

## **Audience engagement with spreadable texts: How to measure fan involvement with *Game of Thrones***

Daniela Schlütz & Friederike Jage-D'Aprile,  
Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Germany

(with the collaboration of Muriel Haas, Robin Leuppert, Vanessa Rahe & Anna Rickmann)

### **Abstract:**

This paper is about audience engagement with transmedia texts. In particular, we look at *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) as an example of quality TV (Schlütz, 2015). *GoT*'s complexity, ambiguity, intertextuality, and distinct stylistic features make rich offerings to engage with the created multiverse. Theoretically we draw on Corner's (2017) and Hill's (2017) understanding of engagement as a spectrum as well as on Eichner's (2014) notion of agency to realize the engagement potential of participatory texts. For the empirical investigation we also draw on Askwith (2007) understanding of viewer engagement as a broad range of opportunities to actively participate in an expanded, multi-platform television text. Thus, our study focuses on the behavioral component of audience engagement.

To investigate this, we designed an online survey with German *GoT* fans (n = 1122) that explored how fans engaged with their favorite television show and its paratexts and how the extent of their engagement related to pleasure. In line with other research, we found that audience engagement is scalable: Both engagement level and the corresponding spectrum varied among the participants. The fans also voiced a pronounced appreciation of the show's quality and made use of its possibilities of expanded access. They were reluctant, however, to fully embrace the transmedia opportunities for engagement that the *GoT* multiverse offered. Finally, we found a positive relationship between audience engagement and other forms of being connected to the show. A positive evaluation of the show, on the other hand, was less strongly associated with engagement. This supports the idea that liking a text is a consequence of the quality of the core narrative, rather than engaging with the text's extensions.

**Keywords:** audience engagement, *Game of Thrones*, agency, transmedia texts, quality TV, online survey

Originally, research on media engagement took the industry's perspective focusing on performance metrics like ratings. It mainly aimed at commodifying the active, participatory audience for advertising purposes with audience engagement being seen as a 'main driver of value enhancement and profitability for broadcasters' (Murschetz & Schlütz, 2018, p. 30). Academic scholars, however, discussed the notion of engagement from the viewpoint of the audience. In this paper we will adopt the latter perspective. To investigate audience engagement in media texts we designed an empirical study that explored how fans engage with their favorite television show and how the extent of their engagement relates to pleasure.

Even though there is no agreed upon definition (Keinonen et al., 2018, p. 59), from an audience perspective engagement might be understood as a form of connectedness with media texts; as one of many psychological orientations to the world and to the artifacts within it (Corner, 2017, p. 3). Audience engagement, then, can be grasped as a cultural experience that is co-created and shaped (as well as limited) by the interplay of producers, texts and audiences. In media psychology, engagement is often equated with involvement. Involvement here is understood as a measure of intensity of information processing (Wirth, 2006), of the cognitive and affective engagement with the text and its characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, 2009). The notion of narrative engagement as a short-term reception phenomenon might fall a little bit short, though. Besides this form of cognitive and affective involvement into the text (i.e., comprehension, transportation) and its story world and characters (i.e., affective dispositions), respectively, there are types of connectedness that go beyond the text (like, for instance, cultural appropriation as a constructive process of sensemaking). Every time we come across media artifacts in everyday life, we decide actively how we want to attend to them, how deep we want to get involved (Corner, 2017) – both with the text and beyond it. We can make sense of the narrative as it resonates with our life, let ourselves be transported into the story world and relate affectively to its characters. We can research additional information by tending to related texts, and we can also use its bits and pieces to create something new.

Any form of engagement is based on cues offered by the text. Individual users realize these cues in different ways, however, depending on his or her background, experiences, media savviness, and interests etc. (Schlütz, 2015). Texts rich on cues like the television drama series *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) (hereafter *GoT*) supply a plethora of 'symbolic material with which audiences in their sociocultural contexts carry on the meaningful construction of their life-worlds.' (Mikos, 2016, p. 59). By engaging with the television text, viewers make sense of it and incorporate it into their everyday life. This process of engagement can be cognitive (straining to comprehend the family affairs of the noble houses of Westeros), affective (passionately hating Joffrey Baratheon) or behavioral

(researching background information on the actor Iwan Rheon who portrays Ramsey Bolton). In short, engagement is multifaceted as well as scalable – two aspects that we will investigate further in our empirical study by measuring the activities associated with actively engaging in the television series *GoT*.

Expanding on Corner's notion of 'stages of engagement', Annette Hill (2017) coined the expression 'spectrum of engagement' to describe the 'dynamic movement across the cognitive and affective work of audiences, highlighting the different positions and intensities of engagement' (p. 7) (cf. the notions of 'engagement types', Barker et al., 2021, or 'levels of engagement', Vilela, 2019, respectively). The concept of a spectrum captures the multidimensionality of engagement within reception contexts including its social and cultural values (Hill, 2017, p. 2). It also includes the notion of intensity. For any given show, this intensity might range from complete disinterest to 'forensic fandom' (Mittell, 2015, p. 52). Spanò (2016, p. 642) found evidence of such a spectrum in her study on Italian *GoT* fans. In our study, we strive to investigate whether the individual level of engagement is associated with enjoyment.

### **Engagement, Agency and Transmediality**

An individual's position on a spectrum of engagement is dependent on his or her media choices and related activities. Doing media, i.e., the constructive processes of media reception, appropriation and identity construction, is influenced by the general ability to perform actions, i.e., on agency (Eichner, 2014). The notion of agency refers to the general ability for action that recipients can exercise in all phases of media use, selection, reception as well as appropriation processes, i.e., to their capability for engagement. The approach understands media practices as a form of social action embedded in a recipient's everyday life. Media practices help to co-construct the text's meaning: 'regardless of the specific form of the media text people actively employ specific media practices that are essential to complete the text' (ibid., p. 126). We will look into specific media practices with regard to the *GoT* fandom and how they relate to engagement. Although agency is a permanent option, it is contextually bound by given structures as well as recipients' dispositions. In short, agency is a function of concrete textual qualities and affordances that enable (and sometimes even motivate) engagement on different levels. As *GoT* is an extremely rich media text, it stimulates a diverse range of media practices. These practices are based on different forms of agency. Eichner distinguishes three categories: personal, creative and collective agency (ibid., p. 163). Personal agency comprises different textual strategies: mastering narrative, mastering choice, mastering action, and mastering space. Mastering narrative, i.e., comprehending and interpreting the text, is the most basic form of personal agency. It is realized when diegetic information is used to form general hypotheses concerning the narrative and dramaturgical course of events. Particularly complex narratives challenge this form of agency as it requires constant reflection and evaluation of the textual cues that are tested against inconsistencies. Mastering narrative is associated with pleasure as it 'enables the spectator to fully enjoy the filmic possibilities of the mind

game' (ibid., p. 165). Mastering choice is marked by the feeling of influence the user has when interacting with the text, even if only on a cognitive level, for instance when following narrative cues. When agency is exercised on this level, viewers are rewarded with the feeling of expertise. Mastering action as well as space are aspects of agency more apt for gaming. The former lets the user experience flow, self-efficacy, and thereby pleasure while the latter sparks the enjoyable experience of presence. Linear narratives can create spatiality by using varying perspectives. Moreover, a multiverse like *GoT* with its elaborate maps might also trigger this aspect of personal agency. Creative agency is employed in participatory media use. It refers to a recipient's capacity to creatively adapt the (supposedly) intended meaning or to use (parts of) the original text to produce something new. Such media users are understood as 'prosumers' (cf. Ritzer, 2010; Toffler, 1980) as they actively (both in terms of cognitive and behavioral activity) co-create texts rather than just consume them. Collective agency, on the other hand, is understood as fan engagement on a meta-text level. It refers to the collective sense-making process associated with the artefacts of creative agency. Within fan communities this form of joint knowledge formation (i.e., in online forums) is quite common.

The notions of agency and audience engagement help us to better understand user behavior in a convergent media culture with convergence being 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms, ... and the migratory behavior of media audiences' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2). Convergence culture relies on engaged users as the circulation of media content depends on active participation that is experienced as enjoyable. Fans, for instance, find pleasure by making active use of dispersed cultural artifacts and by appropriating and transforming them (Jenkins, 2006, p. 257). Content producers respond to the evolution of media convergence and multi-platform media environments by employing transmedia storytelling in order to trigger participatory behavior. By telling a story consistently and plausibly on as many platforms as possible, transmedia storytelling extends the core text of a television drama series in order to engage audiences in multiple ways and in different locations (Mikos, 2016). Thus, although transmedia storytelling has an economic origin, each additional piece makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole text in terms of the narrative that adds to the success with audiences.

Central to our argument is that the notion of the transmedia text calls attention to the active role played by consumers in approaching expanded stories (Spanò, 2016, p. 647), not only in terms of cognitive activity but also in terms of behavior: Engaged users are those who 'actively engage with TV drama by personalizing their viewing practices (when, where and through which technology), by communicating about it, by consuming cross- and transmedia elements of TV drama, or by producing TV drama-related content' (Simons, 2014, p. 2225). In doing so, fans engage in 'world building' – and this world is bigger and deeper than the core text or even than the franchise because user generated content also expands this world (Jenkins, 2006, p. 114). Thus, transmedia texts like *GoT* depend on creative and collective engagement to be realized and appropriated (Eichner, 2014, p. 197). This applies not only to dedicated fans but also to the mainstream audience because the

activities of prosumers add to the industry made *GoT* multiverse that is open for consumption (cf. du Plessis, 2019). Consequently, a complex transmedia multiverse like *GoT* offers audiences a ‘richer entertainment experience’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 21). This experience enables agency by offering engagement potential: ‘Through the practices and modalities of participation, fans ... obtain a higher degree of agency: they control the text by repeated viewing, slow motion, discussion of the details, they become producers of text-related fan art that escapes the control of the (original) producers, and they exert collective agency in forming clusters of collective intelligence’ (Eichner, 2014, pp. 160–161). Thus, agency helps to realize the engagement potential of participatory texts. And – an important point with regard to our study – this experience of perceiving ourselves as agents in the process of media reception is pleasurable (Eichner, 2014, p. 162).

With regard to our study, it is important to understand audience engagement within the logic of convergence culture and spreadable texts (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). We therefore draw on Ivan D. Askwith’s (2007) framework for thinking about viewer engagement as a broad range of opportunities to actively participate in an expanded, multi-platform television text. Within this framework, users are understood as active agents with engagement describing ‘what television compels audiences *to do*.’ (Askwith, 2007, p. 152; emphasis added) Taking on these opportunities to engage means to exercise agency and to derive pleasure from it. Thus, our study deals with the behavioral component of audience engagement and its empirical measurement.

## **Case Study: Measuring the Audience Engagement Spectrum of *GoT* Fans**

### ***Background***

For the study at hand, we adopted an audience-oriented engagement perspective. As a working definition we used Askwith’s understanding of audience engagement ‘as an overall measure describing both the depth and the nature of an individual’s specific investments in the object [that] ... can be expressed as the sum total of the viewer’s behaviors, attitudes and desires in relation to the object’ (2007, p. 49). This includes consumption of related content, paratexts and products as well as participation in activities and interactions. Focusing on a high-quality transmedia text – the multiverse of *GoT* – we understood audience engagement as a set of cross-media practices (as opposed to Keinonen et al., 2018, who focused on experiences and beliefs rather than actions) that require agency for realization. Concretely, we conceived of audience engagement as a ‘range of opportunities and activities that become possible when drawing upon an expanded, multi-platform ... text’ (Askwith, 2007, p. 3).

In her study on Flemish transmedia TV drama, Nele Simons (2014) argued that the core text, i.e., the TV drama episodes, were the primary point of engagement for viewers. All other textual expansions across other media were gratuitous and did not enhance the audience’s pleasure. The work of Spanò (2016) and Barker et al. (2021) confirmed these

results. Other studies, however, showed that at least social media communication did play a role for engagement and pleasure when it came to *GoT* (Unkel & Kümpel, 2020; Vilela, 2019). Bengtsson et al. (2018) also found that persuasive transmedia storytelling can grab the users' attention. Finally, Raney and Ji (2017) suggested that communication about TV series on social media represents an entertainment experience in and of itself. Due to these somewhat mixed results, we were interested in the association between levels of engagement and pleasure derived from engagement in a quality TV series like *GoT*.

To address our research problem, we designed a quantitative study to measure how frequently fans engaged with the *GoT* multiverse and how the level of engagement related to their pleasure. Barker et al (2021) call attention to the fact that that this approach bears the risk of producing artifacts sidelining people's real encounters with rich shows like *GoT*. We agree with that assessment. Therefore, the aim of our study is far less ambitious. We only set out to quantify levels of engagement as a function of certain behaviors with regard to *GoT*-fandom – knowing full well that this only a small part of what can be considered audience engagement.

### **Object of Investigation: *Game of Thrones* as Engaging Quality TV**

Annette Hill (2017, p. 2) argues that long running series are particularly prone to fostering audience engagement. We therefore chose the TV series *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) as our object of investigation aiming at measuring audience engagement and its implications pertaining to its fandom.<sup>1</sup> *GoT* is apt for our research question as it is an exemplar of a spreadable text applying narrative strategies that tap into social dynamics among fans (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 135).

The show was created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss for HBO (2011-2019). Based on George R. R. Martin's books 'A Song of Ice and Fire', the narrative follows the seven kingdoms of Westeros over a span of eight seasons and 73 episodes. Spanò (2014, p. 632) describes the series as 'a vibrant illustration of cutting-edge, multilayered narration, highly realistic and engaging, with supernatural elements to embellish the plot alongside impressive production values'. The series is a 'remarkable cultural phenomenon' (Barker et al., 2021) combining both critical and commercial success: It received 269 awards and 738 nominations<sup>2</sup> and had up to 12 Mio. average viewers per episode in the USA alone<sup>3</sup>. The Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) shows an average rating of 9.3<sup>4</sup> stars out of 10 (based on 1.745.539 votes). With the exception of the last one (6.3/10), each season had an average rating of about 9 stars. Four episodes were rated 9.9/10 (S03E09: The Rains of Castamere, S05E08: Hardhome, S06E09: The Battle of the Bastards and S09E10: The Winds of Winter). It is estimated that HBO made over 2.2 billion US Dollars on the *GoT* franchise which makes it 'easily one of the most profitable TV series of all-time' (Entertainment Strategy Guy, 2019). This kind of quality TV is prototypical content in the age of cultural convergence (Schlütz, 2015, p. 101): The complexity of the *GoT* multiverse – the literary part, the one recreated on screen and a third created by the paratexts<sup>5</sup> that enrich and deepen the storylines and the characters' profiles (Spanò, 2016, p. 625) – offers several

routes to explore the narrative and to get lost within it. *GoT*'s many storylines and huge cast provide several opportunities for cognitive and affective involvement with both the narrative and the characters within it. Its openness fosters audience engagement by inviting to master the narrative. The transmedia story motivates viewers to engage with the core texts and/or its extensions in order to learn more and to contain the tale's polysemy. The autonomy the users have with regard to when and how to view the show and attend to its paratexts, respectively, enables mastering choice. Additionally, the discursive framing of *GoT* as quality TV motivates deeper engagement (by way of exercising creative and collective agency) in order to experience expertise and to self-identify as a connoisseur. The shows visual distinctiveness, its stylistic features and high production values are almost as important for quality TV series as complexity and depth of characters and scripts. Both semantic planes (style and content) reinforce each other and create further opportunities for engagement. Moreover, the distinct stylistic features trigger creative agency (for instance the numerous cover versions and parodies of the main title theme composed by Ramin Djawadi). Finally, complex quality series like *GoT* are intellectually (and emotionally) challenging. One has to make an effort to successfully decode the cues offered by the text, i.e., to comprehend and interpret them. The endeavor of deciphering the core narrative and its extensions – and by this executing personal agency – is the first step of engaging with the series. If creative and collective agency are also carried out successfully, quality TV is rewarding beyond sheer enjoyment because it adds symbolic value to the entertainment experience. As *GoT*'s quality designation carries cultural status, the use and appreciation of such a quality TV series marks the self-proclaimed connoisseur – in his or her own view – as distinct from the 'ordinary viewer'. Thus, quality TV consumption and follow-up communication (i.e., in blogs or forums) build symbolic capital if this action is acknowledged by relevant others (Schlütz et al., 2018).

### **Procedure: Online Survey with German *GoT* fans**

In order to measure audience engagement with *GoT* as quality TV, we conducted an online survey at the end of 2016.<sup>6</sup> At this point in time the sixth season of *GoT* had been aired in Germany and fandom was at its peak. Participants were recruited on German fan platforms.<sup>7</sup> We asked respondents several questions about their usage behavior and assessment of *GoT*. Furthermore, we posed questions regarding their engagement with *GoT* following Askwith's (2007) conceptualization of audience engagement touchpoints detailed below.<sup>8</sup> We operationalized each aspect with regard to *GoT* and its paratexts and measured the frequency of the respondents' behavior (on a scale from (1) 'rarely' to (4) 'often' as well as (0) 'never' to signify disengagement. The respondents were also asked to rate different forms of enjoyment they derived from the show (i.e., liking, cognitive and affective involvement, and connection with the show)

### ***Measuring Engagement Touchpoints***

In order to be able to measure engagement activities quantitatively, we defined audience engagement as the sum of the viewer's behaviors, attitudes and desires in relation to *GoT* and its paratexts (see above). What activities are we speaking about when it comes to audience engagement, however? Several so called 'engagement touchpoints' (Askwith, 2007, pp. 55-99) enable agency by offering opportunities to engage (cf. Simons, 2014). In the following, we will discuss the eight touchpoints with regard to *GoT* as the object of investigation (cf. Spanò, 2016, p. 633-634):

(1) *Formal Program Qualities*. Quality of content of the core text impacts audience engagement. Continuous and complex narratives as well as well-developed characters (as aspects of quality TV) offer the possibility of executing personal agency (mastering narrative). Moreover, they foster deeper intellectual and emotional investment. At least until season 7, *GoT* displayed these formal program qualities in abundance.

(2) *Expanded Access*. Distribution channels that provide access to the show's core content (i.e., full-length episodes) empower media consumers to access content whenever and wherever they want, through whatever device or medium available, thus, fostering agency (mastering choice). In Germany, access to *GoT* was limited because it was at first exclusively broadcasted by TNT Serie and Sky, respectively, two pay TV channels.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, episodes could be purchased on Prime Video, Maxdome and iTunes as well as on DVD und Blu-Ray. Free TV broadcasts (dubbed in German) were aired with a time lag of about 6 months.

(3) *Repackaged Content*. Variations of the core program are produced and distributed as repackaged/reorganized content like episode guides, videos, pics, recaps, etc.<sup>10</sup> providing fans with perpetual access to information.

(4) *Ancillary Content*. As opposed to repackaged content, ancillary content is supplemented with new information that extends, enhances, contextualizes, and/or supplements the core text. It includes (a) textual extensions, (b) relevant information and (c) extratextual information. Textual extensions comprise narrative add-ons like prequels or sequels, diegetic extensions that enhance the story world like the interactive map of Westeros<sup>11</sup> or the 'Dothraki Living Language Course'. Relevant information foster narrative elaboration, i.e., engagement with the text, for instance via encyclopedias.<sup>12</sup> Extratextual information includes background and insider knowledge about the industry or celebrities. They provide fans with a sense of insider access and critical insight into the show's construction and humanize the show's creative participants (i.e., cast, crew, producers and writers). Examples are behind-the-scenes production featurettes<sup>13</sup> or podcasts (see Goldberg, 2019 for numerous examples), interviews with the show's cast and creators, weblogs, details about casting decisions and shooting locations, and reports on the show's ratings and sales.

Both (3) repackaged and (4) ancillary content might be user generated or produced as marketing material (which makes a difference with regard to use frequency; Spanò, 2016,



p. 640). These kinds of cross-media content enable diachronic use which facilitates *GoT* fan activities (Unkel & Kümpel, 2020; Vilela, 2019).

(5) *Branded Products*. Acquiring industry made merchandise like branded clothing or gifts<sup>14</sup>, wallpapers, ringtones, and owning collectibles like special DVD editions indicate audience connectedness (cf. Hills, 2007). Such paraphernalia express a fan's personal investment in the show through both private consumption and public acts of affiliation.

(6) *Related Activities*. Askwith (2007, p. 76-82) distinguishes different kinds of related activities that vary with regard to user agency: (a) themed activities (branded board games like *GoT Monopoly*), (b) experiential activities (computer games like the former online game *GoT Ascent*), (c) productive activities (collaborative user generated content (UGC) that creates knowledge (Jenkins' 'collective intelligence'<sup>15</sup>), meaning<sup>16</sup> or creative artifacts (like *GoT* fanart) and (d) challenge-oriented activities that are pastimes providing viewers with an opportunity to demonstrate their skills, competencies or expert capabilities (Askwith, 2007, p. 82). Mastering quizzes, finding Easter eggs or knowing about *GoT* trivia offers a chance to distinguish oneself as a hardcore fan and thereby gain symbolic capital (cf. Schlütz et al., 2018).

(7) *Social Interaction*. Watching television stimulates collective agency. Askwith (2007, p. 87) distinguishes between (a) horizontal relationships (viewer-audience) that are social in nature, (b) privileged relationships (vertical, viewer-celebrity), and (c) diegetic relationships (diagonal, viewer-character<sup>17</sup>). With regard to *GoT*, there are many opportunities for networking, for instance in online communities, where fans can talk to each other and discuss the meaning of the show and their personal readings (horizontal) (for instance on reddit; cf. Unkel & Kümpel, 2020), at conventions or via social media where fans can follow the show's professionals to get background information (vertical).

(8) *Interactivity*. In television, direct interaction between the viewer-participant and the program is rare. With *GoT* there is the possibility of acknowledged contributions, though, i.e., UGC that is shared or fanart<sup>18</sup> published by the producers.

All of these touchpoints are opportunities to connect with *GoT*'s multiverse and its transmedia text. Their realization requires varying grades of motivation. At the same time, they constitute different levels of the spectrum of engagement. By engaging with varying aspects of the spreadable text the user executes personal, creative, and collective agency, respectively. We assume that this practice elicits pleasure or enjoyment.

### **Sample**

1122 German *GoT* fans took part in our study (60% male, average age: 29 years). Almost 90% of the respondents had watched all six seasons of the show. Asked for their favorite series, 79% of the respondents named *GoT* as one of their top-3. The majority of the respondents (89%) had watched the series within half a year before the survey. The participants reported an extremely favorable attitude towards the show: On a scale from -5 (very negative) to +5 (very positive) 86% rated their appreciation with +4 or higher.

## Results

**Table 1** shows the respondents' engagement with different aspects of the *GoT* multiverse. Depicted are the original items from the questionnaire. They are grouped with regard to the dimensions of audience engagement discussed above. As all items were answered on a scale (i.e., quasi-metric), we calculated the average value for each item as well as the average variance between the answers to account for dissent (arithmetic mean,  $M_{\text{Item}}$ ; standard deviation, SD). To condense the information even further, we computed a mean index by grouping together all items of one category and calculating an overall average ( $M_{\text{Dim}}$ ) for each one. With regard to opportunities for engagement (that were measured on a scale from 0 'never' to 4 'often'), for instance, this makes it easier to compare the frequency of use across all dimensions: the higher  $M_{\text{Dim}}$ , the more frequently users reported this form of engagement.

**Table 1:** Audience Engagement (Askwith, 2007) with *Game of Thrones* (n=1122 German fans)

	$M_{\text{Item}}$	SD	$M_{\text{Dim}}$
<b>Formal Program Qualities</b>			<b>4.8</b>
[scale from 1 'doesn't apply at all' to 5 'applies completely']			
<i>GoT is suspenseful.</i>	4.8	0.5	
<i>GoT is complex in terms of narrative.</i>	4.8	0.5	
<i>GoT has complex characters.</i>	4.7	0.6	
<b>Expanded Access</b>			
<i>How often do you watch GoT via the following channels?</i>			
[scale from 0 'never' to 4 'often']			
<i>DVD or Blu Ray</i>	1.6	1.7	
<i>TV (e.g., RTL 2)</i>	0.9	1.2	
<i>Pay TV (e.g., Sky)</i>	1.2	1.7	
<i>legal streaming service on the Internet (e.g., iTunes, Amazon Prime, Maxdome)</i>	1.2	1.6	
<i>illegal streaming service on the Internet (e.g., kinox.to)</i>	1.8	1.8	
<b>Opportunities for Engagement</b>			
[scale from 0 'never' to 4 'often']			
<b>Repackaged Content</b>			<b>1.8</b>
<i>I read episode guides on websites like HBO or serienjunkies.</i>	2.0	1.5	
<i>I read biographies of GoT characters on the Internet.</i>	1.7	1.3	
<i>I watch videos where GoT episodes are discussed (e.g., on YouTube).</i>	1.6	1.5	
<b>Ancillary Content</b>			<b>1.4</b>
Textual Extensions:			0.7

<i>I read books on background information (e.g., on Westeros etc.).</i>	1.2	1.4	
<i>I read the Dothraki dictionary.</i>	0.1	0.4	
Relevant Information:			1.7
<i>I get background information on GoT on websites like gameofthrones.com.</i>	1.2	1.3	
<i>I read articles in GoT wikis.</i>	1.7	1.3	
<i>I read reviews to learn how GoT episodes are assessed.</i>	2.2	1.5	
Extratextual Information:			1.8
<i>I watch Making Of's or Behind the Scenes videos.</i>	1.9	1.4	
<i>I watch interviews with GoT actors or producers.</i>	1.8	1.3	
<b>Branded Products</b>			<b>0.5</b>
<i>I buy GoT fan merchandise (like T-shirts, mugs, posters).</i>	0.7	1.1	
<i>I download free GoT fan articles (like screensaver, wallpapers or ring tones).</i>	0.6	1.0	
<i>I buy GoT collectables (like collector cards, box sets etc.).</i>	0.4	0.9	
<b>Related Activities</b>			<b>0.4</b>
Experiential Activities:			0.2
<i>I play GoT role playing games (like Game of Thrones Ascent).</i>	0.2	0.7	
<i>I dress up as GoT characters (for instance at Halloween or for conventions).</i>	0.1	0.5	
Challenge Activities:			1.0
<i>I participate in online GoT quizzes to demonstrate my knowledge of GoT.</i>	1.0	1.2	
Themed Activities:			0.4
<i>I play GoT-themed board games (like Monopoly or jigsaw puzzles).</i>	0.4	0.8	
Productive Activities:			0.1
<i>I contribute to a GoT wiki.</i>	0.0	0.3	
<i>I create GoT content (fan fiction or fan art).</i>	0.1	0.5	
<i>I publish GoT content via social media.</i>	0.1	0.5	
<i>I write about GoT on forums or online communities.</i>	0.3	0.7	
<i>I publish GoT episode guides on the Internet (e.g., on serienjunkies.de)</i>	0.0	0.2	
<b>Social Interaction</b>			<b>1.1</b>
Vertical Interaction:			0.4
<i>I follow GoT cast members, producers, etc. on social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter).</i>	1.0	1.4	
<i>I interact with GoT cast members or producers (e.g., via Live Chat, Q&amp;As).</i>	0.2	0.6	
<i>I attend events (e.g., premieres) where I can meet GoT cast members or producers in person.</i>	0.1	0.4	
Horizontal Interaction:			1.8

<i>I compare notes with other GoT fans about the series.</i>	2.2	1.4
<i>I get to know people that share my passion for GoT.</i>	1.4	1.3

**Interactivity**

**0.2**

<i>I share GoT content on social media hoping that HBO or the show's producers will repost them.</i>	0.0	0.3
<i>I participate in surveys of the GoT professional team in order to share my views and to help shape the show.</i>	0.4	0.8

Note:  $M_{Item}$ =item mean,  $M_{Dim}$ =dimension mean (index),  $SD$ =standard deviation

Results show that respondents were united in their praise for the formal program qualities of *GoT*: they agreed that the show was extremely suspenseful and complex both in terms of narrative and characters. Thus, personal agency in the form of mastering narrative should be challenged by the show. This overall positive attitude towards the show's quality was a good starting point for further engagement. With regard to expanded access, we found that the average respondent most frequently used illegal means of watching (probably due to impatience), followed by DVD or Blu Ray and paid Streaming Services or Pay TV. Somewhat less frequently, the respondents waited for the TV airing of the show in Germany.

With regard to our sample, German *GoT* fans' use of the opportunities for engagement compared to empirical results from other countries (Simons, 2014; Spanò, 2016; Barker et al., 2021): On average, ancillary UGC was used most often. The surveyed fans reported to read reviews to align their assessment of an episode with other fans, to watch making-ofs of interviews with the cast and producers, and to expand their knowledge by researching information in wikis, books or websites. In doing so, fans exercised agency, both personal (exercising choice by puzzling together bits and pieces of information) and collective agency by socially interacting with other fans (comparing notes and getting to know each other). Industry-made paratexts like merchandise were in lesser demand. Exercising creative agency was also comparatively rare: The participants hardly ever engaged in related activities (with the possible exception of participating in online quizzes every once in a while to show off their *GoT* knowledge). These results are in line with the extensive study of the *GoT* audience by Barker, Smith and Attwood (2021): Among many other aspects of the shows multiverse, the authors analyzed viewer engagement with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. One set of results that relates to our study, was the analysis of distinct ways of engaging with the series. The derived typology was based on eight more or less active engagement behaviors that transcended the watching of the show. The respondents became active in some ways (for instance, by discussing the show online) but they rarely engaged in what Jenkins (2006; cf. du Plessis, 2019) called prosuming activities. Simons (2014) also showed that viewers were mainly interested in consuming *GoT* episodes and that 'an audience looking for immersion in a

multiplatform narrative story' (p. 2220) was more a marketing objective than an empirical reality.

Barker et al. (2021) also observed a general scaling of levels of engagement. We were interested whether such a spectrum of engagement could be observed in our sample as well. To this end we computed two sum indices: 'engagement level' and 'engagement spectrum'. In doing so, we obtained two summary values for each respondent, quantifying his or her level of engagement and engagement spectrum, respectively, within the given range of 29 opportunities for engagement. First, in order to measure *engagement level*, we counted if a respondent reported engagement with *GoT*, irrespective of how often s/he did so. Thus, the index ranged from 0 (no engagement with *GoT* at all) to max. 29 seized opportunities (engaging in all possible sorts of activities). Within our sample the engagement level was distributed almost normally, i.e., like a bell curve (Mode=11.0, Median=11.0, Mean=11.1; SD = 4.9). This shows that the notion of varying engaging levels is not only theoretically but also empirically sound (at least for this example) with medium levels of engagement more probable than very low or very high ones. Using repacked content (like episode guides), extratextual (making-ofs, interviews) and relevant information (reviews and background information) as well as horizontal interaction (connecting with other fans) make for most of this usage pattern.

For the *engagement spectrum*, on the other hand, we not only considered if a person displayed a given engagement behavior but also how often s/he performed this activity. Therefore, we computed a sum index by adding up the reported frequency values for each of the 29 opportunities for engagement (based on the scale from 0 'never' to 4 'often'). In theory, this sum index could range from 0 (a person who has never engaged in any of the given opportunities) to 116 (a fan who has seized each and every opportunity often). The spectrum index is not as evenly distributed as the other one. The empirical values of the spectrum range from 0 – seven respondents never engaged in any of the opportunities – to 114 – a very avid, albeit exceptionally engaged fan (Mode=19.0, Median=23.0, Mean=24.7; SD=14.4). This means that *GoT* fans distinguish themselves with regard to level of engagement but even more so when the frequency of actively engaging is considered. Similar to what Bengtsson et al. (2018) found, younger users displayed a significantly greater engagement than older ones: Whereas the under 20 years old reported a mean index-level of 32, respondents between 21 and 30 years only had a mean value of 24 and older ones only 21.

Lastly, we wanted to find out whether our measure of the engagement spectrum (quantified by the sum index) was associated with other forms of connectedness with the show. Thus, we correlated the index with measurements of evaluation, bond, affective and cognitive involvement.<sup>19</sup> As a measure of association we used Pearson's correlation to show the strength of the relationship between two variables (ranging from 0, no association at all, to 1, perfect association). For all measures we observed positive associations (see **Table 2**) meaning that the higher a respondent scored on the engagement spectrum the more important was the connection with *GoT* to him or her (bond), the more frequent s/he

reflected on the show (cognitive involvement), the more intense feelings s/he felt towards *GoT* (affective involvement) and the more positive was his or her attitude towards *GoT* (evaluation) – or vice versa<sup>20</sup>. For some of the aspects the correlation was around 0.5 which is considered a large effect (Field, 2009, p. 173). Interestingly, the association between the engagement index and the evaluation of the show was much lower, however. This indicates that aspects like bonding as well as cognitive and affective involvement are strongly connected to engagement behavior (as defined here), whereas a positive evaluation of a text apparently derives from other experiences than (only) exercising creative or collective agency. This is in line with Simons' (2014, p. 2235) results, that fans derive pleasure from merely watching their favorite show without displaying a need for active engagement in transmedia activities. In her research with Italian *GoT* fans, Spanò (2016, p. 639) also found only a minor interest in extra material.

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**Table 2:** Association with Audience Engagement (n=1122 German fans)

	Pearson's R
Bond ( <i>'My connection with GoT is important to me [1 'not at all, 2 'somewhat, 3 'to a great extent']</i> )	0,502
Cognitive Involvement ( <i>'I frequently reflect on GoT [1 'not at all, 2 'somewhat, 3 'to a great extent']</i> )	0,495
Affective Involvement ( <i>'I have [1 'not very intensive feelings' to 9 'very intensive feelings'] towards GoT.'</i> )	0,437
Evaluation ( <i>'My attitude toward GoT is [1 'extremely negative' to 11 'extremely positive']</i> )	0,249

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## Discussion

This paper was concerned with the notion of engagement from an audience's point of view. We presumed that engagement is a form of connectedness with a media text, its storyworld and characters. We particularly looked at transmedia texts, i.e., media artifacts that go beyond a core narrative and encompass related texts on varying media platforms (Corner, 2017; Jenkins, 2006). Participation in transmedia storytelling is triggered by spreading a narrative across various media outlets to give it more depth and backstory. This (marketing) strategy is supposed to lure audiences and to suck fans even deeper into the story world. By generating original content of their own, users partake in this course of action. Thus, transmedia texts are co-created by producers who inscribe certain cues, the resulting affordances of the texts themselves and the users' active engagement practices in decoding,

using, and appropriating the texts into their everyday lives. For our empirical study we chose the long-running television series *Game of Thrones* as object of investigation because of its vast range of symbolic content forming a transmedia multiverse prone to resonate with peoples' lives and to trigger engagement. We modeled our understanding on Askwith's (2007) notion of audience engagement as an overall measure of both the nature and the depth of an individual's specific way of dealing with a transmedia text. From this point of view, audience engagement is multifaceted: It is cognitive (thinking about the outcome of a story line of your favorite series), affective (fussing about the fictional character you love to hate) as well as conative (writing about your experiences in an online forum). It also varies in intensity. This paper was mainly concerned with the latter two issues: The behavioral aspects of audience engagement and its scalability, i.e., the engagement spectrum (cf. Hill, 2017). We argued that an individual's position on this spectrum (overall or in a given situation) depends on his or her general ability for action, i.e., on agency and the contextually bound exertion of it (Eichner, 2014). Agency is a media user's capability to co-construct a text by engaging with it. It is a function of textual qualities and affordances enabling different levels of engagement. Agency comes in three different categories – personal, creative and collective. These types enable certain levels of engagement ranging from decoding the text (personal agency, mastering narrative) to acts of creating and sharing new content (creative and collective agency, respectively). Exercising agency while using media artifacts is rewarded by a feeling of expertise. This feeling is pleasurable.

We set out to test the activity of engaging in transmedia texts empirically by taking audience engagement as a measure of the nature of an individual's specific investment in a transmedia text as well as the depth of this investment. In line with other authors (Corner, 2017; Hill, 2017) we presumed that this measure is scalable. Which level of engagement an individual exhibits depends on the interplay between the engagement potential of the (transmedia) text and the agency exercised by the viewer. To test this notion of audience engagement, we chose the drama series *GoT* as an exemplar of quality TV (Schlütz, 2015). *GoT* was very well suited for this endeavor, because its complexity, ambiguity, intertextuality, and distinct stylistic features make rich offerings to exercise all aspects of agency that might lead to engage with the created multiverse.

In order to measure audience engagement empirically, we operationalized the concept as something that fans actively *do* in connection with a television text. More precisely, we adapted Askwith's definition of audience engagement as the 'sum total of the viewer's behaviors, attitudes and desires in relation to the object' (2007, p. 49; cf. Simons, 2014; Spanò, 2016). To put this idea into practice we applied the eight engagement touchpoints (formal program qualities, expanded access, repackaged and ancillary content, branded products, related activities, social interaction, and interactivity) systematically to *GoT* and its paratexts. In an online survey we then presented this set of media practices to German *GoT* fans ( $n = 1122$ ) and asked them how often they engaged in these activities. Furthermore, we queried usage behavior and assessment of the show (up to its then current

sixth season). The overall aim of our study was to capture an engagement spectrum and to find out whether the level of engagement influences the users' pleasure.

We found that the participants of the survey were avid *GoT* fans with a pronounced appreciation of the show's quality who also made use of its possibilities of expanded access. Both aspects (the liking of the show and the use of diverse viewing channels) enabled the users to exercise personal agency (mastering narrative and choice). In lesser demand, however, was the performance of creative and collective agency. Our results showed that the surveyed German fans were reluctant to fully embrace the transmedia opportunities for engagement that the *GoT* multiverse offered. In line with extant research (Simons, 2014; Spanò, 2016; Barker et al., 2021), they most frequently engaged with user generated ancillary content. Less frequently, however, they engaged in related activities. The use of branded products was also less popular with the surveyed fans. Prosuming, it seems, is more the marketers' wish than the users' reality.

In line with other research, we found that audience engagement is scalable: Both engagement level and the corresponding spectrum varied among the *GoT* fans participating in our study. The calculated indices showed that *GoT* fans distinguished themselves with regard to levels of engagement but even more so when the frequency of actively engaging was considered. Their behavior ranged from complete disinterest in complementing material to 'forensic fandom' (Mittell, 2015, p. 52). Although complete disengagement with *GoT* transmedia touchpoints was rare in our study (only 7 out of 1122 participants reported to have displayed no engagement whatsoever besides watching the show), high frequency use of opportunities of engagement was also scarce. The interviewed *GoT* fans were mostly interested in repackaged content (reading episode guides) and using extratextual information (making ofs, interviews) as well as relevant information (reviews and background information as an aspect of mastering choice by expertly solving a puzzle). Respondents also liked to engage in horizontal interaction (i.e., connecting with other fans).

Finally, we found a positive relationship between audience engagement and other forms of being connected to the show: The higher a respondent was on the engagement spectrum, the more s/he felt connected to the show and the deeper s/he was cognitively and affectively involved in it. A positive evaluation of the show, on the other hand, was less strongly associated with engagement. This supports the idea that liking a text is a consequence of the quality of the core narrative, rather than engaging with the text's extensions. Personal agency (as in mastering the narrative) seems to be more important when it comes to entertainment effects than exercising creative or collective agency. Evidently, engagement is more to do with imaginary activities and connecting with other fans to share these thoughts than with co-creation and prosuming.<sup>21</sup> Engagement then can be understood as a personal investment to realize a text, i.e., as an individual effort to actively decode (comprehend and interpret) a given media text including its extensions (cf. the model of the quality TV entertainment experience; Schlütz, 2015, p. 106). The subsequent reading is shaped by the social and cultural position of the individual (including taste and expertise) and his or her knowledge structures. The entertainment experience



arises from an interaction of situated person and media text (including its transmedia extensions) realized as an individual reading. This reading is informed by the level of engagement invested into the experience.

This study was not the first one to study engagement levels with regard to *GoT* (see for instance Barker et al., 2021; Vilela, 2019) or to test Askwith's engagement model (cf. Simons, 2014; Spanò, 2016). We added to this research by replicating the study within another culture, by relying on quantitative data and by associating engagement with other forms of textual pleasure. While Simons' research was situated in Flanders, Spanò interviewed Italian fans, Vilela worked mostly with Brazilian viewers, and Barker et al. included fans from all over the world, we concentrated on German *GoT* fans. Interestingly, the results were quite similar: The fans' reactions to transmedia extensions were merely 'lukewarm', to quote Nele Simons (2014, p. 2233). Simons supposes that the reasons for not engaging in other textual extensions is their lack of contributing something unique to the story. Research on the extremely popular Norwegian transmedia narrative *Skam* supports this notion (Bengtsson et al., 2018). This, Bengtsson et al. conclude, 'is consistent with Askwith's (2007) claim that a determining factor for audiences' appreciation of narrative extensions is their effectiveness in capturing the appealing qualities of the core programme and consistence with the show's "core narrative"' (2018, p. 74). Thus, in order to succeed in engaging audiences, transmedia drama series need 'authorial, production and temporal coherence' (Mikos, 2016, p. 60). Still, our research showed that fans who did engage in *GoT* in a more active manner, derived more pleasure from it (or vice versa). Thus, even if the main motive for watching TV drama is entertainment obtained from the core narrative (Simons, 2014, p. 2233) this enjoyment can be enhanced by engaging more deeply or more often with the transmedia text.

Despite the coherent results of our study, we have to address some limitations. Firstly, we tried to quantify existing research on audience engagement by applying a strictly standardized method. We thereby consciously adopted a somewhat reductionist perspective of audience engagement. We did not, for instance, capture creative agency in the sense of an aberrant reading in our study. With qualitative or multi-method studies on *GoT* in place (Simons, 2014; Spanò, 2016; Barker et al., 2021), we found it worthwhile to test the notion of an audience spectrum statistically. By applying a cross-sectional design, we cannot account for causal relationships, however. This could be an avenue for further longitudinal or experimental research. Moreover, we only used a convenience sample of German *GoT* fans. Although our results matched existing research, it would be interesting to conduct a representative survey<sup>22</sup> to gain deeper insights in less ambitious groups of viewers. Finally, we did not explicitly deal with *disengagement*. In their study on musical talent shows, Keinonen et al. (2018, p. 74) found that disengagement was mainly motivated by textual reasons (like a bad script). This aspect would be interesting with regard to the finale of *GoT*: the last season got the lowest ratings in the history of the show and was recently polled the most disappointing ending of a TV series (Butler, 2020). As Barker and colleagues (2021) argue, satisfying narrative closure is an important factor for engagement

as it rewards the dedicated, engaged viewer for his or her investment in the show. This makes the engagement worthwhile. If this prerequisite is not met – as with season eight of *GoT* – fans are disappointed, and the experience is devalued retrospectively (at least to some extent). This could also be an interesting research subjective to even better understand the spectrum and level of audience engagement.

### **Biographical notes:**

Daniela Schlütz (corresponding author) is Professor of Theory and Empiricism of Digital Media at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF (Germany). Her research and teaching interests are popular culture (especially quality TV series), entertainment research, strategic communication, and empirical research methods. Contact: [d.schluetz@filmuniversitaet.de](mailto:d.schluetz@filmuniversitaet.de).

Friederike Jage-D'Aprile is a doctoral researcher at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF (Germany). Her research and teaching interest are visual communication, digital storytelling, intersectional theory and gendered spaces in social media. Contact: [f.jage-daprile@filmuniversitaet.de](mailto:f.jage-daprile@filmuniversitaet.de).

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> With Gwenllian-Jones we understand fandom as 'a liminal, fetishistic and highly engaged consumer culture that is both born of and fully implicated in the cultural processes it supposedly 'resists'. Fandom ... is a mode of interactivity as well as a mode of consumption, and the fictions it dedicates itself to are modelled accordingly.' (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003, p. 165)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_awards\\_and\\_nominations\\_received\\_by\\_Game\\_of\\_Thrones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_awards_and_nominations_received_by_Game_of_Thrones).

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Game\\_of\\_Thrones\\_episodes#Ratings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Game_of_Thrones_episodes#Ratings).

<sup>4</sup> However, this figure differs from the average rating across all episodes, which is only 8.7 stars (own calculation).

<sup>5</sup> Mittell (2015) distinguishes two different types of paratexts: (1) Orienting paratexts add knowledge to the core text (e.g., imdb, wikis), offer analysis, exegesis and expansion, and support sense-making and interpretation. (2) Transmedia paratexts continue the story including other platforms (like in-character Instagram accounts).

<sup>6</sup> The original study comprehended many more questions (pertaining to brand loyalty) that were omitted for this study.

<sup>7</sup> We used [serieslyawesom.tv](http://serieslyawesom.tv) and [serienjunkies.de](http://serienjunkies.de).

<sup>8</sup> The original items (translated into English) are included in **Table 1**.

<sup>9</sup> As opposed to other countries, pay TV has a rather small market share in Germany (daily users of Sky Ticket (without sports): 2,2% as opposed to SVoD platforms like Netflix: 59% or Prime Video: 36%; Herrmann, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, <http://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones/episodes/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://quartermaester.info/>

<sup>12</sup> [https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/de/wiki/Game\\_of\\_Thrones](https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/de/wiki/Game_of_Thrones)

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.makinggameofthrones.com/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://officialgotmerchandise.com/>

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, [https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/de/wiki/Game\\_of\\_Thrones\\_Wiki](https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/de/wiki/Game_of_Thrones_Wiki)

<sup>16</sup> See the German forum <http://www.eis-und-feuer.de/>

<sup>17</sup> These kinds of relationships go beyond the scope of our paper (but see Schlütz, Possler & Golombek, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> <https://gameofthrones.tumblr.com/>

<sup>19</sup> The original items from the questionnaire (translated into English) are included in **Table 2**.

<sup>20</sup> As the cross-sectional method of investigations did not allow for conclusions as to the causal relationship of the variables, results only suggested a two-sided association.

<sup>21</sup> This goes along with the notion of narrative engagement put forward in media psychology that is a measure of cognitive and affective involvement with the text and its characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> A representative sample is needed when the goal is to extrapolate findings to the entire population the sample is drawn from (Saldaña, 2017). This can only be obtained by (a) explicitly defining the population in question, (b) using a random sampling technique where all population members have a precise, nonzero probability of being selected (which excludes self-selection) and (c) ensuring a high response rate. All three requirements are very difficult to satisfy (if at all) in online surveys.