (Croatia, Morocco, Iceland, and Northern Ireland). This turns *Game of Thrones* into a personal event that becomes a discovery to the viewer. According to van Laer, the show allows a break from daily life, and helps people cope with their own personal sorrows and heal their own suffering. In fact, participants mentioned that some of the stories were therapeutic such as Arya Stark migrating to Essos; it was a way for viewers to cope with loneliness and be reminded that others have it even harder than them. As for when Ramsay Bolton is eaten by his own hound, the scene offers vicarious revenge for survivors of sexual violence.

Game of Thrones includes plenty of violence. Professor Christian states that people are more used to violence on TV today. It is believed that the dark, violent and sexual content

of *Game of Thrones* allows fans to think about the world and understand that things aren't always roses and butterflies. Breaking characters down in the series aims at something more later on. In addition, the series complicated plotline does not allow for passive viewing; the viewer cannot be going through multiple tasks and watch *Game of Thrones*, it needs full focus (Driscoll, 2016). Some article, such as Jade Standaloft's *Game of Thrones and its influence on audience* (2015) argue that rape scenes in the show are used irresponsibly, as rape is a common occurrence in modern society, and consider that these scenes show an exploitation of female violence for viewership. In the writer's opinion, the show's writer should not be using sexual abuse in such a way. In another article by Julia Alexander (2017) entitled *Game of Thrones show-runners address Show's Controversial Use of Sexual Violence*, the creators are under fire from critics of the use of sexual violence against women on the show; in fact, many critics call the scenes unnecessary. This is where Weiss and Benioff, *Game of Thrones* show-runners, defend themselves by stating that this was actually the power dynamic between men and women of the medieval times; and that they had to remain true to the world they created, even if that was by depicting horrible things. It is argued that the topic of rape should stop being a taboo and should start being talked about more openly, not just because of fictional series. Another piece entitled *Rape of Thrones* (2014) condemns the use of sexual violence on the show, as it does not help the progress of the story but rather only sacrifices characters.

When it comes to empathy while watching a television show, the viewer usually shares the victim's anger and root for revenge. He wants the perpetrator to pay for his crime. Nevertheless, seeing any character suffering would create empathy within the viewer and pity towards the pain. Does this apply to *Game of Thrones*? For example, if Cersei Lannister, the devious queen of the Seven Kingdoms, is taken as an example, one can say without a doubt that she has done terrible things and that she deserves to be punished. But

when she actually was punished and stripped naked for a walk of atonement in front of the whole city, viewers couldn't help but feel empathy towards her. On another hand, empathy might have limits; when the one of the cruelest characters, King Joffrey (son of Cersei) died a horribly graphic and violent death on-screen, not one viewer felt empathy, but rather relief and enjoyment of the moment.

Another prominent and surprising element of the series *Game of Thrones* is its fashion, and the influence of its fashion on designers' collections, and therefore, on audience fashion choices. In a Vogue article by contributor Monica Kim entitled *Why Khaleesi is the secret style muse of the Spring 2015 Runways*, the journalist states that the character Khaleesi's platinum hair had been copied thousands of times, and her cut out dresses inspired some of the biggest designers for the 2015 collections, calling it the "Targaryen influence" – Targaryen being one of the character's many names. In fact, big names in the fashion industry have adopted the *Game of Thrones* character's style in their collections; Kenzo created similar figure-hugging dresses, Alexander McQueen had tiered chiffon ruffles and beaded halter tops, Marta Marques and Paulo Almeida got inspired by the character's crop top and loose tattered work pants, and replaced the blood stains from the series by gems, others like Stella McCartney, Atelier Versace, Celine, Dior Haute Couture and Elie Saab all sent similar styles to Khaleesi's down the runway (Monica Kim, Vogue 2015). Not only is Khaleesi's fashion inspiring designers, but other characters as well. In fact, Atelier Versace created floral headbands and slinky chainmail, Elie Saab designed sharp-shouldered frocks like the ones worn by Cersei's character, queen of the Seven Kingdoms of *Game of Thrones*, as well as chunky gold jewelry like the series' Stark family heirloom, Dior had diaphanous dresses and Valentino created a floor-length velvet cape, the exact one *Game of Thrones*' heroin wears to make a night escape (Hannah Marriott, The Guardian 2015). Givenchy's fall 2014 collection showcased fur-trimmed coats signaling

“winter is coming”; a motto from one of the show’s families, and Tory Burch’s armor-inspired collection evoked the shows’ epic battles. Fashion-savvy viewers even mentioned the resemblance to Balmain’s gowns (Emily McCombs, Yahoo 2016).

According to Sarah Mower in her article *Game of Thrones: the fashion subplot* for The Guardian (2015), Michele Clapton, the costume designer of *Game of Thrones*, attracted many without having to show on a catwalk. According to Mower, instead of going to endless parties, designers today watch TV and shows, keeping their minds on full alert for visual inspirations. Carice van Houten, who plays Melisandre, a character of *Game of Thrones*, says that Michele Clapton is a talented woman who has influenced certain designers, and who has also been inspired by them (Sarah Mower, The Guardian 2015).

According to Justin O’Shea, buying director of designer fashion retailer MyTheresa.com, the effects of *Game of Thrones* have already been seen in real life with Jon Stark’s fur collars and big hooded Victorian coats on the runway. He believes that the most influential TV series do impact the way people dress. *Game of Thrones’* fans will spot the show’s references on the runway, no matter how subtle. Nevertheless, if it isn’t for the show’s biggest admirers, the *Game of Thrones* effect is much less easily tracked by non-viewers (Hannah Marriott, The Guardian 2015). In addition to designers, websites such as Tumblr dedicated pairing high-fashion pieces with the characters that would wear them, showcasing many pieces of the show that made it onto the runway. On Polyvore, there is a section in which members post inspiration and outfit sets for characters that can be found on Net-a-Porter (Emily McCombs, Yahoo 2016).

Breaking Bad

Game of Thrones might be breaking records ever since it started gaining more and more viewership with each new episode and season, but *Breaking Bad*, which first aired back in 2008 was its precursor in record-breaking viewership, and it is agreed upon in many articles that compare both series in their massive audience attraction. In fact, viewership kept growing to reach almost 6.5 million for season 5.

Breaking Bad is an American crime drama television series created and produced by Vince Gilligan. The show originally aired January 20, 2008 and kept going till its 5th and final season in September 2013. It tells the story of Walter White, a struggling high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Together with his former student Jesse Pinkman, White turns to a life of crime by producing and selling crystallized methamphetamine to secure his family's financial future before he dies, while navigating the dangers of the criminal world. The title comes from the Southern colloquialism "breaking bad", meaning to "raise hell" or turn toward crime (Rothman, 2013). *Breaking Bad* is set and was filmed in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Walter's family consists of his wife Skyler and children, Walter, Jr. and Holly.

Breaking Bad is widely regarded as one of the greatest television series of all time (Forbes, 2013). By the time the series finale aired, it was the most-watched cable shows on American television, alongside *Game of Thrones*.

Being filled with crime and dark humor, the series is still watched voluntarily during leisure time, making the viewer almost emotionally exhausted. There is definitely a psychology behind watching *Breaking Bad*. According to one of the founders of entertainment psychology, Dolf Zillmann, two theories are behind the enjoyment of these types of series. First, the excitation-transfer theory states that the emotions experienced while watching

distressing shows may carry over positive emotions when the episode ends on a good note. As for the affective disposition theory, it states that people enjoy identifying “good” and “bad” guys and let justice serve right. Nevertheless, *Breaking Bad* doesn’t have happy ending and has a very blurred definition of good guys vs. bad guys. So why watch *Breaking Bad*? Some communication scholars found evidence that comparing one’s stress to such stressful content makes the viewer feel better about his own, less emotionally draining life. Other research based on Zillmann’s approach claims that watching television is entertaining; whether it’s for the fun or the thrill. According to Professor Mary Beth Oliver in the media studies department of Pennsylvania State University, entertainment goes beyond simple enjoyment, and allows eudemonia; which is the experience of feeling fulfilled, touched, and learning something about ourselves.

Going back to the blurred line of good vs. bad on the series, according to Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad*, one cannot but feel sorry for the protagonist Walter White. In an interview with the New York Times, Gilligan marveled over the fact that fans were still rooting for him even after he became a meth drug lord. It is important to note that viewers hate Walter’s wife for having an affair, and yet still root for Walt and consider him a hero after committing lawless acts and murders.

According to psychologist Joseph Magliano of the Northern Illinois University, movies and television series manipulate viewers’ thoughts and emotions. In *Breaking Bad*, the creators build up sympathy towards the protagonist who has it the very hard way; he’s dying of cancer, his son is sick and he has a baby on the way. Whatever he does next is to protect his family. Through the point-of-view editing technique in filming which closes up on the actor’s face then shows a shot of what he is looking at, the producers allow the audience to get inside the character’s mind; they know directly what the character is thinking, even when he is silent (Hyun, 2013). In a study entitled *Breaking Bad: on the Western Genre*

and Audience Reception published in 2014, the author Marisa Mazart goes deeper into the consumption of the show and the identification with series' protagonist Walter White. In fact, according to the researcher, the series' meaning is created by the consumers, both males and females, who, despite Walter's transformation into a criminal, continue to watch his journey throughout the series. Therefore, it is important to analyze the meanings extracted by the viewers. Mazart (2014) studied data from comments posted by fans, exploring their reactions. By relying on IMDb accounts, viewers averaged of 9.4 females and 9.6 males out of ten, both ranging between the ages of 18 and 29. According to previous research as well as based on the audience's comments online, *Breaking Bad* diverts the viewers from their own daily activities and problems, providing them with an escape. For example, one fan stated that it was about "vicarious but safe thrill". The series, just like *Game of Thrones*, provides catharsis, an emotional release. In fact, the strong identification with the characters on screen allows the audience to release the tension built up throughout the series at the end. Audience members were also shown to build parasocial relationships (called companionship in this present study) by entering into vicarious relationships with the characters as if they were their friends. Nevertheless, some viewers blur the line between what is fiction and what is real, taking their companionship to an extreme level where they cannot separate the fictional character from the real actor. For example, some fans threatened the actress playing Walter's wife, targeting her rather than the fictional character. Other fans put together a real funeral for Walter White, after his death at the end of the series. The study of fans comments also demonstrated that viewers looked forward to discuss the show between each other.

Other research looked at how the audience receives and responds to *Breaking Bad*. For example, in their research entitled *Falling Hard for Breaking Bad: an Investigation of audience response to a popular television series* published in 2015, Bruce Mc. Keown et.al.

in a Q methodology analysis, study viewers' perceptions of *Breaking Bad*. The Q methodology combines conceptual framework, data collection and a method of analysis, all providing basis for the scientific study of subjectivity and focusing on opinions and perspectives (McKeown & Thomas, 2015).

Posed in a research-question form, the research showed different perspectives from the standpoint of audience members of *Breaking Bad*. First, analyzing the audience reactions to *Breaking Bad* showed that the viewers project their identification with the characters who present them with their own flawed humanity. The series take the viewer on an emotional ride where he can't but sympathize with Walt who maintains the viewer's loyalty even after the horrible things he has done; the audience knows it's for "the good of his family", when actually the character himself admitted it was for his own selfish need of power. Embracing this anti-hero blurs the line between right and wrong. Therefore, the viewer experiences vicarious relationship with the "glamour of evil", yearning for the characters success. But what does it mean for the audience, to empathize that much with Walter White?

Indeed, *Breaking Bad* raises questions about morality. The protagonist moves from telling "necessary lies" to finding it easier and easier to commit immoral acts. Meeting the struggling chemistry teacher invites all viewers to empathize with him; Peter Gould one of *Breaking Bad* writers even said "when a character suffers in a way that feels real, it's very hard not to feel a little bit of empathy". When he decides to start cooking meth and selling it to help his family financially, the audience still accept his twisted logic. This could be because at a certain point in life, anyone has fantasized about doing something immoral for power or wealth. Therefore vicariously, the viewer lives through Walter White what he could not do in real life (Abdullah, 2015).

After identification with the characters of *Breaking Bad*, is there desensitization to the massive use of drugs on the show? In order to answer this question, we need to look at how realistic the show is to the real meth trade world. According to Dylan Mathews' article in the Washington Post in 2013, much of what happens on *Breaking Bad* is relatable to real life meth business. In fact, the advanced labs portrayed in the series and used to create massive amounts of methamphetamine are actually real, and common among Mexican cartels. Mathew also discusses the real violence of Mexican cartels that is correctly portrayed in the series. Mathew quotes Patrick Reeden Keefe, a staff writer at the New Yorker who's reported on the business models of Mexican cartels "while viewers were repulsed that Breaking Bad characters used acid to melt one of the dead bodies, this is an actual common disposal in Mexico". Looking at a different angle, the meth use in reality has increased with the rise of low-paying and low-skilled job services; low-income individuals find meth attractive because it helps them stay functional while working several jobs with long hours (Mathews, The Washington Post, 2013). According to prosecutor Blake Ewing, the reality of *Breaking Bad* does glorify meth, and does desensitize the audience to the horror of this particular world. She does not believe that the show encourages meth use, but rather normalizes and glorifies meth business which, in her opinion, is dangerous, stating "I have no interest in blaming television writers and producers for the destructive choices that other people make. But there can be little doubt that some people on the margins of society will be drawn into that world, if only out of morbid curiosity".

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This extensive literature review details the various effects of television series on foreign audiences; there is no doubt in the fact that media psychologically influences teenagers and adults, and allows a part of identity building depending on liked characters, which could be

a positive or a negative thing. Throughout the literature review, many researches have been done on television series and their audiences, based on theories such as social learning, identification, and desensitization. In fact, producers have used social learning theory principles to promote ideas in their soap operas, wishful identification to characters have been depicted in the analysis of many television shows, and desensitization to violence, bullying and morals is at the center of studies on television series.

This research chooses to study three specific television series, each of a different genre, and their psychological effects on the audience: *Gossip Girl*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Breaking Bad*. The literature review covers widespread previous research on the shows, and depicts social learning, identification and desensitization of foreign audiences in all three series. Therefore, in order to study whether or not the Lebanese audience is psychologically affected by these three shows, the following chapter will discuss the three theories on which the research will be based: social learning, identification, and desensitization.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research revolves around three psychological theories: social learning, identification, and desensitization. In this research, the theories of social learning and identification fall under the same umbrella, studied one within the other, since the chosen concepts for this research from both theories are almost identical. Throughout this chapter, all three theoretical frameworks will be defined, as well as their concepts, which will be used later on as variables.

Regarding the social learning and identification theories, the concepts that will be defined are the following: wishful identification, similarities, connectedness, vicarious experiences, imitation, parasocial relationships and social group setting.

As for the desensitization theory, the concepts that will be defined are the justification of violence, the psychological shift from aversion to arousal, and the decrease of emotional responsivity.

A. Social Learning and Identification

The Social Learning Theory as developed by Albert Bandura, analyzes the foundations of human learning, and the willingness of individuals to imitate observed behaviors. The theory found that models, whether parents and peers in a direct environment, or models from the environment of mass media, are an important source for learning new behaviors and for achieving behavioral change. Identification is defined as a behavioral process where a viewer takes on the attitude and appearance of a character he/she likes and feels similar to (Cohen, 2001). Identification finds roots with Freud (1921), and later on in Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1969). In this paper, there will be a brief overview of the psychological approach to identification by Freud, and then the focus will shift on identification as described by the social learning theory of Bandura, which expanded into the social cognitive theory, giving a more

comprehensive overview of human cognition in the context of social learning. The theoretical framework will define the following concepts: wishful identification, similarities, connectedness, vicarious experiences, imitation, parasocial relationships and social group setting.

1. A Psychological Approach to Identification

Theorists like Sigmund Freud or Kenneth Burke used identification because it involved a bond between two persons. In his book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921) dedicates a full chapter to identification. He first defines it as the expression of an emotional tie with another person. Freud distinguishes three main kinds of identification; "First, identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object-tie...and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality which is shared with some other person", in other words, primary identification, narcissistic identification, and partial identification. Primary identification is the unconscious attachment to something or someone; babies take on their parents' characteristics and copy their behavior. Narcissistic identification is the form that follows a loss; an object, or a dear person. In this case, the person identifying wears the clothes of the deceased (Freud, 1921).

The partial identification was the framework developed later on by other researchers such as Bandura (1969). The term identification as used by the Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura is similar to the Freudian term related to the Oedipus complex. For example, they both involve internalizing or adopting another person's behavior. However, during the Oedipus complex, the child can only identify with the same sex parent, whereas with Social Learning Theory the person (child or adult) can potentially identify with any other person. Partial identification happens with a leading figure, or a person that shares common grounds

and interest. This mechanism contributes to the development of character and personality through two main concepts: imitation and empathy. Imitation is the behavioral concept through which an individual observes another, and copies their behavior, as for empathy, it is the possibility to put oneself in another's shoes and understand what they are feeling from their own perspective (Hopper, 2010).

The Social Learning theory of Albert Bandura states that behavioral learning develops through two main concepts: observation and imitation of the model. Based on hypotheses such as "...subjects exposed to aggressive models will reproduce aggressive acts resembling those of the models..." and "...boys will be more predisposed than girls towards imitating aggression..." Bandura (1969) tested this identification with a role model through a laboratory experiment. The experiment was conducted on 36 boys and 36 girls, all observing one male adult and one female adult. The findings supported Bandura's Social learning theory; the children observed the models and imitated them. According to Bandura (1969), identification is central to the Social learning theory regarding types of models to be imitated. The study showed that there should be appropriateness (aggressive male models are seen as more fitting to do so than females), relevance, and similarity of the model (identification with the model as having common points with the observer). Previous psychological theories (Freud, 1921) were cast before the technological advance of the digital world and media, and therefore gave the latter less attention. In a more recent study of the social learning theory (which was renamed social cognitive theory in 1987 for a better description) in relation with mass communication, Bandura (2001) discusses vicarious capability as the capacity of people to learn from observing different models and therefore expanding their skills and knowledge. A vast amount of this behavioral learning occurs not only through observing models from a direct environment, but also from the environment of the mass media. In fact, through media, one model can transmit new behavior to countless people.

When Freud's (1921) partial identification occurs with a symbolic model, also known as a fictional character in media, it is called a psychological matching process in the Social learning theory of Albert Bandura (1969); one changes their behavior to match the other individual's behavior. This behavior allows the viewer to form interpersonal connections, to socialize and also enhances their self-esteem. Mainly two definitions of identification have been used by Bandura (2001): identification with an individual in which the viewer puts himself/herself in the shoes of the character, and actively participates in the program's experiences (empathy and vicarious experience), while the second one is measured by the wishes of the viewer to be like the character (wishful identification). Bandura (2001) stresses on the concept of vicarious experience that allows the person to observe the actions and experiences of the model, internalizing them as his/her own even though he/she has never undergone it. As maintained by Bandura (2001), symbolic modeling is the fact of being a behavioral model to not only one, but virtually several observers because of the advances of digital communication. Symbolic modeling is then transferred through the electronic media worldwide and influences behavioral and social changes (Bandura, 2001). Social networks spread and support the diffusion of new behavior patterns (Bandura, 2001). Through television and social media, people are linked directly to the media source, with little to no interconnection among each other. Therefore people from different location share ideas and information through interactive electronic networking, thus influencing adoptive behavior (Bandura, 2001). Applying Bandura's work to the purpose of this research, Instagram is yet another rising social networking platform following Facebook, and Twitter. It was launched in October 2010 and gained rapid and growing popularity all the way to the present day in 2019. It is used to share pictures and videos by people who have similar tastes and therefore follow each other's accounts.

This section defined identification psychologically under the umbrella of the social learning theory, and in relation to its direct environment through modeling and digital modeling. The

following part of the framework will define the concept of connectedness, a defining characteristic of identification, being a virtual relationship built with this fictional character, and the forms of involvement with the media characters. It will also deal with the other features of identification which are wishful identification, similarities, vicarious experience, and imitation.

2. Wishful Identification and Similarities

As stated beforehand, identification was first explained through a psychological lens. Freud (1921) viewed identification as the unconscious process that was the consequence of the oedipal complex, and identification to a parent would lead to the integration of their identities to the child's superego. Freud's concept was extended by Bettelheim (1943) who pictured identification as adopting other's views rather than fully taking on their personalities. From these prior psychological characterizations of identification, Jonathan Cohen (2001) came up with the concept of identification as a momentary internalization of another's "opinion" leading to looking at the world through an alternative social reality. There are different levels of identification: the wishful identification (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), the similarities with the character, the feelings of affinity and liking towards the character, the imitation or modeling of the character and the vicarious experience (Liebes & Katz, 1990). Each level echoes a certain amount of exchanging one's perspective for that of the other with whom they are identifying (Cohen, 2001).

While identification as defined by Cohen (2001) is an internal process where the viewer puts himself or herself in the shoes of the character and fully takes on their behavior, attitude, and appearance, wishful identification is the theoretical desire of being like this character rather than acting on it (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Through a series of questionnaires, Hoffner and Buchanan were able to determine wishful identification through similarities between the

audience member and the fictional character. In fact, the two concepts are related: being similar to someone initiates a desire to become like this person, and therefore want to emulate them (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Wishful identification is also influenced by the manner in which characters are portrayed (Bandura, 1986). The attributes of television characters have emerged as important in wishful identification. Some of the attributes such as intelligence, success, attractiveness, humor, have been examined in prior research in this area and are characteristics that have been shown to be important in forming impressions of others.

The study focused on the perception of the participants towards their favorite media character. It revealed that participants were more prone to identify with a character they felt similar to, specifically demographically. Participants' wishful identification appeared with characters from the same gender as the participant. Individuals also perceive deeper similarities with the character when it comes to behavior and attitude, which triggers the desire to be like them. Yet, the similarity is not completely identical, leading the audience to feel similar to the character in some ways, in order to look up to this character and want to be like them in other ways (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). The results of the quantitative study of Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) showed that female's wishful identification was associated with attractiveness; young women wish to identify more strongly with the most attractive female character.

3. Connectedness

According to Kenneth Burk (1950), identification depends on connections between the audience and the fictional television character. Therefore, one of the defining characteristics of identification is the concept of connectedness. Audience connectedness defines a relationship between the viewer and the television program that goes beyond simply watching, but rather experiencing the character's traits and actions in the viewer's everyday social and personal life (Russel & Puto, 1999). Individuals vary in the way they watch television and therefore every

viewer-show relationship differs from one another (Lee and Robbins, 1995). Audience connectedness thus relates to identification because building a relationship with the fictional character is by itself a way of identifying with this character as someone the viewer relates or feels similar to. In an exploration of the construct of audience connectedness, Cristel Antonia Russell and Christopher Puto (1999) used a qualitative methodology consisting of a content analysis of focus groups, internet fan forums, and interviews. The manifestation of audience connectedness appeared in the results of the study through three concepts: high involvement, connectedness, and highly symbolic products. High involvement indicated the presence of a relationship between the audience and the program, connectedness was the intense relationship that went beyond simply watching the show into the individual's life, and allows him to identify with the characters and commit to the show, and highly symbolic products are the elements of the show such as hair and clothing styles transmitted to the viewer as trends (Russell & Puto, 1999).

Connectedness manifests itself through adoration, imitation, and modeling of the television character (Russell & Puto, 1999). The consequences of connectedness are both psychological and social; highly connected viewers find the information in the series more essential to their lives than less connected viewers. This makes the connected viewers more prone to molding their own life after the lives of the characters, thus identifying with this character. As for the social consequences, TV programs allow socialization of viewers who watch the same program (Russell, Norman, & Heckler, 2004).

Russell and Puto (1999) developed a qualitative methodology to investigate connectedness, whereas a study entitled *The Consumption of Television Programming: Development and Validation of the Connectedness Scale* by Russell, Norman and Heckler (2004) approached connectedness in a quantitative way through an online survey and a laboratory experiment in order to come up with a measurement instrument of connectedness and develop a scale. Again,

results confirmed previous studies (Russell & Puto, 1999) regarding the factors that represent this relationship between the viewer and the character, based on modeling as a long-term effect on a person's life and identity, imitation as a shallow expression of identification with the fictional character, and also fashion as a measure of how much the viewer emulates his or her favorite character's appearance.

Therefore, as stated previously, connectedness is a feature of identification; a viewer identifies with a character by connecting to this character, and building a relationship through adoration, imitation, and modeling. This is mostly the case when it comes to television shows, to which the viewer's becomes "addicted" at a certain point, and internalizes the character's life as if it was his/her own.

4. Vicarious Experience

Vicarious experiences in media have been associated with the identification and empathy with characters such as protagonists; it is an experience felt through watching something, or reading about someone, rather than experiencing it by oneself (Merriam-Webster). Imagined experiences, also known as vicarious experience created by identification is what mostly attracts media viewers; it is the idea of experiencing things one cannot experience, or hasn't had the chance to, being a person one cannot be, or dressing like a superstar, all through media outlets (Cohen, 2001). On the other hand, the viewer might adopt goals and feelings of his favorite character through vicarious experience. Through this imagined experience, the viewer is able to "live" a situation, or befriend a fictional character, which may not be realized in reality (Thompson, 2001). Media users do not keep their personal identities in such situations, but rather take on the identity, behavior and attitudes of the character, therefore identifying with this character and fully taking on the experience as their own. As stated above, empathy is a concept of vicarious experience through which the viewer puts himself/herself in the

character's shoes and understands them, therefore takes on their experience. Vicarious experience leads the audience to believe they too have these specific characteristics, arousing a need to emulate this character in order to accomplish these same experiences.

5. Imitation

Identification develops at early stages of life (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents identify with others and imitate certain aspects of their characteristics, which results in shaping these adolescents' identities (Erikson, 1968). Therefore, adolescents can be influenced by real life others or media characters that will help them shape their identities. Since nowadays, youth are more exposed to media than parents and peers, these "fictive peers" become the main model to identify with and to internalize their characteristics and actions, even temporarily; in fact, Huesmann, Lagerspetz, and Eron (1984) correlated aggressive television characters with aggressive behavior amongst children who watch these characters on-screen. Similar results were noted on children who identified with their favorite media characters (Liebes & Katz, 1990) and adolescents who identified with celebrities and embraced what these celebrities were promoting (Basil, 1996). These feelings drive the viewer to like the character, feel similar to the character, and model the character according to Liebes and Katz (1990), all part of one process: identification. When identifying with parents or leaders, children and adolescent take what they need to build their identities; so media directors and writers create characters with the specific characteristics with which they want viewers to identify (Cohen, 2001). Identification leads to imitation of the character; though unconscious, the act of identification leads the viewer to copy and imitate the character (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Imitation and wishful identification have in common the desire to be like the admired media character, but the difference lies in the fact that imitation is an action, while wishful identification remains a desire (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Modeling and imitation are related factors where imitation is a shallow expression of identification with the character while modeling has a longer term

effect in shaping a person's identity. Celebrities are usually emulated by the audience because they have characteristics many normal people wish to possess (Boon & Lomore, 2001). While identification according to Cohen (2001) is uncontrolled by the viewer, imitation as part of this identification is a conscious behavior taken on by the audience who is learning something from the character and therefore imitating it willingly. Imitation is linked to gender similarity since girls would emulate female characters whereas boys would more likely imitate male media characters (Hoffner, 1996).

According to Kelman (1961) and Basil (1996), identification can be used as a process for social influence. In fact, in order to persuade the viewer of a certain message, media makes the source of the message appealing, rather than the message itself.

6. Parasocial interaction

Identification with a television character is based on a psychological attachment between the viewer and a character (Cole & Leets, 1999). Parasocial interaction, PSI, finds its roots in psychiatry, but has been developed as a concept in mass communication literature. The phenomena was described by Horton and Wohl, as viewers' responses to soap operas. They identified two essential functions of PSI: companionship and personal identity. Soap characters remind the viewer of people they know, and viewers use situations from the show and behavior as ways to understand their own real lives. Many recent studies have used the 20-item scale to measure PSI with soap characters (Rubin & Perse, 1987), which was reduced to 10 items. Studies using this scale have found a correlation between perceived realism and attraction to the media figure, suggesting that viewers evaluate media characters using similar criteria as the ones for people they encounter in the flesh. Identification itself produces different types of media user-media figure interaction. According to Feilitzen and Linne (1975), similarity identification is when the viewer identifies with a character because he shares noticeable characteristics with him, and wishful identification is when the viewer desires to emulate the

character. As for Cohen (2001), he defines parasocial interaction as one in which the viewer “is engaged in a role relationship with a television persona”, as if this character was a personal acquaintance. This response can be a behavioral response (greeting the character out loud), or a cognitive response (making psychological deductions about a figure’s behavior). According to Cohen’s theory, the interaction between the viewer and the character vary depending on the media figure. He argues that PSI and identification occur with protagonists, such as central characters in movies or television shows. Another key element in the relationship between viewer and character is the extent to which the character is presented as a credible persona; perceived realism being one significant predictor of PSI. The representation of this media character across different media outlets, from the show itself, to magazines, radios and newspapers will intensify visual aspects of PSI with this character (Giles, 2003).

7. Social group setting

Psychologists study groups because nearly all human activities—working, learning, worshipping, relaxing, playing, and even sleeping—occur in groups. The lone individual who is cut off from all groups is a rarity. Most of us live out our lives in groups, and these groups have a profound impact on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Even though people are capable of living separate and apart from others, they join with others because groups meet their psychological and social needs. Humans have a need to belong: “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and impactful interpersonal relationships”. Most of us satisfy this need by joining groups with whom we attend a sports event together, visit one another for the evening, share a meal together, or go out as a group to see a movie. According to Mead (1934), children who participate in a game will anticipate what others will do in response to their actions. By doing so, the child is taking on others’ perspectives, which allows him in time to identify with a community or a group. Here, Mead’s work tied identification with the notion of group identity. Identification with a group increases

the feelings of superiority because belonging to a superior group is a legitimate way to assert self-superiority (Tajfel, 1979). Within the possible influences that television can have on its respective audiences, interpersonal relationships are to be mentioned. Mediated forms conveying sounds and/or images are meant to allow individuals to communicate with each other without actual physical proximity. Television can be used in such a matter to unite two people in a common experience, qualifying as a potential of building interpersonal relationships (Gumpert & Cathcart, 1979). Interpersonal communication is a process involving two or more people interacting with one another, using verbal or nonverbal behavior to achieve communication goals (Berger, 2008). Watching television often involves the presence of other people, from family to friends, and is often accompanied by a conversation about what is depicted on-screen (Bryant & Miron, 2002). The core of the entertainment experience has most often been described as enjoyment, a pleasurable response to media use. This enjoyment is accompanied by the impression of autonomy/self-determination and competence/control. Viewers experience competence when they feel in control of how they receive the situation, without any outside pressure (pressure could stem from social norms). Viewers express autonomy by choosing to watch alone or in a group, and by deciding to interact or not with these other viewers. While watching, different social norms arise when watching with friends and when watching with family; if the groups norms are different than the individual norms, this could undermine the enjoyment of the viewing experience. Watching television is an integral part of everyday life and is directly embedded in social interactions. Watching television with others is a social activity; performed together with a partner, family or friends, it facilitates conversation. Due to the private setting, the small groups of familiar people, and the possibility to observe the behavior of others, interpersonal communication among audience members is fostered. These social interactions can influence the way in which people experience, express and regulate emotions (Fisher & Van Kleef, 2010). Emotional contagion,

which is the tendency to unintentionally imitate the nonverbal emotional expressions of others, becomes a bonding function for a group of people who watch a television show together. As for emotional regulation, it is the adjustment of one's own emotions, after the perception of others' verbal and nonverbal reactions to an emotional event. Watching television in a group should be a different experience than watching it alone. During joint reception, viewers can communicate verbally and nonverbally with each other. These social interactions can induce both emotional contagion and emotional regulation, also known as social appraisal. The positive experience of sharing one's experience with a member of the group may contribute to an overall pleasurable experience, enhancing the viewer's enjoyment. This bonding is noticeable when friends or family watch a television show together in a familiar atmosphere.

B. Desensitization

Desensitization is a psychological process that has often been involved in explaining viewers' emotional reactions to media violence. Research on emotional reactions to violent messages has been concerned with the possibility that repeated exposure to violence in the mass media will result in desensitization, that is, that exposure to media violence will undermine feelings of concern, empathy, or sympathy that viewers might have toward the victims. To understand the effects of repeated exposure to violence, researchers have suggested that viewers become comfortable with violence that is initially anxiety provoking, much as they would if they were undergoing exposure therapy. Originally, researchers emphasized a therapeutic counterconditioning technique known as "systematic desensitization," in which the patient was gradually and systematically exposed to a graded series of anxiety provoking objects or situations. Most of the early work on desensitization to media violence, such as that conducted by Victor Cline and his colleagues (1973) and Margaret Thomas and her colleagues (1977), involved exposure to rather mild forms of television violence for relatively short periods of time. These studies indicated that viewers who watched large amounts of media violence

showed less physiological reactivity to violent film clips, compared to viewers who watched only small amounts, and that general physiological arousal decreased as viewers watched more violent media. Children as well as adults are susceptible to this effect. The theoretical framework will define the following concepts: the nature of the perpetrator, the justification of violence, going from aversion to enjoyment of violence, the decrease of emotional responsiveness, and aggressive thoughts.

1. Nature of the perpetrator

The first conceptual feature of desensitization in this research is the nature of the perpetrator. Perpetrators vary considerably in violent programs, and they use aggression very differently depending on the shows. Some perpetrators may be portrayed as "good" and use violence to protect society whereas others may be "bad" and use physical force for means to a selfish end. Studies indicate that both children and adults are more likely to attend to, identify with, and learn from attractive role models significantly more than unattractive ones (Bandura, 1986). Attractive perpetrators, therefore, may be more potent role models for learning aggressive behaviors than unattractive perpetrators. Studies have found that viewers rate prosocial or benevolent characters more favorably than cruel and malevolent characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). One type of "good" or prosocial character is the superhero, such as Batman or Superman, a hero who uses violence to oppose the forces of "evil". In addition to prosocial orientation, perceived similarity to the viewer can increase a violent character's attractiveness. Perceived similarity may be the result of shared demographics such as age or sex between the perpetrator and the viewer. For instance, boys are more likely to attend to and imitate male characters whereas girls are more likely to attend to and imitate female characters (Bandura, 1986). Collectively, the nature of the perpetrator seems to be an important factor in the learning of aggression with attractive perpetrators or perpetrators with whom the viewer can identify posing the most risk.

2. Justification of violence

Another conceptual feature is the justification of violence. Violence may be used for a variety of reasons in television programming and some of those reasons may be justified or socially acceptable, whereas others may not. Research has consistently documented that justified portrayals of violence increase aggressive responding in viewers; whether aggressive thoughts or behavior (Berkowitz & Geen, 1967; Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Green & Stoner, 1973, 1974). This effect has been documented across both fictional and more realistic programming (Meyer, 1972). Scholars have theorized that viewing justified violence may reduce individuals' inhibitions toward aggression, thereby heightening the likelihood of engaging in antisocial behavior (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994).

According to observational-learning theory, when violence is portrayed as justified, viewers are likely to come to believe that their own aggressive responses to a perceived offense are also appropriate, so they are therefore more apt to behave aggressively. Findings from experiments that varied the extent to which the observed violence was justified have demonstrated that seemingly warranted media violence indeed increases aggression. Theoretically, rewarding perpetrators for their aggression should also raise the likelihood that viewers will model the aggressive act, and indeed, media portrayals in which violence is rewarded have increased the risk that viewers will behave aggressively. Nor is an explicit reward necessary; seeing unpunished media violence may also enhance learning of aggressive thoughts and behaviors. In terms of plot characteristics, portraying violence as justified and showing rewards (or at least not showing punishments) for violence increase the effects that media violence has in stimulating aggression, particularly in the long run. As for viewer characteristics that depend on perceptions of the plot, those viewers who perceive the violence as telling about life more like it really is and who identify more with the perpetrator of the violence are also stimulated more toward violent behavior in the long run. Taken together these facts mean that violent acts

by charismatic heroes that appear justified and are rewarded, are the violent acts most likely to increase viewer's aggression.

3. From aversion to enjoyment of the violence

When talking about desensitization, the concept of going from aversion to enjoyment of the violence watched on-screen is a confirmed hypothesis. Usually, when viewers report higher levels of enjoyment after several exposures to media violence, this indicates pro-violence attitudes. Pro-violence attitudes signify cognitive desensitization. In fact, after continuous exposure to media violence in a short period of time, desensitization to media violence can occur, and that desensitization to violent stimuli could lead to the enjoyment of the violence portrayed on-screen. During the first scenes, the audience usually does not enjoy the violence, but rather feel appalled, disgusted, or shocked, also showing concern for the suffering of victims. With repeated exposure, however, the psychological impact of media violence is reduced, and viewers indicate feeling less sympathy for violence victims, as they start enjoying more the violence portrayed in the media scenes. Individuals tend to have negative responses after initially observing violence, although after repeated exposure they became desensitized to media violence and reported that they actually enjoyed the scenes more (Linz et al., 1988).

4. Decrease of emotional responsivity

This conceptual feature of desensitization states a decrease in emotional responsivity after repeated exposure to media violence, leading to a lower level of empathy towards either victims, or disliked characters. Chronic media violence exposure seems to have long-term effects on viewers' attitudes toward violence and victims of violence through the process of desensitization (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). Even brief exposure to media violence may alter people's physiological and affective reactions to violence and thus cause increased aggressive thoughts or behavior, reduced sympathy for victims of violent acts, and a decreased probability

of helping victims. When viewers report lower levels of sympathy for the victims of violence, they are showing signs of lower empathic responding, which is the capacity to perceive and experience the state of another. This reflects emotional desensitization. During the first scenes of violence, the audience feels sorry for victims of violence, but after repeated exposure, they start feeling less empathy, either towards a victim, or towards a disliked character being tortured or experiencing violence. Studies focusing on the decrease of emotional responsivity suggest that this sort of desensitization might also result in the decreased likelihood of being concerned for the victims of violence, and therefore in decreased likelihood of helping a victim of violence (Mullin & Linz, 1995).

5. Aggressive thoughts

Aggressive thoughts are another conceptual feature of desensitization to media violence. According to Jo and Berkowitz (1994), stimuli seen or heard in the mass media can activate or "prime," for a short time, other related thoughts in viewers. These thoughts, in turn, can activate other semantically associated ideas, feelings, and even action tendencies. The process of thought activation has been labeled a "priming effect." To illustrate how the priming process is instantiated, watching a violent film can "prime" hostile or aggressive thoughts or ideas in viewers. These hostile thoughts may automatically trigger in the viewer other hostile thoughts, feelings, and possibly even behavioral action tendencies on the long term. Bushman (1996) found that undergraduates exposed to violent film clips generated a greater number of aggressive associations to stimulus words than did undergraduates exposed to nonviolent film clips. Research suggests that other forms of violent media can also evoke aggressive thoughts in viewers. These findings suggest that exposure to violence, independent of the medium, can evoke aggressive ideas and thoughts in viewers. Other studies have revealed that individuals who have witnessed certain types of violent encounters via the mass media (i.e., portrayals of sexual violence) are more likely to favor violence in interpersonal settings (Malamuth &

Check, 1981). These results suggest that priming aggressive thoughts can alter both individuals' interpretations of others and attitudes toward aggressive behavior. Research evidence also points to the fact that priming aggressive thoughts may heighten the probability of acting aggressively later on. From a priming effects perspective, Berkowitz and other researchers have argued that such weapons prompt or trigger aggressive thoughts and memories in viewers (Berkowitz, 1990). When these types of thoughts are primed, viewers may be more susceptible to acting or behaving aggressively. Studies have found consistently that violence that is rewarded increases the risk of learning aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). Thus, violence that is either rewarded or not punished may facilitate viewers' learning of aggressive thoughts and behavior.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The chapter will be divided in two parts: the quantitative methodology applied to the first two causal hypothesis, and the qualitative methodology applied to the third descriptive hypothesis. The first part of the chapter will discuss the first two hypothesis, the quantitative method, the conceptualization of variables, the research participants' sample, the definition of the series' characters to better understand the results, as well as the definition of the scales items in relation to the series. It will also include the data analysis tests as well as the validity and reliability of the scales used.

The second part of the chapter will discuss the third hypothesis, the qualitative method, the themes under which the findings will be analyzed, the research participants, and the definition of the series' characters to better understand the results.

A. Quantitative Methodology

1. Hypothesis

As discussed in the literature review, and later on developed in the theoretical framework, viewers who identify with television characters usually find similarities with these character, and then attempt to imitate their favorite character to whom they feel similar to and may form virtual bonds with. The advances of technology, and the imminent role of social networks in today's world is also linked to the identification with these television characters who not only appear on-screen, but are also part of the social media lives of viewers who follow them online. As social learning is strengthened in group settings, it is safe to assume that people who watch the same series, or follow it online are likely to build parasocial relationships with the characters, leading to a stronger identification. The first and second hypothesis are based on the theories of identification and social learning.

From this perspective, two hypothesis were developed:

H1: The series in which characters have more similarities with the Lebanese female audience will have a larger effect on their identification and imitation of the characters.

H2: The series watched and discussed in a social group setting will build parasocial interactions with the characters, and affect identification and imitation of the characters.

2. Conceptualization of variables

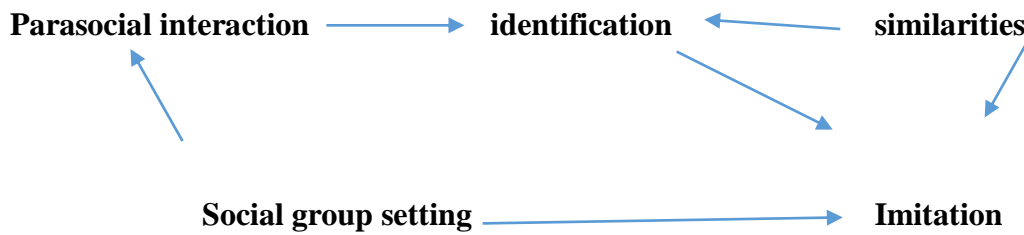
The variables that are used in the hypothesis are based on concepts that were found in the literature review, as well as in the discussion of the theoretical framework of identification, social learning, and desensitization. This section describes how the concepts will be used for this research specifically taking into consideration the Lebanese context.

Regarding the first two causal hypothesis, there are three sets of variables that will be looked at. First, let's take a look at the controlled variables that do not change: the two series chosen for the quantitative research are *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*, which are analyzed under the identification and the social learning theories.

Lebanese audience, since the added value of the research is the study applied to the Lebanese population. The "women only" factor included 115 women between the ages of 15 and 35. The research focused on women because *Gossip Girl* is a female-oriented series, and therefore the viewers of *Game of Thrones* had to be women-only as well, since as part of group 2, they had also watched *Gossip Girl*. They all belong to an "Americanized generation" which talks mostly in English in a country where Arabic is the native language, watches American series, dress in American brands.

Second, the independent variables measured are: parasocial interaction, similarities, and social group setting.

Third, the dependent variable measured are: identification and imitation.



3. Research design and methods

The first and second hypothesis are causal hypothesis, and the research methodology that applies to both will be a quantitative research method, which involves rigorous measurements as well as objective and scientific data analysis and results. The point of a causal hypothesis is to study which independent variable affects the dependent variable; therefore there is a cause/effect relationship.

4. Research Participants' Sample

As per Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), the formula to calculate the sample size is the following: $N > 50 + 8m$, with N being the number of participants, and m being the number of independent variables. In the present study, there are three independent variables: parasocial interactions, similarities, and social group setting. Therefore, the total number of participants has to be higher than 74. The study for the first two hypothesis gathered 115 Lebanese female participants between the ages of 15 and 35. The difference in age is obvious given the fact that *Gossip Girl* is currently watched by teenagers (being a series revolving around teenage drama), whereas *Game of Thrones* is a series targeting adults. Since the participants who watched *Game of Thrones* had to have also watched *Gossip Girl*, it should be noted that they probably watched the teenage series years ago. The participants had to meet certain convenient requirements to the research. Because a very small minority of Lebanese males watch *Gossip Girl*, let alone are affected by it, the study included females solely. The participants should have acquired a

certain level of education (minimum high-school), they should have access to satellite channels which presumably assumes that they had access to *Gossip Girl* on Fox TV or *Game of Thrones* on HBO, or they should have previously acquired the DVDs for the series, or they should also have internet access to watch the episodes online. The sample was selected from the Lebanese high schools, and some of them were acquaintances of the researcher. Other participants were female adults either studying in Lebanese universities, or working young women who had watched the series. The participants in schools were handed hard copies of the surveys that were collected after the filling, and the participants in universities and work were emailed the surveys. The group of girls who watched *Gossip Girl* only answered a survey of 35 questions, and the group of girls who watched *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* answered a survey of 70 questions; 35 questions regarding *Gossip Girl*, and the same ones applied to *Game of Thrones*. They were divided into group 1: girls who have watched *Gossip Girl* only (75 participants), and group 2: girls who have watched both *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* (40 participants). Although the number of girls who have watched both *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* is smaller than the number of girls who have only watched *Gossip Girl*, 40 participants is still considered a fair number for conventional parametric statistics.

The research established three comparisons:

- *Gossip Girl* group 1 (75 participants) with *Gossip Girl* group 2 (40 participants)
- *Gossip Girl* group 1 (75 participants) with *Game of Thrones* group 2 (40 participants)
- *Gossip Girl* group 2 (40 participants) with *Game of Thrones* group 2 (40 participants)

5. Defining Series' characters

In order to have a better understanding of the research's results, it is necessary to define the characters on which the answers to the surveys were based.

Gossip Girl has two main characters that were given as a choice for the participants to pick their favorite character:

Blair Waldorf, the petite brunette, perfectionist and into vintage old-Hollywood style, looking for her one true love, and thriving to excel in school, and later on in life.

Serena Van Der Woodsen, the tall blonde, lost in what she wants to do in her life, always getting into trouble, and always dressed in a very edgy and trendy style.

Game of Thrones consists of a more complicated plot, where the choice of a favorite character sometimes cannot be narrowed down to only one. The participants were given three choices, and a fourth one to write down their own:

Khaleesi, the exiled queen trying to win back her throne, beautiful, just character against criminals in the series, and violent when need be.

Cersei Lannister, the unrightfully ruling queen, cunning, manipulative, and having an incest relationship with her brother.

Jon Snow, the bastard of Winterfell, always aiming for the greater good.

In the choice box, two characters were picked by a number of participants:

Tyrion Lannister: Cersei's younger brother, a very smart and witty dwarf who is mocked, and constantly humiliated, with his intelligence unvalued most of the time.

Arya Stark: Jon Snow's younger sister who refuses to act as a lady, and survives the series by learning men fighting skills and ending up a professional assassin.

6. Defining scale items and their validity

The surveys were created based on five previously set scales with established reliability, and one added scale created by the researcher and the thesis director.

The first scale is the one of Cynthia Hoffner (2005) on character's attributes. The items were the following, each preceded by the coding used to describe it in the results section: CA-1 character's attribute "smart", CA-2 character's attribute "successful", CA-3 character's attribute "attractive", CA-4 character's attribute "funny", CA-5 character's attribute "respected", CA-6 character's attribute "popular".

The second scale is the one of Cynthia Hoffner (2005) on wishful identification. The items were the following, each one preceded by the coding used to describe it in the results section: WI-1 wishful identification 1 "he/she is the kind of person I want to be like", WI-2 wishful identification 2 "I wish I could be more like him/her", WI-3 wishful identification 3 "he/she is someone I would like to imitate", WI-4 wishful identification 4 "I would like to do the kind of things he/she does on the show", WI-5 wishful identification 5 "I would NEVER want to act the way he/she does on the show".

The third scale is the parasocial interaction scale of Rubin and Perse (1987). The scale's items are the following, preceded by their code used in the results section: PI-1 parasocial interaction 1 "my favorite character makes me feel comfortable as if I'm with a friend", PI-2 parasocial interaction 2 "I look forward to watching my favorite character tomorrow", PI-3 parasocial interaction 3 "I would read a story about my favorite character online or on social networks", PI-4 parasocial interaction 4 "I miss my favorite character when he/she is not on the show", PI-5 parasocial interaction 5 "I feel sorry for my favorite character when he/she makes a mistake".

The fourth scale is the attitude similarity scale of Cynthia Hoffner (2005), the scale's items are the following, preceded by their code used in the results section: AS-1 attitude similarity 1 "my favorite character thinks like me", AS-2 attitude similarity 2 "my favorite character

behaves like me”, AS-3 attitude similarity 3 “my favorite character is like me”, AS-4 attitude similarity 4 “my favorite character is similar to me”.

The fifth scale is the connectedness scale by Cristel Russell (2004), with four items generating seven questions. The items are as follows, preceded by their code used in the results section: fashion: connectedness 1 “I like the clothes they wear on the show, connectedness 2 “I like the hairstyles they have on the show”, connectedness 3 “at some point I bought the clothing styles or did the hairstyles of the character”, imitation: connectedness 4 “sometimes, I imitate the attitude of my favorite character”, connectedness 5 “sometimes I find myself saying phrases or expressions from the show”, modeling: connectedness 6 “sometimes I get ideas from the character or the series on how to interact in real life”, paraphernalia: connectedness 7 “I have objects that relate to the character or the series (badges, books, clothes...)”.

The sixth scale was developed by the researcher and the thesis director, to ask questions about the social group setting component. The items were as follows, preceded by their code used in the results section: SGS-1 social group setting 1 “who do you watch the series with” (A-alone, G- in a group, AG- sometimes alone and sometimes in a group), SGS-2 social group setting 2 “how much do you talk about the series or the characters with your friends” (D- daily, W- weekly, M- monthly, N- never), SGS-3 social group setting 3 “do you follow accounts about the series or the characters on social media” (yes, no), SGS-4 social group setting 4 “how much do you check these accounts” (D- daily, W- weekly, M- monthly, N- never).

7. Data analysis

The data generated from the surveys answers was analyzed through SPSS. A scales descriptive was generated, followed by a contrast analysis using both T-Test and Chi-Square.

The T-Test was applied to the items of the scales of character’s attributes, wishful identification, parasocial interaction, and attitude similarities.

The Chi-Square analysis was applied to the items of the scales of connectedness and social group setting.

B. Qualitative methodology

1. Hypothesis

In regards to desensitization, and according to the literature review and the theoretical framework, it is likely that the audience that is exposed to repeated acts of violence becomes less affected by the gore and starts to enjoy the scenes more by justifying the violence. The third hypothesis is based on the theory of desensitization.

H3: After repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer will experience desensitization to the violence portrayed on-screen.

2. Themes

The two series chosen for the qualitative research are *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, which are analyzed under the desensitization theory. Regarding the third descriptive hypothesis, the themes used to develop the hypothesis are the following: the justification of the violence portrayed on-screen, the level of exposure to media violence, going from the aversion to the enjoyment of the violence on-screen, the decrease of emotional responsivity after several exposure to violence on-screen, and the aggressive thoughts that stem from being exposed to violent scenes.

3. Research design and methods

The third hypothesis is a descriptive hypothesis, and the research methodology that applies is a qualitative research method. In the case of a descriptive hypothesis, there is no cause/effect; it is a matter of describing the attitude of the viewer before and after being exposed to violence, lack of morals, and afterwards, establish whether they justified the character's actions, and

went from aversion to enjoyment of these actions. Since there was a lack of quantitative studies applied to desensitization in the literature review, a qualitative method was established for the study of this hypothesis. A qualitative research explores more in depth situations, and generates detailed data in order to understand the context. It establishes an understanding and description of people's personal experiences in the subject discussed. It is not generalizing the results on the Lebanese population but it is describing the effects of repeated exposure to media violence on two Lebanese participants.

4. Research participants

The two series chosen were *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*. In the case of a descriptive qualitative study, there was no specific number of participants required; the requirement remained in the fact that the participant had to not have watched the series previously, in order for the researcher to study the themes pre-series, and then their evolution while the participant was being repeatedly exposed to the series.

Two Lebanese participants were chosen. One of them had never watched *Breaking Bad*, the other one had never watched *Game of Thrones*. Both participants were acquaintances of the researcher, and agreed on participating because each one of them was planning to watch the series anyway. They were both Lebanese because the original component of the research remains studying the Lebanese population, and adding scholarly literature about the region to the subject. It should be noted that the participant watching *Game of Thrones* was male. Due to the limited timing the researcher had, it was very hard to find a participant who had never watched one of the most-watched series worldwide nowadays, and one who was willing to participate in the research. Therefore, since the series is not female-oriented and the gender of the participant would not affect the theory used in this case, the research had to settle for the available male participant.

The choice of only one participant per series was first, because the study was going to be an in-depth description of the evolution of their reactions after repeated exposure. For lack of time, it was not possible to apply this observation on more than one participant. And given the fact that the study is purely descriptive, and not generalizing a cause-effect relationship, the researcher was given permission to apply the study on one participant per series.

5. Defining Series' characters

In order to have a better understanding of the research's results, it is necessary to define the characters on which the answers to the interviews were based.

In *Breaking Bad*, the main character, Walter White, was the one around whom the interview questions mainly revolved. There were other characters, stated below, who appeared in the answers of the participant.

Walter White, chemistry teacher with a very weak personality, finds out he has cancer. In order to provide for his family before his imminent death, he turns into a methamphetamine cook, and later on, develops into a drug lord.

Gus Fringe, successful drug lord, very composed, initially not directly violent, but develops into a very threatening character.

The twins, coming to avenge the death of a cousin by aiming to murder Walter White, uneducated, silent but speaking only in violent and gore acts.

Game of Thrones consists of a more complicated plot, where the choice of a favorite character sometimes cannot be narrowed down to only one. The participant's choice was varying while watching season after season. The recurring characters mentioned in the answers of the participants were the ones below:

Khaleesi, the exiled queen trying to win back her throne, beautiful, just character against criminals in the series, and violent when need be.

Cersei Lannister, the unrightfully ruling queen, cunning, manipulative, and having an incest relationship with her brother.

Jon Snow, the bastard of Winterfell, always aiming for the greater good.

Tyrion Lannister: Cersei's younger brother, a very smart and witty dwarf who is mocked, and constantly humiliated, with his intelligence unvalued most of the time.

Khal Drogo, chief of the Dothraki clan, Khaleesi's husband who leads her to her powerful position.

Joffrey Baratheon, son of Cersei Lannister born of incest with her brother, spiteful king, torturer.

Ramsay Bolton, bastard of one of the lords, finds pleasure in torture and killings.

6. Defining themes

Each participant was separately asked a set of questions, a pre-interview, on their favorite type of series, on their views regarding violence on-screen. The participant who signed up to watch *Breaking Bad* was asked about their view on drug use and drug dealing because this is the main subject of the show. The participant who signed up to watch *Game of Thrones* was asked about their view on power and torture, which are recurring themes in the series.

Afterwards, the participants were asked to watch the series up to specific episodes, after which there was an interview, with questions revolving around the themes that will either confirm or refute the observation of desensitization after the exposure, the themes being: the nature of the perpetrator, the justification of the violence portrayed on-screen, the level of exposure to violence, going from the aversion to the enjoyment of the violence on-screen, the decrease of

emotional responsivity after several exposure to violence on-screen, and the aggressive thoughts that stem from being exposed to violent scenes.

7. Data analysis

The data generated from the interview questions is analyzed through the previously mentioned themes; it will objectively describe the reactions of the participants after repeated exposure to violent scenes, torture, gore, and drug dealing.

This description will be matched to the short-term effects of the theory of desensitization, which will give a first descriptive look at whether the signs shown by participants match the signs of desensitization, opening the door to future research on the matter.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

A. **Quantitative Study: Identification and Social Learning with *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones***

1. Sample characteristics and demographics

The inclusion criteria for participating in the study was that the participant must be: (1) a female participant, (2) Lebanese, (3) between the ages of 15 to 35, (4) must have watched either *Gossip Girl*, or *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*. A total of 115 participants the online questionnaire; 75 of them completed the *Gossip Girl* only questionnaire and were part of Group 1, and 40 of them completed *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*, and were part of Group 2. The number of participants exceeded the initial number of recruitment intended, which was 74 per Tabachnik and Fidell.

Table 1 below reflects the final sample consisting of 115 participants (100% female). The mean age of participants in Group 1 was 18.04 years ($SD=3.236$) with a range from 15 to 26 years. The mean age of participants in Group 2 was 24.55 years ($SD=3.863$) with a range from 16 to 35 years.

Regarding Table 2 below, out of 115 participants who have watched *Gossip Girl* from group 1 and group 2, the choice of favorite character was between Blair and Serena (56 participants Blair, 49%; 59 participants Serena, 51%). Out of 40 participants who have watched *Game of Thrones* from group 2, the choice of favorite character was between Khaleesi, Cersei, Jon Snow, Arya and Tyrion (19 participants Khaleesi, 47.5%; 2 participants Cersei, 5%; 13 participants Jon Snow, 32.5%; 3 participants Arya, 7.5%; 3 participants Tyrion, 7.5%).

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Items	Gossip Girl (group 1)			Gossip Girl (group 2)			Game of Thrones (group 2)		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	75	18.04	3.236	40	24.55	3.863	40	24.55	3.863

Table 2: Characters from *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* and how frequently they are selected

Characters	N	Selection Frequency
Gossip Girl: Blair	115	56 (49%)
Gossip Girl: Serena	115	59 (51%)
Game of Thrones: Khaleesi	40	19 (47.5%)
Game of Thrones: Cersei	40	2 (5%)
Game of Thrones: Jon Snow	40	13 (32.5%)
Game of Thrones: other: Arya	40	3 (7.5%)
Game of Thrones: other: Tyrion	40	3 (7.5%)

2. Scale Descriptives

Table 3 below reflects the mean and standard deviation of the computed variables. The total composite score of each computed variable ranges from 0 to 100, with an average of 50. Concerning group 1 (*Gossip Girl*), the 75 participants reported an above average mean for the variable Character's Attributes ($M=78.00$, $SD=10.31$), a slightly above average mean for the variable Wishful Identification ($M=59.33$, $SD=18.42$), an above average mean for the variable Parasocial Interaction ($M=75.06$, $SD=15.12$), and a slightly below average mean for the variable Attitude Similarities ($M=44.91$, $SD=16.75$). Concerning group 2 (*Gossip Girl*), the 40 participants reported an above average mean for the variable CA Character's Attributes

($M=79.47$, $SD=10.27$), a slightly above average mean for the variable WI Wishful Identification ($M=53.87$, $SD=21.91$), an above average mean for the variable PI Parasocial Interaction ($M=71.50$, $SD=12.77$), and a below average mean for the variable AS Attitude Similarities ($M=38.75$, $SD=16.40$). Concerning group 2 (*Game of Thrones*), the 40 participants reported an above average mean for the variable CA Character's Attributes ($M=81.98$, $SD=10.09$), a slightly above average mean for the variable WI Wishful Identification ($M=53.62$, $SD=17.47$), an above average mean for the variable PI Parasocial Interaction ($M=74.50$, $SD=13.04$), and a below average mean for the variable AS Attitude Similarities ($M=40.00$, $SD=14.90$).

Table 3: Descriptive table of computed statistics items *Gossip Girl* group 1, group 2, and *Game of Thrones* Group 2.

Items	Gossip Girl (group 1)			Gossip Girl (group 2)			Game of Thrones (group 2)		
	N	Mean	Std.	N	Mean	Std.	N	Mean	Std.
			Deviation			Deviation			Deviation
CA	75	78.0000	10.31049	40	79.4792	10.26655	40	81.9792	10.09162
WI	75	59.3333	18.42320	40	53.8750	21.91146	40	53.6250	17.46746
PI	75	75.0667	15.12322	40	71.5000	12.77016	40	74.5000	13.04823
AS	75	44.9167	16.74825	40	38.7500	16.39604	40	40.0000	14.89816

Table 4 below reflect the mean and standard deviation of each individual item of each scale. The total composite score of each item of Character's Attributes, Wishful Identification, Parasocial Interaction and Attitude Similarities ranges from 1 to 5, with an average of 3.

The coding found in table 4 correspond to the following names:

CA-1 character's attribute "smart", CA-2 character's attribute "successful", CA-3 character's attribute "attractive", CA-4 character's attribute "funny", CA-5 character's attribute "respected", CA-6 character's attribute "popular".

WI-1 wishful identification 1 "he/she is the kind of person I want to be like", WI-2 wishful identification 2 "I wish I could be more like him/her", WI-3 wishful identification 3 "he/she is someone I would like to imitate", WI-4 wishful identification 4 "I would like to do the kind of things he/she does on the show", WI-5 wishful identification 5 "I would NEVER want to act the way he/she does on the show".

PI-1 parasocial interaction 1 "my favorite character makes me feel comfortable as if I'm with a friend", PI-2 parasocial interaction 2 "I look forward to watching my favorite character tomorrow", PI-3 parasocial interaction 3 "I would read a story about my favorite character online or on social networks", PI-4 parasocial interaction 4 "I miss my favorite character when he/she is not on the show", PI-5 parasocial interaction 5 "I feel sorry for my favorite character when he/she makes a mistake".

AS-1 attitude similarity 1 "my favorite character thinks like me", AS-2 attitude similarity 2 "my favorite character behaves like me", AS-3 attitude similarity 3 "my favorite character is like me", AS-4 attitude similarity 4 "my favorite character is similar to me".

Table 4: Descriptive table of statistics per item *Gossip Girl* group 1, group 2, and *Game of Thrones* Group 2.

Items	Gossip Girl (group 1)			Gossip Girl (group 2)			Game of Thrones (group 2)		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	75	18.04	3.236	40	24.55	3.863	40	24.55	3.862
Seasons	75	3.85	1.998	40	5.33	1.347	40	6.48	1.339
CA-1	75	3.97	.735	40	4.10	.744	40	4.65	.533
CA-2	75	4.04	.761	40	4.10	.744	40	4.50	.599
CA-3	75	4.64	.584	40	4.53	.640	40	4.60	.841
CA-4	75	3.83	.860	40	3.70	.883	40	3.18	1.035
CA-5	75	3.52	.860	40	3.98	.768	40	4.37	.774
CA-6	75	4.72	.508	40	4.68	.474	40	4.37	.807
WI-1	75	3.32	1.092	40	3.15	.949	40	3.47	.816
WI-2	75	3.53	.935	40	3.15	1.027	40	3.30	.791
WI-3	75	3.20	1.053	40	2.95	.959	40	3.05	.904
WI-4	75	3.44	1.043	40	3.30	1.114	40	2.55	1.108
WI-5	75	3.37	.818	40	3.23	.974	40	3.35	.864
PI-1	75	3.65	.830	40	3.20	.791	40	3.18	.958
PI-2	75	4.03	1.000	40	3.78	.768	40	4.18	.712
PI-3	75	3.97	1.000	40	3.90	.810	40	3.87	.939
PI-4	75	4.16	.806	40	4.18	.781	40	4.35	.736
PI-5	75	4.20	.822	40	4.25	.588	40	4.32	.694
AS-1	75	2.55	.722	40	2.33	.572	40	2.42	.747
AS-2	75	2.31	.716	40	2.03	.733	40	2.10	.632
AS-3	75	3.15	.800	40	2.93	.829	40	2.93	.656
AS-4	75	3.19	1.023	40	2.93	.859	40	2.95	.749

Table 5 below reflects the percentage of “yes” answered for each individual item of the scale connectedness, and the item social group setting 3; all of which items were to be answered by “yes” or “no”. The frequency of the “yes” answer was displayed in its percentage form. Concerning Group 1 (*Gossip Girl*), the 75 participants reported above average percentage for the items connectedness 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and the item SGS-3 social group setting 3, and highly below average percentage for connectedness 3 (38.7%), and connectedness 7 (34.7%). Concerning Group 2 (*Gossip Girl*), the 40 participants reported above average percentage for the items connectedness 1 and 2, and the item social group setting 3, and below average percentage for connectedness 3 (40%), connectedness 4 (25%), connectedness 5 (47.5%), connectedness 6 (47.5%) and connectedness 7 (12.5%). Concerning group 2 (*Game of Thrones*), the 40 participants reported above average percentage for the items connectedness 1, 2, 5 and social group setting 3, and below average percentage for connectedness 3 (10%), connectedness 4 (27.5%), connectedness 6 (32.5%), and connectedness 7 (37.5%).

The coding found in table 5 correspond to the following items:

connectedness 1: “I like the clothes they wear on the show”, connectedness 2: “I like the hairstyles they have on the show”, connectedness 3: “at some point I bought the clothing styles or did the hairstyles of the character”, connectedness 4: “sometimes, I imitate the attitude of my favorite character”, connectedness 5: “sometimes I find myself saying phrases or expressions from the show”, connectedness 6: “sometimes I get ideas from the character or the series on how to interact in real life”, connectedness 7: “I have objects that relate to the character or the series (badges, books, clothes...)”.

Social group setting 3 SGS-3 “do you follow accounts about the series or the characters on social media”.

Table 5: Descriptive table of frequencies per item *Gossip Girl* group 1, group 2, and *Game of Thrones* Group 2.

Items	Gossip Girl (group 1)		Gossip Girl (group 2)		Game of Thrones (group 2)	
	N	Percentage of “yes”	N	Percentage of “yes”	N	Percentage of “yes”
Connectedness 1	75	94.7	40	92.5	40	72.5
Connectedness 2	75	97.3	40	97.5	40	77.5
Connectedness 3	75	38.7	40	40.0	40	10.0
Connectedness 4	75	52.0	40	25.0	40	27.5
Connectedness 5	75	73.3	40	47.5	40	62.5
Connectedness 6	75	77.3	40	47.5	40	32.5
Connectedness 7	75	34.7	40	12.5	40	37.5
SGS-3	75	69.3	40	60.0	40	70.0

Table 6 below reflects the percentage of answers to the items social group setting 1, 2 and 4. Concerning Group 1 (*Gossip Girl*), the 75 participants report the highest percentage in watching *Gossip Girl* alone (60%), talking about the series and characters to their friends equally between weekly and monthly (30.7%), and checking social networks account related to the series or the characters weekly (30.7%). Concerning Group 2 (*Gossip Girl*), the 40 participants report the highest percentage in watching *Gossip Girl* alone (65%), talking about the series and characters to their friends “never” (50%), and checking social networks account related to the series or the characters “never” (52.5%). Concerning Group 2 (*Game of Thrones*), the 40 participants report the highest percentage in watching *Game of Thrones* sometimes alone, and sometimes in a group (50%), talking about the series and characters to their friends

monthly (50%), and checking social networks account related to the series or the characters “never” (37.5%).

The coding found in table 6 corresponds to the following items:

SGS-1 social group setting 1 “who do you watch the series with” (A-alone, G- in a group, AG-sometimes alone and sometimes in a group), SGS-2 social group setting 2 “how much do you talk about the series or the characters with your friends” (D- daily, W- weekly, M- monthly, N- never), SGS-4 social group setting 4 “how much do you check these accounts” (D- daily, W- weekly, M- monthly, N- never).

Table 6: Descriptive tables of social group setting items *Gossip Girl* group 1, group 2, and *Game of Thrones* Group 2.

a.

Item	Gossip Girl (group 1)			Gossip Girl (group 2)			Game of Thrones (group 2)		
	% A	% AG	% G	% A	% AG	% G	% A	% AG	% G
SGS- 1	60.0	33.3	6.7	65.0	27.5	7.5	35.0	50.0	15.0

b.

Item	Gossip Girl (group 1)				Gossip Girl (group 2)				Game of Thrones (group 2)			
	% D	% W	% M	% N	% D	% W	% M	% N	% D	% W	% M	% N
SGS- 2	10.7	30.7	30.7	28.0	2.5	17.5	30.0	50.0	10.0	25.0	50.0	15.0

c.

Item	Gossip Girl (group 1)				Gossip Girl (group 2)				Game of Thrones (group 2)			
	% D	% W	% M	% N	% D	% W	% M	% N	% D	% W	% M	% N
SGS- 4	22.7	30.7	24.0	22.7	5.0	15.0	27.5	52.5	10.0	20.0	32.5	37.5

3. T-test and Chi-square Group 2 (40 participants) *Gossip Girl* vs *Game of Thrones*

In Table 7 below, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference per computed variable within the same group; group 2, comparing different series; *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*. There appears to be no significant differences within the same group, across two different series, with $p > .05$.

Table 7: Independent T-Test Contrast of Computed variables of Group 2, *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* (40 participants)

Pairs of items	t	d.f.	p
Character's Attributes: GG - GOT	-1.525	39	0.135
Wishful Identification: GG - GOT	0.072	39	0.943
Parasocial Interaction: GG – GOT	-1.260	39	0.215
Attitude Similarities: GG – GOT	-0.479	39	0.635

In Table 8 below, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there are significant differences per each item of the scales within the same group; group 2, comparing different series; *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*.

The t-test indicated that participants in Group 2 ($M=24.55$, $SD=3.86$) report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "smart" for *Game of Thrones* compared to *Gossip Girl* $t(39) = -3.731$, $p < .01$. They also report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "successful" for *Game of Thrones* compared to *Gossip Girl* $t(39) = -3.252$, $p < .01$. And they report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "respected" for *Game of Thrones* compared to *Gossip Girl* $t(39) = -2.393$, $p < .05$. The participants report significantly higher level

of parasocial interaction 2, which would be looking forward to watching their favorite character the next day, for *Game of Thrones* compared to *Gossip Girl* $t(39) = -2.449, p < .01$.

The participants report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "funny" for *Gossip Girl* compared to *Game of Thrones* $t(39) = 2.479, p < .05$. They report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "popular" for *Gossip Girl* compared to *Game of Thrones* $t(39) = 2.082, p < .05$. The participants report significantly higher level of wishful identification 4, which would be doing the kind of things their favorite character does on the show, for *Gossip Girl* compared to *Game of Thrones* $t(39) = 3.660, p < .01$.

Table 8: Independent T-Test Contrast of Group 2; *Gossip Girl* v/s *Game of Thrones* (40 participants) per item

Pairs of items	t	d.f.	p
Character's attributes: smart	-3.731	39	0.001
Character's attributes: successful	-3.252	39	0.002
Character's attributes: attractive	-0.534	39	0.596
Character's attributes: funny	2.479	39	0.018
Character's attributes: respected	-2.393	39	0.022
Character's attributes: popular	2.082	39	0.044
Wishful identification 1	-1.674	39	0.102
Wishful identification 2	-0.902	39	0.372
Wishful identification 3	-0.662	39	0.512
Wishful identification 4	3.660	39	0.001
Wishful identification 5	-0.696	39	0.491
Parasocial interaction 1	0.144	39	0.886
Parasocial interaction 2	-2.449	39	0.019
Parasocial interaction 3	0.198	39	0.844
Parasocial interaction 4	-1.312	39	0.197
Parasocial interaction 5	-0.771	39	0.446
Attitude similarities 1	-0.941	39	0.352
Attitude similarities 2	-0.650	39	0.520
Attitude similarities 3	0.000	39	1.000
Attitude similarities 4	-0.158	39	0.875

Table 9 below a chi-square test was conducted on qualitative items of the scales of connectedness and social group setting within the same group; group 2, comparing different series; *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*. Seeing that the chi-square of connectedness 1, which would be liking the clothes they wear on the show, is significant, $X^2(1, N=40) = 5.54, p < .05$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 1, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 2, which would be liking the hairstyles on the show, is significant, $X^2(1, N=40) = 7.31, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 2, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 3, which would be buying the style or doing the hairstyle, is significant, $X^2(1, N=40) = 9.60, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 3, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 7, which would be having paraphernalia related to the series, is significant, $X^2(1, N=40) = 6.67, p < .05$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 7, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among group 2. The chi-square of social group setting 1, which would be who they watch the series with, is significant, $X^2(2, N=40) = 7.21, p < .05$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between social group setting 1, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among group 2. The chi-square of social group setting 2, which would be how much they talk about the series or the characters with friends, is significant, $X^2(3, N=40) = 11.87, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between social group setting 2, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among group 2.

Table 9: Chi-Square Contrast on qualitative items of Group 2, *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* (40 participants)

Items	Categories	Proportions (%)		Chi-squared	p
		Gossip Girl	Game of Thrones		
Connectedness 1	No	7	27	5.541	0.019
	Yes	93	73		
Connectedness 2	No	2	22	7.314	0.007
	Yes	98	78		
Connectedness 3	No	60	90	9.600	0.002
	Yes	40	10		
Connectedness 4	No	75	73	0.065	0.799
	Yes	25	27		
Connectedness 5	No	53	37	1.818	0.178
	Yes	47	63		
Connectedness 6	No	53	68	1.875	0.171
	Yes	47	32		
Connectedness 7	No	88	63	6.667	0.010
	Yes	12	37		
SGS- 1	Alone	65	35	7.213	0.027
	Group	28	50		
	Alone/Group	7	15		
SGS- 2	Daily	50	15	11.868	0.008
	Weekly	30	50		
	Monthly	18	25		
	Never	2	10		
SGS- 3	No	40	30	0.879	0.348
	Yes	60	70		
SGS- 4	Daily	53	38	2.119	0.548
	Weekly	28	32		
	Monthly	15	20		
	Never	4	10		

4. T-test and Chi-square Group 1 (75 participants) *Gossip Girl* vs Group 2 (40 participants) *Game of Thrones*

In Table 10 below, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there are significant differences per age and computed variable between the 75 participants of Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only), and the 40 participants of Group 2 (*Game of Thrones*), therefore comparing two different groups who watched two different series. The t-test indicated that participants in Group 2 (*Game of Thrones*) ($M=24.55$, $SD=3.86$) are significantly older $t(113)=-9.596$, $p<.0001$ than participants in Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only) ($M=18.04$, $SD=3.24$). The t-test also indicated that, on average, participants in Group 2 (*Game of Thrones*) ($M=81.97$, $SD=10.09$) reported significantly higher levels of Character's Attributes with $t(113)=-1.986$, $p<.05$ than participants in Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only) ($M=78.00$, $SD=10.31$).

Table 10: Independent T-Test Contrast of Age and Computed variables of Group 1 *Gossip Girl* (75 participants) with Group 2 *Game of Thrones* (40 participants)

Items	F	p	t	d.f.	p
Age	3.565	0.062	-9.596	113	0.000
Character's Attributes	0.013	0.909	-1.986	113	0.049
Wishful Identification	0.165	0.686	1.611	113	0.110
Parasocial Interaction	0.147	0.702	0.200	113	0.842
Attitude Similarities	1.085	0.300	1.556	113	0.122

In Table 11 below, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there are significant differences per each item of the scales across two groups; the 75 participants of

Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only), and the 40 participants of Group 2 (*Game of Thrones*), therefore comparing two different groups who watched two different series.

The t-test indicated that participants in Group 2 ($M=24.55$, $SD=3.86$) report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "smart" for *Game of Thrones* compared to participants in Group 1 ($M=18.04$, $SD=3.24$) for *Gossip Girl* $t(113) = -5.142$, $p < .0001$, as well as for character's attribute "successful" $t(113) = -3.312$, $p < .01$, and for character's attribute "respected" $t(113) = -5.253$, $p < .0001$.

The t-test also indicated that participants in Group 1 ($M=18.04$, $SD=3.24$) report significantly higher level of character's attribute "funny" for *Gossip Girl* compared to participants in Group 2 ($M=24.55$, $SD=3.86$) for *Game of Thrones* $t(113) = 3.601$, $p < .0001$, as well as for character's attribute "popular" $t(55.94) = 2.457$, $p < .05$. The participants in Group 1 report higher level of wishful identification 4, which would be doing the kind of things their favorite character does on the show, for *Gossip Girl*, compared to Group 2 for *Game of Thrones* $t(113) = 4.265$, $p < .0001$. They also report higher level of parasocial interaction 1, which would be feeling comfortable with your favorite character as if being with a friend, for *Gossip Girl* compared to Group 2 for *Game of Thrones* $t(113) = 2.788$, $p < .01$.

Table 11: Independent T-Test Contrast of Group 1 *Gossip Girl* (75 participants) v/s Group 2 *Game of Thrones* (40 participants) per item

Items	F	p	t	d.f.	p
Character's attributes: smart	0.302	0.584	-5.142	113	0.000
Character's attributes: successful	0.20	0.889	-3.312	113	0.001
Character's attributes: attractive	1.513	0.221	0.299	113	0.766
Character's attributes: funny	0.998	0.320	3.601	113	0.000
Character's attributes: respected	1.290	0.259	-5.253	113	0.000
Character's attributes: popular	11.807	0.001	2.457	55.947	0.017
Wishful identification 1	5.061	0.026	-0.859	100.696	0.392
Wishful identification 2	3.757	0.055	1.342	113	0.182
Wishful identification 3	2.083	0.152	0.763	113	0.447
Wishful identification 4	0.092	0.763	4.265	113	0.000
Wishful identification 5	0.379	0.540	0.143	113	0.887
Parasocial interaction 1	0.886	0.349	2.788	113	0.006
Parasocial interaction 2	1.759	0.187	-0.832	113	0.407
Parasocial interaction 3	0.224	0.637	0.513	113	0.609
Parasocial interaction 4	0.018	0.894	-1.240	113	0.217
Parasocial interaction 5	0.992	0.321	-0.818	113	0.415
Attitude similarities 1	0.002	0.969	0.850	113	0.397
Attitude similarities 2	5.184	0.025	1.593	88.707	0.115
Attitude similarities 3	2.831	0.095	1.502	113	0.136
Attitude similarities 4	7.530	0.007	1.415	101.944	0.160

Table 12 below a chi-square test was conducted on qualitative items of the scales of connectedness and social group setting across two groups; the 75 participants of Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only), and the 40 participants of Group 2 (*Game of Thrones*), therefore comparing two different groups who watched two different series. . The chi-square of connectedness 1, which would be liking the clothes they wear on the show, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 11.30$, $p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 1, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among respectively group 1

and group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 2, which would be liking the hairstyles on the show, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 11.86, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 2, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 3, which would be buying the style or doing the hairstyle, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 10.48, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 3, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 4, which would be imitating the attitude of the character, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 6.37, p < .05$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 4, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 6, which would be getting ideas from the series on how to interact in real life, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 22.20, p < .0001$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 6, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of social group setting 1, which would be who they watch the series with, were significant, $X^2(2, N=115) = 6.92, p < .05$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between social group setting 1, and the series *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones* among respectively group 1 and group 2.

Table 12: Chi-Square Contrast of qualitative items of Group 1 *Gossip Girl* (75 participants)
v/s Group 2 *Game of Thrones* (40 participants)

Items	Categories	Proportions (%)		Chi-squared	p
		GG	GOT		
Connectedness 1	No	5	27	11.301	0.001
	Yes	95	73		
Connectedness 2	No	3	22	11.863	0.001
	Yes	97	78		
Connectedness 3	No	61	90	10.477	0.001
	Yes	39	10		
Connectedness 4	No	48	73	6.372	0.012
	Yes	52	27		
Connectedness 5	No	27	37	1.446	0.229
	Yes	73	63		
Connectedness 6	No	23	68	22.198	0.000
	Yes	77	32		
Connectedness 7	No	65	63	0.091	0.763
	Yes	35	37		
SGS- 1	A	60	35	6.924	0.031
	G	33	50		
	Alone/Group	7	15		
	Daily	28	15		
SGS- 2	Weekly	31	50	4.789	0.188
	Monthly	31	25		
	Never	10	10		
SGS- 3	No	31	30	0.005	0.941
	Yes	69	70		
SGS- 4	Daily	23	38	6.155	0.104
	Weekly	24	32		
	Monthly	31	20		
	Never	22	10		

5. T-test and Chi-square Group 1 (75 participants) *Gossip Girl* vs Group 2 (40 participants) *Gossip Girl*

In Table 13 below, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there are significant differences per age and computed variable between the 75 participants of Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only), and the 40 participants of Group 2 (*Gossip Girl*), therefore comparing two different groups who watched the same series. The t-test indicated that participants in Group 2 (*Gossip Girl*) ($M=24.55$, $SD=3.86$) are significantly older $t(113) = -9.596$, $p < .0001$ than participants in Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only) ($M=18.04$, $SD=3.24$). No other significant difference was found.

Table 13: Independent T-Test Contrast of Age and Computed Variables of Group 1 *Gossip Girl* (75 participants) with Group 2 *Gossip Girl* (40 participants)

Items	F	p	t	d.f.	p
Age	3.565	0.062	-9.596	113	0.000
Character's Attributes	1.070	0.303	-0.734	113	0.465
Wishful Identification	0.772	0.382	1.415	113	0.160
Parasocial Interaction	0.618	0.434	1.269	113	0.207
Attitude Similarities	0.667	0.416	1.894	113	0.061

In Table 14 below, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there are significant differences per each item of the scales across two groups; the 75 participants of Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only), and the 40 participants of Group 2 (*Gossip Girl*), therefore comparing two different groups who watched the same series.

The t-test indicated that participants in Group 2 ($M=24.55$, $SD=3.86$) report significantly higher level of the character's attribute "respected" compared to participants in Group 1 ($M=18.04$, $SD=3.24$) for *Gossip Girl* $t(113)=-2.902$, $p<.01$.

The t-test also indicated that participants in Group 1 reported significantly higher levels of wishful identification 2, which would be "your favorite character is the kind of person you want to be like", than Group 2 for *Gossip Girl* $t(113)=2.024$, $p<.05$, as well as for parasocial interaction 1, which would be "your favorite character makes you feel comfortable as if you are with a friend" $t(113)=2.835$, $p<.01$, and for attitude similarities 2, which would be "your favorite character behaves like you" $t(113)=1.992$, $p<.05$.

Table 14: Independent T-Test Contrast of Group 1 *Gossip Girl* (75 participants) v/s Group 2 *Gossip Girl* (40 participants) per item

Items	F	p	t	d.f.	p
Character's attributes: smart	0.410	0.841	-0.877	113	0.383
Character's attributes: successful	0.001	0.981	-0.406	113	0.686
Character's attributes: attractive	0.614	0.435	0.972	113	0.333
Character's attributes: funny	0.003	0.957	0.745	113	0.458
Character's attributes: respected	5.702	0.019	-2.902	87.928	0.005
Character's attributes: popular	0.177	0.675	0.463	113	0.645
Wishful identification 1	2.653	0.106	0.831	113	0.408
Wishful identification 2	0.069	0.793	2.024	113	0.045
Wishful identification 3	1.772	0.186	1.250	113	0.214
Wishful identification 4	0.120	0.730	0.670	113	0.505
Wishful identification 5	1.868	0.174	0.866	113	0.388
Parasocial interaction 1	0.079	0.779	2.835	113	0.005
Parasocial interaction 2	0.610	0.436	1.388	113	0.168
Parasocial interaction 3	3.141	0.079	0.399	113	0.691
Parasocial interaction 4	0.421	0.518	-0.096	113	0.924
Parasocial interaction 5	4.203	0.043	-0.341	103.406	0.708
Attitude similarities 1	5.329	0.023	1.801	96.627	0.075
Attitude similarities 2	1.550	0.216	1.992	113	0.049
Attitude similarities 3	0.324	0.570	1.398	113	0.165
Attitude similarities 4	6.320	0.013	1.454	92.416	0.149

Table 15 below a chi-square test was conducted on qualitative items of the scales of connectedness and social group setting across two groups; the 75 participants of Group 1 (*Gossip Girl* only), and the 40 participants of Group 2 (*Gossip Girl*), therefore comparing two different groups who watched the same series. The chi-square of connectedness 4, which would be imitating the attitude of the character, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 7.78, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 4, and the series *Gossip Girl* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of

connectedness 5, which would be saying phrases or expressions from the show, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 7.59, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 5, and the series *Gossip Girl* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 6, which would be getting ideas from the series on how to interact in real life, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 10.49, p < .0001$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 6, and the series *Gossip Girl* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of connectedness 7, which would be having paraphernalia related to the series, is significant, $X^2(1, N=115) = 6.51, p < .05$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between connectedness 7, and the series *Gossip Girl* among respectively group 1 and group 2. The chi-square of social group setting 4, which would be the amount of checking the series or the characters online, were significant, $X^2(3, N=115) = 14.62, p < .01$; the variables are not independent, therefore there exist a relationship between social group setting 4, and the series *Gossip Girl* among respectively group 1 and group 2.

Table 15: Chi-Square contrast of qualitative items of Group 1 *Gossip Girl* (75 participants)
v/s Group 2 *Gossip Girl* (40 participants)

Items	Categories	Proportions (%)		Chi-squared	P
		GG Group 1	GG Group 2		
Connectedness 1	No	5	7	0.214	0.643
	Yes	95	93		
Connectedness 2	No	3	2	0.003	0.957
	Yes	97	98		
Connectedness 3	No	61	60	0.019	0.889
	Yes	39	40		
Connectedness 4	No	48	75	7.777	0.005
	Yes	52	25		
Connectedness 5	No	27	53	7.589	0.006
	Yes	73	47		
Connectedness 6	No	23	53	10.494	0.001
	Yes	77	47		
Connectedness 7	No	65	88	6.510	0.011
	Yes	35	12		
SGS- 1	A	60	65	0.415	0.813
	G	33	28		
	Alone/Group	7	7		
SGS- 2	Daily	28	50	7.502	0.058
	Weekly	31	30		
	Monthly	31	18		
SGS- 3	Never	10	2	1.014	0.314
	No	31	60		
	Yes	69	40		
SGS- 4	Daily	23	53	14.620	0.002
	Weekly	24	27		
	Monthly	31	15		
	Never	22	5		

B. Qualitative study: Desensitization to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*

1. Nature of the perpetrator (character's attributes)

In *Breaking Bad*, the main character is Walter White, a chemistry school teacher diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Throughout the series, the character develops into a violent drug dealer who blurs the line between right and wrong. Before starting the series, the participant clarified that she would enjoy more watching a series “when I like the main character”. In the early stages of watching, at the beginning of the first season, the participant defined the perpetrator as “a loser”, and added that she feels “pity for him”. When asked about his character's attributes: smart, successful, attractive, funny, respected, popular and violent, the participant answered “no” to all and described him as “colorless, odorless, and tasteless”. At some point at the end of the first season, the perpetrator changes his appearance by shaving his head, then commits his first act of violence by exploding the office of a drug dealer, the participant's view of the perpetrator changes. In her opinion, he is now “smart”, “attractive and manlier”, “respected”, “feared” and “violent”, and she is “rooting for this Walt”. Throughout the seasons, the participant roots for Walt who develops into a drug dealer, tries to evade the authorities and gains control in his household: “it's good to see a man being a man”. At the end of the last season, the perpetrator is at the head of a drug empire, and the participant shares: “I can't see him as a criminal, maybe he is. But I see him as a businessman”.

Another character that had an impact on the participant is Gus Fringe, a drug lord under whom Walter White worked for a while. For the participant, Gus Fringe is “not violent” which she repeated twice, “respectful and imposes respect”, he is a “genius” and “not a criminal”. After the first act of violence committed by Gus Fringe, in which he graphically slaughters one of his employees and keeps him in his hands until he dies, the participant finds him “smart”, “attractive”, “respected”, “successful”, “popular” and “violent”. When this same character faces enemies and walks amidst fire shots targeting him, she describes the scene as: “an

amazing scene, it tells of his super confidence in himself”. She adds “I respect him, like him and admire him.”

In *Game of Thrones*, narrowing down the nature of the perpetrator is more complicated because the series has many plots, featuring many main characters; some “good” characters become more violent, some “bad” characters become liked. Before starting the series, the participant mentioned that “if the main character is appealing, he becomes the full focus of the series”. One constant character liked by the participants is Daenerys Targaryen, who evolves into a fair queen, nonetheless using violence. The participants defines Daenerys Targaryen as “smart”, “attractive”, “respected”, “successful”, “popular” and “violent only when needed”. The participant also adds that “the problem in this series is that you can get attached to a bad character under the right circumstances”.

2. Justification of violence, lack of morals, drug use, and drug deals

In *Breaking Bad*, the main character Walter White, the perpetrator, commits a series of violent acts, including murders, cooking the hard drug methamphetamine, and creating a drug dealing empire. Throughout the seasons, the participant justifies Walter White actions on many accounts. In the first season, Walter White is thinking about committing his first murder. The participant view on the matter was: “It’s a necessity to kill Kraze8, I don’t see them as criminals”. The participants also shares: “I empathize with Walt because he is doing it for his family” and considers that: “anything he needs to do to get away I would accept”. After the perpetrator commits his first murder, the participant’s reaction is as follows: “I was definitely OK with Walt killing Kraze8; it was self-defense.” The word “necessity to kill” comes up in another answer of the participant, when the perpetrator kills an innocent chemist, Gale, because the latter might take his place in the drug laboratory, which could lead to the murder of the perpetrator. The participant calls the participant calls Gale an “accessory” and considers that

“nothing else could have saved Walt’s life”. Another time the participant considers the murders committed by the perpetrator a necessity is in the two last seasons; the justification for one of the murders in the opinion of the participants is: “I think this happened when he felt his family is threatened”, and regarding the murder of 9 prisoners, the participant “understand(s)” because “they can turn on him and say his name to the police. He is protecting himself by killing them; he has to do it not to get caught”. Throughout the five seasons, the participant believes that the perpetrator “did not intend on things to go this bad so he doesn’t deserve what is happening to him”. Early into the last season, she states: “I can’t see Walt as a criminal. I see him as a business man”. The participant recognizes: “The dilemma is that I see the lack of moral, but I accept it because it’s protecting Walt from being caught”. At the end of the series, the participant considers that the actions of the perpetrator are, as a whole, justified: “I know at the end he was not doing it for his family anymore. But that motive did not change me rooting for him or wanting him to get away with it, maybe it’s because of the initial motive that is still stuck in my head, and maybe that’s why I justify all his actions”.

Before watching *Game of Thrones*, the participant stated: “I could justify murder for the right reasons but not torture” and that “Power in a series is needed up to a certain extent; this factor gets me attached to a character if he knows how to manage this power”. Since as stated before, *Game of Thrones* is more complicated regarding perpetrators because it has many, and the participant can start by rooting for one, then switch and root for another, good or bad character, depending on power and how they use it and what they do to gain it. One example is Cersei. “I hated her initially” are the words of the participant who, in season six, sees this character in a different light and justifies her killing half of the main characters all at once in an explosion scene: “now she has a plan, she was patient and she killed everyone who was against her; I understand her now. I don’t see her as cruel anymore. She deserves this power”.

Early on in the first season, when asked about the rape scene between two characters who were newly married (Khal Drogo and Daenerys Targaryen, both of them liked by the participant), the participant answered: “if it was a regular show I wouldn’t watch the scene. But knowing his barbarian background, I understand his move and it doesn’t bother me as much as it’s supposed to bother me”. When Khal Drogo kills Daenerys’s brother, a disliked character, by graphically melting gold on his head, the participant considered that “the violence against Viserys is needed. He deserved even more than that”. Another character the participant likes is Jon Snow. When he graphically puts a sword in Karl’s head (a character who was trying to kill Jon Snow), the participant shares: “I did not feel any disgust, I was so happy he died”. In addition, when Jon Snow’s team turns on him and he decides to decapitate one of them, the participant is “with the decapitation” and adds: “. I don’t see it as violence; it’s strategy to avoid future mutiny”.

Regarding one of the characters the participant hates; Joffrey Baratheon, the participant was asked if he could justify his actions. He answered: “Everyone uses violence for a purpose which is more acceptable than the violence of Joffrey. His unnecessary violence normalizes the others”, justifying other characters’ violence, but not the hated character Joffrey.

3. Level of exposure to violence, drugs.

Before watching *Breaking Bad*, the participant was asked about her tolerance regarding the presence of weapons and graphic scenes in a television series. The presence of weapons does not bother her, as she has been exposed to guns in real life: “my dad carried guns since I was a child, in Lebanon, it’s a sign of strength and manhood”, so for the participant “the presence of guns in a series doesn’t bother me”. The participant has also been exposed to violence in her country, Lebanon: “there is no censure on Lebanese TV, so maybe I’ve been used to it. If a graphic scene comes on, I would watch it but be disgusted”. Regarding drug use

and drug deals, the participant says: “I am against drug use for sure, and against dealing, especially hard drugs”. The participant reports having watched “6 to 7 episodes per day”. The presence of guns, which is not a problem for the participant pre-series, is not a problem here: “The guns they bought are for self-defense because of the harsh business they are in”. She reports seeing Walter White as a “businessman” and not a criminal. Regarding the series as a whole, the participant had “no problem” with the perpetrator cooking methamphetamine and selling it.

As for *Game of Thrones*, the participant has been exposed to hunting weapons and assault rifles in real life, given that his father likes to hunt as a hobby. Pre-series, the participant reported being “indirectly exposed to violence on TV and on national Lebanese news”. The participant also reported being “disgusted” by rape, and “would want to kill the rapist”. *Game of Thrones*’ seasons are each made up of 10 episodes of 50 minutes each. The participant reports watching “between 2 and 5 episodes per day”. Season 1 portrays 48 deaths and 5 rapes in total, the first episode alone containing 3 violent death and 4 sexual scenes. The participant states “Obviously the violence is more than other shows. It’s good to let the viewer know from the beginning, I know what to expect”. Season 2 portrays 92 deaths and 2 rapes. The participant notices that the violence is “more than season 1” but justifies most violence “because of power, respect or revenge, except Joffrey’s violence”. Season 3 portrays 65 deaths and 2 rapes. The participant sees the violence as increasing “but less bothering”. Season 4 portrays 48 deaths, 5 rapes. The participant reports: “either less violence or I’m adapting, I don’t know” and regarding rape scenes, states: “I honestly don’t remember any rape scene during this season”. Season 5 portrays 48 deaths, 3 rapes, and the participant sees that “violence is a necessity at this point. You kill or you’re killed”. Season 6 portrays 48 deaths, 0 rape. The participant states “the violence now is more meaningful and revenge-based. It doesn’t bother me. Even torturing for a cause doesn’t bother me anymore”.

4. From aversion to enjoyment

Throughout *Breaking Bad*, the participant is constantly exposed to graphic violence from season 1 to 5; there is a decomposition of a dead body by acid, graphic shootings in the heads of various characters, an overdose, slaughtering, and poisoning. When it comes to characters the participant likes, such as the perpetrator Walter White and Gus Fringe, violent scenes involving them are seen under a different light. Early on in the series, the perpetrator Walter White melts a body in acid to get rid of it. The participant was neither bothered nor disgusted “I actually laughed when the bath fell down” (see image 1 below). When the perpetrator strangled another victim in a very graphic scene showing his eyes bulge etc. the participant “didn’t flinch or grimace”. When Walter tells his wife he is the danger, the participant finds him “admired” and “respected”. As for Gus Fringe, who is also a liked character up to a certain point, the participant found it an “amazing scene” when he walks amidst gun shots firing at him. The participant considers that “it tells of his super confidence in himself” and states: “I respect him, like him, and admire him. It takes balls to do what he did”.

Image 1: Stills of the scene in which the perpetrator melts a body in a bath tub



Regarding disliked or hated characters, the participant showed excitement at their deaths, such as “yes finally!” to one’s death, “I enjoyed the violence that was inflicted on them” to two characters who threatened the life of the perpetrator. When they were killed, the participant claims having “screamed: come on do it!” towards the character who shot them, and considered the shooting moment “amazing”. Members of a cartel were disliked characters as well, and when they are mass murdered by a poison, the participant describes the scene as “brilliant” and “genius”. When Gus Fringe became a threat to Walter, the participant enjoyed his death scene, which was very graphic with half of his face burned off from an explosion. The participant found it “funny” and “in line with the character and his signature move of always fixing his tie”, which he does right before collapsing and dying (see image 2 below).

Image 2: Graphic death of Gus Fringe



In *Game of Thrones*, the incest, rape and violence are recurring themes. The point here is to see whether these themes are disturbing the participant from start to end, or does he move from being disturbed to enjoying these scenes. In the series, two main characters commit incest; a brother and a sister are in a relationship from the beginning of season one till the end of the series. The first sex scene between them has the participant thinking “why would they do that?” The scene came up randomly and the participant “didn’t expect it”. He felt “disgusted” and kept repeating “why”. After numerous portrayal of the couple, in season three, the participant has “no thoughts towards the scene” where the couple is reunited. In season four, the participant

states “I don’t see their couple as incest anymore; they are two people in a relationship” and “I didn’t even think she was his sister until you mentioned it”.

When it comes to rape, the first rape scene between the newly married Khal Drogo and Daenerys Targaryen affects the participant who says “if it was a regular show I wouldn’t watch the scene”. As for the second scene, the participant is “bothered” and feels “she is a trade slave”. In the next episode, the character shifts from being raped to learning to please the husband. The participant sees her as getting stronger because of this move, and thinks “it’s a good idea”. The following episodes portray the same couple as in love (see image 3 below). The participant considers that at this point they are a “powerful couple”, there is “no problem in how they started” and states: “I have goosebumps for his power”.

Image 3: Rape scene v/s Love scene of the same couple



Regarding the recurring violence, the participant seems to have a positive view of violence committed by liked or favorited characters. In fact, when Khal Drogo graphically pulls the tongue of an adversary (see image 4 below), the participant, when asked about the scene, mimics the move with a smile and says: “It was really cool. I wouldn’t usually like such a scene but I did”. When Khaleesi watched motionless her husband murdering her brother, the participant loved the fact that “she didn’t flinch”. As for the hanging ordered by Jon Snow involving a young boy who betrayed him (see image 5 below), the participant “enjoyed it happening” and considered “it’s a deserved death for traitors”. During the Red Wedding (see image 6 below), one of the liked characters of the participant, Robb Stark, was murdered. The

participant was “angry”, “disgusted”, “stressed out” and reports having “screamed face down on a pillow”.

Image 4: Khal Drogo graphic tongue rip



Image 5: Graphic hanging of a young boy who betrayed Jon Snow



Image 6: The Red Wedding



When it came to disliked characters, the participant seemed to enjoy their demise and violence inflicted on them. When the sister of Rob Stark who was murdered at the Red Wedding avenged him by feeding the killer his own sons, and then slaughtering him, the participant reports it was “beyond my expectations” and he “loved the scene”. Cersei Lannister was at first hated character, and when she was taken prisoner and tortured, the participants says: “I got what I wanted”; he is “satisfied”. When Jon Snow was hitting a hated character named Ramsay, the participant “loved Jon hitting him and making him feel pain”. When Sansa fed this same character who tortured her on repeated occasions to his own dog, the participant states that the scene being “very satisfying” and that he “enjoyed it”. The Purple Wedding featured the death of Joffrey, a character towards whom the participant has built-up anger and hatred from season one up till season four; this episode. The participant claims he is “ready to stop watching” and that it’s “the greatest weddings in the history of weddings”. In fact, the hated character Joffrey starts choking, then his face changes colors and he graphically dies choking from poisoning (see image 7 below). The participant reports “laughing”, “so much fun watching his agony”, and even claims having paused the episode “to watch his ugly face switching colors”. For the participant, it was “the perfect death to an atrocious human being”. It was “the absolute best scene of season four”.

Image 7: Joffrey’s graphic death



5. Decrease of emotional responsivity/ presence or absence of empathy

As *Breaking Bad* is a series filled with violence, blurring lines between right and wrong when the main character starts dealing drugs in order to provide for his family before he dies of cancer, the question of emotional responsivity is raised, as well as the presence or absence of empathy towards liked or disliked characters. When the participant faces the scene where the perpetrator watches a girl overdose and die without helping her (see image 8 below), the participant's thoughts about the scene are: "what did you expect from being a heroin addict; that's what you get" and considers that "she deserved it". In many other scenes that are stated before, the participant is not bothered by various murders, claiming they are "necessities" to keep the perpetrator alive or not caught by the police. The fact that the perpetrator cooks methamphetamine and sells it, ending up with an entire drug empire doesn't bother the participant "I had no problem with it".

Image 8: Jane overdosing



In *Game of Thrones*, in the first five minutes of the first episode, there is a beheading, as well as a scene with body parts spread all around. The participant felt "disturbed" and "disgusted". In season 2, a very similar scene is portrayed, with horses' not human body parts. The participant states not being bothered by this scene, and that at this point "if I watch again the first episode, it wouldn't bother me". Cersei is a disliked character early on in the show by

the participant. At some point, she reveals that her drunk husband despises her and cheats on her. When the participant is asked if this allows him to understand her more, his answer was: “I don’t like her or have any empathy towards her”. When reaching season 3, the participant is not bothered by the killing of a character who is a prostitute, shot with arrows and displayed in a graphic scene; the participant considers “this type of violence as normalized now”. Also around the end of season 3, a liked character, Daenerys Targaryen, burns a man alive with her dragon. The participant, when asked about Daenerys Targaryen, says: “I don’t remember any violent scene involving her”. He also reports having watched a movie (not the series) while having already watched half the seasons of *Game of Thrones* at a fast rate, and reports that the gruesome movie “did not bother [him] at all”. At some point, one of the characters sacrifices his young daughter and burns her alive, in a graphic scene which did not bother the participant who found it “a normal scene”. Battle scenes with men dying by the thousands, corpses piling up, and explosions burning people alive didn’t bother the participant; on the contrary he described them as “basic violence” and “they were too long it became boring”. At some point, he only saw them as “a bunch of dead bodies”. Regarding the incestuous relationship of the brother and the sister, after a few seasons, the participant did not see the couple as incest anymore: “they are two people in a relationship”. The participant considers that since *Game of Thrones* is all about power, one stops caring about specific characters or what happens to them, and follows the power instead of the character. He also reports tolerating rape scenes and torture scenes more than he used to. The incest didn’t affect him after a while and he “stopped caring about the violent scenes”.

6. Aggressive Thoughts

While watching *Breaking Bad*, the participant experienced aggressive thoughts, mainly towards disliked characters, or characters trying to harm the main character for whom the participant is rooting. For example, the two twin cousins who appear throughout season 3,

cartel members sent to kill Walter White, have the participant on edge. Words such as “fuck them”, “they are animals”, “I want someone to kill them already” are recurring when the participant is asked about these characters. In addition, they are described by the participant as “animals and savages”.

In *Game of Thrones*, even though some characters go from liked to hated, there are two characters hated by the participant from their appearance to their death. The first one is Joffrey Baratheon. When asked about him, the participant said: “I despise him... he is a piece of shit and useless” and wished him “a slow agonizing death”. The participant reports “anger at the sight of him” and that he “cannot wait for Joffrey to die”. When the Purple Wedding episode came up, and the participant watched Joffrey, described as “a horrible human being and a monster” die, the participant paused the scene “to watch his ugly face switching colors”. The other constantly hated character is Ramsay Bolton. When he first appeared, and started graphically torturing a character from his fingers to cutting off his genitals, the participant said: “I don’t even know what to feel towards Ramsay; I could say I want to kill him but I’m afraid of him”. The participant described Ramsay as “the new Joffrey” in his eyes after Joffrey’s death, and kept repeating “when is this guy going to disappear?” At some point, the participant says “I want to go into the TV and throw and feed him to his dogs” after this character feeds others to his dogs. This actually happens, when Jon Snow catches him, and Sansa, a repeatedly abused character by Ramsay, feeds him to his own dogs in a very graphic scene. As for Cersei, which starts as being a hated character, the participant wishes for her “to suffer more than Joffrey” as he has “piling up of anger and hatred towards her”.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

A. Quantitative Study: Identification and Social Learning with *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*

This study examined whether the Lebanese female audience members find similarities and build parasocial interactions with their favorite characters on *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*, affecting the identification with the shows' characters and their imitation. The results will extend the knowledge on these psychological effects of television series on the Lebanese female audience. The study was split into three parts: First, the analysis of the same group of participants, Group 2 consisting of 40 participants who watched two different series; *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*. This will shed the light on how two different series would affect the same group of people. Second, the analysis of two different groups of participants, Group 2 consisting of 40 participants who watched *Game of Thrones*, compared to Group 1 consisting of 75 participants who watched *Gossip Girl*. This will shed the light on how each of the two series affects the group that watches it. Third, the analysis of two different groups of participants, Group 2 consisting of 40 participants who watched *Gossip Girl*, compared to Group 1 consisting of 75 participants who watched *Gossip Girl*. This will shed the light on how this one series is affecting two groups differing in age.

The quantitative study will accept or reject the following hypothesis:

H1: The series in which characters have more similarities with the Lebanese female audience will have a larger effect on their identification and imitation of the characters.

H2: The series watched and discussed in a social group setting will build parasocial interactions with the characters, and affect identification and imitation of the characters.

1. Discussion of Group 2; the 40 participants who watched *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*

In this section, Group 2 is discussed; 40 participants of an average age of 25 years old both watched *Gossip Girl* and *Game of Thrones*.

Regarding *Gossip Girl*, the participants had a choice of attributes to describe their favorite character: smart, successful, attractive, funny, respected, and popular, which according to Reeves (1996) are attributes that predict a desire to be like or act like specific television characters. The participants evaluated their favorite character from *Gossip Girl* as more “funny” and “popular” than the character from *Game of Thrones*. A possible explanation could be that the characters on *Gossip Girl* are high school teenagers and fit those attributes, whereas the characters on *Game of Thrones*, who are serious adults fighting each other for power, would not be described as “funny”, or “popular”, which is not an attribute that matters in a war-oriented show. A possible explanation for the choice of “funny” and “popular” for the characters of *Gossip Girl* is the choice of the favorite character by the participants: 28 of the 40 participants, so the majority, picked Blair, whereas 12 of them picked Serena. Regarding the attribute “funny”, it should be noted that Blair, in *Gossip Girl*, is funnier than the more brooding character of Serena. When it comes to popularity, Blair is the more “settled down” and academic/career oriented character, whereas Serena is the party girl who is most of the time involved in boyfriend drama. It can be assumed that the choice of Blair as a favorite character, and the choice of the character’s attributes “funny” and “popular” is related to the average age of Group 2, which is 25 years old. It can be said that the “adult” age factor plays a role in the choice of the favorite character as the more settled down and academic/career oriented and funny character rather than the immature brooding party girl-type. Those results differ from the literature review of Hoffner and Buchanan’s study (2005), in which it was found that humor does not

enhance wishful identification with the character, and popularity does not appear to be a significant factor. A possible explanation could be that the Lebanese female audience differs from the American audience studied in previous research; The Lebanese in general are known to be witty, and humor is a big part of the culture. Therefore, the Lebanese female audience values humor more than other attributes and considers it important in order to relate to the character. Popularity is a big part of the young adult generation in Lebanon. In fact, Lebanese bloggers are numerous, and the young generation follows them religiously on social networks, aspiring to be like them. It is possible that the choice of the attribute “popular” for the *Gossip Girl* characters relates to the fact that the Lebanese young adult generation values popularity, which they notice prominently in their favorite character.

The participants reported wishing to do the kind of things their favorite character does on *Gossip Girl* rather than on *Game of Thrones*. Logically, the female participants would not wish to do war strategies, fights, and killings that happen on *Game of Thrones*. Rather than that, the participants desire the lavish lifestyle of Blair and Serena, whose main thing to do on the show is shopping, traveling, and attending high-end events. This is in line with the chi-square results of connectedness, in which 93% of the participants report liking the clothes and 98% report liking the hairstyles of their favorite characters on *Gossip Girl*. Nevertheless, when asked if they bought the clothes of their favorite character on *Gossip Girl* at some point, most of the participants answered “no”, and when asked if they own any paraphernalia related to *Gossip Girl*, the majority of the participants answered “no”. The results here differ from the literature review where American teenagers and young adults state walking into shops asking for the exact outfits of their favorite character (La Ferla, 2008), and shop managers and designers have witnessed an increase in sales after certain episodes where their names were mentioned; Ms. Lepore, a New York designer,

received calls within days of her dress appearing on the show with the mention of the brand, and Tory Burch found that having an item of the collection in the show translated into sales (Kwan for the Trail Times, 2008). As previously mentioned in the literature review, *Gossip Girl* portrays mostly high-end couture products; names of designers like Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch, and Chanel appear on almost every episode of the show, and designers such as Tory Burch and Elie Saab had their names mentioned on the series and designs worn more than once (Rubin, 2012). A possible explanation would be that the Lebanese adult audience of *Gossip Girl*, even though liking the style of their favorite character, cannot afford the outfits portrayed on the series like the American generation does according to the previous literature. Lebanon is a country that has been going through an economic crisis for many years now, and adults are struggling between unemployment and underpaid jobs. Given the fact that the participants reported very high positive percentages of connectedness items related to fashion (liking the clothes and the hairstyles on the show) but not owning any item, as well as wishing to do the things the characters do on the show, it could be assumed that the participants, who like and desire the style of the characters, looked for lower-cost replicas, or used similar items from their own closet to imitate the styles of their favorite character. This would be in line with previous literature, with blogs being dedicated to *Gossip Girl* fashion, and how to replicate the style at an affordable cost (Gossip Girl season 5, January 30, 2012).

Hypothesis 1 states that the series in which characters have more similarities with the Lebanese female audience will have a larger effect on their identification and imitation of the characters.

Character's attributes and portrayal influence wishful identification with the favorite character (Bandura, 1986). Over time, viewers come to believe they have incorporated qualities of their favorite characters into their own self-concepts, and thus share a greater

degree of similarity (Duck & Barnes, 1992). Therefore, when the Lebanese female audience of Group 2 perceived attributes in their favorite character, those attributes could be similarities they find between themselves and the character. Those similarities affected identification with the favorite characters, since the viewers reported wishing to do the things the characters do on the show, as well as liking the characters' clothing and hairstyles. The audience did not purchase the items displayed on the show, but it is possible that they looked for affordable replicas to imitate them.

Gossip Girl is the series in which the Lebanese female audience of Group 2 finds more similarities with the characters, leading them to identify with them, but not necessarily imitate them.

Regarding *Game of Thrones*, when it came to the scale of parasocial interaction, the participants reported looking forward to watching their favorite characters from *Game of Thrones* the next day more so than watching the characters from *Gossip Girl*. The participants also reported watching *Game of Thrones* in a group setting rather than alone like *Gossip Girl*, and discussing *Game of Thrones* weekly, whether with peers or online on social networks. According to the literature review (Google, Instagram 2019), *Game of Thrones* aired in 2011, whereas *Gossip Girl* aired in 2007. It is possible that being more recent, *Game of Thrones* was watched by the Lebanese female audience of Group 2 once they reached adulthood; being in universities or having jobs allowed them to watch the series in group settings more so than being in high school when *Gossip Girl* was airing; having homework and curfews wouldn't allow watching *Gossip Girl* in a group setting. Also, Instagram was launched in 2010, so the trend of this specific social network is closer to *Game of Thrones* timeline than *Gossip Girl*'s, which ended in 2012; roughly when *Game of Thrones* started. This could explain why *Game of Thrones* has more accounts in its name on Instagram (32 accounts compared to 30 accounts for *Gossip Girl*), and 5 times more

pictures under its hashtag according to the literature review (9.1 million compared to 1.7 million for *Gossip Girl*). This plays an important role in discussing the series online as part of the social group setting. This is in line with previous literature where the audience's reactions are at the heart of *Game of Thrones*' psychology. As the number of viewers grows, so do their emotional reactions, according to emotional analytics company Canvs. Jared Feldman, CEO and founder of Canvs, claims that the expression of emotional reactions inspires people to tune in and watch more. Also, in the study conducted by Latitude in 2014 entitled *My Game of Thrones: An Audience Self-Portrait*, fans found that the intimate relationships they vicariously built with the show's characters allowed them to build similar relationships with fellow viewers of *Game of Thrones*, creating socialization within a niche audience. It is also in line with Russel and Puto's findings (1999) when viewers of *90210* were motivated to start watching the show in order to be able to discuss it with their friends who are already familiar with it. Also, people who did not know each other felt connected during the focus group while talking about the series they all watch.

The participants perceived their favorite character from *Game of Thrones* as "smart", "successful" and "respected" more than the characters of *Gossip Girl*. A possible explanation would be the choice of favorite character: 19 of the 40 participants, so the majority, picked Khaleesi and 13 of them picked Jon Snow. Both characters gain a lot of success and respect throughout the series, both rising to power through strategic thinking, elaborated plans, and well-thought-of alliances, making the series more about complicated plots than about looks, fashion and high-school popularity like *Gossip Girl*. This is in line with the literature review of Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) stating that women identify with characters that they perceive as smart, successful, respected and attractive.

When it comes to connectedness, the participants report 73% liking the clothes and 78% liking the hairstyles of their favorite characters, but most of them never bought the clothes,

and never owned paraphernalia from the show. The results are similar to the ones of *Gossip Girl*, with even higher percentages of the answer “no” to owning any clothing item or product from the show. In addition, the participants do not report wishing to do the things the characters do on *Game of Thrones*, like they did for *Gossip Girl*. In this case, it will not be assumed that the audience looked for replicas of clothing items from *Game of Thrones*. One possible explanation could be that, even though impressive fashion is portrayed on the show, and according to the literature review, the clothing on the show has inspired many designers’ runway collections (Vogue, 2015), *Game of Thrones* is still set in a medieval-like setting, and the oversized fur coats and extremely cut-out dresses could seem excessive to be worn in real life. Another explanation could be that the second prominent choice of favorite character by the participants is Jon Snow (13 out of 40 picked him), making it impossible for the female participants to imitate his fashion even if they like the style. This is in line with previous literature where Hoffner (2005) confirms that higher level of identification and imitation occurs with same-gender character.

Hypothesis 2 states that the series watched and discussed in a social group setting will build parasocial interactions with the characters, and affect identification and imitation of the characters.

According to Fisher and Van Kleef (2010), watching the series in a group setting induces emotional contagion and regulation, through which the viewers communicate verbally and nonverbally with each other. This bond created between the members of this group of viewers leads them to want to see more of the characters on-screen, in order to discuss them further within each other. Watching and discussing *Game of Thrones* in a group setting pruned higher parasocial interaction with the favorite character that they looked forward to seeing on the next episode. This leads to connecting to this character; perceiving in them attributes such as “smart”, “successful” and “respected”, liking their clothes and hairstyles,

which ultimately leads to the identification with the character, even if it's not always possible to imitate them.

Game of Thrones is the series that the Lebanese female audience of Group 2 watched and discussed in a group setting, which allowed them to build parasocial interactions with the character, and led to identifying with these characters by connecting with them. Nevertheless, this did not lead them to imitate the characters.

Within the same group of people, the psychological effects vary depending on the series. *Gossip Girl* characters, who are teenagers/young adults, students, leading normal lives, are more relatable in similarities to the average age of 25-year-old female participants than the characters of *Game of Thrones*, living in medieval times, belonging to royalties, and fighting wars. *Game of Thrones* being more recent is more likely to be watched and discussed in group settings by the adult participants of Group 2, who build parasocial interaction with the more “mature” characters than the ones of *Gossip Girl*.

2. Discussion of Group 1, the 75 participants who watched *Gossip Girl* and Group 2, the 40 participants who watched *Game of Thrones*.

In this section, the discussion revolves around the 75 participants of Group 1 who watched *Gossip Girl*, compared to the 40 participants of Group 2 who watched *Game of Thrones*.

In this case, the age variable plays an important role, since the 75 participants of Group 1, who have the average age of 18 years old, are significantly younger than the 40 participants of Group 2, whose average age is 25 years old.

Regarding *Gossip Girl*, watched here by Group 1, it should be noted that Group 1 chose Serena as their favorite character (47 out of 75 picked her). Serena is the tall blonde, versatile, very stylish, and always gets herself in trouble with family, school, and

boyfriends. The participants of Group 1 here evaluated their favorite character from *Gossip Girl* as “funny” and “popular”. Those results still differ from the literature review of Hoffner and Buchanan’s study (2005) that was stated in the first part of the discussion, in which it was found that humor does not enhance wishful identification with the character, and popularity does not appear to be a significant factor. Therefore, regardless of their age or their choice of favorite character, the Lebanese female audience seems to value humor and popularity above other character’s attributes when watching a television series and connecting to a character. The explanation to that as stated previously, would be that humor is a major part of the Lebanese culture, and popularity is a growing trend with the growing number of influencers in the country.

The participants of Group 1 reported wishing to do the kind of things their favorite character does on *Gossip Girl*. In order to analyze what kind of things the participants would wish to copy from *Gossip Girl* characters, it is important to look at the results of connectedness, in which 95% like the clothing and 97% like the hairstyles of the characters. Nevertheless, the majority of Group 1 participants reported not buying the clothing styles of their favorite characters. This still differs from the literature review also stated previously, where American teenagers and young adults state walking into shops asking for the exact outfits of their favorite character (La Ferla, 2008), as well as from the literature review of Murray in 1999 whose research stated that teenage girls attempted to imitate the main actress of the analyzed show by dressing like her and having the same style. In this case, the Lebanese participants of Group 1, also teenagers, differ from the American teenage generation, and an obvious explanation is that even though they belong to upper social middle class, attend private schools and have access to American television series, they still live in a country where the economic crisis makes it unaffordable for parents to buy their teenagers designer clothes. It should be noted that the Lebanese minimum wage is of 1000\$. Therefore, even

if family are on the upper end of the country's wages, they still can't afford lavish styles for their daughters while affording day-to-day living expenses. Therefore, the Lebanese participants of Group 1 don't imitate the looks of their favorite characters from *Gossip Girl*. Nevertheless, it was found that they imitate the attitude of the character, and that they get ideas from the character on how to interact in real life. This is in line with their previous answer, that they would like to do the kind of things the characters do on the show. It should be noted that Group 1 average age is 18 years old, so the participants are teenagers, most probably still attending high-school. Given the fact that *Gossip Girl* characters are in high-school, it is logical for Group 1 to identify with the characters' attitudes, as well as their way of dealing with life situations. The quantitative study of Russell, Norman and Heckler (2004) in the literature review supports this, since the results confirmed that the participants were not only influenced by the fashion styles of the characters, but also their personal lives whom they modeled.

Hypothesis 1 states that the series in which characters have more similarities with the Lebanese female audience will have a larger effect on their identification and imitation of the characters.

The Lebanese female audience of Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* perceived attributes in their favorite character, those attributes could be similarities they find between themselves and the character. Those similarities affected identification with the favorite characters, since the viewers reported wishing to do the things the characters do on the show. They like the characters' clothing and hairstyles. The audience did not purchase the items displayed on the show, so they did not imitate the physical looks of the characters. They did, instead, imitate the attitudes of the characters, and they got ideas from their favorite characters on how to interact in real life.

Gossip Girl is the series in which the Lebanese female audience of Group 1 finds more similarities with the characters, leading them to identify with them, and imitate their attitudes and how they interact.

The participants of Group 1 reported parasocial interaction with their favorite character on *Gossip Girl* by saying they felt comfortable with the character, as if they were with a friend. Nevertheless, the majority reported watching *Gossip Girl* alone rather than with a group. This differs from the literature review of Fisher and Van Kleef (2010), who state that watching the series in a group setting induces emotional contagion and regulation, through which the viewers create bonds with the members of this group, and leads them to want to see more of the characters on-screen, in order to discuss them further within each other. A possible explanation would be that a younger generation such as Group 1, who has an average age of 18 years old, is more easily influenced by a character than an older generation of adults. Therefore, it is easier for them to build parasocial relations with a fictional character by themselves, without needing the “emotional approval” they can see in their peers when watching in a group.

Hypothesis 2 states that the series watched and discussed in a social group setting will build parasocial interactions with the characters, and affect identification and imitation of the characters.

In this case, *Gossip Girl* watched by Group 1 compared to Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* goes against the first part of hypothesis 2 in the fact that the audience was able to build parasocial interaction with the character, and feel comfortable with him as if with a friend, without watching and discussing in a group, but rather after watching alone. Building these parasocial interactions with the character did lead them to identify with the character, and imitate their attitude and life interactions.

Regarding *Game of Thrones* watched by Group 2, and compared to the younger generation of Group 1 who watched *Gossip Girl*, it is noticed that the attributes “smart” and “successful” are chosen, rather than “funny” and “popular”, which makes sense as previously stated in the first part of the discussion, given the fact that *Game of Thrones* characters are serious adults fighting wars and aiming for power, rather than teenage high-schoolers. It should also be noted that the choice of the attributes “smart” and “successful” are recurrent for the characters of *Game of Thrones*, just as they were chosen by the same participants in the first part of the discussion, when Group 2 was being compared within each other. One of the explanations is, of course, the age factor; Group 2 are of an average age of 25 years old, compared to Group 1 who are 18 years old. Therefore, the adults tend to look at attributes such as intelligence and success when looking up to a fictional character, and relating to them.

Just like Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl*, Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* liked the clothes and hairstyles on the show, but did not purchase any items. The difference between them and Group 1 is the fact that they did not, instead, imitate the attitudes of the characters, or take ideas from the characters as to how to interact in real life. One potential explanation could be that the characters from *Game of Thrones* are war and strategy oriented set in medieval times; it would be hard to relate to their attitudes, whereas the younger generation could find it easier to relate to the characters of *Gossip Girl* who are high-schoolers, like them, and who live in modern time, like theirs. Even though both series are fiction, *Gossip Girl* is more relatable to the reality than *Game of Thrones*. Another potential explanation would be the age factor; Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* compared to Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* is not as “affected” by the series watched: Group 2 with an average age of 25 years old would have responsibilities such as university, job, potentially a family to raise, and a developed maturity. They wouldn’t be as involved in a medieval-set series like *Game*

of *Thrones*, as would Group 1, with an average age of 18 years old with less responsibilities, who are more likely to be influenced by relatable characters who, even though fictional, have many similarities with them and are set in a modern setting, very relatable to reality.

Hypothesis 2 states that the series watched and discussed in a social group setting will build parasocial interactions with the characters, and affect identification and imitation of the characters.

Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* reported watching the series in a group setting, unlike Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* alone. This is in line with the previous results of Group 2, when they were compared within each other.

Therefore, compared to the younger generation of Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl*, Group 2 does not show a lot of signs of building parasocial interactions with the fictional character, and identifying to them. The age difference between the two groups, as well as the different genre of series watched, plays a role in this outcome. Nevertheless, referring to the first part of the discussion, Group 2 is affected by *Game of Thrones* generally speaking, but they are less affected by *Game of Thrones* compared to Group 1 being affected by *Gossip Girl*.

3. Discussion of Group 1, the 75 participants who watched *Gossip Girl* and Group 2, the 40 participants who watched *Gossip Girl*.

In this section, the discussion revolves around the 75 participants of Group 1 who watched *Gossip Girl*, compared to the 40 participants of Group 2 who also watched *Gossip Girl*.

In this case, the age variable plays an important role, since the 75 participants of Group 1, who have the average age of 18 years old, are significantly younger than the 40 participants of Group 2, whose average age is 25 years old. The analysis will shed the light on which group identifies more with the characters of *Gossip Girl*.

When Group 1, the younger generation watching *Gossip Girl*, was compared to Group 2, the older generation watching *Gossip Girl*, they reported first and foremost, different choices of favorite characters. Group 1 with an average age of 18 years old picked Serena as their favorite character, 47 times out of 75, whereas Group 2 with an average age of 25 years old picked Blair as their favorite character, 28 times out of 40. A possible explanation would be that the younger generation relates to the more rebellious character of Serena, very stylish, and always getting herself in trouble with family, school, and boyfriends, whereas the older generation identifies more with the grounded and academic/career-oriented character of Blair. This is in line with the results stating that Group 2 reported the character attribute “respected” for their favorite character. They could consider Blair more respected than Serena in the way that she carries herself, and in her different, more mature interests.

The younger generation of Group 1 reported that their favorite character was the kind of person they wanted to be like, they found similarities by reporting that the character behaves like them, and they were able to build parasocial interaction with the character, and feel comfortable with her as if with a friend. In order to determine in what way these characters behave like the audience, it is important to look at the other significant items. Group 1 was also prone to imitating the attitude of the character, as well as getting ideas from the characters on how to interact in real life. This is in line with the literature review of Hoffner (2005) where the study shows that respondents reported higher level of wishful identification with characters who shared their own attitudes, and who were of the same gender. Group 1 also reported saying phrases and expressions from the show, such as the iconic “xoxo, Gossip Girl”, or the shortening of names to the first letter (Serena becoming S- and Blair becoming B-). According to Russell, Norman and Heckler’s research in 2004,

individuals who identify with a TV series' character imitate not only the styles of the characters but also their words and even voices.

The most apparent explanation to the fact that Group 1 is seen here as identifying on many more levels than Group 2 with *Gossip Girl* characters is the age factor, with Group 1 being significantly younger than Group 2. According to Anderson et.al, (2017) the American adolescents spend around 9 hours per day consuming entertainment media that ranges from television, to video games, to the internet. Giles (2003) also stresses on the fact that adolescence is one of the most significant periods of a life span when it comes to media psychology. This is in line with the findings and analysis of this research, in which it is noticeable that Group 1, teenagers with an average age of 18 years old, significantly identifies more with *Gossip Girl* characters than Group 2, adults with an average age of 25 years old. The participants in Group 2 could be evaluating *Gossip Girl* in a retrospective manner, filtered by their current values. If they were handed the surveys back when they watched it as adolescents, they would have probably matched Group 1's responses.

These findings also reflect that adolescents are prone to imitate those characters that match them, but young adults may identify, but would not be prone to imitate those they identify with (particularly if the fictional character is younger in age).

Hypothesis 1 states that the series in which characters have more similarities with the Lebanese female audience will have a larger effect on their identification and imitation of the characters.

In this case, compared to Group 2, the Lebanese female audience of Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* perceived similarities with their favorite character by wanting to be like them, and by seeing that this character behaves like them. Identifying with their favorite character

like that led them to imitate the attitude of their favorite character by saying phrases and expressions from the show, and by getting ideas on how to interact in real life.

Gossip Girl is the series in which the Lebanese female audience of Group 1 finds more similarities with the characters, leading them to identify with them, and imitate their attitudes and how they interact.

B. Qualitative Study: Desensitization to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*

This qualitative study is objectively describing the reactions of the participants after repeated exposure to violent scenes, torture, gore, and drug dealing. This description will be matched to the short-term effects of the theory of desensitization, which will give a first descriptive look at whether the signs shown by participants match the signs of desensitization. Experiencing desensitization starts with the nature of the perpetrator, to whom the viewer is drawn, to a point where said viewer justifies the violence committed by this perpetrator. The more the viewer is repeatedly exposed to this violence, the more he starts enjoying it instead of having feelings of aversion. This enjoyment of violence leads to a decrease in emotional responsiveness and empathy towards victims of violence, and increases aggressive thoughts in the viewer.

The qualitative study will accept or reject the following hypothesis:

H3: After repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer will experience desensitization to the violence portrayed on-screen.

1. Nature of the perpetrator

According to Bandura's Social Learning theory, the nature of the perpetrator affects identification; a viewer is more likely to identify with and therefore root for an attractive perpetrator.

In *Breaking Bad*, the participant started the first episode by feeling nothing but pity for the main character, Walter White, who at first appears as a chemistry teacher diagnosed with lung cancer. At this point, she described him as a loser who is, in her own words, “colorless, odorless, and tasteless” and has no respect or liking for the character. The participant only changed her perspective regarding the perpetrator when he changed his physical appearance and started committing acts of violence. This is where she described him as smart, attractive, manly, respected, feared and violent. Throughout the series, the participant keeps rooting for Walt, who develops into a violent drug dealer, blurring the line between right and wrong. Another violent character, Gus Fringe, is also respected and admired by the participant, even after committing graphic acts of violence such as slaughtering his own employee. A possible explanation would be that the participant is attracted to a powerful character, rather than a weak one like the first version of Walter White. This is in line with previous literature where Bruce Mc. Keown’s research states that the viewer experiences vicarious relationship with the “glamour of evil”. In fact, the character himself admits later on in the series that everything he did was for his own need of power rather than for his family like he stated early on in the series. But even though, the audience still embraces this anti-hero (Mc. Keown et.al, 2015).

In *Game of Thrones*, even though the participant likes many characters throughout the show, one constantly liked character is Daenerys Targaryen. A possible explanation could be that the character is physically extremely attractive, and gains power and respect exponentially as the series advances. The participant adds that the problem of *Game of Thrones* is that a viewer can get attached to a bad character under the right circumstances. And this is also reflected in previous literature where Tom van Laer, senior lecturer in Marketing at the University of London, discovered that some people watch the show because they can relate to the battle between good and evil (Laer, 2017).

Therefore, it can be stated that both Lebanese participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* like a character because they are attracted to said character's power. This is in line with previous literature stating that the "glamorization" of media is apparent in the attractive portrayal of the characters and their behavior, making their violence acceptable, like Bonnie and Clyde (Giles, 2003). Statistics from a study entitled *The Influence of Media Violence on Youth* showed that 44% of violent interactions involve attractive perpetrators with whom the viewer can identify, which is also a glamorizing factor of media violence (Anderson, 2003).

2. Justification of violence, lack of morals, drug use and drug deals.

Research confirms that justified violence in the media increases aggressive responses from the viewer, and decreases their inhibition towards violence, therefore creating desensitization (Berkowitz, 1967, 1979, 1994).

In the previous section, it was stated that the participant watching *Breaking Bad* was drawn to the main character, Walter White, who is the perpetrator. It was also established that the participant only started admiring and rooting for the perpetrator after his first act of violence, and not when he was still a simple school teacher diagnosed with cancer. In fact, the participant mentioned empathy, but not when the perpetrator found out he had cancer; the participant empathizes with the perpetrator's violence and immoral acts because he is doing them to provide for his family before dying of cancer. This apparently led the participant to accept the murders committed by the perpetrator, even calling them necessities to save his life and not get caught by the police. After finishing the whole series, the participant considered that, as a whole, all of Walter White's actions were justified; even though she was aware that he was not doing them for his family anymore, she still rooted for him. In this case, the participant isn't justifying Walter White's actions simply because he is doing them for his family; the

participant is drawn to the violent perpetrator, which allows her to accept his actions, and justify them, while still being aware they are immoral. This is in line with the literature review of the New York Times, when Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad*, marveled over the fact that fans were still rooting for him even after he became a meth drug lord and still root for Walt and consider him a hero after committing lawless acts and murders. In fact, according to psychologist Joseph Magliano of the Northern Illinois University, movies and television series manipulate viewers' thoughts and emotions. In *Breaking Bad*, the creators build up sympathy towards the protagonist who has it the very hard way; he's dying of cancer, and has to provide for his family. So whatever he does next is to protect his family, and the audience accepts his twisted logic.

Regarding *Game of Thrones*, before starting the series, the participant stated in a pre-interview that in his opinion, power is needed in a series, and it is a factor that gets him attached to the character if the character knows how to manage his power. In fact, the participant justifies the violence of three different characters, all three being very powerful: Khal Drogo's killing Daenerys' brother is needed, Jon Snow decapitating a member of his team who betrayed him is a strategy to avoid future mutiny, and Cersei exploding the Sept is a patiently thought-of plan to kill whoever was against her. Whereas when Joffrey Baratheon, who is not a powerful character but rather immaturely violent, commits cruel acts of violence, the participant does not justify them, considering they are unnecessary. It should be noted that, when discussing characters with the participants, he stated respecting and admiring Khal Drogo for his power, and Jon Snow for his integrity. Cersei is a hated character, but at some point, her patience leads to a very powerful position which impresses the participant. On the other hand, he hated the character of Joffrey. It can be said that the Lebanese participant watching *Game of Thrones* justifies the violence of powerful characters who are committing those violent acts for reasons, and not for mere pleasure of watching someone suffer.

Therefore, it is clear that both Lebanese participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* justify the violence and immoral acts of powerful perpetrators they admire, respect, and are drawn to and consider their violence to have some sort of validation.

3. Level of exposure to violence, drugs

According to Smith and Donnerstein (1998), repeated exposure leads to the desensitization of the viewer to violence. After establishing that the participants are drawn to powerful and violent characters, and justify their actions as needed means to various ends, it is important to discuss how much they have been exposed to violence pre-series, and how intense was their viewing of each series they were assigned. Both Lebanese participant, the woman who was assigned *Breaking Bad* and the man who was assigned *Game of Thrones*, said pre-series that the presence of weapons on-screen did not bother them, given the fact that they were both exposed to guns since early childhood. It is part of the Lebanese culture to own guns, whether as a sign of manhood, or for the hunting hobby. Both participants also reported being exposed to media violence in their country, Lebanon, where there is no censure on national TV. Therefore, both participants are already familiar with on-screen blood and gore. Nevertheless, the participant watching *Breaking Bad* reported pre-series being against drug use and drug dealing, and the participant watching *Game of Thrones* reported pre-series being disgusted by the idea of rape and rapists. They were both repeatedly exposed to violence, drugs, incest and rape given the fact that they watched a combined average of 5 episodes per day. The participant watching *Breaking Bad*, viewing Walter White as a “businessman” rather than a criminal has obviously changed her mind on being against drug use and drug dealing after repeated exposure to her favorite character becoming a drug lord. The participant watching *Game of Thrones* reports in season 4 not recalling any rape scene, whereas the season portrayed 5 rape scenes. It is clear that after repeated exposure to violence and rape scenes throughout 40 episodes, the participant is experiencing signs of desensitization to on-screen violence such as rape. Given

the fact that after season 1 portraying 48 deaths and 5 rapes, the participant noticed that there's a lot of violence, his pre-series exposure to violence did not fully desensitize him to the presence of on-screen violence in *Game of Thrones*.

4. From aversion to enjoyment

Initial exposure to media violence produces aversion, fear and even disgust; innate negative responses to violence. However, after repeated exposure to screen-based media violence, the viewer becomes desensitized (Cline et.al, 1973).

Regarding the violence portrayed on-screen on *Breaking Bad*, the participant did not experience initial aversion to the on-screen violence. The participant was not bothered by violence inflicted by her favorite character Walter White, as well as by the acts of violence of Gus Fringe, also a respected powerful character. She also enjoyed and was excited to watch the violence inflicted on disliked characters such as members of the cartel, or characters who wanted to hurt Walter White. This goes against the literature review of Zillmann and Weaver (1996), claiming that boys are more prone than girls to enjoy fright and violence in the media, especially adolescent boys who can then prove to their peers that they are undisturbed by horror, while girls prove their sensitivity by being disturbed and shocked. In this case, the participant, a Lebanese female adult, was enjoying the violence. A possible explanation could be that having been exposed to real life on-screen violence in her country Lebanon, the participant is more prone to enjoy fiction violence, rather than be disgusted by it, being previously used to the sight, as well as the fact that the participant is an adult, less easily frightened than a teenager. It should be noted that the participant found two very graphic scenes funny; the melting of bodies with acid that led to the fall of a house's bathtub from one floor to the other, and the death by explosion of Gus Fringe, who lost half of his face before collapsing and dying. Her reaction goes against the literature review of Patrick Reeden Keefe,

a staff writer at the New Yorker who claimed that viewers were repulsed that *Breaking Bad* characters used acid to melt one of the dead bodies. Nevertheless, according to the literature review of Zillmann (1979), humor is considered as a reward or positive reinforcement of violence; it increases the level of arousal, and may increase the desensitization of the viewer. Another possible explanation on how the results of this research on humor are in line with previous literature could be linked to Lebanon and its culture which praises humor, and, as found in the previous quantitative discussion, humor is a very important component in liking a character, and therefore rooting for him.

Nevertheless, at one point, the participant did go from aversion to enjoyment, not of the violence portrayed on-screen, but of the drug exposure. As stated in the previous section, before watching *Breaking Bad*, the participant was fully against drug use and drug deals. Given the fact that she was drawn to the character of Walter White whose violence she justified throughout the show, the participant changed her opinion on drugs to the point where she could not see the perpetrator as a criminal or drug lord, but rather a smart business man. The participant clearly went from aversion of drugs to enjoyment of their creation and sale in a smart way.

When watching *Game of Thrones*, the participant experienced the same reactions as the participant watching *Breaking Bad* when it came to viewing violence; there was no initial aversion, but rather enjoyment of the violence inflicted by liked and powerful characters such as Khal Drogo and Jon Snow, as well as enjoyment and high levels of excitement when graphic violence was inflicted on hated characters such as Cersei walking naked and being humiliated in the streets, Ramsay being fed to his hounds, and Joffrey choking and graphically dying. Even the hanging of a child is enjoyed by the participant because it is inflicted by the powerful and rightful character Jon Snow, and according to the participant, it is deserved since the child betrayed Jon Snow. In this case, the participant does not follow the norms of empathy towards

a child, but encourages vengeance against traitors, regardless their age, gender, or race. A first possible explanation here is that the participant, just like the participant watching *Breaking Bad*, has already been repeatedly exposed to violence in Lebanon and therefore, has no aversion towards gore and graphic scenes. Another possible explanation would be the fact that, since the participant is drawn to powerful characters in the show, it is normal for him to enjoy the violence inflicted by these characters, a violence that he can justify, whereas when it comes to hated characters such as Joffrey and Ramsay, who he considers as tyrants, it is normal for the participant to enjoy the violence inflicted on them, considering it as deserved.

Nevertheless, on the counts of incest and rape, the participant watching *Game of Thrones* did experience initial aversion. In the case of incest, the participant was initially disgusted seeing a brother and a sister having sex, but after repeated exposure up till season 4, the participant started seeing them as a normal couple, and stopped thinking of them as siblings. Even if the participant did not reach the point of enjoyment of the sex scene, the taboo of incest did not negatively affect him anymore. The most obvious explanation here is the repeated exposure to the incest that normalized the taboo in the eyes of the participant. In the case of rape, the participant went from being bothered and seeing Daenerys as a sex slave, to accepting her strategic move of trying to please her husband, which eventually led the couple to fall in love, and the participant to enjoy them as a couple, without having any problem anymore at the way they started. This is in line with the literature review of Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1984), when they exposed male undergraduates to five different movies that portray violence against women during five consecutive days. The comparison between the viewing on the first day and the viewing on the last day showed a decrease of the males' anxiety and depression. Viewers became comfortable with the anxiety-provoking situations. Other than the fact that the participant was repeatedly exposed to the rape scene which lowered his aversion towards it, the fact that the perpetrator was Khal Drogo, a powerful character admired by the participant,

added to his acceptance and justification of the rape scenes that eventually led to forming a loving couple.

Both Lebanese participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* enjoyed the violence on-screen, without going through initial feelings of aversion. This goes against the previous literature results of Fanti et.al. (2009) in their paper *Desensitization to Media Violence over a Short Period of Time* where at first, during the first violent scenes, the college students did not enjoy the on-screen violence and actually felt sympathy towards the suffering victims. However, this psychological impact was reduced after several violent clips, leaving the participants enjoying the violent scenes, and feeling less sympathetic with the victims. The most logical explanation would be that both Lebanese participants have been repeatedly exposed in their country Lebanon to real-life on-screen violence, therefore there is no initial feeling of aversion for viewing on-screen violence in the series. The fact that it is their favorite characters who are powerful and admired performing the violent acts also plays a role in their enjoyment of the violence. It is also logical that the violence is even more enjoyable when it is inflicted on hated characters. Nevertheless, regarding subjects they did not agree upon pre-series, such as drugs, incest, and rape, the participants both felt initial aversion when exposed to these taboos, to later on accept them and, on certain counts, embrace them. This is possibly due to repeated exposure, as well as to the fact that the participants are drawn to the characters performing these taboos, therefore they can justify them and get on board with them.

5. Decrease of emotional responsivity, presence or absence of empathy

In the previous section, it was shown that the participants were enjoying the violence inflicted by powerful characters they admired, as well as the violence inflicted on hated characters they believed deserved to become victims. According to Ceballo (2001), Strasburger

and Wilson (2002), desensitization attenuates cognitive, emotional and sometimes behavioral responses to violence; it appears through numbing and lack of response to a stimulus that should elicit a strong response.

In fact, while watching *Breaking Bad*, some violence was enjoyed by the participant, but other violent event, even though not eliciting positive feelings, were normalized in the eye of the participant instead of eliciting strong reactions. One prominent example is the graphic overdose of Jane, with Walter White standing on her bedside and letting her die. Instead of a strong reaction, whether disgust, shock, or aversion towards the violent scene, the participant considered that the drug addict got what she deserved, and her death was expected.

As for *Game of Thrones*, the participant who was disturbed by body parts in the first season, was not bothered by a similar scene in season 2, and his lack of emotions towards violent scenes also appears during battle scenes that he found boring instead of disgusting. He felt no empathy towards Cersei during her vulnerable moment admitting her husband despises her and cheats on her. This decrease of emotional responsivity is also apparent in the fact that the participant did not recall violence involving Daenerys Targaryen, when this specific character actually burned a man alive with her dragon, or when a character burned his own daughter alive, and the participant was not affected by the graphic scene, but rather found it normal.

Both participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* experienced lack of emotional responsivity towards a lot of violent scenes that would normally elicit strong feelings of disgust, shock, or aversion. This goes against the literature review of Tamborini (1996) stating that the more viewers share the distress of the on-screen character, the more they experience dysphoria towards violence, therefore having more empathy with the victim. A possible explanation could be that the participants have specific characters they like, and unless

they are the ones harmed, they do not empathize with the victim. It should also be noted that some of the victims are disliked characters by the participants, therefore, they do not empathize with them, even when they are suffering from violence.

6. Aggressive Thoughts

According to Anderson (2003), exposure to media violence mainly creates a short-term increase in aggressive thinking and aggressive emotions which are attitudes and not physical actions.

When the participant was watching *Breaking Bad*, she mainly experienced aggressive thoughts towards disliked characters and other characters trying to harm the main perpetrator Walter White. While watching, the participant reported having aggressive thoughts towards these disliked characters, wishing them death and cursing repeatedly.

Same goes to the participant watching *Game of Thrones*, and experiencing aggressive thoughts towards disliked characters committing acts of violence for no valid reason, such as Joffrey towards whom the participant's hatred is shown by the cursing he did at the mention of his name, as well as the many death wishes he had for him. The aggressive thoughts were also apparent at the death of Joffrey's character, during which the participant was calling Joffrey a monster. The participant also had aggressive thoughts towards Ramsay, and wished that he, himself, could throw him to get eaten by his own hounds. When Cersei was still a hated character by the participant, he wished her more suffering than her son Joffrey.

Both participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* experienced similar aggressive thoughts than the one found in the literature review of Bushman and Huesmann (2001) in which a number of laboratory experiments as well as survey analysis came to the conclusion that youth who watch violent scenes subsequently display more short-term aggressive thoughts and emotions. A possible explanation would be that seeing their favorite

character in danger, or watching a disliked character committing violent acts for no apparent or valid reason, angered the participants to a point where they wished similar violence committed by those perpetrators to be inflicted on them.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

A. Findings

When Group 1, the younger generation watching *Gossip Girl* was compared to Group 2, the older generation watching *Game of Thrones*, they perceived the character's attributes "funny" and "popular" in the *Gossip Girl* characters, wanted to do things that were done on the show, and liked the clothing and hairstyles of the characters from *Gossip Girl*, significantly more than Group 2 did while watching *Game of Thrones*. Nevertheless, when Group 2, the older generation watching *Gossip Girl* was compared within themselves watching *Game of Thrones*, they reported the same items as Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* reported when compared to Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones*: in fact, they also found the characters on *Gossip Girl* to be "funny" and "popular", they wished to do the things the characters did on the show, and they liked the clothing and hairstyles. Therefore, regardless of their age, it seems that the Lebanese female audience finds similarities with the characters of *Gossip Girl* significantly more than with the characters of *Game of Thrones*.

When Group 1, the younger generation watching *Gossip Girl* was compared to Group 2, the older generation watching *Gossip Girl*, they reported significantly higher levels of similarities, identification, and imitation with the characters of *Gossip Girl* than did the older generation of Group 2. In fact, Group 1 reported wanting to be the kind of person their favorite character is, they found that their favorite character behaves like them, and they stated imitating the attitude of the characters, saying phrases and expressions from the show, and getting ideas from their favorite characters on how to interact in real life. Consequently, the age factor plays a role when comparing two different age groups watching the same series; Group 1 finds more similarities with the characters of *Gossip Girl* when compared to both Group 2 watching *Game*

of *Thrones*, and Group 2 watching *Gossip Girl*. These similarities lead to a higher level of identification, as well as to the imitation of the characters' attitudes.

Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported by stating that *Gossip Girl* is the series in which the Lebanese female audience of Group 1, with the average age of 18 years old, finds more similarities with the characters, therefore affecting their identification with them and allowing a certain degree of imitation of the characters' attitudes.

Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* was compared first within themselves also watching *Gossip Girl*. It was found that Group 2 watched *Game of Thrones* in group settings. Whereas when comparing Group 1 watching *Gossip Girl* to Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones*, it was found that Group 1 watches *Gossip Girl* alone, whereas Group 2 watches *Game of Thrones* in group settings. Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* in a group setting reported building parasocial interactions with their favorite character on *Game of Thrones* by wishing to see them on-screen the following episodes. Building parasocial relations with the character led the participants of Group 2 to connect to the characters, which is a form of identification, by liking their physical appearances (clothing and hairstyles), without necessarily imitating them. Therefore it is evident that Group 2 watching *Game of Thrones* in a social group setting allows the participants to build parasocial interactions with the characters, proning a higher level of identification.

It should be noted that when Group 1 showed signs of building parasocial interactions with their favorite characters on *Gossip Girl* by feeling comfortable as if with a friend, they were able to do so without watching the series in a group setting, but rather while watching it alone. Age plays a role in this case as well: a younger generation is more easily influenced by a character, and can build a relation with this fictional character without needing the "emotional approval" of a group setting.

Hypothesis 2 is therefore supported by stating that *Game of Thrones* is the series in which the Lebanese female audience of Group 2, with the average age of 25 years old, watches the series in a group setting, which allows them to build parasocial interactions with the characters, affecting their identification with these characters, without necessarily leading to imitating them.

When the two Lebanese participants were asked to watch respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, they were both drawn, each in the respective series they were watching, to perpetrators who were powerful, rather than weak characters. They reported respecting, admiring, and rooting for them. When those powerful perpetrators started committing violence and immoral acts, the participants kept justifying the actions of those favored characters: in *Breaking Bad* the participant accepted the murders, the cooking and dealing of methamphetamine and various other criminal activities committed by the perpetrator because she considered he was doing it for the sake of his family. Even after she found out his motives changed and became for his own personal pursuit of power, she kept justifying his actions, as he was a powerful perpetrator she rooted for. In *Game of Thrones*, the participant justified the violence of powerful characters he considered were using said violence for a higher purpose. Both participants were repeatedly exposed to the two series violence; they watched an average of 5 episodes per day, each *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* episode containing a high amount of respectively drugs, murders, death, rape, and incest. Given the fact that both Lebanese participants have been previously exposed to screen violence and real-life weapons in their country Lebanon where there is no censure on national television, and guns normally exist in households, both of the participants did not experience initial aversion to the violence portrayed on *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*; instead, they enjoyed the violence inflicted by the perpetrators, and the violence inflicted on hated characters. Nevertheless, the participants experienced initial aversion to subjects they stated pre-series they were against:

the participant watching *Breaking Bad* stated before watching that she was against drug use and drug dealing, especially hard drugs. But after being drawn to and rooting for the perpetrator who starts cooking and selling methamphetamine, she did not see him as a criminal or a drug dealer, but rather a business man. As for the participant watching *Game of Thrones*, he reported pre-series agreeing on the taboo of incest, and being disgusted by the idea of rape. After watching several episodes then seasons of *Game of Thrones*, the participant, initially bothered and shocked, accepted a rape that turned into a loving couple, and stopped being affected by the sex scenes between siblings. The repeated exposure that both participants experienced decreased their emotional responsivity and empathy towards victims, especially disliked characters who were being tortured and killed, and increased their aggressive thoughts; in fact, while watching specific scenes, the participants would wish death and torture upon disliked characters or characters willing to harm their preferred perpetrator, and they would curse them out loud.

It is clear that the Lebanese participants experienced signs of desensitization after watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*.

Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported by stating that after repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer, even if already tolerant to on-screen violence, experienced desensitization signs to the violence, drugs, incest and rape portrayed on-screen.

B. Limitations

Despite some of the significant findings that this study revealed, several limitations should be discussed. One of the most important limitations of the study is the dependence of the findings on self-report measures which are subject to demand characteristics and socially desirable responding; measuring declarative behavior is never as accurate as measuring actual behavior through experiments. Even though students are ensured anonymity and

confidentiality, participants might be tempted to positively represent themselves in ways they might feel more protected and less exposed. All these factors might lead to a change in their responding pattern, which in turn leads to potential distortion of the collected data.

Another limitation that should be taken into consideration is the age variable: the data was collected from two different age groups; one significantly older than the other one, which as a result, yielded a variety of findings. Possibly, if the study had taken into consideration the variable of age, and focused on one specific age group, the findings would have been more narrowed down and yielded more specific results.

Another limitation to be mentioned would be the recency of the series and their general popularity; *Game of Thrones* being more recent and more popular than *Gossip Girl* in 2019 today potentially affected findings, especially ones of social group setting. A possible different design comparing two series of the same timeline could have yielded different conclusions.

A final limitation regarding the qualitative study of *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad* would be the scarcity of participants. Choosing only one participant to watch each series did allow in-depth interesting findings, but those cannot be generalized on the whole Lebanese population who watched those two series. It nevertheless provided cues that desensitization works in the two cases as predicted by the theory, and allows sustaining provisional hypothesis on what to expect if a more systematic design is defined.

C. Contribution to knowledge and Future Directions

The research allows enhancement of knowledge on the psychological effects of television series on the Lebanese audience; given the scarcity of research on the subject of identification with media characters in the Arab world, this study contributes to the scholarly literature by giving a new and different insight on the Lebanese population than that of previous literature: as a prominent example, findings of this study suggest that when the western teenage

generation identifies with characters and imitates their looks and lifestyle, the middle eastern Lebanese teenagers identify more with the popularity and the humor of the characters, and imitate their attitudes rather than their physical appearances.

A fairly new finding to this specific field of research that is considered a new contribution is the finding that the Lebanese female audience builds parasocial interactions and discusses the characters of the series *Game of Thrones*, a side of the series that has not yet been in-depth tackled by research yet.

Another contribution of this research to the already existing scholarly data is the fact that Lebanese viewers studied qualitatively appear to be more tolerant to violence than American viewers, not experiencing initial aversion to on-screen violence. Nevertheless, the viewers can still become desensitized to taboo subjects after repeated exposure such as incest or rape.

It would be recommended for future research to narrow the data to a specific age group, in order to yield more detailed results. Another recommendation would be to study a bigger sample of the population in order to yield more generalizable results on the desensitization of the Lebanese audience to television series violence, rape, and incest.

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