

Falling hard for *Breaking Bad*: An investigation of audience response to a popular television series¹

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Abstract:

Television, as scholars have reminded us, is quintessentially *the* medium of popular culture. As such, its popular programming can provide an important window into the cultural dynamics at play in a given period for a given society. To take advantage of this opportunity, however, two provisos must be satisfied. First, a compelling program with a devoted audience must appear. Second, a suitable means for examining the nature and roots of the show's appeal to its fans—a means that makes possible a rigorous exploration of *audience subjectivity*—must exist and be put into service. In this paper, we argue that both conditions are met: the first with the recent conclusion of the five-season run of *Breaking Bad*; the second with the adoption of Q methodology as a systematic means for illuminating viewers' subjective audience reactions to the show, rendering them *operant*, i.e., in publicly-available forms of "subjective communicability" rooted in the naturalistic concerns ("concourse") of the viewers themselves as opposed to the preconceived notions brought to bear by investigators of popular culture's raw material. Our investigation uncovers three basic orientations among viewers to the series, and following their interpretation, a

concluding discussion underscores the significance of these findings methodologically and for the larger context of contemporary American life.

Keywords: Popular culture; Q methodology; “Good TV”; *Breaking Bad*

Introduction: “Good TV”

In 1961, Newton N. Minow, chairperson of the Federal Communications Commission, famously declared that television programming was a “vast wasteland” (Minow, 1961), an opinion he reiterated 50 years later (Minow, 2011). Without dismissing Minow’s reservations, one can contend that television programming has substantially improved due to, among other things, cable, satellite and internet streaming technologies that deliver a more extensive and eclectic range of viewing choices. Characterized as a new “golden age” of television (Martin, 2013), the Public Broadcasting System, premium pay cable channels (HBO, Showtime), other cable networks (AMC) and streaming services (Netflix, Amazon) have invested in original programming that enhances the quantity and quality of televised entertainment. The result, identified as “Good TV”, is “NYPD Blue crossbred with Masterpiece Theater. Good TV is low culture promoted to high, while somehow maintaining its easy-going-down qualities. We sacrifice nothing when we watch it” (Hasak-Lowy, 2013).

Among the offerings constituting Good TV are *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men* and, more recently, *Breaking Bad* which has garnered numerous coveted awards and a loyal audience. The series features a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher who, upon a diagnosis of lung cancer, turns into the Southwest’s most prolific master manufacturer of “high quality” methamphetamines. As widely reported, Vince Gilligan, creator and producer of the series, has stated that his intent was to “turn Mr. Chips into Scarface” (Meslow, 2012). The success of *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013) can be attributed to several features including excellent scripts, acting and storytelling. Informal inspection of internet postings will demonstrate a sustained discussion of the myriad, multi-layered elements constituting the *Breaking Bad* series, such as: allusions to literature (Dante’s *Inferno* [Montgomery, 2012], Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* [Colby, 2013], Whitman’s and Shelley’s poetry (“Gliding Over It All”, “Ozymandias”]), cultural misogyny (McGuire, 2013), racial bias and prejudice (Harris, 2013), mythology (Steinbach, 2013), human tragedy and moral dilemmas (Bowman, 2013; Meslow, 2012) and numerous others.

These attributes “deeply engage many people on a personal level with challenging real-world situations, questions and characters that foster empathy and understanding” (Kerman, 2013). *Breaking Bad* has elicited “water cooler conversations that matter” (Kerman, 2013) occurring, substantially, in the blogosphere where criticisms and interpretations are rejoined nearly instantaneously. Thus, Good TV can rival great film and literature due to content but also to the increasing numbers of people who watch, relate to and discuss it. “We watch Breaking Bad not merely because it is good, but because everyone’s talking about it. Who the hell talks about books anymore?” (Hasak-Lowy, 2013).

The volume of comments regarding *Breaking Bad*'s themes and characters are saturated with personal opinion and deliver a realm of discourse amenable to empirical analysis whereby the patterns of viewers' subjective responses can be ascertained.

Q Methodological Analysis of Viewers' Perceptions of *Breaking Bad*

Q methodology (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Stephenson, 1953) is particularly suited to eliciting and examining viewers' responses to *Breaking Bad*. While concise definitions of the methodology are difficult to come by, the brief passage that follows – from the entry provided by Brown and Good (2010) to the Sage Encyclopedia of Research Methods – captures the core principles:

Q methodology is a combination of conceptual framework, technique of data collection, and method of analysis that collectively provides the basis for the scientific study of subjectivity. This is distinguished from R methodology, which provides the basis for the study of what is objective in human behavior.

Innovated in the mid-1930s by British physicist-psychologist William Stephenson (1902-1989), Q methodology focuses on opinions and perspectives that are gathered using the well-known Q-sort technique. These data are then submitted to factor analysis, pioneered by Stephenson's mentor Charles Spearman, which reveals the segmentation of subjectivity inherent in the substantive domain under consideration (Brown and Good (2010), p. 1149).

The methodology rests on the proposition that subjectivity is primarily the communication of a person's point of view about any aspect of life. These self-referent expressions—"water cooler conversations"—are found everywhere, including opinions about diverse aspects of *Breaking Bad*, and constitute a *concourse of communication* consisting of shared understandings and interpretations. Inasmuch as these are subjective responses, i.e., expressions of self-reference ("Skyler was a tragic heroine but also a strong, leading woman and we need more of these") rather than statements of fact ("Skyler was the wife of Walter White"), Q method enables the analysis of viewers' attribution of meanings to the program and reveals, as we shall see, that the "subjective communicability" encompassing the *Breaking Bad* phenomenon has structure and form (Brown, 1986).

To discern the meanings ascribed to *Breaking Bad* a large volume of opinion statements posted on internet sites was combed for opinions regarding characters, plots and other program elements. A selection of these statements constituting a *Q sample* was presented to research participants who sorted them according to the degree to which they represented, or did not represent, their points of view. While performing a Q sort, an individual appraises the relative significance of each statement in context of all other statements. Thus, self-referent subjectivity is implicated throughout the sorting process. Meaning derives from the placement of statements along a continuum defined by personal

signification (e.g., “statements with which I agree strongly agree” to “statements with which I strongly disagree”). This aspect of the methodology – i.e., the practice of participants “assigning” scores and meanings to naturally-occurring subjective claims (which equate with Skinner’s [1938, p. 20] meaning of operant behavior) as opposed to the more commonplace practice in quantitative research whereby participants “receive” scores on previously-defined indices, measures, operationalizations and the like – gives the subjectivity it measures its *operant* character. This condition of operantcy, as we shall argue subsequently, is what in particular recommends application of Q methodology to studies of popular culture. The rationale behind this claim rests on the nature of the method’s insurance that the influence of author-led interpretation is diminished vis-à-vis the naturalistic respondent-centered subjectivity of interest (Stephenson, 1977).

Posed in research-question form, we are asking: what are the different types of viewer response that emerge from the viewers themselves; that is, what were the different perspectives about *Breaking Bad* from the standpoint of audience members themselves? The study to follow, then, may also be viewed as an illustration of Q methodology’s promise as a “bridge for the qualitative/quantitative ‘divide’” (Davis & Michelle, 2011) in reception research.

Constructing the Q Sample

The utility of Q method is not determined by how many people express a point of view, a task more suited to survey research, but discovering the nature of those points of view. To this end, the opinion statements obtained from the internet were selected in accordance with the multi-dimensional model of audience reception delineated by Michelle (2010). Positive and negative expressions of each mode were equally distributed.

1. *Transparent Mode: Text as Life.* A viewer expresses a sympathetic reaction to a television program and its characters by identifying (or not) with them.
2. *Referential Mode: Text as Life Like.* A viewer’s reactions convey comparable life experiences, likely constructed in metaphoric terms, as in, “I can understand how X’s behavior might actually happen [or not happen] in the real world.”
3. *Mediated Mode: Text as Production.* Mediated responses are more distant and separated relationships between the viewer and the television production. These responses reflect how the program assisted (positive) or hindered (negative) the telling of the narrative.
4. *Discursive Mode: Text as Message.* Viewer comments suggest that the program as an entirety achieved or failed to achieve the purposes and feelings it intended to inculcate.

Five positively stated and five negatively stated statements were selected for each mode for a sample of $N = 40$ items (see Appendix B). Thirty-five research participants, recruited by means of snowball- or respondent-driven sampling techniques (Coleman, 1958-1959; Goodman, 1961) – for having viewed all or portions of *Breaking Bad* – sorted the statements according to customary Q-technique procedures, ranking those items with which they “strongly agreed” at the right-end of the opinion continuum (anchored by +4), to those statements with which they “strongly disagreed” on the left-end (anchored by -4). Using *PQMethod*, a specially-designed Q analysis software program (Schmolck & Armstrong, 2013), the Q sorts were inter-correlated, and the 35 X 35 correlation matrix was factor analyzed (principal components analysis) and three factors were selected for varimax rotation. Thirty-three respondents loaded significantly ($p < .01$) on one or more factors. Factor scores for the sample of $N = 40$ statements were calculated and used as the primary basis for interpretation – the results (Appendix B).

Audience Reactions to *Breaking Bad*

Factor A: “Discursive Viewers”—*Breaking Bad* as Morality Play

The first factor is populated by 12 respondents with significant factor loadings (seven males and five females; Appendix A). Factor A reveals two themes recurrent, in differing ways, in the other two factors. First, it is clear from the statements receiving the highest positive scores (Appendix B) that its viewers resonate with the decisive refrains that lie at heart of the series. *Breaking Bad* presents a potent object lesson instructing the viewer as to how the actions of the show’s protagonists, Walt, Jesse, and Mike in particular, mirror the imperfect condition of humanity, the seductive nature of power, and the vulnerabilities of the “common man” to break bad. These roles are significant due to the viewers’ projective identification with their characters who “present something shared but unacknowledged by all of us. It presents us with our “flawed humanity” (statement no. 29). The identification is also realized through the cleverness with which the series takes viewers on an emotional ride, first sympathizing with Walt and then acknowledging how he had become, through his alter ego of “Heisenberg”, a monster incarnate acting contrary to the best interests of his family and friends.

Statements receiving +4 and +3 scores: (33) On the surface, *Breaking Bad* is a show about a high school chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin. The series, however, has a depth far beyond its subject matter and presents a meditation on morality that can resonate with anyone. (5) The one classic moral principle that functions in the story is “The sinner falls ever deeper into sin.” Walt wasn’t sucked in, he dived in. (17) *Breaking Bad* let us root for the underdog genius in his tighty-whities until we realize we may have developed sympathies for the Devil. (40) The Emmy award-winning series has a depth

far beyond its subject matter, and that fact is well-documented by its critical acclaim and the serious nature of its audience. (10) *Breaking Bad* revealed in excruciating detail how capable human beings are of self-delusion. (1) What made *Breaking Bad* different is that the show turned our natural inclination to support a character against us, and into a moment of moral reflection on our own values. (30) Walt was a living, breathing example that ordinary people are capable of great evil under the right circumstances. (29) *Breaking Bad* has grown from a niche market favorite to a cultural phenomenon, and for good reason: it presents something shared but unacknowledged by all of us. It presents us with our flawed humanity.

As an example, “Fly,” an episode most favored by Factor A, took place almost entirely in the laboratory where Walt is obsessed with killing a fly, much to Jesse’s bewilderment. The fly represents an immediate threat to the purity of Walt’s “product,” but it also epitomizes the fragility of their situation in their shadowy underworld. Also, in this episode, one learns more about the moral sense that Jesse and Walt possess. While Jesse emotionally discusses his aunt’s losing battle to cancer, Walt cannot quite bring himself to tell him about his own role in Jane’s (Jesse’s drug-addicted girlfriend) death. “Fly,” more than any other episode, may be the most cerebral demonstration of Walt’s sinking even deeper into sin and a moral code held by Jesse (and Mike) that eluded Walt.

The second theme is best revealed by the statements receiving the highest negative scores. Significant among them is the opinion that *Breaking Bad* serves as more than mere entertainment. Thus, the series functions as “text as message” (Michelle, 2010) and is an appropriate medium for presenting the first theme of the morality play.

Statements receiving -4 and -3 scores: (14) Why are we debating the morality of a fictional television character, whose creators cleverly turned moral ambiguity into the hook they needed to entertain and, thereby, sell ads? (25) Perhaps viewers obsessed over whether Walt was right or wrong but let’s be honest: Walter White is not real; he’s merely a character in an entertaining show. Questions of deep moral significance should be dealt with outside the theater and the stage. (26) I disliked Skyler so much because she cheated on her cancer-ridden husband. Walt was always about family. Skyler violated that. (12) There lurks a doubt as to how we would cope with the veneer of civilization stripped away in the kind of savage world that Walt inhabited. As our vicarious representative, Walt maintained our loyalty as a tribal chieftain might, with remarkable cunning and unwavering devotion to his family. (18) It was a great show, but let’s stop trying so hard to pigeon-hole it as anything but great entertainment, artfully done. (4) Walter White was a brilliantly written action anti-hero in a scenario with absolutely no basis in reality. (31) I will continue to root for Walt, even though I know he did terrible

things with inadequate moral justification. Fortunately, it's only fiction, isn't it? (24) If teachers were paid what they deserve, then maybe Walter White wouldn't have had any need to break bad.

While not denying its entertainment value, Factor A believes *Breaking Bad* engages the viewer, as do all good texts, in a fashion comparable to acclaimed movies, plays, and opera whose fictional characters transcend play-acting: "Good TV series can do what the news doesn't—deeply engage people with challenging real-world issues that foster empathy" (Kerman, 2013). In doing so, *Breaking Bad* erodes the decree that television can only dwell in a vast cultural wasteland. Rejected is the conclusion that *Breaking Bad's* production values are simply pretensions for delivering commentary on enduring human issues as a "hook" to reign in viewers and attract them as customers to its commercial sponsors, even if artfully done.

Factor B: "Character Identifiers"—Embracing the Anti-Hero

The striking theme of Factor B is identification with the characters in *Breaking Bad* in line with the Transparent Mode of audience reception, i.e., "text as life" (Michelle, 2010). These viewers (10 participants of whom eight are male) resonate positively with male characters, especially Walt, Jesse and Saul, while negatively identifying with the two most prominent female characters in the series; Skyler in particular was named by six as their least favorite (the other was Marie, Skyler's sister). Also, but to a lesser extent than Factor A, Factor B attends to moral issues although they are less central, qualified by the conclusion that the program is a fictitious depiction of real life.

Statements receiving +4 and +3 scores: (31) I will continue to root for Walt, even though I know he did terrible things with inadequate moral justification. Fortunately, it's only fiction, isn't it? (20) The power of this show lies in the way people regard Walt, wondering what they would do in his place with his gifts, opportunities and troubles. His confession that he did it for himself is a masterful dramatic moment and viewers could feel in their hearts the glamor of evil. (33) On the surface, *Breaking Bad* is a show about a high school chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin. The series, however, has a depth far beyond its subject matter and presents a meditation on morality that can resonate with anyone. (27) Live a long and peaceful life Jesse Pinkman. You're a good boy in your heart. (16) Our society generates people like Walter White all the time – smart, intelligent people who feel underpaid and underappreciated in a macho-culture that traditionally favors the brawny hero. (40) The Emmy award-winning series has a depth far beyond its subject matter, and that fact is well-documented by its critical acclaim and the serious nature of its audience. (13) Jesse Pinkman was in some ways the moral center of the show. He was trying to do the right thing but he was the broken child who had

been led astray by this “bad dad.” (35) I don’t know why I found myself identifying with and even excusing the immoral choices Walt made. Though his actions were evil, I found myself wanting him to succeed.

The attraction of Walter White and Jesse Pinkman resides in their roles as anti-heroes, flawed characters blurring the line between right and wrong and who, in spite of their care and love for family and friends, engaged in villainous acts that are not morally justifiable. These characters were sufficiently appealing such that viewers could experience a vicarious relationship with the “glamour of evil” and, because of that, yearn for their success. Of the two, however, Jesse emerges as the more sympathetic character, a young man corrupted by a father figure but who will ultimately be redeemed.

The statements receiving negative scores further clarify the orientation Factor B has toward the characters of *Breaking Bad*. The ambivalent appeal of Walter is offset by the clear dislike for his wife, Skyler White. She is not perceived as a victim of a ruthless husband or as a tragic heroine who attempted against all odds to protect her children and maintain her family.

Statements receiving -4 and -3 scores: (9) I wanted so badly to root for Skyler because I hated Walt and how abusive he was. (38) I felt less sorrow for Walt than his victims, not only those whose lives were ruined by addiction to his meth but especially his wife and family whose welfare he tirelessly claimed to be serving while plotting, scheming and living the life of two-faced criminal. (32) I think the people who dislike Skyler, or the way she was portrayed, miss the point about what her character was really about. Skyler was a tragic heroine but also a strong, leading woman and we need more of these. (37) *Breaking Bad* creates an indictment of an American society that glorifies money and power (Gretchen and Elliot, Gus, and eventually Walt), and victimizes most women and children leaving them to a precarious existence. (24) If teachers were paid what they deserve, then maybe Walter White wouldn’t have had any need to break bad. (15) Drinking the “we are all Walter White” Kool-Aid sure gets us high enough to excuse almost anything—self-indulgence is a ton lighter than the lift of self-analysis. (2) Walter White is all of us. He was each and every person you know, including yourself. He just went too far with his freedom. (34) The truly moral character was Walt’s brother-in-law, the DEA agent Hank. And all Walter White could do was cry helplessly as he watched him get executed right before his eyes.

Thus, Factor B respondents view the show through the prism of identification with the major characters. While Factor A grapples with the manifest themes of *Breaking Bad*, Factor B aligns itself with the major protagonists and enjoy going along for the ride with them, rooting for Walt and against those who oppose him, particularly Skyler.

Factor C: “Men at Work”—Play in Hard-Nosed Criticism

The first feature of Factor C worth noting is that all of its five defining Q sorts were supplied by males. They vary in age from 21 to 66, and, while they are similar in their choice of favorite (two for Walt, three for Saul) and least favorite characters (two for Skyler, one for Marie), their gendered uniformity does not equate with shared “misogyny” in anti-Skyler sentiments.² The men of Factor C vary in other respects as well: occupationally, for instance, they range from college professors to self-employed entrepreneurs to college students.

The Factor C viewpoint displays a deep ambivalence or, perhaps more accurately, a pair of ambivalences at the core of its orientation toward the series. One expression of ambivalence is reflected in the dual nature of the factor’s focus: in some respects, it is focused on “the story as reality”, entering into the conversation as if the characters and the plot twists were part and parcel of real life and, as such, available for personal chastisement and/or advice. The other aspect of Factor C’s dualistic regard for the series is more detached and analytical: in this respect the third factor’s ambivalence reflects less an “immediacy” of the audience-reacting experience (Stephenson, 1978) than a judgment about the “worth” or “inherent quality” of the pop-cultural phenomenon *Breaking Bad* apart, as it were, from the characters, plot and human dilemmas depicted in the series itself. In this sense, the analytic, academic, and “sociological” orientation of the factor is fully aware of the fact that, before its conclusion at the end of Season Five, *Breaking Bad* had already secured an enthusiastic, loyal and deeply-invested viewing audience, not to mention the critical acclaim of the pop-culture punditry class dedicated to dissecting popular programming for the enduring earmarks of genuinely Good TV.

Concurrent with this ambivalence in focus is another element that partly overlays and in part stands apart from this initial duality. Whereas this initial sense of ambivalence turns principally on the distinction between “viewer-as-fan” and “viewer-as-analyst,” the second form is more basic with an emphasis on the fundamentals of positivity vs. negativity. Whether approached as a fan identified with the key characters embodying “real people in a real-world drama,” or as a more detached “scholarly analyst,” *Breaking Bad* elicits reactions that, ultimately, are either inherently affirmative and positive or critically detracting. That these two modes of ambivalence interact in Factor C can be inferred from the statements located at the positive end of the factor array. The sentiment at the core of this ambivalence – “it was a great show, but it was only a show” – is most clearly expressed in the juxtaposition of statements 18 and 14 in the upper-end of the composite Q sort for the factor.

Statements receiving +4 and +3 scores: (30) Walt was a living, breathing example that ordinary people are capable of great evil under the right circumstances. (10) *Breaking Bad* revealed in excruciating detail how capable human beings are of self-delusion. (29) *Breaking Bad* has grown from a niche market favorite to a cultural phenomenon, and for good reason: it presents something shared but unacknowledged by all of us. It presents us with our

flawed humanity. (18) It was a great show, but let's stop trying so hard to pigeon-hole it as anything but great entertainment, artfully done. (14) Why are we debating the morality of a fictional television character, whose creators cleverly turned moral ambiguity into the hook they needed to entertain and, thereby, sell ads? (2) Walter White is all of us. He was each and every person you know, including yourself. He just went too far with his freedom. (36) As far as Skyler's behavior goes, it's only human to get angry and sick by following all the rules when other people, namely your husband, keep disappearing and lying about it over and over again.

As for Factor A, *Breaking Bad* supplies a compelling morality tale, namely, that as frail human beings, we are all capable of succumbing to evil when faced with a conspiracy of uncontrollable circumstances. Moreover, after falling victim to the temptations to break bad, we are equipped with the capacity to protect ourselves from recognizing the damage done by our acts by extraordinary (albeit equally human) recourse to the full panoply of defensive measures – denial, dishonesty, rationalization – that fill the quiver of self-delusion. Yet, one must not forget – that *Breaking Bad* is primarily a television show and, as such, a creative product designed to deliver customers to the advertisers willing to pay the high costs of commercial space for sponsors of a popular television series.

The duality implicit in its take on the show is given further illumination and specificity at opposite end of the Factor C as shown below:

Statements receiving -4 and -3 scores: (9) I wanted so badly to root for Skyler because I hated Walt and how abusive he was. (25) Perhaps viewers obsessed over whether Walt was right or wrong but let's be honest: Walter White is not real; he's merely a character in an entertaining show. Questions of deep moral significance should be dealt with outside the theater and the stage. (7) Marriages are complicated and there are many reasons why just calling it quits isn't necessarily the right thing to do. Skyler trapped herself and the best she could do was to protect her family — including her husband — by pragmatically preventing them from getting caught. (32) I think the people who dislike Skyler, or the way she was portrayed, miss the point about what her character was really about. Skyler was a tragic heroine but also a strong, leading woman and we need more of these. (31) I will continue to root for Walt, even though I know he did terrible things with inadequate moral justification. Fortunately, it's only fiction, isn't it? (40) The Emmy award-winning series has a depth far beyond its subject matter, and that fact is well-documented by its critical acclaim and the serious nature of its audience.

Two themes mirror the factor's ambivalence in ways not anticipated from the aforementioned positively-scored items. First watchers a weekly dose of opportunities to

vicariously “break bad” while being comforted in doing so by the dictum that “all have sinned”; if it can happen to Walter White then it can happen to any one of us. At the same time, the ambivalence presents itself in yet another manifestation: one encounters an apparent contradiction in the precautions voiced in the positively-scored statements about making too much of the Walter White character. The placement of items 25 and 31 disavow Walter White’s status as a mere fictional television character with no basis in reality whereas item 40 denies that the series is best understood as a deep morality play with broad implications and appeal. Follow-up interviews with residents of Factor C account for the contradiction with reference to the niche nature of the series.

What they refute is the breadth of the Walter White appeal while, not too subtly, displaying elements of self-serving bias as well. These viewers deserve to be set apart as an elite class “who got” the series’ deeper meaning that remains elusive to the average viewer. Not only does this attitude betoken a modicum of hubris, it reveals as well the modus operandi of self-proclaimed “contrarian” critics. Bringing analytical-critical capacities to bear in revealing their attraction to a contemporary icon of popular culture supplies an undeniable and compelling opportunity to extract the pleasure of performing as “hard-nosed critics.” This role validates their presentation of self as edgy contrarians apparently incapable of confessing gratification at kicking back and partaking of the plebeian pleasures available to a “typical” member of the mass-audience. To merely admit to enjoying the show, without recourse to complex theories or secretive strategies aimed at playing to the tastes of a mass audience, is beneath them. For these “high-brow” partisans of Factor C, it is virtually impossible to consider popular culture via the medium of television in terms that do not resort to a pejorative appraisal of mass aesthetics wherein unsophisticated tastes form the necessary *yin* for the *yang* of television’s staple of primetime programming.

Finally, it bears noting that also embedded in the negatively scored statements is yet another preoccupation with the character of Skyler. Three statements in particular combine to tell a story of disappointment with Walter White’s wife. One rejects any desire to empathize with her given the allegedly abusive way she was treated by Walt (no. 9). Another defends those with ill-defined reservations about Skyler and the idea that they are, at bottom, baseless (no. 32). Yet, the idea that anti-Skyler sentiments are overdone and she did what any mother would do with the hand she was dealt (no. 7) is also rejected. Altogether, while the outright hostility toward Skyler fails to reach that on Factor B, it is still clear to these viewers that Mrs. Walter White is not a sympathetic character.

Concluding Discussion: Q Methodology and the Operantcy of Popular Culture

Before pausing to probe the deeper significance of these findings, we are obligated to issue the customary disclaimers warranted by studies such as this. We make no assumptions that the three varieties of viewer experience vis-à-vis *Breaking Bad* necessarily exhaust the range of possible audience reactions to the series. Given the “intensive” nature of Q-methodological investigations where the size of the respondent sample rarely exceeds $n = 50$ – and in this case is just shy of three dozen – we cannot rule out the possibility that

other, undetected orientations toward the series exist. By the same token, as tempting as it might be to make much ado about demographic differences – particularly, in this case, the possibly powerful associations between gender and overall viewing experience – we are forced to concede, despite the artistic license taken in the label assigned Factor C, that the types of viewer response represented above bear no known associations with objective, demographic variables of any sort. Again, this does not preclude the possibility that extensive, large-sample survey investigations might someday appear to support such associations; put more positively, our findings provide us with sensible, fairly clear pictures of *how* different viewers actually viewed *Breaking Bad* without allowing us to venture a guess as to *how many* subscribe to each perspective.

These caveats notwithstanding, the three modes of audience response discovered here not only “make sense” individually as distinct viewing orientations toward a popular, critically acclaimed television series. More subtly perhaps, these orientations can be considered as three pieces of an organic whole, and when cast in this light these factors illuminate in turn important elements of the dynamics behind the show’s attractiveness as a phenomenon of popular culture. Imagine, for example, water-cooler conversations among individuals espousing each of the three stances toward the series made manifest above. The conversational dynamics are energized by the differences among the three sets of viewers, drawn for different reasons, to the same program. Factors A and B both consist of avowed fans; A, however, is “motivated” by the story while B is enamored of the main male characters – especially anti-heroes Walt and Jesse – while confessing to discomforting feelings toward Walt’s wife Skyler. The grounds for animated, enthusiastic conversation are readily apparent; add in the “devil’s advocate” character of C, issuing playful “challenges” to possible groupies of a plebeian form of entertainment and the self-sustaining nature of the weekly “gratification ritual” of post-episode conversations becomes almost starkly self-evident.

As a separate matter, rendered important due to the primacy of methodological illustration as an impetus for undertaking this project, it bears noting how the processes producing these results differ in principal respects from the form in which the bulk of popular-culture analyses are advanced. While there are exceptions, to be sure, perhaps the most common approach taken by analysts of popular culture is one featuring careful yet creative observation among skilled scholars with a penchant for penetrating meanings of popular-cultural phenomena. Customary among such analyses is the identity of the researcher-observer of the phenomenon of interest.

With popular culture, however, the identity of observer and researcher arguably entails a methodological contradiction: the meaning of *popular* in popular culture should be subject to popular determination by everyday participants instead of scholarly experts working on their own or detached from key informants of that culture. Indeed, the rise of scholarly attention to audiences and their interpretive behavior, reflected in the contents of this journal, testifies to the salience of this point. It is therefore no minor matter that this methodological conundrum is not present in Q methodology, as demonstrated in the

research by Thomas and Baas (1994) and as more recently explained by Brown, Danielson, and van Exel (2015):

In a science of subjectivity, the observer is the Q sorter, who is the only person in direct contact with his or her own point of view and therefore the only person who can directly inform on it. Ironically, it is R methodology that combines researcher and observer and thereby injects researcher bias by assuming that the measurement scale carries meaning known only to the researcher and that is independent of the person providing the response. This is a grave error that Q methodology would never make (p. 350).

Thus, from a methodological standpoint, Q-method's focus on the subjective communicability embedded in a given popular-cultural discourse ensures that the range of subjective meanings discovered in the form of the factors have scientific status as "subjective operants" (Brown & Mathieson, 1990; Stephenson, 1977). That is, they are naturally occurring; they do not result from preconceived categorical notions favored by investigators and imposed upon the behaviors of the key informants or audience segments. Research participants render their own observations by the act of sorting statements chronicled within the topic's concourse. The results cannot survive independently of the participants' subjective engagement.

Concomitant with Q methodology's virtues is the premise that the findings made operant in studies of popular culture constitute "subjective microcosms" (Brown, 1974) of the issue(s) at hand. Accordingly, they suggest what it is about the phenomenon under investigation that accounts for its popularity. Examining the three factors to emerge from this analysis of the subjectivity undergirding the attraction to *Breaking Bad* as "Good TV," one can conclude that a substantial component of the appeal amongst the different segments of the fan base is rooted in the program's characters, particularly Walter White. On this score, despite the divergence in motives among the different factors, a fundamental point of agreement is born of identification with Mr. White and the ethical dilemma he confronts in the wake of the diagnosis of and high-cost treatment needed to address the advanced stage of his lung cancer although he had never been a smoker. We are also informed that Mr. White, during his college years, was victimized (in an unclear manner) by a pair of friends and fellow investors who unfairly deprived him of his share of what became a multi-billion dollar corporate windfall. Instead of raising his family in a life of luxury, we learn that he makes a \$43,700 as a high school teacher who, when Skyler becomes pregnant with their second child and unable to work, is forced to take on a menial second job as cashier at a car wash to make ends meet. This is the Walter White who, in a drive-along with his DEA brother-in-law, spots a former student escaping from an ongoing bust of a meth-making lab in an Albuquerque suburb. When told what the street value would be of the meth confiscated in the raid, he reconnects with the student and proposes a partnership in

meth production. Thus begins the process of “breaking bad” and Walter’s transformation into the calculating and ruthless “Heisenberg.”

Our findings make much of this morality tale of Walter White. Idiosyncratic variations among the factors notwithstanding, a common message emerges from these data that speak to a larger confluence of dynamics that, taken in context, account for the show’s popularity at this time in American history. Walter White’s dark journey from a well-respected educator to the local DEA’s “most wanted” drug kingpin in the American Southwest occurs precisely in sync with the aftermath of the “Great Recession” that commenced formally on September 15, 2008, the date the Federal Reserve Board and foreign banks decided not to rescue Lehmann Brothers and fueled the scope and speed of the systemic collapse and massive runs on world financial markets. With the macro-economic environment in a free-fall, is it any wonder that popular culture would turn in a way that signified a loss of cultural confidence in the old adage that the surest path to personal success and achievement of the American Dream is “to work hard and play by the rules”? To be sure, the anti-hero theme in popular culture predates the financial sector’s implosion in 2008, dating back at least to “Benjamin” in *The Graduate*, “Alex” in *A Clockwork Orange*, “Bonnie and Clyde” and more recently the criminal underworld as portrayed in *The Sopranos* or the individual pursuits of justice by *Dexter*. We have no intentions of insinuating that there exists a single instigating factor that can be construed as a causal driver of Walter White’s stature as a popular anti-hero. Our point is that in the context in which behemoth investment bankers brought the American and world economies to the precipice of global collapse as a consequence of excessive risk-taking tied to the marketing of mortgage-backed securities, and despite the rare cases of egregious misconduct represented by the likes of Bernie Madoff, those responsible for the painful outcomes have yet to pay a price for their own manner of “breaking bad.”

Against this backdrop, one can speculate that popular culture presents a turn against the “work hard and play by the rules” mentality that was coming to assume to status of a slogan for chumps. In this context the success of Gilligan’s full-throated celebration of “breaking bad” in the predicament and personage of Walter White stands as a clear-cut case of poetic justice if not an artistic expression making deep cultural, sociological, and pop-cultural sense. Was it fair that billionaire investment bankers could break bad and suffer no negative personal consequences while millions of innocent homeowners saw the value of their home equity erased virtually overnight with many losing their homes to foreclosure? Against this backdrop, is the specter of Walt White amassing millions of dollars from the sale of his 99% pure crystal-blue signature product tantamount to evil of an entirely different magnitude? The voices expressed by these factors would seemingly concur with a resounding “no.”

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Appendix A: Factor Loadings and Respondent Characteristics

Q Sort	Factor Loadings ^a			% Watched	Favorite Episode	Favorite Char	Least Favorite Char	Weekly Conversation	Ranking of Final Episode
	1	2	3						
1	X	f	34	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Jesse	Hank	yes	9
3	X	m	68	100		Walt	Tuco	no	8
6	X	m	29	100	"Salud" (S4/E10)	Mike	Todd	yes	9
11	X	f	20	100	"Fly" (S3/E10)	Marie	Todd	yes	10
15	X	f	21	95	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Mike	Skyler	yes	9
18	X	m	25	100	"Felina" (S5/E16)	Walt	Heisenber g	no	9
22	X	m	34	85		Jesse	Hank	yes	
23	X	m	19	100	"Fly" (S3/E10)	Jesse	Skyler	yes	7
25	X	m	37	90		Walt		no	
26	X	f	59	100	Pilot Episode (S1/E1)	Jesse	Walt	no	7
33	X	m	37	100		Mike	Marie	yes	10
34	X	f	21	100	"One Minute" (S3/E7)	Saul	Todd	Yes	10
5	X	m	22	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Walt	Skyler	Yes	9
8	X	m	32	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Walt	Marie	Yes	9
9	X	m	27	100	"Ozymandia s" (S5/E14)	Walt	Marie	Yes	9
10	X	f	21	98	"Felina" (S5/E16)	Walt	Skyler	Yes	9
13	X	f	55	100		Jesse	Skyler	No	8
16	X	m	19	100		Walt	Skyler	Yes	10
17	X	m	18	100		Walt	Hank	Yes	10

20	X	m	22	100	"Felina" (S5/E16)	Saul	Skyler	Yes	10		
28	X	m	21	100		Walt	Skyler	No	9		
30	X	m	37	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Saul		Yes	9		
2		X	m	35	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Jesse	Mike	Yes	8.5	
4		X	m	36	75	"Dead Freight" (S5/E5)	Saul	Marie	No	7	
7		X	m	53	80	"Say My Name" (S5/E7)	Walt	Marie	No	9	
12		X	m	66	100		Walt	Skyler	No	8	
19		X	m	21	100		Saul	Skyler	No	8	
21	X	X	f	32	100		Jesse	Hank	Yes	10	
24	X	X		m	34	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Saul	Skyler	Yes	9
27	X	X		m	46	100	"Felina" (S5/E16)	Walt	Marie	No	10
29	X	X		f	23	100	"Felina" (S5/E16)	Saul	Skyler	Yes	10
32	X	X		f	21	100		Jesse	Tuco	Yes	10
35	X	X		m	21	100	"Face Off" (S4/E13)	Walt	Skyler	Yes	9
14				m	19	100		Walt	Marie	yes	10
31				m	20	75		Walt		no	

^aX indicates significant factor loading ($p < .01$). The standard error for a zero-order factor loading is $SE = 1 / \sqrt{N}$, where N is the number of items in the Q sample. In this study, $N = 40$; $SE = 1 / \sqrt{40} = 0.16$. Loadings in excess of $2.58(SE) = 2.58(0.16) = \pm 0.41$.

Appendix B: Factor Arrays for *Breaking Bad* Q Sample

Factor			Q Sample Statements
A	B	C	
+3	+2	0	1. What made <i>Breaking Bad</i> different is that the show turned our natural inclination to support a character against us, and into a moment of moral reflection on our own values.
-1	-3	+3	2. Walter White is all of us. He was each and every person you know, including yourself. He just went too far with his freedom.
-2	0	0	3. So long as fiction writers continue to make the smart characters the villainous characters, intelligent people will continue to cheer on the villains, no matter how mistaken their moral views might be.
-3	+1	-2	4. Walter White was a brilliantly written action anti-hero in a scenario with

- absolutely no basis in reality.
- +4 -1 +1 5. The one classic moral principle that functions in the story is “The sinner falls ever deeper into sin.” Walt wasn’t sucked in, he dived in.
- 2 0 -1 6. Before Saul Goodman came along, they needed Hank to be in scenes people laughed with. Otherwise the series would have been too depressing.
- 0 0 -4 7. Marriages are complicated and there are many reasons why just calling it quits isn’t necessarily the right thing to do. Skyler trapped herself and the best she could do was to protect her family — including her husband — by pragmatically preventing them from getting caught.
- 1 0 -3 8. I had some sympathy for Jesse, but he wasn’t much deserving of it, either. He murdered, too, although he was a stupid misguided kid when this started and he couldn’t find an out, while he genuinely sought one.
- 2 -4 -4 9. I wanted so badly to root for Skyler because I hated Walt and how abusive he was.
- +4 +1 +4 10. *Breaking Bad* revealed in excruciating detail how capable human beings are of self-delusion.
- 0 +1 -4 11. By the time Hank met his end in the last episode, he had transformed from a one-note impediment to *Breaking Bad’s* true hero — making his death the most emotionally devastating moment yet in a series that isn’t exactly short on emotional devastation.
- 3 +2 +2 12. There lurks a doubt as to how we would cope with the veneer of civilization stripped away in the kind of savage world that Walt inhabited. As our vicarious representative, Walt maintained our loyalty as a tribal chieftain might, with remarkable cunning and unwavering devotion to his family.
- +2 +3 +1 13. Jesse Pinkman was in some ways the moral center of the show. He was trying to do the right thing but he was the broken child who had been led astray by this “bad dad.”
- 4 +1 +3 14. Why are we debating the morality of a fictional television character, whose creators cleverly turned moral ambiguity into the hook they needed to entertain and, thereby, sell ads?
- 1 -3 -1 15. Drinking the “we are all Walter White” Kool-Aid sure gets us high enough to excuse almost anything—self-indulgence is a ton lighter than the lift of self-analysis.
- 0 +3 0 16. Our society generates people like Walter White all the time — smart, intelligent people who feel underpaid and under-appreciated in a macho-culture that traditionally favors the brawny hero.
- +4 +1 -2 17. *Breaking Bad* let us root for the underdog genius in his tighty-whities until we realize we may have developed sympathies for the Devil.
- 4 -2 +3 18. It was a great show, but let’s stop trying so hard to pigeon-hole it as anything but great entertainment, artfully done.
- 0 +2 +2 19. My reaction to Hank was the most disturbing. He was on the side of good, but I just wasn’t interested in his success. Was this intentional? Was Hank meant to be a turnoff, despite his commitment to finding and arresting a very

- | | | | |
|----|----|----|--|
| | | | bad operator? |
| +3 | +4 | +1 | 20. The power of this show lies in the way people regard Walt, wondering what they would do in his place with his gifts, opportunities and troubles. His confession that he did it for himself is a masterful dramatic moment and viewers could feel in their hearts the glamor of evil. |
| -2 | -1 | +2 | 21. Skyler never got much space to be an independent character. Her story really revolved around the choices her husband made. |
| +2 | 0 | -1 | 22. The broken parts of our souls, the ones perhaps buried in the outer regions of the subconscious, carry the same burdens that Jesse's does. |
| +1 | -2 | -1 | 23. The ego burns bright, but all empires turn to dust, as did the empire of Walter White. As will ours. |
| -3 | -3 | 0 | 24. If teachers were paid what they deserve, then maybe Walter White wouldn't have had any need to break bad. |
| -4 | -2 | -3 | 25. Perhaps viewers obsessed over whether Walt was right or wrong but let's be honest: Walter White is not real; he's merely a character in an entertaining show. Questions of deep moral significance should be dealt with outside the theater and the stage. |
| -4 | 0 | -2 | 26. I disliked Skyler so much because she cheated on her cancer-ridden husband. Walt was always about family. Skyler violated that. |
| +1 | +4 | 0 | 27. Live a long and peaceful life Jesse Pinkman. You're a good boy in your heart. |
| 0 | -1 | 0 | 28. The reason the story worked is that all the main characters were deeply flawed anti-heroes. |
| +2 | -1 | +4 | 29. <i>Breaking Bad</i> has grown from a niche market favorite to a cultural phenomenon, and for good reason: it presents something shared but unacknowledged by all of us. It presents us with our flawed humanity. |
| +3 | +2 | +4 | 30. Walt was a living, breathing example that ordinary people are capable of great evil under the right circumstances. |
| -3 | +4 | -3 | 31. I will continue to root for Walt, even though I know he did terrible things with inadequate moral justification. Fortunately, it's only fiction, isn't it? |
| +1 | -4 | -3 | 32. I think the people who dislike Skyler, or the way she was portrayed, miss the point about what her character was really about. Skyler was a tragic heroine but also a strong, leading woman and we need more of these. |
| +4 | +4 | -2 | 33. On the surface, <i>Breaking Bad</i> is a show about a high school chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin. The series, however, has a depth far beyond its subject matter and presents a meditation on morality that can resonate with anyone. |
| -1 | -3 | +2 | 34. The truly moral character was Walt's brother-in-law, the DEA agent Hank. And all Walter White could do was cry helplessly as he watched him get executed right before his eyes. |
| +2 | +3 | +1 | 35. I don't know why I found myself identifying with and even excusing the immoral choices Walt made. Though his actions were evil, I found myself wanting him to succeed. |
| -1 | -1 | +3 | 36. As far as Skyler's behavior goes, it's only human to get angry and sick by |

- following all the rules when other people, namely your husband, keep disappearing and lying about it over and over again.
- 1 -4 +1 37. *Breaking Bad* creates an indictment of an American society that glorifies money and power (Gretchen and Elliot, Gus, and eventually Walt), and victimizes most women and children leaving them to a precarious existence.
- +1 -4 -1 38. I felt less sorrow for Walt than his victims, not only those whose lives were ruined by addiction to his meth but especially his wife and family whose welfare he tirelessly claimed to be serving while plotting, scheming and living the life of two-faced criminal.
- 0 -2 +4 39. Skyler was in denial about who Walt really was and how much damage he had done. She thought that they could eventually have their lives back and pretend the whole meth thing never happened.
- +3 +3 -4 40. The Emmy Award-winning series has a depth far beyond its subject matter, and that fact is well-documented by its critical acclaim and the serious nature of its audience.
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Notes:

¹ The authors wish to thank Steven R. Brown and Martin Barker for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

² As noted, Factor B, with female and male defining variates, more readily approaches this characterization in both the frequency of Skyler citations as least-favored and, more importantly, in the distinguishing statements displaying the subjectivity setting this segment of the *Breaking Bad* viewing audience apart from the others.